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WHAT THE BLACK MAN WANTS: AN ADDRESS DELIVERED IN BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS, ON 26 JANUARY 1865


The Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society opened its thirty-second annual meeting at the Melodeon in Boston on Thursday, 26 January 1865. Weather


19. This principle is expressed in the Declaration of Independence as "governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

described as “bright and serene” by the National Anti-Slavery Standard permitted good attendance at the mid-winter gathering. Edmund Quincy, the Society’s president, called the convention to order at 10:30 a.m. Not waiting for the Business Committee to confer, Wendell Phillips presented a series of resolutions, including one calling for immediate congressional action to enfranchise black men, and addressed the meeting in support of them. Aware that William Lloyd Garrison preferred state action on the suffrage question, Phillips hoped that winning the Society’s endorsement for federal initiative would convert the Liberator’s editor. George Thompson followed Phillips on the platform and seconded the resolutions. During his speech Thompson mentioned that Douglass was in the audience, and the crowd called on him to speak. In an impromptu address frequently applauded by the audience, Douglass also endorsed immediate measures to enfranchise the blacks of every state. The Liberator described Douglass’s speech as both “eloquent and interesting.” At the completion of Douglass’s remarks, the convention adjourned until the afternoon. Lib., 13 January, 3, 10, 17 February 1865; Boston Commonwealth, 14, 21, 28 January, 4 February 1865; Boston Daily Advertiser, 25, 27, 28 January 1865; Boston Daily Journal, 26, 27 January 1865; NASS, 4, 11, 25 February 1865; McPherson, Struggle for Equality, 297–99.

Mr. President. — I have not heard the resolutions read, but I have listened to the speeches of Mr. Phillips and Mr. Thompson, and I do not feel, at this time, like entering into the discussion of the questions which I suppose, from these speeches, to be involved in the resolutions. I came here, as I come always to the meetings in New England, as a listener, and not as a speaker; and one of the reasons why I have not been more frequently to the meetings of this Society has been because of the disposition on the part of some of my friends to call me out upon the platform, even when they knew that there was some difference of opinion and of feeling between those who rightfully belong to this platform and myself; and for fear of being misconstrued, as desiring to interrupt or disturb the proceedings of these meetings, I have usually kept away, and have thus been deprived of that

1. Edmund Quincy.
2. Wendell Phillips’s six resolutions censured the “so-called reconstruction of Louisiana,” began by Major General Nathaniel P. Banks and endorsed by President Lincoln, and condemned Banks’s program of gradual emancipation and apprenticeship for Louisiana slaves as “at once impossible, unjust, and the seed of difficulty only.” Phillips’s final resolution declared that “the United States Constitution needs two amendments: one prohibiting slavery everywhere throughout the Union, and another forbidding the States to enact laws which make any distinction among their citizens on account of race or color.” First Phillips, then George Thompson, and finally Douglass spoke on the resolutions. Lib., 3 February 1865; NASS, 11 February 1865.
educating influence, which I am always free to confess is of the highest order, descending from this platform. I have felt, since I have lived out West, that in going there, I parted from a great deal that was valuable; and I feel, every time I come to these meetings that I have lost a great deal by making my home west of Boston, west of Massachusetts; for, if anywhere in the country there is to be found the highest sense of justice, or the truest demands for my race, I look for it in the East, I look for it here. The ablest discussions of the whole question of our rights occur here, and to be deprived of the privilege of listening to those discussions is a great deprivation.

I do not know, from what has been said, that there is any difference of opinion as to the duty of abolitionists at the present moment. I went with every word uttered by Mr. Phillips, and with almost every word uttered by Mr. Thompson. How can we get up any difference at this point, or at any point, where we are so united, so agreed? I went especially, however, with that word of Mr. Phillips to which, if to any exception was taken by Mr. Thompson, and that is, the criticism of Gen. Banks and Gen. Banks's policy. I hold that that policy is our chief danger at the present moment; that it practically enslaves the negro, and makes the Proclamation of 1863 a mockery and delusion. What is freedom? It is the right to choose one’s own employment. Certainly, it means that, if it means anything; and when any individual or combination of individuals undertakes to decide for any man when he shall work, where he shall work, at what he shall work, and for what he shall work, he or they practically reduce him to slavery. (Applause.) He is a slave. That I understand Gen. Banks to do—to determine for the so-called freedman when, and where, and at what, and for how much he shall work, when he shall be punished, and by whom punished. It is absolute slavery. It defeats the beneficent intentions of the

