

August 27, 1854
Douglass, H. Ford

*Speech of ... in Reply to Mr. J. M. Langston
Before the Emigration Convention at Cleveland, Ohio
Presscropy – New York Historical Society – Anti-Slavery Pamphlets*

ADDRESS.

MR. PRESIDENT:

I suppose that the enemies of this Convention have been highly gratified at the bombastic outpouring of the gentleman from Ohio, (Mr. J. M. Langston,) who, in the abundance of his wisdom, has thought it proper to enlighten us on the many mistakes of his past life, all of which he very modestly attributes to his "YOUTHFUL ENTHUSIASM."

Not content with exposing the instability of "human nature," as exhibited in himself, he undertakes to correct what he conceives to be the errors of others, by assailing the aims and objects of this Convention, and the principles which we have come here to advocate.

Little did I expect that he intended, in such a public manner, to turn a "POLITICAL SOMERSET," although for the last few hours his gloomy diffidence and contracted brow indicated an approaching storm. Like Tam O'Shanter's wife

"He had been gathering his brow, like a gathering storm,
And nursing his wrath to keep it warm."

It is not the first time, however, the gentleman has astonished his friends by suddenly giving the LIE to his former pretensions, by the advocacy of doctrines entirely at variance with his previously expressed opinion. What astonishes me is, that he turns with such ease and agility that the loss of his "political gravity" does not even produce a blush to mantle his cheek, indicative of becoming modesty.

It is a trite saying that "practice makes perfect," which is true in more ways than one. This may be the secret of the gentleman's success. A remarkable change has certainly come over the "spirit of his dreams" since 18[5]1. Well do I remember the doctrine of "MUTUAL REPELLENCY" between the two Races, so furiously contended for by the

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I am not ashamed to confess that it was at hearing him upon that occasion that I formed many of my ideas of “emigration.” “Our side” being scarce of fighting materials, we put the gentleman forth as our champion. I need not say that most manfully did he sustain himself in that contest. He seemed sincere in what he said. To “be earnest is ever to be eloquent.” He had no Lilliputian to deal with in that combat. He had to cross blades with “foemen worthy of his steel.” Opposed, stood Day—free for one from the “SOUL KILLING” trammles of studied effort; sending forth “GRAPESHOT” “hissing hot from the gushing soul of genius.” His silvery cadence ringing upon an admiring audience like true steel. And GAINES, not so polished, but equally as eloquent fighting in “ambuscade, with poisoned and barbed arrows.” His maxim as barbarous as his mode of warfare,—“to take, but never to give quarter.” Notwithstanding these fearful odds against him, he emerged from that intellectual ordeal with no mark upon his shield—not even the smell of fire upon his garments; his “Brow bound with victorious wreath.”

Let no one understand me, from these remarks, to be opposed to individuals changing their opinion upon any subject if they honestly believe themselves in an error. Motives of this kind are always commendable. It does not, in my humble opinion, constitute inconsistency—since repentance is a necessary qualification set down in the economy of

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"God's moral Government." But Sir, I can have but little confidence in any man who is continually changing—always faithless among the faithful, still always strongest on the stronger side. All such characters seem to me to be slightly tinctured with dishonesty. Men sometimes beget for themselves respect even in a bad cause—by being consistent in its advocacy—while as good cause may be injured and brought into disrepute by the inconsistency of its friends.

But the gentleman's protean propositions appear to a very good advantage even while playing the truant to confiding friends, unlike the figure in the Good Book. You can always tell "whence he came," but not "whither he is going." He bears some resemblance to the snake so comically described by the witty poet—

"He wiggles in and wiggles out
And leaves a body still in doubt
Whether the snake that made the track,
Is going South or coming back."

None who know him but will testify that he never had a friend whose confidence he did not betray. His perfidy and inconsistency has furnished food for ridicule for the last eight years. May I not then, in a spirit of Christian FORBEARANCE, regard him as an object of pity rather than of contempt.

For, since the days of Judas of Apostolic memory, he has had no equal, and I would, in all kindness, commend to him the example of his illustrious prototype, who, after repenting of his "Youthful enthusiasm"

"Went out and hanged himself."

