

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Document Based Activity

Part 4: Gathering Forces

MISSION 2: "Flight to Freedom"

The Power of Rhetoric

Today's 24-hour political news media cycle tends to be built on five second sound bites, slickly marketed campaign advertisements, and endless analysis by media pundits. In the 19th century, however, the primary political tool was still the speech—the often extended and sometimes fiery public addresses in which politicians summoned their erudite mastery of rhetoric to advance their positions and denounce those of their opponents. Many of these speeches—often widely read and hotly debated at the time—have since become landmarks of American history, as notable for their eloquence as their content.

Politicians today still give speeches today, of course, but they tend to be shorter, simpler, and more informal. While this reflects our more casual usage of language more generally, it also reflects a specifically diminished appreciation for finely-wrought oratory. "Rhetoric"—the art of persuasive public speaking—was once considered fundamental to a good education, but to many modern ears, the sophisticated vocabulary, extended metaphors, grammatical polish, and classical allusions of 19th century speechifying sound suspiciously artificial, and even undemocratic. We tend to prefer that our politicians at least give the impression of being plain-talking and down-to-earth people. It remains to be seen, however, how many contemporary political sound bites will end up chiseled onto public buildings or etched in our collective consciousness.

Whatever one thinks of rhetoric, it has only ever been a tool for its practitioners, used as effectively on one side of a debate as the other. Below are two famous examples of 19th century political oratory—one arguing that slavery is a "natural" arrangement to the benefit of both races, and the other condemning its utter injustice—particularly in a nation so idealistically conceived as the United States. The questions following will challenge your students to compare and contrast the two speeches, considering the rhetorical devices used by each, estimating their effectiveness at the time, and judging their legacy today.

A Note to the Educator

As with the other "Flight to Freedom" Document-Based Activities, you might wish to share the speeches and the following questions with your students, and give them some time to read and answer them, independently or in small groups, before you begin full-class discussion.

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"The 'Mudsill' Theory"
by James Henry Hammond
from a speech to the U.S. Senate, March 4, 1858

James Henry Hammond was a wealthy 19th century plantation owner 19th century who represented South Carolina in both the U.S. Congress and Senate, and served as that state's governor from 1842 to 1848. He was best known at the time as an outspoken defender of slavery and states' rights. The following excerpt is from his famous "Mudsill Theory" speech, made to the U.S. Senate on March 4, 1858, in which he attempted to justify slavery by claiming that having an underclass performing "menial duties" is what allows a civilization to progress. Hammond further insisted that the South looked after its slaves better than the North cared for its poor.

