



Frederick Douglass to Henry Clay Frederick Douglass Papers: Articles by Douglass, 1846-1894; 1847; Dec. 3; "Letter to Henry Clay," North Star

"You would charge upon God, the responsibility of your own crimes."

Clay, Henry (Addressee)

From The North Star, Friday, December 3, 1847.

Letter to Henry Clay Sir:

I have just received and read your speech delivered at the

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The first issue of The North Star

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millions enduring the evils of slavery in this, otherwise, highly favored and glorious land.

You disavow, in the extraordinary speech before me, after dwelling at length upon the evils,

disgrace and dangers of the present unjust, mean and iniquitous war waged by the United States upon

Mexico, for yourself and the meeting, “in the most positive manner” **any**

wish to acquire any foreign territory whatever for the purpose (2) of introducing slavery into it. As one of the oppressed, I give you the full

expression of sincere gratitude for this declaration and the pledge which it implies, and earnestly hope that you may be able to keep

your vow unsullied by compromises which (pardon me) have on former

occurrences to often marred and defaced the beauty and **consistency of your humane declaration and pledges. It is not, however, part of my**

present intent to reproach you invidiously or severely for the past.

Unfortunately for the race, you do not stand alone in respect to deviation from a strict line of rectitude. Poor, erring and depraved humanity has surrounded you with a throng of guilty associates, and it would not, therefore, be magnanimous in me, above all others, to reproach you for the past.

Forgetting the things that are behind, **I propose simply to speak to you of what you are at this time;— —of the errors and evils of your present,**

as I think, wicked position, and to point out to you the path of repentance which, if pursued, must lead you to the possession of

peace and happiness and make you a blessing to your country and the world.

In the speech under consideration, you say:

“My opinions on the subject of slavery are well known; they have the merit, if it be one, of consistency, uniformity and long duration.”

The first sentence is probably true. Your opinions on slavery may be well know, but that they have the merit of consistency or uniformity, I cannot admit. If the speech before me (3) be a fair declaration of your present opinions, I think I can convince you that even this speech abounds with

This would indeed be compromised in the famous 1850 legislation.

inconsistencies such as to materially affect the **consolation you seem to draw from this source**. Indeed, if you are uniform at all, you are so only in your inconsistencies.

You confess that:

“Slavery is a great evil, and a wrong to its victims, and you would rejoice if not a single slave breathed the air within the limits of our country.”

These are noble sentiments and would seem to flow from a heart overborne with a sense of the flagrant injustice and enormous cruelty of slavery, and of one earnestly and anxiously longing for a remedy. Standing alone, it would imply that the author had long been in search of some meat to redress the wrongs of the “unfortunate victims” of whom he speaks; — — that his righteous soul was, every hour, deeply grieved on account of the foul blot inflicted by this curse on his country’s character.

But what are the facts? You are yourself, at this moment, a slaveholder, and your words on this point had scarcely reached the outer circle of the vast multitude by which you were surrounded, before you poured forth on of the most helpless, illogically and cowardly apologies for this same wrong and “great evil”, which I remember to have ever read. Is THIS, consistency and uniformity? If so, the oppressed may well pray the Most High that you may be soon delivered from it.

Henry Clay held people in slavery up until his death— although he did free some, earlier.

In speaking of the “unfortunate victims” of this “great evil” (4) and “wrong”, you hold this most singular and cowardly excuse for perpetuating the wrongs of my “unfortunate” race.

“But, here they are, to be dealt with as well as we can with a due consideration of all circumstances affecting the security and happiness of both races.”

What do you mean by “the security and happiness of both races”? **Do you mean that the happiness of the slave is augmented by his being a slave? and, if so, why call him an “unfortunate victim?”** Can it be that



this is mere cant by which to secure the North into your supply, on the ground of your sympathy for the slave? **I cannot believe you capable of such infatuation. I do not wish to believe that you are capable either of the low cunning or of the vanity which your language on the subject would seem to imply,** but will set it down to an uncontrollable conviction of the innate wickedness of slavery, which forces itself out and defies even your vast powers of concealment.

