

What to the Slave is the Fourth of July? [modified]

By Fredrick Douglass (July 5, 1852)

Headnote: *Fredrick Douglass was a former slave who became an outspoken abolitionist. In 1852, he gave a speech at an event commemorating the signing of the Declaration of Independence. These words were spoken by Fredrick Douglass in his famous speech.*

Mr. President, Friends and Fellow Citizens: He who could address this audience without a **quailing** sensation has stronger nerves than I have...The fact is, ladies and gentlemen, the distance between this platform and the slave plantation from which I escaped is considerable... That I am here today is, to me, a matter of astonishment as well as of gratitude...

This...is the 4th of July. It is the birthday of your National Independence, and your political freedom...This celebration also marks the beginning of another year of your national life; and reminds you that the Republic of America is now 76 years old...

Fellow Citizens, I am not **wanting** in respect for the fathers of this republic. The signers of the Declaration of Independence were brave men... The point from which I am **compelled** to view them is not, certainly, the most favorable; and yet I cannot contemplate their great deeds with less than admiration. They were statesmen, patriots and heroes, and for the good they did, and the principles they **contended** for, I will unite with you to honor their memory...

But...[y]our high independence only reveals the **immeasurable** distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, **bequeathed** by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me... This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn...

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the **gross** injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a **sham**; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery... There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States ...

Source: Douglass, Fredrick. *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?* Speech delivered on July 5th, 1852 to the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society at Corinthian Hall in Rochester, New York. Document excerpted from Foner, Philip. *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, Volume II Pre- Civil War Decade 1850-1860* (New York: International Publishers, 1950).

Source: <http://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/teaching-guides/23560>

Word Bank:

Bequeathed: handed down; passed on

Compelled: forced

Contended: struggled or strived for

Gross: total; complete

Immeasurable: incapable of being measured; limitless

Quailing: shrinking with fear

Sham: something that is not what it claims to be; fraud or hoax

Wanting: lacking

Focus Question:

In this speech, how does Douglass portray the Fourth of July? Explain using quotations from the document.

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