

Name: _____ Class: _____

Abolishing Slavery: The Efforts of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln

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The American Civil War (1861-1865) was fought within the United States between the Union and the Confederacy. While there were several causes for the conflict between the North and South, the South's desire to maintain slavery was a major point of disagreement. Frederick Douglass, who was born a slave and became an abolitionist, often discussed abolishing slavery with President Abraham Lincoln. This informational text further discusses the relationship between Douglass and Lincoln, and their efforts to abolish slavery. As you read, take notes on Douglass' and Lincoln's perspectives on the abolition of slavery.

- [1] For the Union soldiers and civilians during the American Civil War, the majestic Battle Hymn of the Republic spoke of assurance that, in President Abraham Lincoln's immortal words, "a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, can endure."

But for America's nearly four million oppressed and exploited Black people, the song's solemn vow that "The Truth is Marching on!" had, above all, an intensely personal meaning: it promised them freedom from slavery. It was their good fortune that for one of them, an outstanding leader named Frederick Douglass, the truth was marching too slowly, and he made it his life's mission to make it move faster.

Born as a slave on a Maryland plantation, he shared the suffering and indignities of his millions of peers: he did not know who was his father (but believed that it was his white master); and he rarely saw his mother because she worked on a distant farm, and died young.

But he was exceptionally bright; his grandmother, who raised him, taught him the alphabet; and he learned how to read. Douglass fell in love with — and mastered — the English language. He was strong, decisive, and at the age of 17, while working in a Baltimore shipyard, he decided to escape his bondage to one of the free states in the North.

- [5] He borrowed a sailor's uniform and a freed Black seaman's papers, and with \$17 in his savings he took a train, a steamboat and a ferry all the way to New York. He felt, he wrote in his memoir, "like one who had escaped a den of hungry lions."



"Frederick Douglass appealing to President Lincoln and his cabinet to enlist Negroes mural" by William Edouard Scott is in the public domain.

In the next four years, according to Benjamin Quarles, one of Douglass' biographers, a young Douglass "took whatever jobs that came his way, sawing wood, digging cellars, shoveling coal, blowing bellows,¹ and stevedoring,"² but he also began attending and increasingly speaking up at meetings of abolitionists — whites and blacks who were opposed to slavery.

In August, 1841, Douglass gave a speech for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society that was so eloquent and stirring that he was hired on the spot as the group's lecturer and spokesman. He was now addressing large audiences, and he gained prominence by boldly speaking up on such sensitive issues as the church leaders' timidity on slavery, demanding its abolition in the federal District of Columbia, and protesting the annexation³ of Texas as a slave state.

By 1860, when Lincoln was elected president, Douglass was recognized at home and abroad as an important American leader. He had written the first of his three memoirs that became bestsellers in America and in Europe; spent 21 months giving speeches and lecturing about slavery in England, Ireland and Scotland; and launched a newspaper where for 15 years he published his views.

It added to his stature that he frequently supported issues of importance to white liberals, such as the temperance movement⁴ and the rights of women. Although still not a citizen, his growing prestige gave him resonance in politics, where he eventually joined the-then liberal Republican Party, and put his faith in Abraham Lincoln.

The Douglass-Lincoln Relationship

[10] Even before the Southern states seceded from the Union, Douglass opened a dialogue with the president-elect by urging him in his newspaper, the Douglass Monthly, to "enlist Negroes," freed and slave, into a 75,000-strong "liberating army," and send it to the South to free the slaves.

This was not an idea that Lincoln was likely to favor: he was known to oppose slavery as the cause that was tearing apart the Union, but he wanted to destroy the institution piecemeal,⁵ and without a war.

Speaking in 1858 at Ottawa, Lincoln expressed hope that the involuntary servitude will wither away as "the opponents of slavery arrest the further spread of it" to the new states in the West. Regarding the freed slaves and other American blacks, Lincoln favored their removal to a colony in Africa.

For Douglass, this amounted to a proslavery policy. In his newspaper, he bluntly accused Lincoln of "admitting the right to hold men as slaves" and after Lincoln's election predicted that "Whoever lives through the next four years will see [him] and his Administration attacked more bitterly for their pro-slavery truckling, than for doing any anti-slavery work."