But further, you assert that:

“Every State has the supreme, uncontrolled and exclusive power to decide for itself whether slavery shall cease or continue within its limits, without any exterior intervention from any quarter.”

Here I understand you to assert the most profligate and infernal doctrine, that any State in the Union has a right to plunder, scour and enslave any part of the human family within its border, just so long as it deems it for its interest to do so, and that no person or body of person beyond the limits of said state, has any right to interfere by word or deed, against it. Is it possible (5 - 8)...that you hold this monstrous and blood-chilling doctrine? If so, what confidence can any enlightened lover of liberty place in your pretended opposition to slavery? I know your answer to all this, but it only plunges you into lower

depths of infamy that the horrible doctrines avowed above. You go on to say:

“In states where the SLAVES OUTNUMBER THE WHITES, as is the case in several (which I believe are only two out of fifteen) the blacks could not be emancipated without BECOMING THE GOVERNING POWER IN THESE STATES.”

This miserable bug-bear is quite a confession of the mental and physical equality of the races. You pretend that you are a Republican. You loudly boast of your democratic principles; why, then, do you object to the application of your principles in this case? **Is the democratic principle good in one case and bad in another? Would it be worse for a black majority to govern a white minority that it now is for a latter to govern the former?** But you conure up an array of frightful objections in answer to this.

“COLLISIONS AND CONFLICTS BETWEEN THE TWO RACES WOULD BE INEVITABLE, and, after shocking scenes of RAPINE AND CARNAGE, THE EXTINCTION OF THE BLACKS WOULD CERTAINLY TAKE PLACE.”

How do you know that such results would be inevitable? Where, on the page of history, do you find anything to warrant even such a conjecture? You will probable point me to the revolution in Santo Domingo (Haiti), that ole and thread-bare falsehood under which democratic tyrants have, for the last forty years, sought a refuge. The facts in that direction are, however, all against you. It has (9 - 10) been clearly proven that that revolution was not the result of emancipation, but of a cruel attempt to re-enslave an already emancipated people. I am not aware that you have a single fact to support your truly terrible assertion, while, on the other hand, I have many, all going to show what is equally taught by the voice of reason and of God, “THAT IT IS ALWAYS SAFE TO DO RIGHT.” The promise of God is “that thy light shall break forth as the morning, and they health shall spring forth speedily, and the righteousness shall go before thee, the glory of the Lord shall be that reward; then shalt thou call and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry and he will say, “Here I am.”

The history of the world is in conformity with the words of inspired wisdom. Look, for instance, at the history of Emancipation in the British West Indies. There the Blacks were, and still are, an overwhelming majority. **Have there been and “SHOCKING SCENES of rapine and carnage, extinction or expulsion? You know there have not. Why then do you make use of this unfounded and irrational conjecture to frighten your fellow-countrymen from the righteous performance of a simple act of justice to millions now groaning in almost hopeless bondage?**

I now give your arguments in support of the morality of your position:

“It may be argued that, in admitting the injustice of slavery I admit the necessity of an instantaneous reparation of that injustice. Unfortunately, however, it is not always safe, practicable or possible, in the great movements of States or public affairs (11 - 12) of nations, to remedy or repair the infliction of previous injustice. In the inception of it we may oppose and denounce it by our most strenuous exertions, but, after its consummation, there is often no other alternative left us but to deplore its perpetuation, and to acquiesce, as the only alternative, in its existence, as a less evil than the frightful consequences which might ensue from the vain endeavor to repair it. Slavery is one of these unfortunate instances.”

The cases which you put in support of the foregoing propositions, are only wanting in one thing, and that is, analogy. The plundering the Indians of their territory, is a crime on which no honest man can look with any degree of satisfaction. It was a wrong to the Indians then living, and how muchsoever we might seek to repair that wrong, the victims of it are far beyond the reach of any reparation; but in regard to the slave, the circumstances are different. The wrong to be repaired is a present one; the slave-holder is the everyday robber **of the slave and of his right to liberty, property and the pursuit of happiness. His right to be free is unquestionable; the wrong of enslaving him is self-evident; the duty of emancipated him is imperative. Are you aware to what your argument on this point leads? Do you not plainly see that the greatest crimes**

that ever cursed our common earth, may take shelter under your reasoning, and may claim perpetuity on the ground of their antiquity?

