

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, SEVENTY YEARS LATER

An Address delivered at the University of Rochester, February 23, 1967,  
by Professor John Hope Franklin of the University of Chicago  
to commemorate the Sesquicentennial of the birth  
of Frederick Douglass

One hundred and twenty-five years ago a young abolitionist of indomitable will and incredible courage -- indeed, a man of genius -- visited Rochester for the first time. There was as yet no university, but Rochester was a growing, bustling town; and the cordial and progressive community received the young man with open arms; and he fell in love with it. The fact that this young man was a Negro, Frederick Douglass, was the one thing that set him apart from a procession of ambitious, resourceful, and enterprising young Americans who were then seeking their fortunes in the new and prosperous area of western New York that constituted the gateway to the fabulous, one could almost say exotic, area that lay beyond Buffalo. And the warm, cordial treatment that Rochester accorded Douglass in 1842 set it apart from many of its neighboring cities in the way it received the Negro abolitionist. His hosts, Isaac and Amy Post, "two people of all-abounding benevolence" were not more amiable than brave, "for they never seemed to ask, What will the world say? but walked straight forward in what seemed to them the line of duty, please or offend whomsoever it might." The Posts, and others like them, made it easy for Douglass to move to Rochester five years later and, in the ensuing twenty-five years, to become one of the first citizens of the Flower City.

There would scarcely be a time when Douglass' feeling for Rochester waned in enthusiasm, and the feeling was mutual. During the years when he made Rochester his home and conducted his abolitionist activities from there, he was grateful for the cordiality and understanding that the citizens of the city extended him. Even when his home was destroyed by fire in 1872 he harbored no bitterness in the

great loss that he knew was the result of arson. When the people of Rochester honored him by placing a marble <sup>base</sup> plaque commemorating his distinguished services to mankind in Sibley Hall of the University of Rochester after he ~~had moved away~~, <sup>became a resident of Washington</sup> he was moved almost beyond expression. The city honored few citizens in death as it honored Douglass by having his remains lie in state in the City Hall with the mayor and the aldermen heading the list of notables who paid their last respects to this giant of a man who had adopted a city that in turn adopted him.

If Douglass loved Rochester, he loved no less the country that he served in a dozen honorable ways. It was because ~~he~~ <sup>he</sup> loved the United States so much that he sought constantly to make <sup>it</sup> a better place for all its people. Again, and again he spoke of its beauty, its wealth, its power, its capacity for growth and improvement. It was his confidence in the capacity of the nation to extend justice to all that, on one occasion he said in a moment of despair, "There is heart and eloquence still left in the councils of the nation, and these will, I trust, yet make themselves potent in having both the Constitution of 1789 and the Constitution with the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments made practically the law of the land for all the people thereof." No defect in American life escaped his searching ~~criticism~~ <sup>scrutiny</sup> and his withering criticism. And during his lifetime there were so many glaring deficiencies in American life and, indeed, so many that were pervasive that they kept a sensitive person like Douglass not only busy but outraged as well.

As one views Douglass hammering away at the defective aspects of American life and as one begins to appreciate the relevance of his criticisms to the present condition, one wonders if it is the prescience of the man or the persistence of the problems that makes the Douglass commentaries so timely today. He lived through the period when the District of Columbia lost its right of self-government. As a resident of the capital and as one who was deeply committed to the principle of self-rule, he was greatly distressed over the disfranchisement of Washingtonians.

"The District of Columbia," Douglass wrote, "is the one spot where there is no government for the people, of the people, and by the people. Its citizens submit to rulers whom they have had no choice in selecting. They obey laws which they had no voice in making. They have a plenty of taxation, but no representation.... I have nothing to say in favor of this anomalous condition of the people of the District of Columbia, and hardly think that it ought to be or will be much longer endured...." The analysis was cogent, but the prediction fell far short of the mark. Except for the recent grudging concession to them to participate in Presidential elections, the people of the District of Columbia seem ~~to~~ closer to effective self-government today than they were when Douglass made his remarks in 1835.

