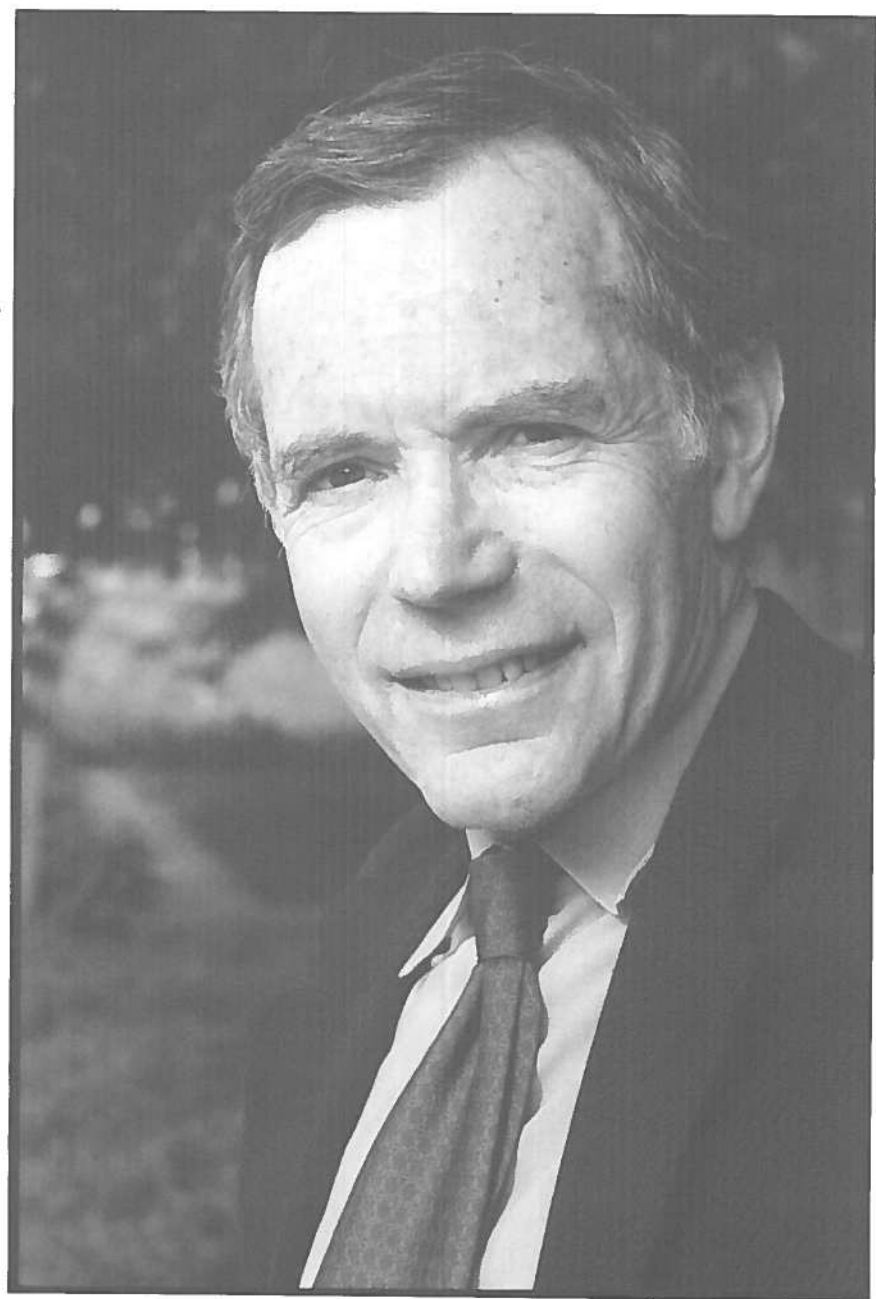


**Eric Foner  
President**

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**2000**



# Eric Foner

Eric Foner, as one of his many admirers writes, is “one of nature’s communicators, a man whose vigorous prose style is matched by an engaging and voluble presence.” This apt description best captures the qualities that make him a premier raconteur of the American experience: his intellectual vigor, passion for history, tremendous literary and oratorical talents, and infectious energy. His versatility as a scholar and his driving commitment to create a truly inclusive and complex version of American history have given him an enviable and unique stature in academia and public life. A historian whose many publications reflect different ways of writing history and who has received nearly every distinction that his profession has to offer, he is, to paraphrase a hoary old saying, the master of all historical arts and jack of none.

