

Dismantling the Peculiar Institution

A bestselling author of the 1990s is, surprisingly, Abraham Lincoln. The Library of America has reissued his speeches and writings; in Eastern Europe, translations of Lincoln now serve as classroom texts on democracy. But few know about the evolution of Lincoln's thinking on the race question, or how he was influenced by the ex-slave and brilliant orator Frederick Douglass. Dorothy Wickenden describes the relationship between the two men—a relationship that would alter the history of race in America.

by Dorothy Wickenden

In late July, 1863, in the middle of the Civil War, an imposing man with stern features arrived at the White House hoping to meet Abraham Lincoln. Describing their interview later, he declared that, though he was the “only dark spot” in the throng of supplicants lining the stairway, he was received a few minutes after presenting his card. Elbowing his way to the front, he heard another visitor grousing, “Yes, damn it, I knew they would let the n---r through.” Lincoln, surrounded by documents and hovering secretaries, sat in a low armchair, with his feet “in different parts of the room.” The president's guest observed that “long lines of care were already deeply written on Mr. Lincoln's brow; and his strong face, full of earnestness, lighted up as soon as my name was mentioned.” He approached Lincoln, who “began to rise, and he continued rising until he stood over me; and, reaching out his hand, he said, ‘Mr. Douglass, I know you; I have read about you, and Mr. Seward has

told me about you.’”

The president's visitor was, of course, Frederick Douglass, the editor of a respected abolitionist newspaper, a man internationally famous for his oratorical powers and anti-slavery activities. A self-taught former slave who had fled to freedom 25 years before, Douglass was the first black man in America to receive a private audience with the president. There was every reason to expect, however, that the meeting would not go well. Douglass was a pitiless critic of Lincoln's hare-brained “colonization” schemes, which would have dispatched freed slaves to Africa or Central America to establish their own republic. What's more, Lincoln could hardly have relished Douglass's reason for coming to the White House—to press him to pay black and white soldiers equally, a highly sensitive political issue. The two men had very different goals: The president's mission in the war was to save the Union; Douglass's was to free the slaves and transform them into citizens. Doug-



lass's demands were not met that day, but he was evidently delighted by his reception. ("I tell you I felt big there!" he boasted.) And the meeting launched an exchange between Lincoln and Douglass that eventually did more than alter each of their views about the proper conduct of the war. It helped to rewrite the history of race in America.

If Frederick Douglass had the courage of Abraham Lincoln's convictions on racial equality, Lincoln perhaps more accurately gauged both the depth of prejudice permeating American society and the staggering complexity of replacing the institution of slavery with all of the safeguards of true democracy. Douglass's dream of a color-blind, integrated society in which blacks would share the privileges of education, voting, public accommodations, and political office seemed on the point of being realized a century later, in the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (1954) and the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Today, Lincoln's tortured views about equal rights seem sadly prescient. Segregation can still be seen in schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces; and the

separatist creeds of extremist politicians—white and black—are again making themselves heard. With current schisms confirming some of Lincoln's worst fears, it is worth reconsidering how he and Douglass came to terms over the future of blacks in America.

During the 1950s and '60s, revisionist historians went back to reexamine Lincoln's views on racial equality and emerged with disturbing news. Kenneth M. Stampp asserted, "... if it was Lincoln's destiny to go down in history as the Great Emancipator, rarely has a man embraced his destiny with greater reluctance than he." A black journalist, Lerone Bennett, Jr., wrote a provocative article for the February 1968 issue of *Ebony* magazine entitled, "Was Abe Lincoln a White Supremacist?" The very question, asked in a black magazine during the racial strife of the 1960s, hinted at its answer.

