1852. Frederick Douglass Discusses the meaning of the Fourth of July (Aptheker 330-334)

As the city's most distinguished resident, Frederick Douglass was requested to address the citizens of Rochester on the Fourth of July celebration in 1852. The speech he delivered, under the title, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?", illustrates the great power, insight and integrity of the man.

Fellow Citizens:

Pardon me, and allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here today? What have I or those I represent to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us? And am I, therefore, called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar, and to confess the benefits, and express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your independence to us?

Would to God, both for your sakes and ours, that an affirmative answer could be truthfully returned to these questions. Then would my task be light, and my burden easy and delightful. For who is there so cold that a nation's sympathy could not warm him? Who so obdurate and dead to the claims of gratitude, that would not thankfully acknowledge such priceless benefits? Who so stolid and selfish that would not give his voice to swell the hallelujahs of a nation's jubilee, when the chains of servitude had been torn from his limbs? I am not that man. In a case like that, the dumb might eloquently speak, and the "lame man leap like a hare."

But such is not the state of the case. I say it with a sad sense of disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you this day rejoice are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence bequeathed by your fathers is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak today? If so, there is a parallel to your conduct. And let me warn you, that it is dangerous to copy the example of a nation whose crimes, towering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrecoverable ruin. I can today take up the lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people.

"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yes! We wept when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive, required of us a song; and they who wasted us, required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth."

Fellow citizens, above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions, whose chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are today rendered more intolerable by the jubilant shouts that reach them. If I do forget, if I do not remember those bleeding children of sorrow this day, "may my right hand forget her cunning, and may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth!" To forget them, to pass lightly over their wrongs, and to chime in with the popular theme, would be treason most scandalous and shocking, and would make me a reproach before God and the world. My subject, then, fellow citizens, is "American Slavery." I shall see this day and! its popular characteristics from the slave's point of view. Standing here, identified with the American bondman, making his wrongs mine, I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this Fourth of July.

Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting. America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future. Standing with God and the crushed and
bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity, which is outraged, in the name of
liberty, which is fettered, in the name of the Constitution and the Bible, which are disregarded
and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can
command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery-the great sin and shame of America! "I
will not equivocate; I will not excuse"; I will use the severest language I can command, and yet
not one word shall escape me that any man, whose judgment is not blinded by prejudice, or who
is not at heart a slave-holder, shall not confess to be right and just.

But I fancy I hear some of my audience say it is just in this circumstance that you and
your brother Abolitionists fail to make a favorable impression on the public mind. Would you
argue more and denounce less, would you persuade more and rebuke less, your cause would be
much more likely to succeed. But, I submit, where all is plain there is nothing to be argued. What
point in the anti-slavery creed would you have me argue? On what branch of the subject do the
people of this country need light? Must I undertake to prove that the slave is a man? That point is
conceded already. Nobody doubts it. The slave-holders themselves acknowledge it in the
enactment of laws for their government. They acknowledge it when they punish disobedience on
the part of the slave. There are seventy-two crimes in the State of Virginia, which, if committed
by a black man (no matter how ignorant he be), subject him to the punishment of death; while
only two of these same crimes will subject a white man to like punishment. What is this but the
acknowledgment that the slave is a moral, intellectual, and responsible being? The manhood of
the slave is conceded. It is admitted in the fact that Southern statute-books are covered with
enactments, forbidding, under severe fines and penalties, the teaching of the slave to read and
write. When you can point to any such laws as reference to the beasts of the field, then I may
consent to argue the manhood of the slave. When the dogs in your streets, when the fowls of the
air, when the cattle on your hills, when the fish of the sea, and the reptiles that crawl, shall be
unable to distinguish the slave from a brute, then I will argue with you that the slave is a man!
For the present it is enough to affirm the equal manhood of the Negro race. Is it not astonishing
that, while we are plowing, planting, and reaping,
using all kinds of mechanical tools, erecting
houses, constructing bridges, building ships, working in metals of brass, iron, copper, silver, and
gold; that while we are reading, writing, and cyphering, acting as clerks, merchants, and
secretaries, having among us lawyers, doctors, ministers, poets, authors, editors, orators, and
teachers; that while we are engaged in all the enterprises common to other men digging gold in
California, capturing the whale in the Pacific, feeding sheep and cattle on the hillside, living,
moving, acting, thinking, planning, living in families as husbands, wives, and children, and above
all, confessing and worshipping the Christian God, and looking hopefully for life and immortality
beyond the grave-we are called upon to prove that we are men?
Would you have me argue that man is entitled to liberty? That he is the rightful owner of his own
body? You have already declared it. Must I argue the wrongfulness of slavery? Is that a question
for republicans? Is it to be settled by the rules of logic and argumentation, as a matter beset with
great difficulty, involving a doubtful application of the principle of justice, hard to understand?
How should I look today in the presence of Americans, dividing and subdividing a discourse, to
show that men have a natural right to freedom, speaking of it relatively and positively, negatively
and affirmatively? To do so would be to make myself ridiculous, and to offer an insult to your
understanding. There is not a man beneath the canopy of heaven who does not know that slavery
is wrong for him.

What! Am I to argue that it is wrong to make men brutes, to rob them of their liberty, to work
them without wages, to keep them ignorant of their relations to their fellow men, to beat them
with sticks, to flay their flesh with the last, to load their limbs with irons, to hunt them with dogs,
to sell them at auction, to sunder their families, to knock out their teeth, to burn their flesh, to
starve them into obedience and submission to their masters? Must I argue that a system thus
marked with blood and stained with pollution is wrong? No; I will not. I have better employment
for my time and strength than such arguments would imply.
What, then, remains to be argued? Is it that slavery is not divine; that God did not establish it; that
our doctors of divinity are mistaken? There is blasphemy in the thought. That which is inhuman
cannot be divine. Who can reason on such a proposition? They that can, may; I cannot. The time
for such argument is past.
At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. Oh! had I the ability, and
could I reach the nation's ear, I would today pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting
reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not
the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The
feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the
propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its
crimes against God and man must be denounced.
What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer, a day that reveals to him more than
all other days of the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To
him your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty an unholy license; your national greatness,
swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants,
brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and
hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him
mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy-a thin veil to cover up crimes which
would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation of the earth guilty of practices more
shocking and bloody than are the people of these United States at this very hour.
Go where you may, search where you will, roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of
the Old World, travel through South America, search out every abuse and when you have found
the last, lay your facts by the side of the every-day practices of this nation, and you will say with
me that, for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival.

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