

A man of his faith

By OMAR SULEIMAN

Frederick Douglass refused to let anyone use his beliefs for evil

I grew up admiring the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass for many reasons, one of which was his boldness to not just free bodies, but to also free minds. He sought to free oppressors from the shackles of self-aggrandizement and the oppressed from the shackles of self-degradation.

As a diplomat, he refused to allow his unprecedented access to power lure him to compromise the cause of liberating his people from the cruelty they faced.

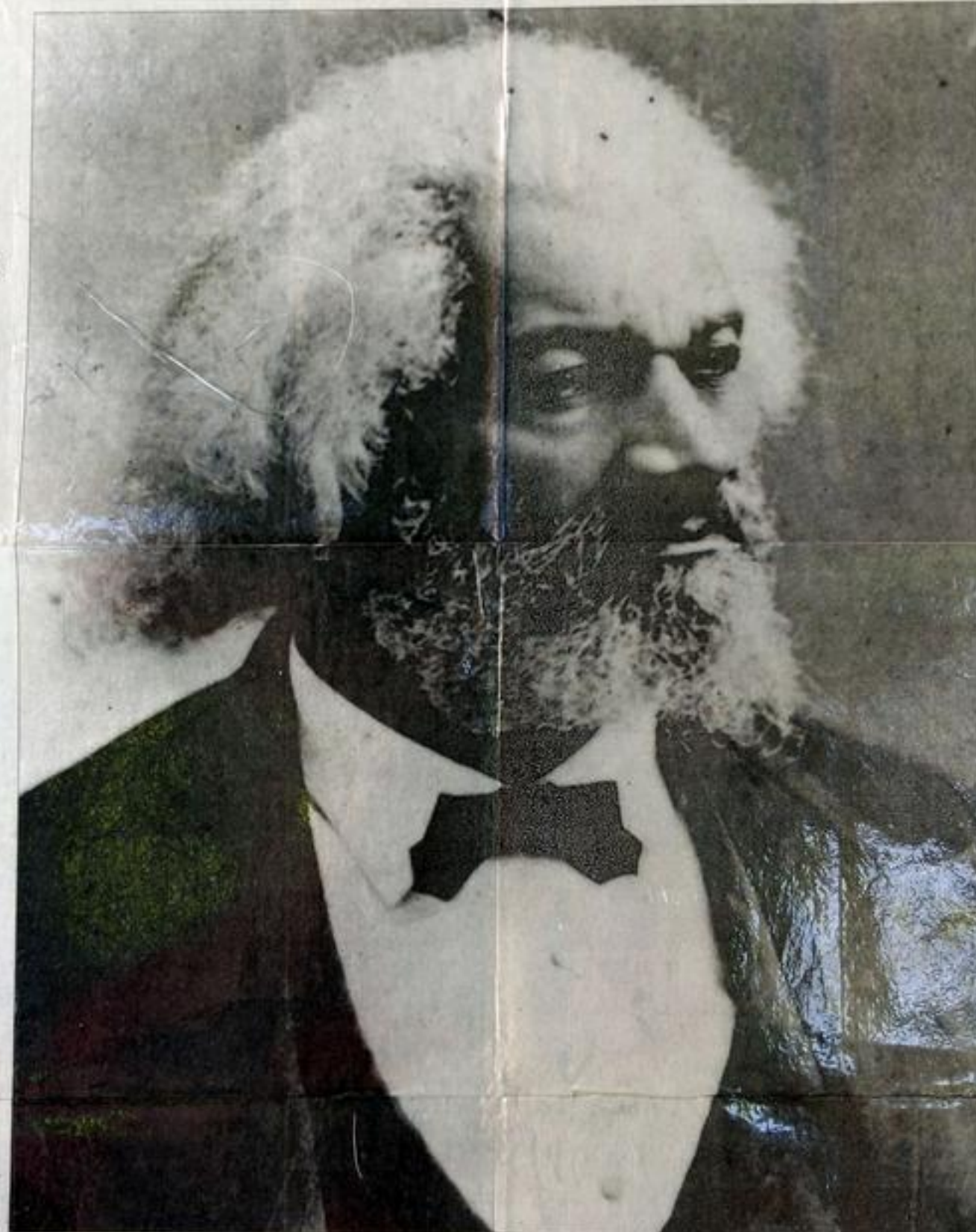
"Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will," Douglass once said.

