

Frederick Douglass's America: Race, Justice, and the Promise of the Founding

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Abstract: *Nearly 50 years after Martin Luther King delivered his memorable "I have a dream" speech, there is a growing consensus that the civil rights movement, despite some important victories, has been a failure. While conceding that these critics have a point, Peter C. Myers faults them for embracing a radical critique of America that rejects America's founding principles as racist, abandons the goal of integration, and fosters alienation. To reaffirm the old integrationist faith in America, Myers turns to the renowned 19th century abolitionist and advocate of civil and political equality Frederick Douglass. In America's dedication to principles of natural human rights set forth in the Declaration of Independence, Douglass found reason to love and identify with his country, despite the injustices that he and his people had suffered. To this day, Douglass endures unequalled as the invincible adversary of racial despair and disaffection—the preeminent exemplar and apostle of hopefulness in the American promise of justice for all.*

Standing in the foreground of the Lincoln Memorial nearly 50 years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered the most famous speech by any American in the 20th century. In it, he articulated in an unforgettable manner the core meaning and mission of America, drawing inspiration, he said, from "the magnificent words" of the nation's two great founding documents, the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

"Even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow," King told his audience, "I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream." At the center of King's dream was the hopeful expectation "that one day this nation will rise up

and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal"—and that "all men, yes black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."¹

It is appealing to think that King's dream has been realized, at least in its essentials, by the reforms of the Civil Rights Era—reforms that King himself characterized as the third, the greatest, and the culminating American Revolution. In this reassuring view, the era of momentous reforms that King's speech and actions did much to elicit vindicates the character of America, displaying the nation's renewed determination to make good on its original commitment to securing the

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equal natural rights of all its members. In like manner, the election of Barack Obama as President might be viewed as the culminating, climactic event of the Civil Rights Era, signifying the advent of a “post-racial” America and vindicating once and for all the mainstream, integrationist tradition in African–American political thought lately exemplified by King.

This reassuring view is not, however, the prevailing opinion among post–Civil Rights Era scholars

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and activists concerned with race relations. To the contrary, among such commentators there appears to be a growing consensus that, despite its important victories, the civil rights movement must be judged as on the whole a failure. Proponents of this skeptical view cite the persistence of racial segregation in neighborhoods and schools; the persistence of stark disparities between black and white Americans in various measures of social and economic well-being; and, most alarmingly, the deepening alienation—the “nihilism,” as Cornel West candidly named it²—prevalent among many African–Americans living in urban poverty. Speaking in 1993 to a black congregation at the Memphis church where King had delivered the final sermon of his life, President Bill Clinton lamented that King “did not live and die to see the American family destroyed” or “for the freedom of people to kill each other with reckless abandon.”³

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), pp. 217, 219.

² Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), chapter 1.

³ William Jefferson Clinton, “Memphis Church of God in Christ Convention Speech,” November 13, 1993, at <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/wjclintonmemphis.htm> (November 8, 2010).

Those who are skeptical of the claim of a post-racial America have a point. A fair-minded observer could scarcely deny that for many Americans, race still does matter. A broad array of racially freighted social problems persists and even intensifies in the post–Civil Rights Era, in the face of which the ideals of the civil rights cause cannot be said to have been fully realized. In response, however, influential scholars and activists have embraced a radical critique of America that is much more likely to worsen those problems than it is to resolve them.

It is very difficult to see how the forward- and upward-looking labor required to achieve the ends of justice for all and black elevation in America is to be sustained amid a spreading sentiment of alienation from America. And it is no less difficult to see how the propagation of the opinion that the American Founders’ ostensibly universal principles and ostensibly free institutions were meant to secure the oppression of people of color could fail to spread and to deepen that demoralizing sentiment. But this is the opinion of the Founding and, more generally, of the nation’s basic moral architecture that critics have propounded widely in today’s schools and universities. For radical critics, America’s betrayals of the ideals of liberty and equality for all are betrayals *in* the nation’s founding principles rather than betrayals *of* them.

Typifying a view of the Founding now common among scholars of race are remarks by Justice Thurgood Marshall, the first African–American Supreme Court Justice and a hero of the legal struggle that paved the way for the Civil Rights Era. In a widely publicized speech commemorating the Constitution’s bicentennial, Marshall asserted that in its infamously pro-slavery ruling in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), the Supreme Court merely “reaffirmed the prevailing opinion of the Framers regarding the rights of Negroes in America.” He claimed that Chief Justice Roger Taney, writing for the Court in that case, had accurately described the Founders’ views when he alleged that in the Founders’ day, black Americans

had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race...and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the Negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit.... [N]o one seems to have doubted the correctness of the prevailing opinion of the time.⁴

In the opinion shared by Taney, Marshall, and many present-day professors, teachers, and students, the stain of racial exclusion suffuses both the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration's affirmation, as self-evident truths, of the principles that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is now commonly read as a declaration only of the rights of propertied white males.

A great deal is at stake in this critique, and it demands a clear, forthright response: These charges against the Founders are false as well as pernicious.⁵ As Abraham Lincoln and many others have observed, the claim that the Founders regarded blacks or nonwhites as beings lacking equal natural rights is altogether false.

James Madison, the commonly acknowledged "Father of the Constitution," in a speech at the Constitutional Convention denounced slavery grounded in "the mere distinction of colour" as "the most oppressive dominion ever exercised by man over man."⁶ Likewise, Thomas Jefferson, the princi-

pal author of the Declaration of Independence, in his original draft of that document denounced slavery (not only the slave trade) as "a cruel war against human nature"—an institution creating and depending on "a market," he emphasized to excite outrage in his readers, "where MEN should be bought & sold." All the major figures of the Founding forwarded similar denunciations of slavery.

It must be acknowledged that most of the Founders, with notable exceptions, were not racial integrationists; yet despite their particular doubts, racial integration is a legitimate inference from their principles, as Douglass forcefully argued.

To correct this historical record is at once an intellectual, a civic, and a moral imperative, but to reaffirm the old integrationist faith in America's principles and institutions, it is necessary (if not sufficient) to recover the Founders' actual opinions about slavery and race. It is particularly important also to pay renewed attention to the most thoughtful apostles of the integrationist faith among the major figures of the

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African-American protest tradition. Such attention is properly directed toward, but also beyond, the icons of the recent era of reform.

With due respect to King and to other stalwarts of the 20th-century movement, I submit that in the search for the most thoughtful proponents of the pro-integration, pro-America argument, there is no worthier object of our attention than the life and thought of the greatest of their 19th-century predecessors, the renowned abolitionist and advocate of civil and political equality Frederick Douglass.

