

In this episode of [Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge's George Washington Slept Here](#), we're thrilled to introduce distinguished speaker, scholar, and friend Dr. Joe Fornieri. Joe discusses his inspiration behind the creation of the [RIT Center for Statesmanship, Law, and Liberty](#), his early influences, his love of music, and his engagement in Freedoms Foundation's graduate programs. He shares his expertise on Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, their mindsets, their influences, and how they traversed the abolition of slavery during the Civil War.

## Quotes

*"Let's find a balanced perspective that means avoiding both an overly idealized portrayal of America worldwide and reducing our history to only despicable or victimizing aspects."-Joe Fornieri*

*"Leadership represents the pinnacle of political greatness, encompassing timeless virtues such as wisdom, courage, and fortitude."-Joe Fornieri*

*"Statesmanship upholds the rule of law, aiming to enhance liberty and human flourishing."-Joe Fornieri*

## Featured Guest

### Joe Fornieri

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## Transcript:

We, the people, of the United States. A House divided against itself cannot stand. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

**Jason Raia:**

Hello, and welcome to *George Washington Slept Here*, the civic education podcast from Freedoms Foundation at Valley Four where we explore American history, civics, and the idea of liberty through conversations with some of our favorite thinkers, writers, and leaders. I'm Jason Raia, Chief Operating Officer at Freedoms Foundation, and the host of *George Washington Slept Here*. The format is simple, a long form conversation with a friend of Freedoms Foundation where everyone can learn something new. Before we go any further, a little housekeeping, we encourage everyone to subscribe to *George Washington Slept Here* wherever you listen to podcasts and make sure you get every new episode as soon as it is out. We love hearing from our listeners, and so please feel free to email us at [gwshpodcast@gmail.com](mailto:gwshpodcast@gmail.com) with your comments, questions, or suggestions, and hit us up at Freedoms Foundation's social media @FFVF on Twitter and on Facebook and Instagram @FreedomsFoundation. Today's interview is with Freedoms Foundation friend and political philosopher, Joe Fornieri. Hey, Joe.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Hey. Delighted to be here.

**Jason Raia:**

Our conversation today is gonna be structured in a way to keep us on track. We wanna explore your origin story. How did you become the person sitting before us? Your current work, which includes, I know, a book on Frederick Douglass that you're working on. Then I wanna talk about the state of America today. And finally, we will end with a quiz, which hopefully will allow listeners to learn something new, before we leave. So, tell us where you were born and raised, Joe.

**Joe Fornieri:**

I was actually born in Buffalo, and I remain a Buffalo Bills fan, but I was raised in Rochester, New York, the home of Frederick Douglass.

**Jason Raia:**

Ah, so there's the connection right off.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Right. He's in the air. He is in the air. And, I think that there's been a lot of great work and recognizing his tremendous legacy in the past, 10, 15 years in Rochester and throughout the country. I went to a public school, Fairport High School. I wrestled, played football, my junior year. I took up guitar, which has been a lifelong friend of mine. I then went to SUNY Geneseo, where I had a real conversion experience. There was a professor there, a very challenging professor named Doctor Deutsch, who really inspired me and changed my life as a teacher. I was considering going to law school and I decided, I don't know, senior year this happens sometimes, I just had had enough of school. And I spent a year playing music and pubs around Europe. Came back and then decided to get my PhD. I went to Boston College for 2 years. Studied with, Father Fortin, who was—

**Jason Raia:**

Oh, Ernie Fortin.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Ernie Fortin.

**Jason Raia:**

You know, that's my undergraduate was at, and my graduate, was at Boston College, and I knew Ernie.

**Joe Fornieri:**

I never knew.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Joe Fornieri:**

So, yes, he was a remarkable person. He had a mischievous twinkle in his eye, as a priest. He kind of liked the bad boys, the renegades, and, he was just a great thinker and a great instructor and kinda took me under his wing. I was gonna do my dissertation on Dante and then went to Catholic University and studied under David Walsh, Phil Henderson, Claes Ryn, there was a group of folks at Catholic University. And, I did my doctoral dissertation on Abraham Lincoln and Lincoln's view of religion and politics, and that became my first book and the basis of my first book in 2003. I play music in a blues band, probably a couple times a month with my brother and my nephew Joey, who's kind of a prodigy, and another friend drummer, Mike Morgan. So we're called the [Fornieri Brothers band on Facebook](#).

**Jason Raia:**

Nice. So, let's talk, let's talk a little bit about the music, though, because that's really been important to you. Obviously, you took that year off, you know, tell us a little bit about spending that year playing in Europe. That's just like, amazing, but also allows you to sort of, you know, give you the time and space to figure out what you were gonna do next and with the rest of your life.

**Joe Fornieri:**

It really did because as I mentioned, I was I was going to go to law school and, when I went to Europe, I went with my best friend, a guy named Craig Delancey, who interestingly enough, became a professor of philosophy in Oswego, you know, highly published, and he's also a science fiction writer. So he went there to you know, we were young and, you know, optimistic and romantic. And we, you know, he wanted to be a writer and I wanted to be a musician. So we kinda slumped it in London, but it was a great experience. I really worked on my guitar playing. I got down to a very broad repertoire of songs. I traveled extensively and I met a lot of different personalities. I did, I could, I guess, I could say this now, I'm not gonna get in trouble. My sojourn was interrupted, probably for the best because I had been in Italy where I was playing and traveling and I got stopped at Heathrow Airport.

**Jason Raia:**

Uh-oh.

**Joe Fornieri:**

And, I was interrogated and, essentially, you know, I was there without - I had extended my visa in London, and that was, you know, that was wrong. And I got caught red handed and so I got deported. I was sent back to the United States.

**Jason Raia:**

So your European musical sojourn was over.

