

Questions

1. Why did Garrison express more effectively — his belief in himself or his belief in his cause? Do you think his tone worked for him or against him?

11-7 What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July? (1852)

Frederick Douglass

Born a slave on a Maryland plantation, Frederick Douglass (1817?–1895) escaped to the North as a young man (see text p. 403). There he became a leading abolitionist speaker; having learned to read and write while a slave, he was also a powerful and eloquent writer, editing the antislavery newspaper *The North Star* in Rochester, New York. An astute reformer and political leader, Douglass became the dominant African American public figure in nineteenth-century America; his literary works, especially his autobiographies, are regarded as classics.

In 1852 the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society invited Douglass to deliver the principal address at a Fourth of July celebration. (Because that year the holiday fell on Sunday, the celebration was actually held on July 5.) Douglass began in a conventional fashion, setting forth the case of the colonists against Great Britain and extolling the founding fathers. But then he veered off in a different direction entirely.

Source: From *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, vol. 2, John W. Blassingame, ed. Copyright © 1982 by Yale University Press. Reprinted by permission of Yale University Press.

I leave, therefore, the great deeds of your fathers to other gentlemen whose claim to have been regularly descended will be less likely to be disputed than mine! . . .

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?

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. In a case like that, the dumb might eloquently speak, and the "lame man leap as an hart." . . .

But, such is not the state of the case. I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within

the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes of death to me. This Fourth [of] July is *yours*, not *mine*. *You* may rejoice, *I* must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak to-day? If so, there is a parallel to your conduct. And let me warn you that it is dangerous to copy the example of a nation whose crimes, towering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrecoverable ruin! I can to-day take up the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people!

"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yea! we wept when we remembered 'Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there, they that carried us away captive, required of us a song: and they who wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget

her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth."

Fellow-citizens; above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of 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! Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting. America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future. Standing with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged, in the name of liberty which is fettered, in the name of the constitution and the Bible, which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery—the great sin and shame of America! "I will not equivocate; I will not excuse;"—I will use the severest language I can command; and yet not one word shall escape me that any man, whose judgement is not blinded by prejudice, or who is not at heart a slaveholder, shall not confess to be right and just.

But I fancy I hear some one of my audience say, it is just in this circumstance that you and your brother abolitionists fail to make a favorable impression on the public mind. Would you argue more, and denounce less, would you persuade more, and rebuke less, your cause would be much more likely to succeed. But, I submit, where all is plain there is nothing to be argued. . . .

At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability, and could I reach the nation's ear, I would, to-day, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, 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 quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced.

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. 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. . . .

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 glory in your refinement and your universal education; yet you maintain a system as barbarous and dreadful as ever stained the character of a nation—a system begun in avarice, supported in pride, and perpetuated in cruelty. 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 discourse eloquently on the dignity of labor; yet, you sustain a system which, in its very essence, casts a stigma upon labor. You can bare your bosom to the storm of British artillery to throw off a threepenny 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 pretence, and your Christianity as 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 by-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!* . . .

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. Long established customs of hurtful character could formerly fence themselves in, and do their evil work with social impunity. Knowledge was then confined and enjoyed by the privileged few, and the multitude walked on in mental darkness. 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 com-

paratively 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.
That year will come, and freedom's reign,
To man his plundered rights again
Restore.
God speed the day when human blood
Shall cease to flow!
In every clime, be understood,
The claims of human brotherhood,
And each return for evil, good,
Not blow for blow;
That day will come all feuds to end,
And change into a faithful friend
Each foe.

God speed the hour, the glorious hour,
When none on earth
Shall exercise a lordly power,
Nor in a tyrant's presence cower;
But all to manhood's stature tower,
By equal birth!
THAT HOUR WILL COME, to each, to all
And from his prison-house, the thrall
Go forth.

Until that year, day, hour, arrive,
With head, and heart, and hand I'll strive,
To break the rod, and rend the gyve,
The spoiler of his prey deprive—
So witness Heaven!
And never from my chosen post,
What'er the peril or the cost,
Be driven.

