

FORTY-FIFTH
DOCTORAL COMMENCEMENT
ADDRESS

JAMES OAKES

DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR OF HISTORY
AND HOLDER OF THE HUMANITIES CHAIR,
THE GRADUATE CENTER

THE GRADUATE CENTER
THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

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AVERY FISHER HALL AT LINCOLN CENTER
10 LINCOLN CENTER PLAZA
(COLUMBUS AVENUE AT 65TH STREET)
NEW YORK, NEW YORK

THE GRADUATE CENTER COMMENCEMENT

May 28, 2009

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Honorary Degree Recipients

Roger Hertog, Doctor of Humane letters
American businessman, philanthropist, and civic leader

Lena Horne, Doctor of Humane Letters
American singer, actress, and civil rights activist

President's Distinguished Alumni Medal

Daniel N. Robinson
Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Georgetown University

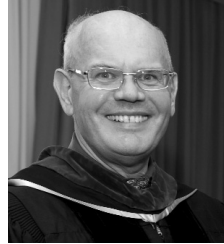
Number of Degrees Awarded

410 Doctoral Degrees

39 Master's Degrees

James Oakes, Distinguished Professor of History and holder of the Humanities Chair, The Graduate Center, CUNY

James Oakes, distinguished professor of history at the Graduate Center and holder of the Humanities Chair, is one of the leading historians of nineteenth-century America and has written several books on the subject as well as scholarly articles, encyclopedia entries, and book chapters. His early work focused on the South, examining slavery as an economic and social system that shaped Southern life. His more recent work examines antislavery thinking in the North and the political processes that led to emancipation. His books include *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders*; *Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South*; and *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics*. In 2008, the latter received the Lincoln Prize, one of the most generous and prestigious awards in the field of American history. The Lincoln Prize jury commended Professor Oakes for using “with great effectiveness a new comparative framework to analyze the careers of the wartime President and the nation’s most important black leader.” The jury particularly cited the author’s “powerful” narrative, designed for historians as well as general readers,” which “flows seamlessly...sometimes with dramatic effect.” Professor Oakes earned his Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley.



I assume that President Kelly's invitation to speak to you this morning is the latest piece of fallout from a book I recently published about Abraham Lincoln. I did not realize while writing it that the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth was approaching, nor could I have known that we were about to elect a president who openly embraces Lincoln as his ideal. This conjunction of events has kept me busy lately. Like many of my fellow historians, I've been besieged with unusual invitations—to speak at the annual black-tie dinner of the Abraham Lincoln Club of Wilmington, Delaware, for example, or to do an interview, on Lincoln's 200th birthday, with the national radio of the Czech Republic. I have been asked questions I never imagined I'd ever have to answer: Was Abraham Lincoln Jewish? Was he gay? Were any of his ancestors African? It's easy enough to wave such questions away by just saying no: Lincoln was not Jewish. Neither was he gay. Nor did he have any black ancestors that anyone knows about. But lurking behind this popular interest in Lincoln's identity is a powerful urge on the part of various groups to claim some connection with him, and that urge is something I cannot fully explain, or explain away.

Nor can I wave off so easily some of the other questions put to me in the past year. A few months back, just prior to Barack Obama's inauguration, I was invited to do an interview on Bloomberg television. I hesitated. Bloomberg is a financial news network. What do they want with a historian of nineteenth-century America? I should have said no.

My concerns heightened when I was introduced to viewers as a presidential historian. Uh-oh, I thought. I write about slavery and antislavery and the coming of the Civil War, so it's not hard for me to talk about Lincoln. But I'm not a presidential historian. What if she starts asking me about Franklin Roosevelt or Lyndon Johnson, or worse, Millard Fillmore or William Henry Harrison? As the beads of sweat began forming on my temples, she threw me her first curve ball: "What," she asked, "will Barack Obama's economic policy be?"

There was no way for me to hide the blank stare spreading over my face. Why couldn't this be a radio interview, I thought to myself. In befuddled

ignorance I managed to mutter something to the effect that Obama's policy would likely be different from that of the previous administration. "How so?" she asked.

