

Look at Lincoln: Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom

Frank J. Williams
alincoln@courts.ri.gov

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Review

Williams, Frank J.

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Blight, David W. *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. Simon & Schuster, \$37.50 ISBN 9781416590316

David W. Blight's impressive tome, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*, is the first biography of the abolitionist, writer, editor, orator, and statesman in twenty-five years. Rather than reworking former research on the great social reformer, Blight has drawn on new information held in a private collection few other historians have consulted, as well as recently unearthed issues of Douglass's newspapers. The result is a distinguished and complete portrait of Douglass, which reveals his complexity and evolving commitment to social transformation, as well as a newly rendered representation of Douglass's relationship with Abraham Lincoln.

The early years and backstory of Frederick Douglass are chronicled in Blight's book, which memorializes Douglass's bicentennial year. The son of a black woman and a white man, Frederick Douglass was born into slavery in Talbot County, Maryland in 1818. After escaping his enslavement in 1838, he made extraordinary use of his freedom, as this distinguished book reveals, by employing his resolve and his eloquence to become one of America's leading abolitionists and its most prominent black man.

Blight venerates Douglass's enormous courage by celebrating Douglass's iconoclastic beliefs, which challenged the country to question its deep pride in its "exceptionalism." In his telling Independence Day speech in 1852, Douglass asked, "What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy – a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation

of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.”

Such condemnation greatly disturbed Abraham Lincoln, a believer in the remarkable moral achievement of the nation’s founding and the country’s “exceptionalism.” Douglass’s indictment of the nation provoked Lincoln who, while running for the U.S. Senate from Illinois two years after Douglass’s speech, cited such criticism as one of the reasons he detested slavery. “I hate [slavery],” he said, “because it deprives our Republican example of its just influence in the world – enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility to taunt us as hypocrites – causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity.”

The impact of Douglass’s argument had an extraordinary national reach. Initially mentored by William Lloyd Garrison, Douglass spoke widely, often to large crowds, using his own story to condemn slavery. However, he broke with Garrison to become a political abolitionist, a Republican, and eventually a Lincoln supporter. By the time of the Civil War and the aftermath of Reconstruction, Douglass was arguably the most famous and widely travelled orator in the nation. He denounced the premature end of Reconstruction during the emerging Jim Crow era of the late 1870’s. In his unique and eloquent written and spoken voice, Douglass was both a fierce critic of the United States and a radical patriot. He could debate younger African-Americans, who sought radical change, while remaining steadfastly loyal to the cause of “Negro” civil and political rights. Throughout this tumultuous time, Douglass remained dedicated to the Republican Party.

Blight provides new insight into the relationship between Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln by detailing the evolution of Douglass’s endorsement of Lincoln, which began with overt rejection; advanced to acknowledged agreement; and culminated with unqualified admiration.

Blight notes that initially Lincoln was too conservative for Douglass, who rallied his support to Salmon P. Chase, abolitionist, governor, senator, and vocal opponent of slavery. As a rising lawyer in Ohio, Chase faced down a mob besieging an abolitionist newspaper and fought for black civil and political rights in the face of death threats. In addition, he gave moral and financial support to Douglass by subscribing to his newspaper, the *North Star*. While Lincoln clung tenaciously to the disintegrating Whig Party until the mid-1850s, Chase boldly left the Whigs in 1841 to join the Anti-slavery Liberty Party. As a U.S. Senator, Chase worked with

such courageous men as John P. Hale of New Hampshire and Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, fighting slavery in the face of their colleagues' ostracism and vitriol. Douglass greatly admired the three for their stubborn refusal to be "inoculated with pro-slavery virus of the times."

The author provides insight as to the evolution of Douglass's relationship with Lincoln, as well as the development of Douglass's views on slavery and emancipation. While both Douglass and Lincoln agreed that the enlistment of African-Americans was essential, they differed in the details and policy of that conscription. In his first visit to the White House, Douglass was surprised to be treated as an equal by the President, and the two spoke openly and freely about parity for black soldiers. Douglass was there to argue for equality of pay for the United States "Colored" soldiers. Boldly, Douglass stated he was disheartened by "the tardy, hesitating, vacillating policy of the President of the United States." Lincoln admitted candidly that he might have been slow, but he did not vacillate. Lincoln stated, "I think it cannot be shown that when I have once taken a position, I have ever retreated from it."

