

“What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”

Frederick Douglass¹ (1852)

Mr. President, Friends and Fellow Citizens:

He who could address this audience without a quailing sensation, has stronger nerves than I have. I do not remember ever to have appeared as a speaker before any assembly more shrinkingly, nor with greater distrust of my ability, than I do this day. A feeling has crept over
5 me, quite unfavorable to the exercise of my limited powers of speech. The task before me is one which requires much previous thought and study for its proper performance. I know that apologies of this sort are generally considered flat and unmeaning. I trust, however, that mine will not be so considered. Should I seem at ease, my appearance would much misrepresent
10 me. The little experience I have had in addressing public meetings, in country schoolhouses, avails me nothing on the present occasion.

The papers and placards say, that I am to deliver a 4th [of] July oration. This certainly sounds large, and out of the common way, for it is true that I have often had the privilege to speak in this beautiful Hall, and to address many who now honor me with their presence. But neither
15 their familiar faces, nor the perfect gage I think I have of Corinthian Hall, seems to free me from embarrassment.

The fact is, ladies and gentlemen, the distance between this platform and the slave plantation, from which I escaped, is considerable—and the difficulties to be overcome in getting from the latter to the former, are by no means slight. That I am here to-day is, to me, a matter of
20 astonishment as well as of gratitude. You will not, therefore, be surprised, if in what I have to say I evince no elaborate preparation, nor grace my speech with any high sounding exordium. With little experience and with less learning, I have been able to throw my thoughts hastily and imperfectly together; and trusting to your patient and generous
indulgence, I will proceed to lay them before you.

This, for the purpose of this celebration, is the 4th of July. It is the birthday of your National
25 Independence, and of your political freedom. This, to you, is what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God. It carries your minds back to the day, and to the act of your great deliverance; and to the signs, and to the wonders, associated with that act, and that day. This celebration also marks the beginning of another year of your national life; and reminds you that the Republic of America is now 76 years old. I am glad, fellow-citizens, that your
30 nation is so young. Seventy-six years, though a good old age for a man, is but a mere speck in the life of a nation. Three score years and ten is the allotted time for individual men; but nations number their years by thousands. According to this fact, you are, even now, only in the beginning of your national career, still lingering in the period of childhood. I repeat, I am
35 glad this is so. There is hope in the thought, and hope is much needed, under the dark clouds which lower above the horizon. The eye of the reformer is met with angry flashes, portending disastrous times; but his heart may well beat lighter at the thought that America is young, and that she is still in the impressible stage of her existence. May he not hope that high lessons of wisdom, of justice and of truth, will yet give direction to her destiny? Were the nation older,

¹ Source: *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1999), pp. 188–206.

40 the patriot's heart might be sadder, and the reformer's brow heavier. Its future might be
shrouded in gloom, and the hope of its prophets go out in sorrow. There is consolation in the
thought that America is young. Great streams are not easily turned from channels, worn deep
in the course of ages. They may sometimes rise in quiet and stately majesty, and inundate the
land, refreshing and fertilizing the earth with their mysterious properties. They may also rise
45 in wrath and fury, and bear away, on their angry waves, the accumulated wealth of years of
toil and hardship. They, however, gradually flow back to the same old channel, and flow on
as serenely as ever. But, while the river may not be turned aside, it may dry up, and leave
nothing behind but the withered branch, and the unsightly rock, to howl in the abyss-
sweeping wind, the sad tale of departed glory. As with rivers so with nations.

50 Fellow-citizens, I shall not presume to dwell at length on the associations that cluster about
this day. The simple story of it is that, 76 years ago, the people of this country were British
subjects. The style and title of your "sovereign people" (in which you now glory) was not then
born. You were under the British Crown. Your fathers esteemed the English Government as
the home government; and England as the fatherland. This home government, you know,
55 although a considerable distance from your home, did, in the exercise of its parental
prerogatives, impose upon its colonial children, such restraints, burdens and limitations, as, in
its mature judgment, it deemed wise, right and proper.