Born in 1943 to a family whose reputation for scholarship and activism is legendary, Eric Foner imbibed the lessons of intellectual duty and social purpose at an early age. His father and uncle, Jack and Philip Foner, were pioneers in labor and African American history and his other uncles and brother participated in the labor and civil rights movements. His mother, a high school art teacher, confronted Eric’s primary school principal about an illustration in his third-grade history text that showed happy slaves. Brought up in a family where intellectual and political issues were the stuff of everyday conversations, he absorbed his parents’ devotion to racial justice and to a broader, inclusive view of American history. Blacklisted and hounded out of academia during the McCarthy era, the Foner family stands vindicated today by the achievements of its talented scion.

By birth and training, Foner was destined to become a historian. His first “book” on the solar system, he confesses, was not based on “archival research.” Written at the age of seven, it was a precocious sign of his lifelong love for astronomy. The call of Clio, however, proved to be stronger. As an undergraduate student at Columbia University, he encountered a group of inspiring U.S. historians: James Shenton, a dynamic teacher who has trained generations of Civil War historians, Eric McKittrick, one of the finest early American historians, and Richard Hofstadter, arguably the greatest historian of his generation. Under Hofstadter’s mentorship, Foner wrote a senior thesis on the Free Soil Party of 1848, the basis of his first two published articles, and won the prestigious Kellett fellowship to study at Oriel College, Oxford University. At Oxford, the well-known Civil War historian Allan Nevins, who had taught his father and uncle, further stimulated his interest in one of the most crucial eras in American history. Weekly tutorial assignments at Oxford assured that he would never suffer from writer’s block, a fact that is borne out by a prolific publishing career.

In 1965 Foner returned to Columbia to pursue his doctoral work under Hofstadter on the free soil ideology of the Republican Party. His choice of topic reflected his abiding interest in the issues of slavery and race, which was spurred by the turbulent decade of the 1960s when he and members of his family participated in the civil rights struggles of the day.

At a time when the debate between the different schools of Civil War historiography had run dry, Foner's dissertation not only revived interest in Civil War causation but also became an instant classic on being published. *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (1970) was a definitive answer to revisionist and neorevisionist historians who downplayed the significance of slavery in the coming of the Civil War by pointing to the racial and ethnocentric attitudes of most white northerners. In a complex and nuanced argument, Foner illustrated that free soilism or the effort to restrict the expansion of slavery to the west encompassed antislavery as well as racial motives. Based on voluminous primary research, the book uncovered Republican views of economy, society, politics, and constitutional reform that had generated criticisms of southern slave society. At a time when political historians were becoming increasingly enamored of quantitative methods borrowed from the social sciences, he blazed a new path by taking ideas and ideology seriously. Foner's book on the *Weltanschauung* of the antislavery Republican party became one of the most influential books ever written in American history. It has been continuously reprinted since it first appeared in 1970, with a new introduction since 1995, and excerpts from it have appeared in numerous U.S. history texts. Amazingly, his early articles based on his undergraduate thesis that first explored the connections between free soil sentiment and racism have also been reprinted in collections of the most outstanding articles on slavery.

Having established his reputation as one of the rising stars in the field, Foner began his academic career at his alma mater, Columbia, where he was hired as an instructor to teach a new field in mainstream academia, African American history. Out of this experience came Foner's next two books, *America's Black Past: A Reader in Afro-American History* (1970) and *Nat Turner* (1971), a documentary history of the great slave rebel. In 1973 the late Herbert Gutman recruited him to join the City University of New York. Foner's interactions with New York City's multiracial, multiethnic, and in many cases, first generation college students, and with a new generation of social and labor historians strengthened his desire to write a different kind of American history, one that would include not only the powerful but also the powerless and disfranchised. While it is difficult to pigeonhole Foner, given the wide repertoire of his corpus, his growing interest in the new histories of African Americans, labor, and immigrants

reflected an early and consistent dedication to write the history of those who were usually left out of history.

Foner's second major book, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (1976), an intellectual biography of the transatlantic radical artisan and pamphleteer, was one of the first to recover the significance of the ideology of artisanal republicanism, an interpretive hallmark of the new labor history. A superbly drawn portrait of the social, intellectual, and political ferment in 18th-century London and Philadelphia, the book linked ideology with the social history of the Age of Revolution. It deftly interconnected the worlds of revolutionary politics, republican ideology, social movements, and the rise of capitalism in early modern England and revolutionary America and France. An exemplar of how to capture the spirit of an entire age through exploring the life and mind of a single person, the book revealed that Foner was as adept at writing biography as narratives of 19th-century American and African American history. In 1995 he would go on to edit the authoritative collection of Thomas Paine's writings for the Library of America.