From the time of emancipation, which he had urged upon President Lincoln with all the power that he could command, the future of the Negro American was a continuing concern of Douglass. He scoffed at the idea that the Negro would become extinct, as many whites believed and, perhaps, hoped. In one form and complexion or another, Douglass said in 1884, the Negro "may be counted upon as a permanent element of the population of the United States. He is now seven millions, has doubled his number in thirty years, and is increasing more rapidly than the more favored population of the South." If the Negro was here to stay, then he should remain in the South, Douglass believed. The Negro's best future lay in the South, he said, and he took every opportunity to counsel against mass migration. He did not countenance the argument that Negroes should move to the North in order to escape the violence and intimidation to which they were subjected <sup>in the South</sup>. "The business of this nation is to protect its citizens where they are," he declared, not to transport them where they will not need protection." When a considerable number of Negroes began to move North in the late 1870's, Douglass was greatly distressed. "It is a surrender, a premature disheartening surrender,"

he argued, "since it would secure freedom and free institutions by migration rather than by protection, by flight rather than by right.... It leaves the whole question of equal rights on the soil of the South open and still to be settled, with the moral influence of the exodus against us, since it is a confession of the utter impracticability of equal rights and equal protection in any State where those rights may be struck down by violence." There were other reasons, moreover, why Douglass urged Negroes to remain in the South. Migration would dilute their political power and influence and render impossible their election to office in the North where they would be outnumbered and in the South where their numbers would be diminished. Migration would also destroy the Negro's firm hold on the labor market in the South, Douglass believed. There, he would be in a position to sell his labor on terms more favorable than in the North, where he would be compelled to compete with immigrant labor. This was obviously an oversimplified analysis of the position of Negro labor in the South in 1879. Already, the position of the Negro worker in the South was, at best, marginal. In the immediate future, it would become even more tenuous, with the rise of industry from which he was excluded or in which he was given only the most lowly jobs.

It is significant that Douglass did not argue that Negroes should remain in the South because of the possible "violence in the streets" that might be occasioned by their mass migration into Northern cities. He was impressed by the fact that the scenes of lawless violence against the Dutch and Irish in New York and Boston had all but disappeared. He had no way of knowing that his beloved Rochester that had a mere five hundred Negroes in 1880 would have some by 1960 and that their presence would create animosities and problems that would tax the resources and ingenuity of every segment of the community. He would have been appalled to contemplate the prospect that by 1960 more than one-third of the Negro population of twenty-two millions would live in twelve metropolitan areas

of the North and West under conditions of discrimination in housing, employment, and education that would, indeed, have terrified him. His remarks against mass migration out of the South were ineffective when he uttered them. They would be even more ineffective in succeeding years.

This is not to say that Douglass lacked wisdom and insight into the problems that Negro Americans faced during his time. Nor is it to assert that he would be overwhelmed or rendered speechless by the gigantic problems that Negro Americans face at the present time. He knew too well the pervasive character of American racism in the late nineteenth century, and if he was a bit sanguine about the eventual triumph of justice, he was certain that it would not come overnight. "Nowhere in the world are the worth and dignity of manhood more exalted in speech and press than they are here," he once declared, "but nowhere is manhood pure and simple more despised than here. We affect contempt for castes and aristocracies of the old world and laugh at their assumptions, but at home foster pretensions far less rational and much more ridiculous." Even so, he confidently believed that there was reason to be optimistic. <sup>in his view</sup> If liberty was not yet more than a name and if the suffrage was only a cruel mockery, he rejoiced that the laws and institutions of the country were "sound, just, and liberal."

It was indeed because Douglass believed that the framework of the American social order was sound that he wrote and spoke and worked so hard to induce the American people to conduct their lives and order their relationships within that framework. Nowhere is this view more clearly set forth than in his remarks on the decision of the United States Supreme Court in 1883 that declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional. He denied that he had a right to view the decision as a lawyer would, although he did declare that in striking down a law that, under the Fourteenth Amendment, sought to confer on Negroes the rights that white people enjoyed, the Court acted in defiant disregard of what was the object and intent of the Fourteenth Amendment. What concerned him most of all was the significance

of the act and the implications of its being struck down. He said, "It is said that this decision will make no difference in the treatment of colored people; that the Civil Rights Bill was a dead letter, and could not be enforced. There is some truth in all this, but it is not the whole truth. That bill, like all advance legislation, was a banner on the outer wall of American liberty, a noble moral standard, uplifted for the education of the American people.... This law, though dead, did speak. It expressed the sentiment of justice and fair play, common to every honest heart. Its voice was against popular prejudice and meanness. It appealed to all the noble and patriotic instincts of the American people. It told the American people that they were all equal before the law; that they belonged to a common country and were equal citizens. The Supreme Court has hauled down this flag of liberty in open day, and before all the people; and has thereby given joy to the heart of every man who wishes to deny to others what he claims for himself. It is a concession to race pride, selfishness and meanness, and will be received with joy by every upholder of caste in the land...."

