

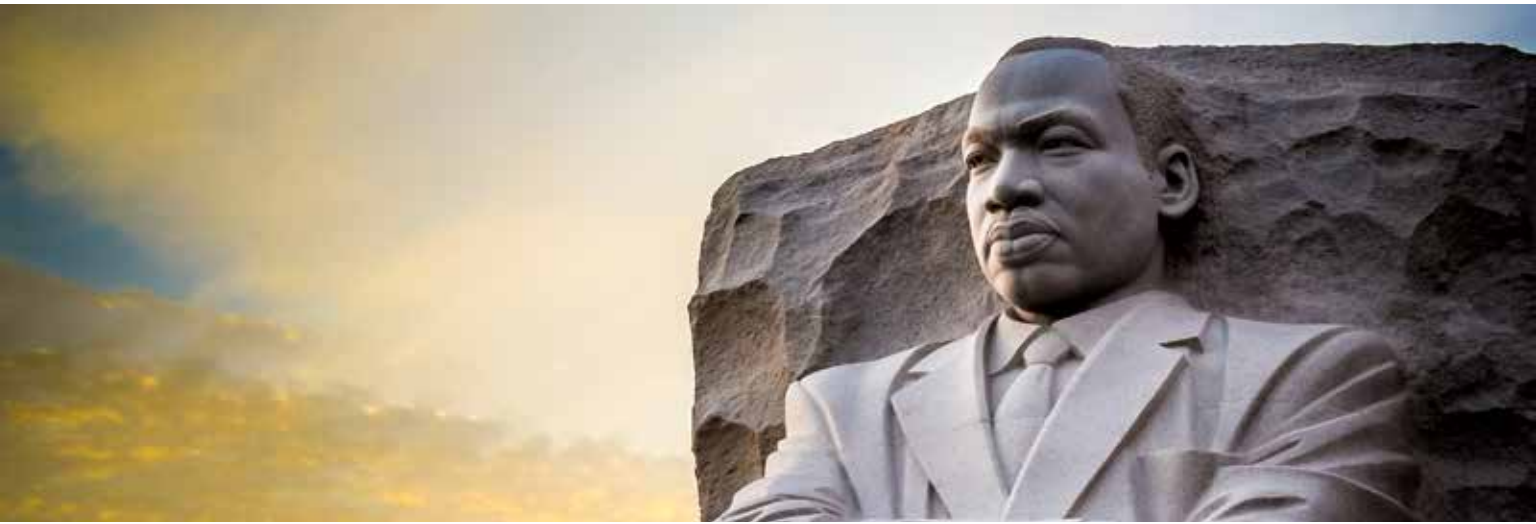


THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT

Promoting the vision that all men are created equal and are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

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JACK MILLER CENTER *For Teaching America's Founding Principles and History*



Our Promissory Note

Justin Dyer

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Living downstream from the American founding, we are heirs today to what Martin Luther King, Jr., in his most famous speech, referred to as the “promissory note” implicit in our Declaration of Independence: that “all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” We have so taken to heart this founding aspiration that even our criticisms of the Republic’s architects are animated by the principles they professed.

What seems obvious about the American founding today – that there was a deep tension between the principle of natural equality and the system of race-based chattel slavery – was obvious to many in the founding era. Few in that generation, however, were able fully to pluck the beams from their own eyes before they endeavored to remove the mote from the eye of King George.

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The Continental Congress nonetheless affirmed ideas in the Declaration of Independence that undermined, in principle, the institution of slavery: that all men are equally endowed by their Creator with natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that governments exist to secure these rights and derive their just powers from the consent

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of the governed; that it is the right of the people to organize the powers of government in a way that seems most likely to secure their safety and happiness. If those ideas are true, then slavery is a great moral evil and affront to natural justice. This is the premise that underlaid Jefferson’s claim that he trembled for his country when he reflected that God’s justice could not sleep forever. The author of *Natural Justice*, God “Almighty has no attribute which can take side with” those who would enslave another human being, Jefferson insisted.

