

FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

Timothy Sandefur

Frederick Douglass (1818–95) was an author, lecturer, activist, and statesman who was born into slavery in rural Maryland. After being sent to Baltimore at the age of seven, he secretly learned to read and began questioning the legitimacy of slavery. When he was 20, he escaped to New York on the Underground Railroad and from there moved to Massachusetts, where he was recruited into the abolition movement by William Lloyd Garrison, publisher of the anti-slavery newspaper *The Liberator*. In 1845, Douglass published *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, and gave a lecture tour in Great Britain. Upon his return, he moved to Rochester, New York, where he repudiated Garrison’s belief that the Constitution was a pro-slavery document. In partnership with New York abolitionist Gerrit Smith, he began publishing his own newspaper, and revised and extended the *Narrative* into *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

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When the Civil War broke out, Douglass helped recruit black soldiers into the Union Army and met repeatedly with President Abraham Lincoln. After the war, Douglass became United States marshal for the District of Columbia and was later appointed minister to Haiti. He continued lecturing throughout, supporting stronger protections for civil rights in the South and denouncing the rise of Jim Crow in the period after Reconstruction. In 1884, he shocked the nation by marrying a white woman, Helen Pitts, a former abolitionist who had taught freedmen in schools in the South. He became a mentor to Paul Laurence Dunbar and Ida Wells, and he died in 1895.

A Self-Made Man

Frederick Douglass's story is mesmerizing (see Sandefur 2018). I think it's the most quintessentially *American* story in all our literature. That's because it is not just the story of a self-made man, but a story of idealism versus cynicism—of pride against despair—of commitment to principle against nihilism and surrender. It's the story of the assertion of American Dream: the dream of the opportunity for men and women of all races and backgrounds to realize their individual destinies in freedom.

The most famous episode in that story is Douglass's fight with Edward Covey. Covey ran a business breaking slaves who were too headstrong, and Douglass's master sent him to Covey in 1834 when Douglass was 17. Covey beat him every week, for any reason or for no reason. He would hide in the bushes and attack Douglass out of nowhere—all to instill in Douglass a sense of helpless terror and to destroy his capacity to dream of a better life. Douglass tells us that before being sent to Covey, he would sometimes gaze out at the ships in Chesapeake Bay and dream of being on one, sailing freely before the wind. But after six months of Covey's brutal regimen, Douglass lost even the desire to imagine his freedom. "Covey succeeded in breaking me," he said, "in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed; my intellect languished; the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died out; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me, and behold a man transformed to a brute!" (in Gates 1994: 268).

Then, one hot August day, Douglass decided that he would not surrender (*ibid.*: 575–92). He had fainted from heat stroke that

day, and Covey had beat him for it with a wooden club. Though Douglass had begged his owner to intervene, he had refused. So Douglass resolved to fight back. The next time Covey attacked him, he grabbed the man around the throat and held on. They struggled until Covey stumbled off mumbling. He never beat Douglass again. And Douglass learned from this incident a crucial principle: *he who would be free must himself strike the blow* (ibid.: 592).

Striking that blow rather than surrendering—believing in himself enough to stand up—that was the crucial lesson. Douglass refused to accept the hopeless, helpless, dreamless life of a brute. “Next to the dignity of being a freeman is the dignity of striving to be free,” he said years later. “I detest the slaveholder, and almost equally detest a contented slave. They are both enemies to freedom. . . . One of the saddest facts connected with organized and settled oppression is, that it deadens the sensibility in its victims. It acts upon the oppressed like certain deadly poisons upon animal life, which lull to sleep before dissolving the body in death” (in Blassingame 1986, 3: 210).

I tell this story because I want to focus on the lessons Douglass teaches us today—as libertarians and as Americans—about idealism and cynicism, about pride and surrender, about the American Dream, and about that deadly poison that lulls to sleep—a hopeless, helpless, dreamless sleep.

Douglass and the Abolition Movement

Let me turn to a part of Douglass’s life that is often neglected: his place in the history of anti-slavery political thought. We often think of abolitionism as a single movement, but in fact, the enemies of slavery were a diverse bunch. And their internal disagreements shaped an important chapter in Douglass’s life. After escaping from slavery in 1838, he moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he planned to get a job in the shipyards (see Gates 1994: 651). He had experience in that line of work, and New Bedford was the capital of the whaling industry. But Massachusetts was also the headquarters of one wing of the abolitionist movement—the wing led by William Lloyd Garrison.

