



Written by [Dennis Behreandt](#) on November 20, 2017

Published in the November 20, 2017 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 33, No. 22

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## Slavery: The Deep History of the Great Evil

**Modern observers single out America as being responsible for the great evil of slavery. But, put in full historical context, the great achievement of the Founders is the first real bulwark against one of civilization's darkest and most pervasive evils.**



Representative John Conyers (D-Mich.), now 88 years old and America's longest-serving member of Congress, has done once more what he has done in each Congress in which he has served, namely, introduce a bill calling for reparations for slavery. Introduced for the 28th time, Conyers' bill, HR 40, presently has 32 cosponsors.

In its introduction, the bill calls on Congress to "address the fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity of slavery in the United States and the 13 American colonies between 1619 and 1865 and to establish a commission to study and consider a national apology and proposal for reparations for the institution of slavery, its subsequent de jure and de facto racial and economic discrimination against African-Americans, and the impact of these forces on living African-Americans, to make recommendations to the Congress on appropriate remedies, and for other purposes."

Among those appropriate remedies to be considered are reparations. "If the Commission finds that such compensation is warranted, what should be the amount of compensation, what form of compensation should be awarded, and who should be eligible for such compensation" will be among the questions that the committee would determine.

Irrespective of the issue of reparations, this bill, and most modern discussion of slavery, presupposes the idea that America is not only especially guilty of slavery, but is solely responsible for slavery. This central idea is embedded within the broader racist contention that whites in general and white American men in particular are responsible for, and guilty of, the barbarity of slavery.

*Mother Jones*, in its coverage of the Conyers legislation, declares that "America Has Never Truly Atoned For Slavery." In 2016, the United Nations singled out the United States as particularly responsible for slavery, chastising the country for "the legacy of colonial history, enslavement, racial subordination and segregation, racial terrorism and racial inequality." The UN's conclusions followed only a few months after an article published by both *Salon* and *AlterNet* that assigned sole blame for slavery and racism to America in general and white men in particular, using peculiarly apocalyptic rhetoric. "The future of life on the planet depends on bringing the 500-year rampage of the white man to a halt," the article



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thundered. "For five centuries his ever more destructive weaponry has become far too common. His widespread and better systems of exploiting other humans and nature dominate the globe."

Slavery, like genocide, its near relative, is among the greatest crimes that can be perpetrated and is deplored and opposed by anyone and everyone who is a friend of liberty. But those who most aggressively point to America's "special guilt" for slavery and racism do so while engaging in their own brand of dangerously racist identity politics. These always seek to divide groups and pit them against each other, with the goal being to diminish individual rights and liberties *for everyone*.

Avoiding the traps laid by demagogues and tyrants in pursuit of power requires a clear view of history. Those looking back to the past will find that not only is America not solely guilty and responsible for slavery, but that slavery, like tyranny in general, has been a universally endemic pox on post-Neolithic human existence and that America was and remains the first and most powerful impediment to these evils.

## **The Genesis of Tyranny**

The beginning of civilization is lost in the deep mists of time, beginning, it is thought, not long after the last of the ice retreated 10,000 or more years ago. In what is called the "Neolithic Revolution," some hunter gatherers gradually transitioned to more settled agricultural lives, forming villages and even early cities. Many of these remain incredibly mysterious. Among the oldest is Çatalhöyük, a city that may have housed 10,000 people and that was already thousands of years ancient when the pyramids appeared in Egypt. Older still is Göbekli Tepe, and, if possible, even more mysterious, as it has long been thought that very early Neolithic human society would not be capable of the social organization necessary for the construction of such a site.

Though there is little but speculation about the people who lived in and built sites such as Göbekli Tepe and Çatalhöyük and other ancient late Paleolithic and early Neolithic settlements, it is often thought they lived in a form of Utopia, an ancient Eden where all were equal and peace prevailed.

Yet it was at this time that social organization began to include kinship arrangements that resulted in families, embedded within larger clans that were themselves embedded within the villages, arrangements that likely provided both advantages and tensions within the villages.