**Joe Fornieri:**

It was over. And I'm happy to say that I've had a wonderful career at the Rochester Institute of Technology. for the past almost twenty-five years. I've really loved it. I mean, you hear a lot of, you know, people complaining about higher ed and it's been a very great experience. I love my students. I've had a very good relationship with the administration there. We have, we're a unique institution at RIT because, the cliché is that we attract students who are right and left brain. We have engineering school, hard sciences, and then we have a design school in video

gaming and photo journalism. So it's really a great mix and, proud to say, my daughter goes there.

**Jason Raia:**

Oh. That's very cool. So tell us what you're teaching. I know because you're you have, and, and then we'll talk about the center, but tell us about your classes and and the students who are coming to your class.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Yeah. Thank you. For the past twentyfive years, I've done a bread and butter American politics class. And, you know, you always, I think, to be an effective teacher, you always wanna find ways to keep things fresh in American politics just because current events keep things fresh, but you don't wanna toss out the tried and true. So that's been enjoyable for me, you know, and it's fresh. It's a new group of students I taught in the interval when I did come back from Europe, I taught in a place called Bishop County High School for three years.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Joe Fornieri:**

So I taught advanced placement, American, and European history in regions, and that really helped my teaching and helped me reach freshman students.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Joe Fornieri:**

So I always have a double section of that as my bread and butter staple. I work with a lot of primary documents, with the students, but I also give them the nuts and bolts, which, as you know, our civic literacy is not at the highest level.

**Jason Raia:**

We are definitely gonna talk about that a little bit later. Yes.

**Joe Fornieri:**

I think we have to, you know, presume that the the they don't know too much, not in a not in a arrogant way, but in an invitation to get them up to up to, a higher level. And I've taught, I've taught all over the spectrum, which is which is this wonderful thing about RIT. Just last semester I did a class on Roman Republicanism. It was the first time –

**Jason Raia:**

Of course, we know it is a huge influence on the founders.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Absolutely.

**Jason Raia:**

And on our own Constitution and what was happening just down the road in Philadelphia.

**Joe Fornieri:**

And that and that was the hook. And I was actually surprised here with this wonderful Frederick Douglass seminar we've had this week how many of our secondary teachers were really interested and wanted more on that subject. It was a, you know, I'm tenured, so but it was a bit of a risk still. I hadn't. I had not thought I was concerned the students would, you know, really not like this material, but I was pleasantly surprised. You know, they liked reading about Cicero, they liked reading Plutarch's history. It really is a you know, Rome is a remarkable history of and there's heroes, there's villains, there's great ideas, and it had a profound influence on our own self-government right, in terms of both–

**Jason Raia:**

Absolutely.

**Joe Fornieri:**

–A cautionary tale and a standard.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Because we know the republic eventually succumbs to the empire.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Exactly.

**Jason Raia:**

And so there is always that question of how long can this last? And it's it's one of the things that periodically, and we see ebbs and flows, but every once in a while, there is this thought that comes and you and you see long think pieces on it of is, are we coming to the end of the American century, or are we coming to the end of American influence? And it is very much the are we Rome?

**Joe Fornieri:**

Right. There's actually a book written on that topic.

**Jason Raia:**

Oh, really?

**Joe Fornieri:**

Yes. Are we Rome? Yeah. Right. I teach rhetoric, which has been a lot a lot on, and I think that's been very successful in assisting students with writing. We talk about, you know, while we're all concerned about the, you know, bringing up writing skills, and there's something about the that tested and tried in the old rhetorical, standards in assisting students become better writers, you know, kind of have to have to, you know, adapt them a little bit to modern times. But so I teach rhetoric. I teach political philosophy. I teach one of my big topics, is the First Amendment in free speech and Constitutional rights and liberties.

**Jason Raia:**

Certainly one of, one of those topics that Freedoms Foundation is deeply interested in and teaches about both with teachers and students is First Amendment rights, but also what are our responsibilities that go along with that? I tend to be an absolutist that the First Amendment is there there's very little that's not protected, but it's, it's a great conversation and engaging young people, especially, are there limits? You know, what is the depth and breadth of the freedom of speech and expression and press and religion and all of that. And we've seen it play out more and more in our courts and in public opinion in certainly in the last five years, I think, more than I've ever experienced it.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Yes. It's certainly been a hot topic. I think that there is the pen— you know, it's something of a cliché to talk about the pendulum, but I think the pendulum was swinging in one direction, perhaps 10, 15 years ago in terms of restricting speech and protecting certain marginalized groups. Now I think the pendulum is swinging back in terms of protecting speech. And I think that's good. I think we can have it both ways. One of my great heroes is Nadine Strossen. I

recommend everyone to read her to read her work. And she's spoken at Rochester several times, just a remarkable thinker and personally an individual. She's a real hero out there for free speech and so principled, you know, in terms of defending speech on both sides.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Joe Fornieri:**

That's the type of people in my mind we need out there. We have that legitimacy and credibility. I was grateful for the opportunity last year to hold a seminar here at Freedoms Foundation on free speech, and we had a, you know, just a, I thought, a great lineup of high school teachers from throughout the country. And that's important too because, diversity comes in many forms and, the geographic diversity—

**Jason Raia:**

Right,

**Joe Fornieri:**

—Can be very, quite interesting as well. And to listen to teachers from different states at the secondary level, what are the guidelines and what are their scenes? And what is the censorship in that state as opposed to another state?

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Joe Fornieri:**

What is offense- what is considered defensive in one state may be orthodoxy in another state? So now it's standing, you know, the fact that we've come more uniform. There's still a great deal of pluralism in the United States.

**Jason Raia:**

Well, that and that's what I was just going to say is this, the diversity of ideas is another important form of diversity you get when you have, you know, people who experience the world differently and they grow their own ideas. And then, you know, we sit down and talk about them and in some ways, we negotiate them with, you know, what is your idea and what is my idea and how do we bring those together and find common ground? Which we are gonna talk about.