Garrison was a brave and uncompromising man, an extreme radical, and Frederick Douglass’s hero. He was a feminist, a

pacifist, and an anarchist. He and his friends had essentially founded American abolitionism in 1831 when they reacted against what was then the only existing school of anti-slavery thought, known as “colonizationism.”

Colonizationists believed that slavery should be ended gradually and that former slaves or their children should be sent to colonies in Africa or Central America. This was considered a respectable form of anti-slavery thinking among whites—Thomas Jefferson and James Madison had been colonizationists. But it was anathema to Garrison. “Gradual emancipation,” as the colonizationists would have it, meant leaving current slaves in chains for life. And sending freed slaves or their children to Africa was irrational and unjust. Most of them had never even been to Africa—in fact, most of their parents and grandparents had never been there. They would probably not survive there, and forcibly expelling freed slaves from their homes—as the government later did with the Cherokee—would be a crime against humanity. Garrison overthrew colonization and replaced it with abolitionism—which called for the immediate, uncompensated, freeing of all slaves with no colonization (Mayer 1998: 72–78).

But he went further: Garrison also thought the United States Constitution was an evil document because it protected slavery. He called it a deal with the devil. He burned it at his July 4 speeches and adopted as his motto, “No union with slaveholders!”—by which he meant that northern states should secede from the union in order to have nothing to do with slavery (Mayer 1998: 326, 444–45). Because he was a pacifist, he did not call for slave uprisings, but instead believed in persuading masters to free their slaves. He also argued that abolitionists should refuse to participate in politics, vote, or run for office, since that would only lend credibility to a political system that was morally corrupt. Nothing short of the total overthrow of the government would do (*ibid.*: 222).

Douglass first met Garrison at the age of 21, when he addressed an anti-slavery meeting with Garrison in the audience. He trembled and stuttered, he says, speaking before his hero (Gates 1994: 660). But Garrison was so impressed that he recruited Douglass into the Antislavery Society, as one of its writers and lecturers. At first, Douglass followed the Garrisonian party line: that the Constitution was a pro-slavery document, that American politics was hopelessly

corrupt, and that abolitionists should remain outside the political system.

The U.S. Constitution: Pro-slavery or Anti-slavery?

It was only natural that Douglass would embrace these views. He was new to the free world and in awe of Garrison. But he soon began to question Garrison's theory. When he wrote his autobiography in 1845, he included scenes of his famous fight with Edward Covey that were not exactly consistent with pacifism. He began endorsing slave uprisings. And when he traveled to Britain in 1845–46, he met with British abolitionists who had done a lot of good by working within the political system, including ending slavery in the West Indies. Douglass returned to the United States with a pocketful of money from British admirers and chose to move to Rochester, New York, and start a newspaper of his own. Garrison was irritated by this.

But what Douglass did next bothered Garrison even more. He began consorting with a different branch of the abolitionist movement—the New York wing, led by the philanthropist Gerrit Smith. Smith differed dramatically from Garrison. He believed the Constitution was *not* a pro-slavery document, but was, in its principles, anti-slavery—or at least, that it gave the federal government power to restrict or abolish slavery, if elected officials were willing to do so. Smith believed in political participation and sponsored the Liberty Party—America's first anti-slavery political party.

Within a few years, Douglass became persuaded that the Constitution was not pro-slavery, but a fundamentally anti-slavery document. The words “slave” and “slavery” did not appear in it, he observed. And even the oblique references to slavery found in the Constitution—the three-fifths clause, the fugitive slave clause, the importation clause, and the prohibition on amending the importation clause—could be interpreted in ways that avoided protecting slavery. Moreover, other provisions of the Constitution—most notably the Privileges and Immunities Clause of Article IV—positively contradicted slavery (Foner and Taylor 1999: 260–71, 344–58).

In fact, Douglass argued that slaves were actually American citizens. Certainly nothing in the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence said otherwise. Black Americans were, after all, part

of the “all men” whom the Declaration said were “created equal.” They were among the “people of the United States” referred to in the Constitution’s preamble. Nothing in the Constitution deprived them of that status. To reduce them to slavery without due process of law was unconstitutional (Foner and Taylor 1999: 353–54).

