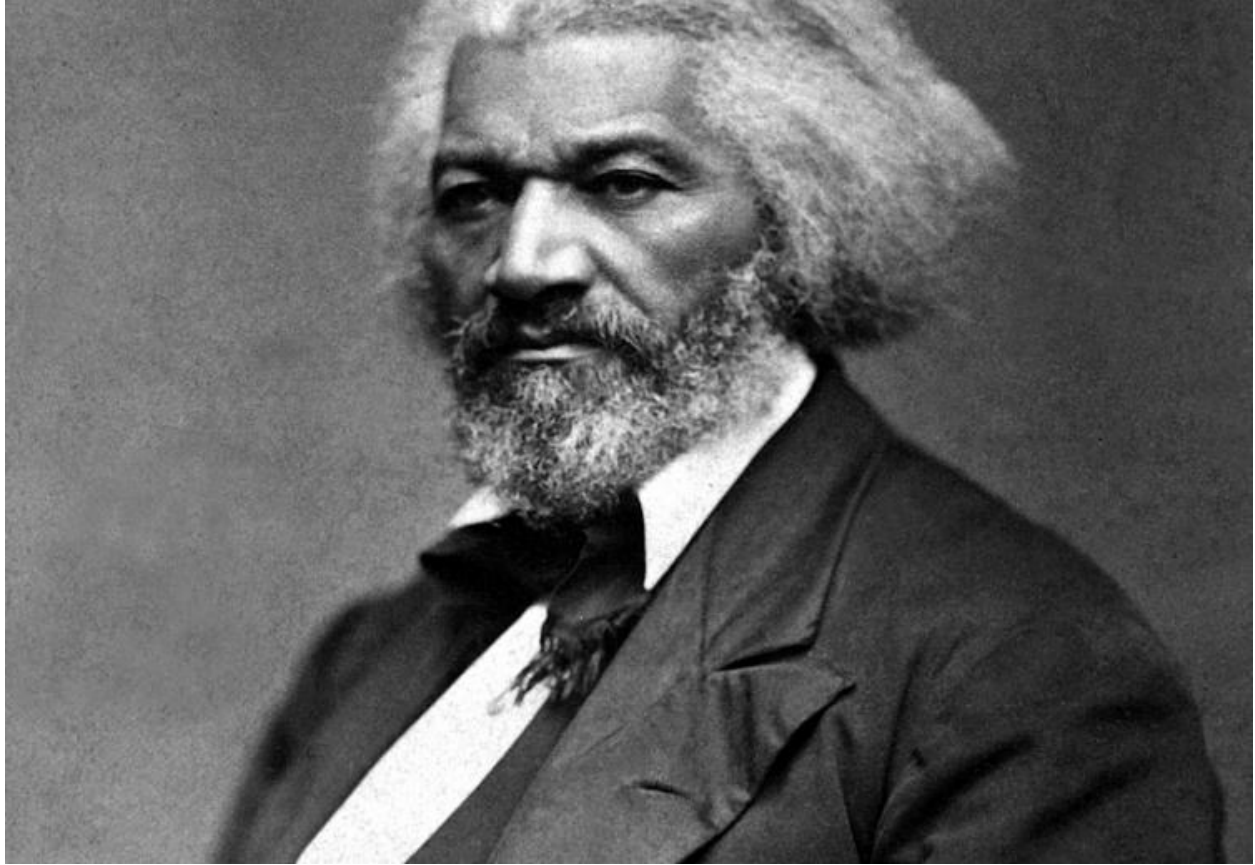


Frederick
Douglass's,
“What To the
Slave Is the
Fourth of July?”



Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) was a former slave who became a nationally recognized abolitionist orator during the antebellum period. During the Civil War he worked tirelessly for the emancipation of enslaved African Americans and during the decades following the war, he was arguably the most influential African American leader in the nation.

What is now known as the "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" speech was delivered on July 5, 1852 as an address to the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society in Rochester, New York.

Part One: A Fourth of July Oration ...

This, for the purpose of this celebration, is the 4th of July. It is the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom. 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 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. 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 impressionable 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?

On the 2nd of July, 1776, the old Continental Congress, 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.

Fellow Citizens, I am not wanting in respect for the fathers of this republic. The signers of the Declaration of Independence were brave men. They were great men too—great enough to give fame to a great age. They were statesmen, patriots and

heroes, and for the good they did, and the principles they contended for, I will unite with you to honor their memory.

Your fathers staked their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor, on the cause of their country. In their admiration of liberty, they lost sight of all other interests. They believed in order; but not in the order of tyranny. With them, nothing was "settled" that was not right. With them, justice, liberty and humanity were "final;" not slavery and oppression. Your fathers, the fathers of this republic, did, most deliberately, under the inspiration of a glorious patriotism, and with a sublime faith in the great principles of justice and freedom, lay deep the corner-stone of the national superstructure, which has risen and still rises in grandeur around you.

Questions:

1. What is Douglass' opinion of the American Founders? What characteristics does he praise about them? What is their most significant accomplishment?
2. What does he mean by ring-bolt?
3. Douglass repeatedly uses the pronouns "you" and "your" (rather than "our" and "ours") throughout this section. Why does he do this?
4. Why does he call his own time "degenerate"?

Part Two: Slavery in America

I am not included within the pale of 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. This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.

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 jubilee shouts that reach them. 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 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 nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th of July! America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future. I will 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!

Must I undertake to prove that the slave is a man? That point is conceded already. Nobody doubts it. The slaveholders themselves acknowledge it in the enactment of laws for their government. They acknowledge it when they punish disobedience on the part of the slave. What is this but the acknowledgment that the slave is a moral, intellectual, and responsible being?

For the present, it is enough to affirm the equal manhood of the Negro race. Is it not astonishing that, while we are ploughing, planting, and reaping, using all kinds of mechanical tools, 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? There is not a man beneath the canopy of heaven that does not know that slavery is wrong for him.

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. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.

Questions:

1. In the second part of the speech, Douglass turns to the present and his own feelings about the 4th of July celebration. What are these?
2. Next, Douglass presents a picture of American slavery. From what point of view does he look at it?
3. How does he show that everyone in America, North and South, views enslaved Africans as human beings?

Part Three: Reasons for Hope

THE CONSTITUTION

"[L]et me ask, if it be not somewhat singular that, if the Constitution were intended to be, by its framers and adopters, a slave-holding instrument, why neither slavery, slaveholding, nor slave can anywhere be found in it?"

In that instrument I hold there is neither warrant, license, nor sanction of the hateful thing; but, interpreted as it ought to be interpreted, the Constitution is a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT. Read its preamble, consider its purposes. Is slavery among them? I scout the idea that the question of the constitutionality or unconstitutionality of slavery is not a question for the people. I hold that every American citizen has a right to form an opinion of the constitution, and to propagate that opinion, and to use all honorable means to make his opinion the prevailing one. Now, take the constitution according to its plain reading, and I defy the presentation of a single pro-slavery clause in it. On the other hand it will be found to contain principles and purposes, entirely hostile to the existence of slavery.

Allow me to say, in conclusion, notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country. I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope. While drawing encouragement from the Declaration of Independence, the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions, my spirit is also cheered by the obvious tendencies of the age.

Questions

1. Why does Douglass appeal to the Constitution in the last section of the speech?
What is surprising about this appeal?
2. Given all that he has said in his speech, why does Douglass conclude on an optimistic note for black Americans?
3. What reasons does he give for optimism?