Both those who defend Lincoln's racial politics and those who deplore them prop up their arguments with the speeches and writings of Frederick Douglass. Douglass's commitment to emancipation, black en-

listment in the army, and universal suffrage was as clear and consistent as Lincoln's was equivocal and changing. Douglass found himself maddened by Lincoln's faltering progress toward emancipation and by his seemingly inexhaustible solicitude toward the border states and northern conservatives. Yet by the end of the war, Douglass had come to admire Lincoln's tactical genius, and with considerable pride he also saw him as an ally and a friend. Douglass's changing opinions about the president reveal as much about his own political evolution as they do about Lincoln's.

Race was the issue that launched Lincoln's career in national politics. In the famous debates of 1858, the other Douglas—Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln's opponent for the U.S. Senate in Illinois that year and again for the presidency in 1860—dwelled incessantly on the theme of racial inferiority. Douglas charged that the Negro race was inferior and thus not entitled to the inalienable rights accorded to whites. Conservative voters responded enthusiastically when Douglas referred to Lincoln as a "black Republican" and an extreme abolitionist (like "Fred. Douglass, the Negro") who was advocating intermarriage and Negro suffrage and officeholding. Lincoln tried to rise above Douglas's distortions and racial slurs, insisting that he was fighting for the nation's moral foundations. The crucial issue, Lincoln said, was that of human rights, not race. And he warned—as the abolitionists did—that the nation could not survive "permanently half slave and half free."

Yet Lincoln's liberal philosophy was countered by his pragmatism and his strong political conservatism. He realized that any attempt to secure all rights for blacks at once would scare the skittish white community and thus defeat the precarious enterprise of building a more equitable society. His goal during the 1850s was to stop the spread of slavery, not to liberate the slaves—hence the seeming contradictions in his views on race. He deplored the extension of slavery but defended southern states' rights to their

slaves as "property." He also supported the southern demand for a tough fugitive slave law and opposed Negro voting and officeholding. During the ruthless political campaign of 1858, Lincoln sounded deeply pessimistic about the prospects for racial equality. In the now infamous Charleston speech he baldly declared that

there is a physical difference between the white and the black races which I believe will for ever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.

The best he could do was to invoke the views of two slaveholders—Thomas Jefferson and Henry Clay—advocating gradual emancipation and voluntary emigration of freed slaves as the only viable solutions to slavery and racism.

Frederick Douglass, who was not running for office in 1858, had a different agenda. While Lincoln was trying to win over antislavery voters without unduly alarming conservatives in the state, Douglass was speaking out for abolition and dismissing colonization as a delusion that "serves to deaden the national conscience when it needs quickening to the great and dreadful sin of slavery."

Yet Douglass campaigned hard for Lincoln both in his Senate race in 1858 and in his 1860 run for the presidency. He, too, was a political pragmatist. He was saddened, he wrote in the June 1860 issue of *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, that the Republicans would not "inscribe upon their banners, 'Death to Slavery,' instead of 'No More Slave States,'" but he was willing to "work and wait for a brighter day, when the masses shall be educated up to a higher standard of human rights and political morality." He described Lincoln approvingly as a "radical Republican," calling him "a man of will and nerve . . . He is not a compromise candidate by any means." Douglass was willing to overlook

Dorothy Wickenden is the managing editor of The New Republic. Born in Norwalk, Connecticut, she received her B.A. from William Smith College (1976). Copyright © 1990 by Dorothy Wickenden.

Lincoln's statements about racial superiority and his schemes for colonization. After all, Lincoln had pledged to stop the spread of slavery and to work toward "its ultimate extinction," and he had a good chance to win the presidential election.

But disillusionment quickly followed his endorsement. By December 1860 Douglass was describing Lincoln not as an abolitionist (which Lincoln had never remotely professed to be), but as a protector of slavery. "Mr. Lincoln proposes no measure which can bring him into antagonistic collision with the traffickers in human flesh," he declared. Douglass's worries were exacerbated by the country's unstable political condition. In the wake of the election, southern states were threatening to secede. Northerners were urging compromise, not confrontation, and Douglass and other abolitionists expected the Republican Party to back down on slavery. "The feeling everywhere," he wrote later, "seemed to be that something must be done to convince the South that the election of Mr. Lincoln meant no harm to slavery or the slave power." Douglass no longer advised against disunion. He sought "any upheaval that would bring about an end to the existing condition of things." As Lincoln desperately sought ways to restore national harmony, Douglass looked forward to war as the beginning of the end of slavery.

