

Frederick Douglass: We Had To Save the Union

The great African-American leader Frederick Douglass, himself born a slave, provides the strongest defense of the course which Abraham Lincoln took in defending the Union, before abolishing slavery. In his autobiography *The Life and Times*, Douglass describes the intellectual process he went through over the issue of the Constitution: “I was then [the 1840s-ed.] a faithful disciple of William Lloyd Garrison, and fully committed to his doctrine touching the pro-slavery character of the Constitution of the United States.... With him, I held it to be the first duty of the non-slaveholding states to dissolve the union with the slaveholding states, and hence my cry, like his, was ‘No union with slaveholders’....

“My new circumstances [as a newspaper publisher—ed.] compelled me to re-think the whole subject, and to study with some care not only the just and proper rules for legal interpretation, but the origin, design, nature, rights, powers, and duties of civil governments, and also the relations which human beings sustain to it. By such a course of thought and reading, I was conducted to the conclusion that the Constitution of the United States—inaugurated to ‘form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty’—could not well have been designed at the same time to maintain and perpetuate a

system of rapine and murder like slavery ... that the Constitution of the United States not only contained no guarantees in favor of slavery but, on the contrary, was in its letter and spirit an anti-slavery instrument, demanding the Abolition of slavery as a condition of its own existence as the supreme law of the land....”

And in his reply to the infamous 1856 *Dred Scott* decision, Douglass noted that the slaveholders “do not point us to the Constitution itself, for the reason that there is nothing sufficiently explicit for their purpose; but they delight in supposed intentions—intentions nowhere expressed in the Constitution, and everywhere contradicted in the Constitution.”

Douglass’s attitude was reflected in the fact he became a close collaborator with President Lincoln himself. He described Lincoln as “the first great man that I talked with in the United States freely, who in no single instance reminded me of the difference between himself and myself, of the difference of color”).

At the unveiling of the Freedmen’s Monument of Abraham Lincoln, in Lincoln Park, Washington, D.C., on April 14, 1876, Douglass described his evaluation of Lincoln:

It must be admitted, truth compels me to admit, even here in the presence of the monument we have erected to his memory, Abraham Lincoln was not, in the fullest sense of the word, either our man or our model. In his interests, in his associations, in his habits of thought, and in his prejudices, he was a white man.... You [whites] are the children of Abraham Lincoln. We are at best only his step-children; children by adoption, children by forces of circumstances and necessity....

The name of Abraham Lincoln was near and dear to our hearts in the darkest and most perilous hours of the Republic. We were no more ashamed of him when shrouded in clouds of darkness, of doubt, and defeat than when we saw him crowned with victory, honor, and glory. Our faith in him was often taxed and strained to the uttermost, but it never failed. . . . Despite the mist and haze that surrounded him; despite the tumult, the hurry, and confusion of the hour, we were able to take a comprehensive view of Abraham Lincoln, and to make reasonable allowance for the circumstances of his position. We saw him, measured him, and estimated him; not by stray utterances to injudicious and tedious delegations, who often tried his patience; not by isolated facts torn from their connection; not by any partial and imperfect glimpses, caught at inopportune moments; but by a broad survey, in the light of the stern logic of great events, and in view of the divinity which shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will, we came to the conclusion that the hour and the man of our redemption had somehow met in the person of Abraham Lincoln. . . .

His great mission was to accomplish two things: first, to save his country from dismemberment and ruin; and, second, to free his country from the great crime of slavery. To do one or the other, or both, he must have the earnest sympathy and the powerful cooperation of his loyal fellow-countrymen. Without this primary and essential condition to succeed, his efforts must have been vain and utterly fruitless. Had he put the abolition of slavery before the salvation of the Union, he would have inevitably driven from him a powerful class of the American people and rendered resistance to rebellion impossible. Viewed from the genuine abolition ground, Mr.

Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent; but measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined. . . .

Few great public men have ever been the victims of fiercer denunciation than Abraham Lincoln was during his administration. He was often wounded in the house of his friends. Reproaches came thick and fast upon him from within and without, and from opposite quarters. He was assailed by Abolitionists; he was assailed by slaveholders; he was assailed by the men who were for peace at any price; he was assailed by those who were for a more vigorous prosecution of the war; he was assailed for not making the war an abolition war; and he was bitterly assailed for making the war an abolition war. . . .

[Lincoln's assassination] was a new crime, a pure act of malice. No purpose of the rebellion was to be served by it. It was the simple gratification of a hell-black spirit of revenge. But it has done good after all. It has filled the country with a deeper abhorrence of slavery and a greater love for the great liberator. . . .

Dying as he did die, by the red hand of violence, killed, assassinated, taken off without warning, not because of personal hate—for no man who knew Abraham Lincoln could hate him—but because of his fidelity to union and liberty, he is doubly dear to us, and his memory will be precious forever. . . .

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