

Ginny Turner

September 24, 2009

Teaching American History

Barnstable

## *The Radical and the Republican*

By James Oakes

### Introduction:

James Oakes, professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, writes a convincing and highly readable account of the transformation of two of America's great leaders. The context is the debate and ultimate civil war that took place in the mid-1800's over the topic of slavery. Oakes' account is filtered through two great spokesmen, Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. A compelling portrait of each of these leaders is painted in steady strokes by Oakes: Douglass is bathed in the vibrant colors of a crusading reformer; Lincoln is shaded by the political framework of a republican coalition. In the early years (the mid to late 1850s), Douglass' bold assertions about human equality stand in contrast to Lincoln's more strategic musings on the topics of slavery and racial equality. Yet, by tracing the later development of both Douglass' and Lincoln's thoughts, words, and deeds about race and slavery in the changing context of an America at war with itself, Oakes argues that ultimately the roles of the "radical" and the "republican" are exchanged. By the end of Oakes account, Lincoln is the bold abolitionist, transformed in part by the necessities of war and in part by his evolution in thought. Beginning with the Emancipation Proclamation and continuing through to his support for the Thirteenth Amendment, Lincoln led the country through a war of liberation rather than simply preservation. Lincoln's transformation was both very public and very tragic,

ending abruptly at the hands of John Wilkes Booth. For Douglass, the change is even more startling. Once he is convinced of Lincoln's commitment to equality, Douglass becomes an ardent supporter. Despite his frustration with Lincoln's earlier statements about race and slavery, Douglass eventually crowns Lincoln as "the Black man's president," and proceeds to dedicate the remainder of his life's work to the Republican Party.

*The Radical and the Republican* is a thorough and engaging picture of "the careful moves of both men in the minefield of Civil War politics." (Waldstreicher, *Boston Globe*) Yet this book holds many lessons which transcend the civil war era: lessons revolving around the importance of historical context, the strategies of effective leadership, and the possibilities for change in a democratic society. Oakes' book stands as testament to the historian's need to provide context for the dialogue of our public figures. Lincoln's words, clipped out of context, have been used by both his defenders and his critics in support of their contrasting theories about his "true" views on racial equality. Oakes, instead, lays bare the "political minefield" within which Lincoln necessarily maneuvered. Lincoln successfully avoided explosions with the proslavery Democrats, with the rampant racial prejudice in the South and in the North, and with the limited support for abolition throughout the general population, all while holding together the nascent Republican coalition formed in the 1850's. An understanding of this context is crucial if one is to make sense of Lincoln "the leader" as well as Lincoln "the man." What becomes clear in this reading is that Lincoln was a *master* of strategy; and while it is true that his thinking about race and equality evolved during the civil war era, it is also the case that he understood clearly the limits to which he could lead the American people on the issue of slavery and race. As Oakes succinctly argues, Lincoln utilized conservative means to accomplish radical ends.

Thus, beyond the importance of context, this book provides great insight into democratic leadership. Finally, I agree with Oakes when he claims in the introduction that this story reveals “. . . what can happen when progressive reformers and savvy politicians make common cause.” (p. xx.) Lincoln needed Douglass, partially because Douglass made Lincoln appear conservative. Douglass needed Lincoln, partially because Lincoln gave political legitimacy to the abolitionist cause.

### A Change of Heart:

Frederick Douglass had a very public change of heart regarding antislavery politics. Initially a Garrisonian abolitionist, Douglass eventually abandoned the route of moral persuasion and denunciation of the Constitution. In part, Douglass realized that calls for Northern secession and rejection of the Constitution would, in the end, leave slavery in the South undisturbed. According to Oakes, it was the Mexican War that reawakened Douglass’ interest in politics (p.16), and the mentorship of Gerrit Smith that transformed his view of the Constitution and of the reformer’s role. With this new lens, Douglass came to believe that each American is obligated to use “. . . his political as well as his moral power to overthrow slavery.” (p. 20) The Constitution was seen as a means to that end; it was embraced as an antislavery document. Yet, by aligning himself with the Republican Party (and supporting candidate Fremont), Douglass also put himself in the precarious position of supporting a party that saw the Constitution as protecting slavery where it already existed. By the mid-1850s, Douglass sounded positively Lincolnian, echoing the famous “House Divided” lines: “Liberty and slavery cannot dwell together forever in the same country.” (p. 37)

## Strategic Racism:

Lincoln was also fine-tuning his message to the American people. He viewed the Constitution as a compromise between slavery and anti-slavery forces, and felt that it protected the existing system of bondage in the South. His obligation was to prevent the spread of slavery; at the same time, he held onto a belief in the eventual extinction of slavery, a belief he felt (perhaps wrongly) that most Americans shared. For Lincoln, the only way to fight slavery was to “build an antislavery coalition, organize it into a mass political party, and take control of the state.” (p . 106) Douglass was frustrated by Lincoln’s limited view.