3. Speaking in behalf of his resolutions, Wendell Phillips condemned the restraints that General Banks had placed upon the wages and terms of employment for blacks in occupied Louisiana. Banks had spoken recently in Boston and defended his policies as intending "to prepare the negro for as perfect an independence as that enjoyed by any other class." In contrast, Phillips characterized Banks's idea of liberty for blacks as meaning "no right to fix his wages; no right to choose his toil, practically no right; having once chosen his place, no right to quit it; [and] any difference between employer and employee, tried by a Provost Marshal, not a jury." George Thompson did not dispute Phillips's criticism of Banks but rather declared that he did not feel "competent, at present, to pronounce judgment in the matter." Thompson went on to present evidence about how an "apprenticeship" system for the ex-slaves, similar to Banks's program, had been attempted in the British West Indies but was found to have been "in some respects worse than slavery itself" and was abandoned. Lib., 3, 10 February 1865; NASS, 11 February 1865; Boston Commonwealth, 18 February 1865.

4. The Emancipation Proclamation issued by Abraham Lincoln on 1 January 1863.
government, if it has beneficent intentions, in regard to the freedom of our people.

I have had but one idea for the last three years to present to the American people, and the phraseology in which I clothe it is the old abolition phraseology. I am for the “immediate, unconditional and universal” 5 enfranchisement of the black man, in every State of the Union. (Loud applause.) Without this, his liberty is a mockery; without this, you might as well almost retain the old name of slavery for his condition; for, in fact, if he is not the slave of the individual master, he is the slave of society, and holds his liberty as a privilege, not as a right. He is at the mercy of the mob, and has no means of protecting himself.

It may be objected, however, that this pressing of the negroes’ right to suffrage is premature. Let us have slavery abolished, it may be said, let us have labor organized, and then, in the natural course of events, the right of suffrage will be extended to the negro. I do not agree with this. The constitution of the human mind is such, that if it once disregards the conviction forced upon it by a revelation of truth, it requires the exercise of a higher power to produce the same conviction afterwards. The American people are now in tears. The Shenandoah has run blood—the best blood of the North. All around Richmond the blood of New England and of the North has been shed—of your sons, your brothers, and your fathers. We all feel, in the existence of this rebellion, that judgments terrible, widespread, far-reaching, overwhelming, are abroad in the land; and we feel, in view of these judgments, just now, a disposition to learn righteousness. This is the hour. Our streets are in mourning, tears are falling at every fireside, and under the chastisement of this rebellion, we have almost come up to the point of conceding this great, this all-important right of suffrage. I fear that if we fail to do it now, if Abolitionists fail to press it now, we may not see, for centuries to come, the same disposition that exists at this moment. (Applause.) Hence, I say, now is the time to press this right.

It may be asked, “Why do you want it? Some men have got along very well without it. Women have not this right.” Shall we justify one wrong by another? That is a sufficient answer. Shall we at this moment justify the deprivation of the negro of the right to vote because some one else is deprived of that privilege? I hold that women as well as men have the right to vote (applause), and my heart and my voice go with the movement to

5. Douglass paraphrases the long-time abolitionist call for immediate emancipation. In his speech preceding Douglass’s, George Thompson advised American abolitionists: “Let your battle-cry to the last be ’Immediate, unconditional, absolute Emancipation.’ ” Lib., 10 February 1865.
extend suffrage to woman. But that question rests upon another basis than that on which our right rests. We may be asked, I say, why we want it. I will tell you why we want it. We want it because it is our right, first of all. (Applause.) 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 for educating our race. Men are so constituted that they derive their conviction of their own possibilities largely from the estimate formed of them by others. If nothing is expected of a people, that people will find it difficult to contradict that expectation. By depriving us of suffrage, you affirm our incapacity to form an intelligent judgment respecting public men and public measures; you declare before the world that we are unfit to exercise the elective franchise, and by this means lead us to undervalue ourselves, to put a low estimate upon ourselves, and to feel that we have no possibilities like other men. Again, I want the elective franchise, for one, as a colored man, because ours is a peculiar government, based upon a peculiar idea, and that idea is universal suffrage. If I were in a monarchical government, or an autocratic or aristocratic Government, where the few bore rule and the many were subject, there would be no special stigma resting upon me because I did not exercise the elective franchise. It would do me no great violence. Mingling with the mass, I should partake of the strength of the mass; I should be supported by the mass, and I should have the same incentives to endeavor with the mass of my fellow-men; it would be no particular burden, no particular deprivation. But here, where universal suffrage is the rule, where that is the fundamental idea of the government, to rule us out is to make us an exception, to brand us with the stigma of inferiority, and to invite to our heads the missiles of those about us. Therefore I want the franchise for the black man.