It was in the broad area of civil rights that Douglass wrote and spoke with a poignancy and a <sup>sensitively</sup> ~~relevance~~ that make his views so <sup>relevant</sup> ~~timely~~ seventy-five years and more after he uttered them. The United States Commission on Civil Rights was established under an act passed by Congress in 1957.--More than a half-century after the death of Douglass. The Commission's fields of inquiry --- housing, voting, education, employment, and the administration of justice --- are the same fields with which Douglass was so deeply concerned; and his remarks about American deficiencies in those fields could well have been testimony taken by the Commission in one of its many hearings.

During Douglass' later years, the problem of housing for Negroes was just becoming an acute one. And in those days it emerged largely as a Northern problem. In the South most Negroes lived in the rural areas. In the towns and cities, they

lived almost everywhere; for no great importance was attached to the fact that some Negroes lived among the whites, as had been true before the Civil War. If they did live among the whites, it was assumed that they were there for the convenience of the whites. This, of course, created no problems regarding churches, schools, or social intercourse, for all Negroes knew their "place". If they did not, they would soon learn. In the North, on the other hand, there was the tendency to herd Negroes into some particular section of the city. This would make it easy to segregate them and, indeed, to discriminate against them in other spheres. This is the beginning of Harlems, the Bedford-Stuyvesants, the Paradise Valleys, and the Southsides.

There ensued the development of a pattern of segregation and discrimination in housing that was in full flower when the United States Commission on Civil Rights began to make its studies in 1957. It led the Commission two years later to conclude that "First, a considerable number of Americans, by reason of their color or race, are being denied equal opportunity in housing, and Second, the housing disabilities of colored Americans are part of a national housing crisis involving a general shortage of low-cost housing." The Commission's findings that housing seems to be the one commodity in the American market that is not freely available on equal terms to everyone who can afford to pay is <sup>about</sup> as true in 1967 as it was in 1957. That is why the President of the United States recently, in an effort to redeem a pledge made when the first National Housing Act was passed, set up a time-table of three years in which he <sup>called</sup> looked for the complete elimination to racial barriers in housing.

While Douglass did not frequently address himself to the problem of housing for Negroes, he was sensitive to the inadequacies as well as to the frequent violations of the sanctity of Negro homes. Speaking in 1883 he said that "after twenty years of so-called emancipation, we are subject to lawless raids of midnight riders,

who, with blackened faces, invade our homes and perpetrate the foulest of crimes upon us and our families. This condition of things is too flagrant and notorious to require specifications or proof. Thus, in all conditions of life and death we are met by the color line." He was especially embittered<sup>at least for the moment</sup> when his home was destroyed by fire in Rochester in 1872. Upon arriving there from Washington, where he was editing the New National Era, he sought a room in one of the nearest hotels. At both he was greeted with the statement that "We are full" until it was known that he was Frederick Douglass, when a room was readily offered to him. He did not accept, but went to the headquarters of the police to inquire of the whereabouts of his displaced family. "Such treatment as this," he asserted, "does not tend to make a man secure either in his person or property. The spirit which would deny a man shelter in a public house, needs but little change to deny him shelter, even in his own house. It is the spirit of hate, the spirit of murder, the spirit which would burn a family in their beds. I may be wrong," he concluded, "but I fear that the sentiment that repelled me at Congress Hall burnt my house."

