

## **1864. The Syracuse National Negro Convention**

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The National Convention of Colored Citizens of the United States met in Syracuse, New York in October, 1864. One hundred and forty-four delegates attended from eighteen states, including Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana and Tennessee. Participants included Frederick Douglass, who was the convention president, William Wells Brown, and Henry Highland Garnet. The call for the convention appeared in *The Liberator* on September 9, 1864. Its Address to the People of the United States was written by Frederick Douglass.

### **A. The Call (*The Liberator*, September 9, 1864)**

Fellow-Citizens: The present state of our country, together with the claims of humanity and universal freedom, and the favorable developments of the Providence of God, pointing to the liberation and enfranchisement of our race, demand of us to be united in council, labor and faith.

The nation and the age have adjudged that the extinction of slavery is necessary to the preservation of liberty and republicanism, and that the existence of the Government itself is contingent upon the total overthrow of the slaveholders' oligarchy and the annihilation of the despotism which is inseparably connected with it.

Brethren, the present time is immeasurably more favorable than any other period in our history to unite and act for our own most vital interests. If we are to live and grow, and prove ourselves to be equal to the exigencies of the times, we must meet in council, and labor together for the general welfare of the people. Sound morality must be encouraged; education must be promoted; temperance and frugality must be exemplified, and industry, and thrift, and everything that pertains to well-ordered and dignified life, must be exhibited to the nation and the world. Therefore, the strong men of our people, the faithful and the true, are invited to meet in a National Convention, for the advancement of these objects and principles, on Tuesday, the 4th day of October, A.D. 1864, at 7 o'clock, P.M. in the city of New York [*sic*]. The progressive and liberty-loving people of the loyal States are invited to send delegates, properly and regularly chosen. Let them come from the cities, towns, hamlets and districts of every section of the country, and lay the foundation of a super-structure, broad and deep, which in the future shall be a stronghold and defense for ourselves and our posterity.

### **B. Address to the People of the United States**

In surveying our possible future, so full of interest at this moment, since it may bring to us all the blessings of equal liberty, or all the woes of slavery and continued social degradation, you will not blame us if we manifest anxiety in regard to the position of our recognized friends, as well as that of our open and declared enemies; for our cause may suffer even more from the injudicious concessions and weakness of our friends, than from the machinations and power of our enemies. . . .

We have spoken of the existence of powerful reactionary forces arrayed against us, and of the objects to which they tend. What are these mighty forces? and through what agencies do they operate and reach us? They are many; but we shall detain by no tedious enumeration. The first and most powerful is slavery; and the second, which may be said to be the shadow of slavery, is prejudice against men on account of their color. The one controls the South, and the other controls the North. Both are original sources of power, and generate peculiar sentiments, ideas, and laws concerning us.

The agents of these two evil influences are various: but the chief are, first the Democratic party; and, second, the Republican party. The Democratic party belongs to slavery; and the Republican party is largely under the power of prejudice against color. While gratefully recognizing a vast difference in our favor in the character and composition of the Republican party, and regarding the accession to power of the Democratic party as the heaviest calamity that could befall us in the present juncture of affairs, it cannot be disguised, that, while that party is our bitterest enemy, and is positively and actively reactionary, the Republican party is negatively and passively so in its tendency. What we have to fear from these two parties,- looking to the future, and especially to the settlement of our present national

troubles,-is, alas! only too obvious. The intentions, principles, and policy of both organizations, through their platforms, and the antecedents and the recorded utterances of the men who stand upon their respective platforms, teach us what to expect at their hands, and what kind of a future they are carving out for us, and for the country which they propose to govern.

Without using the word "slavery" or "slaves," "slaveholders," the Democratic party has none the less declared, in its platform, its purpose to be the endless perpetuation of slavery. Under the apparently harmless verbiage, "private rights," "basis of the federal Union," and under the language employed in denouncing the Federal Administration for "disregarding the Constitution in every part," "pretence of military necessity," we see the purpose of the Democratic party to restore slavery to all its ancient power, and to make this Government just what it was before the rebellion,- simply an instrument of slave-power. "The basis of the Federal Union" only means the alleged compromises and stipulations, as interpreted by Judge Taney, by which black men are supposed to have no rights which white men are bound to respect; and by which the whole Northern people are bound to protect the cruel masters against the justly deserved violence of the slave, and to do the fendish work of the hell-hounds when slaves make their escape from thralldom. The candidates of the party take their stand upon its platform; and will, if elected, -which Heaven forbid! @carry it out to the letter. From this party we must look only for fierce, malignant, and unmitigated hostility. Our continued oppression and degradation is the law of its life, and its sure passport to power. In the ranks of the Democratic party, all the worst elements American society fraternize; and we need not expect a single voice from that quarter for justice, mercy, or even decency. To it we are nothing; the slaveholder every thing. We have but to consult its press to know that it would willingly enslave the free colored people in the South; and also that it would gladly stir up against us mob violence at the North, -reenacting the sanguinary scenes of one year ago in New York and other large cities. We therefore pray, that whatever wrath, curse, or calamity, the future may have in store for us, the accession of the Democratic party to the reins of power may not be one of them; for this to us would comprise the sum of all social woes.