But I wanna first talk about the Center for Statesmanship, Law, and Liberty, which is your center at RIT. Tell me why statesmanship and law and liberty and what it is your center does.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Yep. To use a musical metaphor, this is a triad. Statesmanship, law in liberty. Right? Statesmanship must be mindful of the rule of law and the end of statesmanship and the rule of law is to further liberty and human flourishing. We could say life liberty and the pursuit of happiness we shortened it to liberty. So these are all important considerations of a just and successful government. And I, as someone who is studied Lincoln and lived with him for the past twenty five years, but not only Lincoln, I had, was very interested in in in other great leaders. My mentors at SUNY Geneseo, and in Boston College, a guy named Kishore Mandhyan, devoted quite a bit of time to Gandhi. So I would teach leadership and different types of leadership and I thought that there, there's a lot of places to teach leadership, but I thought that the role of statesmanship of political leadership, per se, needed to be highlighted. I also thought it was important to, consider the role, the unique role the American founding.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Joe Fornieri:**

And to include that and to preserve that. I also, being a high school teacher, part of my mission was to outreach to both high school students that, you know, committed high school students and to, secondary teachers to work with them. That was one of the missions of the center. And so we have, we hold annual seminars on, you know, specific topics dealing with statesmanship and leadership. We had, you know, for example, we went to the Seward House. We went to Susan B. Anthony's house in Rochester. The Tubman House isn't too far from where we are. And, I thought that as I mentioned, there there's a lot of different interpretations of leadership, and I think that's good. There's, you know, the kind of the business model of leadership is salesmanship. I think they catch an element. But I kinda wanted to preserve the traditional understanding of leadership as the pinnacle, the apex of political greatness, and talk about old virtues, like, like, practical wisdom or prudence and courage and fortitude is there displayed in the political realm and taking into considerations the rule of law. And that, of course, means the study of, you know, the bad example of tyranny and, and considering tyranny. So I was fortunate enough to, to have some initial seed money to support. You know, my center is non-partisan. I think it's in me that I make that clear. I'm not here to indoctrinate.

**Jason Raia:**

And that's and that's one of the things that connected us to you was, you know, we can share the same values, the value of liberty, and the value of the Constitution but we both as individuals, but as organizations, Freedoms Foundation, your center, come at it from this

nonpartisan point of view that this is not about indoctrination. It is about engagement. It is about talking about what is incredibly important. But in a way that everybody can be part of the conversation. So I'm curious, what your take on, you know, so you're studying statesmanship, and you're looking at the past, all the way back to the Roman Republic, at least our American founding. There are lessons galore amongst the great statesmen, but also amongst the worst, you know, you, you, whether they're --

**Joe Fornieri:**

The negative.

**Jason Raia:**

Romans like, you know, Nero and Caligula.

**Joe Fornieri:**

You know, health and disease to use as a medical analysis.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah. But, you know, but I'm curious if you're and again, nonpartisan and not in a political way, but do you think political leaders today have a good understanding of the kinds of statesmanship that you are trying to teach your students?

**Joe Fornieri:**

Pass?

**Jason Raia:**

Okay. I don't I don't mean any particular one. You know? But it does feel like there was a deficit.

**Joe Fornieri:**

I think we all could admit there's on both sides of the spectrum, there's a deficit of leadership and it's concerning.

**Jason Raia:**

So let me ask you this question. If you could give one primary source text to every politician out there, what would you want them to read?

**Joe Fornieri:**

Oh, wow. That's a great question. I think I would want them to read Abraham Lincoln's Peoria Address of 1854.

**Jason Raia:**

So you have to tell us and our listeners about it.

**Joe Fornieri:**

This is one of my favorite Lincoln speeches. I know people usually select the Gettysburg Address which is, of course, only 217/272 words and, you know, profound and poetic at the same time, or the second inaugural but the Peoria Address, was in response to the Kansas Nebraska Act of 1854, which Lincoln believed you know, was going to nationalize slavery. And Lincoln provided a magisterial critique of slavery on moral, historical, legal and political grounds in the speech. He integrates. He weaves all these different considerations into the speech and attacks slavery on different levels. There's even a very moving and profound critique of slavery based on the slave holder's intuitive recognition of the wrongs of slavery and the recognition of the common humanity of the slave and empathy, even empathy with the slave. So sympathy, I should say. And in the midst of doing this, Lincoln provides, much like Frederick Douglass a critique of the American regime, but also a vindication of its core principles. And he displays a moderate prudent statesmanship that tries to further the principle of equality for all human beings under the circumstances of the 19th Century. So this would be a great speech for everybody to read because it's a rhetorical masterpiece in style. The substance is profound. You know, I've referred to Lincoln in one of my books as a philosopher Statesman. His greatness of both, thought and action, speech, indeed. And we see this, in his speech. This speech marks the emergence of Lincoln in 1854. He comes out of retirement from, you know, he had been practicing his law career, and he reenter politics.

**Jason Raia:**

And that it's a couple of years before the great debates, with Steven Douglas and then six years before that and that brings him to Washington. And so, tell us the name again so people can.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Yes. It's October 16<sup>th</sup> 1854, Lincoln's speech at Peoria, Illinois. And sometimes it's called the Peoria Speech. Sometimes it's referred to Lincoln's Speech on the Kansas Nebraska Act, but that's the date, October 16<sup>th</sup> 1854. And, it still is accessible today. I think in reading this, just one more example. I think the historical purpose, Lincoln provides a historical overview of the founders intent to restrict slavery and the problem of slavery from the Revolutionary Era up to his own time, and he discusses the various compromises. And like the incredible lawyer that he is, this overview is provided with such clarity, and cogency. It's, you know, maybe a 3/4 page overview. It's one of the best summaries you could get of that complex era.

