

commentary

from other pens...

Frederick Douglass and his fight for freedom

By Lawrence L. Knutson

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — From Cedar Hill, with its view of the city and the Capitol dome, Frederick Douglass could reflect on a life that had made him the most influential black American of his time.

As writer, newspaper editor, lecturer and spokesman for black America, Douglass was as well known to 19th century America as Martin Luther King Jr. became in his century.

The fact Douglass approached his lifelong fight for freedom from the perspective of a former slave gave his voice an authority few could match.

Cedar Hill, the pillared house Douglass bought in 1877 when he moved to Washington permanently, is a national historic site managed by the National Park Service. It tells the Douglass story room by room.

Portraits of abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips hang in its parlor. The desk where Douglass wrote his third autobiography, “Life and Times of Frederick Douglass” in 1881, is in the study.

The dining room table is fully set with china and silver, ready to receive family and guests. Douglass’ nightshirt is laid out on his bed.

And in a display case in the visitor center is a walking stick owned by Abraham Lincoln. It was presented to Douglass by Mary Lincoln after the president’s assassination in 1865.

From his porch above the Anacostia River, Douglass looked out on a capital he knew had been a pulpit for freedom and a market for slaves. He had welcomed the Civil War as a opportunity, visiting the president’s office at the White House to urge Lincoln to make the end of slavery a preeminent war aim. As the war ground on, Douglass helped persuade the president to enlist black soldiers in the Union cause.

He became their most eloquent recruiter.

“I urge you to fly to arms, and smite with death the power that would bury the government and your liberty in the same grave,” he wrote.

When that government paid black soldiers less than whites, Douglass fought for equality in the ranks.

By 1865, more than 200,000 black men were in uniform. Many had seen desperate combat. They had, he believed, earned their freedom.

With slavery ended, Douglass worked for ratification of the 15th Amendment giving black men the right to vote.

He hitched his political wagon to Lincoln’s Republican Party. A series of appointments from GOP administrations followed. Douglass served as marshal of the District of Columbia and the city’s recorder of deeds.

He was named minister to Haiti in 1889, the first black man ever appointed to ambassadorial rank.

Douglass saw the new rights of black citizens threatened by legal repression and illicit lynch law. Late in life he again raised his remarkable voice in protest.

The black poet Paul Dunbar described that voice as it rose over a chorus of jeers at Chicago’s Colombian Exposition in 1892.

“Full, rich and deep came the sonorous tones, compelling attention, drowning out the catcalls as an organ would a penny whistle.”

