

The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics

Phillip Shaw Paludan

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Review

Paludan, Phillip Shaw

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Oakes, James *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics*. W.W. Norton and Company, \$26.95 hardcover ISBN 9780393061949

Ending Slavery

The Converging Paths of Lincoln and Douglass

This book explores the different paths that Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln took in freeing the slaves. It provides a well-written and extremely insightful dialogue between the radical and the conservative, although naming them both as reformers. As Oakes puts it, As a politician Lincoln liked to position himself as the conservative, moved by forces greater than any one man. As a reformer Douglass preferred to position himself on America's left flank; he would hold fast to the moral high ground no matter how great the forces arrayed against him . . . Beneath all of Douglass's seeming dogmatism rested a perfectly reasonable question: Why should he or anyone else have to settle for something less than equal rights? That was Lincoln's question too, and if it made Douglass's radicalism more reasonable, it made Lincoln's pragmatism more radical. They were never as far apart as they seemed (xx-xxi).

The major story that the book tells is of Douglass's growing understanding of Lincoln's conservatism even as he pushed the president toward more radical actions. Douglass could be a passionate critic of Lincoln especially in dealing with such issues as colonization. He could claim that Lincoln inclined to do good only under pressure. The president, he believed, early along, was too much guided by the prejudices of his fellow white people. But Douglass gradually understood the political necessities grounded in race prejudice, respect for the rule of law, and the Constitution that Lincoln had to listen to. In fact Douglass himself, as Oakes observes, had moved away from the more extreme position of William Lloyd Garrison who called the Constitution a covenant with death. Douglass split with Garrison and moved into the political arena joining Gerrit

Smith and the Liberty and Free Soil and then Republican Party's argument that the Constitution was an anti-slavery document. But deep differences could still reveal themselves. Douglas maintained his radicalism in defending John Brown, and of course Lincoln attacked Brown for his bloody extremism.

When war broke out Douglass at first criticized the Kentucky-born president, attacking him bitterly even after he had been called the White House to meet with Lincoln. But a second meeting generated friendship and mutual respect (although Douglass did support the 1864 Fremont boomlet). Lincoln invited Douglass to visit him in his Soldier's Home quarters, publicly recognized him as my friend Douglass, and asked, in front of the packed White House ballroom, for the former slave's opinion of the second inaugural address. After Lincoln died Douglass continued to admire Lincoln's role and his necessary conservatism in bringing about the ends of abolition. He gave several speeches using Lincoln as a weapon to bludgeon white southerners who sought to rebuild their slave society. His July 4, 1876, address especially is a brilliant summation of Lincoln's relationship to Americans black and white.

This short summary cannot do justice to the brilliance of Oakes' work. *The Radical and the Republican* should be read by all people who wish to understand reform and the nature of change in the Civil War era and the two men who played such indispensable roles in emancipating not only the slaves but much of the country from the scourge of slavery.

In a book of this quality one is astonished to find some major errors. In describing the Lincoln-Douglas debates Oakes speaks of the debate in *Chicago*. At one point he describes a conversation involving Lincoln's *Attorney General William Stanton*. To be fair he usually puts Stanton in the right job and gives him the right first name.

Oakes also takes some disputable positions. He makes, I believe, too stark a division between Lincoln's desire to free the slaves and to save the Union. What too many historians fail to notice is the obvious fact that the Union that Lincoln and his party wanted to save was a union in which slavery was in the course of ultimate extinction. It was a union where slavery could not expand and with a national government controlled by Republicans whose foundational ideas were hostile to slavery. That is why the eleven Confederate states seceded.

But lay these critiques aside, and relish a thoughtful and gifted writer dealing with things that matter, the roles of radicals and conservatives in leading a nation toward its best possibilities.

Phillip Shaw Paludan is the Naomi Lynn Distinguished Chair of Lincoln Studies at the University of Illinois, Springfield. He is the author of A Covenant with Death: The Constitution, Law and Equality in the Civil War Era; Victims, A True Story of the Civil War; A People's Contest: The Union and Civil War; and The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln, for which he won the Lincoln Prize. He may be reached by e-mail at ppaludan@insightbb.com.