**Jason Raia:**

Right And that's—

**Joe Fornieri:**

Of course, it's through Lincoln's lens. I recognize that.

**Jason Raia:**

Absolutely. And Lincoln has a particular lens. And, but It is this, or idea that is in this particular way when it comes to the institution of slavery, as well as others that the revolution is unfinished.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Yes.

**Jason Raia:**

And that, you know, it will, and, and some might argue that, you know, in, in some ways, the revolution continues even today. One of the things I love talking to young people about is this idea that, you know, the miracle story of the founders is they created the parameters. They laid the foundation for the growth of liberty year on year on year. And we certainly, you know, the, the, the first, the, the, maybe the, you know, one of the biggest challenges is, of course, slavery. And we end up in the Civil War, but then, you know, women, and the 19th Amendment, you know, are brought into this liberty. And that big tent. And so I'm curious about how you came to Lincoln. And we'll get to Douglass because we know that's at Rochester. You know, that's part of it. But how did you come to the Civil War in Lincoln? You're obviously interested in Rome. You're interested in liberty. Why did that coalesce around Lincoln?

**Joe Fornieri:**

Right. And I was considering doing my doctoral dissertation on, initially under Father Fortin, on Dante.

**Jason Raia:**

That is a very different take. Dante to Lincoln. I wanna hear this story.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Dante to Lincoln. I went to a Catholic University. It's interesting. The Civil War, I think because northern Virginia, was very much in the air in Washington, D.C. And there was a group that

remained. You know, Lincoln is popular, but, there's also strong currents, that from both the left and the right that criticize Lincoln. And there was a critique some of my friends at Catholic University were highly critical of Lincoln and would you know, appeal to this book, this book by M.E. Bradford, the one of his chapters was the heresy of equality. They became interested in the debate between Bradford and Harry V. Jaffa. who, I think, is one of the greatest scholars of Lincoln. He's a political philosopher from Claremont. I was at Claremont for many years. I also was studying Aquinas, and I was, with a, he'll probably disavow me now because he didn't like Lincoln himself, that was with a guy, Ross Hettinger. He was brilliant and a great person but he had a different take on Lincoln. And, so I think some of these some of the critiques of Lincoln actually forced me to dive a little deeper and I and I became enthralled. I also wanted to do, I think, work in the American area, an American political thought, and I was working with Phil Henderson, who was an amazing Eisenhower scholar. And there was a kind of, you know, common interest in American political thought and American things. And I really just began to see Lincoln as a great thinker and was struck by the profanity of his thought. And then all the questions I was interested in as a political philosopher, law and morality religion in politics, these, you know, the natural law of natural rights the difference between human positive law and natural law and how to, you know, close the gap between the two that I I you saw this playing out in practice during the Civil War era is really a battle of ideas as well as bayonets. So I thought it was a way to apply political philosophy to the American experience and to look at it through that lens. And that's what got me into Lincoln.

**Jason Raia:**

So would you say that Lincoln is, and the answer may be both, but is he more pragmatic as a statesman or idealistic?

**Joe Fornieri:**

You know, that's a great question. And I in my book, and I contrast his leadership to pragmatism, which pragmatism is often used in a in a good sense or associated with prudence. But sometimes it has a more pejorative sense when you say the person's being merely pragmatic that they're unprincipled or a little short on principle and they act on the basis of expediency or short term success.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Joe Fornieri:**

So I position Lincoln's prudent statesmanship, and prudence is the virtue of practical wisdom. And applying, you know, it can be defined in many different ways, applying principles under the circumstances, adapting just means to just ends, but it also always involves practical circumstances in actions and deliberation - deliberating on certain means to reach just ends.

Right? It's the realm of human, reason and deliberation. So I contrast that to a pragmatism and if prudence you know, properly applying and considers principles under the circumstances is the right reason in matters of moral and political action, then pragmatism is, let's say, short sighted when it comes to moral principle. And you know, the pragmatist, for example, is someone who, you know, seeks, short term success you know, will not really have any strong moral compass.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. It's the end justifies the means.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Yeah. Right. And it's really self-interest, or, or some other expedient measure. And at the same time, you have the idealist, let's say, on the other end, and that's the person who fixates on moral principles and their abstract purity and is blind to the contingencies, to the limits of politics, prudence, implies a certain moderation that recognizes politics as the art of the possible.

**Jason Raia:**

And that gets to==

**Joe Fornieri:**

And that's a virtue to bring that back.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. But that gets to with Lincoln, you know, that idea, that statement, that quote that that you know, is, is bastardized all the time, but where he says I would, you know, for the sake of the Union, I would free all his slaves or I would free none of the slaves.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Yeah. The letter to Greeley, he lays out, you know, my paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union. If I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it. If I could save it by freeing none of the slaves, I would do it. If I could save it by freeing some and leaving others in slavery, I would do it. Of course, a month before this, he had already written a preliminary draft of the Emancipation we know in retrospect.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Joe Fornieri:**

And, of course, preserving the Union for Lincoln means preserving the principles for which stood.

**Jason Raia:**

And -- Right.

**Joe Fornier:**

Which further inequality under the circumstances --

**Jason Raia:**

-- and the future opportunity to free all slaves that if he'd -- I think that Lincoln recognized that if they lost, then they would have no opportunity to do anything in the Confederacy.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Well, we have that on good, testimony of Frederick Douglass. He meets Lincoln in 1864 --

**Jason Aria:**

You are good at these transitions.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Yeah is that a good transition? Am I transitioning too much?