After a few more minutes of fumbling, the interview got around to a very different kind of question: "Will Obama be a great president?"

I couldn't answer that one either—nobody can. But at least I could trace the logic behind it. You are an expert on Abraham Lincoln, the interviewer was assuming. Abraham Lincoln was a great president. Therefore you know what it takes for someone to become a great president. Does Barack Obama have what it takes?

I left the interview frustrated, not because I couldn't speculate intelligently about Obama's economic policy, nor because I couldn't predict the fate of his presidency. Rather, I was frustrated because I realized that at that point—at this late date in my career—I still couldn't answer the one question everybody assumes I should be able to answer: What made Abraham Lincoln a great president?

It's a hard question for me because I've never subscribed to what's known as "the Great Man theory of history," a point of view most closely associated with the Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle. He believed that the history of human civilization could be told as a series of biographies of Great Men—those rare individuals who rise above the chaos of events, take history by the horns, and shape it to their wills. I don't think history works that way. On the other hand, I would not go as far as Leo Tolstoy, who believed that history has neither rhyme nor reason, that it is little more than the chaotic flow of unpredictable events. If there are patterns in history, Tolstoy argued, they are the work not of Great Men but of an inscrutable divine providence—this puts history beyond human control and even beyond human understanding. But that can't be right either. I think there are patterns in history, but they are the work less of great men than of ordinary men and women who together create great forces and great movements—human forces and social movements that press against and shape the actions of those who exercise power.

I am close to Tolstoy in one respect. He believed that Abraham Lincoln was the greatest man in all human history, and I am inclined to believe—more modestly—that Lincoln was our greatest president. And so, in a sense, Tolstoy's problem is mine as well: I don't believe in Great Man history, yet I

do think that Abraham Lincoln was a Great Man.

How so?

Having failed on Bloomberg television, I went home and thought about the nagging question. What made Lincoln Great? Now, if CNN ever decides to ask me the question, this is what I would say.

There are three things, different but closely related, that made Lincoln great.

The first was his capacity for growth. This was a man who, as a young politician, was little more than a party hack—who in the 1830s used racial demagoguery to attack his political opponents and who, as a lawyer in the 1840s, took cases defending a master's right to reclaim fugitive slaves.

Ten years later Lincoln was refusing to take those cases. In 1854 he began denouncing slavery, publicly and eloquently, and by 1858 he was publicly denouncing racism as well. He continued to grow during his presidency. Only weeks after the war began, Lincoln took the first of several steps that would end in the abolition of slavery, and once he made emancipation the policy of his administration, Lincoln took the next step—toward supporting citizenship and voting rights for blacks. The demagogic hack of the 1830s and 40s had become a determined emancipationist by the 1860s.

Lincoln had not been the first politician to raise his voice against slavery. He was not the first elected official to endorse emancipation during the Civil War. Nor was he the first to support civil rights for the former slaves. He preferred to move with public opinion at his back, and he certainly wanted to make it appear as though he were responding to pressure rather than taking the lead. "I claim not to have controlled events," he once said, "but confess plainly that events have controlled me." There was a vein of fatalism running so deep in Lincoln that some historians see him as essentially passive, "forced into glory," as one critic put it. But then most of history's "Great Men" are, in some sense, forced into glory. What distinguishes the Giants from the Lilliputians is their very different responses to the crises they confront. Not everybody can be forced into glory.

A different person might have been forced into disrepute by the very real pressures urging Lincoln to compromise with the slaveholders, to reject emancipation, and to repudiate civil rights for blacks. There were pressures

from every direction. As Frederick Douglass recalled, Lincoln was “assailed by abolitionists; he was assailed by slaveholders; he was assailed by men who were for peace at any price; he was assailed by those who were for a more vigorous prosecution of the war; he was assailed for not making the war an abolition war; and he was most bitterly attacked for making the war an abolition war.”

The political skill with which Lincoln negotiated these contradictory pressures is, I believe, the second element of his greatness. He refused to compromise with secession, yet he kept the four border slave states from leaving the Union. He kept the War Democrats loyal, yet he moved steadily toward an emancipation policy that most Democrats despised. He maintained relationships—even cultivated friendships—with radicals and abolitionists who often distrusted him.

