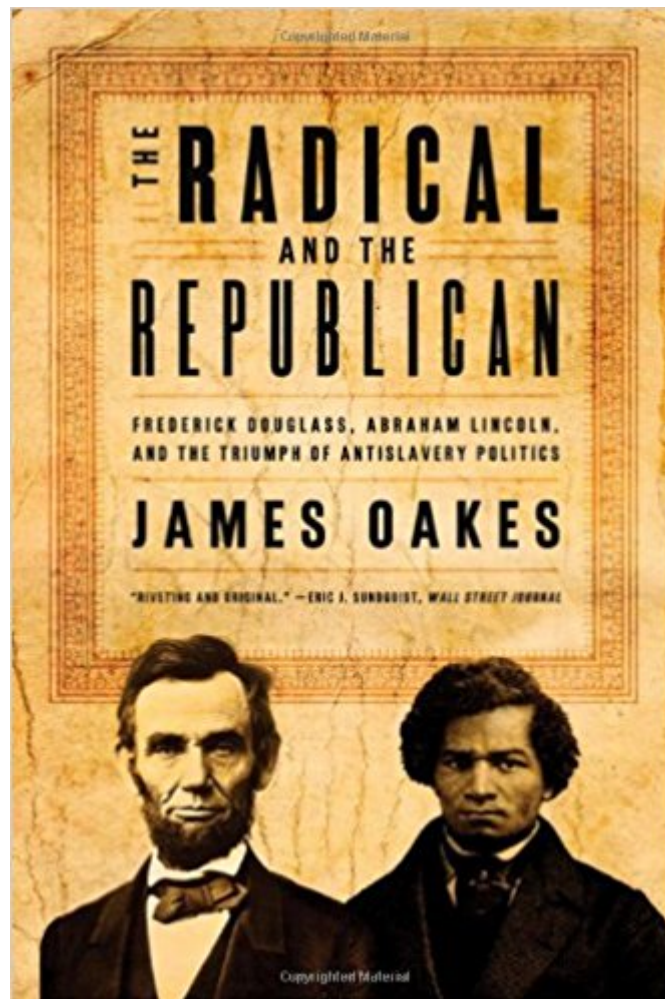


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The Radical And The Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, And The Triumph Of Antislavery Politics



Synopsis

"A great American tale told with a deft historical eye, painstaking analysis, and a supple clarity of writing." • Jean Baker "My husband considered you a dear friend," • Mary Todd Lincoln wrote to Frederick Douglass in the weeks after Lincoln's assassination. The frontier lawyer and the former slave, the cautious politician and the fiery reformer, the President and the most famous black man in America—their lives traced different paths that finally met in the bloody landscape of secession, Civil War, and emancipation. Opponents at first, they gradually became allies, each influenced by and attracted to the other. Their three meetings in the White House signaled a profound shift in the direction of the Civil War, and in the fate of the United States. James Oakes has written a masterful narrative history, bringing two iconic figures to life and shedding new light on the central issues of slavery, race, and equality in Civil War America.

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Customer Reviews

Abraham Lincoln (1809 --1865) and Frederick Douglass (1818 -- 1895) are American heroes with each exemplifying a unique aspect of the American spirit. In his recent study, "The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics" (2007), Professor James Oakes traces the intersecting careers of both men, pointing out their initial differences and how their goals and visions ultimately converged. Oakes is Graduate School Humanities Professor and Professor of History at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He has written extensively on the history of slavery in the Old South. Oakes reminds the

reader of how much Lincoln and Douglass originally shared. Lincoln and Douglass were self-made, self-educated, and ambitious, and each rose to success from humble backgrounds. Douglass, of course, was an escaped slave. Douglass certainly and Lincoln most likely detested slavery from his youngest days. But Lincoln from his young manhood was a consummate politician devoted to compromise, consensus-building, moderation and indirection. Douglass was a reformer who spoke and wrote eloquently and with passion for the abolition of slavery and for equal rights for African Americans. Much of Oakes's book explores the difficult subject of Lincoln's attitude towards civil rights -- as opposed simply to the ending of slavery -- and of how Lincoln's views developed during the Civil War. Oakes uses Douglass as a foil for Lincoln beginning with the Lincoln -- Stephen Douglas debates in Illinois in 1858. Steven Douglas tried hard to link Lincoln to Frederick Douglass and to abolitionism. He claimed that Lincoln favored equal rights for Negroes and raised the spectre of intermarriage between white women and black men.

Author James Oakes tells us this: in 1860 Frederick Douglass wrote of the upcoming presidential election "I cannot support Lincoln." But in 1888, Douglass said he had met no man "possessing a more godlike nature than did Abraham Lincoln." What had happened? Oakes gives us a quick glance at his hypothesis within the subtitle of his book: the triumph of antislavery politics. As he explains, this doesn't apply to Lincoln. Lincoln was always an anti-slavery politician, although his thinking on how and how fast slavery should be destroyed changed over time. But with regards to the use of politics as the means to abolish slavery, the man whose thinking moved more was Frederick Douglass. And although the two men share the billing in Oakes' title, this is far more a book about Douglass than Lincoln. It is a book about the evolution of the reasoning of Frederick Douglass. That evolution, as Oakes paints it, began for Douglass from the belief that the issue of slavery transcended politics and the compromises that came with it. Oakes traces how Douglass the reformer began to be drawn into the political arena, alienating the abolitionists who had first supported his career. But still he carried with him that insistence on absolutism. He brooked no delays, no strategic maneuverings. Lincoln and the Republicans were gradualists, and therefore were deemed irresolute and untrustworthy. After the Civil War began, Douglass found even more reasons for outrage. Lincoln refused to immediately emancipate the slaves. The President even countermanded the Union generals who issued proclamations freeing the slaves in the territories they conquered.

One of the easiest things to do, especially on the web, is to take a highly regarded leader of the

past, say, Abraham Lincoln, pull a few of his quotes or actions out of their historical context, and supposedly "prove" how horrible that leader actually was. In contrast, author James Oakes explains Lincoln to us postmoderns the way an historian should - by reminding us of Lincoln's circumstances and explaining Lincoln's overarching purposes. Oakes does this without resorting to making Lincoln a saint. According to Oakes' compellingly-supported evidence, Lincoln refused to compromise two essential commitments - to antislavery and to the American political system. Lincoln would not compromise his antislavery position to get more votes, nor would he compromise his oaths to uphold the Constitution to undermine slavery. This dual commitment of Lincoln's goes very far in helping us understand why Lincoln limited his goal to preventing the spread of slavery before he became president, why he didn't just go ahead and free all the slaves when he became president, why he moved slowly towards emancipation during the war, etc. Furthermore, the author's discussion of Lincoln's overwhelming desire to change the hearts and minds of Americans about slavery instead of merely forcing through political change regardless of wider support was especially useful. As the "Republican" in the title, Lincoln wanted a government that represented the will of the people; therefore, the will of the people needed to be converted before the government could make radical change. The fact that Lincoln helped accomplish this more widespread change is quite a testament to his legacy of leadership. The "Radical" in the title is another great American, Frederick Douglass.

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