

Learning to Love Lincoln: Frederick Douglass's Journey from Grievance to Gratitude
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I am delighted to be here to talk about my two heroes: Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. I will be focusing on what one of them had to say about the other. Frederick Douglass, in his great oration in memory of Lincoln, delivered in 1876 upon the occasion of the dedication of the Freedmen's Monument, observed that "Any man can say things that are true of Abraham Lincoln, but no man can say anything that is new of Abraham Lincoln." That is still the case today. Not even by resorting to lies and untruths can one find anything new to say about Abraham Lincoln. The truths and untruths—and maybe most common, the half-truths—have all been around a long time. The task is thus not to be original in one's appreciation, but to be just.

Proper appreciation of Lincoln's statesmanship, particularly during his lifetime, was rare. The contrast with George Washington is instructive. Although both experts and ordinary citizens now routinely consider Washington and Lincoln the greatest of American presidents, Washington's rank as a statesman was clear and uncontested from the first—so uncontested that his election to the presidency was unanimous, while the election of Lincoln was so contentious as to provoke civil war. In addition to the seditious opposition of the South, Lincoln encountered plenty of loyal opposition in the North, not only from Democrats, but from those more radical than he both within the Republican Party and outside it (among the various strands of abolitionism). Radicals, then and now, have been particularly stinting in their praise of Lincoln. Some today suggest that credit for emancipation belongs more to those, like Frederick Douglass, who pressured Lincoln to take that decisive step. At the extreme, this position asserts that Lincoln was anti-black, that the Proclamation was basically a fraud, and that Lincoln does not deserve any credit for emancipation since he was "forced into glory."¹

Before signing on to the contemporary radical critique, we might want to examine what the greatest of the abolitionists himself had to say about Lincoln. From his newspaper editorials before and during the war to his speeches and personal reminiscences after the war, the trajectory of Frederick Douglass's thinking about Lincoln is one of increasing and deepening appreciation, often revising his own earlier negative assessments. Perhaps because Douglass was self-educated, he remained a lifelong learner, capable of open-minded and rigorous reconsiderations. The way in which the exercise of his critical faculties could lead him to substantive revaluations was evident early in his career when he dramatically changed his opinion about the status of slavery under the Constitution. Repudiating the Garrisonian view of the pro-slavery character of the Constitution, Douglass embraced an anti-slavery reading of the document, thereby transforming himself from a revolutionary, intent on annulling the Constitution, to a reformer, still fiercely critical of American practice, but ever after a staunch defender of America's founding principles.² A parallel, but more subtle, shift occurred as a result of Douglass's encounter with Lincoln—an encounter that taught him to appreciate the statesman (which is to say the prudent politician) as well as the John Browns of the world. Douglass learned to love Lincoln and in his 1876 “Oration in Memory of Lincoln” he recapitulated that intellectual and emotional journey for the benefit of all Americans.³

First Things

Douglass's oration was the keynote address at the unveiling of the nation's first statue in honor of Lincoln. The statue is entitled “Emancipation” and it was erected in the name of the former slaves and was paid for by their donations. As befitted the ceremonial nature of the occasion, Douglass's speech expressed gratitude toward Lincoln, but more intriguingly, it reflected on the political significance of gratitude. It is a speech both of gratitude and about

gratitude. Douglass says that “the sentiment of gratitude” which “perpetuate[s] the memories of great public men” is “one of the noblest that can stir and thrill the human heart.” Further, he points out that with the dedication of the Freedmen’s Monument black Americans now “[f]or the first time in the history of our people, . . . join in this high worship.” Douglass wants the world to notice what “we, the colored people” are doing in honoring Abraham Lincoln. As he explains, “First things are always interesting, and this is one of our first things.” Douglass presents the black commemoration of Lincoln as an act that honors the honorers almost as much as it honors the honoree.

