



Fourth of July oration Frederick Douglass (1852)

Frederick Douglass was born into slavery in Maryland but escaped north when he was about 20. He achieved fame as an orator, touring the northern United States and the British Isles to speak against slavery. He gave the speech excerpted here at the invitation of a women's anti-slavery society in Rochester, New York, where he was then living. The speech was part of the society's Independence Day celebration, though the women shifted their celebration to July 5 due to July 4 being a Sunday. (Present-day claims that Douglass refused to speak on July 4, or that he preferred July 5 because that was the anniversary of the abolition of slavery in New York, lack historical documentation.)

[“What, to the slave, is your Fourth of July?”]

Fellow citizens, pardon me, 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? [...] This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice; I must mourn.

[...] What, to the American slave, is your Fourth 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. 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. [...]

[“I will show you a man-drover”]

Behold the practical operation of this internal slave trade, the American slave trade, sustained by American politics and American religion. Here you will see men and women reared like swine for the market. You know what is a swine-drover? I will show you a man-drover [...], armed with pistol, whip, and bowie knife, driving a company of a hundred men, women, and children from the Potomac to the slave market at New Orleans. These wretched people are to be sold singly or in lots, to suit purchasers. They are food for the cotton field and the deadly sugar mill. Mark the sad procession, as it moves wearily along, and the inhuman wretch who drives them. Hear his

savage yells and his blood-chilling oaths as he hurries on his affrighted captives! There, see the old man with locks thinned and gray. Cast one glance, if you please, upon that young mother, whose shoulders are bare to the scorching sun, her briny tears falling on the brow of the babe in her arms. See, too, that girl of thirteen, weeping—yes! weeping—as she thinks of the mother from whom she has been torn! The drove moves tardily. Heat and sorrow have nearly consumed their strength; suddenly you hear a quick snap, like the discharge of a rifle; the fetters clank, and the chain rattles simultaneously; your ears are saluted with a scream that seems to have torn its way to the center of your soul! The crack you heard was the sound of the slave whip; the scream you heard was from the woman you saw with the babe. Her speed had faltered under the weight of her child and her chains! That gash on her shoulder tells her to move on. Follow this drove to New Orleans. Attend the auction; see men examined like horses; see the forms of women rudely and brutally exposed to the shocking gaze of American slave buyers. See this drove sold and separated forever; and never forget the deep, sad sobs that arose from that scattered multitude.

Tell me, citizens, where, under the sun, you can witness a spectacle more fiendish and shocking. Yet this is but a glance at the American slave trade as it exists, at this moment, in the ruling part of the United States. [...]

Is this the land your fathers loved,
the freedom which they toiled to win?
Is this the earth whereon they moved?
Are these the graves they slumber in?

But a still more inhuman, disgraceful, and scandalous state of things remains to be presented.

[“The Fugitive Slave Law makes mercy a crime”]

By an act of the American Congress not yet two years old, slavery has been nationalized in its most horrible and revolting form. By that act, Mason & Dixon’s line has been obliterated; New York has become as Virginia; and the power to hold, hunt, and sell men, women, and children as slaves remains no longer a mere state institution but is now an institution of the whole United States. The power is coextensive with the star-spangled banner and American Christianity. Where these go, may also go the merciless slave hunter. Where these are, man is not sacred. [...] Your broad republican domain is hunting ground for *men*. Not for thieves and robbers, enemies of society, merely, but for men guilty of no crime. Your lawmakers have commanded all good citizens to engage in this hellish sport. Your president, your secretary of state, your lords, nobles, and ecclesiastics enforce, as a duty you owe to your free and glorious country and to your God, that you do this accursed thing. Not fewer than forty Americans have, within the past two years, been hunted down and, without a moment’s warning, hurried away in chains and consigned to slavery and excruciating torture. Some of these have had wives and children, dependent on them for bread; but of this, no account was made. The right of the hunter to his prey stands superior to the right of marriage and to *all* rights in this republic, the rights of God included!

