

# Frederick Douglass, “What the Black Man Wants”



**ABOUT THE READING** As the Civil War was drawing to a close, former slave Frederick Douglass gave this speech at an abolitionist meeting in Boston. Douglass was looking ahead to the best way to protect the rights of the newly freed slaves.

## VOCABULARY

**phraseology** choice of words

**enfranchisement** having the rights of citizenship

**enmity** hatred



*As you read think about why Douglass argued that former slaves should be given the right to vote.*

I have had but one idea for the last three years to present to the American people, and the **phraseology** in which I clothe it is the old abolition phraseology. I am for the “immediate, unconditional, and universal” **enfranchisement** of the black man, in every State in the Union. Without this, his liberty is a mockery; without this, you might as well almost retain the old name of slavery for his condition; for in fact, if he is not the slave of the individual master, he is the slave of society, and holds his liberty as a privilege, not as a right. He is at the mercy of the mob, and has no means of protecting himself. . .

[T]his war shall not cease until every freedman at the South has the right to vote. It has bound itself to it. What have you asked the black men of the South, the black men of the whole country to do? Why, you have asked them to incur the **enmity** of their masters, in order to befriend you and to befriend this Government. You have asked us to call down, not only upon ourselves, but upon our children’s children, the deadly hate of the entire Southern people. You have called upon us to turn

Source: “Blacks Should Have the Right to Vote,” Frederick Douglass, 1865.

our backs upon our masters, to abandon their cause and espouse yours; to turn against the South and in favor of the North; to shoot down the Confederacy and uphold the flag—the American flag. . . To reward your enemies, and trample in the dust your friends? Do you intend to sacrifice the very men who have come to the rescue of your banner in the South, and incurred the lasting displeasure of their masters thereby? Do you intend to sacrifice them and reward your enemies? Do you mean to give your enemies the right to vote, and take it away from your friends? Is that wise policy? Is that honorable? Could American honor withstand such a blow? I do not believe you will do it. I think you will see to it that we have the right to vote. There is something too mean in looking upon the Negro, when you are in trouble, as a citizen, and when you are free from trouble, as an alien. When this nation was in trouble, in its early struggles, it looked upon the Negro as a citizen. In 1776 he was a citizen. At the time of the formation of the Constitution the Negro had the right to vote in eleven States out of the old thirteen. In your trouble you have made us citizens. In 1812 Gen. Jackson addressed us as citizens—“fellow-citizens.” He wanted us to fight. We were citizens then! And now, when you come to frame a conscription bill, the Negro is a citizen again. He has been a citizen just three times in the history of this government, and it has always been in time of trouble. In time of trouble we are citizens. Shall we be citizens in war, and aliens in peace? Would that be just?

**Douglass is referring to African Americans.**

**He refers to the original thirteen colonies.**

**During the War of 1812, Andrew Jackson called on African Americans to fight against the British.**

**A conscription bill calls for a military draft.**

**WHAT DID YOU LEARN?**

1. Why does Douglass say that “liberty is a mockery” for former slaves if they do not have the right to vote?

---

---

2. At what times does Douglass argue that African Americans have been treated as citizens? Explain that position and provide examples from the text to support it.

---

---

---