The story of how the Freedmen’s Memorial took the shape it did, and Douglass’s role in ensuring that his people’s first “national act” came off well, is fascinating. Douglass was asked in 1865 to lend his name to the Educational Monument Association which proposed to raise money from blacks and whites alike to build a black college in honor of Lincoln’s memory. Douglass refused to participate in the project. Here is what he wrote in his letter to the organizers:

For a monument, by itself, and upon its own merits, I say *good*. For a college by itself . . . and upon its own merits, I say good. But for a college-monument, or for a monument-college, I do not say good; The whole scheme is derogatory to the character of the colored people of the United States. . . . *It looks to me like an attempt to wash the black man’s face in the nation’s tears for Abraham Lincoln!* . . . I am for washing the black man’s face (that is, educating his mind), for that is a good thing to be done, and I appreciate the nation’s tears for Abraham Lincoln; but I am not so enterprising as to think of turning the nation’s veneration for our martyred President into a means of advantage to the colored people, and, of sending around the hat to a mourning public.⁴

Douglass doesn’t want gratitude—which he calls “one of the holiest sentiments of the human heart”⁵—to be contaminated with blatant self-interest, for gratitude isn’t even gratitude then. In the proposed college-monument, the problem of impure motives would have been even worse, since there would not just be a mixture of motives but actually a division of motives along

racial lines. Whites would be doing the creditable giving and blacks the self-interested taking. Douglass did not want blacks to enter upon citizenship in that way. Instead of an ennobling display of black gratitude, which would elevate the givers and, moreover, elevate the givers in the minds of white observers, the college-monument idea would reduce blacks primarily to the role of recipients.

Douglass was not, in principle, opposed to white philanthropy on behalf of blacks. Years earlier he had sketched a plan for an industrial college in answer to an inquiry from Harriet Beecher Stowe about what she could do to contribute to black advancement.⁶ However, Douglass was always sensitive to the dangers of ill-timed and overly intrusive assistance, which could have the perverse effect of sapping black initiative, thereby impeding the long-term prospects of the race. Douglass worried that there was always more of benevolence and pity rather than straightforward justice in white America's dealings with blacks. His preference was for justice—sternly and blindly equal, with no special pleadings or privileges.⁷

This leads to what at first might seem a contradiction in Douglass's reaction to the monument-college project. As is well-known, Douglass's vision of America was fundamentally integrationist. Nonetheless, he wants the monument to be exclusively a black effort; however humble, it should be, he says, "our own act and deed."⁸ On the other hand, when it comes to the idea of a college, Douglass speaks against not only the self-serving hybrid of a monument-college, but also against the idea of any college being built for the permanent and exclusive use of blacks. Given the discrimination of the day, Douglass admitted the need for temporary recourse to complexional institutions, but he did not want to see the founding of any institution that accepted the permanence of segregation. As he says, "the American people must stand each for all and all for each, without respect to color or race."⁹

So, he is in favor of a separately erected monument but opposed to a separate college. Why a Freedmen's Memorial but not a Freedmen's College? What accounts for the different judgments on these two endeavors? The explanation, I think, hinges on the nature of the two undertakings and their potential contribution to either lessening racial prejudice or prolonging it. A display of gratitude by black Americans, reflecting the special sentiments they bear towards Lincoln, would undercut white prejudice, by showing blacks capable of "the holiest sentiments of the human heart."¹⁰ Conversely, a college explicitly and exclusively reserved to blacks (whoever foots the bill for it), by accommodating race prejudice, in effect bolsters it. Thus, Douglass accepts all-black institutions only with great reluctance and always with the proviso that, as soon as circumstances permit, blacks must make their way into the majority institutions.¹¹ Douglass is consistent in that he judges instances of racial solidarity and group action by their effects on friendship between the races. His guiding question is always: does the doing of this deed point us toward the overcoming of race prejudice and contribute to an ethos of common citizenship? Acts of black self-reliance, both individual and group-based, can create the conditions for non-racial brotherhood. Douglass understood that before the black man could be recognized as a brother, he must be recognized as a man. Manliness precedes fraternity. Or, to give it a non-gendered formulation: independence precedes friendship.

As Douglass had hoped, the monument-college plan was abandoned and, in the end, the memorial took the pure form he had recommended, with Douglass himself delivering the keynote address. Not surprisingly, his first paragraph refers to the "manly pride" with which blacks should view the occasion, while the final paragraph sets forth the black claim to "human brotherhood." More especially, Douglass informs those whites who seek to "scourge [blacks] beyond the range of human brotherhood" that the Freedmen's Monument stands as a refutation

of their “blighting slander.” In between the opening invocation of manliness (or independence) and the closing invocation of brotherhood (or friendship), the speech itself demonstrates how a still very divided nation could develop a shared perspective on the achievements of Abraham Lincoln.