The new president did not intend to turn the war into an abolitionist crusade. He said in his first Inaugural Address in March 1861, "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so . . ." Douglass described the address as "double-tongued"—a shrewd description of Lincoln at the time. Caught between abolitionists and their Republican sympathizers on one side and Northern Democrats and the volatile border states on the other, Lincoln struggled to arrange a compromise. He hoped that he could move the remaining slave states still in the Union slowly toward emancipation by offering financial compensation for freed slaves. At the same time, he sought to soothe racial

fears, in the North and the South, by advocating the colonization of freedmen.

For months after the Civil War broke out, public opinion in the North tended to endorse Lincoln's view of his mission. In November 1861, the three major New York papers, the *Tribune*, the *Times*, and the *World*, all denied that the war's purpose was to abolish slavery. Even Senator Charles Sumner, a friend of Douglass and a longtime supporter of the abolitionists, wrote: "You will observe that I propose no crusade . . . making it a war of abolition instead of a war for preservation of the union." Emancipation was "to be presented strictly as a measure of military necessity, and the argument is to be thus supported rather than on grounds of philanthropy." Though the abolitionists found this a cold-blooded approach, they too argued that the war could be won only if the slaves were freed. "The very stomach of this rebellion is the Negro in the condition of a slave," Douglass wrote. "Arrest that hoe in the hands of the Negro, and you smite the rebellion in the very seat of its life."

Lincoln was an astute politician who moved only when the time seemed right. He was as concerned about the limits of federal power as he was about the evils of slavery. As president he did not express his abhorrence of slavery with the passion he had in the debates with Stephen Douglas. Frederick Douglass was astonished when Lincoln revoked General John C. Frémont's order freeing Missouri's slaves in August 1861. He could not understand Lincoln's refusal to make use of Negro soldiers:

The national edifice is on fire. Every man who can carry a bucket of water, or remove a brick, is wanted; but those who have the care of the building, having a profound respect for the feeling of the national burglars who set the building on fire, are determined that the flames shall only be extinguished by Indo-Caucasian hands . . .

After a series of devastating Union defeats in 1861, however, the public moved closer to the abolitionist view that the war could be won only by destroying slavery. So did the president. Although he still declared

FREDERICK DOUGLASS: HIS BONDAGE AND HIS FREEDOM

The life of Frederick Douglass (1817–1895) has the shape of an American myth—even more, perhaps, than that of Honest Abe, rail-splitter. Douglass's autobiographies (he wrote three) show a man who not only demanded that the nation accept the black dream of freedom and equality, but who embodied the dream in his own life.

Born to a black slave and a white father he never knew, Douglass's early childhood on a Maryland plantation was marked by paralyzing hunger and cold. He recalled his feet being "so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes." At age six or seven, he was sent to a family in Baltimore, where the mistress of the house broke state laws by teaching him the rudiments of reading. This interlude came to an end when the master found out, admonishing his wife that if she taught "that nigger . . . how to read, there would be no keeping him. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master." Few warnings have proved so prophetic.

With the help of local schoolboys, Douglass taught himself to read and write. Now literate, he became even more eager for release from the "peculiar institution." In September 1838, at the age of 21, he escaped from slavery by fleeing to New York City, there marrying a freed woman, Anna Murray, whom he had known in Baltimore. They then moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he changed his name from Bailey to Douglass to elude slaveholders. For three

years he supported himself by shoveling coal, sawing wood, and sweeping chimneys, until, as he put it, "I became known to the anti-slavery world."