For black men, there are neither law, justice, humanity, nor religion. The Fugitive Slave Law makes mercy to them a crime and bribes the judge who tries them. An American judge gets ten dollars for every victim he consigns to slavery, and five when he fails to do so. The oath of any

two villains is sufficient, under this hell-black enactment, to send the most pious and exemplary black man into the remorseless jaws of slavery! His own testimony is nothing. He can bring no witnesses for himself. The minister of American justice is bound by the law to hear but one side, and that side is the side of the oppressor. Let this damning fact be perpetually told. Let it be thundered around the world that in tyrant-killing, king-hating, people-loving, democratic, Christian America, the seats of justice are filled with judges who hold their offices under an open and palpable bribe and are bound, in deciding in the case of a man's liberty, to hear only his accusers! [...]

[“The American church is guilty”]

I take this law to be one of the grossest infringements of Christian liberty; and if the churches and ministers of our country were not stupidly blind or most wickedly indifferent, they too would so regard it. At the very moment that they are thanking God for the enjoyment of civil and religious liberty and for the right to worship God according to the dictates of their own consciences, they are utterly silent in respect to a law which robs religion of its chief significance and makes it utterly worthless to a world lying in wickedness. Did this law [...] abridge the right to sing psalms, to partake of the sacrament, or to engage in any of the ceremonies of religion, it would be smitten by the thunder of a thousand pulpits. A general shout would go up from the church, demanding *repeal, repeal, instant repeal!* [...]

The fact that the church of our country (with fractional exceptions) does not esteem the Fugitive Slave Law as a declaration of war against religious liberty implies that that church regards religion simply as a form of worship, an empty ceremony, and not a vital principle requiring active benevolence, justice, love, and goodwill towards man. It esteems sacrifice above mercy, psalm-singing above right-doing, solemn meetings above practical righteousness. A worship that can be conducted by persons who refuse to give shelter to the houseless, to give bread to the hungry, clothing to the naked, and who enjoin obedience to a law forbidding these acts of mercy is a curse, not a blessing, to mankind. [...]

But the church of this country is not only indifferent to the wrongs of the slave; it actually takes sides with the oppressors. It has made itself the bulwark of American slavery and the shield of American slave hunters. Many of its most eloquent divines, who stand as the very lights of the church, have shamelessly given the sanction of religion and the Bible to the whole slave system. They have taught that man may properly be a slave, that the relation of master and slave is ordained of God, that to send back an escaped bondman to his master is clearly the duty of all the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ—and this horrible blasphemy is palmed off upon the world for Christianity.

For my part, I would say: welcome infidelity! welcome atheism! welcome anything in preference to the gospel as preached by those divines! They convert the very name of religion into an engine of tyranny and barbarous cruelty, and serve to confirm more infidels in this age than all the infidel writings of Thomas Paine, Voltaire, and Bolingbroke put together have done. These ministers make religion a cold and flinty-hearted thing, having neither principles of right action nor bowels of compassion. They strip the love of God of its beauty and leave the throne of religion a huge, horrible, repulsive form. It is a religion for oppressors, tyrants, man-stealers, and thugs [...], a religion which [...] says to the man in chains, “Stay there,” and to the oppressor,

“Oppress on”; [...] it makes God a respecter of persons, denies his fatherhood of the race, and tramples in the dust the great truth of the brotherhood of man. All this we affirm to be true of the popular church and the popular worship of our land and nation—a religion, a church, and a worship which, on the authority of inspired wisdom, we pronounce to be an abomination in the sight of God. [...]

The American church is guilty when viewed in connection with what it is doing to uphold slavery, but it is superlatively guilty when viewed in connection with its ability to abolish slavery. [...] Let the religious press, the pulpit, the Sunday school, the conference meeting, the great ecclesiastical, missionary, Bible, and tract associations of the land array their immense powers against slavery and slaveholding, and the whole system of crime and blood would be scattered to the winds; and that they do not do this involves them in the most awful responsibility of which the mind can conceive. [...]