Douglass endures unequalled as the invincible adversary of racial despair and disaffection—the pre-eminent exemplar and apostle of hopefulness in

⁴ Thurgood Marshall, "Speech at the Annual Seminar of the San Francisco Patent and Trademark Law Association," May 6, 1987, at http://www.thurgoodmarshall.com/speeches/constitutional_speech.htm (November 8, 2010).

⁵ For an indispensable rebuttal of this critique, see Thomas G. West, *Vindicating the Founders: Race, Sex, Class, and Justice in the Origins of America* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), chapter 1.

⁶ James Madison, "Speech of June 6, 1787," in *Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, Vol. I, ed. Max Farrand (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1911), p. 135.

the American promise of justice for all.⁷ At the heart of all that he learned and taught were these simple propositions:

- That the natural-rights principles epitomized in the Declaration of Independence were universally and permanently true;
- That the everlasting glory of America's Founding lay in its dedication to those principles; and
- That the salvation of the nation lay in its rededication to them.

A formidable thinker as well as an activist and a polemicist, Frederick Douglass produced the most powerful argument for the affirmation of those principles in the history of African-American political thought.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Space permits here only a brief sketch of Douglass's singularly remarkable life story, which sheds much light on the formation of his political philosophy.⁸ The boy who became Frederick Douglass was born, enslaved, on Maryland's Eastern Shore in February 1818 and given the improbably dignified name Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey. Despite that glimmer of dignity at his origin, the year of his birth and the identity of his own father remained unknown to him throughout his life. He barely knew his mother, who died shortly before or after he turned eight years old.

As the author of three autobiographies, Douglass framed his life story as a series of reversals of fortune

⁷ I develop this argument at length in *Frederick Douglass: Race and the Rebirth of American Liberalism* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2008).

⁸ The reader interested in a fuller account of Douglass's life should begin by reading Douglass's autobiographies: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845); *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855); and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881; expanded 1892).

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suggestive of the possibility of liberating revolutionary change. The first of his positive reversals occurred as he was sent to serve as a house slave in Baltimore, where, aided by his kindly slavemistress Sophia Auld, he learned the rudiments of literacy. When Hugh Auld, Sophia's husband, promptly forbade further instruction for the reason that literacy would forever unfit the boy for slavery, young Frederick gained a revelatory insight into the evil design of slavery and the sure path to liberation.

The climactic reversal in his youth came when he resolved to resist, and successfully resisted, a cruel slavemaster's attempt to whip him. His forceful resistance proved no less powerfully liberating than his literacy. "I was *nothing* before," he wrote in his autobiography, reflecting on the episode. "I WAS A MAN NOW."⁹

From that moment on, Frederick Bailey was resolved to escape slavery—or die trying. His careful planning paid off in September 1838, when he fled Baltimore disguised as a seaman and made his way ultimately to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he settled, a newly married man, and took the surname Douglass from the hero in Sir Walter Scott's epic poem *The Lady of the Lake*. There he worked proudly as a day laborer and refined his oratorical powers, both as a lay preacher in New Bedford's African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and as a participant in the meetings of local black abolitionists.

His life was transformed yet again in August 1841, when the nation's foremost abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, heard him speak at meetings in

⁹ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1994), p. 286.

New Bedford and Nantucket, Massachusetts, and promptly offered him a position as a lecturer for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. In that position, Douglass's fame grew rapidly, and with it came controversy and heightened personal danger.

Doubts arose as to whether so skilled an orator could ever have been a slave, and Douglass responded by writing his first autobiography. His story, an instant best seller, succeeded in confirming his veracity, but at the cost of attracting greatly intensified attention from fugitive slavecatchers. In August 1845, two months after his book was published, Douglass fled to Great Britain, where his speeches won him international fame. Twenty months later, he returned a free man by law, his freedom having been purchased with funds raised by English friends, and resumed his abolitionist labors in the U.S. He returned also a more confident and independent thinker, and in late 1847, against Garrison's advice, he launched his own newspaper, originally titled *The North Star*.

Douglass labored to remind succeeding generations that “there was a right side and a wrong side” in the Civil War and to propagate his undying faith in the mission and promise of America.

Douglass's new office as editor broadened his education as an abolitionist, and over the next few years, his differences with his erstwhile mentors grew more pronounced. His final break with Garrison came in 1851, when he announced that he had come to reject the core Garrisonian doctrine that the U.S. Constitution was a pro-slavery instrument. His embrace of the arguments of the rival “political abolitionist” school freed him to involve himself in politics, and his increasing political activism through the 1850s and into the Civil War years eventually brought him face to face with President Abraham Lincoln—first in the role of harshly critical petitioner and later, after the

Emancipation Proclamation and the deepening of their acquaintance, as Lincoln's valued adviser and friend.

In the postwar decades, Douglass's initially bright hopes for rapid, lasting reforms faded as the nation's governing majority, weary of conflict, flagged in its commitment to enforcing the civil and political rights of the freedpeople in the ex-rebel states. Undaunted by these setbacks, however, he maintained to the end a strenuous schedule of speaking and writing, laboring to remind the succeeding generations that “there was a right side and a wrong side in the late war” and to propagate his undying faith in the mission and promise of America. As he gathered his energies to prepare yet another lecture on the imperative of equal justice for all, he suffered a sudden heart attack or stroke and died on February 20, 1895.

Douglass's great cause was integration, and his great theme was hopefulness—rationally grounded hopefulness—in America's capacity to secure justice for all, irrespective of race, color, sex, or creed. Once again, that hopefulness was grounded primarily in his appreciation of the unique virtue of America's beginning; “first things are always interesting,” he liked to say,¹⁰ and most of all in the case of a new nation dedicated to universal principles of justice.

That appreciation was, however, specific to the maturity of his thought. How he acquired it is a part of his story not to be neglected. For Douglass's ultimately irrepressible faith in America was not at all a natural inheritance or an easy acquisition. To the contrary, it was a hard-won achievement, and as such, it contains valuable lessons for all Americans and especially for those who, like the young Douglass himself, find themselves dispirited about their place and prospects in their country.

¹⁰ See, for example, Douglass, “Speech at the Unveiling of the Freedmen's Monument in Memory of Abraham Lincoln,” April 14, 1876, in *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One*, Vol. IV, ed. John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979–1992), p. 430 (hereinafter *Douglass Papers*).