The pro-slavery lawyers, obviously, argued the reverse. The Constitution was meant only for white Americans, they said. Its references to slavery amounted to permanent guarantees. The Declaration’s statement that “all men are created equal” was not intended to refer to nonwhites—it really meant “white men.” The idea of black people being citizens was absurd (*Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393: 407–10 [1857]).

What’s remarkable is that the Garrisonian abolitionists *shared* this pro-slavery view. They agreed that the Constitution was a pro-slavery document—that was why they called it evil. The Constitution, said one Garrisonian, “Is, and always has been, a sham—an imposter . . . an instrument of oppression unsurpassed in the criminal history of the world” (Phillips 1845: 103). So when the Supreme Court ruled in *Dred Scott* that black Americans could never be citizens and that the Constitution aimed to protect slavery forever, Douglass pointed out that Chief Justice Taney was just echoing what the Garrisonians believed. What united Garrisonians with their pro-slavery enemies was their shared view that the Founding Fathers could never have really meant what their words said. Both groups believed that it was *unrealistic* to imagine that the Founders had ever expected this country to be anything other than a land for whites only. “It is absurd, it is false,” wrote one Garrisonian, “to pretend that the Constitution was intended to embrace the entire population of the country” (ibid.: 105). Even if it had been, he wrote, “of what avail is a mere piece of parchment?” (ibid.: 116). In their minds, Douglass’s pro-Constitution abolition theory was utopian, pie-in-the-sky, wishful thinking: Unrealistic. Merely a dream.

Yet Douglass asserted that dream wholeheartedly, both as a normative and a practical matter. He pored over the history of the Constitution and concluded that Americans had “allowed themselves to be . . . ruinously imposed upon” by those who called the document pro-slavery. In fact, he argued, it contained “neither warrant, license, nor sanction” for slavery. “Interpreted as it ought to be interpreted,” he said, “the Constitution is a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT.” True, many of the Founders had owned slaves, but it was

“a slander upon their memory” to accuse them of having *approved* of slavery or of having designed the Constitution to perpetuate it (in Foner and Taylor 1999: 204). They had despised slavery, and had hoped it would die from economic weakness or that their children would sicken of it. Alas, by the 1830s, just the opposite had occurred, and Southerners were trying to rewrite history to justify what was never intended: a *permanent* slave nation.

Engagement in Politics—Or Disavowal?

As a matter of history and morality, Douglass was right about this. But there was a practical dimension to it, too. By forfeiting the Constitution into the hands of the pro-slavery lawyers, Garrison and his allies were surrendering their most valuable weapon—namely, their opportunity to use the political system to actually do something about slavery. Garrison’s motto—“no union with slaveholders”—was a dereliction of moral duty. “If I were on board of a pirate ship,” Douglass said, “I would not clear my soul of [my victims’] blood by jumping in the long boat, and singing out ‘no union with pirates!’ My business would be to . . . save the lives and liberties of those against whom I had committed piracy. In like manner, I hold it is our duty to remain inside this Union, and use all [its] power to restore to enslaved millions their precious and God-given rights” (in Foner and Taylor 1999: 352).

The Garrisonians’ refusal to participate in politics also meant prioritizing their own moral purity over the goal of emancipation. They were abandoning “the great idea” of abolitionism, Douglass said—they had started out to free the slave, but by repudiating political engagement, they were “leaving the slave to free himself” (*ibid.*: 324). So Douglass chose a new motto: instead of “no union with slaveholders,” Douglass said, “I would unite with anybody to do right and with nobody to do wrong” (*ibid.*: 326).

In response, the Garrisonians accused Douglass of opportunism and moral equivocation. Participating in politics, they warned, would force Douglass to compromise his beliefs and would lend undeserved legitimacy to the government. He would make a clown of himself and a joke of abolitionism, which was a radical, revolutionary, transformative movement (Filler 1960: 153).

They were not entirely wrong. As Douglass’s later career showed, being involved in politics did, indeed, require compromises, sometimes embarrassing ones. For the rest of his life, Douglass was

forced to swallow insults and to support politicians who took only trivial action, or no action, to protect black Americans from virtual reenslavement.