So Lincoln’s capacity for growth—his embrace of emancipation and his moves toward racial equality—cannot alone account for his greatness. He had to bring a good many skeptical Americans along with him. And that required unsurpassed political skill.

It also required his legendary way with words, his ability to persuade those skeptics—and so I would rank Lincoln’s literary gifts third in my list of elements that made him great. His speeches are so impressive and well known that we give them names: the Peoria speech, Cooper Union, the Gettysburg address, the Second Inaugural. But how many of you know about the public letters he began issuing halfway through his presidency as part of a concerted campaign to persuade Northerners to support the war, emancipation, and black troops? They, too, have names familiar to most historians: the Greeley letter, the Corning letter, and the most impressive of them, the Conkling letter—Lincoln’s brilliant public reply to critics back in his home state of Illinois who objected to a war for emancipation, especially one in which blacks were allowed to fight along with whites in the Union Army.

“You say you will not fight to free negroes,” Lincoln wrote. “Some of them seem willing to fight for you; but, no matter. Fight you, then, exclusively to save the Union.” But bear in mind, Lincoln warned, that when this war is over and slavery has been abolished, “there will be some black men who can remember that, with silent tongue, and clenched teeth, and

steady eye, and well-poised bayonet, they have helped mankind on to this great consummation; while, I fear, there will be some white ones, unable to forget that, with malignant heart, and deceitful speech, they have strove to hinder it.”

I don't want to say that Lincoln was a great president because he wrote beautiful sentences. My point is rather that Lincoln's literary skill was an element of his greatness, precisely because he put it to use. Language was one of his weapons—his “sword,” Douglas Wilson calls it. It matters that at critical moments Lincoln wielded that weapon to persuade Northerners that a war for Union had to be a war for universal freedom and equality as well.

Lincoln was not great the way Thomas Carlyle thought men could be great: He did not bstride American history and bend it to his indomitable will. He did not free the slaves with the stroke of his pen. He did not give our otherwise amoral democracy a moral soul. To accomplish what he did, Lincoln needed—among other things—the pressure of the abolitionists, the commitment of the Republican Party, the determination of runaway slaves, and the victory of the Union Army. They were the wind at Lincoln's back, the forces that controlled him, the human forces and social movements he confronted, and to which he chose to respond.

No doubt there are lessons here—and as this is a commencement address, I'm tempted to send all of you newly minted Ph.D.s out with some uplifting words of wisdom from Professor Dumbledore, who once explained to Harry Potter that—not unlike Abraham Lincoln—it was not the talents he possessed that defined him, but the choices he made.

But that's not what I want to say. I often tell my students that in your last paragraph you're allowed to say whatever you want. Here's what I want to say.

Even when we manage to elect the most impressive politician to the highest public office—no matter how fine his convictions, how sharp his political instincts, no matter how intelligent and articulate—there still has to be pressure. Swooning is not enough. Politicians need—and the best of them cultivate—the pressure of public opinion if they are to do the right thing. They want to be forced into glory. The great ones can be.

The Graduate Center is the doctorate-granting institution of the City University of New York (CUNY). An internationally recognized center for advanced studies and a national model for public doctoral education, the Graduate Center offers more than thirty doctoral programs as well as a number of master's programs. Many of its faculty members are among the world's leading scholars in their respective fields. A recent Academic Analytics Faculty Scholarly Productivity Index placed ten of the Graduate Center's Ph.D. programs among the top ten in the country, and six were ranked in the top five. The school currently enrolls over 4000 students from throughout the United States, as well as from about eighty foreign countries, and its alumni hold major positions in industry and government, as well as in academia. The Graduate Center is also home to thirty interdisciplinary research centers and institutes focused on areas of compelling social, civic, cultural, and scientific concerns. Located in a landmark Fifth Avenue building, the Graduate Center has become a vital part of New York City's intellectual and cultural life with its extensive array of public lectures, exhibitions, concerts, and theatrical events. Further information on the Graduate Center and its programs can be found at www.gc.cuny.edu.

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