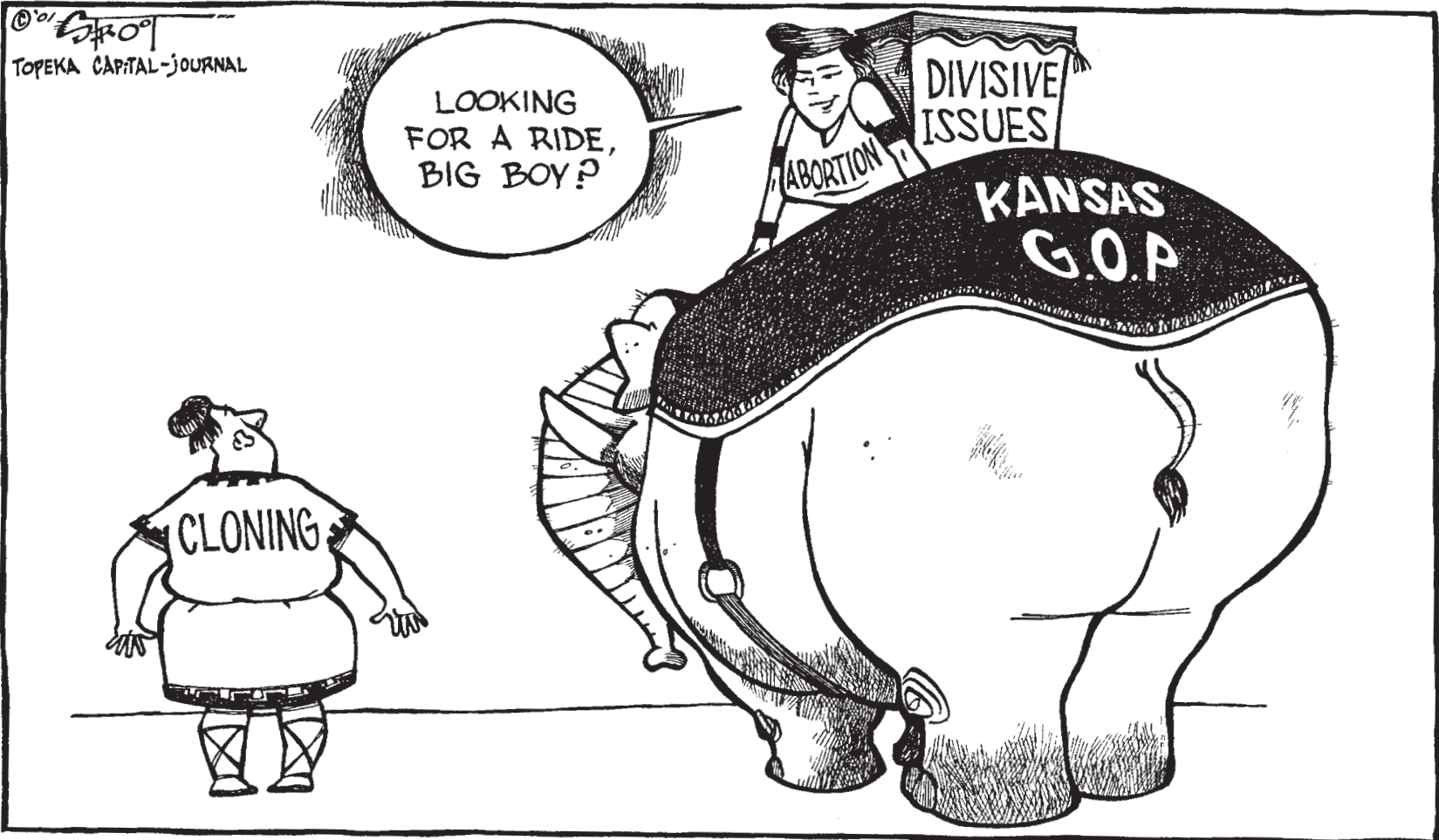
“Men talk of the Negro problem,” Douglass said. “There is no Negro problem. The problem is whether the American people have loyalty enough, honor enough, patriotism enough, to live up to their own Constitution.”

Black citizens, he said, loved their country. “We fought for it; we ask only that we be treated as well as those who fought against it.”

Born a slave in Maryland’s Talbot County in 1817, Douglass was self-invented in every important sense. He taught himself to read when his master objected that education would make a slave unmanageable.

Taken to Baltimore, he escaped in 1839 and found his way to New Bedford, Mass. He soon mastered the ability to write with ease and speak with eloquence and found his way to the abolitionist movement. He established “The North Star,” an antislavery newspaper named for the light that escaping slaves used as a beacon to freedom.

EDITOR’S NOTE — Lawrence L. Knutson has covered the White House, Congress, and Washington’s history for 34 years.



We’re all ‘air marshals’ now



chris matthews

● commentary

WASHINGTON — It’s now official: Everyone boarding an American jetliner joins the front lines in the war on terrorism. It comes down to a personal test of courage between you and the hijacker.

Those were the new rules of engagement delivered personally to me last week by the country’s Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge. Put bluntly: We’re all “air marshals” now.

If you board an American plane, be prepared to defend your country.

“I think while we’re somewhat obsessed about getting X number of federal air marshals,” the former Pennsylvania governor said, “I think every single able-bodied man or woman, from this point forward, looks at themselves as a potential air marshal.

“I think at the end, regardless of how much technology you use and how you strategize, whether it’s checking people into the border or some other situation, you still need some common sense and some intuition and some training.

