

Frederick Douglass and John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry

The debate over slavery was one of the defining issues in the United States from the writing of the Declaration of Independence through the Civil War. In 1773, Patrick Henry, best known for coining the phrase “Give me liberty or give me death” described slavery as a “lamentable Evil.” However, it was an evil with which he and other white colonists were prepared to live. He wrote to a friend, “Would any one believe that I am Master of Slaves of my own purchase! I am drawn along by ye general inconvenience of living without them, I will not, I cannot justify it.” In 1776, Thomas Jefferson removed the section condemning the King of England for promoting the slave trade from the Declaration of Independence. The founders, when they wrote the Constitution, were careful to discuss “others,” but not to mention slaves. During the nineteenth century, abolitionists debated whether constitutional measures could be employed to emancipate enslaved Africans, or whether the Constitution, as a pro-slavery document, had to be abandoned.

In the September 2008 issue of *Social Education*, two articles (“Was the Constitution pro-Slavery? The Changing View of Frederick Douglass,” 246-250; and “Frederick Douglass Changed My Mind about the Constitution,” 251-252) argued that during the course of his long and distinguished career, Frederick Douglass broke with the position held by William Lloyd Garrison and radical abolitionists that the Constitution was a pro-slavery document, “a covenant with death,” and an “agreement with hell.”

The underlying point of the articles was that the founders had built into the Constitution greater flexibility and a potential for rectifying injustice than Douglass originally thought. According to the article by James Oakes, even Garrison himself finally realized that he was wrong about the Constitution as a pro-slavery document and supported Lincoln's re-election in 1864.

However, the documentary evidence suggests that both authors overstate the extent of Douglass's conversion to moderation and the claims about Garrison are historically invalid. During the 1850s, Douglass did come to believe that the Constitution, because it did not actually endorse slavery, provided a possibility for opposing it. However, he still rejected the way it was applied. In 1852, he delivered a Fourth of July speech in Rochester, New York, where he declared:

What have I or those I represent to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us? ... There is not a nation

of the Earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of these United States at this very hour.

Even in his 1860 speech in Glasgow, Scotland, cited as evidence of Douglass's conversion, Douglass presents the Constitution as neutral on the issue of slavery. Douglass espouses what is essentially a textualist interpretation of the document. He argues that whatever the intent of the founders, the text itself did not explicitly endorse slavery, so politicians can overturn it. In no way does this make the Constitution an anti-slavery document.

It is interesting that Douglass saw himself at this time as a reformer rather than as a revolutionary. He wants to preserve the Union because he believes Northern ascendancy in the federal government would lead to emancipation. It is political leadership, not the Constitution that would change.

However, it was not always true that Douglass saw himself as a reformer and defender of constitutional principles rather than as a revolutionary. In fact, Douglass was in Scotland at the time because of his participation in planning John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, and because there was an indictment against him for treason in the state of Virginia.

In the version of his autobiography published in 1892 and available online at docsouth.unc.edu/neh/doug192/menu.html, Douglass explained his involvement with Brown's project, his original support, and later disavowal for what were essentially practical considerations. Douglass broke with Brown because he believed that with Brown's decision to target Harpers Ferry “he was going into a perfect steel-trap, and that once in he would never get out alive; that he would be surrounded at once and escape would be impossible” (389).

Later in his career, perhaps once again a revolutionary as a result of disappointment with the abandonment of Reconstruction, Douglass praised Brown for beginning “the war that ended American slavery and made this a free Republic. Until this blow was struck, the prospect for freedom was dim, shadowy and uncertain.”

Meanwhile William Lloyd Garrison continued to have misgivings about the Constitution, even while supporting Abraham Lincoln for reelection. In a speech at Charleston, South Carolina, in 1865, delivered before he learned of Lincoln's assassination, Garrison asserted that a revolution had taken place in the United States and it was the 13th Amendment, not the Constitution as drafted by the founders, that ended slavery.

Garrison and Douglass were American radicals who challenged inequities supported by constitutional government. It is a mistake to minimize their challenge to the document and world created by the founders of the republic.