Any analysis of the speech must take into account not only the uniqueness of the occasion but the rhetorical dilemma posed by the larger historical moment. The speech was given in 1876, as the Reconstruction period was coming to an end. With the federal government increasingly reluctant to enforce the 14th and 15th Amendments, Douglass was rightly worried about the resurgent spirit of the Old South. Douglass worried that reconciliation between Northern whites and Southern whites could end up excluding the freedmen and erasing the real meaning of the Civil War. Thus, he attempts to use the memory of Lincoln to counteract this dangerous tendency, and to revive the “new birth of freedom.”

The Oration has a careful structure, being composed of eight distinct sections, each of which begins with what grammarians call a “vocative expression”; in the first two sections he addresses “Friends and Fellow Citizens,” in the subsequent six sections, simply “Fellow Citizens.” Politicians, of course, often rely on direct address of this sort. Sometimes it even becomes a kind of verbal tic, like Lyndon Johnson (in his Texas accent, which I can’t imitate) peppering his speeches with “my fellow Americans.” Douglass’s iterations, however, are more deliberate; they signal new phases of an argument that delineates the different (but not irreconcilable) claims of whites and blacks to the memory of Lincoln.

Douglass begins the Oration by addressing his immediate audience: those who assembled that day in Lincoln Park due east of the Capitol building on the 11th anniversary of Lincoln’s assassination. The audience was a large and racially mixed one, composed of 25,000 ordinary

citizens, along with numerous representatives of official Washington. Douglass mentions the presence of members of the House of Representatives and the Senate, the presence of the Chief Justice and Supreme Court, and President Grant himself. These attendees deserved to be called not just “Fellow Citizens,” but “Friends,” whose attendance gave evidence of their sympathies. Interestingly, this first section of the speech makes no mention at all of Lincoln, but instead congratulates “you,” a pronoun that seems to refer, at least initially, only to Douglass’s fellow blacks. Thus, he speaks of “our condition as a people” and the remarkable progress in that condition. The evidence of progress, which Douglass says is a “credit to American civilization,” provides the occasion for a shift to congratulating “all.” Douglass notes that the “new dispensation of freedom”—“has come both to our white fellow-citizens and ourselves.”

The second section of the speech acknowledges especially the federal government and its friendly role in this new dispensation. The erection of the memorial received congressional approval; the pedestal for the statue was paid for by congressional appropriation; and the day itself had been declared a federal holiday.¹² Douglass, however, highlights the awful sacrifice that lies behind this federal friendship. This section contains Douglass’s first mention of Lincoln, whom he calls “the first martyr President of the United States.” Moreover, Lincoln’s martyrdom is presented as the climax of the larger national sacrifice to which Douglass alludes with his reference to “yonder heights of Arlington.” Arlington Cemetery was visible from Lincoln Park, and 16,000 Civil War soldiers were buried there, including 1500 black troops.¹³ On the 11th anniversary of Lincoln’s death, what Douglass wanted to remind his audience of was “blood-bought freedom”—“our blood-bought freedom”—in which “we, the colored people” rejoice.

While Douglass emphasizes the sentiment of appreciation that gives rise to monuments like the one being unveiled, curiously he says nothing about the actual statue. It is known that he

was not altogether pleased with the design which shows Lincoln, Emancipation Proclamation in one hand, standing over the crouching or half-rising figure of a slave. Dissatisfaction with the sculpture was apparently not limited to Douglass, but was shared by other African-Americans.

The official program for the festivities attempted to address these objections, explaining that

In the original [design] the kneeling slave [was] represented as perfectly passive, receiving . . . freedom from the hand of the great liberator. But the artist justly changed this, to bring the presentation nearer to the historical fact, by making the emancipated slave an agent in his own deliverance.