Soon after his arrival in New Bedford, Douglass became a subscriber to the abolitionist paper *The Liberator* and a protégé of its founder, William Lloyd Garrison. His first opportunity to speak before a white audience came in August 1841, when he addressed an anti-slavery convention in Nantucket. His gift for oratory was immediately apparent, and the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society hired him as a lecturer. Using no notes, Douglass could speak for hours at a time, possessing, as one observer said, "wit, argument, sarcasm, pathos" and a voice "highly melodious and rich." Hecklers and skeptics claimed that so articulate a man could never have been a slave. To refute them, Douglass wrote an autobiography in 1845, which he rewrote 10 years later as *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Fearing recapture because of what he revealed in the autobiography, Douglass went on a two-year lecture tour in the British Isles, promoting his book and raising funds for the Massachusetts reformers. Douglass was soon an international celebrity.

In December 1846 friends purchased his freedom, and he returned home with a new ambition: to start his own abolitionist newspaper. After moving to Rochester, he began publishing the *North Star* (later renamed *Frederick Douglass's Paper*), which he described as "a terror to evil-doers."

that the purpose of the war was to restore the Union and urged the border states to accept gradual, compensated emancipation, he simultaneously initiated a number of tactical changes. In August, the month he revoked Frémont's order, he also signed the first Confiscation Act, which freed all slaves who had participated against the Confederate war effort. In April 1862 he signed a bill abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia, and in May he acceded to General Benjamin Butler's "contraband" policy toward fugitive slaves, virtually granting them freedom. In July he signed the Second Confiscation Act. And, despite Lincoln's worries that

arming the Negro would turn the border states against him, in August Secretary of War Stanton authorized Brigadier General Rufus Saxton at Beaufort, South Carolina, to recruit black volunteers. Most telling of all, that summer Lincoln privately discussed emancipation with his cabinet.

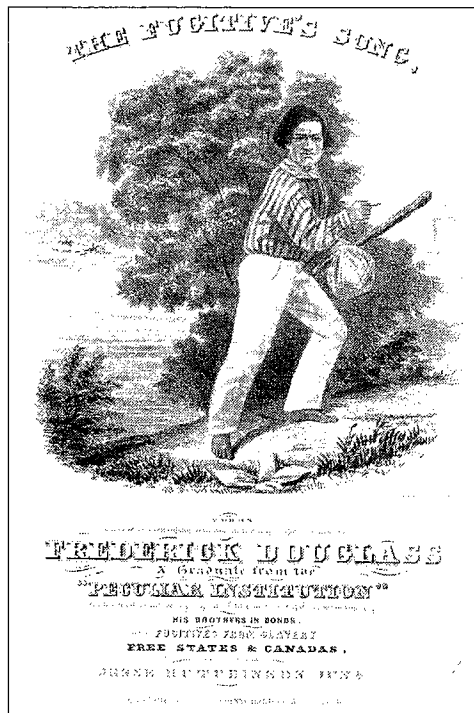
Lincoln had made each of these decisions reluctantly. That is unsurprising, given his cautious political disposition. More troubling to some historians is that Lincoln continued his tenacious support for the voluntary emigration of freed slaves, an idea Douglass described, accurately enough, as "an old Whig and border state prepossession."

In 1851, Douglass made a crucial decision. At the convention of the American Anti-Slavery Society he opposed Garrison's assertion that the Constitution was a pro-slavery document, citing the "noble purposes avowed in its preamble." He made it clear that he no longer supported Garrison's call for the dissolution of the republic.

Soon Douglass's work as an agitator and Lincoln's as a campaigner intersected. The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, sponsored by Stephen A. Douglas, marked a turning point for the two men, as it did for the country. The opening of the territories to slavery unleashed Northern sentiment against the South, sending many voters to the new Republican Party. Impressed by Lincoln's eloquent attacks on slavery and by the promise of the new party, Douglass joined, too, in August 1856.