By 1860, Douglass pronounced, “I cannot support Lincoln.” Without understanding the differences in their beliefs at that moment, Douglass’ failure to support Lincoln seems almost foolish. Yet their differences were real. Douglass was frustrated with Lincoln’s conservative approach to racism and slavery. While Douglass saw racial equality as the basis for a free society, Lincoln saw the destruction of slavery separate from racial equality. Yet, Lincoln’s true beliefs about race cannot be discerned from his public statements. According to Oakes, Lincoln was constrained by political pressures and northern prejudices. While he publicly declared his trust in a system of gradual emancipation and colonization, and clearly distanced himself from Douglass’ view in his 4<sup>th</sup> debate with Stephen Douglas (“I will say then that I am not, nor have ever been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races...”), his later actions bring into question the sincerity of these sentiments. Oakes argues that Lincoln’s defenders claim that, rather than exposing his prejudicial beliefs, he was

instead “responding to the disgraceful race-baiting of his opponents.” (124) In a more nuanced fashion, Oakes argues:

Lincoln’s caginess about racial equality was prompted by something else. For him the entire issue was a distraction. He wanted questions about race removed off the table, and he needed a strategy to get rid of them. The strategy he chose was to *agree* with the Democrats that blacks and whites were not equals. Having thereby dispensed with an issue over which there was no disagreement, he hoped to turn to the issue over which there was substantial disagreement, slavery. (p. 125)

In the world of coalition politics, Lincoln needed to be cagy; and perhaps the knowledge that Douglass and others were fighting a more radical cause allowed him to play the conservative card. Oakes fully admits that it is difficult to disentangle Lincoln’s true beliefs, and even if we could, we might not like what we find. Nevertheless, Lincoln’s “strategic racism” helped to “. . . put a Republican majority in Congress and a man who hated slavery in the White House. We don’t have to like what Lincoln did, but it worked, whether we like it or not.” (p. 130) Douglass definitely did not like it, and refused to support Lincoln until half way through his first administration.

Unlike some of Lincoln’s critics, Oakes believes that Lincoln had strong principles about equality even before the war “transformed” him into an abolitionist. But Lincoln’s principles took back seat to what both the Constitution and the will of the people would allow. What stands out in Oakes’ analysis is Lincoln’s appreciation of both the obstacles to the abolitionist view, and his need to work within those confines. The rule of law, as laid out in the Constitution, was his ultimate guiding principle. He would lead by law, but his leadership was to be informed by the people’s will. Lincoln fully appreciated that political leadership requires

dancing between reflecting and transforming public opinion; a leader cannot be too far ahead. When Lincoln looked over his shoulder, he needed to see his supporters.

### Lincoln as War President:

Oakes' thesis that Lincoln had strong principles about human equality is borne out not only by the references to his childhood upbringing, but also by the initial anti-slavery acts that Lincoln undertook once the war began. Almost immediately, Lincoln proposed a Confiscation Act, sanctioning the policy declaring runaway slaves as contraband of war; he pressured the border states to enact emancipation statutes; he suggested opening diplomatic relations with Haiti and Liberia; and he pressed for the suppression of the illegal Atlantic slave trade. While all of these policies are rooted in the war effort, they also reflect his hatred of slavery and hint of his belief in human equality. (p. 155) Yet Douglass' was not pacified.