How this developed, and the stratification this may have led to, was described by archeologist Dr. Cédric Bodet of Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University in Turkey. In a paper on Göbekli Tepe, Bodet argued that women, due to the importance of motherhood for the survival of the group, were exchanged in a structural way between village clans.

Bodet posits that at Göbekli Tepe, as in other early Neolithic villages, social stratification began as a means of avoiding endogamy (i.e., incest) through the exchange of women between clans.

"The group, which can be referred to as a tribe, is artificially divided into subgroups (moieties, clans, sections, descent lines, etc.) exchanging their women on the basis of reciprocity, according to which a subgroup gives its women and receives, immediately or belatedly, the same number. The internal division follows either one of the genitors, according to the recognized type of descent: female in a matrilineal society, or a male in a patrilineal one. A horizontal or generational division can be added to this vertical division, thus assigning everyone a class.... In primitive societies, which include (early) Neolithic ones, kinship is thus termed 'classificatory.'"



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Bodet notes, for example, that in practice, “exogamous groups exchange mates in a symmetrical pattern: a man from moiety A can only marry a woman from moiety B and vice versa; in its simplest form, referred to as the dualistic organization, the men of two moieties exchange their sisters. Sometimes divided once more into 4 sections (where a generational parameter intervenes), and sometimes again into 8 subsections, the tribe always operates under a direct and reciprocal pattern of exchange and does not open itself to other groups (at least for matters of alliance).”

It’s possible, and probably a certainty, that from this arrangement, jealousies and conflicts may arise. This is exacerbated almost certainly by the simultaneously arising stratification by craft or skill. This includes the rise of skilled agriculturalists, magicians, priests, and healers, and the advent of early skilled workers in metallurgy, with evidence of copper tools appearing as early as 5000 B.C. in the form of a copper awl found in a woman’s grave at Tel Tsaf, an archaeological site in Israel. Interestingly, that awl appears to have been made of copper that originated over 600 miles away, demonstrating the existence of extensive trade networks and complex organization.

The social stratification of the villages in the form of clans as described by Professor Bodet, along with the rise of technical specialization in economic activities, contributed to the growth of early political organization, and with it, armed conflict.

Twentieth-century humanist historian Herbert J. Muller described the outcome, and hinted at the relationship of this to the rise of slavery in his book *Freedom in the Ancient World*:

Although the early villagers seem everywhere to have been peaceful types, the neolithic revolution itself had destructive potentialities. If man was no longer merely preying on nature, killing for his livelihood, he was exploiting nature more aggressively.... And as he prospered he began struggling more violently for survival against his own kind. The spread of neolithic culture stimulated cupidity and conflict as well as creativity; the fences around early villages gave way to ramparts. The abrupt changes in culture that sometimes appear in the layers of settlements found in Near Eastern mounds suggest that invaders conquered the previous inhabitants. The newcomers may not have exterminated them, but put them to work.... In the long run the mixture resulting from such conquests would prove a major means to the development and enrichment of culture. The process was nonetheless hard on the villager, the embryonic slave.

## **Conquest, Genocide, and Slavery**

The relationship between military conquest and slavery is so ubiquitous that it can almost be considered causal. It similarly underscores the relationship between slavery and genocide, two seemingly separate crimes that are, in fact, intimately related.

Genocide came first. In early warfare in the ancient near east, those defeated in war or captured were usually killed. According to the late Assyriologist Ignace Gelb of the University of Chicago, “In the primitive, subsistence economy of tribal and semi tribal societies, POWs are normally killed. They are killed because on this low economic level there is no way to utilize them effectively, and because controls over unruly, foreign elements, normally exercised by the established state apparatus, are lacking.”

The early Near Eastern cultures had laws against killing, as transmitted down to the present by the ancient codes of Hammurabi and Ur-Nammu, for example. The latter, a code dating to 2100 B.C.,



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demands that any man who commits murder or who commits a robbery is to be killed. Yet this law does not apply to war captives. By virtue of defeat and capture in war, those captured have had their native clan and kinship relationships severed. Whether or not early Near Eastern society had a well-rounded understanding of individualism apart from the kinship system or not, the severing of the kinship relationship by defeat in war left the captive devoid of legitimate connection to society. The conqueror was, therefore, within the law fully able to dispose of captives in any way desired, either through slaughter, or later, the living death of slavery.

