

What Frederick Douglass Stood For

Congress is erecting a monument to him, but they'd be better off remembering his ideals.

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Wednesday, Congress will dedicate a statue of Frederick Douglass in the Capitol Rotunda. The dedication ceremony has unfortunately become wrapped up in the politics surrounding the District of Columbia's lack of representation in Congress, but that controversy aside, it is hard to think of a man more deserving of the honor.

An escaped slave and leading abolitionist, orator and newspaper publisher, diplomat and adviser to presidents, Douglass was without a doubt one of the great voices for human freedom. Going far beyond opposition to slavery, Douglass was a relentless advocate for individual rights, whether speaking of blacks, women, Native Americans, or immigrants. Equally important, Douglass knew that government power posed a threat to those rights.

Douglass understood that the proper role of government was to protect individual rights and guarantee equality before the law, not to dispense favors to this group or that. For example, in his famous April 1865 speech, "What the Black Man Wants," Douglass declared, "The American people have always been anxious to know what they shall do with us. . . . I have had but one answer from the beginning. Do nothing with us! If the Negro cannot stand on his own legs, let him fall. All I ask is, give him a chance to stand on his own legs! Let him alone!"

Douglass's message was not just about African Americans. Rather, it offers a stinging rebuke to all those who believe that men and women cannot be the masters of their own fates.

The freedom that Douglass agitated for was not the freedom of the welfare state. Simply providing for people's material needs was not a substitute for giving them their freedom. Besides, "doing for" all too easily morphed into "doing to," an opportunity to do "mischief," as he put it. He knew that, as President Gerald Ford once said (in a quote often misattributed to Barry Goldwater), "a government big enough to give you everything you want is big enough to take away everything you have."

He strongly believed in *limited* government, claiming there was no "governmental authority to pass laws, nor compel obedience to any laws that are against the natural rights and happiness of men."

Moreover, Douglass understood that economic liberty was a crucial component of liberty more generally. He believed in private property and the accumulation of wealth. When a speaker from the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society compared "wage slavery" to "chattel slavery," Douglass declared such sentiments to be "arrant nonsense," and argued

forcefully that “so far from being a sin to accumulate property, it is the plain duty of every man to lay up something for the future.”

He rejected class warfare, saying, “I have no sympathy for the narrow, selfish notion of economy which assumes that every crumb of bread which goes into the mouth of one class is so much taken from the mouths of another class.” And while acknowledging the imperfections of capitalism in practice, he nonetheless saw it as the best engine for both individual betterment and economic progress.

As for the redistribution of wealth, Douglass warned, “The non-producers now receive the larger share of what those who labor produce. The result is natural. Discontent culminates in exactly the same ratio that intelligence sustains aspiration.”

Those are not exactly the sentiments that one would hear from Occupy Wall Street or the Obama administration. In fact, modern liberal historians have accused Douglass of having a “pro-capitalist bias,” in the words of the University of Virginia’s Waldo Martin. Yale’s David Blight criticizes Douglass for preaching “laissez-faire individualism.”

Perhaps. Certainly Douglass would have had no use for today’s leviathan state that tells people how to save for their retirement, what health insurance to buy, what charities to support, what to eat, or whom they can marry. He would have been shocked by a government from which roughly 60 percent of Americans receive more in benefits than they pay to it in federal taxes. The man who advocated self-help and hard work would never have accepted a welfare state that has trapped generations in poverty. This passionate advocate of achievement through education would have been appalled by a system that puts the interests of teachers above those of students and forces parents to continue sending their children to failing schools. And the man who preached thrift and wrote that “I had a wholesome dread of the consequences of running in *debt*” would have certainly opposed the profligacy that’s produced our \$16.7 trillion national debt.

A memorial to Douglass in the Capitol is long overdue. But an even better tribute would be for a few more members of Congress to remember what this great man said, and what he stood for.

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