How stands the case with the great Republican party in question? We have already alluded to it as being largely under the influence of the prevailing contempt for the character and rights of the colored race. This is seen by the slowness of our government to employ the strong arm of the black man in the work of putting down the rebellion: and in its unwillingness, after thus employing him, to invest him with the same incitements to deeds of daring, as white soldiers; neither giving him the same pay, rations, and protection, nor any hope of rising in the service by meritorious conduct. It is also seen in the fact, that in neither of the plans emanating from this party for reconstructing the institutions of the Southern States, are colored men, not even those who had fought for the country, recognized as having any political existence or rights whatever.

Even in the matter of the abolition of slavery...there is still room for painful doubt and apprehension. It is very evident, that the Republican party, though a party composed of the best men of the country, is not prepared to make the abolition of slavery, in all the Rebel States, a consideration precedent to the re-establishment of the Union. However antislavery in sentiment the President may be, and however disposed he may be to continue the war till slavery is abolished, it is plain that in this he would not be sustained by his party. A single reverse to our arms, in such a war, would raise the hands of the party in opposition to their chief. The hope of the speedy and complete abolition of slavery, hangs, therefore, not upon the disposition of the Republican party, not upon the disposition of President Lincoln; but upon the slender thread of Rebel power, pride, and persistence. In returning to the Union, slavery has a fair chance to live; out of the Union, it has a still better chance to live; but, fighting against the Union, it has no chance for anything but destruction. Thus the freedom of our race and the welfare of our country tremble together in the balance of events. . . .

[O]ur Republican Administration is not only ready to make peace with the Rebels, but to make peace with slavery also; that all executive and legislative action launched against the slave-system, whether of proclamation or confiscation, will cease the instant the Rebels shall disband their armies, and lay down their arms. The hope that the war will put an end to slavery, has, according to this exposition, only one foundation; and that is, that the courts and Congress will so decree. But what ground have we here?

Congress has already spoken, and has refused to alter the Constitution so as to abolish slavery. The Supreme Court has yet to speak; but what it will say, if this question shall come before it, is very easily defined. We will not assert positively what it will say; but indications of its judgment are clearly against us. What then have we? Only this, as our surest and best ground of hope; namely, that the Rebels, in their madness, will continue to make war upon the Government, until they shall not only become destitute of men, money, and the munitions of war, but utterly divested of their slaves also. . . .

Do you, then, ask us to state, in plain terms, just what we want of you, and just what we think we ought to receive at your hands? We answer: First the complete abolition of the slavery of our race in the United States. . . . Be not deceived. Slavery is still the vital and animating breath of Southern society. The men who have fought for it on the battle-field will not love it less for having shed their blood in its defence. Once let them get Slavery safely under the protection of the Federal Government, and ally themselves, as they will be sure to do, to the Democratic party of the North; let Jefferson Davis and his Confederate associates, either in person or by their representatives, return once more to their seats in the halls of Congress,- and you will then see your dead slavery the most living and powerful thing in the country. . . .

We want the elective franchise in all the States now in the Union, and the same in all such States as may come into the Union hereafter. We believe that the highest welfare of this great country will be found in erasing from its statute-books all enactments discriminating in favor or against any class of its people, and by establishing one law for the white and colored people alike. Whatever prejudice and taste may be innocently allowed to do or to dictate in social and domestic relations, it is plain, that in the matter of government, the object of which is the protection and security of human rights, prejudice should be allowed no voice whatever. In this department of human relations, no notice should be taken of the color of men; but justice, wisdom, and humanity should weigh alone, and be all-controlling.

Formerly our petitions for the elective franchise were met and denied upon the ground, that, while colored men were protected in person and property, they were not required to perform military duty. . . . But now even this frivolous though somewhat decent apology for excluding us from the ballot-box is entirely swept away. Two hundred thousand colored men, according to a recent statement of President Lincoln, are now in the service, upon field and flood, in the army and the navy of the United States; and every day adds to their number. They are there as volunteers, coming forward with other patriotic men at the call of their imperilled country; they are there also as substitutes filling up the quotas which would otherwise have to be filled up by white men who now remain at home; they are also there as drafted men, by a certain law of Congress, which, for once, makes no difference on account of color: and whether they are there as volunteers, as substitutes, or as drafted men, neither ourselves, our cause, nor our country, need be ashamed of their appearance or their action upon the battlefield. . . .

Give the colored men of this country the elective franchise, and you will see no violent mobs driving the black laborer from the wharves of large cities, and from the toil elsewhere by which he honestly gains his bread. You will see no influential priest, like the late Bishop Hughes, addressing mobocrats and murderers as "gentlemen"; and no influential politician, like Governor Seymour, addressing the "misguided" rowdies of New York [in 1863] as his "friends." The possession of that right is the keystone to the arch of human liberty: and, without that, the whole may at any moment fall to the ground; while, with it, that liberty may stand forever, - a blessing to us, and no possible injury to you. If you still ask why we want to vote, we answer, Because we don't want to be mobbed from our work, or insulted with impunity at every corner. We are men, and want to be as free in our native country as other men.