

Frederick Douglass's American Identity Politics

By Peter C. Myers

Mark Twain copied a friend's remark into his notebook: "I am not *an* American; I am *the* American." That is a claim—to be *the* American, the exemplary or representative American—that very few Americans could plausibly make. Twain himself could. Benjamin Franklin could and did. Abraham Lincoln could but didn't, though admirers made the claim for him. Surely some number of others could, too. But among all Americans past or present, no one could make such a claim more compellingly than Frederick Douglass.

Like his country, Douglass rose from a low beginning to a great height. Like his country again, he won his freedom in a revolutionary struggle, by his own virtue and against great odds, and he matured into an exemplar of universal liberty, admired the world over. And like his country, finally, Douglass the individual was divided by race.

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Unlike America, Douglass could hardly think of himself as "conceived in liberty." But even in this respect—especially in this respect—he represents a larger American promise. The son of a white slaveholder and a black slave, Douglass became, along with Abraham Lincoln, post-Founding America's most important exponent of the natural-rights argument summarized in the Declaration of Independence. Pursuant to the same principles, he became America's most prominent representative of the aspiration toward racial integration, reconciliation, and uplift.

One must emphasize: he *became* that. It didn't come naturally to him. To become the great apostle of those aspirations, Douglass had to overcome a sentiment about and among black Americans that is recurrently present in U.S. history, powerful in his day and again in ours—the feeling or conviction that to be black is to bear an identity antagonistic to American identity.

This sentiment received its most memorable expression from W. E. B Du Bois, now a larger presence in the minds of many educated Americans than Douglass. Du Bois wrote, in the most [famous passage](#) in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, that as a black American, "one ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two *warring ideals* in one dark body."

In his younger years, Frederick Douglass felt that psychic dividedness every bit as acutely and painfully as Du Bois did.

In an 1847 speech, Douglass [asked](#) a troubling question and provided a dispiriting answer. Speaking for black Americans as a class, he asked: "What country have I?" He answered: "I have no patriotism. I have no country." Then 29 years old, for

nearly his entire life recognized in American laws only as an article of property, Douglass here lamented that even as a legally free man, he had no country that honored and protected him, no country to which he belonged and none that belonged to him.

He made that speech at a meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society, an association founded by America's leading abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison. In 1847, Douglass was a faithful Garrisonian. When he declared his profound alienation from the country of his birth, he was rendering a personalized expression of what was standard Garrisonian doctrine.

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What alienated the Garrisonians from America, most of all, was their opinion that the U.S. Constitution was decisively pro-slavery. Garrison near the beginning of his career [called](#) the Constitution “the most bloody and heaven-daring arrangement ever made by men for the continuance and protection of a system of the most atrocious villainy ever exhibited on earth.” From that premise he drew what seemed to him the necessary inference. “Henceforth,” he [announced](#) in 1845, “the watchword” of abolitionists must be disunion: “NO UNION WITH SLAVEHOLDERS!”

According to William Lloyd Garrison, then, the destruction of slavery required the destruction of America—of the American constitutional union. And in 1847, that was Douglass's position, too.

Given Douglass's life experience, there is nothing very surprising in this. What *is* surprising, though, is how quickly and decisively he came to reject the Garrisonian position. Douglass launched his own abolitionist newspaper in early 1848, and after spending a few years reading and rethinking, he announced that he had come to reject the Garrisonian doctrines of disunion and the pro-slavery Constitution.

His turnabout came partly for prudential reasons. First was the realization, as he put it in his [speech](#) on the U.S. Supreme Court's infamous Dred Scott ruling, that “it would be difficult to hit upon any plan less likely to abolish slavery than the dissolution of the Union.” The disunion strategy would strengthen, not weaken the forces of despotism in America. Again from the Dred Scott speech:

If I were on board of a pirate ship, with a company of men and women whose lives and liberties I had put in jeopardy, I would not clear my soul of their blood by jumping in the long boat, and singing out no union with pirates. My business would be to remain on board. Even among slavery's adversaries, the Garrisonians were not alone in wanting to jump ship.

The counterparts to Garrisonian advocates of disunion were black advocates of emigration, led in the 1850s by Douglass's sometime friend, colleague, and rival, Martin Delany. Emigrationists were never a majority of black Americans, but their arguments gained influence in those periods when the prospects for freedom and equal rights appeared especially bleak.

The decade of the 1850s was such a period. So Douglass felt the need to respond to the Garrisonians and the emigrationists, and an invitation from the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society provided the opportunity. The occasion was the

commemoration of Independence Day in 1852. Douglass's [Fourth of July oration](#), which has been called the greatest of all abolitionist speeches, presents his fullest reflections on the meaning of America and on the question Du Bois would pose a half-century later—the question of black identity in relation to America.

. . . [Douglass] considers the Fourth as it appears to white Americans, then as it appears to black Americans, and finally from a universal or fully integrated perspective.

It's a very complex speech. Douglass biographer David W. Blight aptly compares it to a symphony in three movements. One way Douglass divides the speech is temporally, as its sections move from past to present to future. Another way is by sentiment: he begins with a somewhat cautious, reserved expression of hope, then shifts to outrage mixed with something approaching despair, and concludes with a more confident expression of hope. A third mode of division appears in his adoption of three distinct perspectives: he considers the Fourth as it appears to white Americans, then as it appears to black Americans, and finally from a universal or fully integrated perspective.