On the question of equal pay, Lincoln argued with typical pragmatism that black men "had larger motives for being soldiers than white men" and "ought to be willing to enter the service upon any condition." However, ever the strategist, Lincoln knew that the service of blacks in saving the Union would make a powerful case for the final destruction of slavery, and with that annihilation, the recognition of civil and political rights for blacks. While Lincoln admitted that the equality of pay was a "necessary concession to smooth the way," pragmatically, he realized that it could not occur on Douglass's expedited timeline. Lincoln promised Douglass that it would be corrected over time, and true to his word, it was. "We had to make some concessions to prejudice," he said. "I assure you, Mr. Douglass, that in the end they shall have the same pay as white soldiers." Douglass was "not entirely satisfied with his views," but left the meeting with a new appreciation of Lincoln. At the very least, Lincoln respected him and was genuinely interested in his views. The outcome of their first meeting reaped positive results: Lincoln would push for equal pay until it was achieved, while Douglass continued urging blacks to fight despite the initial lower remuneration.

Bright documents vividly Douglass's growing appreciation of Lincoln. During Lincoln's second inaugural address, arguably the apex of all presidential inaugural speeches, Douglass stood near the front of the crowd as Lincoln delivered his oration. At the end of the ceremonies with Lincoln taking the oath of office, Douglass walked with the mob, lost in thoughts of

Lincoln, a man he had initially considered a conniving politician and a poor inferior to then Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase. Now, Douglass recognized Lincoln as the paradigmatic spokesman for equality. The President had used his inaugural address to express the very idea that Douglass and his fellow abolitionists had embraced from the start – that this war was about ending the evil of slavery. In presenting the war as a just verdict on the American people, Lincoln was affectively arguing for the humanity of all, regardless of race.

As a superb writer and orator himself, Douglass grasped the brilliance of Lincoln's prose. The words "struck me at the time, and have seemed to me ever since to contain more vital substance than I have ever seen compressed in a space so narrow," he recalled. "I clap my hands in gladness and thanksgiving at their utterance." However, Douglass conceded that many of the working-class soldiers directing the crowds that afternoon of March 4, 1865 disdained racial equality and Lincoln's theory that God had punished America for slavery. "The darkeys suffered most. Soldiers knocked Negro women roughly about and called them very uncomplimentary names," the *New York Herald* reported.

Amid this polarized setting, Frederick Douglass arrived at the Executive Mansion the evening of the inauguration. Ironically, he was denied entrance until word came from the President that he be allowed to enter the White House. Douglass, who had once pejoratively referred to President Lincoln as an "excellent slave hound," now recognized that the President had undermined slavery, armed the slaves, and forced through a Constitutional amendment that would abolish slavery forever. On that day, Douglass also had heard the President's remarkable condemnation of slavery as the sin of all in America. Lincoln acknowledged Douglass in the greeting line, "Here comes my friend Douglass," the President said. Taking him in the firm grip reserved for important acquaintances, Lincoln said, "I am glad to see you. I saw you in the crowd today, listening to my Inaugural Address; how did you like it?"

Douglass was embarrassed to be taking up more than his allotted two-and-a-half seconds. "Mr. Lincoln, I must not detain you with my poor opinion, when there are thousands waiting to shake hands with you." "No, no." Lincoln said. "You must stop a little, Douglass; there is no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours. I want to know what you think of it." Douglass replied, "Mr. Lincoln, that was a sacred effort." "I am glad you liked it!" Lincoln responded.

David W. Blight's ten-year effort in researching and writing this biography was time well spent. This book adds a dimension to Douglass's story that previously had not been explored. Most compelling is the portrait of the relationship between Douglass and Lincoln, which reveals depth, honesty, and mutual respect and admiration.

Frank J. Williams is the founding Chair of the Lincoln Forum, President of The Ulysses S. Grant Association and Presidential Library, and regular Civil War Book Review columnist for Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War, and Reconstruction.