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Paradox-Warren

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The Declaration of Independence and Slavery

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12/4/13
HIST-110
Prof. Baumgartner

Hello, my name is Dan Warren, and today I will be talking to you about the American Paradox, specifically looking at the paradox of the Declaration of Independence and how it affected slaves. As we have learned about our nation’s history, we have typically seen it in a very positive, proud and hopeful lens. However, sometimes all that glitters is not gold at all. This is where the idea of the American Paradox comes into play. A paradox is defined as a statement that, despite sounding reasoning from acceptable premises, leads to a conclusion that seems senseless or self-contradictory. While there are numerous topics relating to the American Paradox, one paradox seems to stand out amongst the rest, that being the freedom paradox in the Declaration of Independence. The argument can be made that the Declaration of Independence is a paradox in itself because it was untrue to its founding principles of equality and freedom that we see highlighted in Jefferson’s ideas and later on proved by Frederick Douglass’ speech in 1852.

To start, Thomas Jefferson was “a man of paradoxes: a man who was amiable, yet was intensely private; an urban intellectual who feared cities; and especially a slaveholder who preached equality.”1 While Jefferson expressed his aspirations, the Declaration did not extend “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” to African Americans, indentured servants, or women at all. For a while, Jefferson was against

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1 The Advance, The Author of the Great Declaration, 808, 1910 American Periodicals
slavery all together when he called it an "alienable crime," yet he was a lifelong slaveholder.

A comparison was made in which, “It was natural that he should be selected to write the Declaration of Independence as that Washington should be made commander of the armies. It fitted in with the plan of the ages.”² This comparison turned out to be true, because further research indicates that Washington and Jefferson believed that slavery was wrong as the 18th century continued to the later periods. Columnist David Barton wrote that, “it is ironic that two prominent Founding Fathers who owned slaves were both early, albeit unsuccessful, pioneers in the movement to end slavery in their State and in the nation.”³ However, fearful of dividing the new, fragile nation, Jefferson and other founders who opposed slavery did not think that abolishing slavery was necessary. Jefferson’s ideas show the paradox of the Declaration of Independence, but later on, Frederick Douglass proves that this paradox exists.

The year is 1852: exactly 76 years since the Declaration of Independence was written and signed. It was a very pleasant July 5th in Rochester, New York, the place where Frederick Douglass delivered one of his well-known speeches, “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Slave.” Throughout this speech, as well as his life, Douglass advocates equal justice and rights, as well as citizenship for blacks. To start off this


speech, Douglass tells his audience that, “This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.”4 By this he means that white Americans should celebrate their independence and freedom while slaves, who at this point made up 1/3 of the population in the south, could not celebrate because they did not have that freedom and equality. Douglass goes on, stating that, “to drag a man in fetters-and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony.”5 By “sacrilegious irony,” he is talking about the evil defilement of sacred American ideals like democracy, freedom and equal rights.

Next he talks about his “real subject” of the speech: American slavery. He accuses America for being untrue to its founding principles, its past, and its present. To the slave, Douglass tells the audience, “Your 4th of July is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license for enslaving blacks...your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery.”6 Returning to his theme of American democracy and freedom, he criticizes American ideology as inconsistent. He questions American ideology by asking the audience, “What have I, or those I represent, to do with you national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us?”7 Once again, he

4 Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003), 156

5 Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, 156

6 Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, 162

7 Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, 155
questions the decency and correctness of the Declaration and moves onto the Constitution as a whole.

Douglass also argues while the Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal,” American society creates an under-class of men and women. This makes sense because we have learned that were different statuses of American citizens during the 18th century like the Genteel Patriarch who was seen as the elite individual as opposed to the self-made man who spoke of opportunity for all. In fact, a book review from the late 19th century paper, The Golden Rule, says that Douglass’ narrative is one in which Douglass, “seems to fear that his readers will not realize all that he is. It is a common fault with self-made men.”

I find it acceptable that this article claims he is a self-made man, because he truly did preach that everyone in this country has and did have an opportunity.

To his opponents who believe that the Constitution permits slavery, Douglass offers the views of Spooner, Goodell, Sewall, and Smith-four abolitionists whose essays, “have fully and clearly vindicated the Constitution from any design to support slavery for an hour.” Douglass sides with those activists who believe that fathers meant to eliminate slavery and that the Constitution reflects this.

Douglass concludes by preaching hope for all Americans. “While drawing encouragement from the Declaration of Independence, the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions, my spirit is also cheered by the

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8 Livermore, Book Reviews: The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, The Golden Rule, 1893

9 Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, 168
obvious tendencies of the age.”¹⁰ He believes that anti-slavery sentiments will triumph over pro-slavery forces. We do know that ten years later, the answer would finally be called and slavery would be abolished.

In conclusion, as stated at the beginning of this podcast, the view on American history is not all positive. The paradox that America faced was a bit cruel because while white American males triumphed their freedom and equality, they left the rest of Americans in the shadows. What we as Americans living in the 21st century should take away from this is that we need to start looking at history through a new lens instead of only recognizing the triumph that our nation experienced.

¹⁰ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 169