The Right to Criticize American Institutions

***Frederick Douglass***

**Speech before the American Anti-Slavery Society**

**May 11, 1847**

I cannot agree with my friend Mr. Garrison, in relation to my love and attachment to this land. I have no love for America, as such; I have no patriotism. I have no country. What country have I? The institutions of this country do not know me, do not recognize me as a man. I am not though of, spoken of, in any direction, out of the anti-slavery ranks, as a man. I am not thought of, or spoken of, except as a piece of property belonging to some *Christian* slaveholder, and all the religious and political institutions of this country, alike pronounce me a slave and a chattel. Now, in such a country as this, I cannot have patriotism. The only thing that links me to this land is my family, and the painful consciousness that here and there are three millions of my fellow-creatures, groaning beneath the iron rod of the worst despotism that could be devised, even in Pandemonium; that here are men and brethren, who are identified with me by their complexion, identified with me by their hatred of Slavery, identified with me by their love and aspirations for liberty, identified with me by the stripes upon their backs, their inhuman wrongs and cruel sufferings. This, and this only, attaches me to this land, and brings me here to plead with you, and with this country at large, for the disenthralment of my oppressed countrymen, and to overthrow this system of Slavery which is crushing them to the earth. How can I love a country that dooms three millions of my brethren, some of them my own kindred, my own brothers, my own sisters, who are now clanking the chains of Slavery upon the plans of the South, whose warm blood is now making fat the soil of Maryland and of Alabama, and over whose crushed spirits rolls the darks shadow of oppression, shutting out and extinguishing forever, the cheering rays of that bright sun of Liberty lighted in the souls of all God’s children by the Omnipotent hand of Deity itself? How can I, I say, love a country thus cursed, thus bedewed with the blood o f my brethren? A country, the Church of which, and the Government of which, and the Constitution of which, is in favour of supporting and perpetuation this monstrous system of injustice and blood? I have not, I cannot have, any love for this country, as such, or for its Constitution. I desire to see its overthrow as speedily as possible, and its Constitution shriveled in a thousand fragments, rather than this foul curse should continue to remain as now. [Hisses and Cheers.]

In all this, my friends, let me make myself understood. I do not hate America as against England, or against any other country, or land. I love humanity all over the globe. I am anxious to see righteousness prevail in all directions. I am anxious to see Slavery overthrown here; but, I never appealed to Englishmen in a manner calculated to awaken feelings of hatred and disgust, or to influence their prejudices towards America as a nation, or in a manner provocative of national jealousy or ill-will; but I always appealed to their conscience — to the higher and nobler feelings of the people of that country, to enlist them in this cause. I always appealed to their manhood, that which precede their being Englishmen, I appealed to them as men, and I had a right to do so. They are men, and the slave is a man, and we have a right to do so. They are men, and the slave is a man, and we have a right to call upon all men to assist in breaking his bonds, let them be born when, and a live where they man.

But it is asked, “What good will this do?” or “What good has it done?” “Have you not irritated, have you not annoyed your American friends, and the American people rather, than done them good?” I admit that we have irritated them. They deserve to be irritated. I am anxious to irritate the American people on this question. As it is in physics, so in morals, there are cases which demand irritation, and counter irritation. The conscience of the American public needs this irritation. And I would *blister it all over, from centre to circumference,* until it gives signs of a purer and a better life than it is no manifesting to the world.