On the other hand, Douglass could point to the immense progress that abolitionists made between 1855 and 1875 through political engagement. In fact, the cause would have accomplished nothing had it followed Garrison's nonparticipation rule. Only the political activism of people like Douglass, Gerrit Smith, Charles Sumner, Thaddeus Stevens, Josiah Giddings, and many others made any progress toward the actual end of slavery possible. Their greatest triumphs were the ratification of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, which vindicated pro-Constitution abolitionism forever. At least in words.

This tension—between those who say that the best path is to refuse to participate in politics, and those who believe the possible gains from politics outweigh its risks—is characteristic of all reform movements. It exists today in the libertarian community. Bob Poole and Max Borders debated this very issue in *Reason* magazine (Borders and Poole 2018). Neither side is entirely right or wrong—and I don't intend to resolve the debate here. But libertarians do have much to learn from the way it played out in Frederick Douglass's lifetime.

Douglass and Today's Fight over the American Dream

There's another lesson here—one that remains relevant to our national community as well. It's a lesson about viewing the Constitution, not just as a legal document but as an *aspirational commitment*. Because that is what the Constitution is. Our founding document is not a morally neutral machine for making legislation, but a promise—as all laws are promises—grounded on moral propositions. It is therefore as much about how our nation *ought* to be as about what it *is*.

In Douglass's opinion, the Garrisonians' anti-Constitution theory shared a false and even nihilistic premise with the old colonization theory. Both assumed that America was a nation fundamentally committed to white supremacy. Colonizationists could not imagine black men and women sharing the continent with them—and those who viewed the Constitution as a pro-slavery document could not imagine its protections for liberty applying to all races. Both doctrines of

racial separation were the same old serpent that said the Constitution and the Declaration did not really mean what they said, and that instead, America is only for whites. Both the colonization theory and the anti-Constitution theory would, in Douglass's words, make black Americans "despondent and doubtful, where [they] should feel assured and confident," and would "force upon [them] the idea that [they] [are] forever doomed to be . . . stranger[s] and sojourner[s] in the land of [their] birth, and that [they] [have] no permanent abiding place here" (in Foner and Taylor 1999: 767–68).

Douglass had more reason than many people to oppose any doctrine of racial separation. He was half white—and late in life married a white woman. He believed that white and black Americans shared a destiny—a common inheritance in the libertarian principles of the Declaration and the Constitution, regardless of racial ancestry. "Have we not a right here?" Douglass asked. "We have been with you . . . in adversity, and by the help of God will be with you in prosperity. . . . We are American citizens" (in Foner and Taylor 1999: 177). Citizenship was more than a legal status to Douglass—it meant a *conviction* in the truth of the principles of liberty. Black Americans had proven their conviction a thousand-fold—had earned their citizenship through toil, suffering, patience, and courage—and should be proud of it, he said. They should never let it be taken away—or, God forbid, be fooled into giving it up.

That may be the most important lesson Douglass teaches us today. It's a lesson about brotherhood and what it means to be an American. That makes it a hard lesson to hear in today's environment of contempt and even despair. Such despair is merely an echo of the nihilism that Douglass detected in colonizationism and anti-Constitutionalism. Both then and now, that despair tells black Americans that this nation and its principles are not for them and never were. Its most outspoken advocate today is Ta-Nehisi Coates, the anti-Frederick Douglass, who argues in his recent book, *Between the World and Me*, that the American Dream is a lie (Coates 2015).

Coates holds that the American Dream is a mirage, designed to fool nonwhites into believing that America is something other than a land of oppression. The Dream appears in Coates's writing only as a perversity, as a target of scorn and contempt, as just another fraud to be smirked at by those worldly enough to realize that only rubes fall for it. No—not even so jocularly as that. The Dream is a massive, white machine, gorging itself on "black bodies" in order to gather

strength to gorge itself once more. Coates describes it in his sarcastic, pseudo-elegiac phraseology as “perfect houses with nice lawns . . . Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways” (Coates 2015: 11). But in his eyes, the Dream is inherently exclusive. White supremacy, he writes, “remains, as it has since 1776, at the heart of this country’s political life” (Coates 2017). And the American Dream is “concocted by Americans to justify themselves” (Coates 2015: 50).

