

Lincoln's Legacy on Race, Freedom, and Equality

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As Americans commemorate Abraham Lincoln's 200th birthday with conferences, new coins and postage stamps, more statues and memorials, and a slew of new books, we should ask what we can learn from his legacy. What lessons from his life can we apply to ours?

Lincoln's legacy has long been problematic. Too often, he has been a casualty of the "great man" theory of history. As the scholar W.E.B. Du Bois noted long ago, Americans love to think of their leaders as flawless. "As sinners, we like to imagine righteousness in our heroes. As a result, when a great man dies, we begin to whitewash him. We seek to forget all that was small and mean and unpleasant, and remember only the fine and brave and good. We slur over and explain away his inconsistencies until there appears before us, not the real man but the myth---immense, perfect, cold, and dead."

The myth of Lincoln emerged as soon as he died. He was shot on Good Friday, died on Holy Saturday, and the keynote of Easter sermons throughout the North in 1865 was of Lincoln as America's Christ, the martyred president as the nation's redeemer. This myth of Lincoln has endured in varying degrees from Easter Sunday 1865 to the present.

Du Bois loved Lincoln but refused to deify him. "I love him not because he was perfect, but because he was not and yet triumphed," he said. Lincoln was among those white folks "whose taste was educated in the gutter. In his taste, education, and prejudices, he was 'poor white trash,' and yet he became Abraham Lincoln."¹

For Du Bois, Lincoln was "big enough to be inconsistent," by which he meant that Lincoln continually remade himself.

Indeed, I argue in my forthcoming book that Lincoln is, with Frederick Douglass, America's preeminent self-made man. He was born dirt poor, had less than one year of formal schooling, and became the nation's greatest president, whereas Douglass spent the first twenty years of his life as a slave, had no formal schooling, and became the most famous black man in the western world and one of the nation's greatest writers.

In embracing the concept of self-making, Lincoln stood apart from many of his peers and from most people today. For him, self-making was not about getting rich. Rather, it was inseparable from social reform: in remaking yourself, you also transformed your society.

The very existence of slavery precluded the possibility of self-making. As Lincoln noted: "I want every man to have the chance — and I believe a black man is entitled to it — in which he can better his condition." Blacks had as much right to receive the fruits of their labor as whites: "In the right to eat the bread, without leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns," Lincoln insisted, a black person "is my equal... and the equal of every living man.... Free labor has the inspiration of hope; pure slavery has no hope."

At a time in which most Southern men rose up by enslaving others, Lincoln understood that self-making was antithetical to slavery.

¹ Even in Lincoln's day, the term "poor white trash" was used as an epithet.

Indeed, his conception of self-making contradicted the basis of racism. True self-made men continually evolved, constantly changing, whereas racism depends on the idea of a white self being fixed and unchanging, always superior to a black self.

As Du Bois and numerous other critics have noted, Lincoln championed colonization as the solution to slavery throughout his life, save for the last year and a half. He shared with most other Northern reformers in the Civil War era a vision of a white nation, which prohibited blacks from being free and equal members. For Lincoln and other colonizationists, slavery and blacks were both evil, and the nation needed to be purified of both.²

It wasn't until mid-1863 that the apocalypse of war finally made this vision of a white nation untenable for Lincoln. He finally recognized that to win the war and save the nation, he needed to treat blacks as an integral part of it. He ultimately came to believe, with Frederick Douglass, that the destiny of the African American was the destiny of the nation.

In a rich paradox, the man who spent most of his life hoping to rid the nation of slavery and blacks met with more blacks in the White House (not counting servants and slaves) than all previous presidents combined. Bishop Daniel Payne; the Reverend Henry Highland Garnet; Martin Delany, the first black major in the Union army; Elizabeth Keckley; and Sojourner Truth are among the black leaders who visited the White House; and all of them described how Lincoln treated them with great respect and graciousness. He was different from most other white men.

