

# NISKANEN C E N T E R

## FREDERICK DOUGLASS' 1876 REPORT

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Laura K. Field

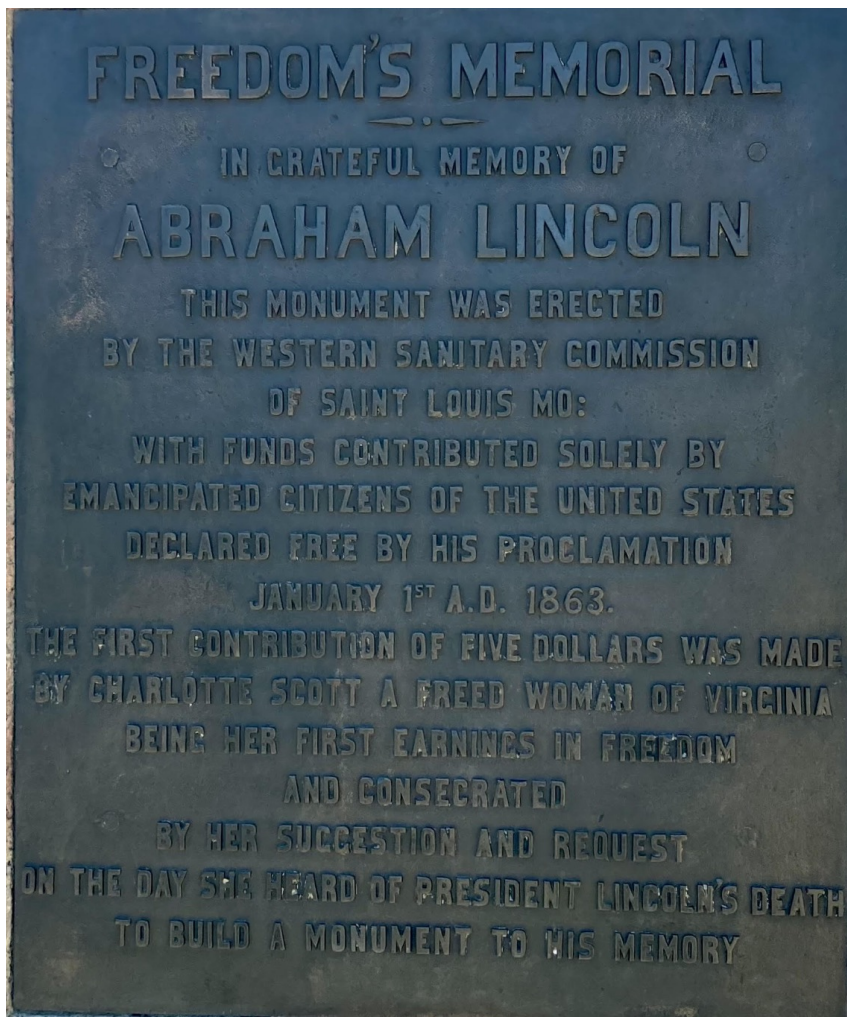
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*Conservatives often use the rhetoric of Frederick Douglass as a cudgel against Black thinkers like Nikole Hannah-Jones. But in an 1876 speech, the venerated abolitionist movingly defended core “woke” insights that are now being cast as a radical break with tradition.*

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## Introduction

*A thousand years hence, when the solid marble that held his remains shall have crumbled; when hundreds of military heroes who have risen under his administration shall have been forgotten; when even the details of the late tremendous war shall have faded from the pages of history, and the war itself shall seem but as a speck up the long vista of ages, then Abraham Lincoln, like dear old John Brown, will find eloquent tongues to rehearse his history, and commend his philanthropy and virtues as a standard to the rulers of nations. Wherever freedom has an advocate, or humanity a friend, his name will be held as an auxiliary.*

Frederick Douglass,  
“[The Assassination and Its Lessons](#),” Brooklyn Academy of Music, 1866

If 2019 was the year of the 1619 Project and 2020 was a year of racial reckoning in the streets, then 2021 has proven to be the year of conservative backlash. It began, unforgettably, with the January 6 insurrection, where a mob hurling racist taunts at beleaguered Capitol police officers rioted with impunity only months after peaceful Black Lives Matter protestors were met with overwhelming displays of force. Then came President Trump’s 1776 Report, intended as an official rebuttal of the 1619 Project, and then the growing momentum behind state-level efforts to control public education on race.

One common move in the turn against the [1619 Project](#) (and against what many now refer to as “wokeness”) is to invoke the words and person of Frederick Douglass. The orator and activist who escaped slavery and went on to lead the abolitionist cause initially [condemned](#) the U.S. Constitution but eventually came to interpret and present it as an [anti-slavery document](#); he famously broke with his abolitionist friend William Lloyd Garrison over the question of how best to conceive of the founding text. Thanks to this history, and to Douglass’ own varied and prolific writings, critics of the 1619 Project find a convenient friend in the 19th century’s foremost thinker on the Black experience in America.

An example: In his 1852 speech “[What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?](#)”—probably his most famous oration—Douglass refers to the Constitution as a “GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT.” Critics from across the political spectrum often use this phrase as a rejoinder to 1619 Project lead Nikole Hannah-Jones, or to the alleged “woke” movement more generally.

The five prominent historians who responded to the 1619 Project [invoke Douglass' line](#), and so do the authors of the [1776 Report](#), presenting Douglass' attitude as a point of contrast with "progressivism." Writing for [The Bulwark in February 2020](#), Cathy Young critiqued the 1619 Project (and echoes the words of Martin Luther King Jr.) by noting that both Douglass and King treated the Founding as a "promissory note of freedom and justice for African-Americans" (Young links to Douglass' July 4th speech).

In an especially [egregious distortion](#), the conservative nonprofit PragerU recently published a short video in which Frederick Douglass is presented as a moderate incrementalist, in sharp juxtaposition to Garrison the dangerous "radical" and his modern-day, activist counterparts. Inevitably, PragerU's scriptwriters invoke the "glorious liberty document," too.

**Reference to older voices like Douglass or King serves to undercut the credibility of contemporary thinkers by presenting their work as a radical departure from what has come before. But it's usually wrong.**

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The quality of these critiques varies enormously. But, in each instance, critics pit Frederick Douglass, the elder, more authoritative Black voice and statesman, against a younger, more controversial one, who in Nikole Hannah-Jones' case happens also to be a Black woman.

Reference to older voices like Douglass or King (whose work is so often [quoted selectively](#), too, by [people](#) from across the [political spectrum](#); [of course](#) I am [hardly the first](#) to observe [this phenomenon](#)) is a powerful rhetorical choice. It serves to undercut the credibility of contemporary thinkers by presenting their work as a radical departure from what has come before, while at the same time flattering the self-conception of the audience ("See, I'm not racist, I side with MLK").

But it's usually wrong.

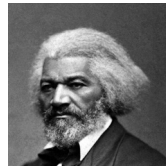
Consider: Taken as a whole, Frederick Douglass' Fourth of July speech was not primarily about the glories of the Constitution. He opens with a discussion of the constitutional convention and concludes with a treatment of the Constitution, but he vehemently emphasizes the present ("We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future... But now is the time, the important time."). The bulk of the speech is about slavery ("My subject, then, fellow-citizens, is AMERICAN SLAVERY"), and offers a scorching indictment of American hypocrisy: "The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretence, and your Christianity as a lie." Douglass' 1852 speech juxtaposes the horrors of slavery with that "glorious liberty document," and so exposes the vast, lying gulf that separates the text from the reality. In 1852 Douglass understood the Constitution to be an anti-slavery document—or at least that was the way he chose to present the matter, which is still a subject of [discussion](#) and [controversy](#)—but he also believed that American practices made an absolute mockery of that truth:

At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability, and could I reach the nation's ear, I would, to-day, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced.