UP FROM ALIENATION: DOUGLASS'S ABOLITIONIST YEARS

Speaking to the Garrisonian American Anti-Slavery Society in 1847, a youthful Douglass posed a poignant question and supplied a dispiriting answer. "What country have I?" he asked, a member of a race placed outside the protections of law, and answered, "I have no patriotism. I have no country." He could feel no attachment to America, he explained, for reasons that ran deeper than the country's unjust practices. He condemned not only America's "Government," but also its "Constitution" for "supporting and perpetuating this monstrous system of injustice and blood."¹¹

That Douglass sympathized, for a period in his youth, with anti-America radicalism is hardly surprising. When he spoke those words he was less than 10 years removed from the depredations of slavery, and the position he took in that 1847 speech reiterates the signature doctrine of his early Garrisonian mentors, for whom condemnation of the Constitution as a villainous compromise with slavery represented an article of abolitionist faith.

Moreover, the increasing incidence of despairing extremism among many abolitionists during this period was abetted by a series of portentous events. To many, the U.S. war with Mexico in 1846 signified an imperialist effort to expand the number and power of slaveholding states at the national level, and the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850—"that most foul and fiendish of all human decrees," Douglass would call it¹²—effectively nationalized slavery, conscripting non-slaveholding states and citizens in the recapture of persons fleeing for freedom. In response, Garrison intensified his calls for the dissolution of the American Union, while influential black abolitionists urged blacks to surrender their hopes in America

and emigrate. Thousands of black Americans did just that.

What is remarkable, then, is not that Douglass felt alienated from his country for most of the 1840s, but rather that, by the force of his character and intellect, he overcame this alienation as rapidly and thoroughly as he did. Spirited and independent-minded by nature, Douglass could abide mentors only to a limited degree even as a young man.

But it was upon becoming the editor of his own paper that his mind truly quickened. His new duties in that office compelled him, as he later wrote, "to re-think the whole subject, and to study, with some care, not only the just and proper rules of legal interpretation, but the origin, design, nature, rights, powers, and duties of civil government."¹³ This rethinking, he reported, brought about "a radical change in my opinions."¹⁴ At the center of that change was a radical reappraisal of the American Founding.

Douglass publicly announced his change of opinion in the spring of 1851, but his most powerful statement of his revised view appears, fittingly enough, in his speech at an Independence Day celebration in 1852. In that speech, often considered the greatest of all abolitionist speeches, he excoriated America's injustices no less vigorously than he ever had, but he took great care to distinguish America's practice from its first principles and the actions of its subsequent generations from those of its Founders.

"The signers of the Declaration of Independence," Douglass told his audience that day, "were brave men. They were great men too.... They were statesmen, patriots and heroes." In his discerning view, however, the main source of their greatness—the virtue that enabled them to be more than revolutionaries, the *Founders* of a great republic—inherited not in their bravery but in their dedication to the "eternal principles," the "saving principles," set forth in the unique

¹¹ Douglass, "Speech at the American Anti-Slavery Society," May 11, 1847, in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, Vol. I, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1950–75), p. 236 (hereinafter *Life and Writings*).

¹² Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" July 5, 1852, in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. II, p. 375.

¹³ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *Autobiographies*, p. 392.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

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revolutionary document they dared to sign. “Your fathers, the fathers of this republic, did, most deliberately...and with a sublime faith in the great principles of justice and freedom, lay deep the corner-stone of the national superstructure, which has risen and still rises in grandeur around you.... Mark them!”¹⁵

In truth, Douglass had long admired the Declaration and the Revolution; but now, having broken with the Garrisonian variant of abolitionism, he had come to admire the whole of the Founding, because he had come to judge the Constitution to be faithful to the saving principles of the Declaration. The charge of a pro-slavery Constitution was “a slander upon [the] memory” of the Framers, he contended; “interpreted as it ought to be interpreted, the Constitution is a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT.” Consider “the constitution according to its plain reading,” Douglass continued, “and I defy the presentation of a single pro-slavery clause in it. On the other hand it will be found to contain principles and purposes, entirely hostile to the existence of slavery.”¹⁶

Building on the ingenious arguments of the 19th-century legal theorist Lysander Spooner, Douglass argued that the passages in the Constitution’s text that admit of some ambiguity, such as the clauses commonly held to concern slavery, must be interpreted in light of the larger ends or “objects” of the Constitution as set forth in the Preamble. Above all, the Constitution must be interpreted in light of its commitment to secure the blessings of liberty for all. This commitment not only appears in the Preamble, but also reflects a

bedrock rule of legal interpretation—a rule “as old as law” itself, Douglass observed, and grounded in the very nature of law, according to which a legal instrument “must be construed strictly in favor of liberty and justice.”¹⁷

In Douglass’s argument, these interpretive principles yielded powerfully anti-slavery results. In fact, he contended, the Constitution was more than merely *anti-slavery*. It did much more, that is, than convey the Framers’ general disapproval of slavery and their design to recognize slavery only as a local institution, to tolerate it only as a necessary, temporary evil, and to contain its expansion to the end of promoting its eventual abolition. This latter, of course, was the position of Lincoln and of the moderate center of the Free Soil and Republican parties during the 1850s. The position of Douglass and constitutional radicals, by contrast, was that the Constitution was in the strict sense *abolitionist*. Slavery, in their view, was simply unconstitutional; the Constitution delegated to the federal government both the right and the duty to abolish slavery immediately, everywhere in the Union.¹⁸

The one thing needful, then, was to elect an abolitionist governing majority at the federal level. Seeking such a consummation, Douglass hurled himself into political activism throughout the 1850s.

The persistence of Douglass’s hopeful, energetic activism during that very difficult decade deserves further comment. Let us consider first the difficulties. The 1850s witnessed a series of what, to many, must have appeared to be catastrophic setbacks for the abolitionist cause, beginning with the execrated Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, including also the Kansas–Nebraska Act of 1854, and culminating in the *Dred Scott* ruling in 1857. The first of those, described above, was the most flagrantly pro-slavery legislation in U.S. history. The Kansas–Nebraska Act reversed a federal prohibition of slavery within those two territories, thus betraying

¹⁵ Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. II, pp. 364–365.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 384–385.

¹⁷ Douglass, “Speech on the Dred Scott Decision,” May 11, 1857, in *Life and Writings*, Vol. III, p. 418.

¹⁸ Douglass, “The Republican Party—Our Position,” in *Life and Writings*, Vol. II, pp. 380–382.

the principles of the Declaration by making moral indifference to slavery the guiding principle of federal policy and prompting an alarmed Abraham Lincoln to return to electoral politics. Worst of all was *Dred Scott*, in which the nation's highest court endorsed the pro-slavery, white-supremacist reading propagated by both the Constitution's Garrisonian enemies and slavery's most determined defenders.