There are, however, other reasons, not derived from any consideration merely of our rights, but arising out of the condition of the South and of the country—considerations which have already been referred to by Mr. Phillips—considerations which must arrest the attention of statesmen. I believe that when the tall heads of this rebellion shall have been swept down, as they will be swept down, when the Davises and Toombses and Stephenses and others who are leading in this rebellion shall have been blotted out, there will be this rank undergrowth of treason, to which reference has been made, growing up there, and interfering with and thwarting the quiet operation of the Federal Government in those States. You will see

those traitors handing down from sire to son the same malignant spirit which they have manifested and which they are now exhibiting, with malicious hearts, broad blades and bloody hands in the field, against our sons and brothers. That spirit will still remain; and whoever sees the Federal Government extended over those Southern States will see that government in a strange land and not only in a strange land but in an enemy's land. A postmaster of the United States in the South will find himself surrounded by a hostile spirit; a collector in a Southern port will find himself surrounded by a hostile spirit; a United States marshal or United States judge will be surrounded there by a hostile element. That enmity will not die out in a year, will not die out in an age. The Federal Government will be looked upon in those States precisely as the governments of Austria and France are looked upon in Italy at the present moment. They will endeavor to circumvent, they will endeavor to destroy the peaceful operation of this government. Now, where will you find the strength to counterbalance this spirit, if you do not find it in the negroes of the South! They are your friends, and have always been your friends. They were your friends even when the Government did not regard them as such. They comprehended the genius of this war before you did. It is a significant fact, it is a marvellous fact, it seems almost to imply a direct interposition of Providence, that this war, which began in the interest of slavery on both sides, bids fair to end in the interests of liberty on both sides. (Applause.) It was begun, I say, in the interest of slavery, on both sides. The South was fighting to take slavery out of the Union and the North fighting to keep it in the Union; the South fighting to get it beyond the limits of the United States Constitution, and the North fighting to retain it within those limits, the South fighting for new guarantees and the North fighting for the old guarantees;—both despising the negro, both insulting the negro. Yet the negro, apparently endowed with wisdom from on high, saw more clearly the end from the beginning than we did. When Seward said the status of no man in the country would be changed by the war, the negro did not believe him. (Applause.) When our generals sent their underlings in shoulder straps to

7. By 1861, the diplomacy of Count Camillo Benso di Cavour and the military skill of Giuseppe Garibaldi had brought all of Italy, except Venetia in the northwest and Rome and its immediate vicinity, under allegiance to King Victor Emmanuel II of Sardinia. Venetia remained a province of the Austrian Empire until 1866, when Italy gained the territory as a reward for its alliance with Prussia in a successful war against the Hapsburgs. Rome was incorporated into Italy as its capital in 1870 after the French troops that supported papal suzerainty were withdrawn to participate in the Franco-Prussian War. Robert C. Binkley, Realism and Nationalism, 1852–1871 (New York, 1935), 197–226.

hunt the flying negro back from our lines into the jaws of slavery from which he had escaped, the negroes thought that a mistake had been made, and that the intentions of the Government had not been rightly understood by our officers in shoulder straps, and they continued to come into our lines, threading their way through bogs and fens, over briars and thorns, fording streams, swimming rivers, bringing us tidings as to the safe path to march, and pointing out the dangers that threatened us. They are our only friends in the South, and we should be true to them in this their trial hour, and see to it that they have the elective franchise.

I know that we are inferior to you in some things—virtually inferior. We walk about among you like dwarfs among giants. Our heads are scarcely seen above the great sea of humanity. The Germans are superior to us; the Irish are superior to us; the Yankees are superior to us (laughter); they can do what we cannot, that is, what we have not hitherto been allowed to do. But, while I make this admission, I utterly deny that we are originally, or naturally, or practically, or in any way, or in any important sense, inferior to anybody on this globe. (Loud applause.) This charge of inferiority is an old dodge. It has been made available for oppression on many occasions. It is only about six centuries since the blue-eyed and fair-haired Anglo-Saxons were considered inferior by the haughty Normans, who once trampled upon them. If you read the history of the Norman Conquest, you will find that this proud Anglo-Saxon was once looked upon as of coarser clay than his Norman master, and might be found in the highways and byways of old England laboring with a brass collar on his neck, and the name of his master marked upon it. You were down then! (Laughter and applause.) You are up now. I am glad you are up, and I want you to be glad to help us up also. (Applause.)

