

CONSTITUTION 101

Module 12: Slavery in America: From the Founding to America's Second Founding
12.3 Primary Source

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, WHAT TO THE SLAVE IS THE FOURTH OF JULY? (1852)

View the document on the National Constitution Center's website [here](#).

SUMMARY

Frederick Douglass was born an enslaved person in Maryland, later escaping into freedom and emerging as one of the leading abolitionist voices in the 1800s. In June 1852, he delivered this Independence Day address to the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society. It became one of Douglass's most famous speeches—criticizing the chasm between America's founding principles and the institution of slavery. In the speech, Douglass lamented that Independence Day wasn't a day of celebration for enslaved people. At the same time, he urged his audience to read the U.S. Constitution not as a pro-slavery document, but as a "GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT."

Excerpt

Why ask me to speak on the Fourth of July when you have refused to extend the Declaration of Independence's promise of freedom and equality to African Americans?

Fellow-citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here to-day? 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?

I wish that you had already extended the Declaration's promise to us; it would make this an easy speech. Would to God, both for your sakes and ours, that an affirmative answer could be truthfully returned to these questions! Then would my task be light, and my burden easy and delightful. For who is there so cold, that a nation's sympathy could not warm him? Who so obdurate and dead to the claims of gratitude, that would not thankfully acknowledge such priceless benefits? Who so stolid and selfish, that would not give his voice to swell the hallelujahs of a nation's jubilee, when the chains of servitude had been torn from his limbs? I am not that man

Today, I think about those who are enslaved and how their enslavement is in such stark contrast to your Fourth of July celebrations; so, I will use my speech today to discuss American slavery and to try to get you to see the Fourth of July from the perspective of the enslaved. Fellow-citizens; above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of

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millions! whose chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are, to-day, rendered more intolerable by the jubilee shouts that reach them. If I do forget, if I do not faithfully remember those bleeding children of sorrow this day, "may my right hand forget her cunning, and may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth!" To forget them, to pass lightly over their wrongs, and to chime in with the popular theme, would be treason most scandalous and shocking, and would make me a reproach before God and the world. 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! . . .

American slavery is inconsistent with America's founding principles and with Christianity; it is terrible for the nation and endangers the Union; you should get rid of it.

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. . . . I will not enlarge further on your national inconsistencies. The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism a sham, your humanity a base pretense, and your Christianity 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 horrible 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!* . . .

The Constitution isn't a pro-slavery document; it is a glorious liberty document. 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? . . . 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. . . . I hold that every American 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. .

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When we read the Constitution plainly, it contains no pro-slavery clauses and embraces principles hostile to slavery. Now, take the Constitution according to its plain reading, and I defy the presentation of a single proslavery clause in it. On the other hand it will be found to contain principles and purposes, entirely hostile to the existence of slavery. . . .

I remain hopeful; America's founding principles are on our side. 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. . . .

***Bold sentences give the big idea of the excerpt and are not a part of the primary source.**

