In the acknowledgements to *Freedom National* I thanked the many friends, fellow historians, editors, university administrators, and institutions that helped me write a far better book than I could ever have written without their support. Here I can only reiterate my thanks to all of them, many of whom are in this room tonight. I trust they know who they are. Others I can only acknowledge here for the first time, beginning with the members of the Lincoln Prize committee—Douglas Wilson, Peter Kolchin, and Elizabeth Leonard—and also to Jim Basker—for their generous endorsement of my book.

Then there’s Lew Lehrman and Dick Gilder. Among those of us who have dedicated ourselves to teaching American history—through our writings and in the classroom--there are few words adequate to express the gratitude we all feel, the debt all of us owe, to these two gentlemen. Their generosity is justifiably legendary—and as the grateful recipient of so much of it over the years, I can hardly let it pass without a mention. And so let me thank them, once again, for sponsoring this extraordinary award, but also for the exhilarating summer seminars for teachers Matt Pinsker and I have been able to conduct under their auspices, for the numerous opportunities to speak with teachers and students across the Northeast, for the conferences, seminars and talks I’ve been able to attend at the Gilder Lehrman Center at Yale, and for the fellowship year they funded at the Cullman Center at the New York Public Library, where the research for *Freedom National* began. Without “Gilder-Lehrman” my world would be a very different place—less rewarding as a teacher, less productive as a scholar—and, I should add, without the piano that now sits in my foyer and on which my son practices each day—for which he, alas, is not *quite* as grateful as I am.

Finally, allow me to single out three historians without whose scholarship, and mentorship, *Freedom National* would be inconceivable to me, beginning with my dissertation
adviser at Berkeley, Kenneth Stampp. Back in the mid-1980s I told Ken that I wanted to trace the connections between what Lincoln was doing in Washington and what the slaves were doing on the ground, and he was skeptical about whether I could find the evidence. It’s taken me thirty years to write up my answer, and Ken is no longer here to read it, but he was willing to change his mind about things, and I’d like to think he’d be persuaded.

A year after completing my dissertation Jim McPherson offered me a job at Princeton, where he became, in effect, my next teacher. From him I learned several things that now seem basic to good history: That chronology matters, for example. That a reputable historian must master a certain amount of indispensable information. And finally, that interpretation and storytelling are not alternative ways of writing history; that good history does both. Jim graciously read the manuscript to Freedom National and, not surprisingly, urged some crucial revisions that significantly improved the final book.

Eric Foner read the manuscript as well, and his larger influence has been immeasurable. In his own acceptance speech here two years ago, Eric mentioned the many lunchtime conversations we had on the upper west side while he was working on his book. Let me only add that those were two-way exchanges; as he was writing The Fiery Trial, I was struggling to figure out the history of slavery’s destruction. At one of those lunches I was excitedly relating my discovery that Republicans intended to build a “corden of freedom” confining slavery to the southern states and protecting freedom everywhere else. Eric nodded his head, knowingly, and simply said: “Freedom National.” So I thank him for my title, and for so much else besides.

Now… to Abraham Lincoln. You can hardly accept a Lincoln Prize without mentioning the man. But I confess this puts me in an odd position. I’ve never been a Lincoln hater, but
partly for the same reasons I’ve never been a very good Lincoln worshipper either. Great man history is just not there in my intellectual DNA. Terms like “Great Emancipator” don’t drop readily from my lips. I can bring myself to say that Lincoln was our greatest president, but I cannot shake the suspicion that “falling in love with Lincoln” is one of the occupational hazards of my profession—something you have to be on guard against. Not because Lincoln doesn’t deserve to be admired; I certainly admire him tremendously. Nor because I think he should be discounted. Like David Donald, I accept that sooner or later we all have to get right with Lincoln. But that’s never been easy for me. Unlike anyone else I’ve ever had to come to terms with as an historian—with the possible exception of Thomas Jefferson—getting right with Lincoln means navigating between the Scylla of cynicism and the Charybdis of idolatry. That was part of the journey I undertook in *Freedom National* and it’s not for me to say whether or not it gets us safely back to Ithaca.