The victories of emancipation and black enlistment that Douglass helped to achieve during the Civil War never seemed to him sufficient. During the 1860s and '70s, when racial animosity appeared more pervasive than ever, he pushed for black suffrage and integrated schools. (He was also one of the few influential men of his time, black or white, to agitate for women's rights.) Douglass's work on behalf of the Republicans was rewarded with government posts: In 1877 he was appointed Marshal of the District of Columbia, in 1881 Recorder of Deeds for the District, and in 1889 he became American ambassador to Haiti.

During the 1880s and '90s, while many of his disillusioned contemporaries were preaching self-help and racial solidarity,



Douglass became stubbornly more assimilationist. In 1884 he remarried, this time a white woman, Helen Pitts. Many blacks were appalled, but Douglass denounced their reaction as a dangerous eruption of "race pride." In a message that sounds particularly pointed today, he insisted that "a nation within a nation is an anomaly. There can be but one American nation . . . and we are Americans."

On August 14, 1862, Lincoln received at the White House a small group of free black men who had been carefully selected by the Commissioner of Emigration, the Rev. James Mitchell, an avid proponent of colonization. Lincoln thought he could convince them that racial prejudice was immutable and emigration inevitable, and he asked them to lead a movement for voluntary colonization. "You and we are different races," he said. "[T]his physical difference is a great disadvantage to us both . . ." Furthermore, he told them, the Negro was the source of the current troubles: "But for your race among us there could not be war." Incensed at what he

perceived as a case of blaming the victim, Douglass wrote a withering account of the inconsistencies in Lincoln's argument, concluding that he was "a genuine representative of American prejudice and Negro hatred and far more concerned for the preservation of slavery, and the favor of the Border Slave States, than for any sentiment of magnanimity or principle of justice and humanity."

Few realized that as Lincoln was making one final push for his tired old Whig solutions to slavery, he was also laying the groundwork for a social revolution. One month before receiving the

black delegation, Lincoln had privately presented the "preliminary" Emancipation Proclamation to his cabinet, and one month later he released it. In December 1862, he proposed amendments to the Constitution that would provide for gradual, compensated emancipation and colonization. But by January 1, 1863, when the final proclamation took effect, Lincoln no longer considered colonization an active political option. Many scholars have claimed that Lincoln supported colonization mainly as a political tool to chip away at conservative worries about black freedom. Certainly, once the slaves were freed and allowed to fight in the war, Lincoln recognized that the obvious next step was citizenship, not banishment.

Douglass wished that the proclamation had gone further. It was, after all, only a war measure that excluded the loyal border states and those areas of the South under occupation by Union troops. It justified emancipation as a "military necessity" and did not condemn slavery. Nevertheless, as he later wrote, he "saw in its spirit a life and power far beyond its letter." The final document made no mention of colonization (as the preliminary one had) or compensation, and it had a provision for incorporating blacks into the Union army. On New Year's Eve in 1862, Douglass waited with crowds of expectant blacks at Boston's Tremont Temple for the momentous announcement from Washington and joined in hours of rejoicing when it came. He set off on an extended lecture tour to explain the proclamation's significance to the public and to press for Negro enlistment. He agreed immediately to Major George L. Stearns's request to help recruit Negro troops. Douglass had begun to work within the political establishment.

For decades, historians have argued about whether Lincoln ever foresaw genuine civil rights for liberated blacks. Frederick Douglass, of course, had much to say on the subject. Although he continued his attacks on the administration after the Emancipation Proclamation, the tone of his remarks changed. Both men faced two pressing questions during the last years of the war—the role of blacks in the army and the future of blacks in Amer-

ica—which they discussed with mutual respect at the White House. The three conversations between the "ex-slave, identified with a despised race" and "the most exalted person in this great Republic," as Douglass put it in his 1892 autobiography, vividly capture how the two leaders practiced the arts of politics and persuasion. The talks also reveal how far each had gone toward accepting the other's views on how best to achieve a more just society.