Sir:—I would willingly follow the gentleman through his entire speech, and give him all the benefit to be derived from the arguments, which he had advanced in opposition to the principles of Emigration, if it was possible for mortal

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I do not, in the first place, lay claim to being so learned in the law, nor am I so verdant in the classics of ancient Rome as the gentleman professes to be, and if I was fortunate enough to possess these acquirements, I would, out of pure respect for the ancient dead, be more general in my quotations of Latin. I have yet to hear that gentleman make a speech upon any subject or occasion that he did not use that worn out quotation from Terrance, the Roman slave—"Homo sum atque nihil humani ame alienum puto." I can, in imagination, hear the Old Romans' dry bones knocking against each other, as he turns over in his grave at the hideous braying of his once soul stirring exclamation.— It is a very good maxim however, and if properly appreciated by the gentleman, it might have a good effect in damping his egotism and vanity by its sage-like admonition. Reminding him that he is only a man; frail and mortal, and that there is nothing pertaining to frail humanity estranged from him.

But to be serious, Sir, our degraded condition needs something more substantial than fine rhetoric, or Latin maxims. These things cannot attest the biting lash of the soul[!] driver nor better the condition of three millions of slaves. The time has come when colored men must cease to build their castles of hope upon the ideal sands of a sickly sentimentality, the effect will only be to hush within us the "STILL SAD MUSIC OF HUMANITY." The mingled tones of

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sorrow and woe which come up upon every breeze from the deep and damning hell of negro slavery speaks a common language to each and every individual, no matter how humble he may be, reminding him that he too has a duty to perform in this world as well as the gifted and the great. A truth told by a patrician would be no less the truth when told by a pelebian. Because Mr. Douglass, Mr. Smith or Mr. Langston tell me that the principles of emigration are destructive to the best interests of the colored people in this country, am I to act the part of a "young robin," and swallow it down without ever looking into the merits of the principles involved? No! Gentlemen. You must show some more plausable reason for the faith which is within you.

Go! reverse the decision of history; blot out the records of the past, for so long as the history of nations exist, will the fact be against you. Gladly would I follow you, if I could. But I have no more reason to believe in the infallibility of "GREAT BLACK men," than in that of great white men, since all history shows that both white and black men have committed woful blunders. It is not always safe to follow great men in their notions of PUBLIC POLICY. Rome had a Caesar who crossed the Rubicon, and was followed by the conquerors of the Gauls and Brittons to the field of Pharsalia, where in fraternal stife the best blood of the Republic was poured out, the "Mad man," of Macedon was followed by the same insagacious infatuation, until the stench of slaughtered nations, upon fields of clotted gore, brought them to their senses. Another could bridge the Hellespont with ships, and pour his "Temple wasting million," on the Western World. He too, was mistaken as to the best interests of Persia.

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Modern history it no less instructive on this subject. We might find not a few instances in our own day bearing directly upon this point. Suffice it to say that I am not insensible to the fact that there is noble metal opposed to this movement. Men from whom I have in past time received instruction, and imbibed enthusiasm. Nor do I think less of them NOW for their opposition. For whatever may be our differences, I am convinced we are all making for the same common end, namely: the moral, physical, and political elevation of the COLORED RACE. Ought we not then, in view of this fact, to treat each other with fairness? Is it gentlemanly to denounce us as "BARBARIANS," the "deadliest foes of our race," because, forsooth, we believe that the surest way of affecting slavery and hastening its downfall in this nation is to establish, if possible, a "COLORED NATIONALITY," on this Continent, whereby the cultivation of the now dormant powers within, we can manifest to the world, that we are fully capable of all the attainments that belong to civilized men. Egotistic "SAPPIES," who differ with us may with monkey motions spatter us with the mud which has entered so largely into both their spiritual and corporal existence; with no other effect than that of making them less "earthy" and increasing the responsibility of their "superiors:" for they are the beacon lights upon the shores of oppression's dark ocean, the Prophets in the distance, the "Heralds" upon the mountaintop that are yet to proclaim the "Glad tidings of great joy" to an oppressed and injured race?

Sir! There does not appear to be a great deal of "Dreamy speculation," about this matter. Have we not truth on our side; does not all the facts of positive history

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plainly and practicably show the expediency and wisdom of such a course?

Is not the history of the world, the history of emigration? Ever since the expulsion of our first parents from the Garden of blessed innocence, the “hand of destiny” has been upon man; soothing his troubled spirit in the hour of adversity if only true to himself, guiding his feet along the “highway” of the world into the open space of legitimate enterprize.— The coming in and going out of nations, is a natural and necessary result. It is but a part of that fixed and eternal law of “supply and demand,” inwoven by an all creating power in the economy of the universe. Let us then be up and doing. To stand still is to stagnate and die. The Children of Israel followed the “pillar of cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night” from the land of their cruel bondage. Unfortunate only when they refused to follow the Divinity which led them. Shall we then refuse to follow the light which history teaches, and be doomed, like our “fathers,” to perish in the dark wilderness of oppression?

