Frederick Douglass
SELECTED SPEECHES AND WRITINGS

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I DENOUNCE THE SO-CALLED EMANCIPATION AS A STUPENDOUS FRAUD. speech on the occasion of the Twenty-Sixth Anniversary of Emancipation in the District of Columbia, Washington, D.C., April 16, 1888

Friends and fellow citizens:

It has been my privilege to assist in several anniversary celebrations of the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, but I remember no occasion of this kind when I felt a deeper solicitude for the future welfare of our emancipated people than now.

The chief cause of anxiety is not in the condition of the colored people of the District of Columbia, though there is much that is wrong and unsatisfactory here, but the deplorable condition of the Negro in the Southern states. At no time since the abolition of slavery has there been more cause for alarm on this account than at this juncture in our history.

I have recently been in two of the Southern states—South Carolina and Georgia—and my impression from what I saw, heard and learned there is not favorable to my hopes for the race. I know this is a sad message to bring you on this twenty-sixth anniversary of freedom in the District of Columbia, but I know, too, that I have a duty to perform and that duty is to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and I should be unworthy to stand here, unworthy of the confidence of the colored people of this country, if I should from any considerations of policy withhold any fact or feature of the condition of the freedmen which the people of this country ought to know.

The temptation on anniversary occasions like this is to prophesy smooth things, to be joyful and glad, to indulge in the illusions of hope—to bring glad tidings on our tongues, and words of peace reveal. But while I know it is always easier to be the bearer of glad tidings than sad ones, while I know that hope is a powerful motive to exertion and high endeavor, while I know that people generally would rather look upon the bright side of their condition than to know the worst; there comes a time when it is best that the worst should be made known, and in my judgment that time, in respect to the condition of the colored people of the South, is now. There are times when neither hope nor fear should be allowed to control our speech. Cry aloud and spare not, is the word of wisdom as well as of Scripture. “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free,” applies to the body not less than the soul, to this world not less than the world to come. Outside the truth there is no solid foundation for any of us, and I assume that you who have invited me to speak, and you who have come to hear me speak, expect me to speak the truth as I understand the truth.

The truth at which we should get on this occasion respects the precise relation subsisting between the white and colored people of the South, or, in other words, between the colored people and the old master class of the South. We have need to know this and to take it to heart.

It is well said that “a people may lose its liberty in a day and not miss it in half a century,” and that “the price of liberty is eternal vigilance.” In my judgment, with my knowledge of what has already taken place in the South, these wise and wide-awake sentiments were never more apt and timely than now.

I have assisted in fighting one battle for the abolition of slavery, and the American people have shed their blood in defense of the Union and the Constitution, and neither I nor they wish to fight this battle over again; and in order that we may not, we should look the facts in the face today and, if possible, nip the evil in the bud.

I have no taste for the role of an alarmist. If my wishes could be allowed to dictate my speech I would tell you something quite the reverse of what I now intend. I would tell you that everything is lovely with the Negro in the South; I would tell you that the rights of the Negro are respected, and that he has no wrongs to redress; I would tell you that he is honestly paid for his labor; that he is secure in his liberty; that he is tried by a jury of his peers when accused of crime; that he is no longer subject to lynching law; that he has freedom of speech; that the gates of knowledge are open to him; that he goes to the ballot box unmolested; that his vote is duly counted and given its proper weight in determining results; I would tell you that he is making splendid progress in the acquisition of knowledge, wealth and influence; I would tell you that his bitterest enemies have become his warmest friends; that the desire to make him a slave no longer exists anywhere in the South; that the Democratic party is a better friend to him than the Republican party, and that each party is competing with the other to see which can do the most to make his liberty a blessing to himself and to the country and the world. But in telling you all this I should be telling you what is absolutely false, and what you know to be false, and the only thing which would save such a story from being a lie would be its utter inability to deceive.