**Jason Raia:**

No, no it's perfect. I'm serious. This is perfect. Please talk about Douglass.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Fascinating in David, there's a lot of great Douglass scholars out there, David Blight, and James Oakes is, you know, amazing. I can't, it's like music. You start listing people. You feel guilty because you leave some people out. But, those two in particular have really done great work, Stauffer on *Giants* - but there's a lot of work that's been done illuminating this meeting between Douglass and Abraham Lincoln in 1864. Lincoln invites Douglass to the White House and Douglass is astounded because Lincoln, first of all, looks despondent. He's very touchy and he reports on his appearance, the Grant's Campaign, you know, to take Richmond and the East Coast is --

**Jason Raia:**

It's a grind. It's a bloody grind.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Yeah. The country's war weary. This is August of 1864.

**Jason Raia:**

The Copperheads are –

**Joe Fornieri:**

There's a clamor for peace. There's a fire in the rear. This is what Lincoln called it. Right? Like, these Copperheads, subverting. There's impatience, and understandable, with Lincoln's suspension of the writ of habeas corpus and, so, you know, restriction of civil liberties –

**Jason Raia:**

One of those –

**Joe Fornieri:**

– military trials–

**Jason Raia:**

-- arguments against Lincoln –

**Joe Fornieri:**

Yep.

**Jason Raia:**

That, you know, the purest libertarians even today, fault Lincoln for is the suspension of habeas corpus.

**Joe Fornieri:**

That's an important argument to have. Right? I have a certain position on it. That's different – Actually, I'm gonna do a podcast on it. I think when I when I, return, but so Lincoln informs



Douglass that he's likely to lose the election in 1864. And, of course, Lincoln's campaign manager, Henry Raymond shares this bad news with Lincoln. He's getting it from many different sources. And he asked Douglass to raise a band of African American scouts to spread the word of Emancipation throughout the south, and here because, you know, not as not as many, fugitives had had been escaping –

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Joe Fornieri:**

I mean, there were a lot, but he wanted to encourage more before the emancipation proclamation got revoked.

**Jason Raia:**

Right because this is now a year after –

**Joe Fornieri:**

Yes.

**Jason Raia:**

he has proclaimed it. It goes into January 1, 1863. So we're now in 1864. So we're beyond a year, and he's in Lincoln still not enough slaves.

**Joe Fornieri:**

More, we want more. We want more freedom We want more slaves coming in line, of course, at this time, African Americans are fighting valiantly in the Union armies. Ultimately, there's about 200,000 who will fight for the Union. And Lincoln recognizes that the strides towards black freedom may be reversed.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Joe Fornieri:**

And, you know, the country could opt for an ignoble piece. And so Douglass is astounded, and this is the plan that was initially or sim- very similar to the plan proposed by John Brown, an armed underground raid road –

**Jason Raia:**

Harper's Ferry.

**Joe Fornieri:**

—that would subvert the south would subvert slavery, encourage survival and selection. and protect, freed persons, you know, seeking free, you know, seeking freedom. A former slave seeking freedom. So, yeah, that will be astounding, very, very telling. Of course, things change in September, late August, guess, you know, early September with the Sherman's capture of Atlanta.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Atlanta and then on to Savannah and --

**Joe Fornieri:**

Christmas gift.

**Jason Raia:**

Yes. The Christmas gifts. I, I saw one time, I did, when I was still teaching history, I did a program in Savannah, and I was at the, the historical society there, and I got to see a reverse Xerox, essentially, of the original handwritten note from Sherman to Lincoln that they use to for the to transmit it over the telegraph, but he writes, and it's in it just he writes that, you know, I I I send to you a Christmas gift of 25,000 bales of cotton to add to the city of Savanna. It is and he just dashes it off in his own hands, and then it's sent by telegraph. And it's just another one of those moments where you're sitting there going this is I'm in the spot. I'm holding this sort of 1 or 2 generations removed, the note that Sherman wrote for Lincoln that is, the one of those turning points that we're, heading, we're barreling toward the close of this chapter of American history. So Lincoln, Douglass, tell us about that relationship between the two of them. Tell us what Douglass thought of Lincoln and, and certainly he survived him because it's not long after that it's April 14, 1865 that Lincoln is assassinated after being reelected and, and Douglass goes on to live another 30 years.

**Joe Fornieri:**

1895.

**Jason Raia:**

So tell us about that relationship between the two of them. And where because it seems like Douglass changed his thinking about Lincoln. And part of that built on the relationship they developed, part of it, just as the years passed, recognizing what Lincoln had done.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Yeah. I think that's fair. Douglass is notable for his, reversals and I-I always, when I teach Douglass, I tell my students, you know, Douglass was a great man and great people, great men are capable of changing their views. And I think it speaks to his integrity. Right? He wasn't rigid. Notably, he shifts in his view on the Constitution when he breaks with William Lloyd Garrison.

**Jason Raia:**

Mhmm.

**Joe Fornieri:**

He initially sees the Constitution as a pro-slavery document as a covenant with debts and an agreement without and then by 1852, even earlier, it's a glorious liberty document.

**Jason Raia:**

So let's stop. Talk about that. Why? Because liberty is important for you. Liberty is important for Freedoms Foundation. Obviously, liberty is important for Douglass. Where did that change come from? What did he come to know signified that his thinking needed to change?

**Joe Fornieri:**

It's a great story. I think there's this book, this author Damon, I think by that name, *Glorious Liberty*, giving all these people plugs they deserve credit, to the nice nice work on this. and something that I'm hoping to explore in further detail and link it up, you know, with Lincoln in this book that I'm working on. He the one of the tenets of garrisonian abolitionists is that the Constitution, the compromises that the Constitution had had sold out.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Joe Fornieri:**

The glorious prince the Declaration of Independence that, you know, it was a great start, but then it was it was completely betrayed and undermined, by the compromises made to –

**Jason Raia:**

And specifically, the Three-Fifths Compromise.