He is accordingly represented as exerting his own strength with strained muscles in breaking the chain which had bound him.¹⁴

The brochure also mentions that there was an alternative design by the female sculptor, Harriet Hosmer, which was rejected as too costly. It would have depicted Lincoln atop a central pillar, flanked by smaller pillars showing, among other figures, black Union soldiers. Douglass would certainly have preferred this design, since it embodied his favorite aphorism: “Hereditary bondsmen! know ye not/ Who would be free themselves must strike the blow?”¹⁵ In a sense, Douglass’s speech corrects the submissiveness or paternalism of the statue, by acknowledging both “our loyal, brave, and patriotic soldiers” and “the vast, high, and preeminent services rendered to ourselves, to our race, to our country, and to the whole world by Abraham Lincoln.” In other words, Douglass’s praise of Lincoln is balanced by his recognition of black agency, the invaluable contribution made by black Union troops (by war’s end, there were 180,000 black troops).

Having spent the opening two sections proclaiming the generous deed of the moment and commending it to the notice of “men of all parties and opinions,” including “those who despise us,” Douglass in the third section begins to speak to the larger nation-wide audience—an audience of “Fellow-citizens” not all of whom are necessarily “Friends.” Douglass now treads

very carefully. He does not want the black embrace of Lincoln to trigger a white flight from Lincoln. And so, he quite dramatically backs away from the Great Emancipator, insisting that

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. He was ready and willing at any time during the last years of his administration to deny, postpone and sacrifice the rights of humanity in the colored people, to promote the welfare of the white people of his country.

. . . The race to which we belong were not the special objects of his consideration.

Knowing this, I concede to you, my white fellow-citizens, a pre-eminence in this worship at once full and supreme. . . . You are the children of Abraham Lincoln.

Douglass devotes the whole of section 3 to reassuring nervous whites—whites who are patriotic, but probably prejudiced. Basically, he tells them, “Look, don't worry. Lincoln always loved you best. Take it from me, a Negro, Lincoln was not a Negro-lover.” It's a rather startling rhetorical gambit, but it allowed Douglass to exhort white Americans to heap high their hosannas of Lincoln. He tells them:

To you it especially belongs to sound his praises, to preserve and perpetuate his memory, to multiply his statues, to hang his pictures on your walls, and commend his example, for to you he was a great and glorious friend and benefactor.

By the close of this section of the speech, which we might dub the white supremacist section, one might wonder why blacks are bothering to honor Lincoln at all? Douglass's answer is that while whites are Lincoln's children, blacks are “his step-children, children by adoption, children by force of circumstances and necessity.” Moreover, what Lincoln did for his step-children, whether it was part of his original intention or not, was deliver them from bondage. Accordingly, Douglass entreats whites “to despise not the humble offering” of former slaves. The separate claims of whites and blacks upon the memory of Lincoln can co-exist. Whites can honor Lincoln for saving the Union; blacks can honor him for Emancipation. Shared homage, if it is ever to develop, must begin with toleration for racially-specific homage.

Frederick Douglass had a gift for metaphor and this image of blacks as Lincoln's step-children is one of his finest. It accords nicely with Lincoln's own account of the relation between the cause of Union and the cause of Emancipation, as expressed in his famous letter to Horace Greeley. Here is how Lincoln himself explained his duty as president:

My paramount object in this struggle *is* to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that.¹⁶

Douglass reminds his listeners that Lincoln was a Unionist first and foremost and that he became the Great Emancipator only "by force of circumstances and necessity." Whites ought to revere Lincoln as the savior of the nation. And indeed, the inscription on the national Lincoln Memorial, built half a century after the Freedmen's Memorial, reads: "In this temple, as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the Union, the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever."¹⁷

Of course, the Union to which Lincoln was devoted had at its foundation the principle of human equality. The Union was itself a moral project. Because the bond of genuine Union is a teaching about natural right, American patriotism ought to produce citizens who are, as Douglass says, "friendly to the freedom of all men." In the 4th and central section of the speech, Douglass presents at greater length the step-children's view of Lincoln, the essential feature of which was faith in Lincoln's "living and earnest sympathy" with their fate. Again, Douglass doesn't paper over the disagreements and disappointments that blacks experienced during the war years. "We were," he admits, "at times stunned, grieved and greatly bewildered." Douglass provides a litany of reasons why blacks might have doubted Lincoln's good will: he supported colonization schemes; he refused to enlist black troops; after finally allowing black recruitment, he refused to

retaliate when the Confederates violated the rules of warfare by massacring black prisoners; and he revoked early emancipation decrees by Union generals in the field.

