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1866

Frederick Douglass, "Reconstruction"

Frederick Douglass was a former slave who had escaped and become a powerful antislavery militant during the years before the Civil War. In 1866 he published the plea for a vigorous approach to Reconstruction from which the following excerpts are taken.

His essay was, in essence, an attack on President Andrew Johnson's attempt in 1865 to quickly "restore" the former Confederate states to the Union, while Congress was not in session, and with no participation by the four million African-American men who might have voted.

Without attempting to settle here the metaphysical and somewhat theological question whether once in the Union means always in the Union, it is obvious to common sense that the rebellious states stand today where they stood when, exhausted, beaten, conquered, they fell powerless at the feet of Federal authority... Congress should begin with a clean slate, and make clean work of it. Let there be no hesitation. It would be a cowardly deference to a defeated and treacherous President, if any account were made of the illegitimate, one-sided, sham governments hurried into existence for a malign purpose in the absence of Congress.

These pretended governments, which were never submitted to the people, and from participation in which four millions of the loyal people were excluded by Presidential order, should now be treated according to their true character, as shams and impositions.... The people... want a reconstruction such as will cause Northern industry, Northern capital, and Northern civilization to flow into the South, and make a man from New England as much at home in Carolina as elsewhere in the Republic. No Chinese wall can now be tolerated. The South must be opened to the light of law and liberty, and this session of Congress is relied upon to accomplish this important work.

QUESTIONS

- ✓ 1. Does Douglass believe that the ultimate solution to the problem of Reconstruction be political?
- ✓ 2. Why do you think he introduces the notion of a "Chinese wall"?
- ✓ 3. What do you think Douglass's motive might be for saying the president is "treacherous" and has purposes that are "malign"? Which branch of the federal government does Douglass assume has complete control over Reconstruction?