But why expose the sins of one nation in the eyes of another? But why expose the sins of one nation in the eyes of another? Why attempt to bring one people under the odium of another people? There is much force in this question. I admit that there are sins in almost every country which can be best removed by means confined exclusively to their immediate locality. But such evils and such sins pre-suppose the existence of a moral power in this immediate locality sufficient to accomplish the work of renovation. But where, pray, can we go to find moral power in this nation, sufficient to overthrow Slavery? To what institution, to what party shall we apply for aid? I say, we admit that there are evils which can be best removed by influences confined to their immediate locality. But in regard to American Slavery, it is not so. It is such a giant crime, so darkening to the soul, so blinding in its moral influence, so well calculated to blast and corrupt all the human principles of our nature, so well adapted to infuse its own accursed spirit into all around it, that the people among whom it exists have not the moral power to abolish it. Shall we go to the Church for this influence? We have heard its character described. Shall we go to politicians or political parties? Have they the moral power necessary to accomplish this mighty task? They have not. What are they doing at this moment? Voting supplies for Slavery — voting supplies for the extension, the stability, the perpetuation of Slavery in this land. What is the Press doing? The same. The pulpit? Almost the same. I do not flatter myself that there is moral power in the land sufficient to overthrow Slavery, and I welcome the aid of England. And that aid will come. The growing intercourse between England and this country, by means of steam-navigation, the relaxation of the protective system in various countries in Europe, gives us an opportunity to bring in the aid, the moral and Christian aid of those living on the other side of the Atlantic. We welcome it, in the language of the resolution. We entreat our British friends to continue to send in their remonstrances across the deep, against Slavery in this land. And these remonstrances will have a powerful effect here. Sir, the Americans may tell of their ability, and I have no doubt they have it, to keep back the invader’s hosts, to repulse the strongest force that its enemies may send against this country. It may boast, and it may *rightly* boast, of its capacity to build its ramparts so high that no foe can hope to scale them, to render them so impregnable as to defy the assault of the world. But, Sir, there is one thing it cannot resist, come from what quarter it may. I cannot resist TRUTH . You cannot build your forts so strong, nor your ramparts so high, nor arm yourself so powerfully, as to be able to withstand the overwhelming MORAL SENTIMENT against slavery now flowing into this land. For example; prejudice against color is continually becoming weaker in this land (and more and more consider this) sentiment as unworthy a lodgment in the breast of an enlightened community. And the American abroad dare not now, even in public conveyance, to lift his voice in defence of this disgusting prejudice.

Cast Off the Mill-Stone

***Frederick Douglass***

**from Douglass’ Monthly**

**September 1861**

We are determined that our readers shall have line upon line and precept upon precept. Ours is only one humble voice; but such as it is, we give it freely to our country, and to the cause of humanity. That honesty is the best policy, we all profess to believe, though our practice may often contradict the proverb. The present policy of our Government is evidently to put down the slave-holding rebellion, and at the same time protect and preserve slavery. This policy hangs like a mill-stone about the neck of our people. It carries disorder to the very sources of our national activities. Weakness, faint heartedness and inefficiency is the natural result. The mental and moral machinery of mankind cannot long withstand such disorder without serious damage. This policy offends reason, wounds the sensibilities, and shocks the moral sentiments of men. It forces upon us in consequent conclusions and painful contradictions, while the plain path of duty is obscured and thronged with multiplying difficulties. Let us look this slavery-preserving policy squarely in the face, and search it thoroughly.

Can the friends of that policy tell us why this should not be an abolition war? Is not abolition plainly forced upon the nation as a necessity of national existence? Are not the rebels determined to make the war on their part a war for the utter destruction of liberty and the complete mastery of slavery over every other right and interest in the land? And is not an abolition war on our part the natural and logical answer to be made to the rebels? We all know it is. But it is said that for the Government to adopt the abolition policy, would involve the loss of the support of the Union men of the Border Slave States. Grant it, and what is such friendship worth? We are stronger without than with such friendship. It arms the enemy, while it disarms its friends. The fact is indisputable, that so long as slavery is respected and protected by our Government, the slaveholders can carry on the rebellion, and no longer. Slavery is the stomach of the rebellion. The bread that feeds the rebel army, the cotton that clothes them, and the money that arms them and keeps them supplied with powder and bullets, come from the slaves, who, if consulted as to the use which should be made of their hard earnings, would say, give it to the bottom of the sea rather than do with it this mischief. Strike here, cut off the connection between the fighting master and the working slave, and you at once put an end to this rebellion, because you destroy that which feeds, clothes and arms it. Shall this not be done, because we shall offend the Union men in the Border States?