Critics like to portray today's "woke" activists and public intellectuals as departing dramatically from all that has come before, but the reality isn't anywhere near so simple. The bitter irony manifest in Douglass' 1852 speech brings him much closer to the spirit of Nikole Hannah-Jones than critics let on.

This is a point worth dwelling on given the controversy that has accompanied the 1619 Project and given all that is at stake: vital civic questions about the legacy of racism and ongoing racial inequalities, about historical interpretation and how to educate children truthfully about the past, and about the meaning of America moving forward.

And to unpack that point, I want to focus on a less famous speech by Frederick Douglass. Delivered more than a decade after the Civil War, it allows us to reflect on our battles over "wokeness" with the benefits of Douglass' hindsight. Anti-woke commentators have also cherry-picked this one for quotes favorable to their cause—but a full reading of the text reveals that Douglass himself was making precisely the kinds of argument they now invoke his authority to attack.

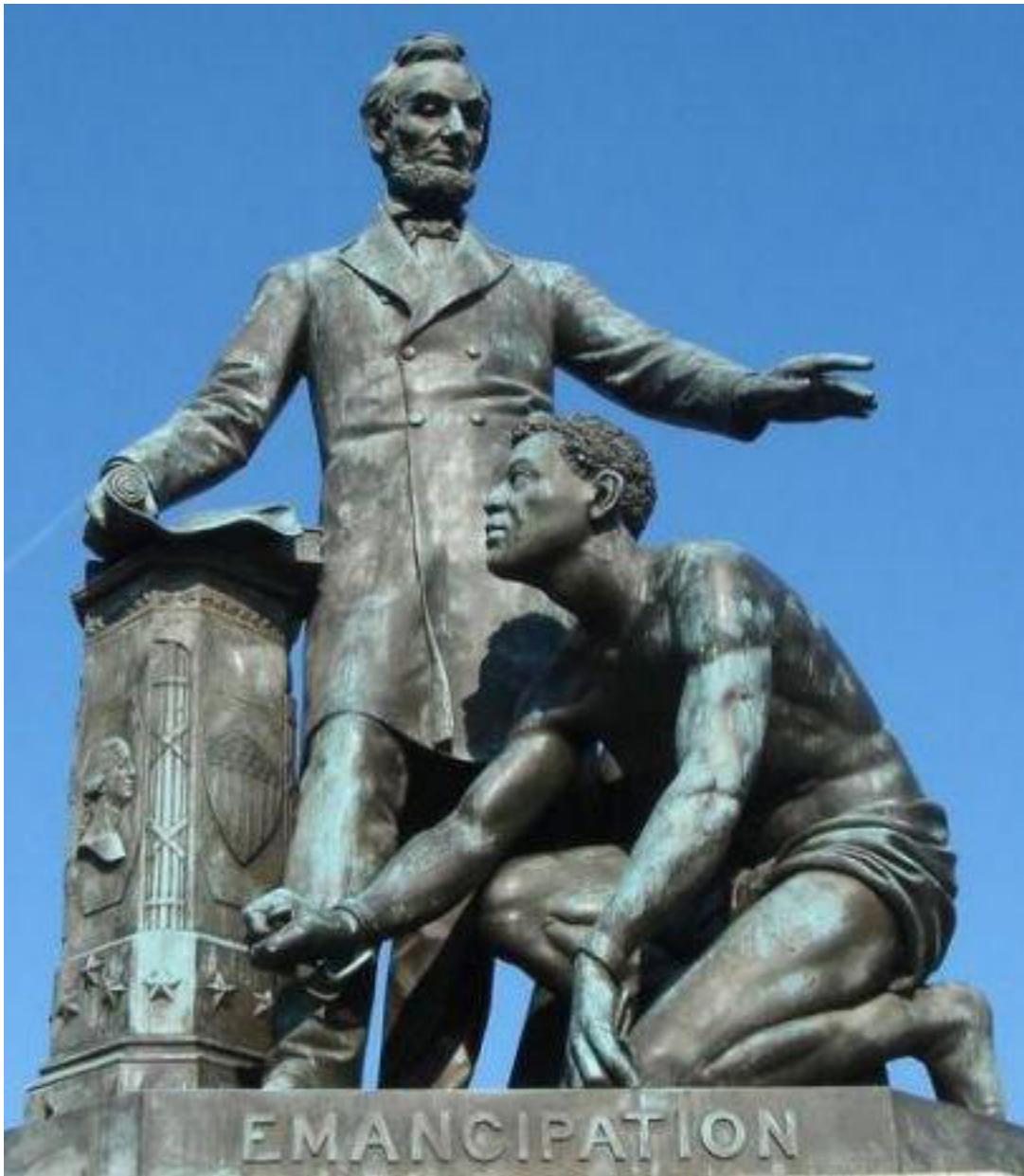


**Abraham Lincoln was not, in the fullest sense of the word, either our man or our model. In his interests, in his associations, in his habits of thought, and in his prejudices, he was a white man.**

## 1876: Frederick Douglass on Abraham Lincoln

Douglass' famous Fourth of July speech was given nearly a decade before the Civil War, as the institution of slavery was still approaching its peak. However, the speech I want to discuss took place nearly a decade after the war's end, during the twilight years of Reconstruction. It is known as the "[Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln](#)." The 1876 speech is less famous than Douglass' searing 1852 oration, perhaps because it takes on a subject that is arguably even more sacred than the Founding—the person and memory of Abraham Lincoln—and does so critically.

Douglass gave this speech on April 14, 1876, at the dedication ceremony for the [Emancipation Memorial](#) in Washington, D.C.—which is a controversial statue that depicts President



The Emancipation Memorial. Credit: US Government, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Lincoln standing over a newly emancipated Black man (it is also known as the Freedman's Memorial). The speech critiques Lincoln in terms so provocative and racialized that it would in all likelihood be banned by some of the new laws against “critical race theory” (CRT).

None of this has stopped critics of today's “woke” intellectuals from co-opting ideas in the speech—places where Douglass praises Lincoln, or implies that the trajectory of American history has been swift and just—as evidence for their side, much as they have with the “glorious liberty document” line from 1852.

A flagrant example comes from Princeton scholar and Claremont Institute fellow Allen Guelzo, in his December 2019 [critique](#) of the 1619 Project for City Journal. The upshot of Guelzo's argument is that the writers of the 1619 Project show insufficient gratitude for the fact that Black people have, in such a meager time, advanced to such positions of high authority: "It is the bitterest of ironies that the 1619 Project dispenses this malediction from the chair of ultimate cultural privilege in America, because in no human society has an enslaved people suddenly found itself vaulted into positions of such privilege, and with the consent—even the approbation—of those who were once the enslavers." Guelzo goes on to argue that "the 156 years since emancipation are less than a second on human history's long clock, so that such a transformation is more in the nature of a miracle to be celebrated than a failure to be deplored for any seeming slowness." He asserts that "it is a miracle Frederick Douglass celebrated" along with several other Black authorities. With respect to Douglass, this is a strange claim, since he lived for only 30 years after Emancipation. But, even so, Douglass' 1876 speech takes on the pace of historical change as one of its major themes. And he does at one point argue that Abraham Lincoln's actions were, when viewed from the perspective of a 19th-century American statesman, "swift, zealous, radical, and determined." As we will see, however, the full story here is much more complicated.

