The Agitator and the Emancipator

How Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln came to an understanding

By Glenn C. Altschuler

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Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln

By John Stauffer

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Frederick Douglass didn't think much of Abraham Lincoln's assertion in 1862 that blacks were the cause of the Civil War or his plan to send as many of them as possible to the republic of Colombia. The innocent horse does not make the horse thief, Douglass fumed. It is "the cruel and brutal cupidity of those who wish to possess horses, or money, and Negroes" that ought to be blamed. Lincoln, he thought, was a "genuine representative of American prejudice." Even his management of the English language "manifested a decided awkwardness." Douglass, however, would change his mind, more than once, about "The Great Emancipator." And the president would soon deem Douglass "one of the most meritorious men" in the United States.

In Giants, John Stauffer, a professor of English at Harvard University, examines the lives of these two extraordinary self-made men, the ex-slave from Maryland who became a radical reformer, and the pragmatic politician who pondered whether he could - or should - end "the peculiar institution" while preserving the Union. Their debates and the friendship they forged, he argues, elegantly and eloquently, help us understand a major - though not yet complete - shift in American history toward the inclusion of blacks in our national ideals of freedom and equality.

Stauffer seems sympathetic to Douglass' conviction that slave owners would not concede power without a fight, and that the president should act more quickly and decisively. To Douglass, he indicates, references in the first inaugural address to the "mystic chords of memory," shared by Northerners and Southerners, that "will yet swell the chorus of the Union" suggested that Lincoln was willing to destroy the nation's ideals to hold it together. The president remained convinced, moreover, that if he emancipated the slaves of disloyal citizens or armed blacks as soldiers, the border states would join the Confederacy. Stauffer doesn't endorse this claim, but he does write that the president was not willing to act on the fact "that arming blacks would turn 150,000 more bayonets against the rebels."
On occasion, Stauffer gives Douglass, the archetypal agitator, more credit than he deserves. In supporting the actions of John Brown with friendship, words and money, did Douglass, in any meaningful way, assist "in electing Lincoln and killing him"? Did the president "finally" begin to listen to Douglass when he used his war powers as commander-in-chief to emancipate the slaves? Or was Douglass' role in establishing this "important precedent" rather limited?

When Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Douglass' frustration with a leader stuck "in slothful deliberation" turned to admiration. "It is a day for poetry and song," he exulted, "a new song." Lincoln, he maintained, "was not in the fullest sense, either our man or our model," but pre-eminently "the white man's president." But had he pushed emancipation too soon, he acknowledged, Lincoln would have alienated millions of Americans "and rendered resistance to rebellion impossible." To an abolitionist, Lincoln might have seemed "tardy, cold, dull and indifferent, but measuring him by the sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical and determined."

Douglass, Stauffer concludes, had "stunningly encapsulated Lincoln's presidency." A pragmatic idealist, he had "steered the nation through a revolution." A one-time colonizationist who had "treated blacks as step-children," he had grown in the crucible of war and "adopted them ... as part of the national family." By honoring Lincoln, blacks honored themselves - and the revolutionary ideas in the Declaration of Independence, ideas that, ironically, were being abandoned - or deferred - in the aftermath of Appomattox.

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