

Race and Historical Literacy in America: Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln

Peter C. Myers

Professor of Political Science

University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

My topic is race and historical literacy in America, which I will address by considering in particular two great figures in American political thought, Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. Why this topic, and why these two figures?

Race has long been America's single most poisonous source of factious division. Because of the persisting sensitivity of the subject, an indirect approach—preparing students to address present-day problems by teaching them how thoughtful Americans addressed related problems in the past—can serve to liberate students to think and speak more freely, even as it deepens their understanding of the problems themselves.

As to why a study of these two figures can prove particularly illuminating, one might begin with the obvious: Douglass and Lincoln are renowned, respectively, as 19th-century America's Great Agitator and Great Emancipator—the greatest advocate of slavery's abolition and the man who, as chief executive, actually accomplished it.

At a deeper level, the subject implicates the question of American identity. In their distinctive ways, Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln could claim, as others have claimed about them, to be at once profound interpreters and real-life exemplars of America's essential meaning and promise.

Careful reading of primary-source documents is indispensable to this approach to the subject matter. In this brief essay, I offer a few suggestions to assist in the reading of a few crucial speeches in which Douglass and Lincoln addressed the crisis of their time, America's nearly fatal division over slavery and race. In a postscript, I offer further suggestions concerning broader lessons 21st-century students can learn from the study of Douglass and Lincoln and comparably great figures from America's past.

Douglass's Fourth of July oration provides a good starting point. He delivered it on July 5, 1852, in Rochester, NY, by invitation from the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society. The speech is commonly considered Douglass's greatest, and by some, the greatest of all abolitionist speeches.

Lending urgency to the occasion was the new Fugitive Slave Law the U.S. Congress had enacted as part of the 1850 Compromise. The new law, which Douglass called "that most foul and fiendish of all human decrees," was much harsher than the 1793 law it replaced. Amounting to a legalization of kidnapping, it rendered perilously insecure the condition of free blacks in non-slaveholding states, and in response thousands of them emigrated to Canada.

In considering the meaning of the Fourth of July, Douglass was therefore asking: What is the meaning of America? Does it stand for slavery or for freedom? Can it ever be a home for black people?

He answered in a complicated way. The July Fourth oration has been likened structurally to a musical composition in three movements. As his address proceeds, Douglass speaks from three different group perspectives (white Americans, black Americans, and a universal or integrated, humanitarian perspective); three different temporal perspectives (past, present, and future); and three different moods (gratitude, anger, and hopefulness).

In the first section, Douglass considers white Americans' reasons for celebrating the Fourth. He joins them in honoring the actions and character of America's revolutionary founders. "The fathers of this republic," he agrees, "were brave men. They were great men"—great *statesmen*, exemplars of the cardinal, classical virtues (courage, temperance, justice, wisdom).

Nonetheless, Douglass's language in the first section, marked by his insistent usage of second-person pronouns, foretells the radical change in mood to come. However admirable the events being commemorated, he told his (predominantly white) audience, "This Fourth [of] July is *yours*, not *mine*."

In the second section, Douglass adopts the perspective of black Americans, especially those enslaved, and comes to the present. He summarizes: "There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour."

In this section, too, Douglass invokes John the Baptist, whose words he adapts in denouncing latter-day Americans who claimed "Washington to our father" even as they traduced his legacy. The implication is a militant warning to a corrupt generation, but it also prefigures another shift in perspective and mood. Warning of an impending baptism by fire, he also anticipates a coming redemption.

The third and final section, focusing on America's future, is marked by hopefulness. Douglass was convinced hopefulness in America was grounded in evidence and reason, and here he gives two general reasons for this conviction.

Against Garrisonian abolitionists, also against the proslavery sophistries of John C. Calhoun, he defended the founders' Constitution as "a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT." He further maintained that the liberty the Constitution was designed to secure was destined to prevail in

America and elsewhere. Douglass believed, with Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, that the moral power of the principles of natural right would prove irresistible as the freedoms of commerce and speech combined to propagate them throughout the world.

Douglass was a hopeful man, at times almost astonishingly so. An even more striking demonstration of this hopefulness appears in his speech a few years later, in response to the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in the case *Dred Scott v. Sandford*.

Here was an even more severe test: the most proslavery statute ever enacted by the U.S. Congress, the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, was succeeded in 1857 by the most proslavery ruling ever issued by the nation's highest court. Lincoln, in his speech on the ruling, remarked, "All the powers of earth seem rapidly combining against [black Americans]."