**Critics like to portray today's "woke" activists and public intellectuals as departing dramatically from all that has come before, but the reality isn't anywhere near so simple.**

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Another example comes from Lucas Morel, a Lincoln scholar at Washington and Lee University, who, [in a discussion with](#) the Claremont Institute in April 2020, brings up Douglass' 1876 speech explicitly. Morel, who is Black, accuses Nikole Hannah-Jones of engaging in something like calumny-by-omission in her brief treatment of Abraham Lincoln (Guelzo published a version of this argument as an op-ed for the [New York Post](#), the headline of which was "The 1619 Project's outrageous, lying slander of Abe Lincoln"). Morel also blames Hannah-Jones for not discussing Douglass at all (Douglass comes up elsewhere in the original 1619 Project, in the essay on music and the blackface minstrelsy by [Wesley Morris](#); he plays a more prominent role in the [expanded book version](#) of the project). Morel then makes the following appeal, referring now explicitly to the 1876 speech. From the transcript:

[Douglass], in one of his most masterful speeches in 1876, Oration on the Dedication of the Freedman's Memorial in D.C., he shows the perspective of an abolitionist towards Lincoln. Why is he going so slow? But then ultimately concludes in his own speech that Lincoln's action when viewed from the vantage point of a statesman—not of an abolitionist who's got one particular important issue and axe to grind, but of a statesman the well-being of an entire nation—from that perspective, even the abolitionist Frederick Douglass acknowledges that Lincoln's actions were swift, zealous, radical, and determined. It's quite a remarkable speech as Douglass in a way reenacts his own journey in appre-

ciation for the work that Lincoln did, not just for blacks, but for whites in this country.

Morel is right that the 1876 speech by Frederick Douglass is remarkable and masterful. But, even as a quick summary, this is too simplistic a gloss on the speech, and on Douglass' outlook. Elsewhere, [Morel argues](#) that the 1876 speech is an acknowledgment by Douglass (he calls it a confession) that Lincoln had greater overall judgment than he himself did. This is a very thorny question. It is so difficult because it is impossible to think of an American who embodies the unsettled tensions of high political life—tensions between idealism and pragmatism, principle and action—as much as Frederick Douglass (except, perhaps, for Abraham Lincoln). Morel's interpretation elides several crucial tensions and challenges presented by Douglass' life, and by his speech in honor of Lincoln.

Indeed, I would go further: It isn't an exaggeration to say that, to the extent that one takes Frederick Douglass as an authority on such matters, his 1876 speech fully exonerates Nikole Hannah-Jones and others for their failure to adequately lionize Abraham Lincoln or America's Founding Fathers.

Critics of “wokeness” often make vague and sweeping accusations against their opponents, and they are not always clear about their precise concerns (which has, in turn, made for [some very confusing anti-CRT laws](#)). But if they object to the argument that Black people's experiences give them distinctive insights into American politics; if they object to a sharp focus on how inequalities and injustice persist, rather than on the progress that has been made; and if they object to the emphasis on moral failings and hypocrisy, as opposed to necessity and political realism, as an explanation for the long-enduring gap between American ideals and practices—then they should know that these ideas have a long lineage, going back to Frederick Douglass himself. What's more, Douglass anticipated their critique.

Douglass' 1876 speech is essential reading in 2021 because it presents, in a manner that would move any thoughtful person, ideas that many on the right today reject out of hand and are trying to ban from schools. It is perfectly reasonable to grapple with these ideas and ultimately to disagree with them, and there are ways [to do so productively](#). But even if in the end one disagrees—with Douglass, or with the 1619 Project's initiator, Nikole Hannah-Jones—their ideas are not a break with American tradition, let alone with American ideals. Before turning to the speech, though, it is important to be clear about some of the language being deployed here, and to underscore just how extreme and distortive the anti-woke attacks have become.

## “Wokeness,” Nikole Hannah-Jones, and anti-CRT panic

The term “woke” originated [among Black activists](#). But in recent years it has been appropriated and converted into a catch-all epithet and smear. Being “woke” originally signaled heightened consciousness of racist police brutality, but today the word is used by critics to

describe perspectives deemed excessively sensitive to racism and other forms of bigotry (the most obvious antecedent here is “political correctness”; the term “woke” is deployed in a [very similar fashion](#) but is arguably more potent by virtue of having been appropriated). I am using scare quotes around “woke” and its cognates in recognition of these difficulties and to reflect the term’s ambiguity. As it exists in the popular imagination, “wokeism” is something that has been formed largely through the act of decrying “wokeism.”

If there were a straightforward “woke” ideology, conservatives would doubtless view the 1619 Project as its manifesto.

Launched in 2019 as a provocative special edition of the *New York Times Magazine*, the 1619 Project had the explicit intention of reframing American history to center Black people and the legacy of slavery. It was released as a book in November 2021. Here, context matters, and so it bears emphasizing: The 1619 Project is a piece of collaborative journalism, created by both journalists and scholars, aimed at shaking up the national discourse on race, against a presumptive background of ongoing public ignorance and historical [whitewashing](#). As I understand it, the purpose of the project is to bring into sharp relief the legacy of slavery in America, and so to look at this history through a lens that would be new and unfamiliar to most readers. This choice (like all choices) was distortive in some ways, and gave little space to traditional perspectives, but such a choice can be understood pretty easily by anyone who takes the project in good faith: Within the broader sweep of public history and more familiar historical narratives, theirs was a choice to provide a corrective contrast. The premise (and [argument](#)) of the 1619 Project was that American history—and not just the history surrounding the country’s founding myths—continues to be skewed in favor of white people’s memories and stories. The project’s authors cover a wide variety of themes—from [electoral politics](#) and [medicine](#) to [mass incarceration](#), [economics](#), and [music](#)—as they work to recover some of this lost terrain for the general public.

Any serious effort to critique the project must contend with this broader social context and purpose.

But many on the right today feel justified in distorting the work of the 1619 Project dramatically in response. Just to flag some of the more serious examples: [Allen Guelzo](#) argues that the purpose of the 1619 Project is not history but “evangelism for a gospel of disenchantment whose ultimate purpose is the hollowing out of the meaning of freedom.” Charles Kesler, editor of the *Claremont Review of Books* and a member of Trump’s 1776 Commission, [argues that](#) Nikole Hannah-Jones blames America’s problems on its principles, and that “modern liberals do their part to cancel any suggestion that the American regime, *especially* its principles, might be good—for its citizens and for the cause of humanity.” In a special “American Mind” podcast episode entitled “[The 1619 Project Exposed](#),” the Claremont Institute’s leaders argued that the project represents nothing less than “an assault on our history truly aimed at supplanting the American system with one wholly anathema to it.”

And, of course, it’s important to note that the discussion surrounding the 1619 Project and all

things “woke” has moved beyond “the discourse” in civil society and into state legislatures. In one red state after another, GOP (Grand Old Party, that is, Republican) lawmakers have been pushing and passing legislation that opposes teaching CRT in schools. As many a think-piece [has explained by now](#), CRT is a decades-old academic framework for understanding how law and race interact. CRT, like many other “critical” approaches, has certainly been influential in the U.S. academy, but it does not play a prominent role in the 1619 Project, and there is no good evidence that it figures directly in American public education. Even so, the 1619 Project, “wokeism,” and CRT have become synonymous in the right-wing imagination.

