

(Source unknown)

Douglass wavered in the spring of 1864 when anti-Lincoln radicals gathered at Cleveland to nominate an alternative to President Lincoln. Larry E. Nelson wrote: “Frederick Douglas, believing that the proposed assembly was in the best interest of his race, publicly supported the convention call.”³⁹ But after the convention nominated General John C. Frémont — support, Douglass restrained his support. “During the summer of 1864, with the war in a bloody stalemate in Virginia, he maintained his criticism of the Lincoln administration, giving every sign that he would work against the president’s reelection in the fall. But in August, Lincoln invited Douglass to the White House for an urgent meeting,” wrote historian David W. Blight.⁴⁰ Before he visited with President Lincoln in August, Union Army chaplain John Eaton met with Douglass in Ohio: “My heart was heavy with the mistreatment and suffering of the Negroes in the conquered territory over which my supervision extended. Douglass and I had found much to talk about, and I was able to give Mr. Lincoln a fairly clear notion of his point of view. The Negro orator felt keenly that our measures of retaliation against cruelty to Negro soldiers were not sharp enough. When I had finished, the President asked if Mr. Douglass knew what he had written Governor Michael Hahn about Negro suffrage.” The President then took his March letter to Hahn out and read it to Eaton.”

“When he had finished reading, the President of the United States and the greatest man of his time asked me, with that curious modesty characteristic of him, if I thought Mr. Douglass could be induced to come to see him. I replied that I rather thought he could. It was soon arranged that Douglass should visit Washington and see the President.”⁴¹

In August 19, 1864, the President met again with Frederick Douglass and recruited the former slave to help organize slave escapees as volunteer recruits for the Union Army. A few days later, Douglass wrote the President: “all with whom I have thus far spoken on the subject, concur in the wisdom and benevolence of the idea, and some of them think it is practicable. That every slave who escapes from the Rebel States is a loss to the Rebellion and a gain to the Loyal Cause I need not stop to argue; the proposition is self evident. The negro is the stomach of the rebellion.”⁴²

Eaton remembered: “Immediately after the interview I called upon Douglass, and found him pacing the long, old-fashioned parlors in a state of extreme agitation. He did not know that I was in Washington, and greeted me in surprise; but nothing could distract his mind for long from that interview. ‘I have just come from President Lincoln,’ he said, making no attempt to suppress his excitement. ‘He treated me as a man; he did not let me feel for a moment that there was any difference in the color of our skins! The President is a most remarkable man. I am satisfied now that he is doing all that circumstances will permit him to do. He asked me a number of questions, which I am preparing to answer in writing,’ and he pointed to the writing materials on a table near him. There was never any doubt afterwards of Mr. Douglass’s enthusiastic regard for the President.”⁴³

In the dark light of the reception room, one Wisconsin visitor to the White House mistook Douglass for the President. When Judge Joseph T. Mills subsequently asked President Lincoln if “you are in favor of miscegenation,” Mr. Lincoln responded: “That’s a democratic mode of producing good Union men, & I don’t propose to infringe on the patent.” Lincoln scholar Roy P. Basler wrote: “Two things interest me about this incident. First, Lincoln’s total good humor in having Douglass, whose very striking, bearded mulatto face was not much darker than Lincoln’s sallow bearded one, mistaken for himself. The second thing is not merely the aptness, but the widening circles of implication for speculation in his metaphorical answer.

For although Lincoln's public pronouncements on miscegenation consistently stated his personal view that miscegenation was not for him, and that it was probably not for most, I believe he recognized it had been and would probably continue to be a principal concern between the two races, which individuals would have to meet as individuals."⁴⁴

Historian James Oakes wrote: "After his second meeting with the President, Douglass wrote up a memo to Lincoln detailing his plans to spread word of emancipation as broadly as possible in the Confederate South. But the plans proved unnecessary when the fortunes of the war shifted decisively in favor of the Union. Weeks before election day the city of Atlanta was captured by Union forces after a successful siege by General William T. Sherman."⁴⁵

Frederick Douglass wrote: "My interviews with President Lincoln and his able secretary greatly increased my confidence in the antislavery integrity of the government, although I confess I was greatly disappointed at my failure to receive the commission promised me by Secretary Stanton. I, however, faithfully believed, and loudly proclaimed my belief, that the rebellion would be suppressed, the Union preserved, the slaves emancipated, and the colored soldiers would in the end have justice done them."⁴⁶