Nonetheless, Douglass asserts that “we were able to take a comprehensive view of Abraham Lincoln”—a view that took the measure of the man and, after factoring in the “logic” of events and even “that divinity that shapes our ends,” Douglass says, “we came to the conclusion that the hour and the man of our redemption had met in the person of Abraham Lincoln.” Douglass then gives a counter-litany of the liberationist and racially transformative policies that transpired under Lincoln’s rule. He lists nine achievements, culminating in the Emancipation Proclamation. Each time, he repeats a version of the phrase “under his rule we saw” The phrase is crucial for both whites and blacks. Blacks—who longed for liberty but who might understandably be suspicious of rule and law, having suffered under generations of misrule—are reminded that their liberty came to them through law and through “wise and beneficent rule.” Conversely, whites are reminded that the actions of Lincoln, which struck not only at slavery but at “prejudice and proscription” as well, were the actions of a dedicated constitutionalist. The closing paragraph of section 4 celebrates Emancipation and, moreover, shows that the celebration can be shared by all. Douglass asks, “Can any colored man, or any white man friendly to the freedom of all men, ever forget the night which followed the first day of January, 1863?” Whites can appreciate black liberation and blacks can appreciate white “statesmanship”—a word that Douglass now uses for the first but not the last time in the address.

On this new bi-racial basis of Union and Liberty, Douglass goes on to a reconsideration of Lincoln in sections 5, 6, and 7. He argues that Lincoln’s “great and good” character was transparent to those “who saw him and heard him.” Indeed, direct contact wasn’t even necessary. In a passage with tremendous import for us today, Douglass says “The image of the man went

out with his words, and those who read him knew him.” We are indebted to biographers and historians who have scoured and scavenged for all the bits and pieces of eyewitness testimony and hearsay evidence, and who have laboriously contextualized and hypothesized and speculated, to such a degree that, with the exception of Jesus, there is now no one who ever walked the earth more written about than Abraham Lincoln. Nonetheless, it is reassuring to know that Lincoln’s words alone are enough. In light of this fundamentalist insight, Douglass now revises his earlier “white supremacist” account of Lincoln. He reconsiders Lincoln’s deference to popular prejudice in the appropriate context—the context of democratic statesmanship. Here’s what he says at the close of section 5:

I have said that President Lincoln was a white man, and shared the prejudices common to his countrymen towards the colored race. Looking back to his times and to the condition of the country, this unfriendly feeling on his part may safely be set down as one element of his wonderful success in organizing the loyal American people for the tremendous conflict before them, and bringing them safely through that conflict. 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 must have the earnest sympathy and the powerful cooperation of his loyal fellow-countrymen. Without this primary and essential condition to success, his efforts must have been vain and utterly fruitless. 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. 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, and determined.

Frederick Douglass himself always occupied “the genuine abolition ground,” and his speeches and writings, from the early years of the war especially, often manifested great frustration with Lincoln’s caution. In retrospect, however, Douglass generously acknowledges the partiality of his own abolitionist stance and credits Lincoln as the “comprehensive statesman.”

I think it is important to note that the final paragraph of this section carefully distinguishes Lincoln’s views on race from his views on slavery. Douglass repeats (for the third

time) that Lincoln was prejudiced, or more precisely that he “*shared* the prejudices of his white fellow-countrymen against the Negro [italics added].” According to Douglass, racial prejudice is a social construct; there is nothing innate or inevitable about it. It seems that Douglass does not regard Lincoln as particularly progressive on the question of race; he was a follower or a sharer in the dominant opinion of the day. However, in this very same section in which Douglass refers to Lincoln’s prejudices, he explicitly says that “the humblest could approach him and feel at home in his presence.” This statement echoes what Douglass said elsewhere about the experience of being in Lincoln’s personal presence. Speaking of his second meeting with Lincoln, Douglass in his autobiography says:

Mr. Lincoln was not only a great President, but a GREAT MAN—too great to be small in anything. In his company I was never in any way reminded of my humble origin, or of my unpopular color.