The history of the education of Negroes in the United States is the history of deprivation, segregation, and discrimination. In the post-Reconstruction years, there was never a time -- anywhere in the United States -- where educational opportunities for Negroes approached the opportunities provided for whites. In the North, where the Negroes were regularly shunted off into ghettos, the educational policy for Negroes was characterized by inferior programs and even astonishing neglect of those. Only where there were insufficient numbers of Negroes for separate schools did Negroes freely attend schools with whites. Even in such situations Negroes were regularly and systematically discouraged from pursuing advanced and collegiate<sup>preparatory</sup> courses. In the South, where most Negroes lived until the period following World War I, segregation in education was universal and discrimination was the pattern. School boards spent five to ten times more for the education of white children than for the education of Negro children. As though



such discrimination was not enough, the United States Supreme Court in 1899 upheld the contention of a Georgia School board that when there were insufficient funds for high schools for both Negroes and whites, it could use its funds to provide a high school for whites and no high school for Negroes. The pattern of segregation and discrimination was to persist down to the middle of the twentieth century. Not until 1954 did the Supreme Court challenge the time-honored practices by declaring that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. *And it turned the desegregation of the schools with all deliberate speed.* For the next decade and more, ingenious <sup>all</sup> methods to evade the Court's decree were devised over the country.

In the South the methods took the form of massive resistance, pupil placement laws, and freedom of choice policies. They succeeded in keeping more than ninety per cent of the schools racially segregated. In the North the practices took the form of gerrymandering the boundaries of school districts, constructing new school buildings at points where the school population would be racially homogeneous, and desertion of the inner city for the more attractive bucolic life of the ever-retreating suburbs. The pace of desegregation continued to be so very slow that a decade later the Court could remark that there had been more deliberateness than speed in following its decree of 1955. And in 1967 the United States Commission on Civil Rights, after carefully studying the trends in school desegregation, lashed out at what it called the "racial isolation" caused by de facto segregation and reiterated its earlier contentions that schools in which Negro children predominate operate under severe handicaps.

The views on education so recently expressed by the Supreme Court and by the Civil Rights Commission are essentially the views that Douglass held. And his statements on the subject could well have been submitted to the Commission during its hearings on education. First, he would make certain that no obstacles or distractions should beset the young in their pursuit of an education. "The ignorance of any part of the American people so deeply concerns all the rest," he said, "that there can be no doubt of the right to pass laws compelling the attendance of every

child at school. Believing that such is now required and ought to be enacted, we hereby put ourselves on record in favor of stringent laws to this end."

Secondly, he believed that the task of public education was so stupendous and so important that it required the total resources of the nation to achieve the desired goals. When the ill-fated Blair bill to provide federal aid to education was before Congress in 1890, Douglass was one of its most ardent supporters. Recognizing the bitter opposition on the part of many white Southerners in Congress, Douglass reminded them that the bill would benefit white illiterates as well as Negro illiterates. "To me it is a Bill in the interest of both races, and is of a tendency to do away with the spirit of caste and of sectionalism and to promote the general welfare of diffusing knowledge and enlightenment, in the darkest corners of the Republic where it is most needed and where the people are the least able to secure such knowledge for themselves." In the third place, Douglass had no illusions about the evil consequences of segregated education; and he consistently struggled to eliminate it. He was delighted, therefore, when Charles Sumner in 1870 proposed in his Civil Rights Bill to abolish segregation in the public schools. "Educate the poor white children and the colored children together; let them grow up to know that color makes no difference as to the rights of a man; that both the black man and the white man are at home; that the country is as much the country of one as of the other; and that both together must make it a valuable country.... We want mixed schools not because our colored schools are inferior to white schools -- not because colored instructors are inferior to white instructors, but because we want to do away with a system which exalts one class and debases another. We look to mixed schools to teach that worth and ability are to be the criterion of manhood and not race and color." He was bitterly disappointed when the Southern leaders coalesced with Northern philanthropists to force Congress to delete the provision for the desegregation of schools from the Civil Rights Bill that finally passed in 1875.

There were no educational opportunities, however attractive, that equipped the masses of Negroes to make a decent livelihood in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The vast majority, still in the rural areas<sup>of the South</sup> and without the means to become independent farmers, eked out an existence as seasonal day laborers or <sup>as</sup> sharecroppers. The minority that lived in the urban centers of the South discovered that most of the doors of opportunity in the new industries were closed to them. In the North they were compelled to compete with the vast numbers of <sup>white</sup> immigrants from Europe and migrants from the rural areas and, invariably, the Negro was at some disadvantage. He did not have the requisite skills, or he had no references, or he was not a union member, or there were not enough Negro workers to make up<sup>a</sup> separate work team, or something else. Negroes, some claimed, could not learn to operate expensive and complicated machinery. Others said that Negroes were not reliable. Most agreed that if there were not enough jobs for all, the Negro had to be excluded.

