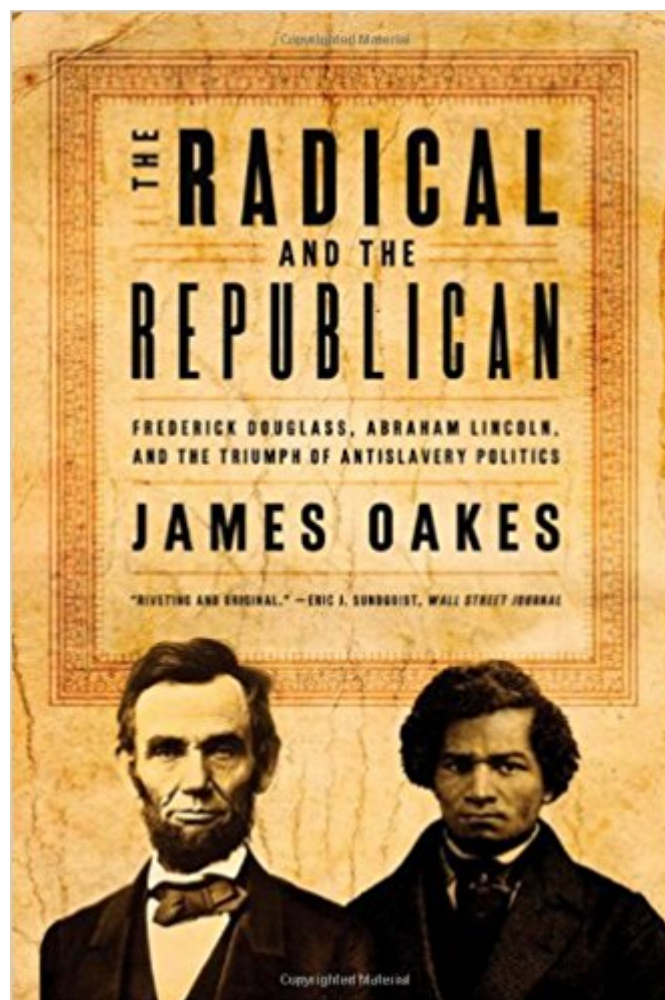




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# The Radical And The Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, And The Triumph Of Antislavery Politics



## 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The perennial tension between principle and pragmatism in politics frames this engaging account of two Civil War Era icons. Historian Oakes (*Slavery and Freedom*) charts the course by which Douglass and Lincoln, initially far apart on the antislavery spectrum, gravitated toward each other. Lincoln began as a moderate who advocated banning slavery in the territories while tolerating it in the South, rejected social equality for blacks and wanted to send freedmen overseas — and wound up abolishing slavery outright and increasingly supporting black voting rights. Conversely, the abolitionist firebrand Douglass moved from an impatient, self-marginalizing moral rectitude to a

recognition of compromise, coalition building and incremental goals as necessary steps forward in a democracy. Douglass's views on race were essentially modern; the book is really a study through his eyes of the more complex figure of Lincoln. Oakes lucidly explores how political realities and military necessity influenced Lincoln's tortuous path to emancipation, and asks whether his often bigoted pronouncements represented real conviction or strategic concessions to white racism. As Douglass shifts from denouncing Lincoln's foot-dragging to revering his achievements, Oakes vividly conveys both the immense distance America traveled to arrive at a more enlightened place and the fraught politics that brought it there. (Jan.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

James Oakes is the author of several acclaimed books on slavery and the Civil War. His history of emancipation, *Freedom National*, won the Lincoln Prize and was longlisted for the National Book Award. He is Distinguished Professor of History and Graduate School Humanities Professor at the Graduate Center, CUNY.

I was always aware that Lincoln publicly claimed not to care much about slavery. He once said that in order to keep the Union together, he would abolish slavery if it would do the trick. If he had to keep slavery going in order to keep the Union together, he would do it, too. This led me to think that Lincoln was indifferent to slavery and its evils. However, after reading this book, I have changed my mind. Lincoln did indeed state the above, but he was politician, not a reformer. This is emphasized several times by Frederick Douglass. Douglass, too, thought that Lincoln did not care about the welfare of African Americans, but after Lincoln's death, he reconciled himself to the fact that Lincoln had to compromise somewhere with the American public. He could not always tell them how he felt personally. Anyway, enough about the contents of the book. The structure of the book was interesting. Whether it is a good interesting or a bad interesting is up to the reader. Typically, Oakes would state the result, as if writing an abstract of a paper, then go back to the beginning of the event and explain the intricacies of Lincoln's actions, or Douglass' opinions, etc. When he sequentially arrived back to the result, he would infer more of his own analysis and wax eloquent on Lincoln's decisions. Occasionally, while writing a paper, and trying to remember what happens first, this causes the reader a bit of confusion, but it is minimal to negligible, especially if one is already familiar with Civil War history.