Douglass intended to demand nothing less than "the most perfect civil and political equality." That included, of course, Negro suffrage. He was convinced that enlistment of blacks in the Union army was the first step toward citizenship, and on February 26, 1863, he published a widely distributed broadside, "Men of Color, to Arms!" urging blacks to fight for their own freedom. Undeterred by complaints of pay inequity, he told an audience of young black men in Philadelphia: "Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters U.S. . . . and there is no power on the earth . . . which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States." He even defended the administration: "I hold that the Federal Government was never, in its essence, anything but an anti-slavery government."

Six months later, after the bloody defeat of the Massachusetts 54th regiment at Fort Wagner, South Carolina (a battle in which his two sons fought), Douglass grew disheartened. Faced with growing evidence of the Confederates' brutal mistreatment of captured black soldiers, he wrote to Major Stearns that he intended to stop recruiting. "How many 54ths must be cut to pieces, its mutilated prisoners killed and its living sold into Slavery, to be tortured to death by inches before Mr. Lincoln shall say: 'Hold, Enough!'"

At Stearns's suggestion, Douglass went to the president himself with his complaints. In late July, 1863, accompanied by Senator Samuel C. Pomeroy of Kansas, Douglass entered the White House. During that first meeting, the president recalled Douglass's criticism of his "tardy, hesitating, vacillating policy" toward the war ("I think he did me more honor than I deserve," Douglass said somewhat disingenu-

ously), and Lincoln told him that this charge of vacillating was unfair. "I think it cannot be shown that when I have once taken a position, I have ever retreated from it." Douglass was more impressed with this statement than with anything else Lincoln said during the interview.

Douglass proceeded bluntly to make his demands: equal pay for black soldiers, equal protection for black prisoners of war, retaliation for Confederate killings, and promotions of blacks for distinguished service in battle. Lincoln replied that eventually black soldiers would receive the same pay as whites, but that the current inequity "seemed a necessary concession to smooth the way to their employment at all as soldiers." Lincoln resisted the suggestion of retaliation, arguing that it would encourage further Confederate atrocities, but he said he would "sign any commission to colored soldiers" recommended by Secretary of War Stanton. Douglass left the interview finally convinced of the president's concern for blacks as a people, not just as a military tool.

At the War Department, Douglass said, Stanton not only "assured me that justice would ultimately be done my race"; he promised Douglass a commission as assistant adjutant. The pledge prompted Douglass to cease publishing his paper, and in his valedictory he proudly told his readers, "I am going south to assist Adjutant General Thomas in the organization of colored troops, who shall win the millions in bondage the inestimable blessings of liberty and country." Although he was informed of his salary, the order for a commission never came. Douglass was displeased, but he later wrote with resignation, rather than resentment, that Stanton must have decided "the time had not then come for a step so radical and aggressive."

Lincoln called Douglass back to Washington the following August. The Rev. John Eaton, who helped run the government's program for freedmen in the Mississippi Valley, had reported to the president Douglass's continuing dissatisfaction with the treatment of black soldiers. Lincoln asked Eaton to set up another interview, telling him that, "considering the conditions from which Douglass rose, and the position to which he had attained, he

was, in his judgment, one of the most meritorious men in America."

This encounter was even more revealing than the first. On August 19, 1864, while waiting in the reception room, Douglass was mistaken for the president. Joseph T. Mills, another visitor that day, told Lincoln:

It was dark. I supposed that clouds & darkness necessarily surround the secrets of state. There in a corner I saw a man quietly reading who possessed a remarkable physiognomy. I was rivetted to the spot. I stood & stared at him. He raised his flashing eyes & caught me in the act. I was compelled to speak. Said I, Are you the President? No replied the stranger, I am Frederick Douglass.

