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## **Fredrick Douglass's Speech "The Meaning of July Fourth for The Negro" Delivered on July 5, 1852, was Literate,**

**Poetic and Stirring**

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### **Abstract**

*Frederick Douglass was an Afro-American social reformer, abolitionist, orator, writer, and statesman. After escaping from slavery in Maryland, he became a national leader of the abolitionist movement in Massachusetts and New York, gained note for his dazzling oratory and antislavery writings. In his time he was described by abolitionists as a living answer to slaveholders' arguments that slaves lacked the intellectual capacity to function as independent American citizens. At the time, people found it hard to believe that such a great orator had once been a slave. Frederick Douglass was a fiery orator and his speeches were often published in various abolitionist newspapers. Among his well-known a speech was "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro," presented in Rochester, New York, on July 5, 1852, a version of it was published as a booklet. It is often studied in literature classes today. He was invited to speak about what the Fourth of July meant for America's black population. During his first part of speech, he praised what the founding fathers did for this country, his speech soon developed into a condemnation of the attitude of American society toward slavery. Throughout this speech, as well as in his life, Douglass advocated equal justice and rights, as well as citizenship, for blacks. He recognized that he has come a long way since his escape from slavery. He told the audience that they had gathered to celebrate the Fourth of July, but reminded them that the nation was capable of positive change.*

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**Introduction:** Douglass was one of the most famous black men in the country, during the time of civil war, known for his orations on the condition of the black race and on other issues such as women's rights. His eloquence always gathered crowd. His reception by leaders in England and Ireland added to his stature. Douglass and the abolitionists argued that because the aim of the Civil War was to end slavery, African Americans should be allowed to engage in the fight for their freedom. Douglass publicized this view in his newspapers and several speeches. In August 1861, Douglass published an account of the First Battle of Bull Run where some blacks were already in the Confederate ranks. Douglass quoted a witness to the battle who said they saw black Confederates "with muskets on their shoulders and bullets in their pockets." Douglass conferred with President Abraham Lincoln

in 1863 on the treatment of black soldiers, and with President Andrew Johnson on the subject of black suffrage.

President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which took effect on January 1, 1863, declared the freedom of all slaves in Confederate-held territory. Douglass was disappointed that President Lincoln did not publicly endorse suffrage for black freedmen. Douglass believed that since Afro-American men were fighting for the Union in the American Civil War, they deserved the right to vote. Douglass fought for equality of his people. He made plans with Lincoln to move liberated slaves out of the South. During the war, Douglass also helped the Union by serving as a recruiter for the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment. His sons, Lewis Douglass fought at the Battle of Fort Wagner. Another son, Frederick Douglass Jr., also served as a recruiter.

The post-war (1865) ratification of the 13th Amendment outlawed slavery. The 14th Amendment provided for citizenship and equal protection under the law. The 15th Amendment protected all citizens from being discriminated against in voting because of race. On April 14, 1876, Douglass delivered a keynote speech at the unveiling of the Emancipation Memorial in Washington's Lincoln Park. In that speech, Douglass spoke frankly about Lincoln, noting what he perceived as both positive and negative attributes of the late President. He called Lincoln as "the white man's president". Douglass criticized Lincoln's tardiness in joining the cause of emancipation, noting that Lincoln initially opposed the expansion of slavery but did not support its elimination. Douglass said: "Though Mr. Lincoln shared the prejudices of his white fellow-countrymen against the Negro, it is hardly necessary to say that in his heart of hearts he loathed and hated slavery...." The crowd, roused by his speech, gave Douglass a standing ovation. Lincoln's widow Mary Lincoln supposedly gave Lincoln's favourite walking-stick to Douglass in appreciation.

**Literature Review:** Fredrick Douglass was a man who could address audience without a quailing sensation, had stronger nerves. A feeling had crept over him, quite unfavourable to the exercise of his limited powers of speech. The task before him was one which required previous thought and study for its proper performance. He knew that apologies of this sort were generally considered flat and unmeaning. He trusted, however, that his would not be considered. Should he seem at ease, his appearance would much misrepresent him. The little experience he had had in addressing public meetings, in country schoolhouses, availed him nothing on the present occasion. The papers and placards said that he was to deliver a 4th July oration. This certainly sounded large, and out of the common way, for it is true that he had often had the privilege to speak in this beautiful Hall, and to address many who now honoured him with their presence. But neither their familiar faces, nor the perfect gage he thought he had of Corinthian Hall, seemed to free him from embarrassment. When Fredrick asked people "What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July? Well, he answered that it was a day that revealed to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he was a constant victim. To him, your celebration was a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of

rejoicing were empty and heartless; your denunciation 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, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.” Dave Zirin qualifies that Fredrick’s speech was not only a brilliant work of oratory but his were words that spoke directly to his moment in history; they still ring with an unsettling power. As Douglass said, “Had he the ability, and could he reach the nation’s ear, he would today pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it was not light that was needed, but fire; it was not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake.”

