

Handout for Week Five: Black Abolitionism—Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth

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During the 1830s the abolitionist movement swept through the land, converting tens of thousands of Americans to the crusade to end our national nightmare of slavery. Many citizens who had previously given little thought to the evils of “The Peculiar Institution” were won over to the noble cause. Critical to the success of the abolitionist movement were the many writers and orators who had the ability to stir emotions and mobilize the public to take political action against slavery. No abolitionist was more successful at reaching a hitherto apathetic public than Frederick Douglass.

Born a slave in Maryland, at the age of 20 Douglass escaped to the North where he soon became a superstar on the abolitionist lecture circuit. He rejected his slave name—Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey—and chose to become Frederick Douglass, in honor of a character in a Walter Scott poem. (He added an extra “s” for distinction.) Initially Douglass avoided politics and instead attempted to reach the hearts and minds of his listeners through “moral suasion.” His hope was that once informed of the horrors of human bondage, good Christians would rise up as one to denounce the wicked practice and demand its eradication from American soil. Slavery would then die a (more or less) natural death. But over time, he became convinced that slavery could be destroyed only through power politics. He wished to add his own story to the nation’s “blood-written history.” He dedicated his life to the struggle for emancipation and for the cause of black equality, vowing to use “my voice, my pen, or my vote.”

His decision to enter the political arena often put him at odds with Abraham Lincoln, whose opposition to slavery was much more moderate than the path marked out by radicals like Douglass. During the Civil War, Douglass frequently clashed with the president over both the timing of abolition (Douglass demanded that slavery be struck down *immediately*; the more prudent Lincoln bided his time until he felt sure he could do so without losing the support of northern conservatives and border state unionists) and the role the freedmen would play after emancipation. Douglass insisted that black freedmen be enrolled in the Union army as full equals of white soldiers. He demanded that black enlisted men receive equal pay and be allowed to move up the ranks to the officer corps. Lincoln initially demurred, feeling that he had to tread carefully on black equality lest he offend northern public opinion. We must never forget how intensely racist most northerners were at this time, and Lincoln always had to take that ugly sentiment into consideration. He saw himself as answerable to *all* Americans, and not just to New England liberals. An increasingly frustrated Douglass even supported a bid by a splinter group of disaffected Republicans who wanted to dump Lincoln and replace him with the more radical John C. Fremont during the 1864 presidential campaign.

In time, Douglass came to appreciate Lincoln’s strategic approach to race relations, and he became one of his greatest admirers. Douglass attended Lincoln’s second inaugural address, and thought it a magnificent statement of our nation’s moral aspirations. Years after Lincoln’s assassination, Douglass acknowledged that the president had been a genuine friend of black Americans, and had moved against slavery as fast as he reasonably could.

Douglass would play a key role during Reconstruction, working tirelessly to advance the political and civil rights of black Americans. He found a friend and ally in President Grant, who (along with Lincoln) did more to protect and promote justice for blacks than any president until Lyndon Johnson.

A curious footnote on the career of Frederick Douglass: he was the most photographed American of the 19th century. He sat for 160 separate photographs which were widely reprinted in the nation's magazines and newspapers. (By way of contrast, George Custer sat for 155, and Lincoln for 126.) As a consequence, he became one of our first "celebrity" activists, over a hundred years before Jane Fonda. In the mid- 1850s, it is probable that Douglass was a better known figure than white politicians like Lincoln or William Seward. A handsome and dignified man, Douglass's portraits upended the contemporary stereotypes of blacks—that they were inferior, unlettered, comical and child-like. In virtually all the pictures, Douglass is formally dressed, in black coat, vest, stiff formal collar and tie. He projected an image of an elegant and highly cultured member of respectable society. His strong features radiated a leonine pride and a fierce determination. In many of the early photos, he stared directly into the camera lens which was rather unusual in that era. His poses were piercing and grave. As he aged, his face seemed to project a melancholy wisdom, without losing any of his Biblical solemnity. As one historian put it, he was using the new art of photography to reteach viewers how to see, redrawing people's unconscious mental maps. His goal was to erase old assumptions and associations about blackness and replace them with a new paradigm, more suitable to a post-slavery world.