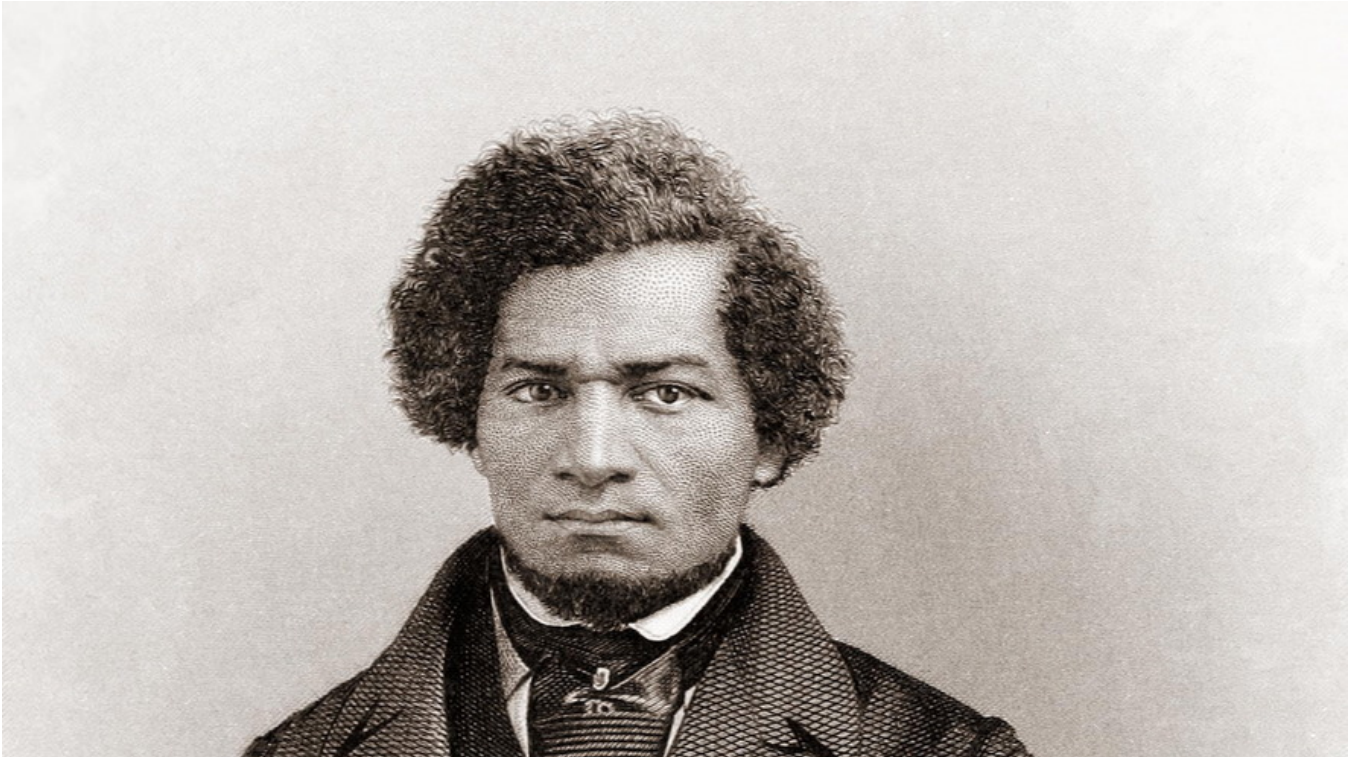


Famous Speeches: Frederick Douglass' "The Hypocrisy of American Slavery"

By Adapted by Newsela staff on 03.29.16

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Portrait of Frederick Douglass from his book, "My Bondage and My Freedom," published in 1856. Image by: New York Public Library

Editor's Note: Frederick Douglass was born in Maryland in 1818, the son of a slave woman and her white master. He became widely known after writing his autobiography in 1845, where he described his escape from slavery. In 1852, he was invited to speak at a July Fourth ceremony in Rochester, New York. The audience was expecting a speech praising America's independence. Instead, Douglass harshly criticized the United States for its support of slavery.