In May 2020, Michigan state [Senator Lana Theis](#) released a [statement](#) that captures the hyperventilating spirit of the new anti-CRT laws:

*Critical race theory is an invention of the extremist political left that has manipulated academia for decades and is now targeting private businesses, public institutions and, sadly, our K-12 classrooms, where it is indoctrinating young minds with anti-American falsehoods... Its ‘woke’ proponents reject our country’s true history and our founding principles, in favor of an identity-based cultural Marxist ideology that seeks nothing more than victimization, envy, division, discrimination and ultimately the destruction of our country and way of life. This radical world view has no place in public education and my bill will make sure it never will.*

Theis’ brief [press release](#) mentions the 1619 Project three times.

The conflation of all things “woke” into the term CRT is entirely in keeping with the intentions of the intellectual who pioneered the anti-CRT movement, the Manhattan Institute’s [Christopher Rufo](#). As [Rufo](#) declared on Twitter in [March](#), “We have successfully frozen their brand—‘critical race theory’—into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category.” Ten days later he put it like this: “I am quite intentionally redefining what ‘critical race theory’ means in the public mind, expanding it as a catchall for the racial orthodoxy.”



**Christopher F. Rufo** ✂  
@realchrisrufo

Replying to @realchrisrufo and @ConceptualJames

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3:14 PM · Mar 15, 2021 · Twitter Web App

117 Retweets 238 Quote Tweets 941 Likes

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**Christopher F. Rufo** ✂  
@realchrisrufo

Replying to @realchrisrufo and @mattyglesias

2. I am quite intentionally redefining what “critical race theory” means in the public mind, expanding it as a catchall for the new racial orthodoxy. People won’t read Derrick Bell, but when their kid is labeled an “oppressor” in first grade, that’s now CRT.

6:30 AM · Mar 25, 2021 · Twitter for Android

1 Quote Tweet 25 Likes



Lincoln Park and the Emancipation Memorial. Credit: Public domain, [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Now, there is so much confusion packed into these cultural discussions (some of which, as we have just seen, is manufactured) that it can be quite difficult to know how to proceed. But, before turning to Frederick Douglass' speech, I think it's important to note that the core allegation against the 1619 Project, and the one that has arguably led to a national campaign against it, is that it is unpatriotic: The 1619 Project allegedly threatens the American way of life, and therefore must be censored. It's also important to emphasize, from the outset, that anybody making this charge fails on the level of basic reading comprehension.

Hannah-Jones opens [the project's introductory essay](#) with a puzzle: How is it that her father revered the American flag so much despite the country having repeatedly let him down? She then tells the story of coming to appreciate the radical pride and hope involved in her father's style of patriotism:

Like most young people, I thought I understood so much, when in fact I understood so little. My father knew exactly what he was doing when he raised that flag. He knew that our people's contributions to building the richest and most powerful nation in the world were indelible, that the United States simply would not exist without us.

The essay concludes with a moving story that captures a simple moment from her childhood, and addresses how she thinks of her ancestry today:

When I was a child—I must have been in fifth or sixth grade—a teacher gave our class an assignment intended to celebrate the diversity of the great American melting pot. She instructed each of us to write a short report on our ancestral land and then draw that nation’s flag. As she turned to write the assignment on the board, the other black girl in class locked eyes with me. Slavery had erased any connection we had to an African country, and even if we tried to claim the whole continent, there was no “African” flag. It was hard enough being one of two black kids in the class, and this assignment would just be another reminder of the distance between the white kids and us. In the end, I walked over to the globe near my teacher’s desk, picked a random African country and claimed it as my own.

I wish, now, that I could go back to the younger me and tell her that her people’s ancestry started here, on these lands, and to boldly, proudly, draw the stars and those stripes of the American flag.

There are plenty of contentious claims in the 1619 Project, but the idea that it is an unpatriotic document is wrong. It is true that Hannah-Jones insists on pointing out historical hypocrisy, but the essay is full of positive references to the Founding ideals and the importance of political rights. She observes, for example, that Jefferson’s “fierce assertion of the fundamental and natural rights of humankind to freedom and self-governance has defined our global reputation as a land of liberty.” When [asked in](#) an interview whether she intended for the essay to have such a strong patriotic takeaway, Hannah-Jones’ answer was emphatic. “What I’m arguing is that our founding ideals were great and powerful. Had we in fact built a country based on those founding ideals, then we would have the most amazing country the earth has ever seen.”

As I understand it, the main point of Hannah-Jones’ essay is to argue that Black Americans have an especially deep understanding of these ideals by virtue of having been subjected to oppression for so long. Hannah-Jones quotes W.E.B. Du Bois: “Few men ever worshiped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries.” Hannah-Jones is clearly expressing love of this country’s ideals. Nevertheless, many conservatives and centrists appear to have little interest in Hannah-Jones’ kind of patriotism, presumably on the grounds that it is too ambiguous and too bound up with group identity.

But in a country whose history involves race-based chattel slavery and stark racialized oppression, the demand for an unambiguous and color-blind patriotism rings a little hollow, if not outright absurd. It is completely inadequate to this country’s historical realities.

Which brings us to Frederick Douglass.

## The occasion of the speech

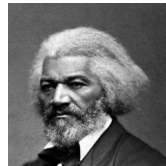
*We are here, with the broad earth freshly adorned with the foliage and flowers of spring for our church, and all races, colors, and conditions of men for our congregation.*

I first read Frederick Douglass' "[Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln](#)" last summer, in the midst of the George Floyd protests and, more specifically, in the course of a controversy surrounding the Emancipation Memorial statue in Boston. [The Boston statue](#) was a copy of the D.C. memorial, which has a [fascinating history](#). It was designed by the artist Thomas Ball and paid for exclusively with funds raised from newly emancipated citizens. Charlotte Scott, a formerly enslaved woman from Virginia, had come up with the idea for such a statue in honor of Lincoln. The D.C. statue was erected in Washington, on April 14, 1876, the 11th anniversary of the president's assassination. It was unveiled by President Ulysses S. Grant.

When protestors turned their attention to these controversial statues in 2020, [conservatives fumed](#). [Rod Dreher](#) took it as some sort of "woke breaking point." [Rich Lowry](#) declared: "We haven't reached peak insanity, but setting an appointment to tear down an Abraham Lincoln statue known as the Emancipation Memorial in the name of racial equity has to be getting close."

In June 2020, Allen Guelzo and Harvard historian James Hankins weighed in with a [Wall Street Journal](#) op-ed that addressed Douglass' speech directly. In this op-ed, Guelzo and Hankins offer a thoughtful overview of the statue's coming-into-being, and acknowledge its fraught reception, including Douglass' harsh critique of Lincoln at the dedication ceremony. But they quickly sweep such criticisms aside as wrong. "Reconstruction had soured Douglass on Lincoln," they declare. And they hastily return to quoting Douglass' praise for the fallen president. According to Guelzo and Hankins, to go along with the statue's detractors is to suggest "that there can never be mutuality of purpose, that all human relationships must be calibrated in terms of power and suspicion." What they fail to acknowledge is that such a calibration of "power and suspicion"—with regards to race and to Abraham Lincoln—is precisely what Douglass offers in his speech. If we take Douglass' admiration for the Founding and for Lincoln seriously, we must also take seriously those views of his that are much more difficult (for some of us) to hear.

