

Frederick Douglass and the Reconstruction of Meaning

“While I am not indifferent to the claims of generous forgetfulness, but whatever else I may forget, I shall never forget the difference between those who fought for liberty and those who fought for slavery; between those who fought to save the Republic and those who fought to destroy it.”

--Frederick Douglass, 1894



b. 1818

1855

1864

1879

d. 1895

Two Views, One Person

“Abraham Lincoln, while unsurpassed in his devotion to the white race, was also in a sense hitherto without example, emphatically the black man's President: the first to show any respect for their rights as men.” (Frederick Douglass, 1865)

“Abraham Lincoln was not, in the fullest sense of the word, either our man or our model. In his interests, in his associations, in his habits of thought, and in his prejudices, he was a white man. He was preeminently the white man's President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men.” (Frederick Douglass, 1876)

Reconstruction Timeline

1866

Edward A. Pollard publishes *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History*

“The South held political power at Washington for a long time; but that power threatened nothing in the North, sought nothing from it, desired to disturb nothing in it. It had no aggressive intent: it stood constantly on the defensive. It had no sectional history: it was associated with a general prosperity of the country.” (p. 81)

1883

Civil Rights Cases, 109 U.S. 3 (1883)

“When a man has emerged from slavery, and, by the aid of beneficent legislation, has shaken off the inseparable concomitants of that state, there must be some stage in the progress of his elevation when he takes the rank of a mere citizen and ceases to be the special favorite of the laws, and when his rights as a citizen or a man are to be protected in the ordinary modes by which other men's rights are protected.” (Majority opinion by Justice Joseph Bradley)

1896

Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)

“The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth, and in power.... But in the view of the Constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our Constitution is color-blind and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law.” (Dissent by Justice John Marshall Harlan)