**Background of the Author:** Douglass admitted that he did not know how a field hand could have gained knowledge. Nevertheless, he felt that thirst for knowledge came from his mother who “was the *only* one of all the slaves and colored people in Tuckahoe” who could read and definitely not from his unknown white father. It was in contrast to what many racists would claim that blacks were unintelligent and “uneducatable,” or some who argued that Douglass must have inherited his intelligence from his white father. Douglass confirmed that even the most abused field slave could learn to read, his capacity for intellect and his love for learning could well have been inherited from his mother. Douglass tells stories about his endeavours to end segregation on trains in New England. Douglass ends in one of his books by promising to use his voice and pen to “promote the moral, social, religious, and intellectual elevation of the free colored people . . . and advocate the great and primary work of the universal and unconditional emancipation of my entire race.” Fredrick described how he became a close friend of John Brown, the leader of a movement dedicated to ending slavery through armed resistance and slave uprisings.

When the Civil War began, Douglass began working to recruit freed blacks into the Union army. He had an audience with President Lincoln and urged him to persuade President Davis of the Confederate States to forbid the South from executing black prisoners of war. He also asked Lincoln to mandate that black soldiers be paid the same wages as white soldiers. Lincoln didn't offer such guarantees. Instead, he told Douglass that black soldiers had more to gain from this war than whites and should therefore accept lower wages, at least for the time being. Douglass expresses great admiration for Lincoln's compassion and humanity, but he disagreed with Lincoln on several points. For Douglass, Lincoln was more concerned about the preservation of the Union than he was with the issue of slavery. He suggested that Lincoln was ready to allow slavery to continue — if the South would abandon the war and pledge loyalty to the Union. Following his meeting with the president, Douglass met with Secretary of War Stanton, who promised him a commission as assistant adjutant to the army's General Thomas. The army commission never arrived, and Douglass told us that Stanton, after due consideration, probably changed his mind and felt that the Union was not ready for a high-ranking black officer. Interestingly, a small number of black soldiers were commissioned as officers during the Civil War, with a select few even reaching the rank of major.

Lincoln made public his intention to free all slaves in a speech on September 22, 1862. The Emancipation Proclamation took effect a few months later, on January 1, 1863. Douglass said that this New Year's Day would probably remain "a memorable day in the progress of American liberty and civilization." After the defeat of the South, Douglass lobbied hard to have Congress grant freed slaves citizenship. In the emotional period after Lincoln's death and the defeat of the South, Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment (abolishing slavery), the Fourteenth Amendment (defining citizenship), and the Fifteenth Amendment (granting suffrage, voting rights, to blacks — a right denied American women until 1920). Douglass' parting advice was compelling but simplistic; he urged blacks to save their money: "Every dollar you lay up represented one day's independence, one day of rest and security in the future. If the time should ever come then we possessed in the colored people of the United States, a class of men noted for enterprise, industry, economy, and success, we should no longer have any trouble in the matter of civil and political rights."

**Gist of the speech:** Frederick Douglass was a fiery orator and his speeches were often published in various abolitionist newspapers. Among his well-known speeches is "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro," presented in Rochester, New York, on July 5, 1852, a version of which he had published as a booklet. It is often studied in literature classes today. Douglass moved to Rochester in 1847, when he became the publisher of *The North Star*, an abolitionist weekly. There were approximately 500 attendees who heard him speak, each paying twelve and a half cents. He had been invited to speak about what the Fourth of July means for America's black population, and while the first part of his speech praised what the founding fathers did for this country, his speech soon developed into a condemnation of the attitude of American society toward slavery.

Douglass began his speech by addressing "Mr. President, Friends and Fellow Citizens." Here, he was addressing the president of the Anti-Slavery Society — not the president of the United States. It was noteworthy that Douglass considered himself a citizen, an equal to the spectators in attendance. Throughout his speech, as well as his life, Douglass advocated equal justice and rights, as well as citizenship, for blacks. He began his speech by modestly apologizing for being nervous in front of the crowd and recognized that he had come a long way since his escape from slavery. He told the audience that they have gathered to celebrate the Fourth of July, but he reminded them that the nation was young, and, like a young child, it was still impressionable and capable of positive change.