Sir, I must pass over your allusion to that almost defunct and infernal scheme which you term “unmixed benevolence”, for ex-(13-14)-pelling, not the slave, **but the free color people**, from the United States, as well as your chart against the Abolitionists.

“It is a philanthropic and consoling reflection that the moral and physical condition of the African in the United Staes in a state of slavery is far better than it would have been had their ancestor not been brought from their native land.”

I can scarce repress the flame of rising indignation as I read this cold-blooded and cruel sentence; there is so much of Satan dressed in the livery of Heaven, as well as the taking consolation from the crime, that I scarcely know how to reply to it. Let me ask you what has been the case of the person unsettle condition of Africa? Why has she not reached forth her hand unto God? Why have not her fields been missionary grounds, as well as the Fiji Islands? Because of the very desolating traffic from which your seem to draw consolation. For three hundred years Christian nations, among whom we are foremost, have looked to Africa only as a place for the gratification of their lust and love of power, and every means have been adopted to stay the onward march of civilization in that unhappy land.

Your declaration on this point places your consolation with that of the wolf in devouring the lamb. You new perpetuate what I conceive to be the most revolting blasphemy. You say:

“And if it should be the decree of the great Ruler of the Universe, that their descendants shall be made instrument in his hands in the establishment of civilization and the Christian religion throughout Africa,—our regrets on account of the original (15 - 16) wrong will be greatly mitigated.”

Here, Sir, you would charge upon God, the responsibility of your own crimes, and would seek a solace from the pangs of a guilty conscience, by sacrilegiously assuming that, in robbing Africa of her children, you acted in obedience to the great purposes and were but fulfilling the decrees of the Most High God; but, as fearing that this refuge of lies might fail, you try to shuffle off the responsibility of this “great evil” on Great Britain. **May I ask if you were fulfilling the great purposes of God in the share you took in this traffic, and can draw consolation from that alleged fact, to make England a sinner above yourselves and deny her all the mitigating circumstances which you apply to yourselves?**

You say that “Great Britain inflicted the evil upon you.” If this is true, it is equally true that she inflicted the same evil upon herself; but she has had the justice and the magnanimity to repent and to bring forth fruits meet for repentance. **You copied her bad example, why not avail yourself of her good one also?**

Now, Sir, I have done with your Speech, though much more might be said upon it. I now have a few words to say to you personally.

I wish to remind you that you are not only in the “autumn”, but in the very WINTER of life. Seventy-one years have passed over your stately brow. **You must soon leave this world and appear before God, to render up an account of your stewardship. For fifty years of your life you have been a slave-holder. You have robbed the laborer who has reaped down your fields, of his rightful reward (17 - 18).** You, are at this moment, the robber of nearly fifty human beings, compelling them to live without liberty and in ignorance. Let me ask if you think that God will hold you guiltless in the great day of account, if you die with the blood of these fifty slaves clinging to your garment? **I know that you have made a profession of religion and have been baptized, and am aware that you are in good and regular standing in the church, but I have the authority of God for saying that you will stand rejected at his bar,** unless you “put away the evil of your doings from before his eyes, cease to do evil, and learn to do well, seek judgment, relieve the oppressed and plea for the widow.” **You must “break every yoke and let the oppressed**

go free,” or take your place in the ranks of “EVIL DOERS” and expect to “reap the reward of corruption.”

I think that it would be unkind to charge you, at this late day in your life, with any ambitious desires to become the President of the United States. I may be mistaken in this, but it seems that you cannot indulge either the wish or the expectation. Bear with me, the, while I give you a few words of further counsel as a private individual and excuse the plainest of one who has FELT the wrongs of Slavery and fathomed the depths of its iniquity.