We might wonder whether the presentation of Lincoln’s racial prejudice is compatible with the presentation of his capacious and welcoming humanity. Of course, it might be possible for someone to regard a particular class of people as inferior in certain respects, while still treating individual members of that class with consideration. Lincoln could have been both prejudiced and polite. If so, it would still be necessary to explain why Douglass in the Oration chooses to draw attention to one quality more than the other. Perhaps he wishes to indicate to both blacks and whites that racial prejudice is not an insuperable obstacle to black advancement or bettered race relations.

Alternatively, I believe it is possible to interpret Douglass’s remarks in a way consistent with the view that Lincoln deferred to popular prejudice without fully subscribing to popular prejudice. The issue might be elucidated by asking “what was the nature of Lincoln’s ‘sharing’ in white prejudice?” When he describes the relation between Lincoln and “the sentiment of his

country,” Douglass credits Lincoln with being in advance of popular opinion (measured against which he was “swift, zealous, radical, and determined”). Douglass introduces the key verb “consult,” claiming that “the sentiment of his country” was something Lincoln “was bound as a statesman to consult.” To the extent that popular sentiment was unfriendly to blacks, Lincoln’s sharing in it may have been political, rather than personal—deliberately affected rather than deeply held. Douglass here conveys a crucial lesson about the limits within which democratic statesmen operate. Politicians can’t get too far ahead of public opinion if they hope to remain politically viable. More than others perhaps, black citizens must incorporate this insight into their assessment of political figures. A “comprehensive view” must “make reasonable allowance for the circumstances” and not judge on the basis of “stray utterances” or “isolated facts.” In taking the measure of Lincoln, Douglass shows how granting this latitude of maneuver is compatible with respect for the burdens of statesmanship as well as the self-respect of citizens.

Douglass tries to model what it looks like to take a comprehensive view of a politician. His people are new voters and there are two dangers they must avoid. Douglass does not want blacks to look to politics for a Moses figure, but he doesn’t want them to fall into the opposite error of cynically seeing only flaws. He shows the possibility of appreciation without idolatry and criticism without rejection.

Whichever way one comes down on the question of Lincoln’s views on race, Douglass is emphatic that Lincoln’s attitude toward slavery was above reproach. Douglass quotes from the atonement passage of the Second Inaugural, in which Lincoln interpreted the Civil War as the blood price exacted by a just God for the nation’s sins toward the slave. [You remember the passage: it speaks of the war possibly continuing “until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn

with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword.”] Those were lines that Douglass quoted in nearly every postwar speech he gave that mentioned Lincoln.¹⁸ The Second Inaugural’s solemn invocation of divine reparations, Douglass says, “gives all needed proof of [Lincoln’s] feeling on the subject of slavery.”

Douglass now revisits an issue he had highlighted earlier. In section 3, when he mentioned Lincoln’s policy of “opposition to the extension of slavery,” he had stressed Lincoln’s willingness to “protect, defend, and perpetuate slavery in the states where it existed.” This tolerance of slavery in the South was there cited as evidence of Lincoln’s pro-white views. Now, however, in section 5, Douglass explains that Lincoln acted as he did not because he was indifferent to the fate of black slaves, but “because he thought that it was so nominated in the bond.” In other words, he acted out of fidelity to the Constitution. Lincoln’s pre-war willingness to leave slavery alone in the Southern states does not in any way disprove or lessen his anti-slavery convictions. Of course, Douglass himself disagreed with Lincoln about what precisely was “nominated in the bond.” Most notably, Douglass argued that the so-called “fugitive slave” clause of the Constitution did not, in truth, refer to slaves but rather to indentured servants (who had signed contracts and could be held to those legal terms). Nonetheless, even though he is not fully in accord with Lincoln’s reading of the document, Douglass moves his audience toward an appreciation of constitutional devotion. He is acutely aware that racial progress in the future will depend upon the fidelity of both blacks and whites to the Constitution—the Constitution as purified and completed by the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments.

