

“What to the slave is the 4th of July” (1852)

Frederick Douglass

Historical Background

In the American Founding period, roughly the time between the Declaration of Independence and the Ratification of the Constitution, many statesmen from the North and South expressed hope that slavery would gradually wither away. At the Constitutional Convention Virginian George Mason argued that, “Every master of slaves is born a petty tyrant. They bring the judgment of heaven on a Country.” By the 1850s, however, slavery had not withered away. The Compromise of 1850, which helped resolve conflicts between the North and South resulting from the Mexican-American War, included a strengthening of the Fugitive Slave Act. The new provisions made “harboring” a runaway a crime punishable by six month in prison and penalized state and local officials who failed to return “fugitives” to their masters with only a sworn affidavit claiming that they legally belonged to an owner. Orator Frederick Douglass, who himself had escaped from slavery in the late 1830s, was asked to give a speech to an Antislavery society, on the occasion of July 4th.

Historical Significance

Frederick Douglass’ address is possibly the greatest abolitionist oration given in U.S. History. In the oration he describes the contrast between the stirring words of the Declaration of Independence and the practice of slavery embedded in American life and protected by the American government as a mockery. Rejecting the need to be conciliatory, especially on a day of national celebration, he strongly rebukes American civil society, government, and religion. Douglass states “that for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival.” He argues that slavery would not endure in America were it not for the support given by pro-slavery clergymen, both north and south. Yet he ends by noting that he has not lost hope. He holds that the “great principle” of the Declaration still stands as a beacon that may yet bring the nation to see its hypocrisy and abolish slavery.

Key Concepts and Learning Objectives

Concepts: abolitionism, American Founding, Declaration of Independence, proslavery arguments, relationship between religion and slavery

Learning objectives: On completion of this unit, students will be able to:

- define abolitionism;
- analyze and describe rhetorical strategies used in Douglass’s speech;
- describe change in the institution of slavery between 1800 and 1850;

- appreciate the role of the Declaration of Independence in United States political history.

Questions to Explore

What is Douglass's view of the Founders? Of the Constitution? Of changes in Americans' views of slavery and the condition of the slaves since the time of the Founding?

Douglass argues that no argument is needed to prove that slavery is immoral and unjust and that giving a logical argument for such a position would be foolish and undignified. Although Douglass does not talk about the matter as being 'self-evident,' that seems to be what he has in mind. Are there self-evident truths? Does the violation of self-evident truths or disagreement with their validity call this into question? Why or why not?

Even after agreeing that a particular practice is unjust, many people disagree about the tactics one should use to right injustice. In the opinion of some, immediate revolutionary action is necessary in these situations. Others argue that gradual change is more likely to result in progress without causing harmful unintended consequences. Where do you place yourself on this spectrum? Explain why, using both slavery and another contemporary issue that you think presents a case of serious injustice.

It is "un-American" to criticize America, especially on Independence Day? Does criticism need to be respectful and measured or can it be total and fiery disagreement? Is the term un-American only used to stifle otherwise acceptable dissent or are there in fact un-American activities?

Comparison

Douglass's arguments are in many respects similar to those used by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in her "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" of 1848. Compare and contrast these two reformers' arguments and the situations in which American women and African-American slaves found themselves. Does either one make a stronger case than the other? Could one consistently accept the arguments of one and not the other? Explain.