

■ Declaration of Sentiments of the American Anti-Slavery Convention

Date: 1833

Author: William Lloyd Garrison

Genre: Public Declaration

Summary Overview

It is not an exaggeration to say that William Lloyd Garrison's speeches and writings, including his "Declaration of Sentiments of the American Anti-Slavery Convention" significantly altered the conversation about slavery in the United States. Garrison's brand of radical abolition startled people in the north while terrifying and angering slave owners in the south. This declaration, in particular, sets out some important aspects of Garrison's viewpoint on slavery that would inform the rest of his career. The first is his militancy—he presents the fight against slavery as equal in importance and consequence as the American Revolution. Garrison's militancy, however, is one of spirit rather than of physical force. While Garrison will reject "all carnal weapons," he believes his cause will triumph because, like the American founders, "the honest conviction that Truth, Justice and Right were on their side" would make his movement "invincible."

Garrison also breaks with the common abolitionist sentiment by demanding complete and immediate emancipation, rather than the gradual efforts that characterized most states' emancipation laws. This declaration clearly demonstrates that Garrison is not a leader who will settle for half measures or compromise. He attacks sacred foundations of the American political and social system—in particular, pointing out aspects of the Constitution that privilege slave owners and slave states. Most striking, however, is his eloquence in the defense of African-American slaves as his fellow human beings and his passion to see them free. Garrison, with his passion and his insistence on radical, rapid change, would become the figurehead of radical abolitionism, revered by some, despised by many.

Defining Moment

The decade of the 1830s saw the development of the abolition movement from one that accepted that the end of slavery in the United States was a long-term project, with a common goal being not only the free-



William Lloyd Garrison. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

ing of the slaves but their transport to Africa, to places like the new nation of Liberia, “restoring” the United States as a white nation. Even in the northern states, racial equality was not enshrined in law, nor was it often exhibited in practice. While slavery had been outlawed in a number of states, most of these emancipation measures were gradual in nature, maintaining the slave-status of a large number of African Americans and condemning their children to decades of indentured servitude before their freedom would be effective.

Events in the early 1830s, however, changed the landscape of both slavery and abolitionism. Nat Turner’s violent slave rebellion in Virginia had encouraged southern state legislatures to increase restrictions on slaves—including prohibitions on teaching slaves to read and write—and increase the financial burden on slave owners who desired to free their slaves. In response to these increasingly repressive measures in the south, activists in the North such as William Lloyd Garrison formed new organizations and publications that agitated for immediate full emancipation of slaves and—shockingly—full legal and citizenship rights not only for the freed slaves but for free African-Americans in northern states. Others, like Lydia Maria Child would echo this more radical approach to the abolition of slaves. Garrison’s radical approach would be taken further by revolutions like John Brown, further polarizing those who opposed slavery, and those who clung to the institution.

Author Biography

William Lloyd Garrison was born in Newburyport, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1805. In 1831, he published the first issue of his Boston newspaper, the *Liberator*, which until the end of 1865 served as his personal vehicle for broadcasting his many controversial opinions, most notably that slavery must be immediately abolished and that people of all skin colors must be treated as equals. In 1833 he played a major role in the establishment of the American Anti-Slavery Society, which for the first time united black and white reformers of both genders in support of programs of mass agitation to promote immediate abolition and racial equality.



The Liberty Bell. Boston: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1856. Division of Rare & Manuscript Collections. Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

Throughout the 1840s and 1850s Garrison and his small circle continued to espouse a wide-ranging reform agenda through speeches and in the pages of the *Liberator*. In 1859, however, John Brown’s insurrectionary raid on the federal armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, led Garrison to jettison his pacifism. When the Civil War began in 1861, he quickly became one of its most fervent supporters, demanding that all slaves be freed by force of arms. In 1865, after the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, abolishing slavery, Garrison closed the *Liberator* and ended his career. He died on May 24, 1879.

Garrison was perhaps the antebellum era's most innovative editorial agitator. In an era of rapidly expanding print and telegraphic communication, his ceaseless desire to promote himself as the nation's moral censor and his unerring capacity for challenging conventional values made it all but impossible for Americans to deny the moral problem of slavery. He accomplished his goals because of his exceptional tal-

ent as a polemicist and his inexhaustible love of ideological conflict. His temperament aligned him closely to the romantic impulses that inspired New England Transcendentalists and utopian reformers who, like him, were deeply suspicious of established institutions and who celebrated intuitive illuminations of God's "truth." In short, he addressed public opinion in idioms it instinctively understood.