What I can do, better now than I could before I wrote this book, is explain why I think Lincoln was so important in the context of his time and place—in relation to the larger antislavery movement of which he was a part, within the Republican Party he came to lead, against the determined opposition of the Democrats, and in a time of war. And I think I can explain, now, why we cannot fully understand Lincoln and the Republicans without some understanding of what they expected the slaves and the slaveholders to do in the event of war, and what the slaves and slaveholders actually did.

After a talk I gave in Washington a few weeks back someone in the audience wondered if I wasn’t diminishing Lincoln’s significance in the history of slavery’s destruction. I don’t think so. There’s more than enough evidence in *Freedom National* to make a strong case for Lincoln’s singular importance. In 1861 his War Department implemented the First Confiscation Act by
issuing instructions that freed far more slaves than Congress had technically required. In 1862 Lincoln personally intervened to extend emancipation deep into the Mississippi Valley. Nothing in the Second Confiscation Act required Lincoln to lift the ban on enticement when he issued the Emancipation Proclamation or to open the Union Army to the “armed” service of black soldiers. Nor was there any precedent for the active role Lincoln played in securing the states needed to get the Thirteenth Amendment through Congress in January of 1865. Anyone searching for a heroic Lincoln can find what they’re looking for in Freedom National. Context explains Lincoln; it does not diminish him. It enables us to see aspects of Lincoln’s achievement that might otherwise be invisible to us if we never took our eyes off him.

But it was context, not heroism, that I was after—the broad historical setting within which slavery was destroyed. Over the course of my research the focus of Freedom National narrowed to an emphasis on the origins and evolution of the antislavery policies of the Republican Party. That sharper focus dictated the starting point, indicated by the book’s title. So let’s start there.

In 1854 Charles Sumner, newly elected as Senator from Massachusetts, delivered his first major speech in Congress, entitled “Freedom National; Slavery Sectional.” Sumner’s overt purpose was to call for the repeal of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, but he justified repeal on the basis of a broader principle—that the Constitution protected freedom nationally, that it recognized slavery only as a state institution. Beyond repeal of the despised 1850 law, Sumner went on, making Freedom National also meant abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia, banning slavery from the territories, suppressing it on the high seas, and denying admission to any new slave states wishing to enter the Union. So Freedom National was two things at once: a broad constitutional doctrine, and a specific set of policies.
It takes nothing from Sumner to note that his 1854 speech was completely unoriginal. That, in fact, is precisely what makes it so important. He was summarizing decades of legal and political spadework by antislavery lawyers and politicians, spadework initiated with the revival of abolitionism in the 1830s. In the late 18th century abolition proceeded on a state by state basis and slavery’s most dedicated opponents assumed that this was the way slavery would eventually be abolished everywhere. By the 1830s a second wave of abolitionists, realizing the inadequacy of a purely state-based approach, transformed antislavery into a national movement. They demanded that the federal government implement a number of policies designed to put slavery in all the states on what Lincoln later called a “course of ultimate extinction.” In the 1840s abolitionism moved into third-party politics and by the 1850s a new major party, the Republicans, had adopted Freedom National as its organizing principle. They would not overstep the limits of the Constitution, Republicans explained; the federal government would not directly abolish slavery in a state where it was legal. But they would surround the slave South with a “Cordon of Freedom” and slowly force the southern states to abolish slavery on their own. They would use the power of the federal government to make Freedom National.

Republicans thought of Freedom National as a peacetime policy of gradual abolition, but southern leaders responded to every iteration of it with overt threats of disunion. It was in reaction to these threats that the opponents of slavery formulated a second scenario for a federal attack on slavery—military emancipation as a means of suppressing a rebellion. Because Republicans assumed that slavery would be abolished peacefully, by means of the Cordon of Freedom, they never took much time to specify how military emancipation would work. But they clearly and repeatedly warned of military emancipation during the secession crisis, and within weeks of Fort Sumter they began to act on their warnings.
So by the time the Republicans took power in 1861 they had formulated two distinct scenarios for slavery’s destruction: gradual state abolition and military emancipation. Over the course of the war Congress and the President pursued both policies along parallel tracks. And both were initiated in the first year of the war, beginning with military emancipation.