The patterns of discrimination in employment were well formed by the time of the death of Douglass; and with the increase in the numbers of Negroes in urban centers in the twentieth century the situation became acute. Soon, cities such as New York, Chicago, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Cleveland had hundreds of thousands of Negroes looking for work; and the per centage of unemployed among Negroes steadily increased. When they gained employment during a strike, they were <sup>with no appreciation for the problems</sup> of the labor movement. denounced by the unions as scabs, When there was no strike and they sought membership in the unions, they were excluded for one reason or another ~~and~~ that was, infact, exclusion on the basis of race. Except during periods of extraordinary demands for labor, such as during a World War, Negroes experienced untold difficulties in securing substantially gainful employment. And even during the war, racial discrimination in employment persisted. Meanwhile, Negro women had more success in securing gainful, if demeaning and poorly paid employment. The

dire consequences in terms of the disintegration of the family, juvenile delinquency, and the loss of pride on the part of the Negro man were incalculable.

The Commission on Civil Rights has, during the past ten years, taken a close look at employment discrimination; and it has reached the inescapable conclusion that such discrimination exists in industry, <sup>in labor unions and</sup> in the federal establishment itself, ~~and in the labor unions~~. In 1960 the rate of unemployment for Negroes was twice that of the white population. In some cities more than one-third of the Negro work force was unemployed. Discrimination in education and training further contributed to the ability of some Negroes to secure the requisite skills, while discrimination against them in apprenticeship training programs often resulted in complete exclusion from employment opportunities. Nothing points up the nature and extent of the problem <sup>more</sup> than the fact that the relative economic position of the Negro has not significantly improved in the past twenty years.

No one felt more deeply than Douglass the bitter experience of discrimination in unemployment, and no one spoke more feelingly about it. His son, a printer, was unable to secure employment for many months because of discrimination against him. He was refused a job because it was claimed that at one time he worked at a lower rate of wages than that fixed by the Printers' Union and that he had worked in a city where the Union existed and did not become a member. His son, Douglass said, was made a transgressor "for working at a low rate of wages by the very men who prevented his getting a high rate. He is denounced for not being a member of the Printers' Union by the very men who would not permit him to join the Union. He is not condemned because he is not a good printer.... There is no disguising the fact -- his crime was his color. It was his color in Denver, it was his color in Rochester, and it is his color in Washington today." But the strictures of Douglass against the employers and the unions went beyond his criticism for the mistreatment of his son. He noted the universal nature of discrimination in employment. The Negro, he said, "is rejected by trade unions, of every trade, and refused work ~~xxxxx~~ while

he lives, and burial when he dies, and yet he is asked to forget his color, and forget that which everybody else remembers. If he offers himself to a builder as a mechanic, to a client as a lawyer, to a patient as a physician, to a college as a professor, to a firm as a clerk; to a government department as an agent, or an officer, he is sternly met on the color line, and his claim to consideration in some way is disputed on the ground of color." No arguments offered in support of the recent legislation and executive orders calling for fair practices in employment were more telling than those advanced by Douglass more than seventy-five years ago.

The last years of Douglass were years of humiliation and degradation for Negro Americans in general. Segregation statutes in the Southern states increased in number and absurdity following the striking down of the Civil Rights Act in 1883. In the Northern states, segregation and discrimination were almost as widespread. Lynch law replaced all semblances of due process, and it appeared that the courts would be closed to Negroes as far as allegedly serious crimes were concerned. In the cities, mobs hunted down Negroes and insulted them, taunted them, even killed them. These were the embryos of the race riots that were to flare up and flourish during the decade following the death of Douglass. There were Wilmington, North Carolina, Statesboro, Georgia, Atlanta, Brownsville, Springfield, Ohio, and Springfield, Illinois. It seemed a waste of time to try Negroes for rape, so when a mob insisted on taking out an accused Negro, the only advice that the South Carolina governor could give them was that they should observe the proprieties. Even in the twentieth century, accused Negroes seldom enjoyed the advice of counsel at an early stage, frequently had confessions <sup>extorted</sup> ~~extorted~~ from them under the most incredibly brutal circumstances, and enjoyed no rights that an innocent citizen was entitled to enjoy until he was proved guilty.