Douglass begins his speech with generous appreciation for the day's significance, but from the outset his object is twofold. He has elevated words for Abraham Lincoln, but he works



**He was ready and willing at any time during the first years of his administration to deny, postpone, and sacrifice the rights of humanity in the colored people to promote the welfare of the white people of this country ... My white fellow-citizens ... you are the children of Abraham Lincoln. We are at best only his step-children; children by adoption, children by forces of circumstances and necessity.**

carefully throughout the speech to center the audience, too. According to [historical accounts](#) and [reports](#), the audience that day [consisted](#) of some 25,000 people, many of whom (perhaps a majority) were, like Douglass, formerly enslaved Black people. Throughout the speech, Douglass identifies with them, using the first person “we.” And the opening of Douglass’ speech pays tribute, primarily, to them. Indeed, the first four paragraphs of Douglass’ text do not mention Lincoln at all, and instead take shape around the notion that “few facts could better illustrate the vast and wonderful change which has taken place in our condition as a people than *the fact of our assembling here for the purpose we have today*” (emphasis my own, here and throughout). In other words, the significant matter of the day was not just Abraham Lincoln; the fact of such a group assembling, and for such a purpose, was momentous, too.

It was momentous in large part because of the brutal realities that had come before. And very early on in the speech Douglass offers a stark reminder of that recent past:

Harmless, beautiful, proper, and praiseworthy as this demonstration is, I cannot forget that no such demonstration would have been tolerated here twenty years ago. The spirit of slavery and barbarism, which still lingers to blight and destroy in some dark and distant parts of our country, would have made our assembling here the signal and excuse for opening upon us all the flood-gates of wrath and violence. That we are here in peace today is a compliment and a credit to American civilization, and a prophecy of still greater national enlightenment and progress in the future.

Douglass does not mince words: Their celebration of Lincoln that day should in no way be taken as an excuse to forget past atrocities, or as an invitation to future complacency (in the opening lines of his speech he anticipates that people will “make a note of this occasion; they will think of it and speak of it with a sense of manly pride and complacency”). Douglass will praise Lincoln and assert his own hopefulness, but his is a hope eked out against a background of blight and barbarism.

When at last he turns, in paragraph six, to the subject of Abraham Lincoln and the meaning of the memorial, Douglass’ praise for the president is extraordinarily high:

In a word, we are here to express, as best we may, by appropriate forms and ceremonies, our grateful sense of the vast, high, and preeminent services rendered to ourselves, to our race, to our country, and to the whole world by Abraham Lincoln.

But, immediately after this, Douglass again shifts his focus onto himself and the other Black people assembled. He notes that this is the first time “in the history of *our* people, and in the history of the *whole* American people, we join in this high worship, and march conspicuously in the line of this time-honored custom. First things are always interesting, and this is one of our first things.” Douglass shines an emphatic, self-conscious light on the fact that this is the first time that Black people, and Black and white people together, have been able



Statue of Frederick Douglass in front of the Talbot County Courthouse.  
Credit: J. Dean/Unsplash.

to participate in the honoring of American heroes. (David Blight opens his [celebrated biography](#) of Douglass with a powerful description of this day and this speech; as he notes, this was also the first time that a Black person had been represented in a national monument.) Douglass repeats his appeal at least six times (“I commend the fact to notice; let it be told in every part of the Republic,” etc.), and he makes brief mention of all the high dignitaries also in attendance, before coming to the essential point:

**We, the colored people, newly emancipated and rejoicing in our blood-bought freedom, near the close of the first century in the life of this Republic, have now and here unveiled, set apart, and dedicated a monument of enduring granite and bronze, in every line, feature, and figure of which the men of this generation**

may read, and those of aftercoming generations may read, something of the exalted character and great works of Abraham Lincoln, the first martyr President of the United States.

The opening section of Douglass’ speech does as much honor to the Black people assembled—brought together to rejoice in “blood-bought freedom,” nearly one hundred years into the life of the Republic—as it does to Lincoln.

## Douglass on Lincoln, whiteness, and the pace of change

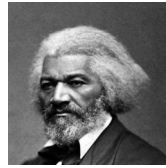
The poignancy of the group's gratitude toward Lincoln becomes clearer in the course of the rest of the speech, because what follows is not at all flattering. Douglass uses the middle portion of his speech to tell some hard truths and to convey some of the complicated feelings that he, as a Black man living in America in 1876, has toward President Abraham Lincoln. If we have just witnessed Douglass placing his Black audience at the center of the narrative, the middle portion of the speech falls neatly into what today could be described as basic “woke” identity politics, including “divisive” racialized concepts and standpoint epistemology.

Here's how Douglass begins his critique of Lincoln:

It must be admitted, truth compels me to admit, even here in the presence of the monument we have erected to his memory, [that] Abraham Lincoln was not, in the fullest sense of the word, either our man or our model. In his interests, in his associations, in his habits of thought, and in his prejudices, he was a white man.

He goes on, and for the better part of a paragraph his language is extremely blunt. It is worth quoting at length, and to read it through carefully (again, emphasis here is my own):

**He was preeminently the white man's President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men.** He was ready and willing at any time during the first years of his administration **to deny, postpone, and sacrifice the rights of humanity in the colored people to promote the welfare of the white people of this country.** In all his education and feeling he was an American of the Americans. He came into the Presidential chair upon one principle alone, namely, opposition to *the extension of slavery*. **His arguments in furtherance of this policy had their motive and mainspring in his patriotic devotion to the interests of his own race. To protect, defend, and perpetuate slavery in the states where it existed Abraham Lincoln was not less ready than any other President to draw the sword of the nation. He was ready to execute all the supposed guarantees of the United States Constitution in favor of the slave system anywhere inside the slave states. He was willing to pursue, recapture, and send back the fugitive slave to his master, and to suppress a slave rising for liberty, though his guilty master were already in arms against the Gov-**



**I have said that President LINCOLN was a white man, and shared the prejudices common to his countrymen towards the colored race. Looking back to his times and to the condition of his country, we are compelled to admit that this unfriendly feeling on his part may be safely set down as one element of his wonderful success in organizing the loyal American people for the tremendous conflict before them.**

ernment. **The race to which we belong were not the special objects of his consideration.** Knowing this, I concede to you, my white fellow-citizens, a pre-eminence 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 step-children; children by adoption, children by forces of circumstances and necessity. **To you it especially belongs to sound his praises, to preserve and perpetuate his memory, to multiply his statues, to hang his pictures high upon your walls, and commend his example, for to you he was a great and glorious friend and benefactor.** Instead of supplanting you at his altar, we would exhort you to build high his monuments; let them be of the most costly material, of the most cunning workmanship; let their forms be symmetrical, beautiful, and perfect, let their bases be upon solid rocks, and their summits lean against the unchanging blue, overhanging sky, and let them endure forever! But while in the abundance of your wealth, and in the fullness of your just and patriotic devotion, you do all this, we entreat you to despise not the humble offering we this day unveil to view; **for while Abraham Lincoln saved for you a country, he delivered us from a bondage, according to Jefferson, one hour of which was worse than ages of the oppression your fathers rose in rebellion to oppose.**

In the aftermath of the war, Douglass would go back and forth on the question of whether Lincoln was “emphatically, the colored man’s president” or, as here, “the white man’s president, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men” (on this, see James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican*, Chapter 7; Guelzo opts for the former line in his defense of Lincoln for the [New York Post](#)). But this paragraph from 1876 is so remarkable because it lays out the case for Lincoln’s white supremacy so starkly, so painfully, and forces us to confront the complexity that so many today want to sweep aside or deny. Douglass suggests that, even though Lincoln abhorred slavery, his actions demonstrated that he cared about preserving the Union more, and that meant caring more about white comfort and white political freedom than about “the rights of humanity in the colored people.” Further: It meant sacrificing *the basic humanity of black people* for the general welfare of whites. Later in the speech he puts it like this: “The Union was more to him than our freedom or our future.”