Coates’s nihilism is truly boundless. There are times when he seems to say the opposite, as when he quotes Abraham Lincoln approvingly. He goes on, however, to say that “Americans believe in the reality of ‘race’ as a defined, indestructible feature of the natural world,” and that racism “inevitably follows from this inalterable condition” (ibid.: 7). Racism lies at the very root of the national consciousness of white Americans—“whiteness,” as Coates understands it—and he sees that “whiteness” everywhere. Whiteness—not the color of white people’s skin, or the content of their minds, but the entire evanescent and omnipresent *thing* of American culture—simply *is* racism. “We are captured, brother,” he writes, “surrounded by the majoritarian bandits of America” (ibid.: 146).

That, of course, was not what Frederick Douglass thought. Douglass (who actually was captured, more than once) was the greatest of all articulators of the Dream, at least until Martin Luther King. He spoke of it when he described America as a land of self-made people, as a boisterous, shifting, often unpredictable society: “Like the sea, we are constantly rising above, and returning to, the common level” (in Blassingame and McKivigan 1992, 5: 572). By this, Douglass meant that a nation premised on equality, in which people must climb on their own merits and hard work, is an ever-shifting tableau of people gaining in wealth and fame—with others rising above them and still others falling through their own bad choices or misfortune—yet knowing, even as they fall, that they have the opportunity to rise again.

Douglass spent two decades in slavery. He had better reason than any American today to call the American Dream a lie and a fantasy. But he did not. He would not let Edward Covey beat it out of him, and he would not surrender it. “My mission,” he said, “is to plead the cause of the colored millions of our countrymen against injustice, oppression, meanness, 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” (in Foner and Taylor 1999: 722).

The False “Realism” of Nihilism

Coates’s nihilism has become a common feature of public discourse. He won a MacArthur Genius Grant and a National Book Award, and many others now see his cynicism as the *realistic* way to view the United States. In January 2019, the *New York Times* ran an article flatly declaring that “The American dream . . . is one of the most enduring myths in this country. And one of its most prominent falsehoods” when it comes to black Americans (Allen 2019).

Of course, cynicism always tries to market itself as “realistic”—but in most cases, and certainly in this case, it is not. Coates writes that “America is literally unimaginable without plundered labor shackled to plundered land, without the organizing principle of whiteness as citizenship” (Coates 2018: 85). But this is untrue in every respect.

First, it *is* possible to imagine America without slavery. Many people throughout history did precisely that. Douglass did so. So did Garrison, John Greenleaf Whittier, John Quincy Adams, and Abraham Lincoln. In fact, they did more than imagine it; they made it a reality—or, if you prefer, brought it closer to reality than it was before they did the imagining. One might assume that every enslaved black American in the two and a half centuries before emancipation imagined it. After them, others imagined an America free of racial oppression and acted to make it a reality—in the Silent Parade, in the bus boycotts, in Freedom Summer. We have a name for their act of imagining: it’s called “the Dream.”

If Coates chooses not to share that Dream, why not? It is surely not on account of realism, which would force him to acknowledge that there is, at the heart of America’s founding documents, a set of principles that frame an abiding dream—a compelling vision of a better world. That vision has led the people of the United States time and again to lay down their lives for a freer, more just country: to free the slaves, to end Jim Crow, to make real a principle of brotherhood by which countless Americans now find it literally unimaginable that there was ever a world in which such things were considered acceptable. What most Americans find “unimaginable” today is the racism their own grandfathers took for granted. And what has made it unimaginable is “the Dream.”

I would go further. Not only is America imaginable without slavery, but slavery has been a feature of nearly every human society in the history of the world, and yet in those societies, what was unimaginable was the principle that all men are created equal. What was unimaginable was the idea that everyone, everywhere, is entitled to liberty. What people in other nations could not imagine was integration, emancipation, and liberation.

