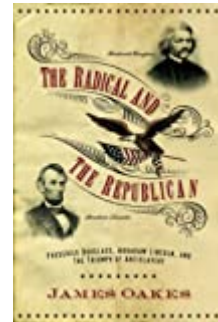
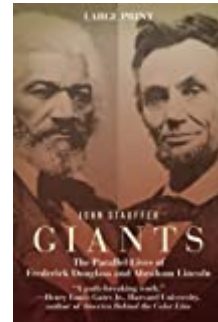


**James Oakes.** *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln and the Triumph of Antislavery.* New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007. 320 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-06194-9.



**John Stauffer.** *Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln.* New York: Twelve, 2008. xiv + 432 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-446-58009-0; \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-446-54122-0.



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## Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, Together Again (and Again)

In this year, the two-hundredth anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth, it is not surprising that Americans have been a bit obsessed with their sixteenth president. A simple Google search for the terms "Lincoln Bicentennial" returned more than 805,000 hits. The federal government bicentennial site includes a trivia quiz, where one can learn such useful information as the name of the Lincoln family dog (Fido). Illinois has created a Bicentennial Commission, and Kentucky and Indiana have

a series of events planned throughout the year to mark this important bicentenary. Scholars have likewise produced a number of articles, monographs, and popular publications on the subject of Lincoln's life and presidency. A bit unexpected, however, is that three of the books appearing in the past two years are dual treatments of Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. Although Douglass's importance to nineteenth-century American history can hardly be questioned, considering that the two men met

in person on only three occasions, the appearance of a veritable Lincoln-Douglass bookshelf is somewhat unanticipated.[1]

James Oakes's *The Radical and the Republican* appeared in 2007, and is a well-researched examination of antebellum antislavery politics. Oakes, a professor of history at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, is best known for his writings on American slavery, including *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (1982) and *Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South* (1990). *Giants* by John Stauffer appeared in late 2008, and offers an interdisciplinary approach to the lives of these two important men reflective of the author's background in American studies. Author of *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race*, which won the Frederick Douglass Book Prize in 2002, Stauffer is chair of the history of American civilization and professor of English at Harvard University. Both books deserve serious consideration by scholars of the mid-nineteenth century but also offer appeal to a broader audience through their engaging narrative and treatment of the interplay between the lives of Lincoln and Douglass. Stauffer argues for an interracial friendship and strives to show that Lincoln and Douglass shared a number of parallel links from early in their lives. Oakes makes a case of opposites attracting or converging at a critical moment in U.S. history. Although the authors approach their subjects with different goals in mind, both result in a rethinking of the lives of two very well-known and oft-studied men.

Based almost entirely on the public speeches, editorials, and collected works of Douglass and Lincoln, Oakes's volume emphasizes their roles and evolving political thought as the nation raced toward Civil War in the 1850s. He argues that for slavery to end in the United States, both the passionate reform impulse of men such as Douglass and practical political leadership embodied by Lincoln were necessary to effect change. According to Oakes, Douglass the radical and Lincoln the Republican did not differ on slavery and abolition as much as historians have assumed. Both asked the same reasonable question, "why should anyone else have to settle for something less than equal rights?" (p. xxi). Pursuing an answer to this quandary led Douglass on a path to reasonable radicalism while Lincoln's pragmatism took on a radical hue. Lincoln's political opponents, especially Stephen Douglas, recognized the commonalities even in the 1850s and actively sought to tie Lincoln to the radical abolitionist. In the fourth of their famous 1858 debates, Douglas called Lincoln a "black republican" and referred

to recent praise of Lincoln by Douglass as proof of his opponent's radicalism (p. 40). Although Lincoln was certainly familiar with the famous abolitionist, he and Douglass did not meet or even correspond until 1863.

Oakes succeeds in providing an internal analysis of the evolving political thought of both men. Douglass began his antislavery career as a Garrisonian, eschewing violence and politics, but came to endorse the violence of John Brown and the politics of the Liberty, Free Soil, and eventually Republican parties. Yet Oakes shows that Douglass was never a very committed pacifist and argues that historians and contemporaries who charged Douglass with being "erratic and unreliable" in his political views are misguided (p. 21). In the unstable world of nineteenth-century American politics, Douglass's seeming vacillation was not uncommon. As Douglass was moderating to accept political abolitionism, Lincoln's views grew more radical over time and were especially influenced by the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Although he spent his early career as a straight-line Whig, after 1854 Lincoln advocated the new Republican Party's clear and simple position that "slavery was wrong" and its "expansion should therefore be restricted" (p. 54). Further angered by the 1857 *Dred Scott* decision, Lincoln came to believe that proslavery politicians who believed that African Americans were less than human were causing the nation irreparable harm. Lincoln used his new political convictions to persuade others that slavery was wrong and eventually to bring the institution to an end.