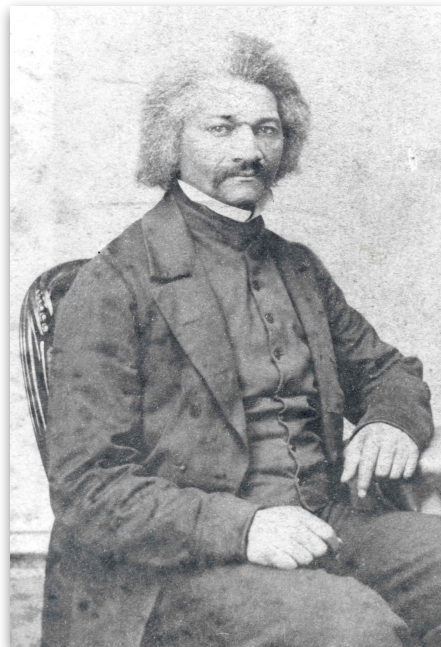
Emancipate your own slaves. Leave them not to be held or sold by others. Leave them free, as the Father of his country left his, and let your name go down to posterity, as his has come down to us, a slave-holder to be sure, but a repentant one. Make the noble resolve that, so far as you are personally concerned, “ AMERICA SHALL (19 - 20) BE FREE.”

In asking you to do this, I ask nothing which, in any degree, conflicts with your argument against general emancipation. The dangers which you conjecture of the latter, cannot be apprehended of the former. **Your own slaves are too few in number to make them formidable or dangerous. In this matter you are without excuse.**

I leave you to your conscience and you God,
and subscribe myself

Faithfully yours,

FREDERICK DOUGLASS



Source & Image:

Frederick Douglass Papers: Speech, Article, and Book File, 1846-1894; Speeches and Articles by Douglass, 1846 -1894; 1847, Dec. 3; "Letter to Henry Clay," North Star. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mss11879.21008/?st=gallery>

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Image: National Park Service, Frederick Douglass c. 1862-1865 FRDO 3929

Frederick Douglass Newspapers, Library of Congress

The North Star (Rochester, N.Y.), 1847-1851

“The first issue of *The North Star*, December 3, 1847, emphasized...belief in "Our Paper and Its Prospects":

‘It has long been our anxious wish to see, in this slave-holding, slave-trading, and negro-hating land, a printing-press and paper, permanently established, under the complete control and direction of the immediate victims of slavery and oppression...that the man who has suffered the wrong is the man to demand redress,—that the man STRUCK is the man to CRY OUT—and that he who has endured the cruel pangs of Slavery is the man to advocate Liberty.’”

“Douglass and his family moved from Lynn, Massachusetts, to Rochester, New York, a thriving city on the Erie Canal and one of the last stops on the Underground Railroad before safe haven in Canada. The move also gave him distance from his early mentor, the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, whose newspaper, *The Liberator*, was published in Boston, and who opposed Douglass' newspaper venture. Initially, his co-editor was black abolitionist **Martin R. Delany**,...”

“His first publisher was **William Cooper Nell**, a black abolitionist from Boston. Douglass gained much of the funding to establish *The North Star* during a lengthy speaking tour of England, Ireland, and Scotland from late August 1845 to early April 1847,...

Frederick Douglass' Paper (Rochester, N.Y.), 1851-1860

“In June 1851, *The North Star* merged with the *Liberty Party Paper* (Syracuse, New York), under the title, Frederick Douglass' Paper. Still published in Rochester with volume and issue numbering continuing from *The North Star*,...

“In 1859, Douglass added a monthly as a supplement to the weekly paper, but by mid-1860, Douglass' Monthly replaced the weekly publication, as he increasingly focused on the impending Civil War and, during the war,...

(Frederick Douglass had three weekly newspapers, at various times, in his life: *The North Star*, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* and the *New National Era* (Washington, D.C.)

New National Era (Washington, D.C.), 1870-1874

“Douglass' final newspaper venture brought him to Washington, D.C. In September 1870, he became editor-in-chief and part owner of the *New National Era*, renamed from the short-lived *New Era*, for which he had been a corresponding editor based in Rochester. The *New National Era* gave Douglass a platform to champion Reconstruction and Radical Republican policies and to attack the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, the romanticizing of the South in the "Lost Cause," and bigotry and violence against African Americans throughout the U.S. His deep association with the newspaper was relatively short-lived, however.”