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In his successive responses to these developments, Douglass expressed not despair but rising hopefulness. Concluding his July Fourth oration in 1852, he reassured his audience, "I do not despair of this country.... 'The arm of the Lord is not shortened,' and the doom of slavery is certain."¹⁹ Stronger still was his statement following the *Dred Scott* ruling: "My hopes were never brighter than now.... Come what will, I hold it to be morally certain that, sooner or later, by fair means or foul means, in quiet or in tumult...slavery is doomed to cease out of this otherwise goodly land, and liberty is destined to become the settled law of this Republic."²⁰

This seemingly contrarian hopefulness was no mere exercise in morale-boosting. Douglass found solid reasons for believing what he repeatedly affirmed throughout the decade, as in his *Dred Scott* speech:

I base my sense of the certain overthrow of slavery, in part, upon the nature of the American Government, the Constitution, the tendencies of the age, and the character of the American

people.... I know of no soil better adapted to the growth of reform than American soil. I know of no country where the conditions for affecting great changes in the settled order of things, for the development of right ideas of liberty and humanity, are more favorable than here in these United States.... The Constitution, as well as the Declaration of Independence, and the sentiments of the founders of the Republic, give us a plat-form broad enough, and strong enough, to support the most comprehensive plans for the freedom and elevation of all the people of this country, without regard to color, class, or clime.²¹

Douglass believed that slavery was doomed, first and foremost, because he believed that the law of nature as epitomized in the Declaration was, at some deep level, not only true but *known* or *felt* to be true by all concerned in the conflict over slavery. The implication was that the agitation that abolitionists had begun could never be finally pacified until slavery was finally abolished. "The fact is," Douglass observed as he reviewed the succession of failed attempts to quiet the controversy over slavery, "the more the question has been settled, the more it has needed settling.... All measures devised...to allay and diminish the antislavery agitation, have only served to increase, intensify, and embolden that agitation."²²

In what turned out to be Douglass's most prescient argument, slavery's demise would come about in the following sequence of events.

- Slavery's primary victims, mostly knowing nothing of the Declaration itself, would corroborate its truth by their various acts of resistance, displaying their natural love of liberty and their moral humanity as rights-possessors.
- These displays of humanity would naturally

¹⁹ Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. II, pp. 386–387.

²⁰ Douglass, "Speech on the Dred Scott Decision," in *Life and Writings*, Vol. II, pp. 411, 414.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 414–415.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 410, 412.

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arouse the sympathy of non-slaveholders, a few of whom at first, and more with the passage of time, would take up the cause of abolition.

- The rise of this abolitionist agitation would alarm slaveholders, who would respond by attempting to suppress abolitionist speech and to strengthen and perpetuate their political power by expanding slavery's presence in federal territories, thus preparing the admission of additional slave states.
- Northerners, remembering their revolutionary heritage enough, at least, to remain vigilant in defense of their own rights, would increasingly view these actions as aggressions until the point was reached that slaveholders, by their own imperial overreach, had assembled a coalition of enemies too large for them to defeat.²³

DOUGLASS AND LINCOLN

With the election of the first Republican President in 1860, Douglass's hopeful predictions would soon be vindicated, but this was not what he initially expected of an Abraham Lincoln Administration. Although the election meant that "a new order of events...is now fairly opening upon the country," he reserved judgment as to just how significant a change was in prospect. He allowed that Lincoln's election "has demonstrated the possibility of electing...an *anti-slavery reputation* to the Presidency of the United

²³ See especially Douglass, "The Doom of the Black Power," July 27, 1855, in *Life and Writings*, Vol. II, pp. 364–366. I explain Douglass's argument more elaborately in *Frederick Douglass*, pp. 72–82.

States."²⁴ But an "anti-slavery reputation" was a far cry from a genuine *abolitionist*, in Douglass's estimation, and Douglass at first expected little of Lincoln, who did not share his radically abolitionist reading of the Constitution.

For its first 18 months, Douglass found in Lincoln's presidency mostly a confirmation of his doubts. Whereas Douglass from the outset called urgently and insistently for the Civil War's prosecution as an "abolition war," Lincoln saw in such a course of action only a self-destructive rashness—a premature radicalizing of the war, most likely to result in the disaffection of vital allies and, ultimately, the catastrophic failure of the Union cause.

Douglass's mind was opened to the wisdom of Lincoln's statesmanship as he came to see the depth of Lincoln's commitment to the anti-slavery cause. "In his heart of hearts," Douglass would later reflect, Lincoln "loathed and hated slavery."²⁵ The foundation of this deepened appreciation was of course Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, promised in September 1862 and delivered the following January. "This proclamation changed everything," Douglass

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later recalled. But the final, unimpeachable confirmation of Lincoln's anti-slavery commitment came for Douglass in August 1864, when the President, fearing that a demoralized electorate would soon force a premature end to the war, summoned Douglass to the White House to discuss a covert scheme for liberating as many as possible in the meantime. "What [Lincoln] said on this day," Douglass wrote in his final autobiography, "showed a deeper moral conviction against

²⁴ Douglass, "The Late Election," December 1860, in *Life and Writings*, Vol. II, p. 528 (emphasis in original).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

slavery than I had ever seen before in anything spoken or written by him."²⁶

In time, Douglass came to see the wisdom in Lincoln's prudent statesmanship, as he acknowledged in his most developed reflection on Lincoln, his speech at the unveiling of the Freedmen's Monument to Lincoln in 1876. Although abolitionists including Douglass had assailed Lincoln for his seeming reluctance to strike at slavery, Douglass now conceded the superiority of Lincoln's judgment:

Had he put the abolition of slavery before the salvation of the Union, he would have inevitably driven from him a powerful class of the American people and rendered resistance to rebellion impossible.... Measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined.²⁷

Through long and deep reflection, Douglass finally came to regard Lincoln as "the one man...to whom we are more indebted for a United Nation and for American liberty than to any other...the greatest statesman that ever presided over the destinies of this Republic."²⁸

Lincoln's assassination was "the crowning crime of slavery," as Douglass declared in his 1876 memorial, and it was also a damaging blow to hopes for a just and prudent policy for the nation's postwar reconstruction. Profoundly aggrieved by that "hell-black" crime, Douglass yet struggled characteristically to find in it cause for hope. So far as it "filled the country with a deeper abhorrence of slavery and a deeper love for the great liberator," the murder of Lincoln,

²⁶ Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, in *Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies*, pp. 790, 795–797.

²⁷ Douglass, "Speech at the Unveiling of The Freedmen's Monument in Memory of Abraham Lincoln," April 14, 1876, in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. IV, p. 436.