Fellow citizens, pardon me, and allow me to ask, why have you called me here to speak today? What do I or those I represent have to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice

in the Declaration of Independence offered to us? And am I, therefore, to let you know the benefits, and show my gratitude for the blessings that come to us from your independence?

I wish to God, both for your sake and ours, that your answer was yes. Then my task would be light, and my job easy and delightful. For who is so cold that a nation's sympathy could not warm him? Who is so stubborn and dead to the feelings gratitude that he would not give thanks for such priceless benefits? Who is so boring and selfish that he would not sing hallelujahs on a nation's anniversary, when the chains of slavery had been torn from his limbs? I am not that man. No sooner would I do that, than a mute man might speak, and the "lame man leap as a deer."

But such is not the case. I say this with a sad sense of the wide gap between us. I am not included in this glorious anniversary! Your independence only reveals the extreme distance between us. The blessings that you rejoice in are not enjoyed by everyone. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence handed down by your fathers is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in chains into the grand temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in happy song, is inhuman mockery. Do you mean, citizens, to make fun of me by asking me to speak today? If so, you are repeating history. Let me warn you, that it is dangerous to copy the example of an ancient nation (Babylon) whose crimes, towering up to heaven, were thrown down by the Almighty, burying that nation in ruin.

Fellow citizens, above your national joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions. Their chains, heavy and terrible yesterday, have become more unbearable today by the joyful shouts that reach them. If I do forget, if I do not remember those bleeding children of sorrow this day, "may my right hand forget her cunning, and may my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth!"

To forget them, to ignore the wrongs they suffer would be treason to them. I would be accused before God and the world.

My subject, then, fellow citizens, is "American Slavery." I speak this day about it from the slave's point of view. Standing here, I identify with the American bondman and make his wrongs mine. I declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this Fourth of July.

Whether we turn to the past or to the present, the behavior of the nation seems equally hideous and disgusting. America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future. I stand with God and the crushed and bleeding slave. In the name of humanity, which is outraged, in the name of liberty, which is chained, in the name of the Constitution and the Bible, which are ignored, I dare to question and to condemn everything that serves to uphold slavery. It is the great sin and shame of America! "I will not conceal the truth. I will not excuse." I will use the harshest language I know. Yet I will not speak one word that any man, whose judgment is not blinded by prejudice, or who is not at heart a slave-holder, shall not say is right and just.

But some of my audience may say that you and your brother Abolitionists fail to make a good impression. If you argued more and criticized less, you would persuade more people. Your cause would be much more likely to succeed. What is the point of the anti-slavery creed you would have me argue? What more do the people of this country need to know? Must I try to prove that the slave is a man? That point is accepted already, and nobody doubts it. The slave-holders themselves acknowledge it in their laws and acknowledge it when they punish their slaves. There are 72 crimes in the State of Virginia, which, if committed by a black man carry the punishment of death. A white man will get death for only two of these crimes.

What is this but the acknowledgment that the slave is a moral, intellectual, and responsible being? The manhood of the slave is accepted. It is admitted in the fact that Southern laws forbid the teaching of the slave to read and write. Point to any similar laws about the beasts of the field. Then I may agree to argue the manhood of the slave. When the dogs in your streets, when the birds of the air, when the cattle on your hills, when the fish of the sea, and the reptiles that crawl, cannot tell a slave from an animal, then I will argue with you that the slave is a man!

For the present, it is enough to affirm the equal manhood of the Negro race. We plow, plant, and reap, use all kinds of mechanical tools. We erect houses, construct bridges, build ships, work in metals of brass, iron, copper, silver, and gold. We read, write, and practice mathematics. We act as clerks, merchants, and secretaries. We have among us lawyers, doctors, ministers, poets, authors, editors, orators, and teachers. We are engaged in all the enterprises common to other men. We dig gold in California, capture the whale in the Pacific, feed sheep and cattle on the hillside, live, move, act, think, plan, live in families as husbands,

wives, and children. And above all, we worship the Christian God, and look hopefully for life and immortality beyond the grave. We must prove that we are men?