Part of Oakes' argument is that Lincoln, somewhat counter-intuitively, needed Douglass' criticism. Lincoln took care to position himself outside of the abolitionist camp; yet he needed the abolitionist voice to be heard. Theirs was a mutually dependent relationship. Lincoln needed Douglass' criticism because it "made (him) appear more conservative than he actually was." (107) Yet Douglass' opinion was not shared by the majority of Northerners. On the other hand, Douglass criticized Lincoln's conservatism, without recognizing all of Lincoln's radical moves toward emancipation. While it seems odd that Douglass would continue to criticize Lincoln in light of Lincoln's early anti-slavery initiatives, Oakes makes sense of his response: "There was still a long way to go. To an instinctive reformer like Douglass, this was no time to ease up on the criticism. . . .The closer Lincoln came to the conclusion that

emancipation was essential to the suppression of the southern rebellion, the more frustrated Douglass seemed to become.” (pp. 159, 165)

By the spring of 1862, the context was ripe for transformation. Public opinion and military necessity combined to give Lincoln the proper milieu for a proclamation on emancipation. Lincoln revealed the plan to his Cabinet in July, and then waited for a military victory before publication. True to his conservative strategy and reverence for the Constitution, the Proclamation was to be presented as a military device, whose primary purpose was restoration of the Union. According to Oakes, “He wanted people to read the forthcoming proclamation as a conservative gesture.” (p. 189) To ensure this interpretation, he coupled this activity with a renewed emphasis on colonization, and even went so far as to suggest that a small group of educated black families lead by example and voluntarily emigrate to Central America. Ultimately, he argued, voluntary emigration would help to melt white hostility toward abolition. (At this point Oakes suggests Lincoln was perhaps deluding himself; nevertheless he was “once again using racism strategically.”(p. 194) ) Douglass was understandably furious. “To Douglass colonization presupposed racism, the spirit of slavery. But to Lincoln colonization presupposed emancipation.” (p. 195)

Emancipation was a radical idea. Most of Lincoln’s generals in the field did not support it. Members of his cabinet opposed it. Many northerners were appalled by the prospect of it. But Lincoln sided with the radicals, and went beyond the justification of military necessity in his message to Congress, in December 1862:

The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the last generation. In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free—honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best, hope of earth.” (quoted on p. 199)

This core principal of human equality is even more famously given voice after the victory at Gettysburg. Going full circle, Lincoln ensured that the Republican Platform in 1864 endorsed a constitutional amendment abolishing slavery *everywhere* in the United States. After Lincoln's second election, Douglass refrained from criticizing the president.

#### Douglass' Transformation:

Lincoln and Douglass met twice, in 1863 and again in 1864. It is through these meetings that Oakes believes the transformation of Douglass occurs. Douglass became a Republican and, more importantly, a politician. When he looked at Lincoln's record through the lens of a democratically elected official, his appreciation for both Lincoln's strategy and his accomplishments soared. After these meetings, and after Lincoln's untimely death, Douglass' perspective changed as well. In the post-war era, Douglass' role changed from being a radical reformer to being "the leading voice of black America," and later, to being "the loyal member of the Republican Party." (172)

Before the war he was a radical first, increasingly committed to politics but always in the service of reform. After the war he was a Republican, still committed to equal justice but always by means of party politics. (p. 281)

#### Conclusion:

Oakes' portrait of the radical and the republican of civil war politics is intriguing and instructive. The reader is left with a more complete picture of the era, including a better appreciation of context, political strategies and democratic leadership. This book could easily be used in an Advanced Placement classroom to supplement textbook readings, and segments of the book could be used in other classroom lessons on reform movements, abolitionism and/or political leadership.

The one question I am left with after reading Oakes' account is: Was the relationship between these men as important to each individual as Oakes theorizes? Did Lincoln really have Douglass in his mind's eye when he was formulating his strategies? Was Douglass so focused on Lincoln? Responding negative to any of these questions lends credence to an alternative view. Perhaps Oakes is guilty of overemphasizing a relationship that certainly existed but that was not that central to each man's strategizing. Could it be that the relationship between the men was emphasized at the expense of reality; that is, in order to support an intriguing thesis?

Oakes provides, I believe, enough evidence to allay this criticism, at least in part. Certainly Douglass was attuned to Lincoln's maneuverings; he could not bring about change without Lincoln's help (or earlier without Fremont's help—or so he thought). Lincoln, of necessity, had a wider scope. Douglass was definitely in Lincoln's view, but Lincoln had many factions to work with and mold into a winning coalition. His was a wide-angle view, and Douglass was likely one of many possible focus points.

While the exchange of the radical and republican roles is the cleverest aspect of Oakes theory, I believe the most important lesson of this study is the reflections it provides on the possibilities in a democratic society. Perhaps our current president, bent on change, could learn much from this book. It just might be that Obama needs a radical spokesman to make his plans for change appear conservative. Unfortunately, that is not how many of our current policy issues are playing out.

[Go to CCC TAH Web Site](#)