The story of our inferiority is an old dodge, as I have said; for wherever men oppress their fellows, wherever they enslave them, they will endeavor to find the needed apology for such enslavement and oppression in the character of the people oppressed and enslaved. When we wanted, a few years ago, a slice of Mexico, it was hinted that the Mexicans were an inferior race, that the old Castilian blood had become so weak that it would scarcely run down hill, and that Mexico needed the long, strong and beneficent arm of the Anglo-Saxon care extended over it. We said that it was necessary to its salvation, and a part of the "manifest destiny" of this Republic, to extend our arm over that dilapidated government. So, too, when Russia wanted to take possession of a part of the Ottoman Empire, the Turks were "an inferior race." So, too, when England wants to set the
heel of her power more firmly in the quivering heart of old Ireland, the Celts are "an inferior race." So, too, the negro, when he is to be robbed of any right which is justly his, is "an inferior man." It is said that we are ignorant; I admit it. But if we know enough to be hung, we know enough to vote. If the negro knows enough to pay taxes to support the Government, he knows enough to vote—taxation and representation should go together. If he knows enough to shoulder a musket and fight for the flag, fight for the Government, he knows enough to vote. If he knows as much when he is sober as an Irishman knows when drunk, he knows enough to vote, on good American principles. (Laughter and applause.)

But I was saying that you needed a counterpoise in the persons of the slaves to the enmity that would exist at the South after the rebellion is put down. I hold that the American people are bound, not only in self-defence, to extend this right to the freedmen of the South, but they are bound by their love of country and by all their regard for the future safety of those Southern States to do this—to do it as a measure essential to the preservation of peace there. But I will not dwell upon this. I put it to the American sense of honor. The honor of a nation is an important thing. It is said in the Scriptures, "What doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul!" 9 It may be said also, what doth it profit a nation if it gain the whole world, but lose its honor? I hold that the American Government has taken upon itself a solemn obligation of honor to see that this war, let it be long or let it be short, let it cost much, or let it cost little,—that this war shall not cease until every freedman at the South has the right to vote. (Applause.) It has bound itself to do it. What have you asked the black men of the South, the black men of the whole country to do? Why, you have asked them to incur the deadly enmity of their masters, in order to befriend you and to befriend this government. You have asked us to call down, not only upon ourselves, but upon our children's children, the deadly hate of the entire Southern people. You have called upon us to turn our backs upon our masters, to abandon their cause and espouse yours; to turn against the South and in favor of the North; to shoot down the Confederacy and uphold the flag—the American flag. You have called upon us to expose ourselves to all the subtle machinations of their malignity for all time. And now, what do you propose to do when you come to make peace? To reward your enemies, and trample in the dust your friends? Do you intend to sacrifice the very men who have come to the rescue of your banner in the South and

9. Douglass slightly misquotes Mark 8:36.
incurred the lasting displeasure of their masters thereby? Do you intend to sacrifice them, and reward your enemies? Do you mean to give your enemies the right to vote, and take it away from your friends? Is that wise policy? Is that honorable? Could American honor withstand such a blow? I do not believe you will do it. I think you will see to it that we have the right to vote. There is something too mean in looking upon the negro when you are in trouble as a citizen, and when you are free from trouble as an alien. When this nation was in trouble, in its early struggles, it looked upon the negro as a citizen. In 1776, he was a citizen. At the time of the formation of the Constitution, the negro had the right to vote in eleven States out of the old thirteen. In your trouble you have made us citizens. In 1812, Gen. Jackson\textsuperscript{10} addressed us as citizens, "fellow citizens." He wanted us to fight. We were citizens then! And now, when you come to frame a conscription bill, the negro is a citizen again.\textsuperscript{11} He has been a citizen just three times in the history of this government, and it has always been in time of trouble. In time of trouble we are citizens. Shall we be citizens in war, and aliens in peace? Would that be just?

I ask my friends who are apologizing for not insisting upon this right, where can the black man look in this country for the assertion of this right if he may not look to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society? Where under the whole heavens can he look for sympathy in asserting this right if he may not look to this platform? Have you lifted us up to a certain height to see that we are men, and then are any disposed to leave us there, without seeing that we are put in possession of all our rights? We look naturally to this platform for the assertion of all our rights, and for this one especially. I understand the anti-slavery societies of this country to be based on two principles—first, the freedom of the blacks of this country; and, second, the elevation of them. Let me not be misunderstood here. I am not asking for sympathy at the hands of Abolitionists, sympathy at the hands of any. I think the American people are disposed often to be generous rather than just. I look over this country at the present time, and I see Educational Societies,

\textsuperscript{10} General Andrew Jackson.

