



Independence Day address Ova P. Hoyt (1826)

Ova P. Hoyt was a white Presbyterian minister. He delivered this Fourth of July address, marking the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, while pastoring a congregation in upstate New York. His address was subsequently published in Freedom's Journal, the first black-owned newspaper in the United States, produced by free African Americans in New York City. Hoyt holds before his white audience the menacing possibility of a massive, bloody slave uprising in the United States. He points to two recent precedents for that possibility: the 1791-1804 revolution in Haiti (which Hoyt calls St. Domingo, using a version of that country's colonial name) and a reportedly planned but thwarted uprising in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1822. A nationwide slave uprising, Hoyt declares, would be God's judgment against white Americans for the "national sin" of slavery.

Among the omens which portend evil to our country, I must mention *slavery*. But what shall I say of it? To say that it is the disgrace of humankind, the curse of the earth, the scourge of heaven, the offspring of hell, would be speaking the truth. But all this is not even the preface to its horrors. There is a cloud gathering over our country. [...] It does not promise a refreshing shower. It is heavy with vengeance and black with the elements of ruin. It covers half the nation; and louder than our cannon can proclaim our liberty, it thunders back the voice of slavery. Its lightnings have already kindled a conflagration in many of our southern cities. And even now, they cannot hear the midnight cry of "Fire!" unaccompanied with agonizing apprehensions that it is bursting, with all its latent horrors, on their defenseless dwellings.

There are now as many as 2,000,000 slaves in the United States. Their increase is almost incredible. Let fancy carry you forward to the end of another half century, and contemplate the possibilities of our condition. Twenty years is more than time enough to double the black population. In 1880, therefore, at this rate, we shall have a number of negroes larger by about 4,000,000 than the present white population. In some states, the increase of the slaves is more than three times as great as that of the whites. In South Carolina, for ten years preceding 1820, the increase of the latter was only 8 to every hundred, while that of the former was 26. As often, therefore, as a given number of the white inhabitants increased 800, the same number of the black was increased 2,600. In some of the states, the number of slaves is already greater than that of the free. Many of these are subjected to sufferings of which we can have only a faint conception. It is not true, as we are prone to imagine, that all masters are alike cruel. Many of them are humane. But this is not uniformly their character. There are monsters of barbarity among them, having nothing human but the form. [...]

Let it be remembered that these negroes only need to know their strength and the unrighteous tenure by which they are held in bondage, together with an artful leader, and they would drench the whole continent, from the Potomac to the Gulf of Mexico, in the blood of the whites. It is vain to think of keeping them in ignorance. They know it to be unreasonable that they should be thus oppressed. Some of the free blacks are men of intelligence. Their influence is great. A new spirit is kindling through the whole body of the slaves. You cannot make the poor black believe it right thus to oppress him. His nature revolts at the thought. The mementos of our country's liberty, they see everywhere. They hear it in the rejoicings of this day. True, they cannot read.

[But t]hey have heard of the scenes of St. Domingo. They see there a colored population, intelligent and free and happy. Nay, more. They see them standing on the shore and, with a fraternal philanthropy, offering them the hand of friendship: offering them houses and lands and liberty. Alas, chains and bondage forbid them to go. Their only relief is to retire into their comfortless cabin to dream of a freedom they are never to enjoy, or meditate on some plan to cut their way, with a bloody sword, to liberty and happiness. A secret influence is imperceptibly conveyed from the land of Bolivar^a to the miserable slaves. It invites them to freedom. You cannot intercept that influence. You may build a wall to heaven around the island of the blacks, and still you cannot resist it. Their example will be perpetually before the slaves and serve as a beacon to invite them to insurrection. It bids them to go forth to freedom or to death. The stifled voice of discontent and desperation has long since been heard. The poor black, preferring death to slavery, has proved that his soul could meditate on vengeance, and his arm could execute it. The plot of Charleston will be long remembered.

“Something must be done.” The day of vengeance is not far distant. The tempest is gathered on the mountaintops and threatens to sweep down into the plains below, desolating with its lightning and deafening with its thunder. A convulsion may yet shake Virginia which we shall feel to this remote corner of the Union. Slavery is a national sin. The stain cleaves to the Constitution of the whole country. And when Jehovah makes inquisition, as He surely will, for the blood of His black children, our garments will be all stained with it. The judgments of heaven may sweep through the whole land. The arm of the slave may yet grasp the battle axe and the sword; and if not we, our children or our children’s children may perish beneath the stroke. Am I told that blacks dare not rise upon their masters? So said the men of St. Domingo. “The slaves dare not rise.” But they did rise. A plot was formed and matured and executed for the achievement of their freedom. And the rains of more than thirty years have scarcely yet bleached the soil from the blood of the French.

I know not what the interposition of heaven and the exertion of men may do to avert this danger. But the causes now at work are moving on, as steady as the progress of the sun, to this very result. Slavery must be abolished, or scenes will here be witnessed of which the very story will make our ears tingle and our hearts bleed. The tale of St. Domingo, with all its horrors, will be but infant’s prattle by its side.

^a *Simón Bolívar was a Spanish colonist who led the revolution of the 1810s-20s that gained independence for a chain of South American countries running from Venezuela to Bolivia. It’s unclear why Hoyt refers to “the land of Bolivar”—which would be Spanish-speaking South America—when he appears to be speaking throughout this paragraph of the former French Caribbean colony of Haiti. Perhaps Hoyt is erroneously naming Bolívar when he means to allude to Toussaint Louverture, the former slave turned general who is regarded as the father of the Haitian Revolution. Alternatively, perhaps Hoyt is intentionally folding the Haitian Revolution into the larger wars for Latin American independence that Bolívar represents, thinking that his audience may be inclined to view the latter more favorably.*

Source: *Freedom's Journal*, May 18, 1827, 38. Available as a digital scan from Digital Howard, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center and Howard University Libraries, https://dh.howard.edu/freedoms_journal1827/10. Hoyt's text is public domain in the United States because published in the United States before 1923.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy with assistance from Henry Testerman. Additional paragraph breaks inserted for readability. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation emended in line with modern American conventions. Quotation marks that enclosed the reprinted address in the source publication have been omitted here. The use of lowercase for the racial labels *negroes*, *black*, and *white*, as well as for the regional label *southern*, reproduces the usage of the source. The words *slavery* and *heaven*, inconsistently capitalized in the source publication, are consistently presented here in lowercase. The capitalizing of divine pronouns replicates the source.

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



© 2021, 2026 by John-Charles Duffy. Except as otherwise noted, this work is made available under the Creative Commons Attribution–NonCommercial–ShareAlike 4.0 International License, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

All rights are reserved for the flag-shaped “Empire and American Religion” logo; if you alter this work, you may not reproduce the logo. Use of the Creative Commons license icon is subject to the Creative Commons Trademark Policy.