For much of the speech, the reader could be forgiven for thinking that Douglass had joined Delany in the black-nationalist camp. First addressing the white members of the audience, he told them, in effect, this is how your national holiday appears to *you*. He addresses them in a chain of second-person pronouns: not *our* but "*your* national independence"; "your political freedom"; "your fathers"; "your nation." The driving spirit seems little different from what animated his 1847 renunciation of patriotism. While admiring the "revolutionary fathers," he yet declared: "This Fourth [of] July is *yours*, not *mine*."

Coming to the present, he excoriated post-Founding America: "There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour."

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Perhaps the worst of the nation's crimes, to that point, was the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850—"that most foul and fiendish of all human decrees," Douglass called it, a law that "stands alone in the annals of tyrannical legislation." For free black Americans, the effect was essentially to legalize kidnapping, leaving many to conclude that there was no protection by law for them anywhere in the U.S. What followed were upsurges in pro-emigration sentiment and in actual emigration.

Douglass fully understood that sentiment, but he believed it to be self-destructive and rejected it repeatedly over the course of his career. He understood, too, however, that the case *against* emigration, like the case against disunion, had to be buttressed by a case *for* America. He concluded the July Fourth oration, as he concluded virtually all his speeches, with an expression of hopefulness.

This was not mere wishfulness. Douglass thought hopefulness in America was rational—grounded in evidence and reason—in part because of America's Founding. America's revolutionary fathers were "brave men," he remarked. They were "great men"; they dedicated the country to eternal principles. Against the Garrisonians,

also against those debauched (as Lincoln put it) by John Calhoun, he maintained that the Founders' Constitution was not pro-slavery; it was "a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT."

The case for hopefulness required that and more. At the conclusion of the Fourth of July speech, Douglass said something particularly interesting about the further grounds of his hopefulness. "A change has now come over the affairs of mankind," he said. Developments in the modern world, crucially enabled by modern philosophy, were making slavery increasingly impossible.

"The arm of commerce," he continued, "has borne away the gates of the strong city. Intelligence is penetrating the darkest corners of the globe." We are living in an age of commerce and enlightenment, he believed, and those developments were closely related.

Douglass believed what Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine believed: the principles of natural right held irresistible power for minds uncorrupted by interest, and freedom of speech, if properly protected, would propagate those principles throughout the world.

So monstrous an injustice as slavery could only survive in a condition of seclusion, and in the modern world the seclusion it needed was becoming impossible. "No abuse," said Douglass, "no outrage . . . can now hide itself from the all-pervading light." Douglass believed what Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine believed: the principles of natural right held irresistible power for minds uncorrupted by interest, and freedom of speech, if properly protected, would propagate those principles throughout the world.

Douglass was a strong believer in the power of speech. This was a man who almost literally talked his way from the bottom to near the top of American society. But he didn't think speech was all-powerful, and he didn't think that the fostering of a healthy sense of American identity was merely a matter of persuading people, white or black, to believe in American principles.

To cultivate a genuine sense of American identity requires more than agreement with its principles. It requires a sense of belonging and affection. It requires a *love* of America as one's *own*. On this point and others, Douglass was a good American disciple of John Locke.

In Locke's well-known reasoning, we own our own labor, and we own what we make. This can apply, however, not only to material property but also to political and patriotic affiliation. What Douglass wanted to teach his fellow citizens, his black fellow citizens in particular, was that we can *build* America, and in building or rebuilding it, we can make it our own. We can improve it by our labor, he argued, culturally and morally no less than materially. And to do this, we need first to improve ourselves. We need to cultivate what he called the "staying qualities," fostering a faith in ourselves and our country. This is why hopefulness is a moral imperative, for Douglass, and why a spirit of alienation is so dangerous.

We are now just over 200 years from Frederick Douglass's birth. In remembering him, we must certainly say today what he said in 1852: Our business is with the present. Republics, he liked to say, are proverbially forgetful—most importantly, forgetful of their own first principles. We live, as Douglass lived, in a period when the first principles of American republicanism are increasingly neglected and even

maligned.

We live in a time when many Americans have forgotten our principles, or never learned them, or learned to revile them; when many young people, young men especially, grow up in the belief that they have no grounds for hope for their future and no reason to identify with their country; when many of our educational institutions have become purveyors of alienation and disintegration, teaching that America is an evil, hateful society and that speech to the contrary must be vilified and suppressed.

By its white and black citizens together, America must be cherished and perfected as a genuine home for all, not merely by the accident and force of necessity but as an object of rational and sentimental identification.

At such a time, as we search for models of understanding and inspiration, it is a vital imperative for us to recover the moral and political vision of Frederick Douglass. In the long history of African-American political thought, there is no more forceful proponent of the cause of integration, and there is no more insightful analyst of the varieties and dangers of national and racial disintegration.

“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.” America, in Douglass’s abiding vision, was black Americans’ proper home, their only realistic alternative and also the locus of their highest ideals. By its white and black citizens together, America must be cherished and perfected as a genuine home for all, not merely by the accident and force of necessity but as an object of rational and sentimental identification. For Douglass as for Abraham Lincoln, their common country was, through it all, the last best hope of earth.

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