²⁸ Douglass, "Address on the Twentieth Anniversary of Emancipation," April 16, 1883, in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. V, p. 78.

Douglass finally came to regard Lincoln as "the one man...to whom we are more indebted for a United Nation and for American liberty than to any other...the greatest statesman that ever presided over the destinies of this Republic."

he hoped, would arouse in the war-weary nation the spirit to continue and complete Lincoln's work—and Douglass's own—in the postwar years.²⁹

So he labored on in those years, cherishing the memory of Lincoln in part for his own, personal reasons and calling his fellow citizens also to venerate the Great Emancipator that they might be bound ever more firmly to the great cause for which he and so many loyal citizens had died: to bring forth out of the terrible war a renewed nation, reconceived in liberty and rededicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

NOTHING BUT FAIR PLAY: THE POSTWAR YEARS

Viewing it amid the grand course of human events, Douglass saw in the Civil War an event of epochal moral significance. The Union victory signified, for Douglass, much more than the defeat of one particular rebellion and more, too, than the defeat of the troublesome particular doctrines that inspired that rebellion. Viewed in its larger significance, the Union victory meant a victory not only over an extreme, implicitly anarchic variant of the state-sovereignty doctrine, but also over the no less pernicious doctrines of sectionalism and racial supremacy. It made of Americans "one glorious and homogeneous people" (as Douglass said of the Emancipation Proclamation)³⁰ and elevated America to its rightful place among nations as exemplar of the humanitarian spirit of the age.

²⁹ Douglass, "Speech at the Unveiling of The Freedmen's Monument," April 14, 1876, in *Life and Writings*, Vol. IV, p. 319.

³⁰ *Life and Writings*, Vol. III, p. 274.

“Every nation, owing to its peculiar character and composition, has a definite mission in the world,” Douglass observed in 1869, but America’s mission, clearer than ever in the aftermath of the war, marks it as exceptional. America’s mission and destiny are to supply “the [most] perfect national illustration of the unity and dignity of the human family that the world has ever seen.” This is the essential bequest of “our fundamental principles of government, world-embracing in their scope and character.”³¹ The Union victory, in Douglass’s view, signified a momentous victory for a grand politics of integration.

Douglass labored throughout his postwar career to preserve and propagate this enlarged, moralized understanding among a war-weary loyalist population longing for reunion and a stable peace. The grave danger was that reunion and peace would be purchased at the cost of obscuring the moral principles that remained in contest. For Douglass especially, the stakes of that contest were matters of concrete urgency as well as of larger national destiny. Central to the question of the war’s larger moral legacy was the fate of those with whom he peculiarly identified: those lately emancipated.

As he renewed his labors for justice and progress for the freedpeople, Douglass had to confront a nettlesome question, lingering in the minds even of many anti-slavery whites, that had long obstructed the abolitionist cause. “Everybody has asked the question,” he complained in early 1865, “and they learned to ask it early of the abolitionists, ‘What shall we do with the negro?’” after emancipation.³² Douglass’s response was disarmingly blunt. “I have had but one answer from the beginning. Do nothing with us! Your doing with us has already played the mischief with us.... [If] the Negro cannot stand on his own legs, let him fall.... All I ask is, give him a

chance to stand on his own legs! Let him alone!”³³

This response epitomizes Douglass’s career-long insistence on the cultivation of self-reliant virtue as the primary means of elevation from the degraded condition in which many years of slavery and proscription had left most black Americans. But his “Do nothing with us!” rhetoric, oversimplified for emphasis, has been misunderstood by critics who read it literally as a denial of public obligation and a justification of pub-

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lic indifference toward the freedpeople. Formulated more precisely, his demand “Let [the Negro] alone” meant “Give him fair play and let him alone, but *be sure you give him fair play.*”³⁴ In its most general meaning, “fair play” or justice to black Americans was to be determined by a principle of non-exceptionalism. As he explained to an audience of Boston abolitionists in early 1862, fair play meant that the ruling majority should “do nothing with us, by us, or for us *as a particular class....* The broadest and bitterest of the black man’s misfortunes is the fact that he is everywhere regarded and treated as an *exception* to the principles and maxims which apply to other men.”³⁵

In its concrete applications, Douglass’s principle of fair play meant first that the white majority must refrain from various courses of action whereby it might be tempted to evade rather than to resolve properly the problem of race relations. Speaking in mid-1863 on the question “What shall be done with the Negro?” he specified four altogether objection-

³¹ Douglass, “Our Composite Nationality,” December 7, 1869, in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. IV, p. 253.

³² Douglass, “What the Black Man Wants,” January 1, 1865, in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. IV, p. 68.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Douglass, “Let the Negro Alone,” May 11, 1869, in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. IV, pp. 202–203 (emphasis added).

³⁵ Douglass, “The Future of the Negro People of the Slave States,” in *Life and Writings*, Vol. III, p. 218 (emphasis added).

able responses. Fair play meant at minimum that the nation must reject the alternatives of (1) re-enslavement, this time of the entire black American population; (2) colonization or expatriation; (3) persisting subordination of blacks as a degraded caste; and (4) outright extermination. Of these four possibilities, he was especially fearful of the third in view of the terrible damage it would do—both directly to the character and morale of its primary victims and indirectly to the entire country. “The effect of abolishing slavery, without conferring equal rights,” he contended, “would be [to doom] the colored race to a condition indescribably wretched and the dreadful contagion of their vices and crimes would fly like cholera and small pox through all classes. Woe, woe! to this land, when it strips five millions of its people of all motives for cultivating an upright character.”³⁶

The only “*solid, and final* solution of the problem before us,” Douglass insisted, was also the only just solution: “the most perfect civil and political equality” such that black Americans “shall enjoy all the rights, privileges and immunities enjoyed by any other members of the body politic.”³⁷ In its primary meaning, Douglass’s fair-play, non-exceptionalism principle entailed simple equality under law, irrespective of race or color, but in the decades following the war, he was most urgently concerned with equal protection for two rights in particular: voting rights and property rights.

Voting Rights and Property Rights

“We want [the voting right],” Douglass explained in his most extended discussion of the question, “because it is our *right*, first of all. No class of men can, without insulting their own nature, be content” without it. To be deprived of the vote in America, or in any democracy, he continued, is to suffer a double injustice. “Here, where universal suffrage is the rule...

³⁶ “The Present and Future of the Colored Race in America,” May 1863, in *Life and Writings*, Vol. III, pp. 350–351.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 348–349 (emphasis in original).