In the summer of 1861 Lincoln called Congress into special session to deal with the emergency of the war. Within days House Republicans almost unanimously endorsed Owen Lovejoy’s resolution declaring that Union soldiers and sailors had no business participating in the capture and return of fugitive slaves. Ten days later Senator Lyman Trumbull reported a confiscation bill to the floor, to which he attached an amendment designed to emancipate all slaves used in support of the rebellion. Lincoln signed the bill on August 6 and two days later his War Department—joining together the Lovejoy and Trumbull policies—instructed Union commanders in the South to emancipate all slaves who “come within your lines.” Over the course of the next several months those August 8 instructions were forwarded to Union commanders in Maryland, Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia, resulting in the immediate, uncompensated emancipation of tens of thousands of slaves in the first year of the war.

A Second Confiscation Act, which Lincoln signed into law on July 17, extended military emancipation to all “rebel-owned” slaves in Union-occupied areas of the Confederacy, resulting in the emancipation of many thousands more slaves in the Mississippi Valley, and authorizing the President to extend emancipation to all unoccupied areas of the Confederacy. On the same day Congress passed a Militia Act removing the ban on black enlistment into the Union Army.

All the while, however, Lincoln and the Republicans were pursing the second policy of pressuring the loyal slave states to abolish slavery on their own. It’s often said that the
President’s concern to hold onto the Border States inhibited his embrace of emancipation, but the
evidence suggests to me that the opposite was true. Lincoln and his fellow Republicans began
emancipating slaves months before he formulated his first proposals for gradual abolition in the
Border States, and far from holding them back, the war enabled policymakers to begin pressuring
those states far more rapidly and far more aggressively than they could possibly have done in
peacetime. In the very first regular session controlled by Republicans, between December 1861
and July 1862, Congress did everything Charles Sumner had asked for in 1854, and more
besides: It abolished slavery in Washington, D.C., banned slavery from the western territories,
prohibited federal enforcement of the fugitive slave clause, ratified a treaty suppressing the
Atlantic slave trade, and for the first time, required a state to abolish slavery as a condition for
admission to the Union. A little over a year after the war began, Republicans had succeeded in
making freedom national, putting enormous pressure on the four loyal slave states, restricting
slavery entirely to the states where it already existed. At the same time, they had committed
themselves to destroying slavery in the disloyal states by means of military emancipation.

Once we understand that the two broad policies—immediate, uncompensated military
emancipation in the Confederacy and federal pressure for gradual abolition in the Border
States—were already in place by mid-1862—we can see more precisely what the Emancipation
Proclamation did to alter Union policy and transform the nature of the war. Skeptics have
always been too quick to claim that the Emancipation Proclamation was a dead letter because it
applied to areas over which the Union had no control. But no one was more aware of this
problem than Lincoln himself and—arguably for that very reason—he lifted the ban on
enticement that had been place since mid-1861. That ban prevented Union soldiers from actively
enticing slaves into federal lines. After January 1, 1863, however, Union soldiers were for the
first time sent onto southern farms and plantations with instructions to systematically *entice* slaves to come within Union lines.

The proclamation also opened the Union army to the systematic enlistment of black soldiers. When Congress repealed the racial exclusion in the militia act the previous July it envisioned blacks working primarily as military laborers. Lincoln’s proclamation explicitly invited the enlistment of African American men into “armed” service. Here the skeptics have missed their mark entirely, for although the Emancipation Proclamation excluded loyal slave states from military emancipation, it did not exclude those states from black enlistment in the Union Army. Over the course of 1863 Lincoln’s War Department opened dozens of recruitment centers for black soldiers in Maryland, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri—all areas formally exempted from the military emancipation provisions of the proclamation. Those states provided by far the largest numbers of slave recruits into the Union Army. Congress had already decreed that their enlistment guaranteed not only their own emancipation but, if their masters were disloyal, the emancipation of the soldiers’ wives, mothers, and children. In this way the Emancipation Proclamation was a direct assault on slavery in the very states critics claim it left untouched.