This turns out to have been true not only in the Near East, but in other primitive societies as well. "I am aware of the sporadic existence of slavery derived from POWs among the so-called primitive societies, as among the African Dahomey and Ashanti and the Creeks of northeast America, where POW slaves were at times sacrificed, at times utilized as labor," Gelb wrote. "But it is interesting to note that even among the Aztecs, whose economy was on a much higher level than that of the tribal, 'primitive' societies, POWs were generally killed, if not on the battlefield, then in the temples, where they were sacrificed to the gods by the thousands."

Roughly dating to the same era as the Ur-Nammu code, we have coming down to the present ancient reports of the disposition of war captives. Roughly between the years 2043 and 2034 B.C., during the reign of the king Šu-Sin of the Third Dynasty of Ur, the region around Šimanum was defeated. According to Gelb, Šu-Sin "offered (the population) ex-voto to his 'servitude,' and settled the enemy 'slaves,' his booty, in a town on the frontier of Nippur for (dedicated to?) Enlil and Ninlil."

It would be tempting to think of the slavery of war captives by kings such as Šu-Sin as deviations from normal society, but the Ur-Nammu code, in that it contains several clauses related to laws on slavery, demonstrates thereby that the practice of slavery was normal and common in the Near East. In its relevant sections, the code mandates:

- If a slave marries a slave, and that slave is set free, he does not leave the household.
- If a slave marries a native (i.e., free) person, he is to hand the firstborn son over to his owner.
- If a man proceeded by force, and deflowered the virgin female slave of another man, that man must pay five shekels of silver.
- If a slave escapes from the city limits, and someone returns him, the owner shall pay two shekels to the one who returned him.
- If a man's slave-woman, comparing herself to her mistress, speaks insolently to her, her mouth shall be scoured with one quart of salt.

From such beginnings, slavery would remain endemic in the Near East, and most famously in Egypt. But it became much the same elsewhere in place and time. Moving west to Greece and forward in time by a millennium, a migrating group of Dorians settled in lands already occupied by Achaeans. This was the genesis of the polis of Sparta, which became famous in the ancient world, as now, for its martial glories and its thorough, despicable tyranny.

That tyranny included not merely the subjugation of the native population, but the enslavement of them. These unfortunates were dubbed *helots*. Historian Jacob Burkhardt, recounting the history of Sparta in his *History of Greek Culture*, noted that the "rise of Sparta was especially hard on the peoples it subjugated. For them the only choices were enslavement, expulsion, or extermination."



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From that point forward, under Spartan rule, the helots became hereditary slaves. “They could get married and have some family life,” recounted Burkhardt, “yet, to be bred to slavery was utter wretchedness in the eyes of the Greek. The Spartiates permitted no traffic in slaves ... but toward these erstwhile fellow Hellenes they maintained a hard and steady rigor unmitigated by any kindly feelings such as Greeks elsewhere at times were wont to show toward slaves bought from Scythia and Asia.”

Indeed, the helots were ritually beaten on an annual basis, and regularly humiliated after having been forced to drink unadulterated wine to induce a state of drunkenness. And this was not yet the worst of the treatment handed out to the slaves of the Spartans.

If a helot harbored any ambitions beyond slavery, Burkhardt noted, “he was put to death and his master punished for not having kept the overweening fellow in place.” Moreover, the helot population was culled on a regular basis to keep their numbers in check. “And if they became too numerous,” Burkhardt wrote, “the masters unleashed against them the so-called *crypteia*, which meant going out at night and killing off as many as necessary.”

It wasn't just the Spartans of classical antiquity who subjugated and employed large numbers of slaves. Most famous of all for this practice were the Romans. In his *Evolution of Civilizations*, historian Carroll Quigley pointed to slavery as of central importance to the growth of the Roman state. “The instrument of expansion of Classical civilization was ... slavery,” Quigley argued. “It remained an instrument so long as the slaveowners worked closely with their slaves, often in the fields themselves, as Cincinnatus was doing when appointed dictator [of Rome] because then the surplus from the slave labor which accumulated to the owner from his legal rights over his slaves could be used for some productive use, since the owner's personal knowledge of the agricultural process permitted him to judge where such investment could best be made.”