What is the condition of the Negro at the South at this moment? Let us look at it both in the light of facts and in the light of reason. To understand it we must consult nature as well as circumstances, the past as well as the present. No fact is more obvious than the fact that there is a perpetual tendency of power to encroach upon weakness, and of the crafty to take advantage of the simple. This is as natural as for smoke to ascend or water to run down. The love of power is one of the strongest traits in the Anglo-Saxon race. This love
of power common to the white race has been nursed and strengthened at the South by slavery; accustomed during two hundred years to the unlimited possession and exercise of irresponsible power, the love of it has become stronger by habit. To assume that this feeling of pride and power has died out and disappeared from the South is to assume a miracle. Any man who tells you that it has died out or has ceased to be exercised and made effective, tells you that which is untrue and in the nature of things could not be true. Not only is the love of power there, but a talent for its exercise has been fully developed. This talent makes the old master class of the South not only the masters of the Negro, but the masters of Congress and, if not checked, will make them the masters of the nation.

It was something more than an empty boast in the old times, when it was said that one slave master was equal to three Northern men. Though this did not turn out to be true on the battlefield, it does seem to be true in the councils of the nation. In sight of all the nation these ambitious men of the South have dared to take possession of the government which they, with broad blades and bloody hands, sought to destroy; in sight of all the nation they have disregarded and ramped upon the Constitution, and organized parties on sectional lines. From the ramparts of the Solid South, with their 153 electoral votes in the Electoral College, they have dared to defy the nation to put a Republican in the Presidential chair for the next four years, as they once threatened the nation with civil war if it elected Abraham Lincoln. With this grip on the Presidential chair, with the House of Representatives in their hands, with the Supreme Court deciding every question in favor of the states, as against the powers of the federal government, denying to the government the right to protect the elective franchise of its own citizens, they may well feel themselves masters, not only of their former slaves, but of the whole situation. With these facts before us, tell me not that the Negro is safe in the possession of his liberty. Tell me not that power will not assert itself. Tell me not that they who despise the Constitution they have sworn to support will respect the rights of the Negro, whom they already despise. Tell me not that men who thus break faith with God will be scrupulous in keeping faith with the poor Negro laborer of the South. Tell me not that a people who have lived by the sweat of other men's faces, and thought themselves Christian gentlemen while doing it, will feel themselves bound by principles of justice to their former victims in their weakness. Such a pretense in face of facts is shameful, shocking and sickening. Yet there are men at the North who believe all this.

Well may it be said that Americans have no memories. We look over the louse of Representatives and see the Solid South enthroned there. We listen with amusement to the South and of the traitors, and forget Andersonville. We look over the Senate and see the Senator from South Carolina, and forget Hamburg. We see Robert Smalls cheated out of his seat in Congress, and forget the Planter, and the service rendered by the colored troops in the late war for the Union.

Well, the nation may forget; it may shut its eyes to the past and frown upon any who may do otherwise, but the colored people of this country are bound to keep fresh a memory of the past till justice shall be done them in the present. When this shall be done we shall as readily as any other part of our respected citizens plead for an act of oblivion.

We are often confronted of late in the press and on the platform with the discouraged statement that the problem of the Negro as a free man and a citizen is not yet solved; that since his emancipation he has disappointed the best hopes of his friends and fulfilled the worst predictions of his enemies, and that he has shown himself unfit for the position assigned him by the mistaken statesmanship of the nation. It is said that physically, morally, socially and religiously he is in a condition vastly more deplorable than was his condition as a slave; that he has not proved himself so good a master to himself as his old master was to him; that he is gradually, but surely, sinking below the point of industry, good manners and civilization to which he attained in a state of slavery; that his industry is fitful; that his economy is wasteful; that his honesty is deceitful; that his morals are impure; that his domestic life is beastly; that his religion is fetishism, and his worship is simply emotional; and that, in a word, he is falling into a state of barbarism.

Such is the distressing description of the emancipated Negro as drawn by his enemies and as it is found reported in the journals of the South. Unhappily, however, it is a description not confined to the South. It has gone forth to the North. It has crossed the ocean; I meet with it in Europe. And it has gone as far as the wings of the press and the power of speech can carry it. There is no measuring the injury inflicted upon the Negro by it. It cools our friends, heats our enemies, and turns away from us much of the sympathy and aid which we need and deserve to receive at the hands of our fellow men.

But now comes the question, Is this description of the emancipated Negro true? In answer to this question I must say, Yes and no. It is not true in all its lines and specifications and to the full extent of the ground it covers, but it certainly is true in many of its important features, and there is no race under heaven of which the same would not be equally true with the same antecedents and the same treatment which the Negro is receiving at the hands of this nation and the old master class, to which the Negro is still a subject.