The Emancipation Proclamation also transformed the nature, though not the formal “purpose” of the war. From the opening of hostilities in the spring of 1861 through Lee’s surrender four years later, Lincoln and the Republicans consistently claimed that under the Constitution the federal government could not prosecute the war for any purpose other than the restoration of the Union. Yet from the start of the war they also claimed that slavery was the cause of the rebellion and that military emancipation was a legitimate means of suppressing it. Once the Emancipation Proclamation was issued everyone understood—northerners and
southerners, Democrats and Republicans, slave and free—all understood that so long as Lincoln and the Republicans held power the Union would not be restored until slavery was completely destroyed.

This turned out to be critical because, by the end of 1863 it was clear to both the President and Congress that state abolition and military emancipation, whether separately or in combination, would not be enough to destroy slavery. To be sure, those policies were necessary to get slavery abolished, but they were not sufficient. Between December, 1863, and March, 1864, Republicans settled on a third policy—a thirteenth amendment to the Constitution—permanently abolishing slavery everywhere in the United States. By then the Emancipation Proclamation had accustomed a majority of northerners to the idea that the war would not end without slavery ending as well. The proclamation had thereby created the political will to rewrite the Constitution in a way that would have been inconceivable four years earlier.

It was also clear to Lincoln and the Republicans that the slaves had played an important role in pushing antislavery policy toward this conclusion. Their initial antislavery policies had been built on the assumption that slaves would actively seek out their freedom by running to Union lines, and Union authorities felt vindicated—if also overwhelmed—by the vast numbers of slaves escaping to the freedom available to them in Union forts and camps. By early 1862, moreover, Union soldiers in the Confederate states were writing back to their families at home and their superiors in Washington telling them that the slaves were the only consistently “loyal” people they encountered in the South. As Frederick Douglass suggested, there was no such thing as a disloyal slave—and he was not the only prominent American taking note of the slaves’ loyalty to the Union. Republicans were soon justifying emancipation not simply as a military necessity but also as a reward for the loyalty of the slaves. Black military service in the last
years of the war pushed Republicans further in the same direction. By 1864—when perhaps 100,000 blacks were enlisted in the Union army—both Lincoln and Grant freely acknowledged that their service had become “indispensable” to northern victory. Black loyalty had thereby created a moral obligation on the part of the Union. This is what Lincoln meant, I think, when he said that ending the war without guaranteeing the freedom of the former slaves would amount to what he called “a cruel and astounding breach of faith.”

This is the story I ended up telling in Freedom National. It is a story in which slavery’s destruction is a process, not an event; in which Abraham Lincoln was not the only agent, though he may have been the only indispensable one. It is a story in which Republicans struggled with the contingencies of war, but responded to those contingencies in ways shaped by decades of antislavery politics. It is a story in which chronology matters—in which antislavery principles and policies barely heard of in 1830 were widely proclaimed among Republicans by 1860, in which statutes that were unimaginable on the day Lincoln was elected were repeatedly signed into law by the President in 1862, in which a constitutional amendment that nobody dreamed of when the war began was deemed essential by the time the war ended. It is a story of people with clear intentions, but also of unintended consequences—a dramatic story, but also a typical one—of idealists and cynics, of small kindnesses and small mindedness, of unheralded courage and unspeakable atrocity. It is a thousand of stories of many different emancipations; but also a single story with a momentous climax. A story driven by an irreconcilable conflict, but whose outcome was unclear until it was nearly there.

1865 was the end of a long struggle, brutal and inspiring by turns, to destroy slavery once and for all in the United States, but it was also the beginning of a new struggle—I suppose we
can call it the unending American struggle—to define the meaning of freedom, and to figure out just what we mean when we tell ourselves that all men are created equal.