**Joe Fornieri:**

The Three-Fifths Compromise, you know, the foreign slave trade, the fugitive slave provision as they were called. All these, and that is for Garrison, the Constitution nationalized slavery. So it is that we were a nation dedicated to human servitude and white supremacy in this sense.

Douglass begins his career as a Garrisonian after he escapes and he meets Garrison, about 1841, in person. He was aware of Garrison. He goes on the speaking circuit with Garrison. He begins his own paper, right, in my wonderful city of Rochester, New York, and, *The North Star*. And Garrison, you know, we see the griffs with Garrison are –

**Jason Raia:**

And, of course, Garrison got *The Liberator*.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Garrison has *The Liberator*. He perturbed to say, you know, that's probably a nice way of saying it, with Douglass because Douglass starts his own newspaper. Then Douglass, within the upstate New York area, begins to engage in dialogue with a group known as the, the political abolitionists. And they're kind of, I think in some ways, unsung heroes, folks like, Gerrit Smith, Gerrit Smith, Lysander Spooner, he mentions these people. Gerrit Smith was a millionaire at the time. He had supported many abolitionist causes and it had helped support Douglass' newspaper and Douglass announces his change in *The North Star* he says, you know, sense of duty and obligation, obliges him to officially and publicly announce his change of opinion that the Constitution is now a freedom document that is anti-slavery and that beautiful quote should be wielded for emancipation. Right? It should be the Constitution should be wielded for emancipation. And, because he was declared anathema by the Garrisonian abolitionists that those who's anti-American, I'm sorry, anti-American anti-slavery society, would not accept this dissenting viewpoint, right, that the slavery may be pro-freedom. That the Constitution may be pro-freedom.

**Jason Raia:**

I mean, it brings us back to this pragmatism, prudence, idealism that, you know, Garrison is the idealist.

**Joe Fornieri:**

I think, yes.

**Jason Raia:**

They are the ones who are like, this is morally wrong. It has to be obliterated immediately. and any other viewpoint from that and not that not that --

**Joe Fornieri:**

is anathema. Right.

**Jason Raia:**

IS anathema, but not that Douglass would have disagreed with that. But again, it seems like there's a prudence there that says, you know, we gotta figure out how to get there. I think, you know, Kevin Greene talked about, you know, baby steps that sometimes it's, you know, you just you take small steps to get there. You know, it's one stair at a time. It's not jumping, you know, ten stairs. You say some people can jump ten stairs. Other people have to go one stair at a time. And then and but you get there.

**Joe Fornieri:**

And, yeah, and, I mean, Douglass, Douglass had the and was far ahead of others in terms of a multiracial democracy. And but also, he was prudent in terms of not only that end, the justice of the end of, you know, and justice demanding that, and the principles pointing to that, but also the means throughout his career he took --

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Joe Fornieri:**

--to attain that lead. You know, Garrison, the Garrisonians were apolitical or even anti political that you couldn't either vote against slavery. That was anathema, nor could you run for office because this would taint you, right, that you can't any, you know, you disavow any allegiance to the covenant with death. And if you're involved in the political process, then you're corrupted. Right? So you would rely entirely on denunciation and moral suasion.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. It's moral suasion. That was the phrase I remember always teaching my suasion students is, you know, William Garrison, you know, William Garrison, is in moral suasion, those two things go together.

**Joe Fornieri:**

The second great awakening, and he's very much influenced by this and that that could create a revival and reform but it's unlikely.

**Jason Raia:**

I wanna give you just the opportunity to speak to Frederick Douglass and the Constitution. And ultimately, he's born a slave. He escapes, on his own. He comes to this transformation in understanding this liberty document is not a pro-slave document. Where does he end his life as far as that belief in the American system? Because it's 1895. It's 30 years on from the end of the Civil War. Where is he on his own?

**Joe Fornieri:**

He was extremely distressed and rightfully so about the Civil Rights Acts, which were passed roughly - not - I'm sorry - the Civil Rights cases, which really stripped the many of the provisions of -

**Jason Raia:**

And is it 1894, Plessy v Ferguson?

**Joe Fornieri:**

1896.

**Jason Raia:**

1896. So he's gonna come after he dies..

**Joe Fornieri:**

And he sees this and it eviscerates many of the protectors for the freed men.

**Jason Raia:**

He knows it's coming.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Oh, I think he anticipates it. And because he sees the direction that the court is moving in. You know, when I tell my students for every court decision you applaud, there's one you could possibly condemn. You know, the court giveth, and the court taketh away. And I think that's how Douglass felt. Not, you know, they misread, I think they grossly misread the Bill of Rights or the 14th Amendment as well as the Constitution, but it, you know, it institutionalized Jim Crow in

effect, that was the effect of all of these, and Douglass was chagrined. But the thing about Douglass is that he never loses hope. There's always a hopeful note, to go forward. He has this tenacity, this resilience and I remind students of that. I think he's a great example of a, you know, a patriot who could be, you know, at the same time and the best way, critical of the country. And wants best for the country, can be critical and —

**Jason Raia:**

And still supportive.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Yeah supports the core principles and prophetically, you know, condemns the country when it betrays itself. but also allowing hope. It's not - Douglass is not a cynic. I don't think so. He's not, he's not, he's not a cynic. He's not a separatist.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Joe Fornieri:**

He's not a cynic, not that that's the same thing, but he's not a separatist. He's not a cynic. He really believes in the possibility of a multi-racial democracy, a freedom for all, And, you know, there's the famous statement where someone, a young person asked him, you know, towards the end of Douglas's life, what, you know, what would you do? What advice would you give me? He says agitate, agitate, agitate.

