

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

2 *Frederick Douglass*

3 **July 5, 1852**

4 This, for the purpose of this celebration, is the 4th of July. It is the birthday of your National  
5 Independence, and of your political freedom. This, to you, is what the Passover was to the emancipated  
6 people of God. It carries your minds back to the day, and to the act of your great deliverance; and to the  
7 signs, and to the wonders, associated with that act, and that day. This celebration also marks the  
8 beginning of another year of your national life; and reminds you that the Republic of America is now 76  
9 years old. I am glad, fellow-citizens, that your nation is so young. Seventy-six years, though a good old  
10 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  
11 individual men; but nations number their years by thousands. According to this fact, you are, even now,  
12 only in the beginning of your national career, still lingering in the period of childhood. I repeat, I am glad  
13 this is so. There is hope in the thought, and hope is much needed, under the dark clouds which lower  
14 above the horizon. The eye of the reformer is met with angry flashes, portending disastrous times; but his  
15 heart may well beat lighter at the thought that America is young, and that she is still in the impressible  
16 stage of her existence. May he not hope that high lessons of wisdom, of justice and of truth, will yet give  
17 direction to her destiny? Were the nation older, the patriot's heart might be sadder, and the reformer's  
18 brow heavier. Its future might be shrouded in gloom, and the hope of its prophets go out in sorrow. There  
19 is consolation in the thought that America is young. Great streams are not easily turned from channels,  
20 worn deep in the course of ages. They may sometimes rise in quiet and stately majesty, and inundate the  
21 land, refreshing and fertilizing the earth with their mysterious properties. They may also rise in wrath and  
22 fury, and bear away, on their angry waves, the accumulated wealth of years of toil and hardship. They,  
23 however, gradually flow back to the same old channel, and flow on as serenely as ever. But, while the  
24 river may not be turned aside, it may dry up, and leave nothing behind but the withered branch, and the  
25 unsightly rock, to howl in the abyss-sweeping wind, the sad tale of departed glory. As with rivers so with  
26 nations.

27

28 **[Break]**

29

30 What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other  
31 days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your  
32 celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity;  
33 your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence;  
34 your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and  
35 thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception,  
36 impiety, and hypocrisy — a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There  
37 is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these  
38 United States, at this very hour.

39

40 **[Break]**

41

42 You boast of your love of liberty, your superior civilization, and your pure Christianity, while the whole  
43 political power of the nation (as embodied in the two great political parties), is solemnly pledged to  
44 support and perpetuate the enslavement of three millions of your countrymen. You hurl your anathemas at  
45 the crowned headed tyrants of Russia and Austria, and pride yourselves on your Democratic institutions,  
46 while you yourselves consent to be the mere *tools* and *body-guards* of the tyrants of Virginia and  
47 Carolina. You invite to your shores fugitives of oppression from abroad, honor them with banquets, greet  
48 them with ovations, cheer them, toast them, salute them, protect them, and pour out your money to them  
49 like water; but the fugitives from your own land you advertise, hunt, arrest, shoot and kill. You glory in

50 your refinement and your universal education yet you maintain a system as barbarous and dreadful as ever  
51 stained the character of a nation — a system begun in avarice, supported in pride, and perpetuated in  
52 cruelty. You shed tears over fallen Hungary, and make the sad story of her wrongs the theme of your  
53 poets, statesmen and orators, till your gallant sons are ready to fly to arms to vindicate her cause against  
54 her oppressors; but, in regard to the ten thousand wrongs of the American slave, you would enforce the  
55 strictest silence, and would hail him as an enemy of the nation who dares to make those wrongs the  
56 subject of public discourse! You are all on fire at the mention of liberty for France or for Ireland; but are  
57 as cold as an iceberg at the thought of liberty for the enslaved of America. You discourse eloquently on  
58 the dignity of labor; yet, you sustain a system which, in its very essence, casts a stigma upon labor. You  
59 can bare your bosom to the storm of British artillery to throw off a threepenny tax on tea; and yet wring  
60 the last hard-earned farthing from the grasp of the black laborers of your country. You profess to believe  
61 “that, of one blood, God made all nations of men to dwell on the face of all the earth,” and hath  
62 commanded all men, everywhere to love one another; yet you notoriously hate, (and glory in your hatred),  
63 all men whose skins are not colored like your own. You declare, before the world, and are understood by  
64 the world to declare, that you “*hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal; and are*  
65 *endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; and that, among these are, life, liberty, and the*  
66 *pursuit of happiness;*” and yet, you hold securely, in a bondage which, according to your own Thomas  
67 Jefferson, “*is worse than ages of that which your fathers rose in rebellion to oppose,*” a seventh part of  
68 the inhabitants of your country.

69  
70 Fellow-citizens! I will not enlarge further on your national inconsistencies. The existence of slavery in  
71 this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretence, and your  
72 Christianity as a lie. It destroys your moral power abroad; it corrupts your politicians at home. It saps the  
73 foundation of religion; it makes your name a hissing, and a bye-word to a mocking earth. It is the  
74 antagonistic force in your government, the only thing that seriously disturbs and endangers your *Union*. It  
75 fetters your progress; it is the enemy of improvement, the deadly foe of education; it fosters pride; it  
76 breeds insolence; it promotes vice; it shelters crime; it is a curse to the earth that supports it; and yet, you  
77 cling to it, as if it were the sheet anchor of all your hopes. Oh! be warned! be warned! a horrible reptile is  
78 coiled up in your nation’s bosom; the venomous creature is nursing at the tender breast of your youthful  
79 republic; *for the love of God*, tear away, and fling from you the hideous monster, and *let the weight of*  
80 *twenty millions crush and destroy it forever!*

81  
82 But it is answered in reply to all this, that precisely what I have now denounced is, in fact, guaranteed and  
83 sanctioned by the Constitution of the United States; that the right to hold and to hunt slaves is a part of  
84 that Constitution framed by the illustrious Fathers of this Republic.