\textsuperscript{11} Some Union states began to draft free blacks into military service under the authority of the Enrollment Act of 3 March 1863. The legality of this action was questioned, however, and some states registered but did not draft blacks. Congress thus passed another enrollment act specifically providing that "all able-bodied male colored persons, between the ages of twenty and forty-five years, resident in the United States, shall be enrolled." The Conscription Act of 4 July 1864 authorized Northern governors to recruit blacks in occupied Southern territory to meet the draft quotas for their own states. Quarles, \textit{Negro in the Civil War}, 193; Wesley and Romero, \textit{Negro Americans in Civil War}, 67–68.
Sanitary Commissions, Freedmen's Association, and the like,—all very good; but in regard to the colored people, there is always more that is benevolent, I perceive, than just, manifested towards us. What I ask for the negro is not benevolence, not pity, not sympathy, but simply justice. (Applause.) The American people have always been anxious to know what they shall do with us. Gen. Banks was distressed with solicitude as to what he should do with the negro. Everybody has asked the question, and they learned to ask it early of the abolitionists: “What shall we do with the negro?” I have had but one answer from the beginning. Do nothing with us! Your doing with us has already played the mischief with us. Do nothing with us! If the apples will not remain on the tree of their own strength, if they are worm-eaten at the core, if they are early ripe and disposed to fall, let them fall! I am not for tying or fastening them on the tree in any way, except by nature's plan, and if they will not stay there let them fall. And if the negro cannot stand on his own legs, let him fall also. All I ask is, give him a chance to stand on his own legs! Let him alone! If you see him on his way to school, let him alone,—don't disturb him! If you see him going to the dinner table at a hotel, let him go! If you see him going to the ballot box, let him alone!—don't disturb him! (Applause.) If you see him going into a workshop, just let him alone,—your interference is doing him positive injury. Gen. Banks's "preparation" is of a piece with this attempt to prop up the negro. Let him fall if he cannot stand alone! If the negro cannot live by the line of eternal justice, so beautifully pictured to you in the illustra-

12. Douglass refers to the religious, secular, and quasi-governmental agencies created during the Civil War to meet the spiritual, intellectual, and medical needs of both freedmen and Union soldiers. Early in the war, the American Missionary Association, an organization of religious abolitionists, as well as many individual denominations established schools and mission stations in the "contraband" camps that sprung up behind Union army lines. At the same time, nonsectarian freedmen's aid societies were founded in many northern cities by Garrisonian abolitionists and others concerned for the welfare of the ex-slaves. After the war, the secular agencies federated into the American Freedmen's Union Commission and, together with the religious groups, gave valuable assistance to the labors of the federal government's Freedmen's Bureau. The United States Sanitary Commission was a civilian auxiliary to the medical bureau of the War Department. Financed by the efforts of the numerous fund-raising auxiliaries throughout the North, the Sanitary Commission operated hospitals and convalescent homes for wounded military personnel. Another agency, the United States Christian Commission, supplied reading material, entertainment programs, and religious ministrations to Union soldiers in order to steer them away from the vices of camp life. The Sanitary Commission of the United States Army: A Succinct Narrative of Its Works and Purposes (New York, 1864); Lemuel Moss, Annals of the United States Christian Commission (Philadelphia, 1868); Quarles, Negro in the Civil War, 121–30; Richard B. Drake, "Freedmen's Aid Societies and Sectional Compromise," JSH, 29: 175–86 (May 1963).
tion used by Mr. Phillips, the fault will not be yours, it will be His who made the negro, and established that line for his government. (Applause.) Let him live or die by that. If you will only untie his hands, and give him a chance, I think he will live. He will work as readily for himself as the white man. A great many delusions have been swept away by this war. One was, that the negro would not work; he has proved his ability to work. Another was, that the negro would not fight; that he possessed only the most sheepish attributes of humanity; was a perfect lamb, or an “Uncle Tom;” disposed to take off his coat whenever required, fold his hands, and be whipped by any body who wanted to whip him;—but the war has proved that there is a great deal of human nature in the negro, and that he will fight, as Mr. Quincy, our President, said, in earlier days than these, “when there is a reasonable probability of his whipping anybody.” (Laughter and applause.)

But here I am talking away, and taking up the time which belongs to others.