No! In spite of the vapid anathemas of “Eastern Stars,” who have become so completely dazzled by their own supposed elevation, that they can scarcely see any of the dark realities below. Or the stale commonplace of “Western satellites” the expediency of a “COLORED NATIONALITY,” is becoming self-evident to Colored men more and more every day. Sir, it is no longer a curiosity to see a Colored man that can read. And they are ceasing in influence just in proportion as they cease to be curiosities.

They are no longer PETS and consequently there is a reaction which is more destructive to their manhood, than physical slavery. For a “taste of honey only makes the gall more bitter.” They feel it more keenly. If, as

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Sir! he never uttered a truer thing. The NORTH is equally guilty, equally responsible for the existence of slavery. If it is a deep and damning wrong. If it is a moral and political curse to this country. The South can point to the North as the guilty Macbeth did at the ghost of a murdered “Banquo,” and say with the same truth,

“Thou canst not say I did it—never shake thy gory locks at me.”

Well might Virginia’s eloquent son say: “Cursed be the tyrants hand that planted that dark plague-spot upon her virgin bosom.” I have no disposition to dispute with any one, much less the gentleman from Ohio, in regard to the anti-slavery or pro-slavery character of the Constitution of the United States. But since an opportunity has been given me by the reference which has been made to it by this “learned scion of the law.” I would ask when and where was there the solemn oath to support it resting upon his soul, that ever gave it a purely anti-slavery construction.

We have certainly had anti-slavery men, both in the higher and lower Courts. Men eminent for judicial and

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legal learning, of unquestionable integrity. Men in whose bosoms flow too much of the milk of human kindness to be unmindful of the poor “bondman,” if it was not for the solemn oath taken to support the Constitution, which, when taken places them in such an unenviable position, that they have either to be faithful to FREEDOM, or in the face of high heaven, perjure and condemn their own conscience.

Can any sane man read Judge McLEAN’S Cincinnati decision, and then doubt its pro-slavery character or the protection it affords to slavery. The fact of its giving the slaveholder the right of pursuing his slave from one State into another, and taking him back to the state from which he fled—implies his right to hold him, let any “strict Constructionist” deny this, and they will have at once reversed all rules of legal construction. No proposition can be more self evident than this. What would you think of a man’s anti-horse thieving propensities, if he should say to you,—“Sir, you stolethat horse, you have no right to keep him, but if he shouldhappen to get away and return to his rightful owner, I will be the first to help you steal him back again. Any sensible man would consider this a farce. It is sheer nonsense. It is a contradiction in terms, totally irreconcilable. While I am willing to admit the fact that the Constitution does not sanction slavery in direct terms, yet it looks to the possibility of its existence in the several states and makes ample arrangements for its protection—when once sanctioned by “LOCAL LAW.”

The framers of the Constitution understood the feelings existing at the South too well, not to know that it would be established unless prohibited by the Constitution. They knew too, that South Carolina and Georgia refused to come into the UNION unless certain protection was afforded them

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in their unlawful and piratical warfare against "human nature." And every one who knows anything about the history of this country, knows that the Constitution of 1789 satisfied these two states upon this point by a "Compromise," which has ever since that date rendered all Compromises between the North and the South significant of the victorious march of slavery. To say that it does not recognize the relation of master and slave, is to show ourselves wofully ignorant of the proper meaning of words—Sir! I care not in what light we look upon that instrument, it is the supreme law of the land and so long as we live here, we are compelled to submit to its stern despotic behests.— And in doing this we daily and hourly support slavery, with all the black crimes connected with that infernal system of "outrage and wrong."

The gentleman has asked if there was "any thing in the DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE incompatible with the liberties of men?" I will answer him in the language of his own distinguished brother, who has said more original things than any other colored man in this nation.

"When Thomas Jefferson wrote that, 'All men are created equal,' he made Negroes an honorable exception!"