I admit that the Negro, and especially the plantation Negro, the tiller of the soil, has made little progress from barbarism to civilization, and that he is in a deplorable condition since his emancipation. That he is worse off, in many respects, than when he was a slave, I am compelled to admit, but I contend that the fault is not his, but that of his heartless accusers. He is the victim of a cunningly devised swindle, one which paralyzes his energies, suppresses his ambition, and blots all his hopes; and though he is nominally free he is actually a slave. I here and now denounce his so-called emancipation as a stupendous fraud—a fraud upon him, a fraud upon the world. It was not so meant by Abraham Lincoln; it was not so meant by the Republican party; but whether so meant or not, it is practically a lie, keeping the word of promise to the ear and breaking it to the heart.
Do you ask me why the Negro of the plantation has made so little progress, why his cupboard is empty, why he flutters in rags, why his children run naked, and why his wife hides herself behind the hut when a stranger is passing? I will tell you. It is because he is systematically and universally cheated out of his hard earnings. The same class that once extorted his labor under the lash now gets his labor by a mean, a sneaking, and fraudulent device. That device is a trucking system which never permits him to see or to save a dollar of his hard earnings. The struggles and struggles, but, like a man in a morass, the more he struggles the deeper he sinks. The highest wages paid him is eight dollars a month, and this he receives only in orders on the store, which, in many cases, is owned by his employer. The scrip has purchasing power on that one store, and that one only. A blind man can see that the laborer is by this arrangement bound hand and foot, and is completely in the power of his employer. He can charge the poor fellow what he pleases and give what kind of goods he pleases, and he does both. His victim cannot go to another store and buy, and this the storekeeper knows. The only security the wretched Negro has under this arrangement is the conscience of the storekeeper—a conscience educated in the school of slavery, where the idea prevailed in theory and practice that the Negro had no rights which white men were bound to respect, an arrangement in which everything in the way of food or clothing, whether tainted meat or damaged cloth, is deemed good enough for the Negro. For these he is often made to pay a double price.

But this is not all, or the worst result of the system. It puts it out of the power of the Negro to save anything of what he earns. If a man gets an honest dollar for his day’s work, he has a motive for laying it by and saving it for future emergency. It will be as good for use in the future and perhaps better a year hence than now, but this miserable scrip has in no sense the quality of a dollar. It is only good at one store and for a limited period. Thus the man who has it is tempted to get rid of it as soon as possible. It may be out of date before he knows it, or the storekeeper may move away and it may be left worthless on his hands.

But this is not the only evil involved in this satanic arrangement. It promotes dishonesty. The Negro sees himself paid but limited wages—far too limited to support himself and family, and that in worthless scrip—and he is tempted to fight the devil with fire. Finding himself systematically robbed he goes to stealing and as a result finds his liberty—such as it is—taken from him, and himself put to work for a master in a chain gang, and he comes out, if he ever gets out, a ruined man.

Every Northern man who visits the old master class, the land owners and landlords of the South, is told by the old slaveholders with a great show of virtue that they are glad that they are rid of slavery and would not have the slave system back if they could; that they are better off than they ever were before, and much more of the same tenor. Thus Northern men come home duped and go on a mission of duping others by telling the same pleasing story.

There are very good reasons why these people would not have slavery back if they could—reasons far more creditable to their cunning than to their conscience. With slavery they had some care and responsibility for the physical well-being of their slaves. Now they have as firm a grip on the freedman’s labor as when he was a slave and without any burden of caring for his children or himself. The whole arrangement is stamped with fraud and is supported by hypocrisy, and I here and now, on this Emancipation Day: denounce it as a villainous swindle, and invoke the press, the pulpit and the lawmaker to assist in exposing it and blotting it out forever.

We denounce the imposition upon the working classes of England, and we do well, but in England this trucking system is abolished by law. It is a penal offense there, and it should be made so here. It should be made a crime to pay any man for his honest labor in any other than honest money. Until this is done in the Southern states the laborer of the South will be ground to the earth, and progress with him will be impossible. It is the duty of the Negro press to take up the subject. The Negro, where he may have a vote, should vote for no man who is not in favor of making this scrip and truck system unlawful.