But we have good reasons for believing that it would not offend them. The great mass of Union men in all those Border States are intelligently so. They are men who set a higher value upon the Union than upon slavery. In many instances, they recognize slavery as the thing of all others the most degrading to labor and oppressive towards them. They dare not say so now; but let the Government say the word, and even they would unite in sending the vile thing to its grave, and rejoice at the opportunity. Such of them as love slavery better than their country are not now, and have never been, friends of the Union. They belong to the detestable class who do the work of enemies in the garb of friendship, and it would be a real gain to get rid of them. Then look at slavery itself—what good thing has it done that it should be allowed to survive a rebellion of its own creation? Why should the nation pour out its blood and lavish its treasure by the million, consent to protect and preserve the guilty cause of all its troubles? The answer returned to these questions is, that the Constitution does not allow the exercise of such power. As if this were a time to talk of constitutional power! When a man is well, it would be mayhem to cut off his arm. It would be unconstitutional to do so. But if the arm were shattered and mortifying, it would be quite unconstitutional and criminal not to cut it off. The cause is precisely so with Governments. The grand object, end and aim of Government is the preservation of society, and from nothing worse than anarchy. When Governments, through the ordinary channels of civil law, are unable to secure this end, they are thrown back upon military law, and for the time may set aside the civil law precisely to the extent which it may be necessary to do so in order to accomplish the grand object for which Governments are instituted among men. The power, therefore, to abolish slavery is within the objects sought by the Constitution. But if every letter and syllable of the Constitution were a prohibition of abolition, yet if the life of the nation required it, we should be bound by the Constitution to abolish it, because there can be no interest superior to existence and preservation.…

Another evil of the policy of protecting and preserving slavery, is that it deprives us of the important aid which might be rendered to the Government by the four million slaves. These people are repelled by our slaveholding policy. They have their hopes of deliverance from bondage destroyed. They hesitate now; but if our policy is pursued, they will not need to be compelled by Jefferson Davis to fight against us.…

A third evil of this policy, is the chilling effect it exerts upon the moral sentiment of mankind. Vast is the power of the sympathy of the civilized world.…

Our policy gives the rebels the advantage of seeming to be merely fighting for the right to govern themselves. We divest the war on our part of all those grand elements of progress and philanthropy that naturally win the hearts and command the reverence of all men, and allow it to assume the form of a meaningless display of brute force.…

Another evil arising from this mischievous slaveholding policy, is that it invites the interference of other Governments with our blockade.… Let the war be made an abolition war, and no statesman in England or France would dare even, if inclined, to propose any disturbance of the blockade. Make this an abolition war, and you at once unite the world against the rebels, and in favor of the Government.

**Frederick Douglass on Lincoln, Rochester New York, June 1, 1865**

"No people or class of people in the country, have a better reason for lamenting the death of Abraham Lincoln, and for desiring to honor and perpetuate his memory, than have the colored people." Compared "with the long line of his predecessors, many of whom were merely the facile and servile instruments of the slave power," Lincoln made an impressive record which entitled him to be considered "in a sense hitherto without example, *emphatically the black man’s president*: the first to show any respect for their rights as men" [emphasis added].

“Already he had expressed himself in favor of extending the right of suffrage to two classes of colored men; first to the brave colored soldiers who had fought under our flag, and second to the very intelligent part of the colored population [of the] South. This declaration on his part, though it seemed to mean but little meant a great deal. It was like Abraham Lincoln**.** He never shocked prejudices unnecessarily. Having learned statesmanship while splitting rails, he always used the edge of the wedge first—and the fact that he used this at all meant that he would, if need be, use the thick as well as the thin. He saw the absurdity of asking men to fight for a Government which should degrade them, and the meanness of enfranchising enemies and disenfranchising friends. He was a progressive man, a humane man, an honorable man, and at heart an antislavery man. He had exhausted the resources of conciliation upon the rebels and the slaveholders and now looked to the principles of Liberty and justice, for the peace, security, happiness, and prosperity of his country. I assume therefore, had Abraham Lincoln been spared to see this day, the negro of the South would have more than a hope of enfranchisement and no rebels would hold the reins of government in any one of the late rebellious states. Whosoever else have cause to mourn the loss of Abraham Lincoln, to the colored people of the country his death is an unspeakable calamity.”

