

Abraham Lincoln and Black Soldiers



Featured Book

Michael Burlingame, Abraham Lincoln: A Life
(Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008)

Susan-Mary Grant, and Brian Holden Reid, editors.
The American Civil War: Explorations and Reconsiderations (Longman Publishing Group, September 2000)

One of the first Union casualties of the Civil War in April 1861 was a black militiaman from Pennsylvania, Nicholas Biddle. Another early black casualty was George Keckley, son of Elizabeth Keckley, the emancipated black dressmaker to Mary Todd Lincoln. Prior to the Civil War, she had worked for the wife of Mississippi Senator Jefferson Davis. Lincoln writer Jerrold M. Packard wrote "The army barred George from openly joining the service as a Negro (the few blacks then serving in the Union army did so almost exclusively as cooks and as servants to officers), but his light complexion had allowed him to pass as white. After leaving Wilberforce College, he enlisted in the First Missouri Volunteers, and on August 10 died in his first experience of battle, at Wilson's Creek, in southwest Missouri."¹

Blacks generally, however, were frustrated in their efforts to join the Union army. Historian Michael Burlingame wrote: "Some blacks had begun serving aboard Union warships as early as the fall of 1861. It was not clear that slaves thus employed would become free. Lincoln deliberately avoided an explicit policy statement for fear of antagonizing Border State sentiment. A journalist remarked apropos of the president's calculated ambiguity, '[n]ever was a man more cat-like in stealthily feeling his way before him.'² Historian Susan-Mary Grant wrote that "free blacks in the North who sought to respond to Abraham Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers found that their services were not required by a North in which slavery had been abolished but racist assumptions still prevailed. Instead they were told quite firmly that the war was a 'white man's fight' and offered no role for them."³ Historian Edna Greene Medford wrote: "The failure of Lincoln's conciliatory overtures and the firing on Fort Sumter renewed African American hopes that the nation would not be reunited with slavery intact....The Hannibal Guards, a group of black men in Pennsylvania, offered their services to the state militia. Elsewhere, black men organized themselves into military units and drilled in anticipation of being mustered into military service. The states spurned their offers, and locals, determined to keep it a 'white man's war,' threatened violence against any black man intent on becoming an active participant."⁴

The prohibition on black enlistments angered free blacks in the North. Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass was an important early advocate for and later recruiter of black soldiers. Historian William Serraille wrote: "In August [1861], The Weekly *Anglo-African*...suggested to its readers to seize arms and prepare themselves for the government's call. The war is not a white man's war, argued the editor who insisted that the fate of his race rested upon its outcome. 'The South must be subjugated, he warned, 'or [free blacks] shall be enslaved.' Frederick Douglass boldly informed the nation in *Douglass Monthly* how to end the war. He wrote 'LET THE SLAVES AND FREE COLORED PEOPLE BE CALLED INTO SERVICE AND FORMED INTO A LIBERATING ARMY.' Douglass deemed it foolish for the Union to continue to fight the Confederacy with one hand. He asked, 'why does the Government reject the negro? Is he not a man? Can he not wield a sword, fire a gun, march and...obey orders like any other [from]...the State of New York?'"⁵ In a speech in 1862, Douglass declared: "Colored men

were good enough to fight under Washington. They are not good enough to fight under McClellan. They were good enough to fight under Andrew Jackson. They are not good enough to fight under Gen. Halleck. They were good enough to help win American independence but they are not good enough to help preserve that independence against treason and rebellion."⁶

Historian David Blight wrote that "Douglass was an intensely interested observer of this evolving policy toward black troops, and he combined his agitation for black enlistment with a wide-ranging discussion of the *loyalty* of his people."⁷ Douglass never did anything half-heartedly. "We shall be fighting a double battle, against slavery at the South and against prejudice and proscription at the North," argued Douglass. "Whoever sees fifty thousand well-drilled colored soldiers in the United States, will see slavery abolished and the union of these States secured from rebel violence."⁸ Douglas argued in August 1863: "Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters, U.S.; let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States."⁹