When I remember the many wrongs that have been inflicted upon my unfortunate race, I can scarcely realize the fact that this is my country. I owe it no allegiance because it refuses to protect me. It is a maxim in Governments, "That each individual owes allegiance in proportion to the protection given." I can hate this Government without being disloyal, because it has stricken down my manhood and treated me as a saleable commodity. I can join a foreign enemy and fight against it, without being a traitor, because it treats me as an ALIEN and a STRANGER, and I am free to avow that should such a contingency arise I should

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not hesitate to take any advantage in order to procure indemnity for the future. I can feel no pride in the glory, growth, greatness or grandeur, of this nation. Cruel oppression and prejudice have driven from my bosom that instinctive love of "home and country," which is traditional even in savage life,—

"The savage loves his native shore,
Tho' rude the wind and chill'd the air."

Yet HE too is a FREEMAN,

"Free as nature first made man,
Ere the base law of servitude began."

Free as the trackless forest amid which he roams.—

His freedom is written in letters of eternal light upon each hoary peak that in silent grandeur lifts itself to GOD. He feels more pride in the rushing rills and mighty rivers of his "native wilderness," than Black men can feel in the proudest achievements of this Republic. Bunker Hill and Lexington have no inspiring recollection to him; nor Chalmette's bloody plain, where they themselves with patriotic devotion stemmed the red flood of invasion in one of the most sanguinary struggles ever painted upon the red pages of this country's warfare.

Sir! I have had the pleasure, nay let me rather say misfortune, while in New Orleans of taking by the hand many of the colored veterans of the war of 1812-15 their fleecy locks whitened over by the frost of many winters, aliens in the land they loved so well, whose freedom they had fought to preserve. Never can I forget the deep emotion of my heart while listening to them relate the stirring events of that war, becoming at times deeply affected, tears would course down their care-worn cheeks, which spoke in tones more eloquent than words this nation's deep ingrati-

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tude. If five of these old men should, at any time, be seen talking, nay standing together even, they are liable to be arrested for conspiracy according to the law of Louisiana, and suffer the penalty attached to crimes of this nature.

This has been the treatment which we have ever received at the hands of the American people for every noble and praiseworthy act, and we cannot expect any better treatment, so long as American slavery exists. God only knows when it will cease, for it seems inseparably connected with the existence of the Government. It has its "Vestals upon both our ecclesiastical and political altars. Grave Senators who talk long and loud about the DESPOTISM of Europe, tell us that to abolish the despotism of this country, would be a dissolution of the government itself. The Southern people believe and act in reference to this fact. I firmly believe that the destruction of slavery depends upon the dissolution of the States. It was a guilty copartnership in the first place, and a righteous God has written its, "Mene mene tekel upharson!! upon the walls of time. It must be and it shall be destroyed.

But, Sir! this event which is as sure to come as God is just and true is still beyond the ken of mortal vision, therefore I regard it unwise and impolitic for us to remain here, with the poison of slavery festering in our very souls, waiting for this providential interposition. I believe that while we are relying upon God for aid in this contest, we should, at the same time, help ourselves:

"Hereditary bondsmen, know ye not
Who would be free *themselves* must strike the blow."

I remember an anecdote which is to the point. A thief in a crowd had thrust his hand into another man's pocket and was scientifically extracting his purse when, interrupted by the police with a startling interrogation of, "What are

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you doing, sir!" Cooley replied, "God helps those who help themselves." This is my idea of the whole matter.— We have been depending too long upon the religion of this land, which is as false as HELL. The God of the American people is a partial, selfish God, and not the meek and lowly Jesus whose advent was proclaimed upon the hill-top of Judea more than eighteen hundred years ago. If we would be true to the religion taught by Jesus Christ, we must be false to the religion of this century. Let us depend less upon hypocritical priests and preachers and more upon our own strong arms. Taking this view of the subject, I would earnestly urge upon the colored people the solemn and sober truths contained in that sublime "document" upon the "Political destiny of the Colored Race," which has been read to this Convention to-day. It not only reflects great credit upon its author, but if carried out would heal up the wounds of an injured race. And, sir, I hazard nothing in saying that it will be read and admired for the beauty or its diction, the force of its logic, the correctness of its conclusions, long after the name and memory of those who arrogantly sneer at it have passed from the recollection of mankind. I would to-day sir, rather be the author of that "document," than to be seated with pomp and imperial grandeur upon the proudest throne in Europe. Emperors and kings are impotent things after all. They may blaze and burn for a moment in the regal firmament, but they disappear like those mysterious meteors traced by the finger of God on the battlements of night; But the whole existing order of things is one vast monument to the supremacy of mind.