The first quarter of the twentieth century was a period of despair for the Negro soldiers in Brownsville, Texas, whom President Theodore Roosevelt dishonorably discharged because the whites there said that ~~ix~~ they had shot up the

town. The Senate investigation and their <sup>of the soldiers</sup> exonerations many years later did not make amends for the cruel injustices to which they were subjected. It was a period of despair <sup>for</sup> of the Negro defendants of Elaine, Arkansas, who had no legal counsel, who were tried in a mob atmosphere ~~in~~ and convicted after a jury deliberation of five minutes. It was no expiation of the crime of a miscarriage of justice that the Supreme Court some years later <sup>threw</sup> ~~threw~~ out the convictions on the obvious ground that there had been no due process of law. The maladministration of justice as far as Negroes were concerned, was inevitably a concern of the United States Civil Rights Commission when it began its work in 1957. In the following decade, it was to discover and expose scores upon scores <sup>of cases involving</sup> of the miscarriage of justice, ranging from what it called "unlawful police violence" to "private" violence, to jury exclusion. It found that ~~Neg~~ handcuffed Negroes had been shot while in the custody of Negroes, that some <sup>unarmed Negroes</sup> had been blackjacked to death as they "resisted" arrest, and that Negro prisoners had been killed <sup>in their jail cells</sup> under circumstances that were, at best, mysterious.

Douglass classified all such actions as the operation of the Lynch Law. "Everyone knows that what is called the lynch law is peculiarly the law for colored people and for nobody else..... The crime of insolence for which the Negro was formerly killed and for which his killing was justified, is as easily pleaded in excuse now, as it was in the old time and what is worse, it is sufficient to make the charge of insolence to provoke the knife or bullet. This done, it is only necessary to say in the newspapers that this dead Negro was impudent and about to raise an insurrection and kill all the white people, or that a white woman was insulted by a Negro, to hull the conscience of the white people of the North into indifference and reconcile its people to such murder. No proof of guilt is required. It is enough to accuse, to condemn and punish the accused with death. When he is dead and silent, and the murder <sup>is</sup> is alive and at large, he has it all his own way,,

It will be remembered that at the close of the Civil War there was no widespread clamor to extend the suffrage to the freedmen. President Andrew Johnson described the Radicals in 1866 as being "wildly in favor of Negro suffrage." The statement is ~~profoundly~~ simply a misstatement of the fact. When, two years following the civil war the Negroes were given the franchise, it was done begrudgingly and only because the intransigent and uncooperative ~~position~~ <sup>attitude</sup> of the Southerners in power indicated/that there was no other way. Although many contemporaries would claim, and many poor students of history would later assert that Negroes wielded great political power during Reconstruction, that is also in error. But the possession of the franchise/<sup>by Negroes</sup> even for the brief period known as Reconstruction was enough to establish and perpetuate the view that the vote in the hands of Negroes is/<sup>a</sup> dangerous and sinister thing. When Southern whites returned to power in the mid 70's, they could not wait to launch the move to drive the Negroes from political involvement ~~in~~ altogether. In defiance of the 15th Amendment, they developed a whole set of devious and cunning practices that made the Negro's vote ineffective, and finally, beginning in 1890 with the Mississippi Constitutional Convention, one Southern state after another revised the ~~its~~ suffrage provisions in its constitutions in order to make virtually impossible the exercise of the franchise by Negroes. Then, to make the matter doubly sure, they proceeded to exclude Negroes from ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> Democratic primary, where all the important political decisions in the South were made any way.

There then ensued a half-century of effort on the part of the Negro to secure the vote in the Southern states. In 1915 the so-called grandfather clause was declared unconstitutional. From that point on, otherwise disqualified white voters could not vote merely because they grandfathers were voting in 1866, <sup>Since no</sup> when no Negroes were voting, <sup>in 1866, the grandfather clause permitted only whites to vote.</sup> There followed the assault on the Democratic white primary that began in 1923 and ended with its final destruction in 1947. Then followed the slow, persistent effort to force white registrars in the South to enroll Negro

voters. The Commission on Civil Rights discovered, in its hearings in Louisiana, Mississippi, and other Southern states, that there were widespread practices by which registrars simply excluded Negroes from ~~making~~ registering to vote. They were ~~r~~uled out because they could not spell, could not interpret the constitution, ~~and~~ could not quote the constitution. The Commission even discovered that one of the registrars who disqualified a Negro because he could not spell, did not spell the word spell correctly in her report. The work of the N.A.A.C.P., The Congress of Racial Equality, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in conducting voter registration drives in the South did much to point up the widespread practices of excluding Negroes from voting.