Do you want me to make the argument that man deserves liberty? That he is the rightful owner of his own body? You have already declared it. Must I argue the wrongfulness of slavery? Is that a question for Americans? Is it to be settled by the rules of logic and debate, as if it were a complicated matter? Is it so hard to understand? How should I argue in front of Americans that men have a natural right to freedom? To do so would seem ridiculous, and insults your intelligence. There is not a man beneath the canopy of heaven who does not know that slavery is wrong.

What! Am I to argue that it is wrong to make men brutes, to rob them of their liberty, to make them work without wages? Is it wrong to keep them ignorant, to beat them with sticks, to strike their flesh with the lash, to put them in chains? Is it wrong to hunt them with dogs, to sell them at auction, to split apart their families, to knock out their teeth, to burn their flesh, to starve them into obeying their masters? Must I argue that a bloody system is wrong? No, I will not. I have better use of my time and strength.

What, then, is left to be argued? Is it that slavery is not divine, that God did not create it, that our ministers and priests are mistaken? Who can reason on such statements? They that can, may. I cannot. The time for such argument is past.

At a time like this, what's needed is scorching irony, not convincing argument. Oh, had I the ability, and could I reach the nation's ear, I would today pour out a fiery stream of biting scorn, blasting contempt, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be stirred up; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the good manners of the nation must be offended; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be denounced.

What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer that it is a day that shows him the terrible injustice and cruelty of which he is the constant victim. To him your celebration is fake; your liberty is not holy; your national greatness is simply arrogance; your rejoicing is empty and heartless; your shouts of liberty and equality are empty; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, are meaningless. To him, they are a fraud, deception, sin, and hypocrisy. They are a

thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation of the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than the United States at this very hour.

Go search where you will. Roam through all the monarchies and the terrible and oppressive countries of the Old World, travel through South America. When you have found every example of cruel and violent treatment, compare them to what goes on here every day. Then you will say with me that, for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival.

Quiz

- 1 Read the excerpt from the speech.

There are 72 crimes in the State of Virginia, which, if committed by a black man carry the punishment of death. A white man will get death for only two of these crimes.

Which inference is BEST supported by this excerpt?

- (A) Many people were punished by death.
 - (B) A large amount of crime occurred in Virginia.
 - (C) Men were punished more often than women.
 - (D) Laws treated different races unequally.
- 2 Which piece of evidence BEST explains what the speaker thinks he must accomplish in his speech?
- (A) Must I try to prove that the slave is a man? That point is accepted already, and nobody doubts it. The slave-holders themselves acknowledge it in their laws and acknowledge it when they punish their slaves.
 - (B) Is it wrong to hunt them with dogs, to sell them at auction, to split apart their families, to knock out their teeth, to burn their flesh, to starve them into obeying their masters? Must I argue that a bloody system is wrong? No, I will not. I have better use of my time and strength.
 - (C) The feeling of the nation must be stirred up; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the good manners of the nation must be offended; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be denounced.
 - (D) Go search where you will. Roam through all the monarchies and the terrible and oppressive countries of the Old World, travel through South America. When you have found every example of cruel and violent treatment, compare them to what goes on here every day.

- 3 What is one of the speaker's central ideas in this speech?
- (A) The Fourth of July is meaningless as long as there is still slavery.
 - (B) Freedom and justice are basic principles of the United States.
 - (C) People who want to end slavery need to use better reasoning.
 - (D) The United States was once a country of equality and fairness.
- 4 Which detail **MUST** be included in a summary of the speech?
- (A) The speaker asks the audience if he should show "gratitude for the blessings" of independence.
 - (B) The speaker calls the Fourth of July holiday a "glorious anniversary."
 - (C) The speaker states that he is not included in the "rich inheritance of justice."
 - (D) The speaker wonders if he needs to argue against a "bloody system."