**Jason Raia:**

And that's and you will see his successors in Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois and eventually into the Civil Rights movement under Martin Luther King and all of them in some ways, and that movement, are descended from Frederick Douglass. And --

**Joe Fornieri:**

Oh, he's a giant. Right? He's a giant in American history. He's a, he's a, he's a giant in telling the story of African Americans in making that story known to whites and, and in 1845 when people thought many people, you know, thought slavery was a benign institution.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Joe Fornieri:**

And public opinion had to be –

**Jason Raia:**

Right? Because for decades, they've been saying, oh, we take care of our —

**Joe Fornieri:**

Paternalistic, let's or you know, mind your own business.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Yeah.

**Jason Raia:**

Mind your own business. This is our peculiar institution.

**Jason Raia:**

Well, there's always more to say, but I do wanna talk before we wrap up here just a little bit about America today. We are, or I am, particularly interested in the state where we find ourselves in political polarization. And there was a really interesting, but disheartening [Pew research poll](#) that just came out that says that 77% of Americans think the country will be more divided in 2050 than it is today. And then when we couple that with the recent, NAEP scores on civics and history that showed that 22% of 8th graders scored proficient in civics and 13% in American history. So we've got this lack of civic knowledge. And then we couple that with, you know, people saying you know,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of people will be saying that the country is on the path to being further divided than it is today. You know, how do we overcome this? How do we find a way, and what might Lincoln and Douglass, you know, speak to this situation that we find out? Because they're living in the most divided time ever.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Right.

**Jason Raia:**

Literally—

**Joe Fornieri:**



**Jason Raia:**

We split into two countries. Where literally are at war, brother against brother, you know, family against family. And so, we're not there yet. I'm not at all, you know, but, you know, the but things you know, people feel that there is a gloom, and what I read from this poll is people don't know how we escape that. How we get and how we get any better than in twenty years, in thirty years, that it's just gonna be worse. And I'm so curious what you think Douglass or Lincoln or any of the great statesmen that you believe in, you know, would say for our time.

**Joe Fornieri:**

I think we need to revive a proper patriotism and we could look to Douglass as a great example of that. You know, someone who an outsider, you know, is in exile from the political system and follows his personal odyssey and recognizes that one can have gratitude for, you know, one's country and should ought to have gratitude and even love and a sense of obligation to others. and to succeeding generations and a sense of gratitude for the sacrifice of the past and still be critical in a balanced manner. You know, we could avoid the extreme of jingoistic nationalism and triumphalism on the one hand, and which, you know, we wanna make the entire world and the image of America. Or, on the other hand, a kind of cynicism that only sees our history as despicable, and a history of victimization and oppression. There's a mean, but it also, I think, requires sensitive teachers, and it, and it and it requires thoughtfulness. It requires engagement. I think one thing I love about Freedoms Foundation is the diversity of teachers, in their political views, as well as the geographic, racial, ethnic, gender, there's diversity amongst these groups of teachers. Listen to them. But we're all on the same page in the sense that, and I, you know, here I am. I'm a college professor, but I do. I feel solidarity. This is part of a calling that, you know, you don't, you don't wanna be dictated in terms of what you teach. But, you know, there should be guidelines, but no one wants censorship, whether it's coming from the right or whether it's coming from the left. And that's not to say that parents don't have a role. But I think it's defined a way in, you know, in terms of civic education. I still have to trust it to strive for that goal of patriotism without blinding ourselves to the sins of the past. Rather or not, but neither, you know, history is not simply, you know, American history is a tale told of oppression but it's not, you know, to use upon fully intended. We shouldn't whitewash history.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Absolutely. History is complex.

**Joe Fornieri:**

And, we can do that. I think we can absolutely do that. We can have dialogue. We can have a conversation. We can have great books that are loose cannons. Right? Frederick, I would include *The Narrative of the Life* of a slave is one of the great books, not only in America, but, you know, at all human history. But I'm but I'm also inclusive. There's other voices that can be I don't think not I don't feel threatened by any of this.

**Jason Raia:**

And that's and that's a choice. And that I think that's something really if we, you know, that to choose to not feel threatened, to choose to engage with people who think differently than you do and not look for the social media echo-chamber—

**Joe Fornieri:**

Right.

**Jason Raia:**

That is repeating back to you what you already believe and the things that you wanna know.

**Joe Fornieri:**

And it thrives off the polarization.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Joe Fornieri:**

It just and I'm not saying there's divisions. Look. I also say, listen, within the diversity, for this diversity to be productive, which I believe it is, champion of diversity, it also presumes a unity.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Joe Fornieri:**

And our national motto, e pluribus unum, is worth preserving and maybe a way of approaching, and ordered patriotism. Unity does not abolish pluralism, but pluralism exists within the context of unity. And I would say that our unity is our core principles.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Joe Fornieri:**

You know, and here I may disagree, with others who say that our principles were false when they were written and there's no opportunity and that we, you know, people of different races or groups can't live together. That there's always a suspicion and an oppression that's there, you know, the diversity occurs within the contact of our common humanity and the inalienable rights we share.

**Jason Raia:**

Right, but with that common humanity comes frailty. And that's part of what we have to overcome. I mean, these are human institutions. You know, every government is made up of human beings.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Father Fortin, Father Fortin's Augustinianism left a big impact on me, in terms of my view of politics. And that's what I tell people. Are you a Democrat or Republican? I'm an Augustinian. because I think everyone is flawed.

**Jason Raia:**

That's it.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Original sin has taken its toll on everyone. I distrust power and all its concentrations.

**Jason Raia:**

So more and more. That's where I keep coming back to is how often the frailties of our civic institutions are really the frailties of the human beings who are involved in them. And that, again, that, a little bit of grace that if we can just find a way to offer a little bit of grace, particularly to the people that we disagree with, and particularly for, those whose viewpoints we struggle to understand, it would go a long way toward you know, managing to find some kind of common ground.

