

# **How Does Frederick Douglass Use The Founding Principles Of America To Build An Argument Against Slavery?**

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Frederick Douglass, one of the most influential abolitionists and orators of the 19th century, masterfully employs the foundational principles of America—such as liberty, equality, justice, and the Constitution—to challenge the moral and political legitimacy of slavery. In his speeches and writings, especially in his seminal 1852 speech "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" Douglass reinterprets the core ideals of the nation to expose the hypocrisy of a nation that proclaims liberty while enslaving millions. By aligning the principles enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution with the fight against slavery, Douglass constructs a compelling moral and intellectual critique that urges Americans to live up to their foundational promises.

## **Utilization of the Declaration of Independence to Advocate for Freedom**

### **Reiterating the Ideals of Equality and Unalienable Rights**

Frederick Douglass draws heavily on the language of the Declaration of Independence, emphasizing the words "all men are created equal" and endowed with "unalienable Rights" such as "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." He argues that these principles are not mere rhetorical devices but foundational truths that should apply universally, including to enslaved African Americans.

- Douglass highlights the contradiction between America's declaration of universal equality and its practice of slavery.
- He asserts that enslaved people are, by their very nature, entitled to the same rights as white citizens.
- By invoking the Declaration, Douglass frames slavery as a betrayal of the nation's founding ideals.

# Challenging the Hypocrisy of American Democracy

Douglass points out that the nation's rhetoric of liberty stands in stark contrast to its reality. He states:

- "What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?" – questioning the significance of independence celebrations for those still in bondage.
- He emphasizes that while Americans celebrate freedom and independence, millions remain enslaved, making the nation complicit in injustice.

This juxtaposition serves to shame the nation into reconciling its principles with its practices, asserting that true patriotism requires ending slavery and ensuring justice for all.

## Using the Constitution as a Tool for Abolition

### Interpreting the Constitution as Antislavery

Douglass famously argued that the U.S. Constitution is fundamentally an antislavery document. He contended that:

- The Constitution's language, such as the clause allowing for the return of fugitive slaves, was intended to protect liberty and justice.
- The framers, including figures like Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, believed slavery was morally wrong, and the Constitution could be interpreted in a way that supports abolition.

He pointed out that:

- Many constitutional provisions, when properly understood, do not justify slavery but can be used to argue for its abolition.
- The Constitution's principles of justice, liberty, and the rule of law are incompatible with the institution of slavery.

### Rejection of the Dred Scott Decision

Douglass vehemently opposed the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision (1857), which declared that Black people could not be citizens and that Congress had no authority to prohibit slavery in the territories. He argued that:

- The decision was a perversion of the Constitution and a betrayal of American founding principles.
- It ignored the fundamental rights of human beings and the promises of equality.

By criticizing this ruling, Douglass underscores that the Constitution, when rightly interpreted, supports the abolition of slavery.

## **Appealing to the Principles of Justice and Moral Rightness**

### **Slavery as a Moral Wrong Contradicting American Values**

Douglass frames slavery as a profound moral evil that violates the core principles of justice and human dignity. He states that:

- Justice demands equality and respect for all human beings.
- Slavery dehumanizes both the enslaved and the enslavers, corrupting the moral fabric of the nation.

He emphasizes that:

- The fight against slavery is not just political but a moral imperative rooted in the nation's own moral principles.
- Americans must align their actions with their founding ideals or face moral failure.

## **Invoking the Spirit of the Revolution**

Douglass appeals to the revolutionary spirit that birthed America, urging citizens to fulfill the promises made during the Revolution:

- He calls on Americans to live up to the ideals of liberty and justice they claimed to fight for.
- Douglass asserts that genuine patriotism involves ending slavery and ensuring freedom for all.

This moral appeal reinforces that the abolition of slavery is consistent with the nation's founding ethos.

## **Mobilizing the Audience Through Constitutional and Moral Language**

## **Framing Abolition as a Constitutional Duty**

Douglass urges Americans to see abolition not just as a moral choice but as a constitutional obligation. He argues that:

- The Constitution provides the legal and moral basis for ending slavery.
- Citizens and lawmakers have a duty to interpret and amend the Constitution to eradicate slavery.

## **Empowering Enslaved People and Allies**

Douglass uses the language of the Constitution and American ideals to empower enslaved people and allies:

- He encourages Black Americans to claim their rights as citizens.
- He calls on white Americans to recognize their moral and constitutional duty to end slavery.