[“Your republican politics are inconsistent”]

One is struck with the difference between the attitude of the American church towards the anti-slavery movement and that occupied by the churches in England towards a similar movement in that country. There, the church—true to its mission of ameliorating, elevating, and improving the condition of mankind—came forward promptly, bound up the wounds of the West Indian slave, and restored him to his liberty. There, the question of emancipation was a high religious question. It was demanded in the name of humanity and according to the law of the living God. [...] The anti-slavery movement there was not an anti-church movement, for the reason that the church took its full share in prosecuting that movement; and the anti-slavery movement in this country will cease to be an anti-church movement when the church of this country shall assume a favorable, instead of a hostile, position towards that movement.

Americans! Your republican politics, not less than your republican religion, are flagrantly inconsistent. 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 bodyguards 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 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 can bare your bosom to the storm of British artillery to throw off a three-penny 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 pretense, and your Christianity as a lie. It destroys your moral power abroad [...]; it makes your name a hissing and a byword to a mocking earth. [...]

[“I leave off with hope”]

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. [...] 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:

God speed the year of jubilee
 the wide world o'er!
 When, from their galling chains set free,
 th' oppress'd shall vilely bend the knee
 and wear the yoke of tyranny
 like brutes no more.

Source: Frederick Douglass, *Oration, Delivered in Corinthian Hall, Rochester, by Frederick Douglass, July 5th, 1852* (Rochester [NY]: Lee, Mann & Co., 1852), 14-15, 20-23, 25-30, 32-34, 37-39, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/inu.30000005087741>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Italicized sections headings added by Duffy, replacing, in some cases, headings that appeared in the source publication. Some paragraph and sentence breaks adjusted. A missing space between words inserted. The varying usages *Fourth July* and *4th of July* regularized to *Fourth of July*. Spelling, punctuation, and the formatting of block quotations emended in line with modern American conventions. Small caps omitted; italics used less frequently here than in the source publication. Quotation marks omitted where they enclosed imprecisely quoted passages from the Declaration of Independence, from a 1786 letter of Thomas Jefferson to Jean-Nicolas Démeunier, and from Isaiah 59:1 and Psalm 68:31. Capital letters at the beginning of poetic lines converted to lowercase for readability. For the sake of modernization, some terms capitalized in the source have been downcased here: *fathers*, *president*, *secretary of state*, *divines*, *institutions*, *democratic*, *liberty*, *light*. Conversely, some terms that are lowercase in the source have been capitalized here: *Old World*, *Bible*, *Christianity*, and *Sunday* (in the expression *Sunday school*).

These edited excerpts from Douglass's speech are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.

See also: There is no documentary evidence that Douglass refused to speak on July 4 or that the speech was moved to July 5 at his request. According to an announcement in the newspaper that Douglass himself edited, the Independence Day program of which Douglass's speech was part was held on July 5 because July 4 fell that year on a Sunday. Maria Weddle and Julia Griffiths, "Celebration of the National Anniversary," *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (Rochester, NY), July 1, 1852, 2, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84026366/1852-07-01/ed-1>.

It is also the case, though, that during the antebellum era, African American leaders and activists in northern states expressed ambivalent or competing attitudes toward July 4 celebrations, and that African Americans celebrated landmark events related to abolition in addition to, or in lieu of, Independence Day. The most widespread such celebration was held annually on August 1 to commemorate the 1834 abolition of slavery in Britain's Caribbean colonies. See Leonard I. Sweet, "The Fourth of July and Black Americans in the Nineteenth Century: Northern Leadership Opinion within the Context of the Black Experience," *Journal of Negro History* 61, no. 3 (July 1976): 256-275.

For documentation of Douglass's attitudes toward July 4 celebrations and toward alternative or additional commemorations observed by African Americans, see Sweet, "The Fourth of July," 259, 270-271; Mitch Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 70-71, 77-78, 86, 92-96.



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