**Joe Fornieri:**

That's right. And recognizing, as John Stuart Mills says, they always teach my students this that there's truth. There's partial truth in the opinions, you know, of those you disagree with.

**Jason Raia:**

Well, we're gonna wrap up with a quiz.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Oh, is this for me?

**Jason Raia:**

This is for you

**Joe Fornieri:**

Oh, no.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah, the good thing is you didn't have to study.

**Joe Fornieri:**

So I'm in trouble.

**Jason Raia:**

Here we go. Excluding –

**Joe Fornieri:**

–undermine, my credibility, though –

**Jason Raia:**

Not at all. Alright. Everyone can pass. Excluding Washington and Lincoln. Who's your favorite president?

**Joe Fornieri:**

Oh, that's a great question. I think my professor Phil Henderson, really, I think it might be Eisenhower.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Isn't it crazy?

**Jason Raia:**

And one of our founders, our founding champion.

**Joe Fornieri:**

I think the more I learn about Eisenhower, the more I admire him. Keeping us out of war and with education.

**Jason Raia:**

You know, level headed and again, you know, was not interested in engaging in politics the way a politician might. This was the savior of Europe engaged in politics, and that was a very difficult one.

**Joe Fornieri:**

I may, my friend Elizabeth Spalding who's written on Truman, and I might throw Truman in the mix too, just the tenacity, and he made mistakes but he was just so human and he came in at such a difficult time.

**Jason Raia:**

So, next question, what's one thing you want every American to learn more about?

**Joe Fornieri:**

Right now, I want everybody in America to learn more about Frederick Douglass.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay, I love it. if you had not shown in to become a political philosopher, and we never really got to delve into what that means particularly. But if you hadn't become a political philosopher, your chosen descriptor, what would you have become?

**Joe Fornieri:**

Is it a high school teacher? Does that count?

**Jason Raia:**

Absolutely.,

**Joe Fornieri:**

I'd wanna be a high school teacher, and I was.

**Jason Raia:**

And you were, you could have made an entire career.

**Joe Fornieri:**

I thought about becoming a chef.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Joe Fornieri:**

But it's, that's it's a really tough life, the hours.

**Jason Raia:**

What pet peeve annoys you the most?

**Joe Fornieri:**

Well, you'd be surprised. Leaf blowers.

**Jason Raia:**

Oh, really?

**Joe Fornieri:**

It drives it. I know when my neighbors I'm a nice guy. It just I think being a musician or something, it was it's when they it's when they go on. It drives me crazy. I can't think.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah. I'll every Tuesday, we have during the summer, spring and summer, the landscaping crew would come in and cut and blow leaves. And and inevitably, they are outside my office window whenever I've got a zoom meeting.

**Joe Fornieri:**

A little bit. You know, a little bit of leaf points. It's a great invention. Sure. But when your Saturday afternoon is destroyed by leaf blowing, and I can't listen to John Coltrane or you know, I can't I can't play my guitar or, you know, I can't talk to my friends because I'm hearing the leaf blowers. We gotta put mufflers on those things.

**Jason Raia:**

I love it. Okay. Favorite movie. What's your favorite movie?

**Joe Fornieri:**

Oh my goodness. We were just talking about that. What's my favorite, you know? I wish I could say, you know I wish I could say something profound but I'm such a product of the 80's and so are the *Blues Brothers*.

**Jason Raia:**

Oh, I love that movie. I wore that –

**Joe Fornieri:**

– my favorite movie. I loved Belushi and Ackroyd and –

**Jason Raia:**

Yep.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Ray Charles, Aretha.

**Jason Raia:**

Oh, Aretha.

**Joe Fornieri:**

– and the restaurant.

**Jason Raia:**

Aretha singing “Think” was just, well we had both the album and the VHS tape –

**Joe Fornieri:**

So funny –.

**Jason Raia:**

– introduced to this man who, you know, was, there at the Harlem Renaissance and here he is, you know, doing that dream sequence.

**Joe Fornieri:**

James Brown and the church. But the penguin.

**Jason Raia:**

Yes.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Don't forget the penguin.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay, let's see. What one lesson from Lincoln or Douglass or any of their scholarly work would you want young people to know?

**Joe Fornieri:**

There's so many. I'm sorry, that's why. I gotta - I gotta just pick one here. Oh, it would be do unto others, but maybe that's–

**Jason Raia:**

No that's great.

**Joe Fornieri:**

– as you would have them do unto you. And that of course becomes the guiding principle of equality and principle against slavery.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.



**Joe Fornieri:**

And that golden rule still needs to be taught and hopefully gets us out of narcissism.

**Jason Raia:**

It's so simple and yet so profound.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Yeah and it's there. It's there in Douglass. It's there in Lincoln. It's not there in John C. Calhoun.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay, ourbon or scotch?

**Joe Fornieri:**

Oh, bourbon.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay. Excellent. Well, Joe Fornieri, thank you for being on the show today. What a great conversation.

**Joe Fornieri:**

Thank you so much.

**Jason Raia:**

I also wanna thank our producers, Lara Kennedy and Sarah Rasmussen and a special shout out to friend of the pod, Bill Franz, for his art design on the logo. Special thanks to longtime Freedoms Foundation historic interpreter, Bob Gleason, for his contributions to the intro. And most of all, I want to thank all of you, our listeners. Please subscribe, follow, rate, and review *George Washington Slept Here*. wherever you listen to podcasts and tell your friends. If you wanna check out Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, just go to our website [www.freedomsfoundation.org](http://www.freedomsfoundation.org) and follow us on social media or email us at [gwshpodcast@gmail.com](mailto:gwshpodcast@gmail.com) with your comments, questions, or suggestions.

That's it for today. We look forward to next time.