**Frederick Douglass, *Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln*, April 14, 1876**

“He [Lincoln] was preeminently the white man’s President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men. He was ready and willing at any time during the first years of his administration to deny, postpone, and sacrifice the rights of humanity in the colored people to promote the welfare of the white people of this country. In all his education and feeling he was an American of the Americans. He came into the Presidential chair upon one principle alone, namely, opposition to the extension of slavery. His arguments in furtherance of this policy had their motive and mainspring in his patriotic devotion to the interests of his own race. To protect, defend, and perpetuate slavery in the states where it existed Abraham Lincoln was not less ready than any other President to draw the sword of the nation. He was ready to execute all the supposed guarantees of the United States Constitution in favor of the slave system anywhere inside the slave states. He was willing to pursue, recapture, and send back the fugitive slave to his master, and to suppress a slave rising for liberty, though his guilty master were already in arms against the Government. The race to which we belong were not the special objects of his consideration. Knowing this, I concede to you, my white fellow-citizens, a pre-eminence in this worship at once full and supreme. First, midst, and last, you and yours were the objects of his deepest affection and his most earnest solicitude. You are the children of Abraham Lincoln. We are at best only his step-children; children by adoption, children by forces of circumstances and necessity. To you it especially belongs to sound his praises, to preserve and perpetuate his memory, to multiply his statues, to hang his pictures high upon your walls, and commend his example, for to you he was a great and glorious friend and benefactor. Instead of supplanting you at his altar, we would exhort you to build high his monuments; let them be of the most costly material, of the most cunning workmanship; let their forms be symmetrical, beautiful, and perfect, let their bases be upon solid rocks, and their summits lean against the unchanging blue, overhanging sky, and let them endure forever! But while in the abundance of your wealth, and in the fullness of your just and patriotic devotion, you do all this, we entreat you to despise not the humble offering we this day unveil to view; for while Abraham Lincoln saved for you a country, he delivered us from a bondage, according to Jefferson, one hour of which was worse than ages of the oppression your fathers rose in rebellion to oppose.

Fellow-citizens, ours is no new-born zeal and devotion — merely a thing of this moment. The name of Abraham Lincoln was near and dear to our hearts in the darkest and most perilous hours of the Republic. We were no more ashamed of him when shrouded in clouds of darkness, of doubt, and defeat than when we saw him crowned with victory, honor, and glory. Our faith in him was often taxed and strained to the uttermost, but it never failed. When he tarried long in the mountain; when he strangely told us that we were the cause of the war; when he still more strangely told us that we were to leave the land in which we were born; when he refused to employ our arms in defense of the Union; when, after accepting our services as colored soldiers, he refused to retaliate our murder and torture as colored prisoners; when he told us he would save the Union if he could with slavery; when he revoked the Proclamation of Emancipation of General Fremont; when he refused to remove the popular commander of the Army of the Potomac, in the days of its inaction and defeat, who was more zealous in his efforts to protect slavery than to suppress rebellion; when we saw all this, and more, we were at times grieved, stunned, and greatly bewildered; but our hearts believed while they ached and bled. Nor was this, even at that time, a blind and unreasoning superstition. Despite the mist and haze that surrounded him; despite the tumult, the hurry, and confusion of the hour, we were able to take a comprehensive view of Abraham Lincoln, and to make reasonable allowance for the circumstances of his position. We saw him, measured him, and estimated him; not by stray utterances to injudicious and tedious delegations, who often tried his patience; not by isolated facts torn from their connection; not by any partial and imperfect glimpses, caught at inopportune moments; but by a broad survey, in the light of the stern logic of great events, and in view of that divinity which shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will, we came to the conclusion that the hour and the man of our redemption had somehow met in the person of Abraham Lincoln. It mattered little to us what language he might employ on special occasions; it mattered little to us, when we fully knew him, whether he was swift or slow in his movements; it was enough for us that Abraham Lincoln was at the head of a great movement, and was in living and earnest sympathy with that movement, which, in the nature of things, must go on until slavery should be utterly and forever abolished in the United States.