## **Conclusion: The Power of Founding Principles in Douglass's Advocacy**

Frederick Douglass's strategic use of America's founding principles—liberty, equality, justice, and constitutional ideals—serves as a powerful rhetorical framework to argue against slavery. By referencing the Declaration of Independence, interpreting the Constitution as supportive of abolition, and invoking the moral spirit of the Revolution, Douglass transforms the nation's founding documents from tools of oppression into instruments of justice. His approach not only exposes the hypocrisy of a nation that claims liberty while enslaving millions but also inspires Americans to reconcile their ideals with their realities. In doing so, Douglass elevates the fight for abolition from a political cause to a moral imperative rooted in the very principles that define the nation's identity. His work exemplifies how foundational American values can be harnessed to challenge injustice and promote true liberty and equality for all.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **How does Frederick Douglass invoke the founding principle of equality to oppose slavery?**

Douglass emphasizes that the Declaration of Independence affirms that all men are created equal, and he argues that slavery directly contradicts this foundational principle, thereby exposing its moral and political

illegitimacy.

## **In what way does Douglass reference the Constitution to challenge slavery?**

Douglass points out that the Constitution, when properly interpreted, supports the principles of justice and liberty, and he condemns those who distort it to justify slavery, advocating for a reading that aligns with America's founding ideals.

## **How does Douglass use the principle of liberty from the American founding to argue against slavery?**

He underscores that liberty is a core principle enshrined in American founding documents, and slavery is a gross violation of that principle, making it inconsistent with the nation's foundational values.

## **What role does the concept of natural rights play in Douglass's argument against slavery?**

Douglass appeals to the natural rights philosophy embedded in American founding principles, asserting that all humans are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, which slavery deprives them of.

## **How does Douglass use the idea of government deriving power from the consent of the governed to criticize slavery?**

He argues that since legitimate government authority is based on the consent of the governed, enslaving people without their consent is fundamentally unjust and illegitimate under American political principles.

## **In what way does Douglass appeal to the founding principle of justice to condemn slavery?**

Douglass contends that justice, as a core American value, requires fairness and moral righteousness, and slavery is inherently unjust because it denies basic human rights and equality.

## **How does Douglass interpret the American founding documents to support abolition?**

He interprets the Declaration of Independence and other founding texts as advocating for universal human rights, using them as a moral and legal foundation to argue against the continuance of slavery.

## **What does Douglass say about the inconsistency between America's founding principles and the practice of slavery?**

He highlights the contradiction between America's ideals of freedom and equality and the reality of slavery, arguing that this inconsistency undermines the moral authority of the nation.

## **How does Douglass use the principle of national self-governance to argue for the abolition of slavery?**

He asserts that a nation founded on self-governance and democratic principles must extend those rights to all its citizens, including enslaved people, making slavery incompatible with American democracy.

## **In what way does Douglass frame the abolition of slavery as a fulfillment of America's founding principles?**

He portrays the end of slavery as a necessary step toward realizing the true meaning of the nation's founding ideals of liberty, justice, and equality for all citizens.

## **Additional Resources**

Frederick Douglass and the Founding Principles of America: A Critical Rebuttal to Slavery

When examining the powerful rhetoric of Frederick Douglass, one cannot overlook how masterfully he leverages the founding principles of America—liberty, equality, justice, and the pursuit of happiness—to dismantle the institution of slavery. Douglass's eloquence and moral authority as a former enslaved person make his arguments particularly compelling. His strategic alignment of these foundational ideals with his critique of slavery not only exposes the hypocrisy of a nation professing liberty while practicing oppression but also challenges the very moral fabric of American society.

In this analysis, we'll explore how Douglass uses the core principles of American founding documents—primarily the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—to craft a persuasive, morally grounded argument against slavery. We will assess his rhetorical strategies, the specific references he makes, and the broader philosophical implications of his critique, all while appreciating his role as both a product and a critic of the American ideals.

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## **Founding Principles as Moral Anchors in Douglass's Argument**

Frederick Douglass recognizes that the moral legitimacy of any system of governance depends on its fidelity to the principles it espouses. His approach is to hold up the founding documents of America as a mirror reflecting the nation's true character. When these documents proclaim universal rights and justice, Douglass argues, slavery stands as a glaring contradiction. His use of these principles forms the backbone of his moral critique.

### **Liberty and the Declaration of Independence**

The central role of liberty:

Douglass frequently references the Declaration of Independence, especially the assertion that "all men are created equal" and endowed with unalienable rights, including "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." He underscores that these rights are not conditional but inherent to human nature, making their denial to enslaved Africans a profound injustice.

Key strategies in Douglass's use of liberty:

- Reframing the Declaration: Douglass emphasizes that the Declaration's words are a universal declaration of human rights, and therefore applicable to all, including Black Americans.
- Highlighting hypocrisy: He points out the contradiction between America's claim to liberty and its practice of slavery, which enslaves millions of innocent people, denying them their fundamental rights.