“You need the courage of individuals to stand up for something bigger than themselves.”

Ridge mentioned the gallant passengers of United Flight 93, heading from Newark to San Francisco that dread day, who prevented that fourth band of hijackers from reaching their target the morning of Sept. 11. He declared it the national role model for future hijackings.

“I think that is the kind of personal resolve that’s magnified across 280-plus million Americans, that says to bin Laden and Al-Qaeda and all the suc-

cessor organizations and individuals, ‘You may threaten us, you may attack us, you may harm us, you may injure us, you may kill us, but you won’t prevail. You will not win. Because every American will rise to that challenge.’”

Hearing this from Ridge, a Vietnam combat veteran, confirms what most Americans have known since the day of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. For all the new security procedures, it comes down to what we, the passengers, are ready to do. In the end, it’s just us.

It’s up to the passengers, Ridge said, the suicide squad. It will be a battle of fists, shoes and laptops against the killers wielding the box-cutters or whatever other potential weapon they’ve managed to sneak aboard.

Ridge and all the rest of us were taught this noble lesson by the courageous, patriotic passengers of Flight 93.

“We’re going to do something,” Tom Burnett told his wife over the phone as he and the others prepared to charge the cockpit. They were going to jump the hijackers and keep the plane from hitting its target, which may well have been the U.S. Capitol itself.

Questions about tobacco litigation fees still linger

TOPEKA (AP) — Nonsmokers who spend time around smokers can’t get away from the smell of tobacco.

Similarly, Attorney General Carla Stovall can’t quite escape from questions about how she handled litigation against large tobacco companies because it generated millions of dollars in fees for her former law firm.

Stovall is less than a month into her campaign for governor, and already Wyandotte County political activist John Altevogt has produced bumper stickers about the issue. They say: “Governor Carla Stovall? When \$27,000,000 just isn’t enough.”

And the issue isn’t likely to be confined to a bumper sticker, even though she’s won reelection and faced a legislative inquiry since hiring the firm in 1996.

She and fellow Republicans who consider themselves moderates consider the tobacco litigation fees an old issue. Conservatives backing State Treasurer Tim Shallenburger in the GOP primary don’t.

“People ask me about it,” Shallenburger said. “It’s becoming an issue. I hear a lot about it.”

Stovall has consistently maintained that hiring her former firm was the right decision, as was getting the state into the tobacco litigation. Most states eventually joined in a 1997 settlement with major tobacco companies guaranteeing compensation nearly three decades into the future.

“One-point-six billion dollars at no cost to the state of Kansas is the bumper sticker I’m going to print,” Stovall said recently.

Stovall became the 11th state attorney general to take on the tobacco industry when she filed her lawsuits in Shawnee County District Court in August 1996. She faced some criticism from conservative legislators.

She contends that Entz and Chanay, of Topeka, was the only Kansas firm qualified to handle the work that didn’t demand a set percentage of any recovery. A Wichita firm, Hutton and Hutton, challenged that assertion.

A legislative inquiry in 2000, led by Stovall critics, left both sides firm in their opinions that their version had prevailed. Supporters of the inquiry couldn’t garner support for punitive action against Stovall but did win enactment of a new law imposing more oversight on state agencies entering into legal contracts.

Before that legislative inquiry began, reports suggested that Entz and Chanay could receive 12.5 percent of the state’s settlement dollars — \$187 million — as its fees. A national arbitration panel set the amount for all attorneys in the Kansas lawsuit at \$54 million, with Entz and Chanay to receive



john hanna

● ap news analysis

half.

To critics, the \$27 million is a huge amount. Stovall has preferred to note that it represents less than 2 percent of the total settlement amount due Kansas, paid from a separate fund financed by the tobacco companies.

Some Republicans, like Lt. Gov. Gary Sherrer, don’t think the issue will have much buoyancy.

Legislators began pressing Stovall about her hiring her former firm in 1997. She won reelection in 1998 with 75 percent of the vote, the most of any statewide candidate.

