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How the Right Co-Opts Frederick Douglass

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Two hundred years ago, one of the most important Americans was born close to the Tuckahoe River on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Frederick Bailey didn't know the exact date of his birth, so he chose Feb. 14. Twenty years later, when he escaped from slavery, he became Frederick Douglass. By the time of his death in 1895, he had become one of the greatest orators and writers of the century.

But in the same way that Abraham Lincoln has become "everybody's grandfather," in the words of the historian David Donald, the one American figure who could be adopted by every part of the political spectrum, Douglass is also appropriated broadly, especially by the American right.

In his life of literary and political activism, Douglass was many things, and it is this set of apparent complexities and paradoxes that makes his story so attractive to biographers, as well as to so many constituencies.

His father was white, perhaps one of his owners, and his mother was Harriet Bailey, a black slave whom he barely knew. Douglass was both a radical thinker and a proponent of classic 19th-century political liberalism. At different times he hated and loved his country; he was a ferocious critic of the United States and its hypocrisies over race and slavery but also, after emancipation, became a government official, a diplomat and a voice of imperial expansion.

He strongly believed in self-reliance but demanded an interventionist government to free slaves, defeat the Confederacy and protect black citizens from terror and discrimination. He was a radical newspaper editor and writer, and also a pragmatist, a perspective he learned in the political crises over slavery in the 1850s.

Douglass was Jim Crowed on railroads, on steamboats and in hotels more times than he could count, but loved the Declaration of Independence, the natural-rights tradition and especially the reinvented Constitution — the one rewritten in Washington during Reconstruction, not the one created in Philadelphia in 1789.

He loved the Bill of Rights and never shied away from condemning those who wantonly violated it in the service of white supremacy. He fought against mob violence but believed in revolutionary violence for self-defense and the destruction of slavery. He truly believed women were equal and ought to have all fundamental rights, but sometimes he acted more like a patriarch in his marriage.

He forged a livelihood with his voice and pen, but fundamentally was not a self-made man as he painted himself in a famous speech, an image through which modern conservatives and libertarians have adopted him as a proponent of their brand of individualism.

On the surface Douglass does appear to be self-made — he was the escaped slave who willed his own freedom, stole the master's language and wrote masterpieces of antislavery literature. But without many people, especially women (his grandmother, two wives, a daughter and countless abolitionist women who supported his career) as well as male mentors, both white and black, he would not have survived and become Douglass. In private, he easily admitted his reliance on friends and associates, and he believed in a theory of history rooted in the Old Testament, in the Exodus story, in collective liberation by God and by events.

In "Self-Made Man*,"* a new book published by the Cato Institute, the lawyer Timothy Sandefur argues that Douglass's essential legacy lies in his advocacy of liberty, individualism and private property and free enterprise. The radical abolitionist who risked all to use words and politics to free an entire people from slavery was, to Mr. Sandefur, only "a radical for individualism" and never concerned with "the interests of the collective."

To believe that, one has to ignore most of Douglass's career, especially his life as an abolitionist, his ferocious attacks on the poison of racism and his brilliant analysis of how lynching emerged from the evils of white supremacy. Douglass believed that freedom was safe only within the state and under law.

Douglass did preach self-reliance for his fellow blacks: He argued that the freed slaves should be given their rights, protected and then "let alone." But he never employed that "let alone" dictum without also demanding "fair play," and security against terror and discrimination. Conservatives have cherry-picked his words to advance their narrow visions of libertarianism.

Douglass, the greatest American abolitionist, also happened to be a Republican in a century when that party stood for using government to free people. The right's effort to get right with Douglass is born of sincere beliefs but also shows a movement's need for a famous black voice. Were he alive, Douglass would most likely laugh, and warmly welcome the debate.

At the unveiling ceremony for the statue of Douglass in the United States Capitol in 2013, congressional Republicans proudly wore large buttons that read, "Frederick Douglass Was a Republican." Douglass's descendants who were there, as well as scholars like me with, shall we say, different training, smiled and endured.

Whose Douglass? Which Douglass? Dead, allegedly alive or in his literary work? These are modern questions rife with meaning. But we cannot contain Douglass within such circumscribed limits.

At the height of the national debate over slavery in 1857 he wrote: "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them," and added, "The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress." Douglass's understanding of power could never confine him to advocacy of individualism alone.