

Document 16.3 Frederick Douglass, "Negroes and the National War Effort" (1863)

Two years into the Civil War, President Lincoln finally allowed for the enlistment of black soldiers. He hoped black participation in the armed forces would bring an end to the war more quickly. Frederick Douglass announced this opportunity for enlistment to his mostly black audience in Philadelphia on July 6, 1863. The speech also links the ideas of black citizenship and military service, and reassures the listeners that the federal government's policy of open enlistment would take precedence over any state policies. African Americans flooded the recruiting stations, sometimes traveling to other states so that they could enlist. Douglass interpreted the Proclamation and military service as a positive advancement and he exhorted men to enlist immediately, even supporting his two sons when they joined the 54th Massachusetts Infantry.

MR. PRESIDENT AND FELLOW-CITIZENS—I shall not attempt to follow, Judge Kelley and Miss Dickinson in their eloquent and thrilling appeals to colored men to enlist in the service of the United States. They have left nothing to be desired on that point. I propose to look at the subject in a plain and practical common-sense light. There are obviously two views to be taken of such enlistments—a broad view and a narrow view. I am willing to take both and consider both. The narrow view of this subject is that which respects the matter of dollars and cents. There are those among us who say they are in favor of taking a hand in this tremendous war, but they add they wish to do so on terms of equality with white men. They say if they enter the service, endure all the hardships, perils and suffering—if they make bare their breasts, and with strong arms and courageous hearts confront rebel cannons, and wring victory from the jaws of death, they should have the same pay, the same rations, the same bounty, and the same favorable conditions every way afforded to other men.

I shall not oppose this view. There is something deep down in the soul of every man present which assents to the justice of the claim thus and honors the manhood and self-respect which insist upon it. (Applause.) I say at once, in peace and war, I am content with nothing for the black short of equal and exact justice. The only question I have, and the point which I differ from those who refuse to enlist, is whether the colored more likely to obtain justice and equality while refusing to assist in putting down this tremendous rebellion than he would be if he should promptly, generously and earnestly give his hand and heart to the salvation of country in this day of calamity and peril. Nothing can be more plain, nothing more certain than that the speediest and best possible way open us to manhood, equal rights and elevation, is that we enter this service. For my own part, I hold that if the Government of the United States offered nothing more, as an inducement to colored men to enlist, than bare subsistence and arms, considering the moral effect of compliance upon ourselves, it would be the wisest and best thing for us to enlist. (Applause.) There is something ennobling in the possession of arms, and we of all other people in the world stand in need of their ennobling influence.

The case presented in the present war, and the light in which the colored man is bound to view it, may be stated thus. There are two governments struggling now for the possession of and endeavoring to bear rule over the United States—one has its capital in Richmond, and is represented by Mr. Jefferson Davis, and the other has its capital at Washington and is represented by "Honest Old Abe." (Cheers and long-continued applause.) These two governments are to-day face to face, confronting each other with vast armies, and grappling each other upon many a bloody field, north and south, on the banks of the Mississippi, and under the shadows of the Alleghenies. Now, the question for every colored man is or ought to be, what attitude is assumed by these respective governments and armies towards the rights and liberties of the colored race in this country? Which is for us, and which against us? (Cries of That's the question.)

Now, I think there can be no doubt as to the attitude of the Richmond or Confederate government. Wherever else there has been concealment, here all is frank, open, and diabolically straightforward. Jefferson Davis and his government make no secret as to the cause of this war, and they do not conceal the purpose of the war. That purpose is nothing more nor less than to make the slavery of the African race universal and perpetual on this continent. It is not only evident from the history and logic of events, but the declared purpose of the atrocious war now being waged against the country. Some, indeed, have denied that slavery has anything to do with the war, but the very same men who do this affirm it in the same breath in which they deny it, for they tell you that the abolitionists are the cause of the war. Now, if the abolitionists are the cause of the war, they are the cause of it only

because they have sought the abolition of slavery. View it in any way you please, therefore, the rebels are fighting for the existence of slavery—they are fighting for the privilege, the horrid privilege, of sundering the dearest ties of human nature—of trafficking in slaves and the souls of men—for the ghastly privilege of scourging women and selling innocent children. (Cries of That's true.)

I say this is not the concealed object of the war, but the openly confessed and shamelessly proclaimed object of the war. Vice-President Stephens has stated, with the utmost clearness and precision, the difference between the fundamental ideas of the Confederate Government and those of the Federal Government. One is based upon the idea that colored men are an inferior race, who may be enslaved and plundered forever, and to the heart's content of any men of a different complexion, while the Federal Government recognizes the natural and fundamental equality of all men. (Applause.)

I say, again, we all know that this Jefferson Davis government holds out to us nothing but fetters, chains, auction-blocks, bludgeons, branding irons, and eternal slavery and degradation. If it triumphs in this contest, woe, woe, ten thousand woes, to the black man! Such of us as are free, in all the likelihoods of the case, would be given over to the most excruciating tortures, while the last hope of the long-crushed bondman would be extinguished forever.