The voting right was, for Douglass, the “keystone of the arch of human liberty,” as it was the primary, indispensable means of guarding every other right.

to rule us out is to make us an exception, to brand us with the stigma of inferiority, and to invite to our heads the missiles of those about us.”³⁸

This was no merely abstract consideration. The voting right was, for Douglass, the “keystone of the arch of human liberty,” as it was the primary, indispensable means of guarding every other right. Without it, black Americans would remain all too often outside the protection of law, dependent for their rights on white officeholders who lacked any electoral incentive to represent them. Addressing a women’s rights convention in 1868, Douglass made the point simply and bluntly: “If the elective franchise is not extended to the negro, he dies—he is exterminated.”³⁹

Moreover, as the voting right was an imperative of justice, it was also, Douglass argued, a powerful agency for the cause of integration. This meant first the reintegration of a country still badly divided by sectionalism in the immediate aftermath of the war. The federal government would find itself “surrounded by a hostile spirit” in the lately rebellious states, he warned, and “the strength to counterbalance this spirit” would be found “in the negroes of the south.”⁴⁰ Moreover, a policy of equal suffrage would have, over time, a more profound integrative effect in the healing of racial divisions. Soon enough after African-Americans gained the vote, Douglass believed, the interests of white politicians and voters would overcome their prejudices;

³⁸ “What the Black Man Wants,” in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. IV, p. 63.

³⁹ “Address of the Colored National Convention to the People of the United States,” October 4–7, 1864, in *Life and Writings*, Vol. III, p. 420; “Douglass, “Women’s Rights Are Not Inconsistent with Negro Rights,” November 19, 1868, in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. IV, p. 183.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

blacks would be “courted by the leaders of all parties,” and their rights and interests would be recognized in law and policy.⁴¹

Scarcely less important than suffrage as a guarantor of personal security were property rights. Douglass’s arguments on this subject extended back to his early abolitionist years, when he saw very clearly that slaves’ natural rights to liberty were fundamentally identical with their natural rights to property—with their natural properties in their own persons, in their own labor, and in the fruits of that labor—and that the fundamental evil of slavery was to deprive them, at once, of both.

This deep, Lockean insight, which he shared, once again, with America’s Founders, moved Douglass to defend the natural right of property against errors and attacks from divergent positions. On one side, he rejected as “plainly blasphemous” the radical positivism expressed in the eminent Senator Henry Clay’s assertion “that what the law makes property, is property.”⁴² At the other extreme, he judged it “arrant nonsense” to conflate the causes of abolitionism and socialism, as some abolitionists did in the belief that they could eradicate the desire for property in another human being only by eradicating the desire for private property of any kind.⁴³ True abolition and true liberation, in Douglass’s understanding, required the restoration of slaves’ property rights, not the elimination of all others’ property.

Douglass’s postwar arguments were consistent with this position. His fair-play principle required, first and foremost, the cessation of various practices in the post-Reconstruction South that were designed to frustrate blacks’ efforts to acquire property for themselves. Such practices implicated southern white landowners in a conspiracy to refrain from selling land to

black would-be buyers and to compensate black laborers only by means that prevented them from accumulating any savings. In all such policies, Douglass protested, “there is clearly seen the purpose to crush our spirits, to cripple our enterprise and doom us to a condition of destitution and degradation.”⁴⁴

Again in contrast to more radical critics in his day and our own, Douglass insisted that these persisting abuses by the class of former slaveholders constituted clear violations, not legitimate applications and not refutations, of the natural right of property. The proper remedy for these violations, as he conceived of it, was in accord with this conviction.

True abolition and true liberation, in Douglass’s understanding, required the restoration of slaves’ property rights, not the elimination of all others’ property.

In a short manuscript written sometime in or near 1869, he formulated in “rough outline” a land-reform proposal, according to which the federal government would correct for southern landowners’ collusion by becoming itself a purchaser and seller of lands. Douglass proposed the chartering of a “national land and loan company” empowered to purchase available tracts of land and then to resell or lease those lands to members of the newly emancipated class.⁴⁵ Two things are noteworthy about this proposal.

First, it makes clear that Douglass’s demand for nothing but fair play allowed for vigorous protective and remedial action by the federal government.

Second, it indicates Douglass’s reluctance to support more radical measures such as the “plan for

⁴¹ “Address of the Colored National Convention,” in *Life and Writings*, Vol. III, p. 420

⁴² Douglass, “Northern Whigs and Democrats,” July 7, 1848, in *Life and Writings*, Vol. I, p. 311.

⁴³ Douglass, “Property in Soil and Property in Man,” November 18, 1848, in *Life and Writings*, Vol. V, p. 105.

⁴⁴ Douglass, “We Are Not Yet Quite Free,” August 3, 1869, in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. IV, pp. 235–236.

⁴⁵ The manuscript is available in the Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress (Speech, Article, and Book File; Miscellany, Folder 7 of 20) and also online at the library’s Douglass Papers Web site, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/doughtml/doughome.html>.

confiscation” proposed in 1867 by Pennsylvania Congressman Thaddeus Stevens, leader of the Radical Republicans in the House of Representatives.

In Stevens’s plan, lands belonging to the former Confederate states and their soldiers would be deemed forfeited and then distributed in parcels of 40 acres as homesteads to the freedpeople. In developing his own proposal, Douglass did not identify the precise grounds of his disagreement with Stevens. but his relative moderation in this proposal is certainly in keeping with his classical-liberal respect for property rights, along with his longtime concern to sustain and strengthen a spirit of virtuous self-reliance among black Americans.

SELF-RELIANCE AND CORRECTIVE JUSTICE

In his efforts to cultivate a respect for and proper understanding of the natural right of property, Douglass was laboring for a cause he considered vital both to America’s moral and political culture and to the liberation and elevation of black Americans in particular. Here it is essential to note that Douglass, like James Madison, conceived of the right to property in its primary sense as a right to *acquire* material goods, grounded in the free use of one’s faculties for productive labor.⁴⁶ One of the most corrupting, debilitating effects of slavery, in Douglass’s analysis, was its fostering of a cultural disdain for laboring as an activity beneath the dignity of truly free, truly human beings. To remedy the degradation and impoverishment that proceeded from this culture of indolence, Douglass throughout the postwar years insistently extolled the property right and the virtues of free labor that supported it, and he called upon his fellow black Americans in particular to cultivate the self-reliant virtues of industry, productivity, and thrift.