JEFFERSON, UNEDITED

In his rough draft of the Declaration, before committee revisions and additions, Jefferson had written that it was a “sacred & undeniable” truth that “all men are created equal & independent” and “from that equal creation they derive rights inherent & inalienable.” In doing so, he did not advance any novel or original idea. He was, as he would later claim, merely giving expression to the American mind, and it did not take long for those animating principles of the revolution, and of the American mind, to be put into the service of emancipation. Within a year of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Prince Hall, a leader of the free black community in Boston, would file a petition with the Massachusetts legislature on behalf of “A Great Number of Blacks detained in a State of Slavery in the Bowels of a free & christian

Country,” asserting that “every principle” of the American Revolution “Pleads Stronger than A thousand arguments” in favor of freedom for the enslaved.

In 1783, as the Treaty of Paris marked the end of the war, the state of Massachusetts abolished slavery by judicial decree – a significant indication of the revolutionary ethos. As the late Stanford historian Don Fehrenbacher observed, the

antislavery tendencies of the revolutionary period were not inconsiderable. State after state took steps to end the African slave trade. Abolition of slavery itself was achieved in New England and Pennsylvania, and it seemed only a matter of time in New York and New Jersey. Virginia gave strong encouragement to private manumissions by removing earlier restrictions upon them, and both Maryland and Delaware subsequently followed her example. By the 1790’s, abolition societies had appeared in every state from Virginia northward, with prominent men like Benjamin Franklin and John Jay in leading roles. And Congress in 1787 prohibited slavery in the Northwest Territory with scarcely a dissenting vote.

And yet Fehrenbacher later wrote a book titled *The Slaveholding Republic*, detailing how United States government policy was increasingly and consistently proslavery in the nineteenth century. America’s founding principles may have been arrayed against slavery, but American politics and law were not.

THE DECLARATION & LINCOLN’S VISION FOR AMERICA’S FUTURE

Aware of the ways in which nineteenth-century defenders of the institution of slavery had criticized and abandoned the principles of the Declaration—and knowing full well that the founders did not immediately realize the promise of their own avowed principles—Abraham Lincoln nonetheless made the Declaration central to his vision for America’s future as he launched a campaign for the presidency and guided the country through the carnage of the Civil War. “All honor to Jefferson,”

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Lincoln had written in an 1859 letter, “—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.”

The harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression included those confederates, such as Alexander Stephens, who recognized clearly that the principles of the founding were a bulwark against the rebel cause. “The prevailing ideas entertained by [Jefferson] and most of the leading statesman at the time of the formation of the old constitution,” he said in his “Cornerstone Speech,” delivered in Savannah on the eve of civil war, “were that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically,” a conclusion they “rested upon the assumption on the equality of the races.” In contrast, Stephens declared flatly that the new, confederate government “is founded upon exactly the opposite idea.” Against the confederate cornerstone of racial subordination, Lincoln pointed back to our founding principle of equality in natural rights and maintained that “nothing stamped with the divine image and likeness was sent into the world to be trodden on, and degraded, and imbruted by its fellows.”

The statesman and abolitionist orator Frederick Douglass righteously and rightfully denounced American hypocrisy but offered the same account of the wrong of slavery: that an enslaved person is “a moral and intellectual being” bearing “the image of God” and “possessing a soul, eternal and indestructible,” and slavery is for this reason a “crime against God and man.” When invited to give a Fourth of July oration commemorating the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Douglass delivered a searing rebuke of the United States, and yet he nonetheless insisted that the principles of the Declaration are our “saving principles.” “Stand by those principles,” he admonished his audience, “be true to them on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever cost.”

After the war, while some were still talking about schemes for black colonization or for the maintenance of a racially-segregated and hierarchical civil society, Douglass envisioned a multiracial republic

celebrating our “composite nationality” under a “Government founded upon justice, and recognizing the equal rights of all men.” It was an audacious vision built on the principles of natural equality and human dignity. Those principles are, or at least still have the potential to be, our shared principles, part of an American tapestry woven together from past and present.

THE DECLARATION AND THE COUNTRY THAT YET MUST BE


King’s reference in his “I Have a Dream” speech to the Declaration as America’s promissory note kept this vision in the American mind. Beginning with the Biblical dating of “Five score years ago,” King pointed his listeners to 1863, the year Lincoln began his most famous speech with the words, “Four score and seven years ago.” Lincoln, of course, was, in

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turn, pointing the country back to 1776, to the advent on the world stage of a “new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Lincoln’s reframing of the national narrative, and of the meaning of the war itself, around the principles of the Declaration was as much aspiration as it was plea.