Douglass was one of the earliest and most consistent advocates of suffrage ~~exam~~ for Negroes. In April, 1865, the month the Civil War ended, he made an eloquent plea for the extension of the franchise to Negroes. "We want the vote," he said, "because it is our right, first of all. No class of men can, without insulting their own nature, be content with any deprivation of their rights. We want it again, as a means of educating our race. .... By depriving us of suffrage, you affirm our incapacity to ~~make~~ an intelligent judgment respecting public men and public measures; you declare before the world that we are unfit ~~for~~ to exercise the elective franchise, and by this means lead us to undervalue ourselves, to put a low estimate upon ourselves...." Douglass was greatly pained, in the days following Reconstruction, to hear the arguments that Negroes should be disfranchised because they were ignorant and had misused their political power. He said that it was utter nonsense to claim that Negro suffrage was the cause of the failure of the governments in the South. "It is not the ignorance of the Negro, but the ~~malevolence~~ <sup>is</sup> of his accusers," he ~~said~~, "which ~~is~~ <sup>is</sup> the real cause of Southern disorder." <sup>he said.</sup> "It is easy to show that the illiteracy of the Negro has no part or lot in the disturbances there. They who contend for disfranchisement on this ground, know and know very well that there is no truth whatever in their contention. To make out their case they ~~must~~ show that some oppressive and



hurtful measure has been imposed upon the country by the Negro voters. But they cannot show any such thing and they know it."

Because of the persistence of the evils that Douglass attacked, he spoke to our generation as well as his own. His faith in his country and his commitment to its institutions were never shaken, even when it seemed that it was impossible to make any significant headway against the ever-present and rancorous evil of race prejudice. Because he recognized the nature of the problem, he could face it with greater understanding and <sup>resoluteness</sup> ~~determination~~. "Few evils," he said on one occasion, "are less accessible to the force of reason, or more tenacious of life and power, than a long-standing prejudice. It is a moral disorder, which creates the conditions necessary to its own existence, and fortifies itself by refusing all contradiction. It paints a hateful picture according to its own diseased imagination, and distorts the features of the fancied original to suit the portrait. As those who believe in the visibility of ghosts can easily see them, so it is always easy to see repulsive qualities in those we despise and hate."

The remedies for the conditions created by racial prejudice and conflict were implicit in Douglass' analysis of the conditions. The public must make available the kind of education and training for every citizen that will make it possible for him to function effectively in a free society. There must be fair employment that recognizes skills and not color as the basis for the effective performance of the required tasks. The government should be strong enough and honorable enough to protect the rights of the weak as well as the strong. Every citizen must have the full and free opportunity to exercise the franchise in order to secure that better government that will effectively administer justice to all. Every citizen should employ every reasonable means to secure the enjoyment of every civil right that is enjoyed by others.

It was his understanding of the problems that his people and his country faced and it was the ceaseless efforts that he made to solve them that caused the Rochester Chronicle in 1879 to insist that he must rank among the greatest of men,

"not only of this city, but of the nation as well — great in gifts, greater in utilizing them, great in his inspiration, greater in his efforts for humanity, great in the persuasion of his speech, greater in the purpose that informed it."

Douglass has recently been called the "Father" of the Civil Rights Revolution. This is a sobriquet not easily won nor lightly conferred. It was won because of the consonance of his views and actions with those who today seek equality. It was conferred because of the growing recognition that his counsel and leadership are as fresh and as effective as they were seventy-five years ago. A young contemporary Negro poet, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, spoke of Douglass for his own generation and for succeeding <sup>including our own</sup> ones when he said,

And he was no soft-tongued apologist;

He spoke straight-forward, fearlessly uncowed;

The sunlight of his truth dispelled the mist

And set in bold relief each dark-hued cloud;

To sin and crime he gave their proper hue,

And hurled at evil what was evil's due.