Douglass made these appeals to greatest effect in the most popular and frequently presented of his postwar speeches, his lecture on “Self-Made Men.” After

⁴⁶ See Madison, “Property,” in *Madison: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1999), pp. 516–517.

briefly considering a few alternative explanations of worldly success, Douglass declares it evident that “we may explain success mainly by one word and that word is WORK! WORK!! WORK!!! WORK!!! Not transient and fitful effort, but patient, enduring, honest, unre-

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mitting, and indefatigable work, into which the whole heart is put....” Much of the distinctive greatness of this nation, he continues, is due to its hospitality to just this sort of virtue. “America is said, and not without reason, to be preeminently the home and patron of self-made men.... Search where you will, there is no country on the globe where labor is so respected and the laborer so honored, as in this country.”⁴⁷

This, too, was a corollary of Douglass’s non-exceptionalism principle. His emphasis on property rights grounded in productive, opportunistic laboring went hand-in-hand with a respect for blacks’ equal capacity for cultivating and perfecting the self-elevating virtues. Likewise, it went hand-in-hand with his wariness of the moral hazards attendant on whites’ benevolence. “What I ask for the negro,” he explained in 1865, “is not benevolence, not pity, not sympathy, but simply *justice*.”⁴⁸

Ten years later, in an Independence Day address, he issued a similar, much more pointed appeal. Objecting to the efforts of some white benevolent societies, he urged his black compatriots indignantly to reject any condition of dependence:

⁴⁷ Douglass, “Self-Made Men,” in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. V, pp. 556, 569.

⁴⁸ “What the Black Man Wants,” in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. IV, p. 68 (emphasis in original).

A new condition has brought new duties. A character which might pass without censure as a slave cannot so pass as a freeman. We must not beg men to do for us what we ought to do for ourselves. The prostrate form, the uncovered head, the cringing attitude, the bated breath, the suppliant, outstretched hand of beggary does not become an American freeman, and does not become us as a class, and we will not consent to be any longer represented in that position. No people can make desirable progress or have permanent welfare outside of their own independent and earnest efforts.... We utterly repudiate all invidious distinctions, whether in our favor or against us, and ask only for a fair field and no favor.⁴⁹

Human nature cannot honor one who is helpless, Douglass had observed long before, but it is bound to respect those who display a forceful, virtuous self-reliance. "The most telling, the most killing, refutation of slavery," he wrote to Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1853, "is the presentation of an industrious, enterprising, thrifty, and intelligent free black population." Ever confident in the power of virtue to dispel prejudice, Douglass affirmed in 1883 that "the moral government of the universe is on our side.... Every year adds to the black man's numbers. Every year adds to his wealth and to his intelligence. These will speak for him. There is a power in numbers, wealth and intelligence, which can never be despised nor defied."⁵⁰ Self-reliant virtue was indispensable to the cause of national integration, just as it was an essential condition of the securing of rights.

Douglass's sometimes stern emphasis on the virtues of self-reliance and self-elevation does not mean

that he had grown insensitive to the magnitude of the difficulties yet to be overcome; nor does it mean that he had resorted to "blaming the victim" or placing exclusive responsibility on the freedpeople for their condition. Throughout his postwar career, he remained acutely aware of the depth of the injuries inflicted by slavery and of the persisting power of racial prejudice, and he was carefully attentive to the claims of corrective justice. "Under the whole Heavens," he re-

Self-reliant virtue was indispensable to the cause of national integration, just as it was an essential condition of the securing of rights.

marked in 1894, "there never was a people liberated from bondage under conditions less favorable to the successful beginning of a new and free mode of life, than were the Freedmen of the South."⁵¹ With respect to corrective justice, he firmly endorsed the principle but took a subtle, carefully measured position with respect to its present application.

"To find an adequate measure of compensation for any wrong," Douglass explained, "we must first ascertain the nature and extent of the wrong itself." The *extent* of the wrongs of slavery over hundreds of years simply beggared any possible response. To "the enslaved and battered millions [who] have come, suffered, died, and gone," he observed, "no recompense can be made." The same was true for those millions' living descendants:

If the American people could put a school house in every valley; a church on every hill top in the South and supply them with a teacher and a preacher respectively and welcome the descendants of the former slaves to all the moral and intellectual benefits of the one and the other, without money and without price, such a sacrifice would not compen-

⁴⁹ Douglass, "The Color Question," July 5, 1875, in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. IV, p. 420.

⁵⁰ *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *Autobiographies*, p. 286; Douglass to Stowe, March 8, 1853, in *Life and Writings*, Vol. II, p. 235; "Address on the Twentieth Anniversary of Emancipation," April 16, 1883, in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. V, pp. 61, 64–65.

⁵¹ Douglass, "The Blessings of Liberty and Education," September 3, 1894, in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. V, p. 624.

sate their children for the terrible wrong done to their fathers and mothers, by their enslavement and enforced degradation.⁵²

The specific *nature* of slavery's worst wrongs, however, suggested a more definite approach. The "labor and stripes" that accompanied slavery—even its lasting material deprivations—did not reach the depth of its harmful effects in Douglass's estimation. "These were indeed terrible enough; but deeper down, and more terrible still, were the mental and moral wrongs" that slavery inflicted. Slavery not only expropriated the fruits of its victims' labor, but also assaulted the moral and mental *faculties* by which, once freed, they might otherwise have put their labor to profitable and elevating uses.

Rather than attempting to restore what slavery took from its victims in actual or potential acquirements of wealth and status, governments should secure opportunities and lend support for the freedpeople's own efforts in self-improvement and self-elevation.

In particular, slaveholders perpetrated "no greater wrong" than their withholding of education from those enslaved. Reiterating at the end of his life a powerful theme of his earliest writings, Douglass insisted that "education...means emancipation. It means light and liberty. It means uplifting the soul of man into the glorious light of truth, the light by which men can only be made free."⁵³

When Douglass remarked on America's inextinguishable debt to those who had been enslaved, he was not demanding an effort to restore, however imperfectly, the actual and potential material wealth that slavery had stolen from its victims. He was appealing to the public to honor those victims' "claim for a slight mea-

sure of compensation" in a fashion carefully tailored to their needs and to the deepest of the wrongs that they had suffered.

Douglass made these particular remarks in a speech at the dedication of an industrial education institution in the state of Virginia, but they represent an extension of his broader advocacy, in this period, of a federally established system of public schools. It was specifically on grounds of reparative justice that he urged support of one particular federal public-education proposal, a bill put forward by Senator Henry Blair of New Hampshire. Passage of the bill would signify, he contended, "at least a recognition of a great national duty towards a people to whom an immeasurable debt is due. It will tell that people and all others that the nation has the disposition if not entire ability to do the Negro right and justice."⁵⁴

Douglass's suggestions in these remarks about the proper way to conceive of reparation for slavery nicely encapsulate his political thought in the postwar period and indeed throughout his entire career. Here again, two points are especially salient.