On Feb. 14, the 200th anniversary of Douglass' birth, his heirs and researchers at American University named 200 people who embody his work. It is one of the great honors of my life to be on this list. The project, called the FD200, honors activists, celebrities, leaders, writers and others who carry on Douglass' work. I was in very good company in the category of diplomats, which included Michelle Obama, George and Amal Clooney, Harry Belafonte and LeBron James.

Yes, during his life, Douglass was criticized by some of his own for his willingness to engage slaveholders. Their fears that he would be appropriated and weaponized against them were not unwarranted, as many times a spokesperson rises among a community only to become a voice that serves in maintaining their chains. But Douglass was remarkably consistent not just in his writings and speeches, but in the tenor he maintained while he rose out of those chains to the highest pulpits of the nation. Douglass would always be a spokesperson not merely from his people, but for his people.

who remained in that condition, were never distant from him. And his heart, mind and tongue were never shackled because his soul was always free. "The soul that is within me no man can degrade," he said referencing the irrelevance of his worldly condition to his inward strength even if his oppressor only defined him by his color.

As an American imam, I draw something else very specific from him. Like the great American freedom fighters who came later — the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Medgar Evers and Muhammad Ali — Douglass was a man of faith. And he refused to let that faith be defined by those



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who used it for nasty causes. He contended that the worst slaveholders he met were the "religious" ones. He said they were "the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others."

Yet he, too, drew from a place of faith to inspire him to uplift. He said, "I love that religion which sends its votaries to bind up the

wounds of those who have fallen among thieves."

In my life, I have committed myself to uplifting all people through my faith, regardless of whether or not they identify with Islam, and combating all who have used my faith to harm, regardless of whom they were harming. Extremists who use Islam falsely

wish to silence, by intimidation and threats of violence, those scholars and preachers who uphold the truth. If the scholars and preachers are silenced, then propaganda is unchallenged.

And extremists who use Islam to push hateful agendas against the Muslim community wish to relegate American Muslims to a lower place

in society. They want Muslims to be treated with suspicion, unable to contribute to the making of a more agreeable society. This paves the way for legalized discrimination and the rise of hate crimes against the Muslim community.

Such extremist views also envelop Islam in a sense of insecurity that only allows Muslims a seat at the table within the apparatus of national security. The Muslim community is then content with whatever tokens of acceptance it gets as a community relegated to secondary status with no agenda, self-determination or capacity to actually challenge the nation and contribute as an equal stakeholder on far-ranging issues that affect us all.

Douglass teaches me that to be free is to operate completely outside of the bounds placed upon me by the conditioned hateful, limiting perceptions of others. I refuse to operate in anyone else's paranoia.

Ali once said: "I am America. I am the part you won't recognize. But get used to me. Black, confident, cocky; my name, not yours; my religion, not yours; my goals, my own; get used to me."

Douglass was an abolitionist committed to the fullest sense of liberation. The first Muslim ban in America was against Muslim slaves who were considered rowdy because they found liberation in their theology. I continue to find liberation in my theology today as a version of the president's "Muslim travel ban" remains in effect. And that liberation is one that I'm committed to, not just for Muslims, but for all those harmed by the politics of hate.

Douglass sat in uncomfortable places, but he always made those who were a little too comfortable feel that discomfort as he highlighted the urgency of justice.

"Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe," Douglass said.

May we not only move to a place of safety, but even further to a place of love.

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