There is nothing very new nor startling in the announcement of the gentleman that he intends to work out his own destiny in this country. It is just what our fathers have done

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for the last three hundred years, who having neither the will to do, or the courage to dare in enterprises of great pith and moment; nor content to be “Hewers of wood and drawers of water,” and dying, had no other heritage to leave us, but a life of degradation and slavery. We, as emigrationists, are not quite so selfish as the gentleman. We care nothing about the destiny of an individual. It matters but little with us whete he works out his “destiny.” If it should be in a lunatic asylum (and there is some probability of it,) we do not apprehend that it would have much effect one way or the other in changing the condition of the Colored People. It is not isolated individuals we care about; but it is the destiny of a whole race, and millions yet unborn whose condition and happiness we wish to consider. We would avoid the errors of our ancestors, who concluded that they could do no better than to remain here; we have, certainly been very forcibly reminded of this mistake.

It is true the Colored race can be elevated in this country, if you call amalgamation with the White race elevation.— I prefer to call it annihilation. This process of elevation is going on “down south,” very rapidly on one side, and if the same facilities were offered on the other, a remarkable change, not only in their social condition, but in their physical appearance, might be looked for in two or three hundred years. Now, if this is what the gentleman means, if these are the agencies which he intends to employ, in affecting the elevation of our race, why not be candid and say so. I would then say, if he is correct, the sooner we cease to be Nogroes the better. It would be virtually acknowledging our inferiority of blood. Like the mental inebriate, who seeks his bane and antidote in the repose of death, we would be seeking for our rights and finding them only when

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the race became distinct. When black men shall occupy positions of responsibility and profit, having their political rights granted to them by something stronger than positive law. The sentiment of the entire people, which is often the highest law of a nation, since chosen representatives do not at all times reflect the will of their constituents in the laws which they enact.

When Colored men shall have social equality, which is all that makes political equality with any thing;—the leopard may not have changed his spots, but I am quite confident the Ethiopian will have changed his skin. The gentleman's loud vociferations about remaining here because it happens to be the place of his birth, is a very poor argument indeed, it is rather stale, it has been kept on hand so long by the advocates of inactivity and a special Providence, that it has lost its savor.

It matters but very little where a man first opens his eyes, whether in the frigid or torrid zone. His chain will be just as heavy amid oriental grandeur, as amid the cold rugged cliffs of a more northern clime. There is just as much force in a Black man's standing up and exclaiming after the manner of the "old Roman,"—"I am an American citizen," as there was in the Irishman who swore he was a loaf of bread, because he happened to be born in a bake oven.

Sir, "Ubi liberatas ibi patria," is the oft repeated maxim of William Lloyd Garrison, who, if it were not sacriligious I would call the Jesus of the 19th century; whose dear memory we wear in our "hearts of hearts." He rises up in our conception of true greatness,—

"Like some tall cliff that lifts its awful form
Swells in the vale and midway leaves the storm
While round its base circling clouds are spread,
Eternal sunshine settles on his head."

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But, after all, love of country and of one's home is a sentiment that operates very strongly on the passions of mankind, it is a noble and generous feeling, akin to that of patriotism. I would not willingly destroy this feeling in the bosom's of colored men—if I could—and I could not if I would. In the language of another—

"It is not a sentiment that springs up with instruction, on the contrary it dates back before all training, and centers in those affections of which even the individual memory holds no record of the beginning.— But this sentiment is a rude one when adopted as an enlightened principle, civilization does not enrich it, christianity does not adorn it, it lives by itself, and is great only in itself. It is just as noble in the breast of the savage as in that of civilized men. Like that of heroism is only great when on the side of great principles.

The departure of the "*Mayflower*" from "Delft Haven" was no less glorious in its results, than the manly defence of Leonidas and the three hundred Spartans at Themoplae the first were the founders of the American Republic, the latter the preservers of the liberties of Greece. In conclusion let me say, this country is just as dear to me as it is to other men—bright memories of my boy-hood's home, and the still more glorious reminiscence of a mother's love, all mingle with beautiful and majestic scenery of my native hills, calling forth ever and anon from the hearts pure fountain the better feelings of our nature. But, Sir, these warm sympathies are soon stifled when I remember that every green spot in my native land is cursed by the withering blight of negro slavery; when I remember that for the crime of having colored blood coursing in my veins I must walk the "plank" of social and political death, in a land that was defended by the blood of my brave ancestors in every field of honorable achievement during the Revolution. When I remember that every sugar and cotton plantation in the south, is watered by the tears and enriched by the blood of my outraged and degraded countrymen. When I remember that there is no law in fifteen States of this inglorious Union to protect the chastity and virtue of my enslaved sisters, that they are liable

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