“It’s not new,” Sherrer said. “It’s not some kind of great disclosure.”

But Stovall critics still want the issue aired.

Stovall faced no primary opponent and only a modest Democratic challenge in 1998. The governor’s race receives significantly more attention than the attorney general’s race.

“Are you guys ready?” Todd Beamer called out after reciting the Lord’s Prayer and the 23rd Psalm. “Let’s roll.”

I doubt there’s a person reading this who hasn’t thought about what he or she would have done at that horrid moment of truth. Or wonder what he or she will do tomorrow, or the next day, when a similar moment confronts them with life’s most basic decision.

Next time it could be a knife or a gun. It could be on a plane, train, subway, tall building or national monument. The question will be the same: Do you have the guts to face it down? Will you have the same grace under pressure as those people who charged the cockpit of Flight 93?

“Now is not the time to back off,” Ridge declared this Monday as he issued another national alert. “Obviously, the further we’re removed from Sept. 11, the natural tendency is to let down our guard. We cannot do that. We are a nation at war.”

And, as the president’s man guarding the homeland put it to me with blunt clarity, “This war is deadly personal.”

It’s not the fear. It’s how we deal with it. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil....”

Chris Matthews, author of “Now, Let Me Tell You What I Really Think” (Free Press, 2001) and “Hardball” (Touchstone Books, 1999), is a nationally syndicated columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle and the host of “Hardball” on CNBC and MSNBC cable channels.

And for some GOP activists like Wyandotte County’s Altevogt, the legal fees represent government corruption. Altevogt began printing the “When \$27,000,000 just isn’t enough” bumper stickers last week after writing a satirical column posted on the Internet.

Altevogt is a conservative populist, but he doesn’t view the infighting in the Republican Party as ideological. Instead, he labels the moderate camp that Stovall and Gov. Bill Graves lead as the “Long Green Party,” arguing that the key issue is cronyism.

Sherrer and other moderates, would disagree, of course, and act unimpressed with Altevogt’s political statement.

Sherrer said: “Fine, do a bumper sticker.”

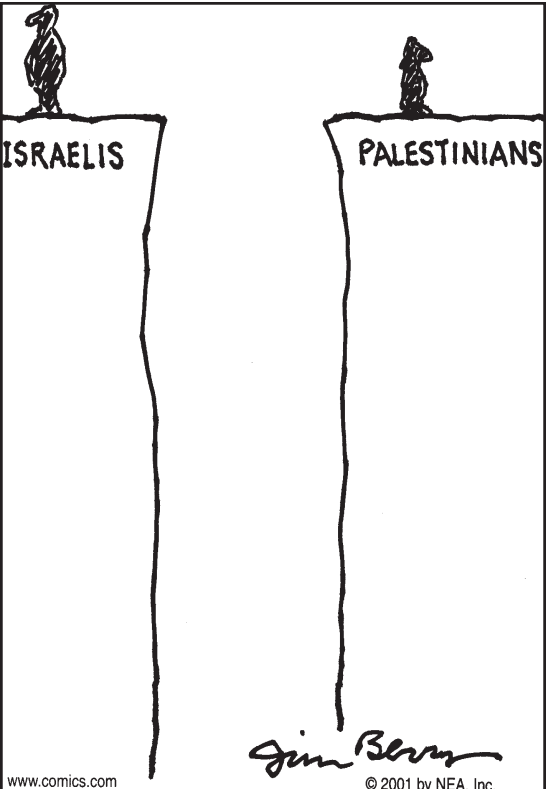
“I think that I’m not going to debate a bumper sticker,” Stovall initially replied.

Altevogt said he’s not sure how far he’ll go with his bumper stickers, whether they’ll end up being more than a satirical poke at Stovall.

But it seems likely that questions about Stovall hiring her former law firm will linger around the Republican primary, just as secondhand smoke hangs in the air wherever cigarette users congregate.

EDITOR’S NOTE: Correspondent John Hanna has covered Kansas politics and government since 1987.

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