There is a perennial tension in any democracy between those who insist that there must be scrupulous respect for the law, and those who insist that at times a higher law must be followed. Philosophical and moral disagreements separate the two groups. But so does temperament. James Oates' *The Radical and the Republican* masterfully witnesses to the crucial role temperament plays in determining which side of the political and moral divide one lands in the higher law debate. Lincoln (the republican) was by nature a man inclined toward moderation, reason, patience, and unemotional analysis. Although always a loather of slavery, it took the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act to put slavery in the middle of his political radar screen. Even then, he insisted that slavery was implicitly guaranteed in the Constitution, and that, short of a constitutional amendment, the most a President or Congress could do was to geographically contain it. Lincoln, who eventually adopted a policy Oates calls "strategic racism"--refusing to speak against the race-baiting so popular in the U.S. in order to make his eventual decision to emancipate the slaves an easier pill to swallow--thought John Brown a madman. Douglass (the reformer--or better, perhaps, the rebel) had a much more phlegmatic temperant: emotional, volatile, black-and-white thinking, quick judgments. Although aligned when young with the pacifist Garrisonians, Douglass was never much of a pacifist. But he imbibed the Garrisonian insistence that the Constitution and the government, through their complicity with slavery, were utterly corrupt, and that a higher moral law not only sanctioned but obliged disregard of them when it came to slavery. Douglass, who adopted a policy of black self-reliance which Oates calls "strategic separatism," thought John Brown a hero. The Civil War created an extraordinary environment, argues Oates, in which Lincoln the republican and Douglass the reformer began to converge. Lincoln dropped his idea of gradual and compensated emancipation by issuing the Emancipation Declaration and lobbying for the passage of the 13th Amendment. Douglass, under the influence of Gerrit Smith, came to see the Constitution as an anti-slavery document and politics as a legitimate method to reforming society. By the time Lincoln was murdered, Douglass had come to greatly admire the man who he mercilessly criticized through much of the war. And Lincoln went out of his way to refer publicly to "my friend" Douglass. Still, their basic temperaments remained quite different, and it's curious to reflect on what their relationship might've evolved into had Lincoln lived. Oates' discussion of the two men is fascinating, well-written, and well-documented. Strongly recommended not only for those interested in the Civil War but also for anyone interestd in the higher law debate.

On Douglass, Oakes looks at how he moved from radical to politician throughout his life, including wedding himself so much to the GOP in his last years that he apparently never entertained the idea

of a "Free Vote Party" paralleling the Liberty Party of his younger days. No, it's not a full bio, but it leads to further questions. Was this the "settling" of an old man? Was it an evolving pragmatism? Did getting a patronage job bank his inner fires? On Lincoln, Oakes takes a careful look at the long-debated issue as to whether or not he had any racist bones, either before election to the presidency or even after. On 126-29, Oakes tackles the pre-1860 politics of Lincoln re black-white relations beyond slavery with depth. He says Lincoln simply accepted white intransigence was so great that blacks never could have equality and that it was not a case of Lincoln himself rejecting racial equality. Nonetheless, Oakes believes "spineless" is a legitimate charge, as is "cynical." More serious are some of the themes from a pro-colonization lecture, in essence, Lincoln gave to northern black leaders shortly before announcing the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Oakes sees this as a more cynical version of Lincoln's 1850 stance on accepting white racism even though Lincoln didn't hold to it himself. After claiming in the past "racism" and "slavery" were different, Oakes says Lincoln now tried to conflate them with a cheap syllogism. This level of analysis is what makes the book all of the things I said in my header. No, again, this is not a complete dual bio. But Oakes' excellent "For Further Reading" appendix points to the best bios on both men, as well as takes on the Civil War militarily and socially, Reconstruction and more.

This book was for school but I really like it

Amazing read! The story of a Radical Abolitionist and a Conservative Republican before during and after the Civil War, and how they were able to mesh each other's political views and meet half way during one of the major American crises.

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