



**National  
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**Spielberg's "Lincoln" Begs the Question: Where is Fred?**

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*"If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning." Frederick Douglass*

No doubt many of you will take the opportunity during the holiday break to see the movie "Lincoln," Steven Spielberg's much acclaimed dramatization of Abraham Lincoln's determined and ultimately successful 1865 fight for the passage of the 13th Amendment which abolished slavery. I came away from the movie impressed with its gripping depiction of the legislative maneuvering and horse-trading that Lincoln employed to win passage of the Amendment. But, I am concerned that the movie leaves the false impression that the fight to end slavery was waged solely by white men in Washington and white (as well as a few black) soldiers on the battlefield. What about the brave abolitionists of that time? Where are Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and William Lloyd Garrison? And most puzzling of all, where is the great African American anti-slavery champion, Frederick Douglass?

In a recent New York Times letter, Pulitzer Prize winning historian, Eric Foner, noted this omission in the film by making the point that "Emancipation – like all far-reaching political change – resulted from events at all levels of society, including the efforts...of slaves themselves to acquire freedom." But aside from the presence of some black Civil War soldiers, the few African Americans in Spielberg's film were cast as admiring and grateful maids and butlers. In criticising the fact that the movie overlooked the important role that free and enslaved blacks played in the abolitionist movement, Civil War historian, Kate Masur wrote, "Mr. Spielberg's 'Lincoln' gives us only faithful servants, patiently waiting for the day of Jubilee." That is not only factually incorrect, it does a disservice to the historic efforts of numerous black and white abolitionists of that time, none more courageous and effective than Frederick Douglas.

Born in Talbot County, Maryland in 1818, Frederick Douglass spent the first 21 years of his life as a slave, working variously as a household servant and unskilled laborer. In 1838, he escaped bondage and quickly became one of the most eloquent and forceful abolitionist voices of his day. Self-taught, in 1845 he published his autobiography, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave," and in 1847 he launched his anti-slavery newspaper, "The North Star," in Rochester, New York. At great risk to himself, Douglass recruited black soldiers for the Union Army during the Civil War, influenced Lincoln's thinking, and even challenged the President's slow, legalistic walk towards emancipation. Douglass saw the end of slavery as only the beginning of the fight for full economic and political equality, beginning with extending the right to vote to freed slaves. He argued, "What I ask for the Negro is not benevolence, not pity, not sympathy, but simply justice." Frederick Douglass' efforts subsequently led to the passage of the 15th Amendment in 1869, guaranteeing African Americans the right to vote.

Stephen Spielberg's "Lincoln" affirms the fact that President Abraham Lincoln played a pivotal role in ending slavery in America, but it egregiously omits the fact that Frederick Douglass and a courageous group of grassroots abolitionists led Lincoln and the nation to this victory.

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