Historical Document

Declaration of Sentiments of the American Anti-Slavery Convention

Done at Philadelphia, December 6th, A. D. 1833.

The Convention assembled in the city of Philadelphia, to organize a National Anti-Slavery Society, promptly seize the opportunity to promulgate the following Declaration of Sentiments, as cherished by them in relation to the enslavement of one-sixth portion of the American people.

More than fifty-seven years have elapsed, since a band of patriots convened in this place, to devise measures for the deliverance of this country from a foreign yoke. The corner-stone upon which they founded the Temple of Freedom was broadly this—"that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, LIBERTY, and the pursuit of happiness." At the sound of their trumpet-call, three millions of people rose up as from the sleep of death, and rushed to the strife of blood; deeming it more glorious to die instantly as freemen, than desirable to live one hour as slaves. They were few in number—poor in resources; but the honest conviction that Truth, Justice and Right were on their side, made them invincible.

We have met together for the achievement of an enterprise, without which that of our fathers is incomplete; and which, for its magnitude, solemnity, and probable results upon the destiny of the world, as far transcends theirs as moral truth does physical force.

In purity of motive, in earnestness of zeal, in decision of purpose, in intrepidity of action, in steadfastness of faith, in sincerity of spirit, we would not be inferior to them.

Their principles led them to wage war against their oppressors, and to spill human blood like water, in order to be free.

Ours forbid the doing of evil that good may come, and lead us to reject, and to entreat the oppressed to reject, the use of all carnal weapons for deliverance from bondage; relying solely upon those which are spiritual, and mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds.

Their measures were physical resistance—the marshalling in arms—the hostile array—the mortal encounter. Ours shall be such only as the opposition of

moral purity to moral corruption—the destruction of error by the potency of truth—the overthrow of prejudice by the power of love—and the abolition of slavery by the spirit of repentance.

Their grievances, great as they were, were trifling in comparison with the wrongs and sufferings of those for whom we plead. Our fathers were never slaves—never bought and sold like cattle—never shut out from the light of knowledge and religion—never subjected to the lash of brutal taskmasters.

But those, for whose emancipation we are striving—constituting at the present time at least one-sixth part of our countrymen—are recognized by law, and treated by their fellow-beings, as marketable commodities, as goods and chattels, as brute beasts; are plundered daily of the fruits of their toil without redress; really enjoy no constitutional nor legal protection from licentious and murderous outrages upon their persons; and are ruthlessly torn asunder—the tender babe from the arms of its frantic mother—the heart-broken wife from her weeping husband—at the caprice or pleasure of irresponsible tyrants. For the crime of having a dark complexion, they suffer the pangs of hunger, the infliction of stripes, the ignominy of brutal servitude. They are kept in heathenish darkness by laws expressly enacted to make their instruction a criminal offence.

These are the prominent circumstances in the condition of more than two millions of our people, the proof of which may be found in thousands of indisputable facts, and in the laws of the slaveholding States.

Hence we maintain—that, in view of the civil and religious privileges of this nation, the guilt of its oppression is unequalled by any other on the face of the earth; and, therefore, that it is bound to repent instantly, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free.

We further maintain—that no man has a right to enslave or imbrute his brother—to hold or acknowledge him, for one moment, as a piece of merchandise—to keep back his hire by fraud—or to brutalize his mind, by denying him the means of intellectual, social and moral improvement.

The right to enjoy liberty is inalienable. To invade it is to usurp the prerogative of Jehovah. Every man has a right to his own body—to the products of his own labor—to the protection of law—and to the common advantages of society. It is piracy to buy or steal a native African, and subject him to servitude. Surely, the sin is as great to enslave an American as an African.

Therefore we believe and affirm—that there is no difference, in principle, between the African slave trade and American slavery:

That every American citizen, who detains a human being in involuntary bondage as his property, is, according to Scripture, (Ex. xxi. 16,) a man-stealer:

That the slaves ought instantly to be set free, and brought under the protection of law:

That if they had lived from the time of Pharaoh down to the present period, and had been entailed through successive generations, their right to be free could never have been alienated, but their claims would have constantly risen in solemnity:

That all those laws which are now in force, admitting the right of slavery, are therefore, before God, utterly null and void; being an audacious usurpation of the Divine prerogative, a daring infringement on the law of nature, a base over-throw of the very foundations of the social compact, a complete extinction of all the relations, endearments and obligations of mankind, and a presumptuous transgression of all the holy commandments; and that therefore they ought instantly to be abrogated.