I come now to another feature of Southern policy which bears hard and heavily on the Negro laborer and land renter. It is found in the landlord-and-tenant laws. I will read an extract to you from these laws that you may see how completely and rigidly the rights of the landlord are guarded and how entirely the tenant is in the clutches of the landlord:

**REVISED CODE OF MISSISSIPPI**

SEC. 1301. Every lessor of land shall have a lien on all the agricultural products of the leased premises, however and by whomsoever produced, to secure the payment of the rent and the market value of all advances made by him to his tenant for supplies for the tenant and others for whom he may contract.

SEC. 1304. When any landlord or lessor shall have just cause to suspect and shall verify believe that his tenant will remove his effects from the leased premises to any other place within or without the county before the rent or claims for supplies will fall due, so that no distress can be made, such landlord or lessor on making oath thereof, and of the amount the tenant is to pay, and at what time the same will fall due, and giving a bond as required in the preceding section, may, in like manner obtain an attachment against the goods and chattels of such tenant, and the officers making the distress shall give notice thereof and advertise the property distrained for sale, in the manner directed in the last preceding section, and if such tenant shall not, before the time appointed for such sale, give bond with sufficient security in double the amount of the rent, or other demand payable to the plaintiff, conditioned for the payment of said rent or other thing at the time it shall be due, with all cost, the goods distrained, or so much thereof as shall be necessary, shall be sold by the said officer at public sale to the highest bidder for cash, and out of the proceeds of the sale he shall pay to the plaintiff the amount due him, deducting interest for the time until the same shall become payable.

SEC. 1361. Said lien shall exist by virtue of the relation of the parties as employer and employee, and without any writing or recording.

SEC. 1362. Provides that any person who aids or assists in removing anything subject to these liens, without the consent of the landlord, shall, upon conviction, be punished by a fine of not more than $500, and be imprisoned in the county jail not more than six months, or by either such fine and imprisonment.
VOORHEE'S REVISED LAWS OF LA. 2D

SEC. 2165. Article 287 shall be so amended that a lessor may obtain a writ of provisional seizure even before the rent is due, and it shall be sufficient to entitle the lessor to the writ to swear to the amount which he claims, whether due or not due, and that he has good reasons to believe that the lessee will remove the furniture or property upon which he has a lien or privilege out of the premises, and that he may be, therefore, deprived of his lien.

LAWS OF FLORIDA—M'CLELLAN'S DIGEST

SEC. I, chapter 137. All claims for rent shall be a lien on agricultural products raised on the land rented, and shall be superior to all other liens and claims, though of older date, and also a superior lien on all other property of the lessee or his sublessee, or assigns usually kept on the premises, over any lien acquired subsequently to such property having been bought on the premises leased.

CODE OF ALABAMA

SEC. 3055, chapter 6. Lien continues and attaches to crop of succeeding years. When the tenant fails to pay any part of such rent or advances, and continues his tenancy under the same landlord for the next succeeding year for which the original lien for advances, if any remain unpaid, shall continue on the articles advanced or property purchased with money advanced, or obtained by barter in exchange for articles advanced, and for which a lien shall also attach to the crop of such succeeding year.

You have thus seen a specimen, and a fair specimen, of the landlord-and-tenant laws of several of the old slave states; you have thus seen how scrupulously and rigidly the rights of the landlords are guarded and protected by these laws; you have thus seen how completely the tenant is put at the mercy of the landlord; you have thus seen the bias, the motive, and intention of the legislators by whom these laws have been enacted, and by whom they have been administered; and now you are only to remember the sentiment in regard to the Negro, peculiar to the people of the South, and the character of the people against whom these laws are to be enforced, and the fact that no people are better than their laws, to have a perfectly just view of the whole situation.

To my mind these landlord-and-tenant laws are a disgrace and a scandal to American civilization. A more skillfully contrived device than these laws to crush out all aspiration, all hope of progress in the landless Negro could not be devised. They sound to me like the grating hinges of a slave prison. They read like the inhuman bond of Shylock, stipulating for his pound of flesh. They enjoin the helpless Negro like the devilish Victor Hugo, and draw the blood from every pore. He may writhe and twist, and strain every muscle, but he is held and firmly bound in a strong, remorseless and deadly grasp, a grasp from which only death can free him. Floods may rise, droughts may scorch, the elements may destroy his crops, famine may come, but whatever else may happen, the greedy landlord must have from his tenant the uttermost farthing. Like the den of the lion, all toes in its path turn inward.