The rest of Douglass’ speech does pay tribute, as we will see, to the political complexity of these realities, as well as to Lincoln’s extraordinary statesmanship. But Douglass’ final sentence above nevertheless suggests that, in his own view, Abraham Lincoln had a wrongful ordering of concerns—or an ordering that differed from his own. At least that is how I read it, contra Morel, for I do not think that Frederick Douglass simply takes the part of the statesman over the abolitionist in this speech, even if he is grateful that Lincoln’s statesmanship coincided so fortuitously with his own abolitionism. If one hour of slavery is worse than ages of British oppression (Douglass makes the same appeal in his 1852 speech), then that fact, while amplifying the massive good achieved by Lincoln, also radically diminishes the

historical meaning of the Union/Founding, and possibly the value of preserving it.

The point is simple, but also brutal and inescapable: While Lincoln was a source of great good for this country, no shining words in his honor can outweigh all that inhumanity. With his reference to the Jefferson line, Douglass briefly gives voice to a far more radical perspective: a perspective from which arguments about the strengths and weaknesses of the traditional Founding—about this or that Founder or constitutional clause, or even about Abraham Lincoln—are simply beside the point. They are beside the point because they reduce a major historical atrocity to debaters' fodder. As such, Douglass suggests, the real lionization of Lincoln is best left to white people.

A gentler way of putting the matter is this: Just because Douglass had a deep grasp of and appreciation for Lincoln's statesmanship and realism does not mean that he was identically subject to their dictates, or that abolition was not always foremost in his own ranking of priorities and concerns.

**Even if in the end one disagrees  
— with Douglass, or with Nikole  
Hannah-Jones — their ideas are not  
a break with American tradition, let  
alone with American ideals.**

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In the very least, we can say that Douglass never allows his audience to forget that the divide between the abolitionist's moral outlook and the statesman's prudential one is fraught with tragic tension.

In the next paragraph, Douglass doubles down, in a way, with his radically critical view, but with characteristic nuance. Douglass expresses sincere reverence for Lincoln, while at the same time conveying, again and again, reasons for frustration and distrust:

Fellow-citizens, ours is no new-born zeal and devotion—merely a thing of this moment. The name of Abraham Lincoln was near and dear to our hearts in the darkest and most perilous hours of the Republic. We were no more ashamed of him when shrouded in clouds of darkness, of doubt, and defeat than when we saw him crowned with victory, honor, and glory. Our faith in him was often taxed and strained to the uttermost, but it never failed. **When he tarried long in the mountain; when he strangely told us that we were the cause of the war; when he still more strangely told us that we were to leave the land in which we were born; when he refused to employ our arms in defense of the Union; when, after accepting our services as colored soldiers, he refused to retaliate our murder and torture as colored prisoners; when he told us he would save the Union if he could with slavery; when he revoked the Proclamation of Emancipation of General Fremont; when he refused to remove the popular commander of the Army of the Potomac, in the days of its inaction and defeat, who was more zealous in his efforts to protect slavery than to suppress rebellion; when we saw all this, and more, we were at times**

**grieved, stunned, and greatly bewildered; but our hearts believed while they ached and bled.** Nor was this, even at that time, a blind and unreasoning superstition. Despite the mist and haze that surrounded him; despite the tumult, the hurry, and confusion of the hour, we were able to take a comprehensive view of Abraham Lincoln, and to make reasonable allowance for the circumstances of his position. We saw him, measured him, and estimated him; not by stray utterances to injudicious and tedious delegations, who often tried his patience; not by isolated facts torn from their connection; not by any partial and imperfect glimpses, caught at inopportune moments; but by a broad survey, in the light of the stern logic of great events, and in view of that divinity which shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will, **we came to the conclusion that the hour and the man of our redemption had somehow met in the person of Abraham Lincoln.** It mattered little to us what language he might employ on special occasions; it mattered little to us, when we fully knew him, whether he was swift or slow in his movements; **it was enough for us that Abraham Lincoln was at the head of a great movement, and was in living and earnest sympathy with that movement, which, in the nature of things, must go on until slavery should be utterly and forever abolished in the United States.**

Frederick Douglass professes to take the full measure of Abraham Lincoln, and the resulting tribute is so powerful because it is so high-minded, and because it is so honest. Here again we see Douglass reiterate the argument that Lincoln's ends coincided fortuitously (but, again, not neatly) with Douglass' own. The first part of the paragraph (in bold) reads like a list of grievances against Lincoln, each point of which is weighty and painful. Douglass' accusations against Lincoln are so strong that the gratitude on display in the rest of the paragraph comes off as all the more impressive.

(The historian James Oakes, who is [among the more thoughtful critics](#) of the 1619 Project, captures the spirit of Douglass' list [when he refers to it](#) as a "scandalous rehearsal" of all the criticisms Douglass levied against Lincoln in his lifetime"; in their [special discussion](#) for the "American Mind" podcast on the 1619 Project, leaders at the Claremont Institute rail against Nikole Hannah-Jones for her mention of some of these same facts about Lincoln; James Poulos calls Hannah-Jones' list a "hodge-podge of ahistorical hash").

The rest of the middle part of Douglass' speech continues in a similar vein. Douglass again professes his people's appreciation for Lincoln's remarkable achievements, but he does so while reminding his audience of Lincoln's tardiness, his countless delays, and his perpetual willingness to compromise with slaveholders. At one especially powerful juncture he writes:

Can any colored man, or any white man friendly to the freedom of all men, ever forget the night which followed the first day of January, 1863, when the world was to see if Abraham Lincoln would prove to be as good as his word? I shall never forget that memorable night, when in a distant city I waited and watched at a public meeting, with three thousand others not less anxious than

myself, for the word of deliverance ... Nor shall I ever forget the outburst of joy and thanksgiving that rent the air when the lightning brought to us the emancipation proclamation. **In that happy hour we forgot all delay, and forgot all tardiness, forgot that the President had bribed the rebels to lay down their arms by a promise to withhold the bolt which would smite the slave-system with destruction;** and we were thenceforward willing to allow the President all the latitude of time, phraseology, and every honorable device that statesmanship might require for the achievement of a great and beneficent measure of liberty and progress.

In that “happy hour” Frederick Douglass forgot the president’s delay and tardiness, and he leaves no doubt that Lincoln eventually earned his trust. But, in the course of this speech, written just over a decade later, Douglass ensures that his audience does not forget the delays. Guelzo’s idea that Frederick Douglass regarded this country’s rapid transformations as a kind of miracle is, from the perspective of the 1876 speech, straight-up bad history.

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## **Gratitude, the nature of change, and the “foul reproach of ingratitude”**

The final third of Douglass’ speech proceeds more conventionally. It includes the famous passage quoted by Morel, in which Douglass offers his summary judgment of Lincoln. It is worth quoting the lead-up to that statement in full, since it contends with Lincoln’s racism, again, directly:

I have said that President LINCOLN was a white man, and **shared the prejudices common to his countrymen towards the colored race.** Looking back to his times and to the condition of his country, we are compelled to admit that this **unfriendly feeling on his part may be safely set down as one element of his wonderful success** in organizing the loyal American people for the tremendous conflict before them, and bringing them safely through that conflict. His great mission was to accomplish two things: first, to save his country from dismemberment and ruin; and, second, to free his country from the great crime of slavery. To do one or the other, or both, **he must have the earnest sympathy and the powerful cooperation of his loyal fellow-countrymen.** Without this primary and essential condition to success his efforts must have been vain and utterly fruitless. Had he put the abolition of slavery before the salvation of the Union, he would have inevitably driven from him a powerful class of the American people and rendered resistance to rebellion impossible. Viewed

from the genuine abolition ground, Mr. LINCOLN seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent; but measuring him by the **sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult**, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined.