Questions

1. How did Douglass make effective use of the Declaration of Independence to confront white Americans with their shortcomings? What sort of imagery did Douglass use, and how effective do you think his speech was?

many men
 What were
 these and
 regard to the profile of this particular slave community.

percentage of each?
 based on your answers to
 can you offer with re-

2. The inventory states that there were “92 Men & Boys & 44 Women & Children.” Is there anything puzzling about this count? What might explain the apparent discrepancy between your count and that of the inventory-taker?
3. What was the average assessed “value” of a male slave? What was it for female slaves? How do you explain the difference? Why might “average” value be misleading? In addition to gender, what categories would you suggest for getting the most information possible out of this inventory?

12-6 Edmund Ruffin Defends Slavery (1853)

The American Revolution was a pivotal moment in the history of slavery. Before the onset of the imperial crisis, the institution existed largely unchallenged in every colony. After the War of Independence, slavery came increasingly under attack for being inconsistent with the professed ideals of the new republic. As the antislavery movement gained momentum in the North, however, proslavery forces mounted a spirited defense in the South. Beginning in the 1780s, these proslavery southerners marshaled a variety of arguments, some of them linked to the principles of the Revolution itself (see Document 6-15), to justify the perpetuation of the slave system. The intensification of sectional strife and the advent of Garrisonian abolitionism (see text pp. 351–354) in the antebellum years led many southerners to forge ever more impassioned defenses of the institution, and none did so with greater conviction than Edmund Ruffin (1794–1865). In the three decades prior to the Civil War, Ruffin emerged as a leader among militant secessionists in Virginia. When his home state did not immediately secede from the union following Abraham Lincoln’s election in 1860, Ruffin chose to move to South Carolina. In April 1861, his adopted state gave him the “honor” of firing the first shot at Fort Sumter. In June 1865, barely two months after Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse, Ruffin committed suicide.

Source: Excerpts from Paul Finkelman, *Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003), 61–65, 67, 71.

Whether in savage or civilized life, the lower that individuals are degraded by poverty and want, and the fewer are their means for comfort, and the enjoyment of either intellectual or physical pleasures, or of relief from physical sufferings, the lower do they descend in their appreciation of actual and even natural wants; and the more do they magnify and dread the efforts and labors necessary to protect themselves against the occurrence of the privations and sufferings with which they are threatened. When man sinks so low as not to feel artificial wants, or utterly to despair of gratifying any such wants, he becomes brutishly careless and indolent, even in providing for natural and physical wants, upon which provision even life is dependent. All such persons soon learn to regard present and continuous labor as an evil greater than the

probable but uncertain future occurrence of extreme privation, or even famine, and consequent death from want. . . . In all such cases—whether in civilized or in savage society, or whether in regard to individuals, families in successive generations, or to more extended communities—a good and proper remedy for this evil, if it could be applied, would be the enslaving of these reckless, wretched drones and cumberers of the earth, and thereby compelling them to habits of labor, and in return satisfying their wants for necessities, and raising them and their progeny in the scale of humanity, not only physically, but morally and intellectually. Such a measure would be the most beneficial in young or rude communities, where labor is scarce and dear, and the means for subsistence easy to obtain. . . .

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But the disposition to indulge indolence (even at great sacrifices of benefit which might be secured by industrious labor) is not peculiar to the lowest and most degraded classes of civilized communities. It is notorious that, whenever the demand for labor is much greater than the supply, or the wages of labor are much higher than the expenses of living, very many, even of the ordinary laboring class, are remarkable for indolence, and work no more than compelled by necessity. The greater the demand, and the higher the rewards, for labor, the less will be performed, as a general rule, by each individual laborer. If the wages of work for one day will support the laborer or mechanic and his family for three, it will be very likely that he will be idle two-thirds of his time.