Fellow-citizens, there is little necessity on this occasion to speak at length and critically of this great and good man, and of his high mission in the world. That ground has been fully occupied and completely covered both here and elsewhere. The whole field of fact and fancy has been gleaned and garnered. Any man can say things that are true of Abraham Lincoln, but no man can say anything that is new of Abraham Lincoln. His personal traits and public acts are better known to the American people than are those of any other man of his age. He was a mystery to no man who saw him and heard him. Though high in position, the humblest could approach him and feel at home in his presence. Though deep, he was transparent; though strong, he was gentle; though decided and pronounced in his convictions, he was tolerant towards those who differed from him, and patient under reproaches. Even those who only knew him through his public utterance obtained a tolerably clear idea of his character and personality. The image of the man went out with his words, and those who read them knew him.

I have said that President Lincoln was a white man, and shared the prejudices common to his countrymen towards the colored race. Looking back to his times and to the condition of his country, we are compelled to admit that this unfriendly feeling on his part may be safely set down as one element of his wonderful success in organizing the loyal American people for the tremendous conflict before them, and bringing them safely through that conflict. His great mission was to accomplish two things: first, to save his country from dismemberment and ruin; and, second, to free his country from the great crime of slavery. To do one or the other, or both, he must have the earnest sympathy and the powerful cooperation of his loyal fellow-countrymen. Without this primary and essential condition to success his efforts must have been vain and utterly fruitless. Had he put the abolition of slavery before the salvation of the Union, he would have inevitably driven from him a powerful class of the American people and rendered resistance to rebellion impossible. Viewed from the genuine abolition ground, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent; but measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined.

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 man who could say, “Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war shall soon pass away, yet if God wills it continue till all the wealth piled by two hundred years of bondage shall have been wasted, and each drop of blood drawn by the lash shall have been paid for by one drawn by the sword, the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether,” gives all needed proof of his feeling on the subject of slavery. He was willing, while the South was loyal, that it should have its pound of flesh, because he thought that it was so nominated in the bond; but farther than this no earthly power could make him go.

Fellow-citizens, whatever else in this world may be partial, unjust, and uncertain, time, time! is impartial, just, and certain in its action. In the realm of mind, as well as in the realm of matter, it is a great worker, and often works wonders. The honest and comprehensive statesman, clearly discerning the needs of his country, and earnestly endeavoring to do his whole duty, though covered and blistered with reproaches, may safely leave his course to the silent judgment of time. Few great public men have ever been the victims of fiercer denunciation than Abraham Lincoln was during his administration. He was often wounded in the house of his friends. Reproaches came thick and fast upon him from within and from without, and from opposite quarters. He was assailed by Abolitionists; he was assailed by slave-holders; he was assailed by the men who were for peace at any price; he was assailed by those who were for a more vigorous prosecution of the war; he was assailed for not making the war an abolition war; and he was bitterly assailed for making the war an abolition war.

**Key Terms from Douglass:** Chattel, Garrison, Moral Power, Remonstrance, Anarchy, Abolition, Border Slave States, Disenfranchising, “black man’s president,” “white man’s president”

**Guiding Questions:**

1. On what authority does Douglass critique American institutions?
2. Should political figures criticize their nation when abroad?
3. What criticism of emancipation is Douglass addressing?
4. Why is it easier for Douglass to advocate emancipation than it is for Lincoln?
5. What did Douglass mean by referring to Lincoln as “emphatically the black man’s president?”
6. How did Douglass use the wedge and rail-splitting analogy to explain Lincoln’s statesmanship?
7. What did Douglass mean by referring to Lincoln as “preeminently the white-man’s president” and African-Americans as “only his stepchildren”? To what extent does he modify this statement later in the speech?
8. According to Douglass, what differing circumstances did Lincoln have to consider when dealing with the slavery question?
9. How does Douglass praise Lincoln in handling these circumstances as a statesman?
10. To what extent then does Douglass recognize the difference between radical-reform leadership and statesmanship?