Douglass, Lincoln had historic relationship

By Lewis E. Lehrman
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Frederick Douglass, the great black abolitionist, did not like to be told no. On March 4, 1865, he lined up at the White House to greet President Abraham Lincoln after his second inauguration. No African-American would go with him.

"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," Douglass recalled.

So, Douglass went alone. "As I approached the door, I was seized by two policemen and forbidden to enter," he remembered. "I said to them that they were mistaken entirely in what they were doing, that if Mr. Lincoln knew that I was at the door, he would order my admission, and I bolted in by them. On the inside, I was taken charge of by two other policemen, to be conducted as I supposed to the president, but instead of that they were conducting me out the window on a plank."

On the White House grounds, Douglass encountered a white member of Congress. Douglass explained that he could not enter the ongoing reception: "Strict orders have been issued not to admit people of color." The congressman went inside and soon returned with President Lincoln's personal orders to bring Douglass inside.

Entering the East Room, Douglass observed: "Like a mountain pine high above all others, Mr. Lincoln stood, in his grand simplicity and homelike beauty."

"Here comes my friend Douglass," President Lincoln said as Douglass approached. The president "reached out his hand, gave me a cordial shake, and said: 'Douglass, I saw you in the crowd today listening to my inaugural address. There is no man's opinion that I value more than yours; what do you think of it?' I said: 'Mr. Lincoln, I cannot stop here to talk with you, as there are thousands waiting to shake you by the hand'; but he said again: 'What did you think of it?' I said: 'Mr. Lincoln, it was a sacred effort,' and then I walked off. 'I am glad you liked it,' he said."

Elizabeth Keckley, the black seamstress who was a confidante of Mrs. Lincoln, recalled: "Mr. Douglass was very proud of the manner in which Mr. Lincoln received him. On leaving the White House, he came to a friend's house where a reception was being held, and he related the incident with great pleasure to myself and others."

On two previous occasions during the Civil War, Douglass had met with President Lincoln at the White House for extended discussions on the emancipation of slaves and the recruiting of black soldiers. During one session, Lincoln kept the governor of Connecticut waiting while he talked to Douglass, who criticized the speed of Lincoln's emancipation policies, even as he rejoiced in their impact.

Throughout his life, Douglass, a former slave, never ceased to fight for the rights of African Americans. Historian James Oakes noted: "From a very young age, Frederick Douglass had dared imagine that one day he would be free, just as he dared imagine that he would one day be a senator." At 16, he had a vicious fight with his white overseer on the eastern shore of Maryland. The confrontation was meant to break Douglass, but instead it freed him. Douglass would spend the rest of his life defining the American dream to include all Americans, regardless of color or gender.

Like Lincoln, Douglass believed that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were anti-slavery documents. In his "Fifth of July Speech" in 1852, Douglass proclaimed: "Fellow citizens! There is no matter in respect to which the people of the North have allowed themselves to be so ruinously imposed upon as that of the pro-slavery character of the Constitution. In that instrument I hold there is no warrant, license nor sanction of the hateful thing; but, interpreted as it ought to be interpreted, the Constitution is a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT." On Jan. 31, 1865, under pressure from President Lincoln, Congress passed the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery. Douglass exulted.

Over time, Douglass had learned that a compassionate Abraham Lincoln was an important ally in his fight for human rights in the midst of a society that was defined by profound racism in the South and North. Douglass recalled: "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."

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