

**Freed Bondage: How American Liberalism and Slavery Collided in Early American  
Politics**

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In 1918, W.E.B Du Bois wrote a letter to then United States President Woodrow Wilson about his concerns surrounding race relations in the Union. “American civilization must not be considered voluntarily negligent nor even as deeply conscious of ignoring the solution to this question which is unique among the civilized nations” (Du Bois, Getachew, and Pitts 2022, 52). The question he is concerned about is the glaring contradiction between the American ideology—that being a nation granted inalienable rights by “almighty God,” and the mistreatment of African Americans.

Du Bois pointed this out in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but his contradiction is of enduring character, having been pointed out much earlier. In fact, an argument could even be made that this contradiction was more obvious before Du Bois’ time, as for several centuries slavery had been legal in the United States — roughly a century after partition from the British Crown. Using two critical pieces of work, I will argue that the views of Frederick Douglass align with the ideas of American liberalism of democracy and freedom, exhibiting patriotic views of the American project as outlined by the Declaration of Independence. He is, however, critical of the material conditions that existed in the United States at the time. More specifically, the Declaration is a document that would immediately shape a set of patriotic values oriented around freedom, liberty, and democracy, which, in its idealist form, Douglass subscribes to but questions its validity given the material forces confronting African Americans at the time.

This essay will start with identifying tenets of American patriotism. It will first look over the Declaration of Independence and how it painted a picture of American liberalism and democracy. It will examine the 13 colonies’ discontent with the British Empire and how it led to the emergence of this new ideology. After analyzing the Declaration, the paper will continue by looking at how the Declaration shaped American patriotism and politics. This will focus on both historical and more contemporary accounts. Next, there will be an examination of the discrepancy between these ideals and material reality. This section will discuss the material conditions and the cracks in the liberal idealism mentioned above utilizing a variety of Fredrick Douglass’ speeches and works to emphasize their presence and

effects. By reading his speech, the reader will be presented with contrasting perceptions of the ideas of American liberalism relative to its practice. While American patriotism is oriented around liberty and democracy— as can be derived from the Declaration— these ideals in practice are not reflected by the present conditions in much of American life, especially for African Americans, something Douglass is concerned about, as both a patriot and a Black American.

### **Part I: Liberal Idealism**

It does not take long for any observer of American life to take note of its patriotic roots. A state and the nation's capital are named after George Washington, schools are named after Civil War generals, and street names commemorate political heroes. Countless cultural artifacts embody the Americans' pompous veneration for their past heroes to an almost obsessive degree. A 14-year-long project carved the faces of Roosevelt, Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln into Mount Rushmore, the District of Columbia is filled with different "memorials," enshrining the legacies of several political figures, ranging from Martin Luther King, Washington, and Lincoln, and countless others. In most of these cases, the idolized figures contributed in some way to American freedom. These monuments embody broader American culture and can help signal to us the link between American patriotism and freedom. This suggestion dates back to the conception of the United States, with the signing of the Declaration of Independence. A disgruntled Thomas Jefferson representing the 13 colonies proclaimed a series of grievances with the British Empire, laying out a series of claims as justification for immediate partition.

The Declaration shaped both American liberalism and patriotism in a few ways. First, the grievances in the declaration were extremely important in crafting the ideas of American liberalism. The Declaration mocked the Empire for employing practices that benefit unelected elites at the expense of Americans. Jefferson accuses the king of forming a loyal army, impeding American trade, forcing

quartering,<sup>1</sup> a subordinate judiciary, and other issues that ran contrary to what would be American values (Jefferson, 103-104, 1776). These claims acted as a starting point for other influential state-building documents such as the Constitution, and articulated grievances, such as quartering, were later remedied within these future documents. The grievances that were outlined in the Declaration as such were later operationalized as pointers for what liberty and freedom would look like in the United States in the coming centuries.

Secondly, the target of the Declaration was not the British *Parliament*, but rather, the British *Empire* as embodied by the *King*. The claims made in the Declaration are derived from the fact that the decisions levied against the Americans come from an unelected tyrant in Europe. “The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpation, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over [the United States]” Jefferson wrote (Jefferson, 103, 1776). Immediately after claiming every man's right to “life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness,” the Declaration calls for a government that “[derives] their powers from the consent of the governed” (Jefferson, 102, 1776), and “that whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government.” These critical sections from the Declaration as such also lay out the groundwork for American Democracy as a vital political project alongside other tenets of liberalism.

Finally, the Declaration has remained critical in the political culture of the United States. An example of this is shown within the *Great Seal of the United States*. In the Declaration, Jefferson emphasizes the fact that the United States had sought peaceful cooperation with the British Empire, a strategy that was ignored by the greed of the monarchy, which forced the Americans' hand to cut the ribbon with the crown off. “In every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress in the

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<sup>1</sup> Quartering here meaning the forced accommodation of British troops on private property, a practice later banned in the third amendment to the American Constitution.

most humble terms; our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injury” (Jefferson, 104-105, 1776). An implicit message is shown within the Declaration: Americans—and the American state—want to prioritize diplomatic ties unless forced into war. To this day, every time a president speaks at the White House podium,<sup>2</sup> this message is relayed through the Great Seal.<sup>3</sup> For these three reasons, it is fair to assume that the Declaration of Independence played an invaluable role in the establishment and maintenance of the tenets of American liberalism, democracy, and patriotism. The Declaration and its values of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are celebrated every year on the day it was adopted—July 4<sup>th</sup>. As such, the day itself is generally a very patriotic one, filled with fireworks and other forms of celebration. But the day which is traditionally used to celebrate America is also the day Fredrick Douglass used to deal blows to the actual existence of the values America fought for from the British.