Typically, Foner's next book was different in style and content, but just as significant and trendsetting as his previous works. *In Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (1980), a collection of pathbreaking essays on the Civil War era, he once again displayed his mastery over the so-called middle period in American history. The essays argue for the revolutionary impact of the Civil War on American history and look at how race, class, and ethnicity interacted with the legacy of republicanism to generate a peculiarly American tradition of radicalism in the 19th century. Few anthologies have contained so many articles that have had a major impact on historiography in their own right. Whether examining Civil War causation, the relationship between abolitionists and the labor movement, the economic and political demands of the freed people during Reconstruction, the radicalism of Thaddeus Stevens, or the Irish Land Leagues of the 1880s, their literary quality and historical sweep established Foner as a great essayist.

Eric Foner's prodigious dexterity as a historian has insured that each of his books represents a different genre in the art of writing history. In *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* (1983), a comparative history, he juxtaposed the aftermath of emancipation in the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa. A theoretically sophisticated yet historically grounded study of the questions of freedom, land, labor, and political rights in post-emancipation societies, it drew attention to the grassroots political and economic activism of former slaves and the role of the state in shaping the terrain of freedom. As the Pitt Professor of American History at Cambridge University (1980–81), Foner had encountered a vast

historical literature on the transition from slavery to freedom in the British Empire, particularly in South Africa and the West Indies. In *Nothing But Freedom*, he skillfully wove the economic focus of this literature, the control of labor and access to resources, with the traditional focus on race in American history. The result was a work that epitomizes the strengths of doing comparative history and avoids its pitfalls. *Nothing But Freedom* is an adept examination of the similar struggles that beset ex-slave societies. It also elaborated on W.E.B. Du Bois's (to whom the book is dedicated) insight that the American experience of Reconstruction was a unique and startling experiment in interracial democracy.

Foner's interest in the post-Civil War period of Reconstruction, a time fraught with political and racial conflict, was natural given his long-standing concern for writing an inclusive version of American history. Fate also intervened in the form of Richard Morris, coeditor of the New American Nation series, who commissioned him to write the volume on Reconstruction. When Foner agreed to write the book, he was perhaps thinking of his ninth grade teacher, "Big Bertha" Berryman (apparently as formidable as the piece of WW I artillery she was named after). Bertha Berryman insisted that the Reconstruction Act that gave black men the right to vote was the worst law in American history. In what was surely a fairly courageous act for a teenaged student, Foner not only challenged her but also presented an alternative view of Reconstruction based on the work of Du Bois. In a class vote taken after his presentation, only one friend of his supported his version of Reconstruction. Having lost the somewhat unequal battle with his teacher, he no doubt wanted to win the historical war. Mrs. Berryman's views epitomized the then dominant lay and academic understanding of Reconstruction as a period when vengeful radical Republicans and northerners foisted "Negro misrule" on a repentant and submissive South. In another of the ironic twists that tended to mark Foner's academic career, it was two Columbia historians, William A. Dunning and John W. Burgess, who had been most responsible for such an interpretation of Reconstruction. When he rejoined Columbia as Professor of History in 1982, he was foreordained to expiate the sins of his predecessors. Much has been written on Reconstruction since the heyday of the Dunning School but none would capture this period as fully or refute the traditional argument as forcefully as Foner's book.

*Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (1988), commonly referred to by students of American history across the country as "the Reconstruction Bible," is undoubtedly Eric Foner's magnum opus. Originally intended as a survey text, *Reconstruction* in its final form was based on extensive research, including 121 previously unused boxes of correspondence addressed to South Carolina's Reconstruction Governors, as

well as a thorough reading of all the secondary material. Researched and written over a period of 10 years and more than 600 pages long, it was a stunning historical synthesis whose original arguments have changed the shape of American historiography. *Reconstruction* overcomes the recent fragmentation and compartmentalization of history into various subfields and points to a new direction in American history. Elegantly written and analytically rigorous, the book captures the best qualities of the old and new histories. Reminiscent of the grand narrative syntheses of American history, it also incorporates and enlarges on the arguments of the new social histories. Encompassing discussions of the impact of the Civil War, the state and constitutional reform, local southern history, the postwar debate over free labor and land reform, the rise of industrial capitalism in the north, the tragic fall of Reconstruction and the conservative backlash in its aftermath, the compelling interpretive schema behind this large and complicated story is the African American attempt to define the content and scope of freedom. Foner captures the historical drama of the destruction of racial slavery, the grassroots political activism of black communities, and that moment when it seemed that the nation would finally come to terms with the legacy of slavery and racism. Above all, this is a poignant and moving account of the black quest for economic autonomy and political citizenship. In the author's own words, "if *Reconstruction* was born in the archives, it was written from the heart." In a companion documentary volume, *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction* (1993, revised edition 1996), Foner painstakingly compiled a pioneering and comprehensive biographical list of all black officeholders (at the federal, state, and local levels) during Reconstruction. A tour de force by any standards, *Reconstruction* showed brilliantly how African American history could redefine American history. *Reconstruction* garnered many accolades and awards, including the Bancroft Prize, the Francis Parkman Prize from the Society of American Historians, the Avery O. Craven prize of the Organization of American Historians and the Frank and Harriet Owsley Prize from the Southern Historical Association, to name but a few. *Reconstruction* created ripples not only in academia but also established Eric Foner's public reputation as a foremost practitioner of his craft.