The reality is that America is literally unimaginable without the *end* of slavery. It is not remarkable that America had slavery, which is an ancient and ubiquitous institution, vastly more common in history than, say, monogamy. The wonder, rather, is that the end of slavery in this country came as a *necessary consequence* of her fundamental creed. What is impossible to imagine is America without the principle of equality—the core of the Declaration of Independence, which Douglass called “the ringbolt of the chain of our nation’s destiny” (in Foner and Taylor 1999: 191). Without that “ringbolt,” America would not be America. She would be like every other country—rocks and trees, and people connected by ethnicity, rather than principle. This is what Lincoln meant when he said that the “electric cord” that binds us together is not race, but the principles of the Declaration, which make each of us “blood of the blood and flesh of the flesh” of the revolutionary fathers (in Basler 1953, 2: 499–500). These are the things we celebrate on July 4th—or those Memorial Day barbecues Coates sneers at—because they are essential. They make the Dream. They are what America is unimaginable without.

In this connection, I cannot refrain from telling a personal story. I was in Washington, D.C., on July 4, 2000. I sat on the Capitol steps to watch Ray Charles sing “America, the Beautiful.” I could barely hear him because the fireworks were so loud. I didn’t like that, and the mass of people made the evening less fun. But as I walked back to my apartment, I saw something that stuck with me forever: in an empty lot, an SUV; in front of it, a father—a black man—who was lighting off some little fireworks he’d brought with him. Inside, pressed against the driver’s side window, two little children, their shining faces overwhelmed with guileless joy—utterly pure. That is my real memory of that day.

Now, I wonder, what were these three Americans celebrating? Were they ignorant of the history of racism in this country? Did they not know about slavery and segregation? Were they fools, walking about in the delusion from which Coates has “liberated” himself? Or could it be that they know that story well enough—and that in their

veins runs the blood of enslaved Americans, and freedmen, and the brave black soldiers who fought in the Union Army, and the Selma marchers and Freedom Riders and the black businessmen and scholars and artists and scientists who labor every day knowing this country is theirs? Could it be that they were celebrating *their* country? Could it be that they know that what can't be imagined is America *without* the Dream?

I suspect, in fact, that these people, if they were tourists, came to Washington in part to visit the spot at the Lincoln Memorial where a black man gave voice to that Dream so profoundly, so truly, so eloquently, that when you speak of “the Dream” to nearly any American today, he thinks not of James Truslow Adams—the author who first used the phrase “American Dream”—but of Martin Luther King Jr. I suspect that these people came, not to repudiate, but to *claim* that Dream. Not to concede, as Coates does, that America and slavery are inseparable—an idea that the foulest racist in the land would applaud with conviction—but rather, that they came as they had a right to do: to *assert* the Dream.

Now, you may call this foolish. But it is not unrealistic. It is not a delusion. To maintain that it is a delusion is to say that this family, and millions like them, are also deluded. It would mean, too, that Frederick Douglass was deluded. And that doesn't seem realistic at all.

What Is America without the Dream?

Believing in the reality of the American Dream today does not require us to ignore the history of racial oppression or other wrongs in American history. In fact, our awareness of our past failures is itself a function of our commitment to the Dream—and it makes possible a future that more closely approaches the principles of that Dream. As the Reason Foundation's Sikha Dalmia (2011) put the point some years ago:

Americans are their own worst critics—always looking for lessons to improve what is working and fix what's not. . . . Indeed, Americans have a grab-the-bull-by-its-horns quality so that they simply don't hang around hoping for things to get better on their own. . . . This American spirit, ultimately, is the biggest reason to believe that the American dream is and will stay alive—in America.

Coates's contempt for the Dream leads me to ask, in all candor: What are we—as individuals or a nation—if we surrender our commitment to principle (which is what we mean when we speak of our dreams)? Without dreams, are we not just “poor, bare forked creatures”? Aren't we just doomed to repeat the crimes of past ages? “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” A land without a dream is only dirt. A creature that does not dream is only a congeries of bones and tissues. A person who can dream and *chooses not to* has surrendered the one thing that can never be taken away by any jailer. Why does the caged bird sing? Because it dreams of freedom. What comes of a dream deferred? It festers like a sore and then runs. But a dreamless man can neither sing nor run. He can only be a body—a thing acted upon by others. A racist may be deluded by thinking he's biologically superior, but a dreamless man is even more deluded—because he thinks that he's *awake*.

One of the gravest threats to freedom in our country today is the growth of cynical abandonment—of hopelessness, helplessness, and dreamlessness. That cynicism is revealed in the idea, held by Coates and others, that our Constitutional promise is a fraud and that our progress has just perpetuated that lie—particularly among minority groups who today feel increasingly isolated, and understandably so.