Figure 1.1. Wikipedia, Great Seal of the United States. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Seal\\_of\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Seal_of_the_United_States)

## Part II: Material Reality

76 years and a day after the Declaration of Independence was adopted by Congress, Fredrick Douglass took to a stage in Rochester, New York. A former slave in a Free State less than a decade before the Civil War broke out, he was invited to deliver a Fourth of July speech to remind the crowd about the ideas of the American project and what they stand for. Douglass opens with resounding respect for the Founding Fathers and the American Revolution. “Oppression makes a wise man mad,” he said, “your fathers were wise men, and if they did not go mad, they became restive under [the treatment of the British Empire]” (Douglass, 1852). Douglass also sheds love for American liberty,

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted here that there are a few exceptions to this, notably Donald J. Trump’s use of a doctored Seal during a presidential address in 2019 which saw the Eagle facing in both the direction of the branch and the arrows: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-49116539>

<sup>3</sup> As shown in **Figure 1.1**, the Seal hoists an olive branch in one hand and a flurry of arrows in the other, with the eagle facing the former to demonstrated that while the Americans desire diplomatic solutions, they are not afraid to use violence.

praising the Declaration of Independence and that Americans should stand by its principles “at whatever cost.” But from this stance—one which is ultimately grounded in love for America, liberty, and freedom—Douglass lays his harshest critiques of the United States.

Douglass brings to light the contradiction that has existed since partition—the United States separated on the grounds of a lack of freedom, yet its core principles are betrayed by the existence of slavery.<sup>4</sup> “Allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here today? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extend to [slaves]?” (Douglass, 1852). Framing slavery as a contradiction to the core tenets of American politics is something Douglass uses frequently during this speech and his other works. He extends this rhetoric beyond just the Declaration of Independence and strikes at a secondary element of American values — religion. “I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged, in the name of liberty which is fettered, in the name of the constitution and the Bible, which are disregarded upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery” (Douglass, 1852). The denunciation of slavery using this framing stabs the ideas of liberalism with the *Chelsea Dagger* of reality and material life — American society deviates from its revolutionary principles when it comes to African Americans, especially those enslaved in the South.

This framing gave Douglass the ability to take a shot at the fourth of July — the day which is celebrated by Americans as a day commemorating the values of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness — a day that symbolizes American patriotism & nationalism — and the day that marked the establishment of a state built on these principles — is a lie, or at the very least a very selective practice.

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<sup>4</sup> While slavery was a common practice, at the time of this speech, slavery had been abolished in all the Northern states for just under half a century.

The day that is revered by countless Americans is also a reminder to countless others of what their nation has done for them. It is a reminder that for all the freedoms the Fathers fought for were not applied to millions of others when they should have been. It represents “the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.” It is a day that is not only based on betrayed principles but also one that reveals *how harshly* those principles have been betrayed by slavery.

To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty[...]; your national greatness [...]; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants[...]; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; [...] all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.

- (Douglass, 1852)

Douglass’s speech not only draws the line between the ideas of American liberalism and the reality of it but also gives a clear demonstration that the United States has failed to uphold fundamental ideas that make up the country’s politics. He shows us that the ideas that were presented by Jefferson and eventually used by the 13 colonies to become independent were nullified for a large portion of the population. He shows us that the United States was unable to materially uphold the values Jefferson talked about. “The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretence, and your Christianity as a lie” (Douglass, 1852).

At the core of this all, Douglass argues that he and other slaves were not victims of America or Christianity, but rather they were the *most* American, standing up for the rights provided in the foundational documents. Conversely, the standing American political system — especially in the South— *contradicted* the values of America and Christianity with the existence of chattel slavery. By extension, patriotic symbolism and celebration such as the Fourth of July are systems which uphold the un-American status quo. Through this messaging and framing, Douglass advocates for the fair application of

the real American values — those derived from the Declaration of Independence and its founding documents — to slaves and to all Americans who are not subject to its freedoms.

## **Conclusion**

Racism in the United States has been complicated to say the least. Domestic legislation, international diplomacy, and everything in between, race relations have played a central role in political decision-making for most of the history of Washington. 85 years after Thomas Jefferson's ideas of *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness* were adopted by Congress, nearly 4 million African Americans were enslaved in 15 states south of Pennsylvania. Just under a decade later, however, slavery had been abolished throughout the Union. For those 85 years, however, a present contradiction had existed between the ideas of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence and the institution of slavery. I demonstrated that despite the influence the Declaration had on American culture, politics, democracy, and patriotism, Douglass' Fourth of July Speech argued that those ideas were at odds with the material reality for millions of African Americans. Through his speech, it is made clear that Douglass subscribed to the ideas of the Declaration and liberty, rather than accusing the status quo and the celebrations of the young republic that had not followed the principles which Douglass subscribed to due to the ongoing practice of slavery in the South.

### Work Cited

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