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Book Review – The Radical and the Republican

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The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics

By

James Oakes

Probably no president has been the principal subject of as many books as Abraham Lincoln. Recent years have seen at least three works, including the one under review, dealing specially with his relations with other people. The other two are Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals* (2005) and *Lincoln and Chief Justice Taney* written by James F. Simon (2006).

Now comes James Oakes with *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery*, which is about as close to a page turner as non-fiction can be. The reader sees Lincoln and Douglass, two of the great minds of their time, juxtaposed, each with his own agenda, sometimes in apparent conflict with each other, but each determined to prevail in seeing his respective cause justified and upheld.

And their causes were not exactly the same. Lincoln's was to preserve and restore the Union. Douglass's was to end slavery, and it can be said safely that he intended to do this by virtually any means, including armed rebellion, if that proved to be the only solution.

Professor Oakes reinforces the public image of Lincoln as a man of almost unlimited patience when dealing with political issues, and portrays him as possibly more conservative than we might impulsively think of him as being. Oakes suggests that many of Lincoln's actions and statements that would today seem racist were, in fact, only for political consumption, designed so as not to lead Northern white voters to believe that what he was actually about was more than preserving the Union.

Undoubtedly, Lincoln was one of the master politicians of all times, but Douglass was certainly at least almost as great. However, one thing that must be remembered when these two great leaders are considered together is that their constituencies were entirely different. Douglass
said, with some justification, that Lincoln was a "white man's president." And that is the way he comes through most of the time. In spite of their differences, Oakes makes it clear that each man considered the other as his friend, and that there was great mutual respect between them.

One criticism that some mighty have of *The Radical and the Republican* is the scarcity of footnotes. But Oakes relies heavily on quotes, which seem to be adequately documented. It is actually somewhat refreshing not to deal with overabundant footnotes. (Goodwin's book, referred to above, contains 120 pages of footnotes.) But a more expansive bibliography and an index would probably be helpful. This book was published by W. W. Norton & Company, 2007. The hardcover book sells for $26.95 and the ISBN-10 is: 0-393-06194-9.

- Reviewed by Hartwell Lutz