

A Historical Reminder of What Defines the United States, as Told by a Former Slave. Frederick Douglas (1817-1895)

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We live in tumultuous days... one could say "the end of an era".

It is clear that there is a storm coming, however, the question is will it be the sort of storm that provides sustenance and relief to drought-stricken and barren lands, or will it be the sort of storm that destroys indiscriminately and leaves nothing recognizable in its wake?

There is such a heavy tension in the air, the buildup we are told of centuries of injustice, oppression and murder. It feels like the entire world's burden has laid itself upon one culprit and that it is high time that that villain pay for past blood spilled.

That villain is the United States.

It is common to hear that this nation was created under the hubristic banner of "Freedom from Empire", while it brutally owned slaves and committed genocide on the indigenous people. That the "Declaration of Independence" and the "U.S. Constitution" are despicable displays of the highest degree of grotesque hypocrisy, and that in reality the U.S. was to replace one system of empire with another and far worse.

These are weighty charges indeed, and nobody can deny that great crimes against humanity have been committed. However, it is important that we review this history in full, for if we lose sight of the forest, we will be losing sight of an ongoing battle that is still waging.

We will have abandoned the work of past heroes that has been left unfinished and will have replaced it with the false idol of anarchy, mistaking its 'empty-promises of liberty' as a mark of what constitutes a 'true freedom'.

How can we avoid such 'empty-promises' and strive for 'true freedom'?

There is no better account in addressing such a question as that of Frederick Douglass (1817-1895), a former slave who would become an advisor to Abraham Lincoln during the dark days of the Civil War and the Consul General to Haiti in his elder years.

A through-and-through TRUE American hero (1).

From Slavery to Freedom

Frederick Douglass was born in Talbot County, in the State of Maryland. Though it was

impossible to know his exact date of birth, he gathers that the month of February 1817 is as accurate as possible. The name given to him by his dear mother was, in the words of Douglass “no less pretentious and long” than Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey (Frederick’s mother was believed to be the only slave in the region who knew how to read).

Frederick recalls that in his youth

“I was just as well aware of the unjust, unnatural, and murderous character of slavery, when nine years old, as I am now. Without any appeals to books, to laws, or to authorities of any kind, to regard God as ‘Our Father’ condemned slavery as a crime.”

Already, by the age of nine, Frederick had set himself upon not only the idea of escape from this destitution, but was always mindful to an education wherever he could find it.

Luckily, in this unhappy state his only adult friend Miss Lucretia, (daughter of Captain Anthony the slaveholder of Frederick), arranged for Frederick, at the age of ten, to be sent away from the plantations to live in Baltimore with her husband’s brother Hugh Auld.

It was in Baltimore that Frederick would learn how to read.

Years go by and at around the age of fifteen or sixteen, Frederick is sent back to the plantations (over a family squabble), and not surprisingly is found to be wholly unfit for a life of hard-labour as an obedient slave. He is thus promptly sent to “Covey, The Negro Breaker” to lodge with for a period of one year.

For six months, Frederick was whipped and beaten on a regular basis. From the dawn of day till the complete darkness in the evening, he was kept hard at work in the fields, and was worked up to the point of his powers of endurance.

Until one day he decides finally that it is better to resist and risk the consequences than continue to live such a contemptible life as a mere brute. He decides one day to simply refuse to be treated as an animal, not to strike back but to oppose the striking.

As Frederick states

“A man without force is without the essential dignity of humanity. Human nature is so constituted, that it cannot honor a helpless man, though it can pity him, and even this it cannot do long if signs of power do not arise. He only can understand the effect of this combat on my spirit, who has himself incurred something, or hazarded something, in repelling the unjust and cruel aggressions of a tyrant. Covey was a tyrant and a cowardly one withal. After resisting him, I felt as I had never felt before. It was a resurrection from the dark and pestiferous tomb of slavery, to the heaven of comparative freedom. I was no longer a servile coward, trembling under the frown of a brother worm of the dust, but my long-cowed spirit was roused to an attitude of independence. I had reached the point at which I was not afraid to die. This spirit made me a freeman in fact, though I still remained a slave in form. When a slave cannot be flogged, he is more than half free. He has a domain as broad as his own manly heart to defend, and he is really ‘a power on earth’. From this time until my escape from slavery, I was never fairly whipped. Several attempts were made, but they were always unsuccessful. Bruised I did get, but the instance I have described was the end of the brutification to which slavery had subjected

me.”

The Abolitionist Cause in Light of the Preservation of the Union

“...that the fathers of the Republic neither intended the extension nor the perpetuity of slavery and that liberty is national and slavery is sectional.” - Frederick Douglass

To make a long story short, Frederick would successfully escape the South and on September 3rd 1838, arriving in New York at the age of 21, he would finally embark on a life as a free man.

It would be only four or five months living in New Bedford before Douglass would meet William Lloyd Garrison, one of the most prominent leaders of the Abolitionist movement. It did not take long for Douglass to be invited along their speaking tours to recount his story as a runaway slave from the South.

Though Douglass would owe much of his future as a great orator and writer in thanks to his Abolitionist friends who gave him a strong start in this direction and introduced him to many important figures, Douglass would eventually distance himself from the Abolitionist “scripture”.

This distancing was caused by Douglass’ later recognition that there was in fact, no “pro-slavery” character in the U.S. Constitution as Garrison had been stating.

Douglass states,

“After a time, a careful reconsideration of the subject convinced me that there was no necessity for dissolving the union between the northern and southern states, that to seek this dissolution was not part of my duty as an abolitionist, that to abstain from voting was to refuse to exercise a legitimate and powerful means for abolishing slavery, and that the Constitution of the United States not only contained no guarantees in favor of slavery, but, on the contrary, was in its letter and spirit an antislavery instrument, demanding the abolition of slavery as a condition of its own existence as the supreme law of the land.”

During this time, Douglass would start his own anti-slavery newspaper called “The North Star”. Along with this new editorial responsibility, Douglass would no longer leave it to the “good advice” of his “more learned” Abolitionist friends, but would take the responsibility upon himself to seek out and come to know whether such assertions by the Abolitionists on the nature of the Republic were true.

“My new circumstances compelled me 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 governments, and also the relations which human beings sustain to it. By such a course of thought and reading I was conducted to the conclusion that the Constitution of the United States - inaugurated to ‘form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty’ - could not well have

been designed at the same time to maintain and perpetuate a system of rapine and murder like slavery, especially as not one word can be found in the Constitution to authorize such a belief...the Constitution of our country is our warrant for the abolition of slavery in every state of the Union...being convinced of the fact, my duty upon this point in the further conduct of my paper [The North Star] was plain."

Abraham Lincoln would be elected as the President of the United States on March 4th, 1861. To which Douglass stated of the occasion:

"It was Mr. Lincoln who told the American people at this crisis that the 'Union could not long endure half slave and half free; that they must be all one or the other, and that the public mind could find no resting place but in the belief in the ultimate extinction of slavery.' These were not the words of an abolitionist - branded a fanatic, and carried away by an enthusiastic devotion to the Negro - but the calm cool, deliberate utterance of a statesman, comprehensive enough to take in the welfare of the whole country...In a few simple words he had embodied the thought of the loyal nation, and indicated the character fit to lead and guide the country amid perils present and to come."

On Meeting Lincoln

"I still believed, and spoke as I believed, all over the North, that the mission of the war was the liberation of the slave, as well as the salvation of the Union..." - Frederick Douglass

With this newly discovered orientation, Douglass not only put the preservation of the Union as something necessary and expedient but, most importantly, something that could not be sacrificed in striving for the Abolitionist cause.

Douglass would be one of the first to encourage the recruitment, through his paper "The North Star", of black soldiers to join the Union's war against the Confederate South. The thought was that by these men joining the war, they would prove their mettle in the cause for emancipation.

These were hard days, since black soldiers were not given equal treatment nor protection in the Union army. They also risked, if captured by the South, being enslaved, a sentence in Douglass' words "worse than death". Douglass had been assured that equal treatment would eventually occur, but it was too slow moving in his eyes and he refused to continue recruiting black soldiers into the Union army.

It was at this point that Douglass was invited to meet with President Lincoln to discuss his concerns over the matter.

Douglass describes his first meeting with Lincoln:

"I was never more quickly or more completely put at ease in the presence of a great man than in that of Abraham Lincoln...Long lines of care were already deeply written on Mr. Lincoln's brow, and his strong face, full of earnestness, lighted up as soon as my name was mentioned...I at once felt myself in the presence of an honest man - one whom I could love, honor, and trust without

reserve or doubt.”

One of the points of concern Douglass discussed with the President, was on the unfair treatment of black soldiers as POWs and suggested that the North should retaliate and commit the same treatment on their Southern POWs to dissuade this unequal treatment, to which Lincoln responded,

“Retaliation was a terrible remedy, and one which it was very difficult to apply – that, if once begun, there was no telling where it would end – that if he could get hold of the Confederate soldiers who had been guilty of treating colored soldiers as felons he could easily retaliate, but the thought of hanging men for a crime perpetrated by others was revolting to his feelings...Though I was not entirely satisfied with his views, I was so well satisfied with the man and with the educating tendency of the conflict I determined to go on with the recruiting.”

Douglass reflects on his decision:

“It was a great thing to achieve American independence when we numbered three millions, but it was a greater thing to save this country from dismemberment and ruin when it numbered thirty millions. He alone of all our presidents was to have the opportunity to destroy slavery, and to lift into manhood millions of his countrymen hitherto held as chattels and numbered with the beasts of the field.”

The Emancipation Proclamation

“Since William the Silent, who was the soul of the mighty war for religious liberty against Spain and the Spanish Inquisition, no leader of men has been loved and trusted in such generous measures as was Abraham Lincoln.”

- Frederick Douglass

During the third year of the sanguinary Civil War, January 1st 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Douglass states of the occasion: *“the formal and solemn announcement was made that thereafter the government would be found on the side of emancipation...It must be the end of all compromises with slavery – a declaration that thereafter the war was to be conducted on a new principle, with a new aim.”*

It was at this point that Lincoln received criticism for extending the war unnecessarily. The South was ready to make certain concessions and the North was eager to end the war. By Lincoln announcing the Emancipation Proclamation, it was thought by many to be a reckless provocation making any possibility of peace fruitless.

On this subject, Douglass would meet with Lincoln for the last time, before he would be assassinated.

“The main subject on which he wished to confer with me was as to the means most desirable to be employed outside the army to induce the slaves in the rebel states to come within the deferral lines. The increasing opposition to the

war, in the North, and the mad cry against it, because it was being made an abolition war, alarmed Mr. Lincoln, and made him apprehensive that a peace might be forced upon him which would leave still in slavery all who had not come within our lines. What he wanted was to make his proclamation as effective as possible in the event of such a peace...He said he was being accused of protracting the war beyond its legitimate object and failing to make peace when he might have done so to advantage. He was afraid of what might come of all these complaints, but was persuaded that no solid and lasting peace could come short of absolute submission on the part of the rebels [the South]...He saw the danger of premature peace...I was the more impressed by this benevolent consideration because he before said, in answer to the peace clamor, that his object was to save the Union, and to do so with or without slavery. What he said on this day showed a deeper moral conviction against slavery than I had ever seen before in anything spoken or written by him. I listened with the deepest interest and profoundest satisfaction, and, at his suggestion, agreed to undertake the organizing of a band of scouts, composed of colored men, whose business should be somewhat after the original plan of John Brown, to go into the rebel states, beyond the lines of our armies, and to carry the news of emancipation, and urge the slaves to come within our boundaries.

...I refer to this conversation because I think that, on Mr. Lincoln's part, it is evidence conclusive that the proclamation, so far at least as he was concerned, was not effected merely as a [political] 'necessity'."

President Lincoln would be selected to continue a second term and was inaugurated on March 4th, 1865. About one month after the official end of the Civil War. Lincoln would be assassinated just a mere 41 days after his second inauguration.

Douglass writes, "His first inauguration arrested the fall of the Republic, and the second was to restore it to enduring foundations." The fact that Lincoln's leadership was savagely cut short was a tragedy for all who understood that the true foundation of the Republic was built upon the principle "liberty for all".

In that sad moment, when the country heard of the death of their leader who was to bring them closer to this goal, Douglass states,

"We shared in common a terrible calamity, and this 'touch of nature made us' more than countrymen, it made us 'kin'."

Reflections on the Past

It is an utmost testament to the grace and nobility of Frederick Douglass' character that as soon as the law and spirit of slavery had been broken, he made a point to no longer harbour hate and resentment for the past wrongs committed upon himself. He recognised that humanity was indeed inherently good and would ultimately strive towards goodness if left to its natural tendency... that to punish the children of those who committed crimes before them would destroy any good that ever existed in the world.

Douglass recounts,

"If any reader of this part of my life shall see in it the evidence of a want of manly resentment for wrongs inflicted by slavery upon myself and race, and by

the ancestors of...[those who once owned slaves], so it must be. No man can be stronger than nature, one touch of which, we are told, makes all the world akin. I esteem myself a good, persistent hater of injustice and oppression, but my resentment ceases when they cease, and I have no heart to visit upon children the sins of their father.”

I will end here with an account of Douglass when he revisits the place where he was born a “slave” and sees his former “master” Captain Auld, upon his request on his deathbed, after his escape to the North over 25 years ago:

“But now that slavery was destroyed, and the slave and the master stood upon equal ground, I was not only willing to meet him, but was very glad to do so...He was to me no longer a slaveholder either in fact or in spirit, and I regarded him as I did myself, a victim of the circumstances of birth, education, law, and custom.

Our courses had been determined for us, not by us. We had both been flung, by powers that did not ask our consent, upon a mighty current of life, which we could neither resist, nor control. By this current he was a master, and I a slave, but now our lives were verging towards a point where differences disappear, where even the constancy of hate breaks down and where the clouds of pride, passion, and selfishness vanish before the brightness of infinite light.”

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Note

(1) This paper has used Douglass’ account of American history from his writings in his autobiography “Life and Times of Frederick Douglass”, for which the full pdf version can be found [here](#).

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