

# “How Would Frederick Douglass Regard Today’s Left?”

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**By Dennis Prager**

LOS ANGELES, Calif.—Frederick Douglass was one of the greatest Americans who ever lived. This man began life as an illiterate slave—nearly all slave owners prevented slaves from learning to read—and rose from slavery to become, along with Abraham Lincoln, the greatest orator of his time, and one of the wisest and most eloquent writers in American history.

He became the great black leader of his day, honored by multiple American presidents who frequently sought his counsel. If you read his autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, you will experience English-language writing that has few peers in any nonfiction writing in American history.

Every American child and adult should read this book for many reasons.

- First, it should be read to appreciate the inhumanity of slavery. The physical abuse and perhaps, worst of all, the human degradation inherent to slavery are depicted in understated yet riveting language.
- Second, it should be read as a document of history.
- Third, it should be read for its wisdom about the human condition.

Frederick Douglass may be one of the few figures in American history revered by Left and Right, and by nearly all blacks and all whites.

In light of that, it is worth pondering the question: Are Frederick Douglass’s views more consonant with today’s Left or today’s conservatives?

It is fair to say that nearly every leftist believes that Frederick Douglass is one of them. But, if you read his *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, you will discover a man who, with regard to race, the Constitution, Abraham Lincoln and related matters, has virtually nothing in common with today’s Left. In fact, leftists would identify every one of the following quotes from Douglass’s autobiography as “white supremacist” and/or “racist.”

Frederick Douglass: "When an unknown man is spoken of in their presence, the first question that arises in the average American mind concerning him and which must be answered is, Of what color is he? and he rises or falls in estimation by the answer given. It is not whether he is a good man or a bad man. That does not seem of primary importance."

This Douglass quote runs completely counter to the virtually universal left-wing (not liberal, left-wing) claim that race is important and that to ignore it—to attempt to be color-blind—is racist.

*The Atlantic*, Sept. 13, 2013: From an article titled, "Color Blindness Is Counterproductive": "How many times have you heard someone say that they 'don't see color,' 'are color-blind,' or 'don't have a racist bone in their body'? Maybe you've even said this yourself. Many sociologists, though, are extremely critical of color blindness as an ideology."

"The language of explicit racism has given way to a discourse of color blindness."

"It is no longer socially acceptable in many quarters to identify oneself as racist. Instead, many Americans purport not to see color."

*TED Talk* by Heather McGhee, chair of the board of Color of Change, "the country's largest online racial justice organization": "Why saying 'I don't see race at all' just makes racism worse."

American Psychological Association: "Has The United States Really Moved Beyond Race?"

"In this collection, scholars in psychology, education, sociology, and related fields provide a probing analysis deconstructing racial color blindness; all of the contributors point out the problems with . . . racial color blindness, point out major flaws in the myth of racial color blindness, and reveal its harmful impact on the lives of people of color."

Southern Poverty Law Center: "Colorblindness: The New Racism?"

*Forbes*, Sept. 28, 2022: "Color-Blindness Perpetuates Structural Racism" by Maia Niguel Hoskin. Frederick Douglass: "Races, like individuals, must stand or fall by their own merits."

Advocating that individuals rise or fall "by their merits" is derided on the Left as racist.

Wikipedia: "'Myth of meritocracy' is a phrase arguing that meritocracy, or achieving upward social mobility through one's own merits regardless of one's social position, is not widely attainable in capitalist societies because of inherent contradictions."

Toronto Metropolitan University: "Meritocracy is one of the beliefs that sustains systems of inequity and supremacy."

Douglass: "The downfall of slavery under British power meant the downfall of slavery, ultimately, under American power, and the downfall of negro slavery everywhere."

According to the Left, anyone who credits whites with ending worldwide slavery is a white supremacist. And anyone who credits British colonialism with almost any moral achievement is a defender and supporter of imperialism and colonialism.

Douglass: "Had he (Abraham Lincoln) put the abolition of slavery before the salvation of the Union, he would have inevitably . . . rendered resistance to [Southern] rebellion impossible."

Here is *New York Times* columnist Charles M. Blow citing Douglass on Lincoln: "In 1861, after Abraham Lincoln defended the Fugitive Slave Act as an attempt to assuage Southern slavers, Douglass called him an 'excellent slave hound' and the 'most dangerous advocate of slave-hunting and slave-catching in the land.'"

Both citations are accurate. But the one I cite is from much later in Douglass's life when he could better judge Lincoln.

Douglass: "The Constitution of the United States not only contained no guarantees in favor of slavery, but, on the contrary, was in its letter and spirit an anti-slavery instrument, demanding the abolition of slavery as a condition of its own existence as the supreme law of the land."

The Left generally holds the Constitution in contempt—at the very least, as a slavery-defending document.

Suggestion: Copy these Frederick Douglass statements into a document and ask any leftist in your life what he or she thinks of them.