The case is aggravated when you think of the illiteracy and ignorance of the people who sign land leases. They are ignorant of the terms of the contract, ignorant of the requirements of the law, and are thus absolutely in the power of the landholder.

You have heard much, read much, and thought much of the flagrant injustice, the monstrous cruelty and oppression inflicted on the tenant class in Ireland. I have no disposition to underrate the hardships of that class. On the contrary, I deplore them. But knowing them as I do, and despising them as I do, I declare to you that the condition of the Irish tenant is merciful, tender and just, as compared with the American freedman. There are thousands in Ireland today who fix the price of their own rent, and thousands more for whom the government itself measures the amount of rent to be paid, not by the greed of the landlord, but by the actual value of the land and its productions, and by the ability of the tenant to pay.

But how is it with us? The tenant is left in the clutches of the landlord. No third party intervenes between the greed and power of one and the helplessness of the other. The landholder imposes his price, exacts his conditions, and the landless Negro must comply or starve. It is impossible to conceive of conditions more unfavorable to the welfare and prosperity of the laborer. It is often said that the law is merciful, but there is no mercy in this law.

Now let us sum up some of the points in the situation of the freedman. You will have seen how he is paid for his labor, how a full-grown man gets only eight dollars a month for his labor, out of which he has to feed, clothe and educate his children. You have seen how this is reduced by the infamous truck system of payment. You have seen how easily he may be charged with one third more than the value of the goods that he buys. You have seen how easily he may be compelled to receive the poorest commodities at the highest prices. You have seen how he is never allowed to see or handle a dollar. You have seen how impossible it is for him to accumulate money or property. You have seen how he may be called on to receive the poorest commodities at the highest prices. You have seen how he is never allowed to see or handle a dollar. You have seen how impossible it is for him to accumulate money or property. You have seen how he may be compelled to receive the poorest commodities at the highest prices. You have seen how he is never allowed to see or handle a dollar. You have seen how impossible it is for him to accumulate money or property. You have seen how he may be compelled to receive the poorest commodities at the highest prices. You have seen how he is never allowed to see or handle a dollar.
the people. Toward him, it abandons the beneficent character of a government, and all that gives a government the right to exist. The true object for which governments are ordained among men is to protect the weak against the encroachments of the strong, to hold its strong arm of justice over all the civil relations of its citizens and to see that all have an equal chance in the race of life. Now, in the case of the Negro citizen, our national government does precisely the reverse of all this. Instead of protecting the weak against the encroachments of the strong, it tacitly protects the strong in its encroachments upon the weak. When the colored citizens of the South point to the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments of the Constitution for the protection of their civil and political rights, the Supreme Court of the United States turns them out of court and tells them they must look for justice at the hands of the states, well knowing that those states are, in effect, the very parties that deny them justice. Thus is the Negro citizen swindled. The government professes to give him citizenship and silently permits him to be divested of every attribute of citizenship. It demands allegiance, but denies protection. It taxes him as a citizen in peace, and compels him to bear arms and meet bullets in war. It imposes upon him all the burdens of citizenship and withholds from him all its benefits.

I know it is said that the general government is a government of limited powers. It was also once said that the national government could not coerce a state and it is generally said that this and that public measure is unconstitutional. But whenever an administration has had the will to do anything, it has generally found Constitutional power to do it. If the general government had the power to make black men citizens, it has the power to protect them in that citizenship. If it had the right to make them voters it has the right to protect them in the exercise of the elective franchise. If it has this right, and refuses to exercise it, it is a traitor to the citizen. If it has not this right, it is destitute of the fundamental quality of a government and ought to be hissed and hurried out of the sisterhood of government, a usurper, a sham, a delusion and a snare.

On the other hand, if the fault is not in the structure of the government, but in the treachery and indifference of those who administer it, the American people owe it to themselves, owe it to the world, and to the Negro, to sweep from place and power those who are thus derelict in the discharge of their place in the government who will not enforce the Constitutional right of every class of American citizen.