docility – an ability to be taught fidelity – loyalty	In all social systems there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life. That is, a class requiring but a low order of intellect and but little skill. Its requisites are vigor, docility, fidelity. Such a class you must have, or you would not have that other class which leads
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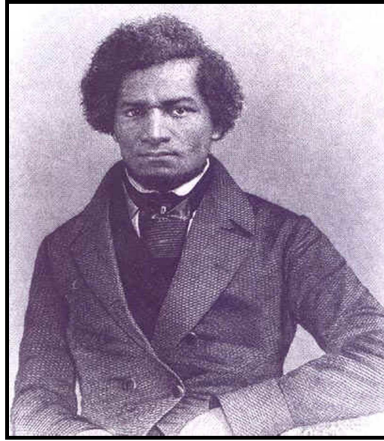
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<p>mud-sill - the lowest level of a building; a foundation</p> <p><i>"lex naturae est"</i> - (Latin) "is natural law"</p> <p>"ears polite" – higher class society</p> <p>repeals – removes, reverses fiat – a command or declaration</p> <p>hireling – one who works for money without regard for the nature of the work</p> <p>want - lack</p>	<p>progress, civilization, and refinement. It constitutes the very mud-sill of society and of political government; and you might as well attempt to build a house in the air, as to build either the one or the other, except on this mud-sill. Fortunately for the South, she found a race adapted to that purpose to her hand. A race inferior to her own, but eminently qualified in temper, in vigor, in docility, in capacity to stand the climate, to answer all her purposes. We use them for our purpose, and call them slaves. We found them slaves by the common "consent of mankind," which, according to Cicero, <i>"lex naturae est."</i> The highest proof of what is Nature's law. We are old-fashioned at the South yet; slave is a word discarded now by "ears polite;" I will not characterize that class at the North by that term; but you have it; it is there; it is everywhere; it is eternal.</p> <p>The Senator from New York said yesterday that the whole world had abolished slavery. Aye, the name, but not the thing; all the powers of the earth cannot abolish that. God only can do it when he repeals the fiat, "the poor ye always have with you;" for the man who lives by daily labor, and scarcely lives at that, and who has to put out his labor in the market, and take the best he can get for it; in short, your whole hireling class of manual laborers and "operatives," as you call them, are essentially slaves. The difference between us is, that our slaves are hired for life and well compensated; there is no starvation, no begging, no want of employment among our people, and not too much employment either. Yours are hired by the day, not cared for, and scantily compensated, which may be proved in the most painful manner, at any hour in any street in any of your large towns. Why, you meet more beggars in one day, in any single street of the city of New York, than you would meet in a lifetime in the whole South. We do not think that whites should be slaves either by law or necessity. Our slaves are black, of another and inferior race. The status in which we have placed them is an elevation. They are elevated from the condition in which God first created</p>
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<p>galled - humiliated</p> <p>hearthstones – fireplaces, symbolic of the home</p>	<p>them, by being made our slaves. None of that race on the whole face of the globe can be compared with the slaves of the South. They are happy, content, unambitious, and utterly incapable, from intellectual weakness, ever to give us any trouble by their aspirations. Yours are white, of your own race; you are brothers of one blood. They are your equals in natural endowment of intellect, and they feel galled by their degradation. Our slaves do not vote. We give them no political power. Yours do vote, and, being the majority, they are the depositories of all your political power. If they knew the tremendous secret, that the ballot-box is stronger than "an army with banners," and could combine, where would you be? Your society would be reconstructed, your government overthrown, your property divided, not as they have mistakenly attempted to initiate such proceedings by meeting in parks, with arms in their hands, but by the quiet process of the ballot-box. You have been making war upon us to our very hearthstones. How would you like for us to send lecturers and agitators North, to teach these people this, to aid in combining, and to lead them?</p> <p>Picture: http://www.sciway.net/hist/governors/hammond.html</p> <p>Speech: www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h3439t.html</p>
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Frederick Douglass
Fourth of July Speech, 1852

When the leading citizens of Rochester, New York invited the famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass to speak on the Fourth of July, 1852, they were well aware of the powerful irony of having the former slave speak at a celebration of the country's independence. In this dramatic piece of oratory, Douglass takes on defenders of slavery by making the hideousness of slavery clear and unmistakable. He makes quick work of those who defend slavery with scripture, and severely criticizes America as hypocritical for celebrating "independence" while four million people remained enslaved in the South.