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1. a device constructed to provide a strong blast of air
 2. Stevedoring is the loading and unloading of cargo at the docks.
 3. the incorporation of a territory within the domain of a state
 4. a social movement against the consumption of alcoholic beverages
 5. one piece at a time; gradually

This was Douglass' opening salvo⁶ against the president's agenda, which at first was to preserve the Union and the Constitution, and silence any mention of the divisive issue of slavery. Thus on August 30, 1861, Lincoln cancelled General John C. Fremont's order to free some slaves in Missouri. "I think there is great danger," Lincoln wrote the general, "...that liberating slaves of traitorous owners will alarm our Southern Union friends, and turn them against us..."

- [15] And in May 1862, after General David Hunter issued an order to emancipate all slaves in the South Military Region, Lincoln emphatically announced that "I, Abraham Lincoln... proclaim and declare, that the government of the United States, had no knowledge, information, or belief, of an intention on the part of General Hunter to issue such a proclamation...and that the supposed proclamation... in question... is altogether void."⁷

Douglass, who was travelling throughout the free states urging young black men to sign up for an anti-slavery militia, was furious. He repeatedly criticized Lincoln for downplaying the slavery issue, and urged him to "turn the war into a crusade to rid the land once and for all of the hated institution." Eventually, his arguments began to make headway.

As the "events during the first half of 1862 pushed moderates toward the radical position," wrote James McPherson in his *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, Lincoln — while still maintaining that his main goal was to save the Union — began coming closer to Douglass' positions.

In August 1861, he signed the first Confiscation Act, stipulating that all slaves who had fought for the Confederacy could be confiscated from their owners and freed. Next March, he prohibited the Union Army or Navy from returning fugitive slaves to their owners. And in April, he signed a bill abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia.

The next month, Lincoln struck a major blow against slavery by in effect revoking the Fugitive Act, a law under which the Northern states were obligated to return fugitive slaves to their Southern owners. His policy ultimately freed all slaves who crossed the Northern lines.

- [20] And in the summer of 1862 — while complaining that he was under "heavier and heavier" pressure — Lincoln raised the subject of emancipation with his Cabinet.⁸ His mind was already made up, but on the advice of Secretary of State William Seward, Lincoln decided to wait with any announcement until the Union Army won a significant victory.

The delay triggered a bitter outcry from Douglass who was already incensed⁹ by what Lincoln had told a small group of black leaders on August 14, 1862. While briefing his guests on his plan to emancipate the slaves, the president also blamed the blacks for the war, and made no secret of his wish to expel them to a colony. "But for your race among us there could not be war," Lincoln said, "although many men engaged on either side [of it] do not care for you one way or the other."

6. a spirited attack

7. of no legal force or effect

8. (in the US) a body of advisers to the president, composed of the heads of the executive departments of the government

9. **Incensed** (*adjective*): enraged

Douglass was hurt and infuriated, and he rudely attacked Lincoln in an article titled “The President and His Speeches.” “The President”, he wrote in the Douglass Monthly, “... seems to possess an ever-increasing passion for making himself appear silly and ridiculous, if nothing worse.” Lincoln’s statements were not only “illogical and unfair,” he added, but also showed his racism.

In another issue, the monthly charged that Lincoln “says to the colored people: ‘I don’t like you, you must clear out of the country,’” and accused him of not being able “to muster courage and honesty enough to obey and execute... his antislavery testimonies.”

Douglass’ frustration with Lincoln subsided after the Union Army’s victory at Antietam on September 22, 1862 which led to the Emancipation Proclamation that, from January 1, 1863, gave freedom to all slaves in the Confederacy. Douglass was so delighted he wrote a friend that he wished “one could strike December from the calendar” so that the Proclamation would go into effect sooner.

- [25] Lincoln also changed his mind about black soldiers — in May 1863, the Union Army established a Bureau of Colored Troops to manage black enlistment — and the two men’s relationship changed dramatically. Douglass visited the White House three times, and each time was received with utmost respect by Lincoln.

“I at once felt myself in the presence of an honest man,” Douglass later wrote about their first meeting, “one whom I could love, honor, and trust without reserve or doubt.” During their second meeting, Lincoln left a political ally in the waiting room while talking with Douglass: “Tell Governor [of Rhode Island, William] Buckingham to wait,” Lincoln instructed his secretary, “for I want to have a long talk with my friend Frederick Douglass.”

Following his second Inaugural Address, Lincoln asked Douglass what he thought of it. In his memoir, Douglass quoted the president as saying, “there is no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours.” No other black leader received similar treatment until 1901, when President Teddy Roosevelt invited Booker T. Washington for dinner in the White House.