Fittingly, sections 6 and 7 transcend race altogether. These are the only sections that make no reference to either whites or blacks. Section 6 describes Lincoln’s early years and his preparation, through plain speaking and plain dealing, for the great crisis of civil war. Douglass

emphasizes Lincoln's humble origins: "A son of toil himself he was linked in brotherly sympathy with the sons of toil in every loyal part of the Republic." In this section, racial division is overcome and replaced by the class division between the patrician, James Buchanan, who was willing to allow "national dismemberment," and the plebeian, Abraham Lincoln, who had "an oath in heaven" to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States. The division we ought to dwell on, Douglass implies, is that between patriotism and treason.

This theme reaches an apotheosis in section 7 which describes the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Despite the "hell-black spirit of revenge" that motivated the crime, Douglass argues that good has come from it. Dying as a martyr to "union and liberty"—these twin aims now conjoined and equal—Lincoln has become "doubly dear to us."¹⁹ In his autobiography, Douglass noted that one effect of the assassination was to bring him into "close accord" with his white neighbors, feeling, for the first time he said, more like "kin" than "countrymen."

In the final section of the speech, just one paragraph in length, Douglass comes full circle, speaking once more to his largely black audience. He tells them: "In doing honor to the memory of **our friend** and liberator we have been doing highest honor to ourselves and those who come after us [emphasis added]." Note that despite the "unfriendly feeling" ascribed to Lincoln in sections 3 and 5, Lincoln by the end has become "our friend."²⁰

Through his interpretation and masterful presentation of Lincoln's statesmanship, Douglass has knit together the American polity in mutual understanding and appreciation of Lincoln. Douglass has acted as a statesman himself by demonstrating how memory and memorialization, done well, might shape a better American future.

In conclusion, let me just say a word about the larger lesson to be drawn from this speech. Frederick Douglass is best known as an activist. Much of his speaking and writing

involved demands for justice: justice toward blacks, justice toward women, justice toward laborers. Approached by a young man asking what he should do for the cause of racial justice, the elderly Douglass is said to have answered “agitate, agitate, agitate.” However, this fabled agitator also devoted a goodly portion of his public speaking to commemorating the past, celebrating the founding ideals of the nation, and praising those citizens and public figures who remained faithful to both the Declaration and the Constitution. In other words, he tried to foster a spirit of friendship and a unified national consciousness.

Aristotle (the first political scientist) called this *homonoia*, or like-mindedness. Like-mindedness—or thinking the same—about certain crucial matters, is the form of friendship that should characterize fellow citizens. Aristotle calls this like-mindedness “the greatest of goods for the political order” (*Politics* 2.4.6). It lessens civic strife among the parts or parties that are always present in any larger collective. Diversity—without this foundation of like-mindedness—is a recipe for growing discord. Like-mindedness allows cooperation and trust to replace contentiousness and suspicion. Aristotle argued that lawmakers should pursue this sort of friendship more than justice even, since civic friendship leads to justice and does so without having to involve the coercive bite of the law (*Ethics* 8.1). In friendship, what is right and what is pleasing come naturally together. For a model of how to encourage this civic friendship, there are very few who equal Frederick Douglass.

Especially in our contemporary moment, as protests have erupted over incidents of racial injustice, as well as over statues and memorials that are thought to symbolize and contribute to ongoing injustice, I can’t think of a better resource than Frederick Douglass. He is one of our nation’s greatest fighters against injustice and he took very seriously the topic of public commemoration. It matters intensely who we memorialize and how we understand the past.

Let me mention just a couple of things that distinguish Douglass from today's protestors and progressives. While Douglass was a fierce critic of our national transgressions, he also believed deeply in the American project. He considered the principles of the Declaration of Independence to be "saving principles" and he considered the Constitution to be "a great liberty document." He criticized the nation from the perspective of its own highest ideals, calling us to live up to our professions. Although he could be bitingly satirical, he was never cynical. He was always ready to find and praise what was good and generous and true in the American experiment. I am worried that this spirit of gratitude is being lost. There is a very deep alienation expressed in much contemporary rhetoric and action. Over the last summer, this hostility went so far as to threaten the Freedmen's Monument itself with destruction. There are many reasons to preserve the monument, including that it was the site of one of Douglass's most significant speeches and that it marks what Douglass called his people's first "national act"—the act by which they translated their gratitude for emancipation into an enduring work of art. The controversy over the monument will be salutary if it leads us to revisit its history and reread Douglass's speech. He can help us toward a more thoughtful and nuanced patriotism.