Again, I do not believe that Douglass thought the latter to be the more compelling point of view in any straightforward way. He is willing, in this part of the speech—which, we might recall, is an oration in honor of Abraham Lincoln, given on the anniversary of the assassination, in front of some of the most powerful people in America—to concede that Lincoln was an extraordinary man and statesman, and even that, as a statesman, he succeeded where the genuine abolitionist would necessarily have failed. This is a major concession and does tremendous honor to Lincoln and to republicanism. Even so: Given all that has come before, that concession says as much about the general state of American politics at the time as it does about Lincoln’s particular virtues. Douglass has made it crystal clear: the general sentiment that Lincoln “was bound as a statesman to consult” was a racist sentiment. That beautiful concluding line—so often quoted to defend the comprehensiveness of Lincoln’s statesmanly outlook—references something that is rotten and ugly.

Douglass refuses to grant his audience the satisfactions of moral or political complacency. But on the heels of this statement, Douglass does proceed to offer a more standard eulogy for Lincoln. He tells of Lincoln’s remarkable life, of his common sense, and of his continued solidarity with the working people and “plebeians” over America’s patrician class (“he was a man of work”); he tells of his fortitude, and honesty, and honor (“his plain life had favored his love of truth”). Over the course of the reading/hearing, the blunt criticisms fade, and certainly the final impression imparted by the speech is a glow of wholehearted and sincere admiration for Lincoln. It is a beautiful tribute, and anyone who doesn’t already admire Lincoln should [read it in full](#).

If there’s one final thing worth emphasizing from the speech as a whole, including its more celebratory parts, it’s that Douglass’ respect for Lincoln turns on the latter’s *capacity for change* on the question of race and racism. Change is a major theme of the speech from the outset, since the assembly itself signifies such a massive historical shift and “first.” And scholars often read the 1876 speech as an account of Douglass’ own changing disposition toward Lincoln (as Morel does, too). But the speech also dramatizes and celebrates Lincoln’s transformations (James Oakes explores both in his book). Douglass first presents Lincoln as the “white man’s president”—and what else might anyone have expected of an American president at the time? But Douglass’ subsequent analysis shows how Lincoln changed over the course of the war. He grew bolder. And he *became* a man seeking not merely to contain slavery but to destroy it. At one point Douglass lists the massive changes that Lincoln oversaw: the creation of Black regiments, the formal recognition of the Haitian government (“the special object of slave-holding aversion and horror”), the end of the internal slave-trade, and the abolishment of slavery in the District of Columbia. And Douglass explains that Lincoln, unlike any of his predecessors, took decisive action to punish those who sought to preserve

the institution of slavery:

Under [Lincoln's] rule we saw for the first time the law enforced against the foreign slave trade, and the first slave-trader hanged like any other pirate or murderer; under his rule, assisted by the greatest captain of our age, and his inspiration, we saw the Confederate States, based upon the idea that our race must be slaves, and slaves forever, battered to pieces and scattered to the four winds; under his rule, and in the fullness of time, we saw Abraham Lincoln, after giving the slave-holders three months' grace in which to save their hateful slave system, penning the immortal paper, which, though special in its language, was general in its principles and effect, making slavery forever impossible in the United States. Though we waited long, we saw all this and more.

Douglass refers here to the execution of Nathaniel Gordon in 1862. This was [the first time](#) that the full force of the law was brought to bear against an American slave-trader (despite the fact that the foreign slave trade was abolished in 1808 and participation in it became punishable by death when it was brought under [anti-piracy laws in 1820](#); the domestic slave trade, of course, remained legal). As soon as he took office in 1861, Lincoln took deliberate action to enforce these laws, and when he was asked to pardon Gordon, [he refused](#). This signaled something new, and something radical: a white man who was willing to hang another white man for a crime perpetrated against Black people. The war and the Emancipation Proclamation were, of course, further demonstrations of Lincoln's hardening radical resolve.

To put the matter in more contemporary terms: Frederick Douglass understood that multi-racial America was not just going to come into existence naturally. It would need to be cultivated and created, through the social, cultural, educational, and political efforts of people with power. And it would require that Lincoln turn his back on what today is sometimes called "whiteness." For Douglass, Lincoln's actions during the course of the war demonstrated a growing commitment to these same truths.

Even so, to focus exclusively on Douglass' praise, with reference to a speech like this one, is to miss much that is essential in what he said that day. And in the final paragraph of the speech, Douglass' critical edge returns:

Fellow-citizens, I end, as I began, with congratulations. We have done a good work for our race today. In doing honor to the memory of our friend and liberator, we have been doing **highest honors to ourselves and those who come after us**; we have been fastening ourselves to a name and fame imperishable and immortal; **we have also been defending ourselves from a blighting scandal**. When now it shall be said that the **colored man is soulless, that he has no appreciation of benefits or benefactors; when the foul reproach of ingratitude is hurled at us, and it is attempted to scourge us beyond the range of human brotherhood**, we may calmly point to the monument we have this day erected to the memory of Abraham Lincoln.

It is revealing that Douglass felt compelled to conclude his speech about Abraham Lincoln in such a fighting, defensive posture. It is revealing that he anticipated “blighting scandal,” “the foul reproach of ingratitude,” and efforts to “scourge us beyond the range of human brotherhood.” He anticipates such gross attacks, and concludes his speech by effectively saying to his Black compatriots: Here, today, we have done our utmost to preempt and thwart all that, to pay our (supposed) dues.

Were he alive today, I do not imagine that this man would be surprised to see the most prominent and outspoken Black writers of our day misinterpreted and under siege for being insufficiently appreciative of America’s Founding Fathers.

## Faltering past, uncertain futures

In 2020, two scholars, [Scott A. Sandage](#) and [Jonathan W. White](#), [discovered a letter](#) to the editor of the *National Republican* from Frederick Douglass that was published just a few days after the dedication ceremony in D.C. The letter is brief but direct, and it sheds fresh light on the Emancipation monument:

Admirable as is the monument by Mr. Ball in Lincoln park, it does not, as it seems to me, tell the whole truth, and perhaps no one monument could be made to tell the whole truth of any subject which it might be designed to illustrate. The mere act of breaking the negro’s chains was the act of Abraham Lincoln, and it is beautifully expressed in this monument. But the act by which the negro was made a citizen of the United States and invested with the elective franchise was pre-eminently the act of President U.S. Grant, and this is nowhere seen in the Lincoln monument. The negro here, though rising, is still on his knees and nude. What I want to see before I die is a monument representing the negro, not couchant on his knees like a four-footed animal, but erect on his feet like a man. There is room in Lincoln park for another monument, and I throw out this suggestion to the end that it may be taken up and acted upon.

In plainer language than he used at the unveiling, Douglass explains why he does not care for the monument, and he recommends a possible remedy. The suggestion he makes is simple but elegant: bring in another monument, add another perspective, make another voice heard. Today we might put it like this: Just as no single monument could be made “to tell the whole truth of any subject which it might be designed to illustrate,” so too with any written record, or body of work, be it that of the Founders, or MLK Jr., or Nikole Hannah-Jones. Needless to say, Frederick Douglass isn’t advocating for a crude relativism or the equality of all perspectives: He isn’t recommending the addition of a Confederate monument in Lincoln Park, or the celebration of [Robert E. Lee](#). He is, at bottom, commenting on the relationship between multiplicity and truth, and advocating for a healthy pluralism against a background of racial singularity and oppression.