I am a Republican. I believe in the Republican party. My political hopes for the future of the colored people are enforced in the character and composition, in the wisdom and justice, in the courage and fidelity of the Republican party. I am unable to see how any honest and intelligent colored man can be a Democrat or play fast and loose between the two parties. But while I am a Republican and believe in the party, I dare to tell that party the truth. In my judgment it can no longer repose on the history of its grand and magnificent achievements. It must not only stand abreast with the times, but must create the times. Its power and greatness consisted in this at the beginning. It was in advance of the times and made the times when it abolished the slave trade between the states, when it emancipated the slaves of the District of Columbia, when it stemmed the bloody tide of disunion, when it abolished slavery in all the states, when it made the Negro a soldier and a citizen, when it conceded to him the elective franchise; and now, in my judgment, the strength, success and glory of the Republican party will be found in its holding this advanced position. It must not stand still or take any step backward. Its mission is to lead, not to follow; to make circumstances, not to be made by them. It is held and firmly bound by every sentiment of justice and honor to make a living fact out of the dead letter of the Constitutional amendments. It must make the path of the black citizen to the ballot box as safe and smooth as that of the white citizen. It must make it impossible for a man like James Russell Lowell to say he sees no difference between the Democratic party and the Republican party. If it fails to do all this, I for one shall welcome the bolt which shall scatter it into a thousand fragments.

The supreme movement in the life of the Republican party is at hand. The question, to be or not to be, will be decided at Chicago, and I reverently trust in God that it may be decided rightly. If the platform it shall adopt shall be in accordance with its earlier antecedents; if the party shall have the courage in its maturity which it possessed and displayed in its infancy; if it shall express its determination to vindicate the honor and integrity of the Republic by stamping out the fraud, injustice and violence which make elections in the South a disgrace and scandal to the Republican, and place a man on that platform with a clear head, a clean hand and a heroic heart, the country will triumphantly elect him. If it, however, should fail to elect him, we shall have done our duty and shall still have under us a grand party of the future, certain of success.

I do not forget that there are other great interests beside the Negro to be thought of. The civil service is a great interest, protection to American industry is a great interest, the proper management of our finances so as to promote the business and prosperity of the country is a great interest, but the national honor—the redemption of our national pledge to the freedmen, the supremacy of the Constitution in the fullness of its spirit and in the completeness of its letter over all the states of the Union alike—is an incomparably greater interest than all others. It touches the soul of the nation, which against all things else should be preserved. Should all be lost but this, the nation would be like Chicago after the fire—more prosperous and beautiful than ever. But what I ask of the Republican party requires no sacrifice or postponement of the material interest of the country. I simply say to the Republican party: Those things ye ought to have done and not to have left the others undone, and the present is the time to enforce this lesson.

The time has come for a new departure as to the kind of man who is to be the standard-bearer of the Republican party. Events are our instructors. We have had enough of names, we now want things. We have had enough of good feeling, enough of shaking hands over the bloody chasm, enough of conciliation, enough of laudation of the bravery of our Southern brethren. We tried all that with President Hayes, of the purity of whose motives I have no shadow of doubt. His mistake was that he confided in the honor of the Confederates, who were without honor. He supposed that if left to themselves and thrown upon their honor they would obey the Constitution they had sworn to support and treat the
colored citizens with justice and fairness at the ballot box. Time has proved the reverse of all this, and this fact should cure the Republican party of adopting in its platform any such soft policy or any such candidate. Let us have a candidate this time of pronounced opinions and, above all, a backbone.