Douglass was undaunted. His Dred Scott speech is worth studying for various reasons, but the speech's salient feature is his insistence, less *despite* than *because* of the Court's infamous ruling, that the demise of slavery in the U.S. was imminent.

Douglass argued, in simplified summary, that because the love of liberty is natural to humankind and particularly powerful in Americans, slavery's inherent insecurity would compel slaveholders to tyrannize over both black and white Americans to preserve it. Eventually slavery would assemble a coalition of enemies too powerful for it to overcome.

As events unfolded, Douglass's explanation of slavery's impending demise proved impressively prescient, but it also entailed a serious difficulty. If nonslaveholding white Americans could be expected to act against slavery only in defense of their own rights and interests, then by what comparable motivation could they be expected to support the rights of black Americans in the aftermath of emancipation?

This is the problem that Lincoln began to address, albeit with significant indirection, in his own speech on *Dred Scott*. Like Douglass, he treated various aspects of the ruling's significance, but his main object was to clarify the country's foundational commitment to the securing of equal natural rights for all.

Such a clarification was needed to correct the errors propagated not only by the Supreme Court in *Dred Scott* but also by Lincoln's political adversary, Senator Stephen A. Douglas, who had spoken on the subject in the same (Springfield, Illinois) location two weeks previously. That he framed it as a direct response to Douglas is crucial to a proper understanding of Lincoln's speech.

The core of Douglas's position appeared in two main claims. First, he agreed with Chief Justice Taney: America's founders created a white man's republic; the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution contemplated neither citizenship nor full human personhood for blacks. Second, the notion, endorsed by Lincoln and his fellow Republicans, that the Declaration affirmed the equal natural rights of all human beings entailed a commitment to full equality, irrespective of color, in political, civil, and even domestic life.

As Lincoln observed, by these two claims Douglas was attempting to align himself and his party, the Democrats, with a broadly popular position (fidelity to the Founders) and to align Lincoln and Republicans with a profoundly unpopular position (support for black-white race-mixing, or "amalgamation"). In response, Lincoln contended that Douglas's assertions and insinuations were wrong on four main points.

First, Douglas was disastrously wrong on the meaning of the Declaration. This was for Lincoln a matter of surpassing importance: if the commitment to the equal natural rights of all human beings was to be replaced with a doctrine whereby a politically dominant group could

define others, based on a mere difference in color, as outside the protections of justice and law, then no free, republican government could endure in America.

Douglas was no less wrong, Lincoln continued, in his forebodings about interracial amalgamation. Douglas was wrong in supposing his own position would prevent it; wrong in claiming Lincoln's reading of the Declaration entailed it; and wrong in insinuating that Lincoln was personally in favor of it.

This last part of Lincoln's rejoinder, politically imperative in his day, causes him trouble in ours. In the *Dred Scott* speech, Lincoln stated with great emphasis his agreement with Douglas in disapproving of interracial amalgamation ("a thousand times agreed"). He also suggested that he supported colonization as the ultimate preventive of amalgamation and the ultimate solution to America's race problem. To latter-day critics, such statements imply that in his vision of post-slavery America, Lincoln hardly differed after all from his purported antagonist—that his support for colonization marked him, like Douglas, as a proponent of a white men's republic in America, even as a tacit segregationist and white supremacist.

Much is at stake here; let us take a closer look.

Lincoln was an adroit politician and a subtle rhetorician, and in the *Dred Scott* speech he spoke under considerable duress. Because support for interracial amalgamation was indeed, as Douglas calculated, a fatally unpopular position for any seeker of elective office to take, it is reasonable to question whether Lincoln felt free, in context, to state his true position fully and forthrightly.

To consider more carefully Lincoln's words, an initial suggestion is: attend the modifiers. Lincoln said, for instance, that nearly all whites opposed the "indiscriminate" amalgamation of the two racial groups. One should ask: What is that modifier, *indiscriminate*, doing in that

sentence? Likewise, in his discussion of the means for preventing amalgamation, Lincoln said colonization was the only “perfect” way to prevent it. Other, less perfect means were available and even acceptable, including—but not necessarily limited to—the Republican policy of preventing slavery’s further expansion into federal territories.

On the crucial subject of colonization, consider, too, the evasive manner in which Lincoln addressed it in the *Dred Scott* speech. He observed that neither political party was then actively promoting colonization, and he added that he could not say even that the Republican Party in its collective will was in favor of it. He framed his comment in conditional or hypothetical terms: “Let us be brought to believe it is morally right, and, at the same time, favorable to, or, at least, not against, our interest, to transfer the African to his native clime, and we shall find a way to do it, however great the task may be.”