Impact:

By invoking the Declaration, Douglass positions slavery as a betrayal of America's founding ideals. He makes the moral case that the nation has a duty to live up to its promises, and that enslaving others is fundamentally un-American.

### **Equality and the Constitution**

Interpreting the Constitution:

Douglass examines the U.S. Constitution, recognizing it as a document that, in theory, can be interpreted to support liberty and justice. While he acknowledges that its original framers held contradictory views, he argues that the Constitution's language and principles can be reinterpreted to oppose slavery.

Strategies in his constitutional argument:

- Constitution as a living document: Douglass advocates for a flexible, progressive interpretation that aligns with the nation's moral ideals.
- Use of constitutional clauses: He points to clauses like the "necessary and proper" clause and the preamble's call for "justice" as tools to expand rights and justify abolition.
- Legal and political engagement: Douglass urges Americans to use the Constitution as a weapon against slavery—calling for amendments and judicial interpretation that uphold the principles of justice and equality.

Impact:

His approach reframes the Constitution from being a slaveholder's shield into an instrument that, if properly interpreted, can abolish slavery and promote equality.

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## **Rhetorical Strategies and Techniques Employed by Douglass**

Douglass's mastery lies not only in what he says but how he says it. His use of rhetoric amplifies his appeal to America's founding ideals, making his critique both morally compelling and intellectually persuasive.

### **Appeal to Moral and Religious Values**

Douglass invokes religious and moral themes, asserting that the principles of Christianity and natural law align with the ideals of liberty and justice. He argues that slavery is not only a political injustice but a moral abomination, violating the moral fabric of the nation.

### **Use of Personal Narrative and Authority**

As a former slave who escaped and became a respected orator and writer, Douglass's personal testimony lends credibility and emotional weight to his arguments. His firsthand experience underscores the contradiction between American ideals and the lived realities of enslaved people.

### **Logical and Ethical Appeal**

Douglass combines logical reasoning—pointing out contradictions and legal inconsistencies—with ethical appeals that invoke the nation's moral

responsibilities. This dual approach enhances the persuasive power of his arguments.

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## **Specific Examples of How Douglass Uses Founding Principles**

To understand the depth of Douglass's rhetorical mastery, it's instructive to examine specific passages where he explicitly appeals to American founding principles.

### **"What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"**

In this famous speech, Douglass challenges the hypocrisy of celebrating independence while millions remain enslaved. He states:

> "The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This is the American slaveholder's boast, that the Constitution is 'color-blind,' that it guarantees equality to all, and that the nation's laws are just. Yet, in practice, these principles are ignored or perverted to sustain slavery."

He underscores the inconsistency between the nation's ideals and the reality of slavery, arguing that the principles of liberty and equality are betrayed by slaveholders.

## **Referring to the Declaration of Independence**

Douglass often quotes the Declaration's assertion that governments derive their "just powers from the consent of the governed." He contends that enslaved people, having no voice or representation, are denied this consent, rendering slavery unjust and illegitimate.

## **Interpreting the Constitution**

Douglass argues that the Constitution was designed to promote justice and liberty, not to uphold slavery. He points to the "preamble" and the "general welfare" clause as potential grounds for abolition, urging Americans to reinterpret the document in a manner consistent with its original moral intent.

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## **The Broader Impact of Douglass's Use of Founding Principles**

Frederick Douglass's strategic invocation of foundational American ideals has had lasting implications:

- Moral Reframing: He reframes slavery as a moral failing that contradicts American virtues, transforming the debate from political expediency to ethical necessity.
- Political Engagement: His arguments motivate political action, including calls for constitutional amendments and civil rights.
- Historical Legacy: Douglass's rhetoric influences subsequent generations, reinforcing the idea that American principles are a moral yardstick against injustice.

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## **Conclusion: Douglass's Enduring Legacy as a Moral Architect**

Frederick Douglass's use of the founding principles of America exemplifies a masterful blend of moral philosophy, legal interpretation, and rhetorical finesse. By aligning his anti-slavery stance with the nation's core ideals of liberty, equality, and justice, he not only exposes the hypocrisy of slavery but also reaffirms the moral potential embedded within America's founding documents.

His approach demonstrates that the principles enshrined at the nation's birth are not merely symbolic but serve as a moral compass guiding the nation towards justice and equality. Douglass's legacy persists as a testament to the power of moral integrity and principled advocacy—showing that true patriotism lies in holding the nation accountable to its highest ideals.

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In essence, Frederick Douglass's rhetorical strategy of invoking America's founding principles transforms the debate on slavery from a contentious political issue into a moral crusade rooted in the nation's own moral and philosophical heritage. His work remains a vital blueprint for using foundational ideals as a moral weapon against injustice.

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