But no additional statue was raised in Lincoln Park in the course of Douglass' lifetime. In 1888, Douglass would refer to the Emancipation Proclamation as a "stupendous fraud." And by the time of his death in 1895, the [disenfranchisement of Southern Black men](#) (as well as of many poor whites) was [nearly complete](#).

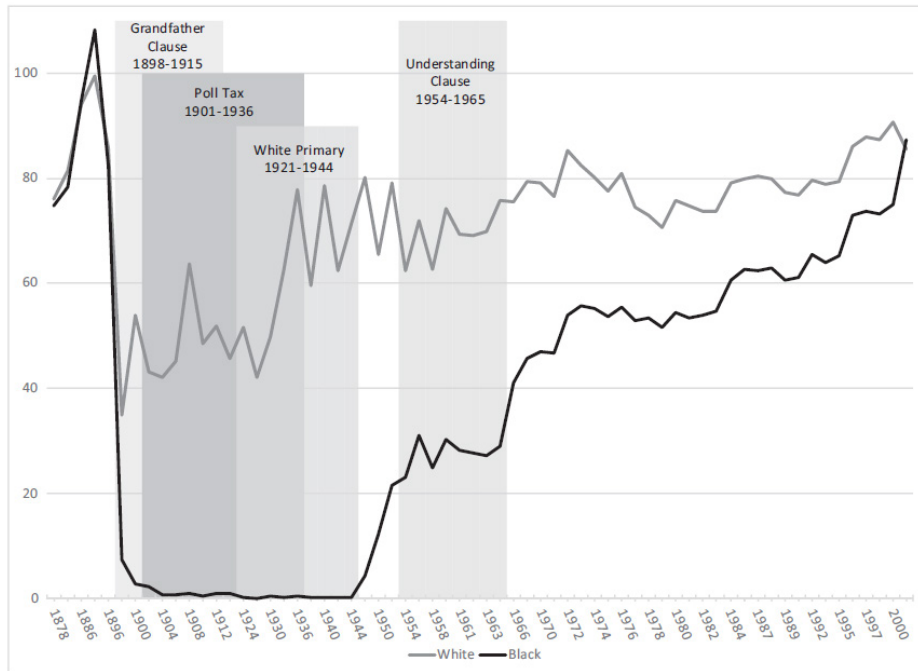


Figure from Keele, Cubbison, and White, "Suppressing Black Votes: A Historical Case Study of Voting Restrictions in Louisiana," *APSR*, March 2019.

And the end of Reconstruction didn't just mean disenfranchisement and the de facto collapse of Fifteenth Amendment protections in the South; it also meant loss of wealth (as Trymaine Lee puts it in [his essay](#) for the 1619 Project, "After a decade of black gains under Reconstruction, a much longer period of racial violence would wipe nearly all of it away"); it also meant Jim Crow and the Ku Klux Klan. It meant renewed terror [against Black people and those who sympathized with them](#). The [NAACP estimates](#) that some 4,743 lynchings took place in the United States between 1882 and 1968.

It would take roughly 100 years to raise another statue in Lincoln Park. That happened in 1974, and it depicts Mary McLeod Bethune, a Black educator and activist for women's rights and civil rights. The Bethune memorial was the [first statue](#) to honor an African American woman in a District of Columbia park. She stands next to two children, leaning on a cane given to her by President Roosevelt, in jaunty opposition to Lincoln on his pedestal and the newly emancipated Black man at his knees.

The Bethune statue is wonderful. But it, too, is just one step on a long and uncertain trajectory. Americans raised [hundreds of Confederate monuments](#) across the United States before they recognized Bethune.



The Mary McLeod Bethune statue in Lincoln Park. Credit: Public domain, [Wikimedia Commons](#).

MLK Jr. captured [the dynamic](#) clearly:

Ever since the birth of our nation, white America has had a schizophrenic personality on the question of race, she has been torn between selves. A self in which she proudly professes the great principle of democracy and a self in which she madly practices the antithesis of democracy. This tragic duality has produced a strange indecisiveness and ambivalence toward the Negro, causing America to take a step backwards simultaneously with every step forward on the question of racial justice; to be at once attracted to the Negro and repelled by him, to love and to hate him. There has never been a solid, unified and determined thrust to make justice a reality for Afro-Americans.

[Jamelle Bouie](#) and [Bryan Stevenson](#) also convey these push-and-pull dynamics vividly in their essays for the 1619 Project.

Today, we are living through a period in which illiberal laws are being passed across the country that appear designed to squelch Black voices, and that may well have that effect in practice. It is happening yet again at a moment when we are seeing vocal demands for something like a “solid, unified and determined thrust” for racial equality—for the birth of what Frederick Douglass, in the years following the war, [hopefully referred](#) to as the “[composite nation](#),” and which today we often call [multiracial democracy](#).

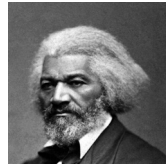
Contra [Christopher Rufo](#) and the anti-CRT crowd, the path toward real, multiracial democ-

racy in America has been unsteady and faltering, and it remains perilous. But one thing here is certain: Many of the values and ideals that are often called “woke” today have played a long-standing and significant role in American intellectual history, and in [progressive understandings of patriotism](#). No one has any business casting these ideas out of the mainstream.

Some of the main provocations of the 1619 Project were that it dared to elevate Black voices in the grand narrative of American history; that it argued that [Black people were chiefly responsible](#) for bringing American reality in line with American aspirations; that it did so while casting an eye of suspicion—including racial suspicion—on the motives and interests of those involved in this history, including the Founders and Abraham Lincoln; and that it refused to sweep the moral depravities of American history under the twin rugs of high statesmanship and historical necessity. Critics of 1619 should reflect on the fact that when they reject these challenges, they are rejecting ideas that reach back at least to 1876, and to Frederick Douglass—a man who did as much as any other for freedom and equality in this country.

In the end, though, neither Lincoln nor Douglass would have wanted us to settle for the kind of hagiography that reading about their speeches and deeds sometimes inspires. They would have hoped in addition for something more—something more questioning, more free, and more republican in spirit; the kind of inquiry that actually grapples with hard historical truths, that contends honestly with the kind of choices that political life entails, and helps us set higher aims for tomorrow. Considered in isolation, the 1619 Project, and “wokeness,” and CRT can’t do any of this with finality since, like all human perspectives, they are partial. The most extreme critics of the 1619 Project often point to this partiality without seeing the ways in which their own accounts, in addition to being lopsided, are unoriginal, deploy extreme rhetoric, and often paper over the country’s long history of anti-Black oppression and exclusion.

Rather than fixate on partiality, we would do well to consider these works “by a broad survey, in the light of the stern logic of great events”—that is to say, historically, and with careful attention to the ends pursued. We each have a role to play in determining whether America’s next steps will be faltering, or tragic, or true.



**When now it shall be said that the colored man is soulless, that he has no appreciation of benefits or benefactors; when the foul reproach of ingratitude is hurled at us, and it is attempted to scourge us beyond the range of human brotherhood, we may calmly point to the monument we have this day erected to the memory of Abraham Lincoln.**

## About the Author

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Lincoln Memorial. Credit: Alejandro Barba/Unsplash