When Lincoln died, he left Douglass his most favorite walking staff as a sign of his profound appreciation. Douglass showed his own fondness for Lincoln by hanging his portrait in his home in Washington D.C. And on the 11th anniversary of the president’s death, Douglass delivered an emotional tribute to Lincoln’s leadership in which he indirectly apologized for his own criticism of the slow progress to the Emancipation Proclamation.

“Had [Lincoln] 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,” Douglass said, adding:

- [30] “Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull and indifferent; but measuring him by the sentiment of his country... he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined. Though Mr. Lincoln shared the prejudices of his white fellow-countrymen against the Negro... in his heart of hearts he loathed and hated slavery.”

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies the central idea of the text? [RI.2]
 - A. Despite their different approaches and opinions on slavery, both Lincoln and Douglass contributed to abolishing it.
 - B. Though Lincoln played a significant role in abolishing slavery, Douglass was primarily responsible for this outcome.
 - C. Douglass and Lincoln's primary objective during the Civil War was to abolish slavery, at whatever cost.
 - D. Lincoln found Douglass's approach to abolishing slavery to be too radical and often had to intervene to maintain peace.

2. PART B: Which section from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "He had written the first of his three memoirs that became bestsellers in America and in Europe; spent 21 months giving speeches and lecturing about slavery in England, Ireland and Scotland; and launched a newspaper where for 15 years he published his views." (Paragraph 8)
 - B. "For Douglass, this amounted to a proslavery policy. In his newspaper, he bluntly accused Lincoln of 'admitting the right to hold men as slaves'" (Paragraph 13)
 - C. "He repeatedly criticized Lincoln for downplaying the slavery issue, and urged him to 'turn the war into a crusade to rid the land once and for all of the hated institution.' Eventually, his arguments began to make headway." (Paragraph 16)
 - D. "In August 1861, he signed the first Confiscation Act, stipulating that all slaves who had fought for the Confederacy could be confiscated from their owners and freed." (Paragraph 18)

3. PART A: What is the meaning of "stature" in paragraph 9? [RI.4]
 - A. appeal
 - B. importance
 - C. accomplishment
 - D. movement

4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "protesting the annexation of Texas as a slave state." (Paragraph 7)
 - B. "and launched a newspaper where for 15 years he published his views." (Paragraph 8)
 - C. "his growing prestige gave him resonance in politics" (Paragraph 9)
 - D. "Douglass opened a dialogue with the president-elect" (Paragraph 10)

5. PART A: How did Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass differ in their approaches to abolishing slavery? [RI.3]
- A. While Douglass wanted to abolish slavery immediately, Lincoln was initially more concerned with its impact on the status of the Union.
 - B. Lincoln's use of violence to abolish slavery conflicted with Douglass' peaceful approach to creating social change.
 - C. Lincoln wanted to free slaves to weaken the Confederacy, while Douglass was more concerned with the morality of slavery.
 - D. Lincoln was hesitant to create conflict by abolishing slavery, while Douglass' only concern was bankrupting the South.
6. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
- A. "he was known to oppose slavery as the cause that was tearing apart the Union, but he wanted to destroy the institution piecemeal, and without a war." (Paragraph 11)
 - B. "Regarding the freed slaves and other American blacks, Lincoln favored their removal to a colony in Africa." (Paragraph 12)
 - C. "He repeatedly criticized Lincoln for downplaying the slavery issue, and urged him to 'turn the war into a crusade to rid the land once and for all of the hated institution.'" (Paragraph 16)
 - D. "The next month, Lincoln struck a major blow against slavery by in effect revoking the Fugitive Act, a law under which the Northern states were obligated to return fugitive slaves to their Southern owners." (Paragraph 19)
7. How does paragraph 24 contribute to the development of the ideas in the text? [RI.5] [RI.3]
Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Throughout the text, Mike Kubic references negative comments that Abraham Lincoln made towards African Americans. Did these comments surprise you? In your opinion, why would Lincoln fight to abolish slavery if he was unsupportive of the African American community?
2. In the context of the text, how has America changed over time? How has America's treatment of African Americans changed over time? How have relationships within the United States changed since the Civil War? Does there continue to be tension? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
3. In the context of the text, what are the effects of prejudice? How was Abraham Lincoln influenced by his own personal prejudices towards African Americans? How did this effect his decisions during the Civil War? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
4. In the context of the text, what is fair? Do you think it was the right decision for Abraham Lincoln to delay abolishing slavery? Why or why not? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
5. In the context of the text, how do people create change? How did Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass' efforts to create change compare? How did Lincoln and Douglass's different approaches to creating change complement each other? Do you think one's method was more successful than the other's? Why or why not? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.