The meeting itself perpetuated this eerie confusion of identities, with Douglass assuming the role of wise statesman and Lincoln proposing a radical scheme to ensure black freedom.

The Union troops were foundering, and Lincoln (in the midst of his reelection campaign) was afraid he would be forced into a premature peace agreement. He told Douglass he would like his advice on two matters, doubtless fully calculating the disarming effect the request would have. Horace Greeley, the editor of the *New York Tribune*, and others had been pressing for peace. In his reply to Greeley, Lincoln had made the abolition of slavery an explicit condition for the restoration of the Union. This "To whom it may concern" letter inflamed moderate Republicans and Copperheads (Democrats who pressed for reunion through negotiations), and Lincoln showed Douglass a response he had drafted, in which he said, in his usual circumspect manner, that even if he wanted to wage the war for the abolition of slavery, the country would not go along. Douglass emphatically urged the President not to send the letter, warning that it would be interpreted as a "complete surrender of your anti-slavery policy." In the end, Lincoln did not send it.

Lincoln told Douglass that, if peace were forced upon them now, he must find a way to get as many blacks as possible behind Union lines. He proposed a kind of underground railroad that curiously re-

sembled John Brown's early plan of attack on slavery: a small band of black scouts would infiltrate rebel states and accompany their charges to the North. Douglass worried that Lincoln was implicitly conceding that the Emancipation Proclamation could be suspended after the war, but he agreed to cooperate. He wrote the president a letter several weeks later suggesting the number of agents to be assigned, their salaries, and how to assure their safety. He also proposed some temporary government support for the freed slaves.

In his autobiography, Douglass recorded his impressions of the meeting: "What he said on this day showed a deeper moral conviction against slavery than I have ever seen before in anything spoken or written by him . . . I think that, on Mr. Lincoln's part, it is evidence conclusive that the proclamation, so far at least as he was concerned, was not effected merely as a 'necessity.'" Moreover, Douglass added, "In his company, I was never in any way reminded of my humble origin, or of my unpopular color."

At the time Douglass had only a partial picture of the president's intentions. He did not know that Lincoln was deliberately making his way from the Emancipation

Proclamation toward the 13th Amendment, which the President would describe as "the King's cure for all the evils." He had already moved from an acceptance of black soldiers to enthusiasm for their performance. In August 1863 he had written a letter to his old friend James C. Conkling, stating:

I know, as fully as one can know the opinions of others, that some of the commanders of our armies in the field who have given us our most important successes believe the emancipation policy, and the use of colored troops, constitute the heaviest blow yet dealt to the rebellion; and that, at least one of those important successes, could not have been achieved when it was, but for the aid of black soldiers.

Furthermore, Lincoln had made the crucial connection between arming the Negro and allowing him the privilege of voting. Louisiana, where Reconstruction had begun before the end of the war, was a test case. In March 1864, Lincoln wrote a letter to the newly elected Union governor, Michael Hahn, saying that the elective franchise might be offered to some blacks, "as, for instance, the very intelligent, and



The largely black Massachusetts 55th Regiment marches into Charleston on February 21, 1865. Douglass had championed the idea of blacks serving as soldiers as a step toward citizenship.

especially those who have fought gallantly in our ranks." He closed on a timid note: "But this is only a suggestion, not to the public, but to you alone." Nevertheless, on April 11, 1865, in his last public address a few days before his assassination, he returned to the idea, advocating limited suffrage and public education for blacks in reconstructed Louisiana.

Douglass disliked Lincoln's approach to Reconstruction, which allowed each state to decide for itself whether to confer the vote upon blacks. Like Senator Sumner, Douglass argued that Congress should demand universal suffrage as a condition for a state's readmission into the Union. Still, he did finally support Lincoln's reelection effort, agreeing with him "that it was not wise to 'swap horses while crossing a stream,'" and he attended the inauguration.