¹ Lerone Bennett, Jr. *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 2007).

² Diana J. Schaub, "Frederick Douglass's Constitution," in *The American Experiment: Essays on the Theory and Practice of Liberty*, ed. Peter Augustine Lawler and Robert Martin Schaefer (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994).

³ Lucas Morel has spoken and written insightfully on the "Oration." See "America's First Black President?: Lincoln's Legacy of Political Transcendence" (2001) and "Frederick Douglass's Emancipation of Abraham Lincoln" (2005). See also the excellent recent article by Peter C. Myers, "'A Good Work for Our Race To-Day': Interests, Virtues, and the Achievement of Justice in Frederick Douglass' Freedmen's Monument Speech," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 104, No. 2 (May 2010).

⁴ Frederick Douglass, "To W.J. Wilson," in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 4:173.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4:172.

⁶ Frederick Douglass, "To Harriet Beecher Stowe," March 8, 1853, in *Writings*, 2:229-236.

⁷ See especially “What the Black Man Wants, speech at the Annual Meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society at Boston, April 1865,” in *Writings*, 4:157-165.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4:172.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ See especially “The Nation’s Problem: An Address Delivered in Washington, D.C., on 16 April 1889,” in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, ed. John W. Blassingame (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 5:414-416.

¹² “Inaugural Ceremonies of the Freedmen’s Memorial Monument to Abraham Lincoln Washington City, April 14th, 1876,” available online through the Frederick Douglass Papers of the Library of Congress.

¹³ <http://www.richardscenter.psu.edu/Documents/ArlingtonNationalCemeteryTour.pdf>.

¹⁴ “Inaugural Ceremonies of the Freedmen’s Memorial Monument to Abraham Lincoln Washington City, April 14th, 1876.” <http://memory.loc.gov/mss/mfd/18/18006/0009.jpg>. <http://memory.loc.gov/mss/mfd/18/18006/0010.jpg>.

¹⁵ Douglass cited these lines from Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (Canto II, Stanza LXXVI) often, including in “What Are the Colored People Doing for Themselves?” *The North Star*, July 14, 1848 in *Life and Writings*, 1:315.

¹⁶ Abraham Lincoln to Horace Greeley, August 22, 1862 in *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings 1859-1865* (NY: The Library of America, 1989), 358.

¹⁷ At the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial in 1922, the keynote address was given by Dr. Robert Moton, Booker T. Washington’s successor as president of Tuskegee Institute. Douglass might have been intrigued to learn that Moton spoke not of Union, but of Liberty, fixing Lincoln’s claim to greatness in “the word that gave freedom to a race.” In the draft of his speech, Moton proceeded to transform the Negro’s debt to Lincoln into the nation’s (unpaid) debt to the Negro, a rhetorical move that displeased the organizers and forced Moton to tone down his talk of a “great unfinished work” of “equal opportunity.” Even with the edits, however, the focus of the speech was emancipation. Almost a half-century later, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would sound a very similar theme in his “I Have a Dream” speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

¹⁸ See especially, “The Black Man’s Debt to Abraham Lincoln,” 12 February 1888, and “Abraham Lincoln, the Great Man of Our Century,” 13 February 1893, both in Blassingame, volume 5.

¹⁹ Walt Whitman’s lecture, “Death of Abraham Lincoln,” first delivered in 1879, further develops the meaning of Lincoln’s martyrdom.

²⁰ Douglass’s eulogy of his fellow abolitionist Wendell Phillips provides an interesting point of comparison. Douglass asserts that “none have a better right” to honor the memory of Phillips than “the colored people of the United States.” Although he was active for a variety of causes, Phillips “was primarily and pre-eminently the colored man’s friend, . . . The cause of the slave was his first love; and from it he never wavered, but was true and steadfast through life.” “Wendell Phillips Cast his Lot with the Slave: An Address Delivered in Washington, D.C., on 22 February 1884,” in Blassingame, vol. 5, 151-2.