First, Douglass's focus on education indicates that in his view, the public (federal or state) role in repairing the wrongs in question must be instrumental rather than providential. In other words, rather than attempting to restore what slavery took from its victims in actual or potential acquirements of wealth and status, governments should secure opportunities and lend support for the freedpeople's own efforts in self-improvement and self-elevation. Douglass never tired of quoting the lines of Byron to this effect: "Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow." To the end, he held strongly to the principle that he stressed in an 1855 editorial: "OUR ELEVATION AS A RACE, IS ALMOST WHOLLY DEPENDENT UPON OUR OWN EXERTIONS."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Douglass, "To the Editor of the *National Republican*," in *Life and Writings*, Vol. IV, p. 459.

⁵⁵ *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *Autobiographies*, p. 287; Douglass, "Self-Elevation," in *Life and Writings*, Vol. II, p. 360.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 623–624.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 623.

Second, any truly salutary public assistance must also be integrative, not divisive, in its design and effects. In this respect, what is notable in Douglass's advocacy of education reforms is that whereas he justified them primarily as the payment of a debt due specifically to those formerly enslaved and their relations—specifically to black Americans—he proposed the payment of that debt by a policy framed in nonracial terms, designed to benefit Americans irrespective of race. Of the Blair bill, he insisted that “the Negro needs it, the illiterate white needs it and the nation needs it.”⁵⁶ Arguing in 1872 against racial segregation in public schools, Douglass described his purpose as “patriotic” as well as “beneficent,” on the premise that the public schools should function as “a common platform of nationality.”⁵⁷ Any measure that authorizes or deepens one's self-identification in predominantly racial terms is to be opposed, he maintained, insisting that race is a morally arbitrary quality.

In his 1894 “Blessings of Liberty and Education” speech, presented a few months before his death, Douglass ventured on the subject a last word that he feared would be “more useful than palatable”:

Since emancipation we hear much said of our modern colored leaders in commendation of race pride, race love, race effort, race superiority, race men and the like.... In all this talk of race, the motive may be good, but the method is bad. It is an effort to cast out Satan by Beelzebub. The evils which are now crushing the Negro to earth have their root and sap, their force and mainspring, in this narrow spirit of race and color and the Negro has no more right to excuse or to foster it than men of any other race.... Not as Ethiopians, not as Caucasians, not as Mongolians, not as Afro-Americans, or Anglo-American are we addressed but as men.

God and nature speak to our manhood and manhood alone.⁵⁸

FINDING A HOME IN AMERICA

Frederick Douglass devoted his singular 54-year career of public advocacy to the grand, mutually inseparable causes of the liberation and elevation of his fellow black Americans and the racial and moral integration of America. In the long history of African-American political thought, there is no more forceful proponent of the cause of integration than Douglass, and there is no more insightful analyst of the varieties and dangers of national and racial disintegration.

In Douglass's day, the forces of disintegration were represented by slaveholders, white supremacists, segregationists, colonizationists, and the more extreme partisans of state or regional sovereignty, and also by black emigrationists and other proponents of black nationalism in its own more extreme forms. Douglass rejected the various white disintegrationists for obvious reasons, and he rejected the black variants too. The propensity of the latter, he warned, was to foster an enervating spirit of alienation—a perpetual “longing for some mighty revolution,” diverting and dissipating the energies of those who harbored it.⁵⁹

Taking a long view, Douglass judged that there was no greater danger to the elevation of black people and the integration of America than this spirit of alienation. “We want no black Ireland in America,” he warned in response to the Supreme Court's disappointing ruling in the *Civil Rights Cases* in 1883—no American counterpart to the aggrieved, unproductive, disproportionately criminal (under)class that Douglass viewed as the natural issue of England's injustice.⁶⁰ He feared that such a development among black Americans like-

⁵⁶ “To the Editor of the *National Republican*,” in *Life and Writings*, Vol. IV, p. 459.

⁵⁷ Douglass, “Schools Are a Common Platform of Nationality,” May 9, 1872, in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. IV, p. 302.

⁵⁸ “The Blessings of Liberty and Education,” in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. V, p. 625.

⁵⁹ Douglass, “African Civilization Society,” February, 1859, in *Life and Writings*, Vol. II, p. 446.

⁶⁰ Douglass, “This Decision Has Humbled the Nation,” in *Douglass Papers*, Vol. V, pp. 117–118.

wise would be the effect of continuing failures to do justice by American institutions, as it could result also from the disaffection propagated by black advocates of emigration, despairing of America's prospects for reform.

These fears clearly retain their currency in our own day, as do Douglass's efforts to dispel their causes. His speeches and writings supply a treasure of arguments against the perpetuation of racial injustice and, no less, against the demoralizing critiques of it according to which, absent a utopian transformation of America's principles, institutions, and culture, white racism and an oppositional identity for blacks must be taken as permanent features of American society.

"No people can prosper," Douglass reiterated late in life, "unless they have a home, or the hope of a home"; and "to have a home," one "must have a country."⁶¹ America was African-Americans' proper home, he maintained, their only realistic alternative and also the locus of their highest ideals. America must be envisioned and remade by its white and black citizens alike as African-Americans' genuine home, not merely by the accident and force of necessity but as an object of their rational and sentimental identification. For Douglass as for Abraham Lincoln, America was, after all, the last, best hope of Earth.⁶²

The principles of natural human rights set forth in the Declaration of Independence, Douglass was convinced, represent a permanent, universal truth as well

⁶¹ Douglass, "Why Is the Negro Lynched?" in *Life and Writings*, Vol. IV, p. 514.

⁶² Abraham Lincoln, "Annual Message to Congress," December 1, 1862, in *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, ed. Roy P. Basler (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2001), p. 688.

The principles of natural human rights set forth in the Declaration of Independence, Douglass was convinced, represent a permanent, universal truth as well as the most practically powerful moral and political theory ever conceived.

as the most practically powerful moral and political theory ever conceived. It was above all in America's original and unforgettable dedication to those principles that Douglass found reason to love and identify with his country, despite the injustices that he and his people had suffered.

In his reasonable faith in their ultimate triumph in America, Douglass found an enormous reservoir of strength that he labored to share with others. Drawing upon that faith, he taught black Americans and all other Americans to stand up for justice and to strive for excellence. He taught them through all their hardships to love their country and their future in it. Most urgently, he taught them to reject the spirit of alienation, which he saw as the greatest danger to any people's liberation and elevation.

Over one hundred years after Frederick Douglass's death, this teaching has lost none of its essential vitality.

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