The slaves of Rome were manual laborers, domestic servants, and even tutors, teachers, and accountants. They were nonetheless held and forced to labor for their masters, and against their own free will, and did not have the advantages, such as they were, of Roman citizens. Indeed, they could be tortured and executed at will. Though they could be freed by their owners, and could and did work to save enough money to buy their freedom, the core fact of slavery remained, and slave revolts occurred periodically, most famously in the Third Servile War. Led by the slave and gladiator Spartacus, the revolt eventually drew more than 100,000 slaves to the Thracian rebel's banner. With this force, he and his lieutenants terrified Rome, and the Senate eventually called on Rome's richest man, Marcus Crassus, to lead the legions against the upstarts. Ultimately, Pompey's legions would be called into the effort as well, but Spartacus and his supporters ultimately succumbed to Crassus. In the end, 6,000 slaves captured by Crassus' legions were crucified along the Appian Way in a terrifying display of Roman power and brutality.

## **A Pervasive Evil**

The practice of slavery did not perish with the fall of Rome. Just as it was widespread in the cultures of the ancient Near East and throughout the period of Classical Antiquity, slavery remained a constant down to the time of the onset of the Atlantic slave trade.

After the rise of Islam, slavery remained as a legally recognized status under Islamic law, and slaves were employed in numerous capacities. Writing in his *History of the Arab Peoples*, Albert Hourani





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noted: "The legal category of slavery included different social groups. From a time early in the 'Abbasid period, the caliphs had recruited slaves coming from the Turkish peoples of Central Asia into their armies, and this practice continued. Military slaves and freedmen, drawn mainly from Central Asia and the Caucasus, and in the Maghreb and Andalusia from the lands of the Slavs, were the supporters of dynasties, and could be their founders; the Mamluks who ruled Egypt and Syria from 1250 to 1517 were a self-perpetuating group of soldiers recruited and trained as slaves, converted to Islam and freed."

Other slaves toiled as agriculturalists after having been captured and transported against their will from East Africa. These Bantu-speaking slaves often labored under harsh conditions in sugar plantations in southern Iraq during the Abbasid period, and were employed in oases in the Sahara desert as well as along the upper Nile.

It was this group that led the greatest slave revolt since Spartacus. Led by perennial malcontent and agitator Ali ibn Muhammad, who had attempted previous uprisings, the Zanj slaves rose against their oppressors in September 869 and persisted in their struggle for some 14 years.

Outnumbered and outgunned by the forces of the Abbasid government, the Zanj under Ali ibn Muhammad were nonetheless able to engage, at least for a time, in a successful campaign of guerrilla warfare. Ultimately, in 883 the rebels were under siege in their last stronghold of al-Mukhtarah, south of Basra. In August of that year, Ali ibn Muhammad and his lieutenants were either captured or killed and the Zanj uprising, which by all accounts had claimed large numbers of lives, was ended.

Broadly, the Zanj uprising could be seen as part of the longest-lasting slave trade system, that being the trans-Saharan slave trade.

Writing in the peer-reviewed journal *BMC Evolutionary Biology*, Nourdin Harich and co-authors Marta Costa, Veronica Fernandez, Mostafa Kandinsky, Joana Pereira, Nuno Silva, and Luisa Pereira point out that the Arab slave trade across the Sahara reached near the same scale as the more infamous Atlantic slave trade, but persisted much, much longer.

"It began in the middle of the seventh century (650 A.D.) and survives still today in Mauritania and Sudan, summing up 14 centuries rather than four as for the Atlantic slave trade," Harich and co-authors wrote in 2010. "Although estimates are very rough, figures are of 4,820,000 for the Saharan trade between 650 and 1600 A.D., and, for comparison purposes, of 2,400,000 for the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean trade between 800 and 1600 A.D."

