

Bettyann Foley

Final Project: Book review, The Radical and the Republican, by James Oakes

A More Perfect Union Year Two

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The book, The Radical and the Republican, written by James Oakes was a fantastic read. The book communicated the attitudes and the politics of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass towards the issue of slavery and the emancipation of slaves. Oakes' portrayal of both men was extremely positive. He went into detail about their politics and the reasons behind their public positions regarding slavery. "Their minds worked differently. Though they both hated slavery, they hated it for different ways and not always for the same reasons."(P. 90) He focused on the changes in their relationship on the road to emancipation of the Slaves. It was a powerful book that could be read by many as a great example of men having different reasons for working to correct an injustice.

Lincoln and Douglass were both great men. Both having had struggles in their lives, they were destined for greatness. "Lincoln and Douglass were very different men. True, there were parallels. Both had grown up in poverty; they were largely self-taught; in a generation of great orators they were two of the greatest; in a century of the self-made man both came to see their own lives as exemplary."(P. 90) Lincoln and Douglass both had strong views on work ethnics. Both strongly believed people should reap the benefits of their labor.

Lincoln and Douglass both believed that slavery was wrong and should be abolished. Douglass, being a former slave, had different reasons for wanting an end to slavery. Lincoln, having been raised in a church at young age with a minister that "filled them with notions about the wrong of slavery and the rights of man" (P41), had different

reasons. Although Lincoln may not have believed in racial equality, he did believe slavery was morally wrong. Even with their different reasons, "by 1858 Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass were saying the same thing, preaching the same antislavery politics. Liberty or Slavery must become law of the land" (P.5)

A major difference between Lincoln and Douglass were there views on the Constitution. Douglass changed his views about the Constitution; at one point he believed it was a proslavery document and then he changed his opinion to believe it was an anti-slavery document. Lincoln never changed his opinions about the Constitution. "Lincoln saw the Constitution as neither a clarion call to abolition on a proslavery scandal. It was a compromise. It recognized slavery, but only out of necessity and only three times." (P.63) Lincoln believed in the founding fathers and believed that they had envisioned an end to slavery in the future of the then-fledgling United States. He also believed they had to make concessions to allow for the formation of the Union. "Unlike Frederick Douglass, Lincoln did not claim those concessions had not been made. He accepted them, but that didn't mean he liked them."(P.63)

Another major difference between Lincoln and Douglass was in the idea of colonization. Lincoln believed in setting colonies with emancipated slaves in Central America. "He always supported colonization, and in August of 1862, when he knew that emancipation was coming, his moment of truth arrived." Douglass strongly disagreed. "We are Americans and we shall rise or fall with Americans." (P190) Douglass believed emancipated slaves should live and prosper in America.

Lincoln and Douglass had significantly different personas. "Douglass had the blustery, oversized persona of a nineteenth-century Romantic. Abraham Lincoln was the

cautious grandchild of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.” (P.90) Douglass tended to be reactive and outspoken. Lincoln tended to be methodical and measured in his response, and always waited for the proper time to express it. This was an area of frustration for Douglass. He believed Lincoln waited too long to make important proclamations or decisions. “Lincoln had often admitted that his concern to prevent a popular backlash sometimes caused him to move slowly.” (P.216)

Another criticism Frederick Douglass had of Lincoln was his handling of Reconstruction. He did not believe Lincoln was being pro-active enough to ensure freedoms for the emancipated slaves. He was particularly enraged by Lincoln’s lack of attempt to exert pressure on Louisiana to give blacks the right to vote. “Douglass characterized Lincoln’s position as do evil by choice, right by necessity.” (P.225) Douglass wanted racial equality, Lincoln wanted slaves freed. Douglass believed if blacks could fight for the government then they should have a voice in government. Without the right to vote Douglass believed the freed slaves were still at the mercy of their former masters. “Lincoln’s reconstruction policy was as good as sending sheep to their slaughter.” (P.225)

A turning point in their relationship happened during Douglass’s second meeting with Lincoln. Lincoln was concerned that the slaves did not know that they were being emancipated. Slaves were staying in the South, and not coming North. At this point Lincoln was not sure that the Union was going to win the war. He was concerned the war would end and that there would still be enslaved people in the South. “Lincoln was fairly certain that slaves already freed could not be reenslaved, but he could not be sure about the millions still on farms and plantations across the South. Emancipation was not

inevitable after all.” (P.231) this was the reason Lincoln asked Douglass to come to meet with him. Lincoln wanted Douglass to spread the word about emancipation. He wanted more emancipated slaves to come to the North for their freedom. “Lincoln said, I want you to set about devising some means of making them acquainted with it, and bringing them into our lines.” (P.231) Douglass changed his opinion about Lincoln after this meeting. “Douglass’s long-standing suspicions of the President’s commitment to emancipation vanished.” (P.233)

After their meeting the Union started making great gains. They were winning battles and it looked like the war would be ending soon. Douglass was amazed at the outcome; “The final test of our national fitness for self-government...We passed the test and have come out it like pure gold.” (P.236) Douglass was very appreciative of the depth of commitment that Lincoln had to emancipation and respected him greatly for his dedication.

Although the men had differing opinions of each other in the end they were good friends. They respected each other’s opinion and valued their conversations. In a time where black men were not held in high esteem, Lincoln held Douglass there. “You must stop a little, Douglass there is no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours. I want to know what you think.” (P.242)

This book was wonderful. It depicted both men as humans who did great things. They made mistakes along the way but they stayed true to their cause to end slavery. I would strongly recommend this book to my fellow teachers and to some of my students.

## Pedagogical Approach

There are a number of approaches you could use in the classroom with this book. The approach I would use would use would be a group project. I would divide the class into cooperative learning groups. Each group would be required to read a chapter in the book and summarize their chapters. In their summaries they would have to focus on the similarities and difference between Lincoln and Douglass. They could present in a poster, PowerPoint presentation or a report.

When they had finished this part of the assignment they would be required to present to the class. As they are presenting, the other students would have to take notes on the similarities/differences between Lincoln's and Douglass' positions on slavery and the road to emancipation. They would do this individually. After all the presentations were completed, students would be asked to give their opinions about the men's positions. They would then be asked to decide who they would have backed.

Hopefully the class would be split in the middle and there would be a class debate about the men and their positions. It would give students the opportunity to discover and explore two great men. It would also allow a concrete example of how people can want and work for the same cause for different reasons.

## Bibliography

The Radical and the Republican, James Oakes; W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2007.