Slave labor, in each individual case, and for each small measure of time, is more slow and inefficient than the labor of a free man. The latter knows that the more work he performs in a short time, the greater will be his reward in earnings. Hence, he has every inducement to exert himself while at work for himself, even though he may be idle for a longer time afterwards. The slave receives the same support, in food, clothing, and other allowances, whether he works much or little; and hence he has every inducement to spare himself as much as possible, and to do as little work as he can, without drawing on himself punishment, which is the only incentive to slave labor. It is, then, an unquestionable general truth, that the labor of a free man, for any stated time, is more than the labor of a slave, and if at the same cost, would be cheaper to the employer. Hence it has been inferred, and asserted by all who argue against slavery, and is often admitted even by those who would defend its expediency, that, as a general rule, and for whole communities, free labor is cheaper than slave labor. The rule is false, and the exceptions only are true. Suppose it admitted that the labor of slaves, for each hour or day, will amount to but two-thirds of what hired free laborers would perform in the same time. But the slave labor is continuous, and every day at least it returns to the employers and to the community, this two-thirds of full labor. Free laborers, if to be hired for the like duties, would require at least double the amount of wages to perform one-third more labor in each day, and in general, would be idle and earning nothing, more length of time than that spent in labor. Then, on these premises and suppositions, it is manifest that slave labor, with its admitted defect in this respect, will be cheapest and most profitable to the employer, and to the whole community, and will yield more towards the general increase of production and public wealth; and that the free laborer who is idle two days out of three, even if receiving double wages for his days of labor, is less laborious, and less productive for himself, and for the community, and the public wealth, than the slave. . . .

But in every country, when covered by a dense population, and when subsistence to free laborers becomes difficult to be obtained, the competition for employment will tend to

depress the price of labor, gradually, to the lowest rate at which a bare subsistence can be purchased. The indolence natural to man, and especially in his lowest and most degraded state, can then no longer be indulged; because to be idle would not be to suffer privation only, and to incur risks of greater suffering, but absolutely and speedily to starve and die of want. If domestic slavery could have continued to exist so long, the slaves then would be in a very much better condition than the free laborers, because possessing assured means for support, and that for much less labor and hardship. For sharp want, hunger and cold, are more effective incentives to labor than the slaveowner's whip, even if its use is not restrained by any feeling of justice or mercy. But under such conditions of free labor, domestic or individual slavery could not exist. For whenever want and competition shall reduce the wages of free labor below the cost of slave labor, then it will be more profitable for the slaveowner and employer to hire free labor (both cheapened and driven by hunger and misery) than to maintain slaves, and compel their labor less effectually and at greater expense. Under such conditions, slaves (if they could not be sold and removed to some other country, where needed) would be readily emancipated by masters to whom they had become burdensome. Soon, under the operating influence of self-interest alone on the master class, domestic slavery would come to an end of itself—give place to the far more stringent and oppressive rule of want, as a compeller of labor, and be substituted by class-slavery, or the absolute subjection of the whole class of laborers to the whole class of employers—or of labor to capital. . . .

So long as domestic slavery in general in any country, and for the most part supplies the labor of the country, there is no possibility of the occurrence of the sufferings of the laboring class, such as were described above. There, the evils which are caused by extreme want and destitution, the competition for sustenance, class slavery of labor to capital, and lastly pauper slavery, are all the incidents and necessary results of free society, and "free labor." Before such evils can visit any laboring class of personal slaves, they must have first been emancipated, and personal slavery abolished. This abolition of slavery is indeed like to occur in every country in the progress of society, and where the increasing population has no sufficient and advantageous outlet. But so long as domestic slavery remains, and is the main supply of labor, among any civilized people, it is a certain indication, and the most unquestionable evidence, that extensive and long continued suffering from want or hunger have as yet had no existence in that country. The first great effect of such distress will be to reduce (by competition) the wages of free labor below the cost of maintaining slaves—and this effect would next cause the extinction of slavery, by the mode of sale and exportation, or otherwise the emancipation of all the slaves. After this step has been made, of course, in due time, the want and suffering, which are the necessary incidents and consequences of free society, are to be expected to follow in after times.