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The authors respond:

We welcome Alan Singer’s letter since it shows teachers that the debate about slavery and the Constitution is—as our articles argued—a lively one that they can use to bring this history to life in their classrooms. Although Singer seeks to portray our articles as too moderate, actually they have a radically desegregationist purpose since they enable students and teachers to go beyond the white founders and explore the history of the Constitution and slavery by also examining the constitutional views of the great African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

Singer’s letter distorts the meaning of not only our articles but Frederick Douglass’s changing views of the Constitution. Neither of our articles argued—as Singer claims—for “Douglass’s conversion to moderation.” Singer sets up Garrison’s position as the standard for “radicalism” but misses the fact that most antislavery radicals ended up disagreeing with Garrison’s reading of the Constitution. In fact, the position Douglass took in Glasgow was radical, descending directly from the radical anti-slavery constitutionalism of William Goodell, Gerrit Smith, and others whose radical credentials are unimpeachable. Nobody in the political mainstream espoused Douglass’s claim that the Constitution was an antislavery document that justified a direct federal assault on slavery in the southern states.

Nor was it necessarily radical, as Singer seems to think, to see the Constitution as a pro-slavery document, since many slave owners, including Chief Justice Roger Taney (author of the racist Dred Scott decision), held that view. It was for this very reason that Douglass eventually rejected what he called “the slaveholders’ view” of the Constitution.

Singer says that we overstate the extent of Douglass’s conversion to an anti-slavery reading of the Constitution, but Douglass himself stressed the significance of this shift in his speeches, editorials, and last two autobiographies. In the 1840s, Douglass denounced the Constitution as a proslavery document; in the 1850s, he defended the Constitution as an antislavery document. It’s hard to imagine a more thoroughgoing transformation. For Douglass it meant that electoral politics was a legitimate means of opposing slavery because if antislavery politicians succeeded they would have the constitutional power to overthrow slavery. The problem was no longer the Constitution itself, but the political power of the slaveholders. We believe

this was a significant shift on Douglass’s part; Singer does not. But regardless of what any of us believes, there is no doubt that Douglass and the Garrisonians thought the shift was profoundly important and that it contributed to the personal and organizational rift between them.

Douglass’s views on the Constitution were never static, but he did come to accept Gerrit Smith’s claim that, in the absence of any overt references to slavery, the Constitution should be read in the light of the principles laid down in the preamble. The preamble declares that one of the purposes of the Constitution is to “secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” Douglass believed this made the Constitution an antislavery document. We are not saying that Douglass’s antislavery reading of the Constitution was correct, but there is no doubt that this was the position he eventually took.

Singer is not quite correct in claiming that Douglass was in Scotland “because of his participation in planning John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry.” Douglass repeatedly warned Brown that his plan would fail and he resisted Brown’s urgent appeals to participate. But Douglass admired Brown, and when the raid collapsed authorities found letters from Douglass in Brown’s possession. After Virginia authorities targeted Douglass as a co-conspirator he went abroad. Actually, Douglass denied that he fled; he claimed that he had been planning the trip for some time and that it had nothing to do with Brown’s raid. It soon became clear that Douglass was not a co-conspirator. The charges against him were dropped, and he returned safely to the United States.

It matters little whether we label Douglass a “radical,” a “reformer,” or a “revolutionary,” so long as we get the facts of his career right. By the 1850s, most abolitionists came to the same conclusion as Douglass about Garrison: His interpretation of the Constitution hampered rather than helped the progress of antislavery.

Finally, we want to emphasize a point that Singer misses: The particulars of the positions Douglass took on the Constitution were less important than the theory of constitutional interpretation he ended up espousing. In the final analysis, Douglass argued, the text of the Constitution will not determine what the federal government can or cannot do about slavery. That determination will be made by whichever party controls the federal government. And here’s the most important point: Douglass was right. Once the Republican Party took control of the federal government, slavery was abolished—something that could not have happened if the Constitution was as unambiguously proslavery as Garrison made it out to be.

By the way, there was someone else who agreed with Douglass that in the end the rights southerners were entitled to under the Constitution were determined not by the text of the document but by whoever was in power. His name was Abraham Lincoln.

— James Oakes and Robert Cohen