When Frederick Douglass met with Lincoln in August 1863 (the first of three meetings), it was the first time that an African American and United States president met as equals, in the sense that each man was a cultural ambassador of his race.

Lincoln described Douglass as "one of the most meritorious men, if not the most meritorious man, in the United States. Douglass called Lincoln "the king of self-made men." And he emphasized that Lincoln treated him as a man, not as a black man. "In his presence I was never reminded of my humble origin, or of my unpopular color," Douglass noted. They respected each other's self-making.

The flow of blacks to and from the White House became so regular as to prompt a Washington newspaper to comment on it in early 1864: "Years ago had a colored man presented himself at the White House at the President's levee, seeking an introduction, he would have been, in all probability, roughly handled for his impertinence."

Lincoln's legacy on race thus points to the extraordinary capacity for change. As Du Bois emphasized, he was big enough to be inconsistent.

What about Lincoln's legacy on freedom and equality of opportunity?

Frederick Douglass recognized that neither Lincoln nor any other individual had control over emancipation. In October 1862, events far greater than the president "had wrung the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation from him," Douglass said, and these same events would carry Lincoln to sign the final emancipation decree. Every day slaves fled their masters for Union lines, disrupting the Confederacy and becoming its worst enemy. Every day abolitionists spoke out in one united voice. Every day Union soldiers killed slaveowners. And every day Republicans in Congress worked to dethrone slavery. In May 1862 Congress passed the Second Confiscation Act, which declared that slaves of rebel masters were "forever free" and called on the president to issue an emancipation proclamation to give

² See David Brion Davis, Challenging the Boundaries of Slavery (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 33.

teeth to the act. For Douglass, this was all part of a providential wave of progress sweeping the nation and indeed the globe. It was thus absurd to assume that one man could emancipate four million.

Lincoln himself emphasized that he had no control over events that led to emancipation. "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me." He understood that the leader of a nation "must oftentimes be content to follow."

Lincoln's legacy on freedom and equality of opportunity suggests that these ideals are beyond one individual's power to shape or control, and that they remain for the present generation to fulfill.

Frederick Douglass brilliantly encapsulates Lincoln's legacy on freedom, equality, and race in his speech commemorating the unveiling of the Freedmen's monument in Lincoln Park in 1876. It was one of the most important speeches of Douglass' life. In the audience were President Grant and his cabinet, justices of the Supreme Court, congressmen and diplomats, and leading clergymen, along with a few black leaders.

Even in this setting, Douglass refused to mythologize Lincoln. "Truth compels me to admit---even here in the presence of this monument we have erected to his memory---that Abraham Lincoln was neither our man nor our model. He was preeminently the white man's president, entirely devoted to the welfare of the white men, and he shared toward the colored race the prejudices common to his countrymen."

Douglass then turned to the white dignitaries and said: "You are the children of Abraham Lincoln. We are at best only his step-children."

Strong words, these. And yet anyone who had followed Douglass's career would have recognized his penchant for suddenly reversing course and surprising his audience. He did it now.

"By prioritizing the Union over the plight of blacks, Lincoln brought the American people safely through the conflict," Douglass said. "Had he put the abolition of slavery before the salvation of the Union, he would have alienated large numbers of 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, determined."

The conservative Republican had helped steer the nation through a revolution. The white man's president who treated blacks as stepchildren had ultimately adopted them as his own children, part of the national family. And so by honoring Lincoln, blacks honored themselves, Douglass said.

In the process, blacks and whites, working together, dramatically narrowed the gap between national ideals and realities. Statesmen, soldiers, and civilians all participated in this process. These ideals were larger than one man. And they would be left hanging in the balance to this day.

And so another legacy of Lincoln is inspiration. A gap between national ideals and realities remains, and we face another national crisis. It is thus the mission of all Americans to unite and, working together, finally fulfill the nation's ideals of freedom and equality of opportunity for all.