But, your fathers, who had not adopted the fashionable idea of this day, of the infallibility of
government, and the absolute character of its acts, presumed to differ from the home
government in respect to the wisdom and the justice of some of those burdens and restraints.
60 They went so far in their excitement as to pronounce the measures of government unjust,
unreasonable, and oppressive, and altogether such as ought not to be quietly submitted to. I
scarcely need say, fellow-citizens, that my opinion of those measures fully accords with that
of your fathers. Such a declaration of agreement on my part would not be worth much to
anybody. It would, certainly, prove nothing, as to what part I might have taken, had I lived
65 during the great controversy of 1776. To say now that America was right, and England wrong,
is exceedingly easy. Everybody can say it; the dastard, not less than the noble brave, can
flippantly discant on the tyranny of England towards the American Colonies. It is fashionable
to do so; but there was a time when to pronounce against England, and in favor of the cause
of the colonies, tried men's souls. They who did so were accounted in their day, plotters of
70 mischief, agitators and rebels, dangerous men. To side with the right, against the wrong, with
the weak against the strong, and with the oppressed against the oppressor! here lies the merit,
and the one which, of all others, seems unfashionable in our day. The cause of liberty may be
stabbed by the men who glory in the deeds of your fathers. But, to proceed.

75 Feeling themselves harshly and unjustly treated by the home government, your fathers, like
men of honesty, and men of spirit, earnestly sought redress. They petitioned and
remonstrated; they did so in a decorous, respectful, and loyal manner. Their conduct was
wholly unexceptionable. This, however, did not answer the purpose. They saw themselves
treated with sovereign indifference, coldness and scorn. Yet they persevered. They were not
the men to look back.

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On the 2d of July, 1776, the old Continental Congress, to the dismay of the lovers of ease, and the worshipers of property, clothed that dreadful idea with all the authority of national sanction. They did so in the form of a resolution; and as we seldom hit upon resolutions, drawn up in our day whose transparency is at all equal to this, it may refresh your minds and help my story if I read it. “Resolved, That these united colonies are, and of right, ought to be free and Independent States; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown; and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, dissolved.”

Citizens, your fathers made good that resolution. They succeeded; and to-day you reap the fruits of their success. The freedom gained is yours; and you, therefore, may properly celebrate this anniversary. The 4th of July is the first great fact in your nation’s history—the very ring-bolt in the chain of your yet undeveloped destiny.

Pride and patriotism, not less than gratitude, prompt you to celebrate and to hold it in perpetual remembrance. I have said that the Declaration of Independence is the ring-bolt to the chain of your nation’s destiny; so, indeed, I regard it. The principles contained in that instrument are saving principles. Stand by those principles, be true to them on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever cost.

...

My business, if I have any here to-day, is with the present. The accepted time with God and his cause is the ever-living now.

*Trust no future, however pleasant,
Let the dead past bury its dead;
Act, act in the living present,
Heart within, and God overhead.*

We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future. To all inspiring motives, to noble deeds which can be gained from the past, we are welcome. But now is the time, the important time. Your fathers have lived, died, and have done their work, and have done much of it well. You live and must die, and you must do your work. You have no right to enjoy a child’s share in the labor of your fathers, unless your children are to be blest by your labors. You have no right to wear out and waste the hard-earned fame of your fathers to cover your indolence. Sydney Smith tells us that men seldom eulogize the wisdom and virtues of their fathers, but to excuse some folly or wickedness of their own. This truth is not a doubtful one. There are illustrations of it near and remote, ancient and modern. It was fashionable, hundreds of years ago, for the children of Jacob to boast, we have “Abraham to our father,” when they had long lost Abraham’s faith and spirit. That people contented themselves under the shadow of Abraham’s great name, while they repudiated the deeds which made his name great. Need I remind you that a similar thing is being done all over this country to-day? Need I tell you that the Jews are not the only people who built the tombs of the prophets, and garnished the sepulchres of the righteous? Washington could not die till he had broken the chains of his slaves. Yet his monument is built up by the price of human blood, and the traders in the bodies and souls of men shout—“We have Washington to our father.”—Alas! that it should be so; yet so it is.

*The evil that men do, lives after them,
The good is oft-interred with their bones.*

125 Fellow-citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here to-day?
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
130 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
135 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 as an
hart."

But, such is not the state of the case. I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am
140 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
145 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 to-day? 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, lowering up to heaven, were
150 thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrecoverable ruin! I can
to-day take up the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people!

*"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yea! 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
155 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, to-day, rendered more intolerable by the
160 jubilee shouts that reach them. If I do forget, if I do not faithfully 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
165 AMERICAN SLAVERY. I shall see, this day, and its popular characteristics, from the slave's
point of view. Standing, there, 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

170 nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th 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
175 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 slaveholder, shall not confess to be right and just.

...

180 At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability,
and could I reach the nation’s ear, I would, to-day, 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
185 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 proclaimed and denounced.

190 What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more
than all other days in 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
denunciations 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
195 not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people
of these United States, at this very hour.

200 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 everyday 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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