



FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND THE 4TH OF JULY: STILL SEARCHING FOR AFFIRMATIVE ANSWERS

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

As we prepare for the July 4th celebrations and contemplate the real racial meaning of the post-racial message of the Supreme Court's recent retrograde decisions on affirmative action and the Voting Rights Act, and as President Obama continues to call us to Americanization without racial distinction, while leaving disparities of wealth, power and status intact, we might want to revisit Frederick Douglass' classic Fourth of July speech. For Douglass demands a real sharing of the rights and goods of the land for any genuine and justifiable celebration.

Somewhere beyond the barbecuing, the beach and backyard parties, the fireworks, the pro-forma flag-flying and perfunctory parades, are the original meaning and motivating ideas of celebrating the Fourth of July. It was to be, but never was, a celebration of the independence and creation of a country that would protect and promote the God-given inalienable rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" for all, as the Declaration of Independence advocated and promised.

But even before the independence of the country, there were contradictions. For those seeking freedom for themselves were enslaving us; those proclaiming the right to life were committing genocide against Native Americans; and those advocating equality rejected the principles and practice when applied to us, Native Americans and even their own women. They had not encountered the Latino and Asian yet, but the pattern of oppression had been put in place and would continue in various forms and fashions to this day.

It is because of this continuing contradiction that African Americans and others similarly situated have mixed feelings about the Fourth of July. It's not that we

don't welcome, like others, another day to rest and recreate ourselves. It is, above all, because we experience in our daily lives a continuing contradiction between the self-congratulatory claims of the country and its everyday practices, and because of a deep historical and ongoing sense that whatever independence was achieved in 1776, it didn't include us.

So, even when we deny or don't know it, we still stand with Frederick Douglass at Rochester, NY in 1852 as he gives his classic lecture, "The Meaning of July 4th for the Negro". And with him, we are asking ourselves and the ruling race-class of this country, "What have I or the people I represent have to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and natural justice, embodied in the Declaration of Independence, extended to us? And am I therefore, called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar and to confess the benefits and express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your independence to us". Douglass' questions are both real and rhetorical. For we know the answers already, as he and they did. As he says, "would to God, both for your sakes and ours that an *affirmative answer* could be truthfully returned to these questions. . . But such is not the case."

Douglass lists several things that prevent him from seeing the Fourth as a day of celebration for him and his people. Among those are "a sad sense of the disparity between us"; "the immeasurable distance between us"; the fact that "the blessings" and "the rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence bequeathed by your fathers, is shared not by me." Thus, he says, "This Fourth of July is *yours* not *mine*."

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Douglass focuses on the Holocaust of enslavement and the barbarity and hypocrisy of its existence in a self-proclaimed land of freedom. He asserts, "Go where you may, search where you will. . . , 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." Certainly, as a morally monstrous act of genocide which is not only against African people but also a crime against humanity, the Holocaust of African enslavement reaffirms Douglass' position. Add to it the Native American Holocaust as part and product of "the everyday practices of this nation" during that time and Douglass' declaration becomes even more cogent.

Although Douglass focused on the barbarity and savagery of enslavement, enslavement is a metaphor for gross oppression and radical evil in the world. It speaks not only to holocaust, genocide, injustice and exploitation, but also to degradation, dehumanization and systematic and sustained violence against vulnerable and less powerful persons and peoples of the world. Thus, Douglass' message and model are a timeless text to be read as a foundation and framework for us as a people to understand and assert ourselves in the world. It calls on us to continue the vanguard role we have historically played in helping to shape the moral and political direction of this country. And he suggests we cannot do this, if we confuse our identity and independence with our oppressor's; forget Black freedom is indivisible, even if some of us seem more free than

others; or assume we are already in possession of the freedom, justice, equality and power we still are struggling to achieve.

Douglass wants us and the whole country to use the Fourth, not simply as a time of celebration but also as a time of sober reflection on the real state of things in this land and the world. He wants us to see the world from the position of the most oppressed and identify and stand with them in the ongoing struggle to reconceive and reconstruct society and the world in the interest of freedom, justice and human flourishing.

He suggests that we reject a patriotism which is reduced to ritualistic references to ideals and use every opportunity to insist on and struggle for their realization in the everyday practices of the country. So, he would ask us to fold up those little plastic and cheap-cloth flags made in China or some other low-wage or sweat-shop location and get busy building a real basis for a just and good society and world.

Revealing a belief in our ethical role and promise as a people, he says in speaking of the forces of progress in the world "Africa must rise and put on her yet unwoven garment." This is to say, the world African community must build on its best ethical insights and put forth its own paradigms for bringing goodness in the world. Only then can we honestly and effectively speak our own special cultural truth and make our own unique contribution to how this country is reconceived and reconstructed in the most positive, progressive and promising ways.

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