*This article appears in the November 20, 2017, issue of The New American.*

These slaves were captured and transported for a variety of purposes, according to Harich, et al.:

Males were sought for a variety of functions: door-keepers, secretaries, militaries or eunuchs. Black soldiers were seen from Islamic Spain to Egypt, and in Morocco a whole generation of black young boys were bought at the age of 10 or 11 and trained to become its army. However, the bulk of the trade was in females, as domestic servants, entertainers and/or concubines: two females for every male overall, in contrast to the ratio of two males for every female overall in the Atlantic trade [15]. Some harems could be enormous, reaching even the extravagant number of 14,000 concubines. Young female slaves were instructed in household crafts and were then provided with resources to buy a home and get married.

This is evil on an unimaginable, industrial scale. As such, it had a corrosively self-reinforcing impact on



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the people and societies involved, powered by greed and avarice. Thus we find the intrepid Scottish explorer Mungo Park engaged in an exploratory investigation of West Africa in the 18th century encountering “slatees” — the native slave traders involved in transporting captives from the interior regions of the continent to slave markets.

The slatees, Mungo Park found, were freeman merchants and traders, engaged in carrying goods from the interior of West Africa to the coasts and back. But their trade was not confined just to goods, but most perniciously included slaves.

These, Park recounted in his *Life and Travels*, were “nearly in the proportion of three to one to the freemen.” Moreover, as Park found firsthand during his travels in West Africa, a large number of the “inhabitants of Africa have continued from the most early period of their history” in the state of slavery. Others, as always dating back to the earliest slavery regimes of the ancient Near East, were captured in battle or otherwise kidnapped. In total, this was the source of supply for the Saharan, Atlantic, and Indian Ocean slave trades. The pre-existing presence of this system and the riches available to native traders engaged in supplying the external demand for slaves were strong inducements to engage in the evil business.

Mungo Park recounted the details of the system within West Africa:

There are, indeed, regular markets, where slaves ... are bought and sold; and the value of a slave, in the eye of an African purchaser, increases in proportion to his distance from his native kingdom; for when slaves are only a few days’ journey from the place of their nativity, they frequently effect their escape; but when one or more kingdoms intervene, escape being more difficult, they are more readily reconciled to their situation. On this account, the unhappy slave is frequently transferred from one dealer to another, until he has lost all hopes of returning to his native kingdom. The slaves which are purchased by the Europeans on the Coast are chiefly of this description; a few of them are collected in the petty wars, hereafter to be described, which take place near the Coast; but by far the greater number are brought down in large caravans from the inland countries, of which many are unknown, even by name, to the Europeans.

### **America — A Dream of Freedom**

The foregoing is but the most cursory overview of the genesis, growth, and extent of an evil that is nearly coterminous with the very inception of human civilization. In all ages and all times down to the very present this scourge has been with us. Across all those many centuries, it is only with the dawn of the doctrines of classical liberalism and the concrete foundation of the American Republic that was its signal achievement that we see the first true instrument of human civilization aimed at the destruction of all forms of tyranny, slavery included.

Slavery came to the Americas before the Republic came into existence, and it was promulgated by the British crown, not by American colonists. This point was made by historian Holly Brewer in an interview with *Carolina Journal* in 2009. Brewer pointed out in that interview “that it’s under the Stuarts — Charles II and James II, kings of England — that slavery first begins to be introduced in the empire.”

As Brewer points out, the Stuarts and their ilk believed in a natural social order, not in natural rights and liberties. Thus, slaves should accept their place in the order, as should each class.

Working against this were early classical liberals, most noteworthy among them being John Locke.



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Lately, Locke has been attacked as a hypocrite for having connections of his own to slave owners. But as Brewer points out, Locke actively worked against slavery by promulgating classical liberal ideas that opposed the strict hierarchies of the Stuart monarchical system.

“When he was in a position of real power, he did everything he could to change the course of empire,” Brewer said of Locke. “This is after the Glorious Revolution, the Stuarts have been displaced, and with them their ideas. And instead, there is much more emphasis on government based on the consent of the governed, on the principle that all men are born equal at least — even if they’re not perfectly equal, but at least they should be equal under the law — and Locke really tries to implement those ideas in the empire and to undercut slavery.”