We find the same nihilism in the language of President Trump, who, when asked what he thought of Vladimir Putin's habit of murdering political opponents, answered, “We've got a lot of killers [too]. What, do you think our country's so innocent?” (Tatum 2017). He also said, “When the world looks at how bad the United States is, and then we go and talk about civil liberties, I don't think we're a very good messenger” (Benen 2019). His domestic policy advisers ridicule cosmopolitanism, free trade, and liberal immigration policies as unrealistic. His foreign policy advisers say America should turn its back on humanitarianism and on the freedom and safety of the world's oppressed peoples—and they call their creed “realism.” But it's actually the nihilism of the hopeless, the helpless, and the dreamless.

Similar attitudes were voiced in Douglass's day. And he rejected them eloquently. Back then, after the Civil War, Chinese immigration became the hot issue. But Douglass argued that “a liberal and

brotherly welcome to all who are likely to come” was “the only wise policy.”

I want a home here not only for the negro . . . but I want [Asians] to find a home here . . . for [their] sake and for ours. . . . Every nation . . . has a definite mission in the world. . . . Ours . . . is to make us the perfect national illustration of the unit and dignity of the human family. . . . Our greatness . . . will be found in the faithful application of the principle of perfect civil equality to the people of all races and of all creeds, and to men of no creeds. We are not only bound to this position by . . . our revolutionary antecedents, but by the genius of our people. Gathered here, from all quarters of the globe by a common aspiration for rational liberty . . . it would be madness to set up any one race above another, or one religion above another (in Blassingame 1991, 4: 252).

Douglass saw not only that American ideals are fundamentally just, but that those ideas are the only *realistic* ones in the long run. “Nothing is settled that is not right,” he said (in Foner and Taylor 1999: 192). And nihilism, far from being rational, is in reality debilitating: at best, it can paralyze; at worst, it can invite pointless violence. The person who truly sees no difference between being alive or dead has taken the most dangerous step toward suicide. That’s why nihilism so often leads to tyranny, as Douglass himself warned:

If human nature is totally depraved, [and] if the character of this government will inevitably be the expression of this universal and innate depravity, then . . . [w]e should abandon our Republican government, cease to elect men to office, and place ourselves squarely under . . . some . . . potentate who governs by divine right [in Blassingame and McKivigan 1992, 5: 387].

Cynicism about race relations is simply not warranted by the facts—it is not realistic. Black Americans are freer, wealthier, happier, better educated, healthier, and safer today than they were 30 years ago. In fact, they are better off in nearly all these categories than whites were 30 years ago (see Pinker 2018 and Hughes 2019). Obviously racism remains, and there is still much work to be done before we overcome its awful legacies. But the idea that the American Dream is a fraud, or that white supremacy is at the heart

of American politics, or that we can protect American culture by excluding those who seek it, dishonors people like Douglass who fought to vindicate the American Dream. These ideas are lies, and if left unchallenged, they will lull this nation to sleep before dissolving it in death.

First Steps toward a Different Conversation about Race

Reason magazine's Nick Gillespie (2016) says that we need to have "a *different* conversation about race" today: "one that simultaneously acknowledges real progress, personal responsibility on all sides, *and* systemic effects of public policies" and is "conducted in an atmosphere of mutual trust and good faith." How do we do that? It will obviously take a lot of work. Let me give just one small suggestion.

I wrote my book about Frederick Douglass with an audience in mind—a white audience. That seems a startling thing to say, but I made that decision consciously, because I think black Americans already know Douglass's story. They know what happened after that, too: the descent into virtual reenslavement in the early 20th century. Yet an astonishing number of white Americans do not know that story. Their ignorance is responsible, among other things, for the persistent myth that public monuments celebrating the Confederacy are harmless or valuable tokens of history—rather than the remnants of a disgraceful era in which the constitutional rights of our fellow citizens were shamefully sacrificed.

