

George Will - Frederick Douglass, a champion of American individualism

George Will

February 7, 2018

It was an assertion of hard-won personal sovereignty: Frederick Douglass, born on a Maryland plantation 200 years ago this month, never knew on what February day because history-deprivation was inflicted to confirm slaves as non-persons. So, later in life, Douglass picked the 14th, the middle of the month, as his birthday. This February, remember him, the first African-American to attain historic stature.

In an inspired choice to write a short biography of this fierce defender of individualism, Washington's libertarian Cato Institute commissioned the Goldwater Institute's Timothy Sandefur, who says that Douglass was, in a sense, born when he was 16. After six months of being whipped once a week with sticks and rawhide thongs — arbitrary punishment was used to stunt a slave's dangerous sense of personhood — Douglass fought his tormentor. Sent to Baltimore, where he was put to work building ships — some of them slave transports — he soon fled north to freedom, and to fame as an anti-slavery orator and author. His 1845 "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass" is, as Sandefur says, a classic of American autobiography.

Abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison said there should be "no union with slaveholders," preferring disunion to association with slave states. They said what the Supreme Court would say in its execrable 1857 Dred Scott decision — that the Constitution was a pro-slavery document. Douglass, however, knew that Abraham Lincoln knew better.

"Here comes my friend Douglass," exclaimed Lincoln at the March 4, 1865, reception following his second inauguration. After the assassination 42 days later, Lincoln's widow gave Douglass her husband's walking stick. After Appomattox, Douglass, who had attended the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention on behalf of women's suffrage, said: "Slavery is not abolished until the black man has the ballot." If so, slavery ended not with the 13th Amendment of 1865 but with the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Douglass opposed radical Republicans' proposals to confiscate plantations and distribute the land to former slaves. Sandefur surmises that "Douglass was too well versed in the history and theory of freedom not to know" the importance of property rights. Douglass, says Sandefur, was not a conservative but a legate of "the classical liberalism of the American founding." His individualism was based on the virtue of self-reliance. "He was not," Sandefur says, "likely to be attracted to any doctrine that subordinated individual rights — whether free speech or property rights — to the interests of the collective."

Although Douglass entered the post-Civil War era asking only that blacks at last be left to fend for themselves, he knew that “it is not fair play to start the Negro out in life, from nothing and with nothing.” A 20th-century Southerner agreed. In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson said: “You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him to the starting line of a race and then say, ‘you are free to compete with all the others,’ and still justly believe that you have been completely fair.” As Martin Luther King knew: In 1965, he met Alabama sharecroppers who, having been paid all their lives in plantation scrip, had never seen U.S. currency. Peonage had followed slavery in sharecropper society.

By the time of Douglass’ 1895 death, the nation was saturated with sinister sentimentality about the nobility of the South’s Lost Cause: The war had really been about constitutional niceties — “states’ rights” — not slavery.

This, Sandefur says, was ludicrous: Before the war, Southerners “had sought more federal power, not less, in the form of nationwide enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act and federal subsidies for slavery’s expansion.”

Nevertheless, in the South, monuments to Confederate soldiers were erected and Confederate symbols were added to states’ flags. In the North, the University of Chicago’s Charles Edward Merriam, a leading progressive, wrote in a widely used textbook that “from the standpoint of modern political science, the slaveholders were right” about some people not being entitled to freedom. As an academic, Woodrow Wilson paid “loving tribute to the virtues of the leaders of the secession, to the purity of their purposes.” As president, he relished making “The Birth of a Nation,” a celebration of the Ku Klux Klan, the first movie shown in the White House.

Douglass died 30 years before 25,000 hooded Klansmen marched down Pennsylvania Avenue. That same year, Thurgood Marshall graduated from Baltimore’s Frederick Douglass High School, en route to winning *Brown v. Board of Education*. Douglass, not Wilson, won the American future.