He touched on the history of the American Revolutionaries' fight for freedom against their legal bondage under British rule. He told the audience that he supported the actions of revolutionaries. Douglass thereby had set up an argument for freeing of slaves. He reminded the audience that, in 1776, many people thought it was subversive and dangerous to revolt against British tyranny. In 1852, however, with hindsight, to say "that America was right, and England wrong was exceedingly easy." Similarly, he reasoned, in 1852, people considered abolitionism a dangerous and subversive political stance. Douglass thus implied that future generations would probably consider his anti-slavery stance patriotic, just, and reasonable.

Douglass praised and respected the signers of the Declaration of Independence, people who put the interests of a country above their own. He conceded, however, that the main purpose of his speech was not to give praise and thank these men, for he said that the deeds of those patriots were well known. Instead, he urged his listeners to continue the work of those great revolutionaries who brought freedom and democracy to this land. Douglass then asked a rhetorical question: "Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us blacks?" He pushed forward his thesis: "This Fourth July is yours, not mine". Indeed, he said, to ask a black person to celebrate the white man's freedom from oppression and tyranny as "inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony." By "sacrilegious," he meant the evil defilement of sacred American ideals — democracy, freedom, and equal rights.

The real subject of his speech, he conceded, was American slavery. He condemned America for being untrue to its founding principles, its past, and its present. The audience must fulfil what the founders of the country advocated. To the slave, Douglass told the audience, "your 4th of July is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license for enslaving blacks . . . your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery." Douglass spent the next part of his speech pre-empting some of the arguments that theoretical opponents might make. As for the mildly sympathetic spectator who complained that the abolitionist failed to make a favourable impression by constantly denouncing slavery rather than making persuasive arguments, Douglass retorted by saying that there were no more arguments to be made. He said there was no person on earth who would be in favor of becoming a slave himself. How could it be, therefore, that some people were in favor of imposing a condition on others that they would not impose on themselves? As for those who maintained that slavery was part of a divine plan, Douglass argued that something which was inhuman cannot be considered divine. He considered such a pro-slavery posture to be blasphemy because it gave cruelty a place in God's nature.

Douglass condemned the profits made from the slave trade, and, once again, he compared the treatment of slaves to that of animals. He mentioned that in Baltimore, slave traders transported slaves in chains to ships in the dead of night because anti-slavery activism had made the public aware of the cruelty of that trade. Douglass recalled that when he was a child, the cries of chained slaves passing his house on route to the docks in the middle of the night had a chilling, unsettling effect on him. Next, Douglass condemned the American churches and ministers for not speaking out against slavery. The contemporary American church, by remaining silent and acquiescing to the existence of slavery, he argued, was an infidel. Douglass argued that the church was "guilty" because it is an institution which had the power to eradicate slavery by condemning it. The Fugitive Slave Law, Douglass reasoned, was "tyrannical legislation" because it removed all due process and civil rights for the black person: "For black men, there was no law or justice, humanity or religion." The Christian church which allows this law to remain in effect, Douglass said, is not really a Christian church at all.

Douglass returned to his theme of American democracy and freedom. He criticized American ideology as inconsistent. For him, while it meant freedom, it did not give all people that right. While it advocated democracy in Europe and elsewhere, it did not grant it to its own entire people. Similarly, he argued that while the American Declaration of Independence stated that "all men were created equal," American society created an underclass of men and women. To his opponents who believed that the Constitution permitted slavery, Douglass offered the writings of Spooner, Goodell, Sewall, and Smith — four abolitionists whose essays "clearly vindicated the Constitution from any design to support slavery." Douglass sided with those activists who believed that the founding fathers meant to eliminate slavery and that the Constitution reflected this.

Douglass concluded on an optimistic note. He believed that anti-slavery sentiments would eventually triumph over pro-slavery forces. Nations, particularly Western countries, in the mid-nineteenth century were generally against slavery. In fact, slavery was banned in the British colonies in 1834 and in the French colonies in 1848; politicians in those countries could no longer claim to support the rights of man while allowing slavery. He argued that no longer can the cruelties of American slavery be hidden from the rest of the world. Trade and commerce have opened up borders, and political ideas know no boundaries. Douglass closes his speech with a poem by Garrison entitled "The Triumph of Freedom," stressing the inevitable arrival of freedom and the abolitionist's promise to fight slavery "whatever the peril or the cost."

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