The persistence of the color line in our culture would be problematic enough on its own, because there can be no trust and good faith without a common frame of reference. But there is more that we lose if we fail to know, commemorate, and celebrate the black experience in the United States—because that experience is in many ways the most profound, most moving, *freedom story* that can be told. Americans claim to love freedom, and we libertarians in particular define ourselves by our love of liberty. But how much attention have we really paid to the story of black Americans and their struggle—not just against slavery, which was heroic enough, but against Jim Crow, lynching, and segregation? Where is the movie about the life of Frederick Douglass? Or Robert Smalls? Or Dorie Miller? Instead of these stories, we are given films and books that tell us that America is inherently at odds with the lives of black Americans—that the

Constitution wasn't for them, and that America isn't for them—that teach hopelessness, helplessness, and dreamlessness.

Some who hear me may think this is silly—after all, we have monuments to black history and black history month. But, in a sense, that's just the problem. These things are still treated as separate, as someone else's culture that white Americans are obliged to acknowledge, rather than as being part—at the very core—of our national story and that we can all share. The history of black America is the history of the American Dream.¹ Yet many white Americans view this story as off limits to them. And, sadly, some prominent black Americans prefer it that way. Some even denounce efforts to celebrate and share in this glorious history as “cultural appropriation.”

“It is remarkable,” writes Cato's Jonathan Blanks (2012), “that American libertarians—so often eager to discuss freedom in nearly every conceivable iteration—rarely address African-Americans and the struggle for civil rights in America.” He's right. We have an obligation—no, we have the privilege of being able to share this story. And we must do so—not only because it will increase the appeal of the vision we want to articulate and make us more well-rounded people, but because there's no other way to answer the false “realism” of today's nihilists.

Sharing across cultural boundaries is an act of good faith—and of pride. If we keep our cultural borders closed and fail to embrace black history as part of our shared American heritage, we not only deprive ourselves and our fellow citizens of the ability to fully participate in the American Dream, we lend credence to those on both the left and the right who preach hopelessness, helplessness, and dreamlessness. In the long run, that idea can only make us enemies.

Frederick Douglass refused to believe that Americans were destined to be enemies. He embraced the only valid form of American

¹In October 2019, Lonnie Bunch of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History, was quoted on Twitter saying, “Often we look at African American history as an ancillary story. But America's core values of spirituality, resilience and optimism are the African American story. I want people to understand that this is their story regardless of who they are.” (Available at <https://twitter.com/jazprose/status/1178782341956882432?s=20>.)

exceptionalism—namely, that our constitutional principles are what make us, and would make any people, exceptional. His words teach us that a nation that is, in a sense, consecrated to a dream—“conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal”—can only thrive by being true to those convictions. A nation cannot endure as alienated groups who insist that the Declaration does not mean what it says, or that its principles are just a social construct, no more valid than any other society’s principles.

Conclusion

Frederick Douglass’s whole life was a war against prejudice, cynicism, and surrender. “No man was ever . . . lost who seriously thought himself worth saving,” he said; and “the same is . . . equally true, of a great nation” (in Stauffer and Gates 2016: 346). The goal of the slave breaker Covey was to eradicate the capacity to believe in a better world. Douglass would not accept that. The goal of the colonizationists was to destroy the belief that America is a land for all races. Douglass would not accept that. The goal of the anti-constitutionalists was to elevate their moral sterility over the hard work of making a better world. Douglass would not accept that. And the goal of today’s sophisticated, realistic nihilists, on the right and on the left, is to demolish the idea of the American Dream; to persuade us that progress has been an illusion, that our Constitution is a racist document, that America is, in spirit, a fraud and, in substance, a wasteland of walls and hatreds; that its slogans about freedom are lies; and that Americans are really enemies. But these are all poisons that lull to sleep before they kill—and Douglass rejected them. “There is no negro problem,” he said. “The problem is whether the American people have loyalty enough, honor enough, patriotism enough, to live up to their own Constitution” (Sandefur 2018: 101–2).

As *Reason’s* Damon Root (2018) says, “At a time when the principles of the Declaration of Independence were under assault, Douglass waved the banner of classical liberalism, championing inalienable rights for all. . . . [T]he former slave . . . would teach the American people a thing or two about the true meaning of the Constitution.” Those principles are under assault again today—and again we must heed Douglass’s lesson. We must have enough pride in ourselves to refuse to surrender our convictions to those who call

them “unrealistic.” And we must strive to make those convictions a reality to those still sitting in darkness.

“Next to the dignity of being a freeman is the dignity of striving to be free,” Douglass wrote. How lucky are we, then, that we can have both.

Well, I am loath to close. We Americans are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

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