*Reconstruction's* huge success as well as Foner's determination to bring good history to nonacademic audiences have marked his subsequent professional achievements. In the past decade, Eric Foner has brought his tremendous scholarly talents and indomitable energy to his role as a public historian. The need to ensure that the latest research in American history be accessible to, and understood by, a broader lay audience lies at the heart of his recent efforts. He has been the guest curator of some highly acclaimed historical exhibitions—*A House Divided: America in the Age of*

*Lincoln* (1990), *America's Reconstruction: People and Politics after the Civil War* (1995), and *Dance for a City: Fifty Years of the New York City Ballet* (1999, with his wife, Lynn Garafola, an eminent dance historian and critic)—for the Chicago Historical Society, the Virginia Historical Society, and the New York Historical Society. These exhibitions and the books that resulted from them have won several prizes including the Lawrence Towner Award from the Illinois Humanities Council, the James Harvey Robinson Prize from the American Historical Association, the Award of Merit from the American Association for State and Local History, and the Outstanding Book on Human Rights from the Gustavus Myers Center, respectively. His popular guide *The Reader's Companion to American History* (1991) was awarded an Outstanding Reference Book citation from the *Library Journal* and the New York Public Library. He is the editor in chief of the American Historical Association's pamphlet series in American history and the well-known American History series published by Hill and Wang. He has been the historical adviser for numerous radio and television documentaries and the historical consultant for Walt Disney's Hall of Presidents (Orlando) and Meet Mr. Lincoln (Anaheim) and for a Broadway musical, *The Civil War*. He is the author of several op-ed pieces for the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* and is on the editorial board of the *Nation*. In Foner, one perceives an optimum mixture of theory and practice that many intellectuals strive for, but few achieve.

Foner's most recent book, *The Story of American Freedom* (1998, Italian translation 2000, Chinese translation 2001), a best-selling narrative history of the United States, effectively bridges the yawning gap between academia and the public. Organized around the ubiquitous American theme of freedom and its many meanings, it argues that the progress of freedom in American history has hardly been a linear, uncontested phenomenon. Instead, the concept of freedom has always been contested and redefined throughout the history of the American republic, from its birth to the dawn of the 21st century. Abolitionists, suffragists, African Americans, and workers as well as the Founding Fathers have breathed new life into the idea of American freedom. Interestingly, in this book, Foner uses the theme of freedom that characterized the celebratory and uncritical writings of most consensus historians to skillfully challenge their view of U.S. history, a view that is firmly entrenched in the popular historical imagination. Moreover, for a historian whose expertise lies in early American history, this book with its extensive coverage of the 20th century is an act of intellectual courage. His mastery of nearly every topic and period in American history is superbly displayed here. Written with literary flair and historical imagination, *The Story of American Freedom* is perhaps the best "crossover" book on American history.



Few historians have achieved the kind of stature that Foner has in this country and abroad. He has held an endowed chair in American History as the DeWitt Clinton Professor of History at Columbia University since 1988 and has taught at Oxford University (1993–94) and Moscow State University (Spring 1990). He was elected a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Antiquarian Society (1989), President of the Organization of American Historians (1993–94), and a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy (1996). A man whose intellectual reputation is truly global, he is perhaps one of the few contemporary U.S. historians to have such an extensive international following: his ideas and work are read with as much interest and anticipation in New Delhi, Beijing, Pretoria, Moscow, Rome, and London as in this country.

Eric Foner's career as a historian, poised at midstream, has already achieved the kind of greatness that eludes many over a lifetime. He is the author of 14 books, over 100 articles and essays, and numerous reviews, and is the editor of innumerable volumes. He is one of those rare historians whose erudition as a scholar is matched by a superlative teaching record. Undergraduate students at Columbia flock to his lectures, his classrooms literally overflowing their capacity. He has trained several generations of very fortunate graduate students who are now located at premier institutions all over the world. In 1991, the Society of Columbia Graduates unanimously chose him as the recipient of the Great Teacher Award. And he has been the most influential figure in the construction and dissemination of the new American history in our times. He has fulfilled and extended the Foner legacy of intellectual duty and social purpose. He is, indeed, a scholar, a teacher, and a humanist par excellence.

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