More of a dual biography than political analysis, Stauffer's *Giants* explores other commonalities in the lives of Lincoln and Douglass beginning with their early lives. Stauffer draws his analysis from the writings of Lincoln and Douglass, and relies on numerous biographies to fill in colorful detail. The result is a rich picture of both subjects and a well-crafted narrative likely to appeal to a popular reading audience. Careful documentation of sources, however, demonstrates the depth of research and the author's knowledge of his subjects. Stauffer shows that Lincoln and Douglass each emerged from a culture of poverty and violence that deeply shaped their early existence and continued to influence their life choices. Although some might argue that the "enslavement" a youthful Lincoln experienced in his father's household is less than analogous to Douglass's actual bondage, both men did endure difficult situations to become the very embodiment of the self-made man celebrated in Victorian culture. Whether their three meetings really count as an "interracial friendship" as Stauffer asserts, Lincoln and Douglass were "giants" of the ante-

bellum era, and examining their lives side by side reveals much about the period as well as the men. From a common popular text, Caleb Bingham's *The Columbian Orator* (1797), Lincoln and Douglass each drew important early lessons. Both were largely self-educated. But while Lincoln's early talent for writing found him struggling to learn the craft of oratory, Douglass's self-education relied on an oral tradition that allowed him to become a practiced orator before he mastered the written word. Despite these early challenges, at the apex of their careers, Lincoln and Douglass were among the most important and popular writers and orators of the nineteenth century.

Striving for balance, each book nevertheless presents one of the men in a more positive light. Stauffer is willing to overlook Douglass's proclivity for relationships with white women including Julia Griffiths, who came from England to assist on his newspaper in the 1850s. Much to his wife's dismay, Griffiths lived in the Douglass household and spent long hours alone with Douglass in his newspaper office. Giving Douglass the benefit of the doubt, Stauffer refuses to speculate on the nature of the relationship and even notes, "whatever he did behind closed doors, he took every precaution to make sure that any unseemly behavior would not come back to haunt him" (p. 142). He also dismisses Douglass's relationship with Otilie Assing, a German woman who spent several summers in the Douglass household and aided his escape following the John Brown raid, by noting, "how deep and sexual was their love is unknown" (p. 237).<sup>[2]</sup> Yet Stauffer speculates freely on a possible sexual relationship between Lincoln and his friend Joshua Speed, noting Lincoln "did not consider the one form of sex to be substantially different than the other" (p. 115). Oakes is more critical of Douglass, finding him to be naive in his early commitment to Garrisonian moral suasion. Douglass also takes a hit for endorsing the radical abolition politics of Gerrit Smith and supporting the actions of Brown. In contrast, Oakes praises Lincoln for keeping his moderate antislavery sentiment in concert with public opinion. Even his 1861 support for congressional appropriation for colonization is seen as "classic Lincoln,

employing conservative means to radical ends" (pp. 153-154). Oakes also glosses over Douglass's support for emigration on the eve of the Civil War, noting only that Douglass was "less skeptical than usual" on the subject of emigration. In fact, Douglass planned a detailed ten-week trip to investigate Haiti and its possible merits for relocation (p. 190).<sup>[3]</sup> In this case, Stauffer offers better political analysis of the events leading to the eruption of war and the way that each man came to view the role of blacks in the conflict. Although Douglass lacked enthusiasm for Lincoln at his inauguration, he came to have the utmost respect for his president, and was honored to meet him in person.

Despite the minor quibbles noted, these books are both important and timely contributions to the history of the mid-nineteenth century. Bringing together narrative history and a new political analysis of Douglass and Lincoln, they have managed to offer a unique perspective on the relationship of two of the most familiar Americans. Even more important, they have done so in a clearly written and engaging style that will make both works accessible to a wide audience.

#### Notes

[1]. The third dual biography, aimed at a popular reading audience, is by Unitarian Universalist minister Stephen Kendrick and his son Paul Kendrick. Stephen Kendrick and Paul Kendrick, *Douglass and Lincoln: How a Revolutionary Black Leader and a Reluctant Liberator Struggled to End Slavery and Save the Union* (New York: Walker and Company, 2008). It is not included in this review, but has been featured on Book TV and several other important public forums.

[2]. On Douglass's relationship with Assing, see also Maria Diedrich, *Love across Color Lines: Otilie Assing and Frederick Douglass* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999).

[3]. A clear discussion of Douglass's position on emigration can be found in David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 122-147.

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