There has been no show of federal power in the borders of the South for a dozen years. Its people have been left to themselves. Northern men have even refrained from going among them in election times to discuss the claims of public men, or the wisdom of public measures. They have had the field all to themselves, and we all now know just what has come of it, and the eyes of the leaders of the Republican party are, I trust, wide open. Mr. James G. Blaine, after, as well as before, he failed of his election, pointed out the evil which now besets us as a party and a nation. Senator John Sherman knows full well that the Solid South must be broken, that the colored citizen must not be cheated out of his vote any longer and that the Constitution must be obeyed in all parts of the country alike; that individual states are great, but that the United States are greater. He has said the right word, and said it calmly but firmly, in the face of the South itself, and I thank him and honor him for it. I am naming no candidate for the presidency. Any one of the dozen statesmen whose names are in the air, and many whose names are not, would suit me and gain my best word and vote. There is one who has not been named and not likely to be named, who would suit me and who would fulfill the supreme demand of the hour; and that man is a Southern man. I refer to the Honorable John M. Harlan, Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, who, true to his convictions, stood by the plain intention of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States in opposition to all his brothers on the bench. The man who could do that in the circumstances in which he was placed, if made President of the United States, could be depended upon in any emergency to do the right thing.

But, as I have said, I am not naming candidates. The candidate of the Republican party will, in all the likelihoods of the case, be my candidate. I am no partisan. I have no ambition to be the first to name any man or make any man obliged to me for naming him for the high office of President. Other men may do this, and I have no disposition to find fault with them for doing it. If, however, John A. Logan were living I might name him.11 I am sure he would not allow himself to be trifled with, or allow the Constitution to be defiled or trampled in the dust. I have faith also, in Roscoe Conkling, whose dangerous illness we all deplore and whose recovery we profoundly and anxiously desire. With such a man in the Presidential chair, the red shirt and rifle, horseback and tissue-battle plan of South Carolina and the Mississippi bulldozing plan would receive no encouragement.12

I am, however, not here to name men. My mission now, as all along during nearly fifty years, is to plead the cause of the dumb millions of our countrymen against injustice, oppression, meanness and cruelty, and to hasten the day when the principles of liberty and humanity expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States shall be the law and the practice of every section, and of all the people of this great country without regard to race, sex, color or religion.

Washington National Republican, April 17, 1888


2. In 1892 a group of Southern Negroes called on Douglass to obtain his advice relative to an exodus of Negro people from Arkansas to Africa. Douglass suggested that they go west instead of Africa. The group formed the Washington Co-operative Improvement Society and settled in Spokane, Washington. On January 9, 1893, Chas. E. Hall, secretary of the society, wrote to Douglass: ‘Acting upon your suggestion and believing that America is our home and that if we can care for ourselves here, it is almost useless to seek other climes, six of us young men have organized the above society whose purpose is clearly indicated. We propose to state facts regarding the resources of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, particularly those of Washington.’ The society was organized ‘to promote the general welfare and assist materially the condition of our fellow Afro-Americans in the pursuit of independence and prosperity.’ (Frederick Douglass Papers, Frederick Douglass Memorial Home, Anacostia, D.C.)

3. Hamilton J. Smith to Douglass, Apr. 17, 1888; Geo. B. Edmonds to Douglass, Apr. 17, 1888; J. B. White to Douglass, Apr. 17, 1888; John W. Curtis to Douglass, Apr. 18, 1888; Charles N. Hunter to Douglass, Apr. 23, 1888; Frederick Douglass Papers, Frederick Douglass Memorial Home, Anacostia, D.C.

4. Andersonville was the notorious Confederate prison in southwestern Georgia for Union prisoners, who were packed together with little food and hardly any medicine. From June to September, 1864, 8,589 prisoners died in Andersonville. (This and the following endnotes to this speech are taken from Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Voice of Black America: Major Speeches by Negroes in the United States, 1779-1971*, New York, 1972, pp. 524-536.)

5. In 1866 Robert Smalls was not seated in Congress as representative from South Carolina, even though he spoke for his right to his seat.

6. James Russell Lowell (1819-1892), poet, essayist, editor and diplomat, frequently wrote against slavery in his poetry. In his *Bigelow Papers* (1848) he had opposed the Mexican War.

7. When Rutherford B. Hayes removed the troops from Louisiana and South Carolina, he wrote in his diary that the governors and legislatures of these two states had pledged to observe the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. He concluded: ‘I am confident this is a good work. Time will tell.’ Eighteen months later he was deeply shocked that Louisiana and South Carolina were not keeping their promises. Gravely, he wrote: ‘By State legislation, by frauds, by intimidation and by violence of the most atrocious character, colored citizens have been deprived of the right of suffrage—a right guaranteed by the Constitution, and to the protection of which the people of those States have been solemnly pledged.’ (T. Harry Williams, *editor, *Hayes: The Diary of a President*, 1877-1881*, Philadelphia, 1964, pp. 122, 196.)

