



THE RACE PROBLEM

GREAT SPEECH OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Delivered before the Bethel Literary and Historical
Association
in the Metropolitan A. M. E. Church, Washington, D.C.

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Excerpts*

Members and friends of the Bethel Literary and Historical Association:

I esteem it a great privilege to be with you and assist in this your first meeting since the close of your last winter's term. The organization of your association was an important step in the progress of the colored people in this city. It is an institution well fitted to improve the minds and elevate the sentiments not only of its members, but of the general public. Nowhere else outside of the courts of law and the Congress of the United States have I heard vital public questions more seriously discussed. The men selected to address you know very well that what they may utter is subjected to close scrutiny and severe discussion. Mere rant, bombast, and self-inflation may pass elsewhere, but not here. For this reason, and for my own self-respect, I shall endeavor to say only what I believe to be the truth upon what is popularly called "The Negro Problem. . . ."

. . . . It has been well said that in an important sense words are things. They are especially such when they are employed to express the popular sentiment concerning the Negro: to couple his name with anything in this world seems to damage it and damage him likewise. Hence I object to characterizing the relation subsisting between the white and colored people of this country as the Negro problem, as if the Negro had precipitated that problem, and as if he were in any way responsible for the problem. . . .

Now that the Union is no longer in danger, now that the North and South are no longer enemies: now that they have ceased to scatter, tear, and slay each other, but sit together in halls of Congress, commerce, religion, and in brotherly love, it seems that the negro is to lose by their sectional harmony and good will all the rights and privileges that he gained by their former bitter enmity. This, it is found, cannot be

* Full text at African American Perspectives: Pamphlets from the Daniel A.P. Murray Collection, 1818-1907, in American Memory, Library of Congress, at http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?aap:4:/temp/~ammem_Zyrr:

20 accomplished without confusing the moral sense of the nation and misleading the public mind; without creating doubt, inflaming passion, arousing prejudice, and attracting to the enemies of the negro the popular sympathy by representing the negro as an ignorant, base, and dangerous person, and by presenting to those enemies that his existence to them is a dreadful problem. With their usual cunning, these enemies of the negro have made the North partly believe that they are now contending with a vast and mysterious problem, the mere contemplation of which should cause the whole North to shudder and come to the rescue. The trick is worthy of its inventors, and has been played for all that it is worth. The orators of the South have gone North and have eloquently described this terrible problem, and the press of the South has flamed with it, and grave Senators from that section have painted it in most distressing colors. Problem, problem, race problem, negro problem, has, as Junius says, fitted through their sentences
30 in all the mazes of metaphorical confusion. . . .

. . . The true problem is not the negro, but the nation. Not the law-abiding blacks of the South, but the white men of that section, who by fraud, violence, and persecution, are breaking the law, trampling on the Constitution, corrupting the ballot-box, and defeating the ends of justice. The true problem is whether these white ruffians shall be allowed by the nation to go on in their lawless and nefarious career, dishonoring the Government and making its very name a mockery. It is whether this nation has in itself sufficient moral stamina to maintain its own honor and integrity by vindicating its own Constitution and fulfilling its own pledges, or whether it has already touched that dry rot of moral depravity by which nations decline and fall, and governments fade and vanish. The United States Government made the negro a citizen, will it protect him as a citizen? This is the problem. It made him a soldier, will it honor him as a patriot? This is the problem. It made him a voter, will it defend his right to vote? This is the problem.
40 This, I say, is more a problem for the nation than for the negro, and this is the side of the question far more than the other which should be kept in view by the American people.

What these problem orators now ask is that the nation shall undo all that it did by the suppression of the rebellion and in maintenance of the Union. They ask that the nation shall recede from its advance in the path of justice, liberty, and civilization. They boldly ask that what was justly and gratefully given to the negro in the hour of national peril shall be taken from him in the hour of national security. They ask that the nation shall stultify itself and commit an act of national shame which ought to make every lover of his country cry out in bitter indignation and unite as one man to oppose. A demand so scandalous and so shocking to every sentiment of honor and gratitude. And from whom does this demand come? Not
50 from who gave their lives to save the nation, but from those who gave their lives to destroy it. Not from the free and loyal North, but from the rebellious and slave-holding South. Not from the section where men go to the ballot-box with the same freedom from personal danger as they go to church on Sunday, but

from that section where personal safety is endangered, where Federal authority is defied, where the amendments to the Constitution are nullified, where the ballot-box is tainted by fraud, and red-shirted intimidation makes a free vote impossible. It comes from the men who led the nation in a dance of blood during four long years, and who now have the impudence to assume to control the destiny of this Republic as well as the destiny of the negro.

60 And what are the reasons they give for demanding of the nation this retreat from its advanced position? They are these: They tell us that they are afraid, very much afraid: they are alarmed, very much alarmed, by the possibility of negro supremacy over them. This is the calamity from which they would be delivered, and with eloquent lips and lusty lungs they are calling out: "Men and brethren, save us from this threatened and terrible danger!"

My reply to this alarm is easy. It is that the wicked flee when no man pursueth: that the thief thinks each bush an officer: that the thing they pretend to fear can never happen, and that blank absurdity is written upon the face of it. The eagle, with fierce talon and bloody beak screaming in terror at the approach of a harmless black bird would not be more absurd and ridiculous. The superior intelligence of the whites, the comparative ignorance of the blacks, the former dominion of the whites and the former subjection of the blacks, the habit of bearing rule of the whites, and the habit of submission by the blacks make black supremacy in any part of our common country utterly impossible.

