

Republican school bill mocked for claim Frederick Douglass debated Lincoln

Virginia bill banning teaching of 'divisive concepts' confused black civil rights campaigner with white senator Stephen Douglas



Abraham Lincoln during one of his debates with Stephen Douglas, not Frederick Douglass.

Martin Pengelly in New York
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A Republican bill to ban the teaching of “divisive concepts” in schools in Virginia ran into ridicule when among historical events deemed suitable for study, it described a nonexistent debate between Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass.

Lincoln did engage in a series of historic debates hinged on the issue of slavery, in the Illinois Senate campaign of 1858. But he did so against Stephen Douglas, a senator who had ties to slavery – not against Frederick Douglass, the great campaigner for the abolition of slavery who was once enslaved himself.

The Virginia bill was sponsored by Wren Williams, a freshman Republican sent to the state capital, Richmond, in a tumultuous November election.

Identifying “divisive concepts” including racism and sexism, the bill demanded the teaching of “the fundamental moral, political and intellectual foundations of the American experiment in self-government”.

In part, this was to be achieved with a focus on “founding documents” including “the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, the Federalist Papers, including Essays 10 and 51, excerpts from Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, the first debate between Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, and the writings of the Founding Fathers of the United States”.

The teaching of history has become a divisive concept across the US, as rightwing activists have spread alarm about the teaching of race issues. In November, the winning candidate for governor in Virginia, the Republican Glenn Youngkin, made it a wedge issue in his win over the Democrat, Terry McAuliffe.

Youngkin successfully seized upon critical race theory, an academic discipline that examines the ways in which racism operates in US laws and society – but which is not taught in Virginia schools.

The elementary error in Williams’s bill attracted national attention, including from the *Washington Post*. However, reports that the bill had been withdrawn were in error, a spokesperson for the politician said on Friday.

The spokesperson also provided to the *Guardian* a statement from the Virginia division of legislative services, which said the error “was inserted at the drafting level, following receipt of a historically accurate request from the office of Delegate Wren Williams”.

Williams told *Townhall.com* he was “frustrated” but realized “mistakes happen”.

Nonetheless, many were happy to point out the error.

“New rule,” wrote Steve Vladeck, a University of Texas law professor. “If you don’t know the difference between Frederick Douglass and Stephen Douglas, you don’t get to tell anyone else what to teach.”

Many were also happy to point out that Douglass has caused embarrassment for Republicans before. In 2017, Donald Trump at least gave the impression he thought the great campaigner was alive.

“Frederick Douglass is an example of somebody who’s done an amazing job and is getting recognised more and more, I notice,” the former president said.

Sidney Blumenthal, a *Guardian* contributor and Lincoln biographer, said: “Lincoln did not debate Frederick Douglass. Historians may search for the video, but they will not find it.”

Blumenthal also pointed out that Lincoln and Douglass did meet three times when Lincoln was president, from 1861 to 1865 and through a civil war that ended with slavery abolished.

Their conversations included a discussion about inequality in pay between Black and white soldiers, upon which Lincoln ultimately acted, and Confederate abuse of Black

prisoners. There was also a famous meeting after Lincoln's second inauguration, in 1865, when Lincoln greeted Douglass at the White House as a friend.

Blumenthal also offered a way in which students in Virginia and elsewhere might use Douglass's life and work to examine divisions today.

Speaking a day after two centrist Democratic senators sank Joe Biden's push for voting rights reform, Blumenthal said: "Frederick Douglass's great cause became that of voting rights.

"If there is any debate that is going on now, it is not between Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. It is between Frederick Douglass and all the Republican senators who refuse to support voting rights – and Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema too."