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Final Paper
“A More Perfect Union”

In *The Radical and the Republican*, James Oakes does not write a dual biography but rather examines Abraham Lincoln’s journey to emancipation as perceived by Frederick Douglass. Oakes has the radical abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, critique the conservative Lincoln’s cautious and calculated antislavery policies. Oakes believes that Lincoln was just as passionate about the abolition of slavery as Douglass. However, Oakes asserts the two differed in position and tactics. Lincoln was a politician and Douglass was a reformer. And because of their different roles and positions, the two men differed in how to abolish slavery. Eventually, the two men bridged their differences and reached a mutual understanding and admiration.

Although Oakes’s title implies a dual biography, the book focuses more on Lincoln’s conservatism which infuriated and baffled Douglass. As the title suggests, Lincoln was a Republican. And as such, his approach to emancipation - a radical idea in 1860s America - was conservative. Wanting to preserve the Union, his antislavery policies were slow and calculating. In 1858, Lincoln stated, “I have always hated slavery...I think as much as any abolitionist” (41). However, Lincoln’s early actions and statements paint him as the reluctant emancipator and not the “Great Emancipator.” As a Whig Congressman, Lincoln avoided the slavery question. The Kansas - Nebraska act awakened Lincoln to the slavery issue. Lincoln openly criticized Senator Stephen Douglas, who sponsored the bill. Lincoln abhorred the fact that the bill permitted the extension of slavery into the free territories. He publicly denounced the act. Now

committed, Lincoln established an antislavery coalition which ultimately grew into the Republican Party.

Like Lincoln, Douglas abhorred slavery and celebrated universal freedom. However, Douglas embraced radicalism. He wanted immediate emancipation. In the wake of Harper's Ferry, Lincoln declared John Brown "a madman" and his actions lawless (95). Douglas, meanwhile, hailed him as hero (95). In the 1850s, Douglas, a former slave, identified more with the passion of John Brown than he did with the conservatism of Abraham Lincoln. Brown was a zealot, who sought immediate emancipation. His tactics were violent and radical. Lincoln was a pragmatic politician. He thought real freedom must be legally acquired. Lincoln's course would be slow and steady which often infuriated Douglas.

In the late 1850s, Lincoln and Douglas differed in their view on how the Constitution dealt with slavery. Lincoln, the conservative, realized that the Founding Fathers compromised over slavery. The Constitution protected slavery where it already existed. Lincoln still thought slavery could be attacked but within the legal parameters of the Constitution. Douglas thought Lincoln's ideas were unacceptable. For Douglas, the former slave and now radical abolitionist, the Constitution was an antislavery document. Therefore, politicians could destroy slavery anywhere it existed. Douglas detested Lincoln's argument. According to him, Republicans were too cautious and too limited in the late 1850s. Thus, in July 1860, Douglas stated that he could not support Lincoln and would support the radical abolitionist candidate in the upcoming presidential election.

Another major difference that existed between Lincoln and Douglas was their views on race and equality. Throughout the campaign of 1860s, Democrats alleged that

Lincoln supported racial equality. Lincoln claimed otherwise. In fact, according to Lincoln, slavery and racial equality were two separate issues. Surprisingly, Lincoln claimed he could support discrimination while at the same time oppose slavery. Douglas did not fathom his logic. For Douglas, slavery and racism were linked. Douglas steadfastly clung to the Garrisonian idea that the abolition of slavery would eradicate racial prejudice. Furthermore, the racism afflicting the North was the ugly “spirit of slavery” (111).

As a radical, Douglas could afford to be passionate. Lincoln, on the other hand, was a politician. He needed to be practical and strategic. Lincoln had a great and serious responsibility: the American public. To abolish slavery, Lincoln had to be careful. He could not alienate mainstream America with radical ideas such as immediate emancipation and racial equality. When his Democratic opponents alleged he supported racial equality, Lincoln had to react. He had to show Americans he was a conservative, not a radical advocating immediate emancipation. In a brilliant yet dangerous move, Lincoln agreed with the supporters of racial discrimination. And although Lincoln seemed racist, this was not the case.

