"What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"

Frederick Douglass

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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, 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 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 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 impenetrable 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, 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 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.

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 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.

You boast of your love of liberty, your superior civilization, and your pure Christianity, while the whole political power of the nation (as embodied in the two great political parties), is solemnly pledged to support and perpetuate the enslavement of three millions of your countrymen. You hurl your anathemas at the crowned headed tyrants of Russia and Austria, and pride yourselves on your Democratic institutions, while you yourselves consent to be the mere tools and body-guards of the tyrants of Virginia and Carolina. You invite to your shores fugitives of oppression from abroad, honor them with banquets, greet them with ovations, cheer them, toast them, salute them, protect them, and pour out your money to them like water; but the fugitives from your own land you advertise, hunt, arrest, shoot and kill. You glory in
your refinement and your universal education yet you maintain a system as barbarous and dreadful as ever
stained the character of a nation — a system begun in avarice, supported in pride, and perpetuated in
cruelty. You shed tears over fallen Hungary, and make the sad story of her wrongs the theme of your
poets, statesmen and orators, till your gallant sons are ready to fly to arms to vindicate her cause against
her oppressors; but, in regard to the ten thousand wrongs of the American slave, you would enforce the
strictest silence, and would hail him as an enemy of the nation who dares to make those wrongs the
subject of public discourse! You are all on fire at the mention of liberty for France or for Ireland; but are
as cold as an iceberg at the thought of liberty for the enslaved of America. You discourse eloquently on
the dignity of labor; yet, you sustain a system which, in its very essence, casts a stigma upon labor. You
can bare your bosom to the storm of British artillery to throw off a threepenny tax on tea; and yet wring
the last hard-earned farthing from the grasp of the black laborers of your country. You profess to believe
“that, of one blood, God made all nations of men to dwell on the face of all the earth,” and hath
commanded all men, everywhere to love one another; yet you notoriously hate, (and glory in your hatred),
all men whose skins are not colored like your own. You declare, before the world, and are understood by
the world to declare, that you “hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal; and are
endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; and that, among these are, life, liberty, and the
pursuit of happiness;” and yet, you hold securely, in a bondage which, according to your own Thomas
Jefferson, “is worse than ages of that which your fathers rose in rebellion to oppose,” a seventh part of
the inhabitants of your country.

Fellow-citizens! I will not enlarge further on your national inconsistencies. The existence of slavery in
this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretence, and your
Christianity as a lie. It destroys your moral power abroad; it corrupts your politicians at home. It saps the
foundation of religion; it makes your name a hissing, and a bye-word to a mocking earth. It is the
antagonistic force in your government, the only thing that seriously disturbs and endangers your Union. It
fetters your progress; it is the enemy of improvement, the deadly foe of education; it fosters pride; it
breeds insolence; it promotes vice; it shelters crime; it is a curse to the earth that supports it; and yet, you
cling to it, as if it were the sheet anchor of all your hopes. Oh! be warned! be warned! a horri-
ble reptile is coiled up in your nation’s bosom; the venomous creature is nursing at the tender breast of your youthful
republic; for the love of God, tear away, and fling from you the hideous monster, and let the weight of
twenty millions crush and destroy it forever!

But it is answered in reply to all this, that precisely what I have now denounced is, in fact, guaranteed and
sanctioned by the Constitution of the United States; that the right to hold and to hunt slaves is a part of
that Constitution framed by the illustrious Fathers of this Republic.

And instead of being the honest men I have before declared them to be, they were the veriest imposters
that ever practiced on mankind. This is the inevitable conclusion, and from it there is no escape. But I
differ from those who charge this baseness on the framers of the Constitution of the United States. It is a
slander upon their memory, at least, so I believe.

Fellow-citizens! there is no matter in respect to which, the people of the North have allowed themselves
to be so ruinously imposed upon, as that of the pro-slavery character of the Constitution. 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? Is it at the gateway? or is it in the temple? It is neither.
While I do not intend to argue this question on the present occasion, let 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. What would be
thought of an instrument, drawn up, legally drawn up, for the purpose of enlisting the city of Rochester to
a track of land, in which no mention of land was made? Now, there are certain rules of interpretation, for
the proper understanding of all legal instruments. These rules are well established. They are plain,
common-sense rules, such as you and I, and all of us, can understand and apply, without having passed
years in the study of law. 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. Without this right, the liberty of an American citizen would be as insecure as that of a
Frenchman. Ex-Vice-President Dallas tells us that the Constitution is an object to which no American
mind can be too attentive, and no American heart too devoted. He further says, the Constitution, in its
words, is plain and intelligible, and is meant for the home-bred, unsophisticated understandings of our
fellow-citizens. Senator Berrien tell us that the Constitution is the fundamental law, that which controls
all others. The charter of our liberties, which every citizen has a personal interest in understanding
thoroughly. The testimony of Senator Breese, Lewis Cass, and many others that might be named, who are
everywhere esteemed as sound lawyers, so regard the constitution. I take it, therefore, that it is not
presumption in a private citizen to form an opinion of that instrument.

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.

I have detained my audience entirely too long already. At some future period I will gladly avail myself of
an opportunity to give this subject a full and fair discussion.

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. There are forces in operation, which must inevitably work the
downfall of slavery. “The arm of the Lord is not shortened,” and the doom of slavery is certain. 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. Nations do not now stand in the same relation to each other
that they did ages ago. No nation can now shut itself up from the surrounding world, and trot round in the
same old path of its fathers without interference. The time was when such could be done. Long
established customs of hurtful character could formerly fence themselves in, and do their evil work with
social impunity. Knowledge was then confined and enjoyed by the privileged few, and the multitude
walked on in mental darkness. But a change has now come over the affairs of mankind. Walled cities and
empires have become unfashionable. The arm of commerce has borne away the gates of the strong city.
Intelligence is penetrating the darkest corners of the globe. It makes its pathway over and under the sea, as
well as on the earth. Wind, steam, and lightning are its chartered agents. Oceans no longer divide, but link
nations together. From Boston to London is now a holiday excursion. Space is comparatively annihilated.

Thoughts expressed on one side of the Atlantic, are distinctly heard on the other. The far off and almost
fabulous Pacific rolls in grandeur at our feet. The Celestial Empire, the mystery of ages, is being solved.
The fiat of the Almighty, “Let there be Light,” has not yet spent its force. No abuse, no outrage whether in
taste, sport or avarice, can now hide itself from the all-pervading light. The iron shoe, and crippled foot of
China must be seen, in contrast with nature. Africa must rise and put on her yet unwoven garment.

“Ethiopia shall stretch out her hand unto God.” In the fervent aspirations of William Lloyd Garrison, I
say, and let every heart join in saying it:

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Foner (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1999), 188-206.