President Lincoln subsequently invited Douglass to meet with him at the Soldiers' Home on the outskirts of Washington but Douglass declined because of a scheduling conflict. Historian James Oakes wrote that "there is every reason to believe that Lincoln invited Douglass to the Soldier's Home because he enjoyed Douglass's company as much as he valued Douglass's opinion. At least that is what Douglass believed when he recalled the invitation some years later."⁴⁷ In mid-September 1864, Frémont withdrew from the campaign and Douglass reevaluated his public position on the election. Historian Larry E. Nelson wrote that Douglass "explained that he had criticized Lincoln in public and private and withheld support while hoping for the nomination and election of a man 'of more decided anti-slavery convictions' and a firmer commitment to 'justice and equality for all men.' Convinced that such a possibility no longer existed, Douglass declared that 'every man who wished well to the slave and to the country should at once rally with all the warmth and earnestness of his nature to the support of Abraham Lincoln.'"⁴⁸

An important factor in Douglass's decision was the nomination of General George B. McClellan at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Douglass wrote: "When we were thus asked to exchange Abraham Lincoln for McClellan — a successful Union president for an unsuccessful Union general — a part earnestly endeavoring to save the Union, torn and rent by a gigantic rebellion, I thought with Mr. Lincoln, that it was not wise to 'swap horses while crossing a stream.' Regarding, as I did, the continuance of the war to the complete suppression of the rebellion, and the retention in office of President Lincoln as essential to the total destruction of slavery, I certainly exerted myself to the uttermost, in my small way, to secure his reelection."⁴⁹

Douglass was again heartened on January 31, 1865, when with the help of President Lincoln the House of Representatives passed the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery. Historian Michael Vorenberg wrote that among the blacks in the gallery was Charles Douglass, son of the abolitionist leader. "I wish that you could have been here," the former Union soldier wrote his father, "such rejoicing I never before witnessed (white people I mean)."⁵⁰ Douglass was further thrilled by President Lincoln's Second Inaugural speech five weeks later, but chagrined by his reception later that day at the White House. He recalled in his memoirs:

"In the evening of the day of the inauguration, another new experience awaited me. The usual reception was given at the Executive Mansion, and though no colored persons had ever ventured to present themselves on such occasions, it seemed now that freedom had become the law of the Republic, now that colored men were on the battlefield mingling their blood with that of white men in one common effort to save the country, it was not too great an assumption for a colored man to offer his congratulations to the president with those of other

citizens. I decided to go, and sought in vain for someone of my own color to accompany me. It is never an agreeable experience to go where there can be any doubt of welcome, and my colored friends had too often realized discomfiture from this cause to be willing to subject themselves to such unhappiness; they wished me to go, as my New England colored friends in the long ago liked very well to have me take passage on the first-class cars, and be hauled out and pounded by rough-handed brakemen, to make way for them. It was plain, then, that someone must lead the way, and that if the colored man would have his rights, he must take them; and now, though it was plainly quite the thing for me to attend President Lincoln's reception, 'they all with one accord began to make excuse.' It was finally arranged that Mrs. Dorsey should bear me company, so together we joined in the grand procession of citizens from all parts of the country, and moved slowly towards the executive mansion."

"I had for some time looked upon myself as a man, but now in this multitude of the elite of the land, I felt myself a man among men. I regret to be obliged to say, however, that this comfortable assurance was not of long duration, for on reaching the door, two policemen stationed there took me rudely by the arm and ordered me to stand back, for their directions were to admit no persons of my color. The reader need not be told that this was a disagreeable setback. But once in the battle, I did not think it well to submit to repulse. I told the officers I was...sure there must be some mistake, for no such order could have emanated from President Lincoln; and if he knew I was at the door he would desire my admission. They then — to put an end to the parley, as I suppose, for we were obstructing the doorway and were not easily pushed aside — assumed an air of politeness, and offered to conduct me in. We followed their lead, and soon found ourselves walking some planks out of a window, which had been arranged as a temporary passage for the exit of visitors. We halted so soon as we saw the trick, and I said to the officers: "You have deceived me. I shall not go out of this building till I see President Lincoln." At this moment a gentleman who was passing in, recognized me, and I said to him: 'Be so kind as to say to Mr. Lincoln that Frederick Douglass is detained by officers at the door.'"

"It was not long before Mrs. Dorsey and I walked into the spacious East Room, amid a scene of elegance such as in this country I had never witnessed before. Like a mountain pine high above all others, Mr. Lincoln stood, in his grand simplicity, and homelike beauty. Recognizing me, even before I reached him, he exclaimed, so that all around could hear him, 'Here comes my friend Douglass.' Taking me by the hand, he said, "I am glad to see you. I saw you in the crowd today, listening to my inaugural address; how did you like it?" I said, "Mr. Lincoln, I must not detain you with my poor opinion, when there are thousands waiting to shake hands with you." "No, no," he said, "you must stop a little, Douglass; there is no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours. I want to know what you think of it." I replied, "Mr. Lincoln, that was a sacred effort." "I am glad you liked it!" he said, and I passed on, feeling that any man, however distinguished, might well regard himself honored by such expressions, from such a man."