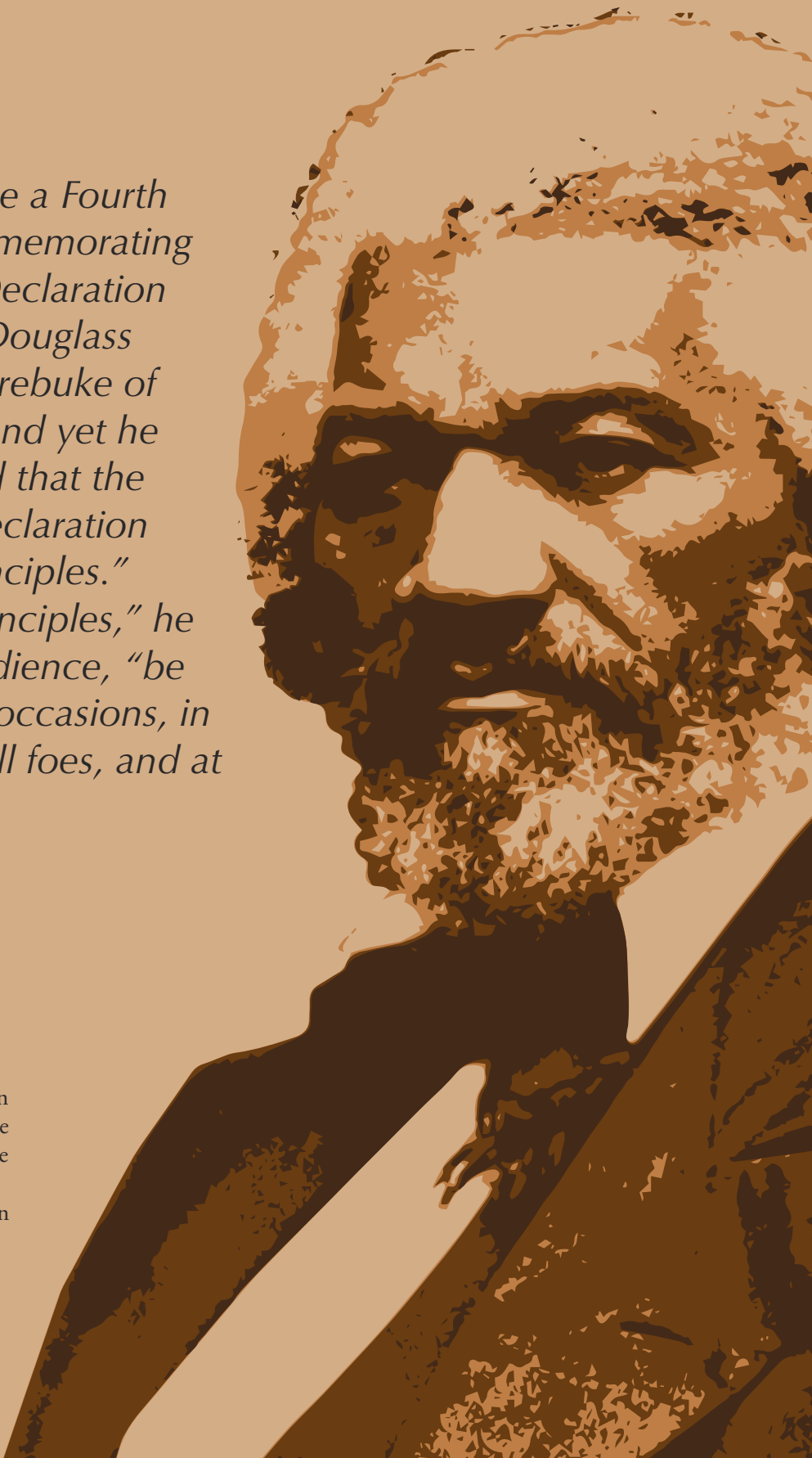
Those principles speak to our current national reckoning with the continued reality of racial injustice and the tragic gulf that continues to separate practice and principle, fact and right. As heirs to this shared history and these shared principles, our responsibility is to live up to the noble aspiration of America – a land, in the words of Langston Hughes, “that never has been yet – and yet must be.” 

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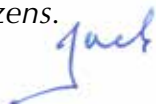
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Frederick Douglass—former slave, turned orator, writer, tireless abolitionist, statesman, and one of the most influential public figures in our nation’s history—delivered these words during his “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” speech on July 5, 1852 at a commemoration in Rochester, New York.



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