"Fighting Rebels with Only One Hand" by Frederick Douglass / delivered in September 1861

What on earth is the matter with the American Government and people? Do they really covet the world's ridicule as well as their own social and political ruin? What are they thinking about, or don't they condescend\* to think at all? So, indeed, it would seem from their blindness in dealing with the tremendous issue now upon them. Was there ever anything like it before? They are sorely pressed on 5 every hand by a vast army of slaveholding rebels, flushed with success, and infuriated by the darkest inspirations of a deadly hate, bound to rule or ruin.

Washington, the seat of Government, after ten thousand assurances to the contrary, is now positively in danger of falling before the rebel army. Maryland, a little while ago considered safe for the Union, is now admitted to be studded with the materials for insurrection\*, and which may flame forth at any 10 moment.--Every resource of the nation, whether of men or money, whether of wisdom or strength, could be well employed to avert the impending ruin. Yet most evidently the demands of the hour are not comprehended by the Cabinet or the crowd.

Our Presidents, Governors, Generals and Secretaries are calling, with almost frantic vehemence, for men.--"Men! men! send us men!" they scream, or the cause of the Union is gone, the life of a great 15 nation is ruthlessly sacrificed, and the hopes of a great nation go out in darkness; and yet these very officers, representing the people and Government, steadily and persistently refuse to receive the very class of men which have a deeper interest in the defeat and humiliation of the rebels, than all others.

Men are wanted in Missouri, wanted in Western Virginia, to hold and defend what has been already gained; they are wanted in Texas, and all along the sea coast, and though the Government has at its 20 command a class in the country deeply interested in suppressing the insurrection, it sternly refuses to summon from among the vast multitude a single man, and degrades and insults the whole class by refusing to allow any of their number to defend with their strong arms and brave hearts the national cause. What a spectacle of blind, unreasoning prejudice and pusillanimity\* is this! The national edifice\* is on fire. Every man who can carry a bucket of water, or remove a brick, is wanted; but those who have 25 the care of the building, having a profound respect for the feeling of the national burglars who set the building on fire, are determined that the flames shall only be extinguished by [white] hands, and to have the building burnt rather than save it by means of any other. Such is the pride, the stupid prejudice and folly that rules the hour.

Why does the Government reject the Negro? Is he not a man? Can he not wield a sword, fire a gun, 30 march and countermarch, and obey orders like any other? Is there the least reason to believe that a regiment of well-drilled Negroes would deport themselves less soldier-like on the battlefield than the raw troops gathered up generally from the towns and cities of the State of New York? We do believe that such soldiers, if allowed to take up arms in defense of the Government, and made to feel that they are hereafter to be recognized as persons having rights, would set the highest example of order and 35 general good behavior to their fellow soldiers, and in every way add to the national power.

If persons so humble as we can be allowed to speak to the President of the United States, we should ask him if this dark and terrible hour of the nation's extremity is a time for consulting a mere vulgar and unnatural prejudice? We should ask him if national preservation and necessity were not better guides in this emergency than either the tastes of the rebels, or the pride and prejudices of the vulgar? We would 40 tell him that General Jackson\* in a slave state fought side by side with Negroes at New Orleans, and like a true man, despising meanness, he bore testimony to their bravery at the close of the war. We would tell him that colored men in Rhode Island and Connecticut performed their full share in the war of the Revolution, and that men of the same color, such as the noble Shields Green, Nathaniel Turner and Denmark Vesey\* stand ready to peril everything at the command of the Government. We would tell him 45 that this is no time to fight with one hand, when both are needed; that this is no time to fight only with your white hand, and allow your black hand to remain tied. [ . . . ]

It is now pretty well established, that there are at the present moment many colored men in the Confederate army doing duty not only as cooks, servants and laborers, but as real soldiers, having muskets on their shoulders, and bullets in their pockets, ready to shoot down loyal troops, and do all that 50 soldiers may to destroy the Federal Government and build up that of the traitors and rebels.

There were such soldiers at Manassas\*, and they are probably there still. There is a Negro in the army as well as in the fence, and our Government is likely to find it out before the war comes to an end. That the Negroes are numerous in the rebel army, and do for that army its heaviest work, is beyond question. They have been the chief laborers upon those temporary defenses in which the rebels have been able to 55 mow down our men. Negroes helped to build the batteries\* at Charleston. They relieve their gentlemanly and military masters from the stiffening drudgery of the camp, and devote them to the nimble and dexterous use of arms. Rising above vulgar prejudice, the slaveholding rebel accepts the aid of the black man as readily as that of any other. If a bad cause can do this, why should a good cause be less wisely conducted? We insist upon it, that one black regiment in such a war as this is, without being 60 any more brave and orderly, would be worth to the Government more than two of any other; and that, while the Government continues to refuse the aid of colored men, thus alienating them from the national cause, and giving the rebels the advantage of them, it will not deserve better fortunes than it has thus far experienced.--Men in earnest don't fight with one hand, when they might fight with two, and a man drowning would not refuse to be saved even by a colored hand.

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| condescend (3): deign | insurrection (9): an act of revolt | pusillanimity (23): timidity or cowardice | national edifice (23): a building or complex organization |
| General Jackson (40): Andrew Jackson. African-Americans fought in the Battle of New Orleans alongside Jackson. | Shields Green, Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey (43-44): leaders of slave revolts | Manassas (51): Site of the Battle of Bull Run, an important victory for the Confederate army | batteries (55): a fortified emplacement for heavy guns. Um, a fort. |

1. What sort of tone does Douglass establish in the opening paragraph? How do these questions make his feelings about the American government clear?

2. Douglass does not provide evidence for the claims he makes in paragraph 2 (“Washington [ . . . ] is now positively in danger of falling before the rebel army” (7-8) ). Does this oversight hurt his argument? Is it fallacious?

3. Who is the “class of men” to which Douglass refers (17)?

4. Explain the metaphor that begins on line 23. What effect does this metaphor intend to have on the audience?

5. What counterarguments does Douglass address in lines 29-35?

6. Where does Douglass provide grounds to prove his claim that African-Americans are capable of fighting in the Union army?

7. Explain the main metaphor of the text. What effect does Douglass intend this metaphor to have on his audience? (Be sure to identify the audience as well.)