

Make Democracy Real For All: Douglass Sounded a Warning

“What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty of which he is the constant victim.”

Nearly 150 years ago, the legendary Black activist Frederick Douglass provided searing insight on the meaning of the Independence Day celebration to the then-majority of African-Americans who were slaves in the land of liberty.

Obviously much has changed in America since Douglass stunned his audience in Rochester, N.Y.

Chattel slavery in America has been abolished, yet for vast numbers of Blacks the bondage of physical slavery has been replaced by the purgatory of economic serfdom. Racial reasons continue to deny vast numbers of African-Americans the equality of access to the opportunities arising from our economic, political, and social systems promised in the preamble to the U.S. Constitution.

“Whether we turn to the declarations of the past or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting.”

There remain many disturbing parallels between the peculiarities Douglass pointed out in his 1852 speech and present-day America.

In the middle of the last century the U.S. Supreme Court was extremely hostile to extending any recognition of constitutional rights to African-Americans. Today that hostility remains. The conservative right-wing majority on the high court just issued a decision stating victims of employment discrimination can't prevail even if they produce conclusive proof that their employers lied under oath.

Raw prejudice ruled the day in Douglass' time. Today prejudice remains a predominant factor in the body politic. A recent report by the Jewish Anti-Defamation League discovered that some of the most negative racial attitudes in America today are held by young whites. We have a genuinely progressive president who has sadly displayed a propensity to play the race card when it is expedient for him politically.

“You are all on fire at the mention of liberty for France or for Ireland, but are as cold as an iceberg at the thought of liberty for the enslaved of America.”

As in the mid-19th century, there remains a disturbing reticence to respect the constitutional rights of African-Americans. To paraphrase Douglass, “. . . the existence of (racism) in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretense, and your Christianity as a lie. It destroys your moral authority abroad . . .”

The time has come, and in fact is long since past, for America to make the promises of democracy real for all Americans.

On way to effect the realization of true democracy for all Americans is to convene a national summit to discuss civil rights issues and the formulation of a definitive policy on how the federal government will work to ensure the rights of all Americans going into the 21st century.

During an exclusive interview with *Tribune* reporter Vince Thompson last week, former NAACP Executive Director Dr. Benjamin Hooks said he believes President Bill Clinton should convene such a summit. The last such summit was convened nearly 20 years ago by then-President Lyndon Johnson.

Hooks stressed that after nearly a dozen years of rule under former Presidents Reagan and Bush which saw “(the) almost dismantling (of) the civil rights apparatus” it is important for Clinton to have vigorous enforcement of civil rights laws during his tenure.

The confirmation hearing on the nomination of Penn Law Professor Lani Guinier to head the U.S. Justice Department's Civil Rights Division could have provided a forum for a frank discussion on the course of civil rights enforcement in the near future but President Clinton scuttled this opportunity by pulling the plug on Guinier's nomination.

Some of the biggest boosters of this civil rights summit should be the supporters of giving South African President F.W. de Klerk Philadelphia's Liberty Medal. Supporters of the de Klerk award say they are acknowledging this supposedly repentant racist's act of reconciliation in his nation. America needs reconciliation on the issue of racism.

“Oh, be warned! Be warned! A horrible reptile is coiled up in your nation's bosom,” Frederick Douglass said. “. . . For the love of God, tear away and fling from you the hideous monster . . .” of racism . . .