70 But supposing such an occurrence possible, what hardship would it impose? What wrong would it inflict? Who would be injured by it? If the blacks should get the upper hand, their rule would have to be regulated by the Constitution and the laws of the United States. They could not discriminate against white people on account of race, color, or previous condition without findings the iron hand of the nation laid heavily on their shoulders. The white people of the South are the rich, the negroes the poor; the white people are the landowners, the negroes are the landlers. The white people of the South are numbered with the ruling class of the nation. They have behind them every possible source of power. They have railroads, steamships, electric telegraphs, the Army and the Navy. They have the sword and the purse of the nation behind them, and yet they profess to be shaking in their shoes lest the 8,000,000 of blacks shall come to rule over them and their brethren, the 50,000,000 of whites.

80 Now I am here to say that there is nothing whatever in this supposition. I can hardly call this invention a cunning device, for the pretense is too open, too transparent, too absurd, to rise even to the dignity of low cunning. It is an old ragged pair of trousers, and an old mashed and battered hat of the last century stuck upon a pole in a field where there are neither crows nor corn. It is the cry of fire by the thief when he would divert the officer of the law. It is as I have said, a red herring to divert the hounds from the true game, and the strange thing is that any class of our citizens, white or black, can be deceived by it. . . .

But let me say again, the South neither really fears the ignorance of the negro, nor the supremacy of the negro. It is not the ignorant negro, but the intelligent North that it fears; not the supremacy of a different race from itself, but the supremacy of the Republican party. It is not the men who are emancipated but the people who emancipated them that disturb its repose. In other words the trouble is not racial, but political. It is not the race and color of the vote. Disguise this as it may, the real thing that troubles the South is the Republican party, its principles, and its ascendancy in Southern States and the nation. When it talks of negro ignorance, negro supremacy, it means this, and simply this, only this. . . .

And now comes Mr. Isaiah Montgomery, of Mississippi, with his solution of the pretended Negro problem.* I have spoken of him elsewhere, and I take back nothing that I have said either of this remarkable man, or his remarkable address. He has surrendered to a disloyal State a great franchise given to himself and his people by the loyal nation. He has taken the work of solving the nation's work of the nation's hands. He has virtually said to the nation: "You have done wrong in giving us this great liberty. You should give us back a part of our bondage." He has surrendered a part of his rights to an enemy who will make this surrender a reason for demanding all of his rights. He has conducted his people to a depth from which they will be invited to a lower deep, for if he can rightfully surrender a part of his heritage from the National Government at the bidding of his oppressors, he may surrender the whole. The people with whom he makes this deal are restrained in dealing with the rights of colored men by no sense of modesty or moderation in their demands. They want all that is to be had, and will take all that they can get. Their real sentiment is that no Negro shall or ought to have the right to vote. Yet I have no denunciation for the man Montgomery. He is not a conscious traitor though his act is treason: treason to the cause of the colored people, not only of his own State, but of the United States.

I wish the consequences of his act could be confined to Mississippi alone, but I fear this cannot be. Other colored men in other States, dazzled by the fame obtained by Mr. Montgomery through the Democratic press, will probably imitate his bad example. I speak of this Montgomery business more in sorrow than in anger. I hear in the plaintive eloquence of his marvelous address a groan of bitter anguish born of oppression and despair. It is the voice of a soul from which all hope has vanished. His deed kindles indignation to be sure, but his condition awakens pity. He had called to the nation for help—help which it ought to have rendered and could have rendered but it did not—and in a moment of impatience

* Isaiah Montgomery, a successful black businessman and former slave, was the only black representative at the 1890 Mississippi constitutional convention, the first of many state conventions called primarily to disenfranchise African Americans. Montgomery voted in favor of disenfranchisement, arguing that the loss of political power would enable blacks to pursue education and economic progress without fear of white opposition and violence. Later that year he joined with Booker T. Washington in founding the National Negro Business League. [NHC note]

and despair he has thought to make terms with the enemy, an enemy with whom no colored man can make terms but by a sacrifice of his manhood. . . .

120 . . . I am hopeful. I have no doubt whatever of the future. I know that there are times in the history of all reforms when the future looks dark; when the friends of reform are impatient and despondent; when they cannot see the end from the beginning; when the truth that is plain to them compels them to reject the honesty of all who receive it. When they meet with opposition where they expected co-operation; when they met with treachery where they expected fidelity, and defeat where they expected victory. I, for one, have gone through all this. I have had fifty years of it, and yet I have not lost either heart or hope. . . .

130 . . . The business of government is to hold its broad shield over all and to see that every American citizen is alike and equally protected in his civil and personal rights. My confidence is strong and high in the nation as a whole. I believe in its justice and in its power. I believe that it means to keep its word with its colored citizens. I believe in its progress, in its moral as well as its material civilization. Its trend is in the right direction. Its fundamental principles are sound. Its conception of humanity and of human rights is clear and comprehensive. Its progress is fettered by no State religion tending to repress liberal thought: by no order of nobility tending to keep down the toiling masses: by no divine right theory tending to national stagnation under the idea of stability. It stands out free and clear with nothing to obstruct its view of the lessons of reason and experience.

It may be said, as has been said, that I am growing old, and am easily satisfied with things as they are. When our young men shall have worked and waited for victory as long as I have worked and waited, they will not only learn to have patience with the men opposed to them, but with me also for having patience with such. I have seen dark hours in my life, and I have seen the darkness gradually disappearing and the light gradually increasing. One by one I have seen obstacles removed, errors corrected, prejudices softened, proscriptions relinquished, and my people advancing in all the elements that go to make up the sum of general welfare. And I remember that God reigns in eternity, and that what ever delays, whatever disappointments and discouragements may come, truth, justice, liberty and humanity will ultimately prevail.