

FOURTH OF JULY

Douglass held US accountable

Renowned orator wrote speech in indignation

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USA TODAY

On the heels of America's 76th birthday, Frederick Douglass, a renowned orator, abolitionist and former slave, criticized the United States for celebrating its political freedom while millions of Black Americans were still enslaved.

Douglass delivered his "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" speech July 5, 1852, at the historic Corinthian Hall in Rochester, New York. The Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society had invited Douglass to speak on the Fourth of July, but he declined because, as he explained to an audience of roughly 600 free, white people:

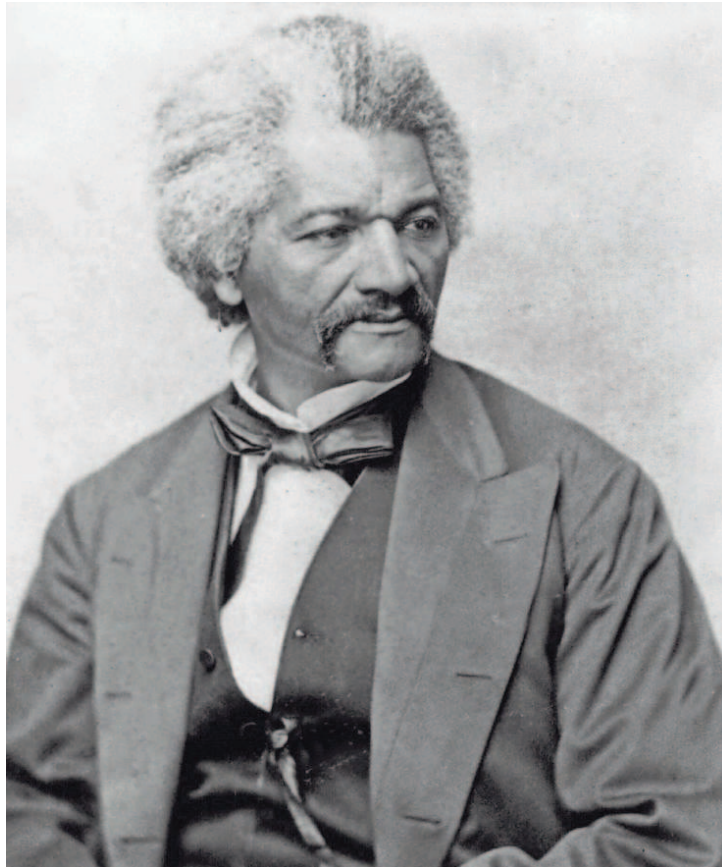
"The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine."

In what some historians consider the greatest antislavery speech, Douglass cited the Bible, evoked Shakespeare and touted the Constitution as a "glorious liberty document" that is "entirely hostile to the existence of slavery."

"He's trying to puncture this American hypocrisy of how you could have such a huge and growing slave system and (a) society that says it's dedicated to liberty and to freedom and even to equality," said David Blight, a history professor at Yale and author of the Pulitzer-prize winning biography, "Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom."

Despite being nearly 170 years old, Douglass' speech still lives in American public consciousness. It's often quoted and recited at this time of year. Leading Douglass scholars spoke with USA TODAY about what motivated Douglass to deliver such a scathing critique of America.

Douglass spent almost three weeks writing the speech. His motivation was quite simple, said Raymond Winbush, director of the Institute for Urban Re-



Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), an American slave who became a spokesman of abolitionists. APIC/GETTY IMAGES

search at Morgan State University.

"What inspired him was the hypocrisy of this country," Winbush said. "He was angry when he wrote it."

Douglass saw two Americas: one with a massive system of roughly 3 million slaves and another where Americans beat drums, sang hymns, preached sermons and waved banners with "joyous enthusiasm" to celebrate their freedom.

Two years before Douglass' famed speech, the U.S. government passed the

Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which required runaway slaves to be returned to their owners.

For decades, slaves fled the South through the Underground Railroad. Until the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, Northern states made it illegal for law enforcement officials to apprehend runaways. The federal law mandated that U.S. marshals, federal officials and everyday citizens help apprehend suspected runaways, even those found in free states. Those who refused to cap-

ture a runaway slave or helped them could be fined or jailed.

Douglass believed this new law nationalized slavery because everyone in the USA was legally obliged to return escaped enslaved people to their so-called owners, said Robert Levine, University of Maryland professor and author of several books about Douglass. "So he's angry about that and sees that whole act as an act of violence against Black people," Levine said. Douglass was incensed that "merciless slave hunters" lawfully tracked down and captured runaways trying to flee to freedom. Legally, there was nowhere in the country for slaves to hide.

"Slavery has been nationalized in its most horrible and revolting form," Douglass said in his speech. "By that act, Mason and Dixon's line has been obliterated; New York has become as Virginia; and the power to hold, hunt, and sell men, women, and children as slaves remains no longer a mere state institution, but is now an institution of the whole United States."

The political climate was tense when Douglass gave his speech, Blight said: 1852 was a presidential election year in which three parties – Whig, Democratic and Free Soil – vied for the presidency. The Whigs and the Democrats supported slavery in the South. Politicians debated how to approach the division in the country between free and slaveholding states. A conflict was brewing in the country, which erupted into the Civil War nearly a decade later.

One of the secrets to the success of Douglass' speech was how it was framed, Blight said. Before diving into his critique, he acknowledged that the nation's Founding Fathers were "brave" and "great" men. He then spoke from a former slave's point of view and used the Declaration of Independence to urge white people to fight against slavery.

"It's a bitter critique of American hypocrisy, but at the very end, he lets the audience back up," Blight said. "He gives the audience and the country hope. He's saying your principles and your ideals are fine, but you've got to live up to it. And until you do, you're simply not the country you say you are."