85  
86 **[BREAK]**

87  
88 And instead of being the honest men I have before declared them to be, they were the veriest imposters  
89 that ever practiced on mankind. This is the inevitable conclusion, and from it there is no escape. But I  
90 differ from those who charge this baseness on the framers of the Constitution of the United States. It is a  
91 slander upon their memory, at least, so I believe.

92  
93 **[BREAK]**

94  
95 Fellow-citizens! there is no matter in respect to which, the people of the North have allowed themselves  
96 to be so ruinously imposed upon, as that of the pro-slavery character of the Constitution. In that  
97 instrument I hold there is neither warrant, license, nor sanction of the hateful thing; but, interpreted as it  
98 ought to be interpreted, the Constitution is a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT. Read its preamble,  
99 consider its purposes. Is slavery among them? Is it at the gateway? or is it in the temple? It is neither.  
100 While I do not intend to argue this question on the present occasion, let me ask, if it be not somewhat

101 singular that, if the Constitution were intended to be, by its framers and adopters, a slave-holding  
102 instrument, why neither slavery, slaveholding, nor slave can anywhere be found in it. What would be  
103 thought of an instrument, drawn up, legally drawn up, for the purpose of entitling the city of Rochester to  
104 a track of land, in which no mention of land was made? Now, there are certain rules of interpretation, for  
105 the proper understanding of all legal instruments. These rules are well established. They are plain,  
106 common-sense rules, such as you and I, and all of us, can understand and apply, without having passed  
107 years in the study of law. I scout the idea that the question of the constitutionality or unconstitutionality of  
108 slavery is not a question for the people. I hold that every American citizen has a right to form an opinion  
109 of the constitution, and to propagate that opinion, and to use all honorable means to make his opinion the  
110 prevailing one. Without this right, the liberty of an American citizen would be as insecure as that of a  
111 Frenchman. Ex-Vice-President Dallas tells us that the Constitution is an object to which no American  
112 mind can be too attentive, and no American heart too devoted. He further says, the Constitution, in its  
113 words, is plain and intelligible, and is meant for the home-bred, unsophisticated understandings of our  
114 fellow-citizens. Senator Berrien tell us that the Constitution is the fundamental law, that which controls  
115 all others. The charter of our liberties, which every citizen has a personal interest in understanding  
116 thoroughly. The testimony of Senator Breese, Lewis Cass, and many others that might be named, who are  
117 everywhere esteemed as sound lawyers, so regard the constitution. I take it, therefore, that it is not  
118 presumption in a private citizen to form an opinion of that instrument.

119  
120 Now, take the Constitution according to its plain reading, and I defy the presentation of a single pro-  
121 slavery clause in it. On the other hand it will be found to contain principles and purposes, entirely hostile  
122 to the existence of slavery.

123  
124 I have detained my audience entirely too long already. At some future period I will gladly avail myself of  
125 an opportunity to give this subject a full and fair discussion.

126  
127 Allow me to say, in conclusion, notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented of the state of  
128 the nation, I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation, which must inevitably work the  
129 downfall of slavery. "The arm of the Lord is not shortened," and the doom of slavery is certain. I,  
130 therefore, leave off where I began, with hope. While drawing encouragement from the Declaration of  
131 Independence, the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions, my spirit is also  
132 cheered by the obvious tendencies of the age. Nations do not now stand in the same relation to each other  
133 that they did ages ago. No nation can now shut itself up from the surrounding world, and trot round in the  
134 same old path of its fathers without interference. The time was when such could be done. Long  
135 established customs of hurtful character could formerly fence themselves in, and do their evil work with  
136 social impunity. Knowledge was then confined and enjoyed by the privileged few, and the multitude  
137 walked on in mental darkness. But a change has now come over the affairs of mankind. Walled cities and  
138 empires have become unfashionable. The arm of commerce has borne away the gates of the strong city.  
139 Intelligence is penetrating the darkest corners of the globe. It makes its pathway over and under the sea, as  
140 well as on the earth. Wind, steam, and lightning are its chartered agents. Oceans no longer divide, but link  
141 nations together. From Boston to London is now a holiday excursion. Space is comparatively annihilated.  
142 Thoughts expressed on one side of the Atlantic, are distinctly heard on the other. The far off and almost  
143 fabulous Pacific rolls in grandeur at our feet. The Celestial Empire, the mystery of ages, is being solved.  
144 The fiat of the Almighty, "Let there be Light," has not yet spent its force. No abuse, no outrage whether in  
145 taste, sport or avarice, can now hide itself from the all-pervading light. The iron shoe, and crippled foot of  
146 China must be seen, in contrast with nature. Africa must rise and put on her yet unwoven garment.  
147 "Ethiopia shall stretch out her hand unto God." In the fervent aspirations of William Lloyd Garrison, I  
148 say, and let every heart join in saying it:

149  
150 **Source: *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S.**  
151 **Foner (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1999), 188-206.**