

Demand Better of Power

by Spencer H. Kim



Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.
Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass escaped slavery in the American South as a teenager in 1838. He went on to be a renowned orator and author and profoundly influenced American politics for over fifty years. I first read the quote above as a young man and it has stuck in my head ever since.

Those in power tend to be very satisfied with the *status quo*. After all, that system has given them power and they want to keep that system so that they can remain in power. And usually, using power to stay in power is more important than risking power to achieve change. So if there is to be change, it must be demanded of power. That is the genius in Douglass' comment and it was and ever will be so.

So where does that leave us, today, in America and Korea, for example, when we see hyper-partisanship in both countries and growing income inequality in both countries. In America, we see decay in what was once the best infrastructure in the world. In Korea, we have seen youth sacrificed because money was more important than safety. In America, veterans die waiting to see a doctor despite a Veterans

Administration budget of \$164 Billion. In Korea, the rise of China and other fundamental changes cry out for leaders, South and North, to secure the country's position in a new century and not repeat the weakness, division and infighting that led Korea to be a pawn of the big powers at the start of the last century, with all the death and humiliation that that led to.

But what to do? Destroy the *status quo*? Blow up buildings, kill innocent bystanders? Vent your rage? Is that the kind of demand that leads those in power to make positive change? No. Here, again, I found Douglass instructive. In his crusade against slavery, he opposed armed slave rebellion; he argued for using the US Constitution, and the Declaration of Independence, as tools to demand the end of that *status quo* which allowed one man to enslave another. Preserving the union of states, the core idea of the US Constitution, was the goal that Northern soldiers fought for in the Civil War.

Each of us now must look around us. When we see a wrong that we feel must be righted, when we see a situation that we know will lead our community and our country in a wrong direction, we are the ones that must demand change. We cannot trust that those in power -- no matter what they might say to get elected, or to get you off their back -- will do what is necessary when it might put their power, or their wealth or convenience, at risk.

It is not easy being a citizen. But remember Douglass, he had to escape a cruel master (and he was caught the first two times he tried) just to get the freedom to become a citizen so that he could demand change from power.

Spencer H. Kim is Chairman of CBOL Corporation, a California aerospace company. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and a founder of the Pacific Century Institute.