We further believe and affirm—that all persons of color, who possess the qualifications which are demanded of others, ought to be admitted forthwith to the enjoyment of the same privileges, and the exercise of the same prerogatives, as others; and that the paths of preferment, of wealth, and of intelligence, should be opened as widely to them as to persons of a white complexion.

We maintain that no compensation should be given to the planters emancipating their slaves:

Because it would be a surrender of the great fundamental principle, that man cannot hold property in man:

Because slavery is a crime, and therefore is not an article to be sold:

Because the holders of slaves are not the just proprietors of what they claim; freeing the slave is not depriving them of property, but restoring it to its rightful owner; it is not wronging the master, but righting the slave—restoring him to himself:

Because immediate and general emancipation would only destroy nominal, not real property; it would not amputate a limb or break a bone of the slaves, but by infusing motives into their breasts, would make them doubly valuable to the masters as free laborers; and

Because, if compensation is to be given at all, it should be given to the outraged and guiltless slaves, and not to those who have plundered and abused them.

We regard as delusive, cruel and dangerous, any scheme of expatriation which pretends to aid, either directly or indirectly, in the emancipation of the slaves, or to be a substitute for the immediate and total abolition of slavery.

We fully and unanimously recognise the sovereignty of each State, to legislate exclusively on the subject of the slavery which is tolerated within its limits; we concede that Congress, under the present national compact, has no right to interfere with any of the slave States, in relation to this momentous subject:

But we maintain that Congress has a right, and is solemnly bound, to suppress the domestic slave trade between the several States, and to abolish slavery in those portions of our territory which the Constitution has placed under its exclusive jurisdiction.

We also maintain that there are, at the present time, the highest obligations resting upon the people of the free States to remove slavery by moral and political action, as prescribed in the Constitution of the United States. They are now living under a pledge of their tremendous physical force, to fasten the galling fetters of tyranny upon the limbs of millions in the Southern States; they are liable to be called at any moment to suppress a general insurrection of the slaves; they authorize the slave owner to vote for three-fifths of his slaves as property, and thus enable him to perpetuate his oppression; they support a standing army at the South for its protection and they seize the slave, who has escaped into their territories, and send him back to be tortured by an enraged master or a brutal driver. This relation to slavery is criminal, and full of danger: IT MUST BE BROKEN UP.

These are our views and principles—these our designs and measures. With entire confidence in the overruling justice of God, we plant ourselves upon the Declaration of our Independence and the truths of Divine Revelation, as upon the Everlasting Rock.

We shall organize Anti-Slavery Societies, if possible, in every city, town and village in our land.

We shall send forth agents to lift up the voice of remonstrance, of warning, of entreaty, and of rebuke.

We shall circulate, unsparingly and extensively, anti-slavery tracts and periodicals.

We shall enlist the pulpit and the press in the cause of the suffering and the dumb.

We shall aim at a purification of the churches from all participation in the guilt of slavery.

We shall encourage the labor of freemen rather than that of slaves, by giving a preference to their productions: and

We shall spare no exertions nor means to bring the whole nation to speedy repentance.

Our trust for victory is solely in God. We may be personally defeated, but our principles never. Truth, Justice, Reason, Humanity, must and will gloriously triumph. Already a host is coming up to the help of the Lord against the mighty, and the prospect before us is full of encouragement.

Submitting this Declaration to the candid examination of the people of this country, and of the friends of liberty throughout the world, we hereby affix our signatures to it; pledging ourselves that, under the guidance and by the help of Almighty God, we will do all that in us lies, consistently with this Declaration of our principles, to overthrow the most execrable system of slavery that has ever been witnessed upon earth; to deliver our land from its deadliest curse; to wipe out the foulest stain which rests upon our national escutcheon; and to secure to the colored population of the United States, all the rights and privileges which belong to them as men, and as Americans—come what may to our persons, our interests, or our reputation—whether we live to witness the triumph of Liberty, Justice and Humanity, or perish untimely as martyrs in this great, benevolent, and holy cause.



Glossary

dumb: without speech, silent

expatriation: the practice of sending freed slaves back to Africa

imbrute: to lower someone to the level of a brute or animal

marshall: gather

Pharaoh: ancient ruler of Egypt who, in the Hebrew Bible, enslaved the Israelites

Document Analysis

The declaration begins by taking advantage of the convention's Philadelphia location to draw parallels between their work and the work, half a century before, of the Continental Congress that oversaw the establishing of the United States and its independence from Britain. Recalling the words of the Declaration of Independence, Garrison declares that the Americans won that fight because of the moral rightness of their position rather than their numbers or resources. These founders, however, left their job incomplete and so Garrison and the convention must finish the work of liberty and freedom. Unlike the revolutionaries of the 18th century, this movement will rely on spiritual weapons rather than "carnal" ones. Further, Garrison declares the "grievances" of the American founding to be "trifling" in comparison to those of slaves ("those for whom we plead").