8. James Gillespie Blaine (1830-1893) was the Republican candidate for President in 1884 against Grover Cleveland, the victorious Democratic candidate.

9. John Sherman (1821-1900), author of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890, was a leading Republican Senator and U.S. Secretary of State (1897-98).

10. John Marshall Harlan (1833-1911), born in Kentucky, served on the U.S. Supreme Court from 1877 to 1911, during which time he consistently supported rights of black Americans. He dissented in the Civil Rights Case of 1883 and the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896, in both cases denouncing the deprivation of the Constitutional rights of Negroes under the Fourteenth Amendment.

11. John A. Logan (1826-1886), a Union general and frequent supporter of Negro rights, was U.S. Senator from Illinois (1871-77; 1879-86).

12. Roscoe Conkling (1829-1888), leader of the Republican party in New York and Senator from that state between 1867 and 1881, was a staunch opponent of reconciliation with the South. He headed the so-called Stalwart faction in the Republican party, which stood for upholding the rights of the Negroes under the Constitutional amendments adopted during Reconstruction.

13. In states where Negroes were a majority or nearly so, virtual disfranchisement of the blacks was accomplished without legal action, after the overthrow of Reconstruction, by such
devices as the Mississippi Plan, which used violence to force Negroes to desist from political action. "Red Shirts" were armed vigilantes on horseback in South Carolina.

Although not a delegate, Douglass was present at the Republican National Convention in Chicago, in June [1888]. In response to a call from the convention, he delivered [this] brief address on the opening day.

Three days later, the convention adopted a platform which expressed indignation at the suppression of suffrage among the Negroes in the South, and advocated fuller control of Congressional elections by the Federal government so that the Negro should be assured of, and guaranteed, a free exercise of his rights. Benjamin Harrison, the Republican candidate for President, announced that he subscribed fully to the policy set forth in the platform.¹ [IV:128]

**THE BLOODY SHIRT**, speech delivered at the National Republican Convention, Chicago, June 19, 1888

I have only one word to say to this convention and it is this: I hope this convention will make such a record in its proceedings as will entirely put it out of the power of the leaders of the Democratic party and of the leaders of the Mugwump party to say that they see no difference between the position of the Republican party in respect to the class I represent and that of the Democratic party. I have a great respect for a certain quality for which the Democratic party is distinguished. That quality is fidelity to its friends, its faithfulness to those whom it has acknowledged as its masters during the last forty years. It was faithful to the slave-holding class during the existence of slavery. It was faithful to them before the war. It gave them all the encouragement that it possibly could without drawing its own neck into the halter. It was also faithful during the period of reconstruction, and it has been faithful ever since. It is to-day faithful to the solid South. I hope and believe that the great Republican party will prove itself equally faithful to its friends, those friends with black faces who during the war were eyes to your blind, shelter to your shelterless, when flying from the lines of the enemy. They are as faithful to-day as when the great Republic was in the extremest need; when its fate seemed to tremble in the balance; when the crowned heads of the Old World were gloating over our ruin, saying, "Aha! aha! the great Republican bubble is about to burst." When your army was melting away before the fire and pestilence of rebellion; when your star-spangled banner trailed in the dust or, heavy with blood, drooped at the mast head, you called upon the Negro. Yes, Abraham Lincoln called upon the Negro to reach forth with his iron arm and catch with his steel fingers your faltering flag, and he came, he came full two hundred thousand strong. Let us in the platform we are about to promulgate remember the brave black men, and let us remember that these brave black men are now stripped of their constitutional right to vote. Let this remembrance be embodied in the standard bearer whom you will present to the country. Leave these men no longer compelled to wade to the ballot-box through blood, but extend

over them the protecting arm of this government, and make their pathway to the ballot-box as straight and as smooth and as safe as that of any other class of citizens. Be not deterred from this duty by the cry of the bloody shirt. Let that shirt be waved as long as there shall be a drop of innocent blood upon it. A government that can give liberty in its constitution ought to have the power in its administration to protect and defend that liberty. I will not further take up your time. I have spoken for millions, and my thought is now before you.

*Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, 1893*