Lincoln's transcendent second Inaugural Address thrilled Douglass as much as the first had disappointed him. He was particularly struck by the president's conviction that slavery was "one of the offenses which . . . [God] now wills to remove," and that "this terrible war" was the "woe due to those by whom the offenses came." In Lincoln's words about the bond-man's 250 years of unrequited toil and suffering under the lash, Douglass could not have asked for a more stirring tribute to his people and the righteousness of the war against slavery.

The evening of the Inauguration Douglass went to the White House for the third time, to pay tribute to the president. He was turned away at the door, an affront that was quickly atoned for when an acquaintance of Douglass's let the president know he was there. Douglass entered the elegant East Room, and there, as he remarked in his autobiography, "Like a mountain pine high above all others, Mr. Lincoln stood, in his grand simplicity and homely beauty. Recognizing me, even before I reached him, he exclaimed, so that all around could hear him, 'Here comes my friend Douglass.'" Lincoln, ever the politician, took Douglass's hand and 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 de-

murred, afraid of detaining the president. "'No, no,' he said. 'You must stop a little, Douglass; there is no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours.'" Douglass, an equally adept flatterer, told him that the speech was "a sacred effort," and Lincoln replied, "I am glad you liked it!" His black friend "moved on, feeling that any man, however distinguished, might well regard himself honored by such expressions, from such a man."

On April 14, 1876, the eleventh anniversary of Lincoln's assassination, Frederick Douglass gave a speech at the unveiling of the Freedmen's Monument in Washington. It was a ceremonious occasion attended by senators, Supreme Court justices, and President Ulysses S. Grant and his cabinet. The oration is a favorite both with historians who cast Lincoln as a white supremacist and with those who see him as the Great Emancipator. In it, Douglass began with what sounded like sharp criticism: "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. He was preeminently the white man's president, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men." Black Americans, continued Douglass, "are only his step-children . . . children by force of circumstances and necessity." Yet later in the speech, Douglass's praise for the President was unstinting:

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 needed the earnest sympathy and the powerful cooperation of his loyal fellow countrymen . . . 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. From the genuine abolition view, 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.

Douglass was far from immune to the sentimental view of Lincoln that so many Americans acquired after his death. And the president's apparent fondness for him was reciprocated. He was deeply touched that Lincoln had left his walking stick to him. According to his biographer Benjamin Quarles, Douglass cherished this more than any other gift he received—including those from Charles Sumner and Queen Victoria.

Nevertheless, Douglass was not one to let sentiment override truth, and in his oration he was groping toward a painful recognition that the president's ultimate triumph was due in part to those distasteful concessions he made to white prejudice. As Richard Hofstadter acknowledged in *The American Political Tradition* (1948), Lincoln "knew that formal freedom for the Negro, coming suddenly and without preparation, would not be real freedom, and in this respect he understood the slavery question better than most of the Radicals, just as they had understood better than he the revolutionary dynamics of the war." The abolitionists and the radical Republicans could not have won their war against slavery. Nor would Lincoln's early support for black rights have prevailed without the determination of extreme idealists like Douglass.

At the time of his death Lincoln had not

yet made a clear commitment to full citizenship for blacks. But in the Gettysburg Address in November 1863, he described a nation that, "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal," would be given "a new birth of freedom." This was not the old Jeffersonian social order he had set out to defend. It was, in fact, very close to the "new Union" Douglass talked about the next month: "We are fighting for something incomparably better than the old Union." In the new union there would be "no black, no white, but a solidarity of the nation, making every slave free, and every free man a voter." In strikingly similar terms, Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass thus described a more perfect union, one they together helped to construct.

Today, amid the politics of self-interest and racial resentment, this sense of shared purpose is ever more fragile. Douglass saw that the country would be susceptible to such fragmentation, and he fought against it throughout his political life. "Nothing seems more evident," he repeatedly insisted to blacks who despaired of finding common ground with whites, "than that our destiny is sealed up with that of the white people of this country, and we believe that we must fall or flourish with them."