According to Oakes, Lincoln was “strategically racist” for political purposes (127). He appeared to be racist in order to block a debate with Democrats over racial equality. A debate might have jeopardized Lincoln’s conservative tactics and alienated mainstream Americans. To be effective, he had to outmaneuver Democrats, which he did brilliantly. Having foiled the Democrats, Lincoln could then focus on the real evil plaguing America: slavery. Douglas, however, did not understand Lincoln’s tacit approval of racial discrimination. He wrongly inferred that Lincoln could be not a

dedicated opponent of slavery. Thus, in 1861, Lincoln still did not have the support of Douglas. Ironically, Douglas's public frustration benefited Lincoln. It made Lincoln seem even more conservative. In time, Lincoln would make an aggressive push for emancipation. However, he would wait until he could make it seem that it was vital to the war effort.

Lincoln's inaugural address in March of 1861 worried Douglas who found it too compromising. Lincoln infuriated Douglas when he stated again that he would not interfere with slavery in the southern states. Not surprising, the tone of Lincoln's inaugural was conservative. Lincoln spoke about preserving and defending the Union. Douglas failed to see that Lincoln's idea of preserving the Union would also promote universal freedom, an idea Douglas celebrated. Douglas instead wondered what it would take for Lincoln to embrace emancipation. And on April 12, 1861, Douglas's question was answered when Fort Sumter was attacked. The attack began not only the Civil War, but also the federal government's war on slavery.

Once war broke out, Lincoln began to take more radical moves. He believed that the war powers act gave him the authority to emancipate the slaves. He signed the first Confiscation Act in April 1861, which stated that runaway slaves could be held if they had been used in the war effort. It was impossible to determine whether slaves had been used in the war effort. Therefore, the Fugitive Slave Law was nullified and the slaves were freed. Lincoln took radical steps but had effectively disguised them through legal means. Lincoln's radical steps were so well orchestrated that they went unnoticed by the impatient Douglas. For Douglas, anything short of complete emancipation was a failure.

However, Lincoln needed to maintain the support of the border – states. Therefore, his attacks on slavery continued to be slow, cautious and above all, legal.

In 1862, Lincoln, frustrated with the lack of border-state support and spurred by Union victories in the West, took a more radical step: emancipation. While Lincoln waited for victory to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, Douglas and Horace Greeley grew very impatient. Greeley openly called for emancipation. In response, Lincoln took the conservative stance. He said his primary goal was to save the Union. Radicals like Douglas questioned Lincoln's commitment to abolition especially since calls for black colonization once again surfaced. As emancipation grew closer, Lincoln pushed for colonization, a conservative move. Lincoln was again the cunning politician, masking his radical move with a veil of conservatism. Lincoln knew what Americans could and could not handle. In 1862, America was not ready for radical emancipation and Lincoln knew it.

Although Lincoln supported colonization, he must have known the logistics of colonization made it impossible to implement. He put forth colonization to pave the way for emancipation. Lincoln's plan was so ingenious that it had Douglas fuming. It was a conservative tactic towards a radical solution. And on September 22, 1862, Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Slaves in the rebellious states would be free if such states did not return to the Union by January 1. Douglas rejoiced. After January 1, the Union army became an army of liberators. In January of 1863, Lincoln provided for the enlistment of blacks into the Union army. Lincoln recognized the war had changed. There was now no chance for reconciliation. The Union would either

conquered or be conquered. And with this in mind, Lincoln recognized the advantages of enlisting blacks in the Union army.

The Emancipation Proclamation did not end the disagreements between the two men. Lincoln and Douglas continued to clash until Lincoln's death in April of 1865. Despite their differences, they still bridged the gap between radicalism and mainstream politics. Douglas was the passionate and radical reformer; Lincoln was the cautious and conservative politician. They inspired and balanced each other. Douglas advocated for immediate abolition and universal equality. Americans, however, were unprepared for his radical ideas and tactics. Fortunately, Lincoln's conservatism balanced Douglas's radicalism. Lincoln masked radical ideas with the appearance of legal and political conservatism. Lincoln needed Douglas to crusade for radical reforms, while Douglas needed Lincoln, the politician, to enact antislavery legislation. Together, the two men freed not only countless number of slaves but America from the evils of slavery.