

**WHAT IS
THE FOURTH OF JULY
TO BLACK & INDIGENOUS
AMERICANS?**



TEXT

Fourth of July by Frederick Douglass

To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak to-day? If so, there is a parallel to your conduct. And let me warn you that it is dangerous to copy the example of a nation whose crimes, lowering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrecoverable ruin! I can to-day take up the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people!

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down....

What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.

To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your 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, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloodier, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour. Go where you may, search where you will, roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of the old world, travel through South America, search out every abuse, and when you have found the last, lay your facts by the side of the everyday practices of this nation, and you will say with me, that, for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival.

HISTORY

In 1852, Frederick Douglass delivered the keynote address at the Ladies’ Antislavery Society’s celebration of Independence Day in Rochester, New York. Douglass, who had escaped from slavery at the age of 20 and published his autobiography detailing the brutality of slavery, was one of the nation’s leading orators and the nation’s most prominent abolitionist.

At the time of Douglass’s speech, the Mexican War (1846-1848) had expanded U.S. territory to the Pacific Ocean, adding all or part of what became nine Western states. Their addition precipitated a conflict over the westward spread of slavery, which led to the Compromise of 1850, a series of five laws addressing slavery in the newly acquired territories. One of these laws, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, provided for returning escaped slaves to the South without trial and required citizens to assist in apprehending runaway slaves.

Within this historical context, Frederick Douglass took to the podium. He was aggrieved not only by slavery itself, but also by the corrosive effect of hypocrisy. To observe a ritual celebrating “freedom” in a time of rampant oppression was to treat the country’s core ideas cheaply. Therefore, in his remarks, he turns July 4, the day which our nation celebrated the signing of the Declaration of Independence, into a confrontation with the country’s failure to live up to the ideals espoused in that document.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In what ways are national rituals like the Fourth of July similar to religious holidays? Why does Frederick Douglass make this comparison?
- Why was the Fourth of July so painful for Douglass?
- How does Douglass’s separation of himself from his audience (“This 4th of July is yours, not mine.”) impact his message? Is it effective?

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Seneca Address to George Washington

“Father! The voice of the people of the United States has spoken to us through you. It bids us to offer our minds and hearts in friendship to you and to your people.”

“When your army entered the country of the Six Nations, we called you Town Destroyer; and to this day when your name is heard, our women look behind them and turn pale, and our children cling close to the necks of their mothers.”

“Our counselors and warriors are men and cannot be afraid; but their hearts are grieved with the fears of our women and children.”

“You say you are our father and that we are your children. We cannot understand this. We thought you meant to leave us the lands we love and not to destroy us.”

“We are told that you have purchased from the Indians a great tract of land... but we know that they were not the owners of it; they had no right to sell it.”

“The land belongs to a great many nations, and they have all agreed together that no part of it should be sold without the consent of the whole.”

“You told us a lie, and deceived us.”

“We called the Great Spirit to witness the promises made to us. Yet the white people have continued to encroach upon our lands.”

“Father! We are discouraged; our hearts are sick; we are sorry for the wrongs done by the white people, and we wish for peace and justice.”

“We ask you to teach your people to treat us with fairness and not to destroy the remains of our nation.”

“We wish to sit down upon the land of our fathers and to remain there in peace.”

HISTORY

In 1790, Cornplanter (also known as Big Tree), a Seneca leader of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Iroquois Confederacy), addressed President George Washington regarding the treatment of Indigenous nations after the American Revolution.

During the Revolutionary War, many Haudenosaunee nations attempted neutrality, while others allied with the British because they feared American expansion onto Indigenous lands. After the United States gained independence, Indigenous nations found themselves excluded from decisions about their own territories despite never surrendering their sovereignty.

The new U.S. government celebrated liberty and independence through events such as the Fourth of July, yet Indigenous peoples experienced these same years as a time of invasion, broken treaties, land theft, village destruction, forced displacement, and violence.

Cornplanter’s address reminds Washington that the birth of the United States came at a devastating cost to Indigenous nations. The speech challenges the idea that American independence represented freedom for everyone living on the continent.

The address also exposes the gap between American ideals and American actions. While the United States proclaimed liberty and self-government, Indigenous communities often experienced betrayal, coercion, and loss of homeland.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why did many Indigenous nations view the American Revolution differently than the colonists?
- How does this address challenge traditional Fourth of July narratives?
- What similarities do you see between Cornplanter’s critique and Frederick Douglass’s “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” speech?