Lincoln’s hypothetical formulation implies that Republicans, perhaps including himself, were not yet convinced that colonization was morally right or in their or the nation’s interest. More plainly stated, the core question was whether it would or could be morally right to “transfer the African” out of the U.S.—i.e. to expatriate black Americans, without their consent.

In the *Dred Scott* speech Lincoln refrained from directly answering that question. In a later statement on colonization, to Congress in December, 1862, he clarified his position. “I strongly favor colonization,” he said—speaking specifically in support of his own proposal that Congress allocate funding “to aid in colonizing *such as may consent*” (emphasis added).

At the time he said this, Lincoln surely knew that the large majority of black Americans considered America their permanent home and had no inclination to emigrate. The implication is that in supporting colonization in its *voluntary* form, Lincoln was also supporting the eventual integration of the majority of blacks into a post-emancipation America.

This is the larger counsel that he sought gently but firmly to convey to loyalist whites. The abolition of slavery and the institution of a regime of equal civil rights and freedom of association would not bring about the political and social effects they feared. Instead, as Lincoln wrote to General Nathaniel P. Banks with reference to a post-slavery Louisiana, the idea was simply to create conditions whereby “the two races could gradually live themselves out of their old relation to each other.”

Postscript:

With an apology for trying readers’ patience, I thought it might be useful for me to add, to the preceding suggestions about how to read particular texts, a few broader considerations, both timely and untimely, concerning the teaching of figures like Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln to 21st-century students.

For decades, educators have noticed an alarming decline in civic literacy in the U.S., especially among younger generations of citizens. One plausible corrective is to employ an approach loosely based on Plutarch: against a common approach of studying history as a depersonalized story of social movements and classes, to attempt to bring the pertinent events, principles, institutions, and controversies to life by embodying them in the study of the “lives of noble Americans” such as Douglass and Lincoln.

In various ways the study of Douglass and Lincoln in particular seems to me to signify a whole-person education writ small—a moral education in the virtues of mind, heart, and character, as well as a civic education as to how and why to love and serve one’s country, even in the awareness of its grave historical failings.

Both men, having risen by their own virtues from low beginnings to positions of high eminence, serve as inspiring exemplars of democratic promise. Especially to the disadvantaged

and disaffected young males of his day and ours, Douglass could say: I was one of you, enslaved throughout my youth and absorbed in anti-American radicalism as a young adult; the full-hearted American patriotism of my maturity was a hard-earned achievement, forged in full critical awareness of the challenges to it. A like audience might find it ennobling to consider that Lincoln was raised among the “deplorables” of his era, yet somehow rose above the prejudices and resentments of his native class to become, as president, the author of an act of justice unparalleled in U.S. history and a singular exemplar of magnanimity and charity.

As Douglass and Lincoln can serve to exemplify democratic promise, so, too, they can serve as exemplars of democratic greatness. That present-day American politics suffers from a dearth of statesmanship (among activists as well as officeholders) is a concern shared among thoughtful observers from diverging partisan and ideological perspectives. In their different ways, Douglass and Lincoln displayed a cogent grasp of first principles, an appreciation of the virtue of prudence in the advancement of those principles, and a rare command of the art of rhetoric—all vital qualities of democratic statesmanship.

The notice of Douglass’s and Lincoln’s greatness as rhetoricians yields a final consideration. Each of these men, to a remarkable degree, almost literally talked his way from the bottom to the top of American society. “Great is the power of speech,” as Douglass liked to say. The fuller lesson, however, is: Great is the power of education, the indispensable means of enabling that speech. Both Douglass and Lincoln were almost entirely self-educated; each somehow learned the value of education from the want of formal education.

In his autobiographies, Douglass tells how his slave master forbade his charitable but naïve wife from continuing the early lessons in literacy she was providing for young Frederick. Master Hugh Auld told his wife Sophia that education would make Frederick unfit for slavery. Douglass

called that a “revelation.” He learned that day that education is liberation. For students today who chafe at the idea that education is forced on them, there is food for thought.

Editor’s Note: All speeches the author describes in this pedagogical essay are available at the Center for Reflective Citizenship website:

<https://www.utc.edu/center-reflective-citizenship/june2018readings.php>

PETER C. MYERS is Professor of Political Science, specializing in political philosophy and U.S. constitutional law, at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Professor Myers is the author of two books and has published numerous articles, chapters, and book reviews in the fields of liberal political philosophy, American literature, and American political thought.

References and Resources

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