Much like his compatriots Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, revolutionary freedom fighter Lemuel Haynes (1753–1833) heartily embraced and defended the “self-evident truths” defined in the Declaration of Independence. As an American soldier, writer, theologian, and Congregational minister, Haynes distinguished himself as an advocate for the dissolution of slavery, emphasizing that liberty and freedom must be recognized as inherent principles to which all were entitled, under the authority of natural law and Christian doctrine. Clearly, human bondage stood against every axiom of justice and morality, Haynes explained, and was as “intolerable to a black man, as it is to a white one.” The original manuscript denouncing the practice of slavery was discovered nearly 150 years after his death and was first published in 1983.

Born in West Hartford, Connecticut to a “white woman of respectable ancestry” and an African father, Haynes grew up as an indentured servant until he was 21 years old. During his adolescence he developed his literary skills reading the Bible and mainly theological texts, later orating sermons at the local church. After serving as a “Minuteman” during the Revolutionary War, Haynes resumed his scholarship, studying Latin and Greek with the Connecticut clergy and was ordained as Congregational minister in 1780. As a preacher, scholar, and writer of over 30 years, Haynes was honored with the first ever Master of Arts degree received by an African American. Although revered throughout this period, conflicts arose among the congregation over his political conservatism as an original Federalist and longtime admirer of George Washington. This resulted in a parting from his pastorship, which Haynes attributed partly to racism. Writing of himself in 1818, Haynes stated: “He lived with the people of Rutland thirty years, and they were so sagacious that at the end of that time they found out that he was a nigger, and so turned him away.” Haynes continued his ministry in Vermont and New York for more than a decade and died at the age of 80 in 1833.

We hold these truths to be Self-Evident, that all men are created Equal, that they are Endowed By their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

—Congress

Liberty, and freedom, is an innate principle, which is immovably placed in the human species; and to see a man aspire after it, is not enigmatical, seeing he acts no ways incompatibly with his own nature; consequently, he that would infringe upon a man’s liberty may reasonably expect to meet with opposition, seeing the defendant cannot comply to nonresistance, unless he counteracts the very laws of nature.
Liberty is a jewel which was handed down to man from the cabinet of heaven, and is coeval with his existence. And as it proceed from the Supreme Legislature of the universe, so it is he which has a sole right to take away; therefore, he that would take away a man’s liberty assumes a prerogative that belongs to another, and acts out of his own domain.

One man may boast a superiority above another in point of natural privilege; yet if he can produce no convincive arguments in vindication of this pre-eminence his hypothesis is to be suspected. To affirm, that an Englishman has a right to his liberty, is a truth which has been so clearly evinced, especially of late, that to spend time illustrating this, would be but superfluous tautology. But I query, whether liberty is so contracted a principle as to be confined to any nation under heaven; nay, I think it not hyperbolical to affirm, that even an African, has equally as good a right to his liberty in common with Englishmen.

I know that those that are concerned in the slave-trade, do pretend to bring arguments in vindication of their practice; yet if we give them a candid examination, we shall find them (even those of the most cogent kind) to be essentially deficient. We live in a day wherein liberty and freedom is the subject of many millions’ concern; and the important struggle hath already caused great effusion of blood; men seem to manifest the most sanguine resolution not to let their natural rights go without their lives go with them; a resolution, one would think every one that has the least love to his country, or future posterity, would fully confide in; yet while we are so zealous to maintain, and foster our own invaded rights, it cannot be thought impertinent for us candidly to reflect on our own conduct, and I doubt not but that we shall find subsisting in the midst of us, that may with propriety be styled [called] oppression, nay, much greater oppression, than that which Englishmen seem so much to spurn at. I mean an oppression which they, themselves, impose upon others.

It is not my business to enquire into every particular practice, that is practiced in this land, that may come under this odious character; but, what I have in view, is to humbly offer some free thoughts, on the practice of slave-keeping. Oppression is not spoken of, nor ranked in the sacred oracles, among the least of those sins, that are the procuring cause of those signal judgments, which God is pleased to bring upon the children of men. Therefore let us attend. I mean to write with freedom, yet with the greatest submission.

And the main proposition, which I intend for some brief illustration, is this: namely, that an African, or, in other terms, that a Negro may justly challenge, and has an undeniable right to his liberty: Consequently, the practice of slave-keeping, which so much abounds in this land, is illicit.

Every privilege that mankind enjoy have their origin from God; and whatever acts are passed in any earthly court, which are derogatory to those edicts that are passed in the Court of Heaven, the act is void. If I have a particular privilege granted to me by God, . . . then he that would infringe upon my benefit, assumes an unreasonable and tyrannic power.

It hath pleased God to make of one blood all nations of men, for to dwell upon the face of the Earth. Acts 17, 26. And as all are of one species, so there are the same laws, and aspiring principles placed in all nations; and the effect that these laws will produce, are similar to each other. Consequently we may suppose that what is precious to one man, is precious to another, and what is irksome, or intolerable to one man, is so to another, considered in a law of nature. Therefore we may reasonably conclude, that liberty is equally as precious to a black man, as it is to a white one, and bondage equally as intolerable to the one as it is to the other: seeing it effects the laws of nature equally as much in the one as does in the other. But, as I observed before, those privileges that are granted to us by the
divine being, no one has the least right to take them from us without our consent; and there is not the least precept, or practice, in the Sacred Scriptures, that constitutes a black man a slave, any more than a white one.