"It came out that the officers at the White House had received no orders from Mr. Lincoln, or from anyone else. They were simply complying with an old custom, the outgrowth of slavery, as dogs will sometimes rub their necks, long after their collars are removed, thinking they are still there. My colored friends were well pleased with what had seemed to them a doubtful experiment, and I believe were encouraged by its success to follow my example. I have found in my experience that the way to break down an unreasonable custom is to contradict it in practice. To be sure in pursuing this course I have had to contend not merely with the white race, but with the black. The one has condemned me for my presumption in daring to associate with them, and the other for pushing myself where they take it for granted I am not wanted. I am pained to think that the latter objection springs largely from a consciousness of inferiority, for as colors alone can have nothing against each other, and the conditions of human association are founded upon character rather than color, and character depends upon

mind and morals, there can be nothing blameworthy in people thus equal in meeting each other on the plain of civil or social rights.”⁵¹

Frederick Douglass recalled of his interactions with President Lincoln: “The simple approached him with ease, and the learned approached him with deference.”⁵² Douglass wrote: “In all my interviews with Mr. Lincoln I was impressed with his entire freedom from popular prejudice against the colored race. He was the first great man that I talked with in the United States freely, who in no single instance reminded me of the difference between himself and myself, of the difference of color, and I thought that all the more remarkable cause he came from a State where there were black laws. I account partially for his kindness to me because of the similarity with which I had fought my way up, we both starting at the lowest rung of the ladder.”⁵³

After President Lincoln’s assassination in April 1865, Douglass was called upon in Rochester, New York, to give an impromptu eulogy for the murdered President. He told the crowd: “It was only a few weeks ago that I shook his brave, honest hand, and looked into his gentle eye and heard his kindly voice.”⁵⁴ A few months later, Douglass wrote: “If he did not control events he had the wisdom to be instructed by them. When he could no longer withstand the current he swam with it.”⁵⁵ On April 14, 1876, Douglass spoke at the dedication of the statute of Abraham Lincoln in a park a few blocks east of the Capitol: “I concede to you, my white fellow citizens, a preeminence in this worship at once full and supreme. First, midst, and last, you and yours were the objects of his deepest affection and his most earnest solicitude. You are the children of Abraham Lincoln. We are at best only his stepchildren; children by adoption, children by force of circumstances and necessity. To you it especially belongs to sound his praises, to preserve and perpetuate his memory.”⁵⁶ Political scientist Lucas Morel commented: “Douglass is correct to surmise that Lincoln did not view his constitutional authority to include the abolition of slavery by mere executive fiat, especially during a time of peace.”⁵⁷ Douglas understood that President Lincoln saw his primary constituency as the white voters who elected him and whose votes could assure continuity of his policies.

After President Lincoln’s death, Douglass continued the fight for black equality — especially for black suffrage, but he acknowledged his autobiography that “I felt I had reached the end of the noblest and best part of my life.”⁵⁸ He remained a strong supporter of the Republican Party until his death in 1892 largely because of his antipathy to Democratic involvement in protecting slavery. He moved to Washington after his Rochester house burned down in 1872. Under Ulysses S. Grant, he was appointed president of the Freedmen’s Bank, a banking institution which was destined for failure before Douglass arrived. Under President Rutherford B. Hayes, he was appointed U.S. marshal for the District of Columbia; under President James Garfield, he was recorder of deeds for the District of Columbia, and under President Benjamin Harrison, he was named U.S. ambassador to Haiti.

Historian Waldo Martin wrote: “Douglass’s position as the preeminent black spokesman continued after the war and emancipation. Forty-seven years old in 1865, he decided after much soul-searching that he could still best serve his people’s cause through hard-hitting agitation as a leader rather than as an elected official. In fact, with increasing age, personal comfort, and venerability, Douglass’s leadership often assumed a more moderate and emblematic quality that tended to overshadow its earlier, more activist and reformist quality.”⁵⁹ Indeed, noted historian James Oakes, Douglas’ leadership and rhetoric became more Lincolnian: “Echoes of Lincoln reappeared over and over in Douglass’s words. More than once Lincoln had associated slavery with the divine right of kings or with predatory aristocrats who lived off the fruits of other men’s labor. In 1894 Douglass used nearly identical language to rebuke those who favored stripping black men of their voting privileges.”⁶⁰