	<p>This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn....</p> <p>I shall see this day and its popular characteristics from the slave's point of view....</p> <p>Must I undertake to prove that the slave is a man? That point is conceded already. Nobody doubts it. The slave-holders themselves acknowledge it in the enactment of laws for their</p>
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<p>ciphering – doing arithmetic</p>	<p>government. They acknowledge it when they punish disobedience on the part of the slave. There are seventy-two crimes in the State of Virginia, which, if committed by a black man (no matter how ignorant he be), subject him to the punishment of death; while only two of these same crimes will subject a white man to like punishment.</p> <p>What is this but the acknowledgment that the slave is a moral, intellectual, and responsible being? The manhood of the slave is conceded. It is admitted in the fact that Southern statute books are covered with enactments, forbidding, under severe fines and penalties, the teaching of the slave to read and write. When you can point to any such laws in reference to the beasts of the field, then I may consent to argue the manhood of the slave....</p> <p>For the present it is enough to affirm the equal manhood of the Negro race. Is it not astonishing that, while we are plowing, planting, and reaping, using all kinds of mechanical tools, erecting houses, constructing bridges, building ships, working in metals of brass, iron, copper, silver, and gold; that while we are reading, writing, and ciphering, acting as clerks, merchants, and secretaries, having among us lawyers, doctors, ministers, poets, authors, editors, orators, and teachers; that we are engaged in all the enterprises common to other men -- digging gold in California, capturing the whale in the Pacific, feeding sheep and cattle on the hillside, living, moving, acting, thinking, planning, living in families as husbands, wives, and children, and above all, confessing and worshipping the Christian God, and looking hopefully for life and immortality beyond the grave -- we are called upon to prove that we are men?....</p> <p>What! Am I to argue that it is wrong to make men brutes, to rob them of their liberty, to work them without wages, to keep them ignorant of their relations to their fellow men, to beat</p>
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them with sticks, to flay their flesh with the lash, to load their limbs with irons, to hunt them with dogs, to sell them at auction, to sunder their families, to knock out their teeth, to burn their flesh, to starve them into obedience and submission to their masters? Must I argue that a system thus marked with blood and stained with pollution is wrong? No - I will not. I have better employment for my time and strength than such arguments would imply.

What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer, a day that reveals to him more than all other days of the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.... There is not a nation of the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of these United States at this very hour.

Speech: <http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/douglass.htm>

Picture:

<http://symonsez.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/douglass.jpg>

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Discussion Questions

1. What arguments does each speaker use to make his case for or against slavery and the racial inferiority of Africans?

2. How would you describe the speaker's tone in each speech?

3. Who is the audience for each speaker? How do you think each speaker has tailored his remarks to their audience?

4. How does each speaker describe the nature of slavery?

5. If you were designing a historical monument to commemorate the pre-Civil War debate on slavery, and had to feature a quote from each of these speeches, which would it be?

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Discussion Questions (Answer Key)

1. What arguments does each speaker use to make his case for or against slavery and the racial inferiority of Africans? (*Hammond is defending slavery as part of a "natural" order in which a supposedly inferior race is happily "hired for life" as slaves to a supposedly superior race; he further draws a critical comparison with the North, where he claims that working poor are more profoundly exploited than any southern slave. Douglass argues that the very existence of Southern statues against teaching slaves to read or write tacitly acknowledge slaves' "manhood" or humanity, as do the virtually infinite number of roles and occupations which had already been successfully undertaken by blacks.*)
2. How would you describe the speaker's tone in the speech? (*Hammond affects a pseudo-scientific tone of dispassionate rationality: he claims to be only describing only a "natural" order of things in slavery—and indeed one more humane than that of the North. Douglass, on the other hand, does not bother to conceal his contempt for a nation which continues to permit the outrage of slavery.*)
3. Who is the audience for each speaker? How do you think each speaker has tailored his remarks to their audience? (*Hammond is addressing the United States Senate—a body of highly educated, overwhelming wealthy, and entirely white males. Accordingly, he is able to base his entire argument on an extended metaphor of slavery as "mudsill of society" necessary for civilization—namely, men like those in his audience—to progress. He further grounds his "us against them" appeal by invoking Northern senators' fears of an armed uprising by their own disenfranchised poor. Douglass' audience are prominent citizens of the northern city of Rochester who were certainly aware of their famous guest's position on slavery; nevertheless, one suspects that Douglass intended his fiery words to shame his audience into greater abolitionist action than inviting a former slave to speak at their 4th of July celebration.*)
4. How does each speaker describe the nature of slavery? (*For Hammond, slavery is essentially an economic system, more or less humane to its sub-human cogs. For Douglass, slavery is a hellishly brutal experience that robs slaves of their humanity.*)
5. If you were designing a historical monument to commemorate the pre-Civil War debate for and against slavery, and had to feature a quote from each of these speeches, which would it be? (*Accept all answers.*)