Shall a man’s color be the decisive criterion whereby to judge of his natural right? Or because a man is not of the same color with his neighbor, shall he be deprived of those things that distinguisheth him from the beasts of the field?

I would ask, whence is it that an Englishman is so far distinguished from an African in point of natural privilege? Did he receive it in his original constitution? or by some subsequent grant? Or does he boast of some higher descent that gives him this preeminence? For my part I can find no such revelation. It is a lamentable consequence of the fall, that mankind have an insatiable thirst after superiority one over another. So that however common or prevalent the practice may be, it does not amount, even to a circumstance, that the practice is warrantable.

God has been pleased to distinguish some men from others, as to natural abilities, but not as to natural right, as they came out of his hands.

But sometimes men by their flagitious practice forfeit their liberty into the hands of men, by becoming unfit for society; but have the Africans ever as a nation forfeited their liberty in this manner? Whatever individuals have done, yet, I believe, no such challenge can be made upon them, as a body. As there should be some rule whereby to govern the conduct of men, so it is the duty and interest of a community, to form a system of law, that is calculated to promote the commercial interest of each other, and so long as it produces so blessed an effect, it should be maintained. But when, instead of contributing to the well being of the community, it proves baneful to its subjects over whom it extends, then it is high time to call it in question. Should any ask, where shall we find any system of law whereby to regulate our moral conduct? I think there is none so explicit and indefinite, as that which was given by the blessed savior of the world. As you would that men should do unto you, do you even so to them. One would think, that the mention of the precept, would strike conviction to the heart of these slavetraders, unless an avaricious disposition governs the laws of humanity.

If we strictly adhere to the rule, we shall not impose anything upon others, but what we should be willing should be imposed upon us were we in their condition... 

O! what an immense deal of African blood hath been shed by the inhuman cruelty of Englishmen! that reside in a Christian land! Both at home, and in their own country? they being the fomenters of those wars, that is absolutely necessary, in order to carry on this cursed trade; and in their emigration into these colonies? and by their merciless masters, in some parts at least? O ye that have made yourselves drunk with human blood! although you may go with impunity here in this life, yet God will hear the cries of that innocent blood, which cries from the sea, and from the ground against you, like the blood of Abel, more pealfull than thunder, vengeance! vengeance! What will you do in that day when God shall make inquisition for blood? he will make you drink the vials of his indignation which like a potable stream shall be poured out without the least mixture of mercy. Believe it. Sirs, there shall not a drop of blood, which you have spilt unjustly, be lost in forgetfulness. But it shall bleed afresh, and testify against you, in the day when God shall deal with sinners. 

Can you wash your hands, and say, I am clean from this sin? Perhaps you will dare to say it before men, but dare you say it before the tremendous tribunal of that God before whom we must all, in a few precarious moments, appear? Then whatever fair glosses we may have put upon our conduct, that God whose eyes pervade the utmost extent of human thought, and surveys with one intuitive view,
the affairs of men; he will examine into the matter himself, and will set every thing upon its own basis; and impartiality shall be seen flourishing throughout that solemn assembly. Alas! shall men hazard their precious souls for a little of the transitory things of time. O Sirs! Let that pity and compassion which is peculiar to mankind, especially to English-men, no longer lie dormant in your breast; let it run free through disinterested benevolence, then how would these iron yokes spontaneously fall from the galled necks of the oppressed! And that disparity, in point of natural privilege which is the bane of society, would be case upon the utmost coasts of oblivion. . . . Therefore is it not high time to undo these heavy burdens, and let the oppressed go free? And while you manifest such a noble and magnanimous spirit, to maintain inviolably your own natural rights, and militate so much against despotism, as it hath respect unto yourselves, you do not assume the same usurpations, and are no less tyrannic. Pray let there be a congruity amidst your conduct, lest you fall amongst that class the inspired penman speaks of, Romans 2.21 and on: Thou therefore which teacheth another, teachest thou not thy Self? thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal? thou that sayest, a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery? thou that abhorreth idols, dost thou commit sacrilege? thou that makest thy boast of the law, though breaking the law disbonorest thou God? While you thus sway your tyrant scepter over others, you have nothing to expect but to share in the bitter pill. 'Twas an excellent note that I lately read in a modern piece, and it was this. “O when shall America be consistently engaged in the cause of liberty!” If you have any love to yourselves, or any love to this land, if you have any love to your fellow-men, break these intolerable yokes, and let their names be remembered no more, lest they be retorted on your own necks, and you sink under them, for God will not hold you guiltless.

**Source:** Lemuel Haynes, “Liberty Further Extended,” in *Black Preacher to White America: The Collected Writings of Lemuel Haynes, 1774–1833*, edited by Richard Newman (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing, 1990), 17–30 (excerpts). [Spelling and punctuation have been modernized from the original.]

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