



## Frederick Douglass and the Answer to Cancel Culture

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August 19, 2020

“Liberty is meaningless,” Frederick Douglass once said, “where the right to utter one’s thoughts and opinions has ceased to exist.”

Born a slave in the Antebellum South, Douglass knew a thing or two about freedom and bondage. As a child, Douglass learned to read and write by challenging white schoolboys his age to spelling contests. He lost every time at first, but in time, Douglass leveraged his hard-earned mastery of the English language to not only secure his own freedom, but play a crucial role in the eventual liberation of millions of American slaves.

Fast-forward to 2020. Not only are monuments to Douglass’ likeness in jeopardy from the mob, but so are the characteristics that led to his freedom. Competition, hard work, and rugged individualism—qualities that Douglass personified and which led to his own liberation—are all derided as racially exclusive values of “whiteness.”

All the while, free speech itself, which Douglass called the “great moral renovator of society and government,” is under threat as never before. Cancel culture, social media mobs, and intolerant campus administrators are so ubiquitous that only the most obtuse defenders of the new orthodoxy can deny their existence or minimize the danger they pose.

Can the freedom of speech that Douglass held so dear make a comeback?

In early July, a largely center-left group of writers, historians, and scholars published an open letter at *Harper’s Magazine* calling for a recommitment to free speech and open debate. And while its signatories, including Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling and Vox’s Matthew Yglesias, faced sharp backlash from far-left activists, the letter was nonetheless a bold step in the right direction.

More recently, a separate group of prominent scholars, legal experts, and religious leaders signed onto the Philadelphia Statement. Released at Newsweek, the statement’s signatories call “for a renewed commitment to civil discourse and free speech” that is built upon the free speech tradition at the heart of the American experiment.

It’s “the American tradition of freedom of expression,” the statement lays out, that “trains us to think critically, to defend our ideas, and, at the same time, to be considerate of others whose creeds and convictions differ from our own ... And it admonishes us that if we value the freedom

of expression, we must extend the same measure of freedom to others, even to those whom we believe have gone very wrong in their thinking.”

In its first 24 hours, the Statement gained well over 5,000 signatories, adding onto its initial list that included human rights scholar and advocate Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Kevin D. Williamson of *National Review*, and Dr. Charles Murray of the American Enterprise Institute—three public figures who have experienced the human cost of cancel culture firsthand.

Ali grew up in truly oppressive conditions in Somalia, and has spent her adult life advocating for the rights of women and minorities. Yet in 2016, she was targeted by the thoroughly discredited Southern Poverty Law Center as an “anti-Muslim extremist”—an unfounded allegation that not only damaged her reputation, but further compromised her physical safety. In 2018, Williamson was fired by *The Atlantic* at the behest of a Twitter mob just three days after his first piece appeared there. And a year earlier, Murray was caught in the middle of an actual mob at Middlebury College, where he had been invited as a guest speaker by a student group.

Perhaps fueled by alarming instances like these, a recent poll from the Cato Institute found that 62 percent of Americans are afraid to share their own political views.

With cancel culture threatening American life in a variety of ways, a return to first principles is essential. It is crucial that people are heard—and not just public figures or those who hold popular or majority opinions. Freedom of speech is most important for the marginalized, the unpopular, those whose opinions are outside of the current norm.

In 1860, there’s no doubt that the abolitionist views of Frederick Douglass were outside the mainstream, and radical—indeed, fighting words to many. But Douglass’ courageous, relentless commitment to the liberty of the mind and freedom of speech played a major role in achieving the physical liberation of millions of Americans bound in chains.

Following Douglass’ example, the Philadelphia Statement is a prime opportunity for everyday Americans to recommit to the values of free speech and robust civil discourse. After all, as Douglass reminds us, our freedom is only meaningful if we can say what we mean and allow others to do the same.