Locke was followed in this effort by the American Founders. Like Locke, they too have been roundly criticized for their own connections to slavery. While demanding freedom and independence for the American colonies, Washington, Jefferson, and others owned their own slaves.

They recognized this paradox themselves. Stuck with the system of slavery that had been imposed on the colonies, they nonetheless set about creating the first constitutional political order that would make it possible to finally put an end, first to the slave trade, and then to slavery itself.

Their attitude was exemplified by slave owner and fervent partisan of freedom Patrick Henry. The great Virginian orator was a slave owner who recognized the need to end slavery, which, he said, is “a principle as repugnant to humanity as it is inconsistent with the Bible and destructive to liberty.” Lamenting that he owned slaves himself, he continued:

Would any one believe that I am master of slaves by my own purchase? I am drawn along by the general inconvenience of living without them. I will not — I cannot justify it, however culpable my conduct. I will so far pay my devoir to Virtue, as to own the excellence and rectitude of her precepts, and to lament my want of conformity to them. I believe a time will come when an opportunity will be afforded to abolish this lamentable evil.

Those words were written in 1773, three years before the Declaration of Independence would set in motion the conditions that would lead to the eventual end of the slave trade.

The author of that document, Thomas Jefferson, would, as president, sign into law legislation that he had promoted in the form of the Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves of 1807, which took effect in 1808 and prevented the legal importation of slaves into the United States. This, though, was often of little import at state and local levels. In New York City and elsewhere, trade in slaves was kept alive and even was boosted by the anti-slavery federal legislation. The end of the slave trade from Africa in 1808 and the spread of cotton cultivation led to a rapid rise in the price of slaves, noted Eric Foner in his book *Gateway to Freedom*. In the 1820s, a gang known as the Blackbirders operated in the Five Points, seizing both fugitives and free blacks living there. *Freedom’s Journal* regularly complained about the facts of kidnapping, not less cruel than those committed on the Coast of Africa, that took place in New York City.

It is the greatest achievement of the United States that, enabled by the vision of its Founders, the Republic was able, through much strife and bloodshed, to eventually end slavery.

It is not easy to end a diabolical practice that has persisted since the dawn of civilization and reached its greatest extent in only the most recent centuries. But the founding principles of liberty that support





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the entire edifice of the American idea and that are given voice in the Declaration of Independence are a strong inoculation against tyranny.

On this point, the great abolitionist and former slave Frederic Douglass rested his hopes. In his tremendous Fourth of July oration, "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro," given in Rochester, New York, in 1852, he lauded those principles as a corrective for the evil of slavery that was as of yet still present.

"I have said that the Declaration of Independence is the ring bolt to the chain of your nation's destiny; so, indeed, I regard it," Douglass said. "The principles contained in that instrument are saving principles. Stand by those principles, be true to them on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever cost."

By using these principles, and calling attention to them, Douglass juxtaposed what the Founding Fathers had created against the reality of the American slavers and exhorted his audiences to bring the reality of the country at last into alignment with its founding principles.

In the Constitution, Douglass argued, "there is neither warrant, license, nor sanction for the hateful thing [slavery]; but interpreted, as it ought to be interpreted, the Constitution is a glorious liberty document. Read its preamble, consider its purposes. Is slavery among them? Is it at the gate way? Or is it in the temple? It is neither."

Ultimately, Douglass echoed the sentiments of Patrick Henry. "Allow me to say, in conclusion, notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented, of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery."

Those forces against tyranny remain in operation today, hence the reason so many demagogues, like the slavers of Douglass' day, would seek to obscure and even obstruct or overthrow the Constitution and the principles of the Declaration.

Those who criticize America today for its supposed singular guilt for slavery are among those who would damage or destroy those very principles that undergirded the hopes and dreams Douglass expressed in his Fourth of July oration.

With a more thorough view of the history of the deplorable tyrannies of the past, including slavery, and the unique position the American Republic holds as the singular impediment to new tyrannies only now imagined in the minds of ambitious despots, we can join with Douglass across the past century and hang fast our hopes on the sturdy bulwark of the American ideas of freedom and independence.

The future of liberty, "for ourselves and our posterity," demands it.



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