During 1862 Union generals in the field - particularly David Hunter in South Carolina, John W. Phelps in Louisiana, and James Lane in Kansas - began using black soldiers without authorization from Washington. Lincoln chronicler Jay Winik wrote "...the First Kansas Colored...won broad praise for two fierce engagements at Cabin Creek and Honey Springs in present-day Oklahoma." One hitherto prejudiced white Union officer noted after the Cabin Creek battle that black soldiers "are hell for fighting."¹⁰ In Louisiana, General Phelps enthusiastically recruited black soldiers - although his superior, General Benjamin F. Butler, objected to the impact on white plantation owners.. Butler engaged in "an angry feud with a subordinate, General John W. Phelps, who offered protection to escaping slaves," wrote historian Louis Gerteis. "Butler insisted that planters in the occupied portions of Louisiana were loyal men whose property in slaves should be recognized and protected by the Union army. Phelps consistently disobeyed Butler's orders to exclude blacks from his lines and the commander thought him 'as mad as a March Hare....' Butler himself had grown to fear a general slave insurrection..."¹¹

Although these efforts attracted little opposition in Washington, the situation was different when General David Hunter attempted to emancipate and recruit slaves in South Carolina. "David Hunter was presumed to be safely conservative in the fall of 1861," wrote historian Dudley Taylor Cornish. "Certainly he was more capable and experienced in military affairs than Fr  mont. Of his personal loyalty to the president, Lincoln could have no doubts. Not until the spring of 1862, as commanding general of the Department of the South, would this West Pointer violate at last the Greeley stereotype." Hunter's proclamation undermined the President's authority and the war effort in many Union eyes. It prompted the National Intelligencer to editorialize: "What hopes of reconstruction can survive if the President, neglecting to restrain his subordinates...should tamely acquiesce in the parcelling out of the national authority into as many Major Generalships as we have Major Generals in the field?"¹²

Hunter's implementation of his own policy was problematic and coercive. Historian James M. McPherson noted that "few freedmen volunteered and Hunter was compelled to order a draft to fill up his regiment. This was a serious mistake. Squads of white soldiers marched into the cotton fields and dragged freedmen off to headquarters, often without explanation. The Negroes began to fear that their old masters' tales about Yankee plans to sell them to Cuba were true after all. They hid in swamps and woods to escape the draft, but were rounded up and riven to General Hunter's headquarters at bayonet point."¹³ Historian Dudley Taylor Cornish wrote: "Had Hunter...patiently sought *volunteers* instead of dragooning the terrified Negroes and forcing them willy-nilly into baggy red trousers, his progress must have been far smoother than it was."¹⁴

Regardless, Hunter's policy had its admirers. Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase wrote: "In my judgment, the military Order of Hunter should have been sustained. The President, who is as sound in head as he is excellent in heart, thought otherwise, and I, as in duty bound, submit my judgment to his. The language of the President's Proclamation, however, clearly shows that his mind is not finally decided. It points to a contingency in which he may recognize the same necessity. My conviction is that that contingency will soon arrive, if misfortunes so great do not occur as to overthrow all anticipations."¹⁵ On July 20, 1862, Presidential aide John Hay wrote: "How gloriously General Hunter has justified my statement that the future would prove his soundness in hatred of slavery. He has done the greatest thing of the war even though unfruitful of results." He added: "Although the President repudiated his order he regards him none the less kindly, and so told the Border State Slaveholders the other day."¹⁶

Historian Michael Burlingame wrote: "Politically, Lincoln had to contend with fierce popular resistance to recruiting blacks, especially in the Midwest and Border States."¹⁷ On July 12, 1862, President Lincoln told Border State members of Congress: "General Hunter is an honest man. He was, and I

hope, still is, my friend. I valued him none the less for his agreeing with me in the general wish that all men everywhere, could be free. He proclaimed all men free within certain states and I repudiated the proclamation. Yet in repudiating it, I gave dissatisfaction, if not offence, to many whose support the country can not afford to lose. And that is not the end of it. the pressure, in this direction, is still upon me, and is increasing."¹⁸ About a week later, the President wrote a brief note on the subject:

To recruiting free negroes, no objection[.]

To recruiting slaves of disloyal owners, no objection[.]

To recruiting slaves of loyal owners, *with their consent*, no objection[.]

To recruiting slaves of loyal owners *without* consent, objection, *unless the necessity is urgent*.

To conducting offensively, while recruiting, and to carrying away slaves not suitable for recruits, objection.¹⁹

There were strong advocates in Congress for the use of black soldiers - but there were strong opponents as well, especially in the Border States. Historian John T. