

# FREDERICK DOUGLASS SPEAKS FOR THE SLAVES

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*Frederick Douglass delivered the famous speech condensed here in 1852, when the people of Rochester, New York, invited him to speak at a Fourth of July celebration.*

Fellow citizens: Pardon me, and allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here today? What have I or those I represent to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us?

Would to God, both for your sakes and ours, that an affirmative answer could be truthfully returned to these questions. Then would my task be light, and my burden easy and delightful.

But such is not the state of the case. I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary!

The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence bequeathed by your fathers is shared by you, not by me. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.

Fellow citizens, above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the wail of millions!

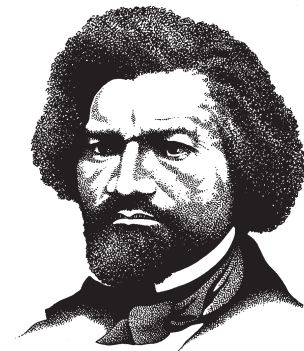
My subject, then, fellow citizens, is “American Slavery.” I shall see this day and its popular characteristics from the slave’s point of view. Standing here, identified with the American bondman, making his wrongs mine, I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this Fourth of July.

Standing with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity, which is outraged, in the name of liberty, which is fettered, in the name of the Constitution and the Bible, which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce

everything that serves to perpetuate slavery – the great sin and shame of America!

Oh! had I the ability, and could I reach the nation’s ear, I would today pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake.

The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be denounced.



What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer, a

day that reveals to him more than all other days of the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.

To him your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity.

Your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless, your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy – a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.

**Group Discussion:** *What message about the Fourth of July does Douglass have for the people of Rochester? What does he mean when he says “the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed”?*