Garrison then describes in harsh and emotional terms the conditions American slaves live under. They are legally considered commodities rather than humans, they are exploited and have no legal protection from physical abuse. Families and marriages are destroyed "at the caprice or pleasure of irresponsible tyrants." His characterization of slave owners as "tyrants" is another, harsher, echo of the revolutionary era, with the founders declaring themselves the enemy of the tyrannical British government. Despite the laws that exist, Garrison asserts that humans have no moral right to enslave others. To steal another's liberty is beyond the rightful ability of human beings.

Garrison then begins to list the specific demands and goals of this new Anti—Slavery Society, beginning from the premise that American slavery is the moral equivalent of the African slave trade. By this point, the United States had banned participation in African slave trade. It follows, logically, that slavery in America itself should be illegal as well. Garrison demands that all slaves should be set free "and brought under the protection of law." He dismisses laws that protect slavery as being "null and void" because they are in opposition to the "law of nature." Here, Garrison is using the same ideas of the social contract (or compact) that the founders did and declaring slavery to be a violation of the foundations of human society. Those

freed slaves should also be treated in the same way as white citizens.

Garrison then, in a position that is more radical than other abolitionists of the time, demands that slave owners receive no compensation from the government for their freed slaves. Slavery is a crime against nature and it is not morally possible to own another human. Why should a slave owner receive payment for someone he should never have been able to "own" in the first place? What Garrison is saying is that to allow for compensation in return for freeing slaves, is to admit that slavery had been proper and legal at one point. Garrison's argument is that the laws that allowed slavery were never valid. Slaves were never "real" property, they were "nominal" property. Any money being given out, he claims, should be given to "the outraged and guiltless slaves" rather than to their oppressors.

He next denounces "any scheme of expatriation"—an attack on the "colonization" movement whose supporters wanted to end slavery, but not allow freed slaves to stay in the United States, instead wanting to send them back to Africa (even if they had been born in the United States).

Garrison, in the final portion of the declaration, moves to the particulars of ending slavery. He acknowledges that Congress cannot ban slavery in individual states, but he does call upon Congress to ban the interstate trade in slaves (which would have had severe financial consequences for the institution as a whole). While Congress cannot ban slavery, the people of free states have an obligation to change the political and legal principles that require taxpayers to put down slave insurrections, that require the return of fugitive slaves, and that provides for the three-fifths clause which gives disproportional power to slave owners. Here, Garrison is attacking the constitutional provisions that he sees as supporting the institution of slavery.

In closing, Garrison outlines his organization's plan of action. They will grow their influence across the country and continue to rebuke and warn of the dangers of slavery. They will distribute publications, push their message in churches and the media—and, at the same time work for an end to the "participation in the guilt of slavery" within churches. They will boycott

goods produced by slave labor. They will trust solely in God and Garrison boldly proclaims that God is on their side. Finally, Garrison announces that they will “witness the triumph of Liberty” or they will die as martyrs to the cause of abolition.

Essential Themes

Garrison’s declaration sets out a number of principles that would come to define the cause of radical abolitionism. One of the most critical to keep in mind is his insistence that there is no legal or moral legitimacy to the institution of slavery as it is practiced in the United States. Contrary to the arguments of slavery’s advocates, Garrison characterizes American chattel slavery not as equivalent to Roman or Greek slavery but rather, as falling under the definition of “man stealing,” a heinous crime in Old Testament law.

Because he finds no legitimacy for the institution, Garrison is compelled to distance himself from the more moderate anti-slavery activists of the time who tried to find ways to make emancipation palatable to slave owners. Garrison strongly rejects measures such as gradual emancipation, financial compensation for those who free their slaves, and the “colonization” movement which sought to remove freed slaves from

the United States (often, whether they wanted to leave or not). To Garrison, to accept any compromise or delay is to acknowledge that there is at least some degree of legitimacy to the institution of slavery. For Garrison, slavery is not only wrong, it has always been wrong, and it always will be wrong, and it must be expunged from the fabric of American society.

—Aaron Gulyas, MA and
James Brewer Stewart, PhD

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