Now, what is the attitude of the Washington government towards the colored race? What reasons have we to desire its triumph in the present contest? Mind, I do not ask what was its attitude towards us before this bloody rebellion broke out. I do not ask what was its disposition when it was controlled by the very men who are now fighting to destroy it, when they could no longer control it. I do not even ask what it was two years ago, when McClellan shamelessly gave out that in a war between loyal slaves and disloyal masters, he would take the side of the masters against the slaves—when he openly proclaimed his purpose to put down slave insurrection with an iron hand—when glorious Ben Butler (cheers and applause), now stunned into a conversion to anti-slavery principles (which I have every reason to believe sincere), proffered his services to the Governor of Maryland to suppress a slave insurrection, while treason ran riot in that State, and the warm, red blood of Massachusetts soldiers still stained the pavements of Baltimore.

I do not ask what was the attitude of this government when many of the officers and men who had undertaken to defend it, openly threatened to throw down their arms and leave the service, if men of color should step forward to defend it, and be invested with the dignity of the soldiers. Moreover, I do not ask what was position of this government when our loyal camps were made slave-hunting grounds, and United States officers performed the disgusting duty of slave dogs to hunt down slaves for rebel masters. These were all dark and terrible days for the republic. I do not ask you about the dead past. I bring you the living present. Events more mighty than men, eternal Providence, all wise and all controlling, have placed us in new relations to the government. What that government is to-day, and what it will be to-morrow, is made evident by a very few facts. Look at them, colored men! Slavery in the District of Columbia is abolished forever; slavery in all the territories of the United States is abolished! The foreign slave trade with its ten thousand revolting abominations, is rendered impossible, slavery in ten States of the Union is abolished; slavery in the five remaining States is as certain to follow the same fate as the night is to follow day. The independence of Hayti is recognized; her minister sits beside our Prime Minister, Mr. Seward, and dines at his table in Washington, while colored men are excluded from the cars in Philadelphia; showing that a black man's complexion in Washington, in the presence of the Federal government, is less offensive than in the city of brotherly love. Citizenship is no longer denied us under this government.

Under the interpretation of our rights by Attorney General Bates, we are American citizens. We can import goods, own and sail ships, and travel in foreign countries with American passports in our pockets; and now, so far from there being any opposition, so far from excluding us from the army as soldiers, the President at Washington, the Cabinet and the Congress, the generals commanding, and the whole army of the nation unite in giving us one thunderous welcome to share with them in the honor and glory of suppressing treason and upholding the star-spangled banner. The revolution is tremendous, and it becomes us as wise men to recognize the change, and to shape our action accordingly. (Cheers, and cries of "We will.")

I hold that the Federal Government was never, in its essence, anything but an anti-slavery Government. Abolish slavery to-morrow, and not a sentence or syllable of the Constitution need be altered. It was purposely so framed as to give no claim, no sanction to the claim of property in man. If in its origin slavery had any relation to the Government, it was only as the scaffolding to the magnificent structure, to be removed as soon as the building was completed. There is in the Constitution no East, no West, no North, no South, no black, no white, no slave, no slaveholder, but all are citizens who are of American birth.

Such is the Government, fellow-citizens, you are now called upon to uphold with your arms. Such is the Government that you are called upon to co-operate with in burying rebellion and slavery in a common grave. (Applause.) Never since the world began was a better chance offered to a long enslaved and oppressed people. The opportunity is given us to be men. With one courageous resolution, we may blot out the hand-writing of ages against us. Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters U. S.; let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder, and bullets in his pocket, and there is no power on the earth or under the earth which can deny that he has earned the right of citizenship in the United States. (Laughter and applause.) ...

Do not flatter yourselves, my friends, that you are more important to the Government than the Government is to you. You stand but as the plank to the ship. This rebellion can be put down without your help. Slavery can be abolished by white men: but liberty so won for the black man, while it leave him an object of pity, can never make him an object of respect.

Depend upon it, this is no time for hesitation. Do you say you want the pay that white men get? I believe that the justice and magnanimity of your country will speedily grant it. But will you be over-nice about this? Do you get as good wages now as white men get by staying out of the service? Don't you work for less every day than white men get? You know you do. Do I hear you say you want black officers? Very well, and I have not the slightest doubt that, in the progress of this war, we shall see officers, black colonels, and generals even. But is it not ridiculous in all at once refusing to be commanded by white men in time of war, when we are everywhere commanded by white men in time of peace? Do I hear you say still that you are a son, and want your mother provided for in your absence?—a husband, and want your wife cared for?—a brother, and want your sister secured against want? I honor you for your solicitude. Your mothers, your wives and your sisters ought to be cared for, and an association of gentlemen, composed of responsible white and colored men is now being organized in this city for this very purpose.

Do I hear you say you offered your services to Pennsylvania, and were refused? I know it. But what of that? The State is not more than the nation. The greater includes the lesser. Because the State refuses, you should all the more readily turn to the United States. (Applause.) When the children fall out, they should refer their quarrel to the parent. "You came unto your own, and your own received you not." But the broad gates of the United States stand open night and day. Citizenship in the United States will, in end, secure your citizenship in the State.

Young men of Philadelphia, you are without excuse. The hour has arrived, and your place is in the Union army. Remember that the musket—the United States musket with its bayonet of steel—is better than all mere parchment guarantees of liberty. In your hands that musket means liberty; and should your constitutional right at the close of this war be denied, which, in the nature of things, it cannot be, your brethren are safe while you have a Constitution which proclaims your right to keep and bear arms. (Immense cheering).

Source: Douglass' Monthly, August 1863.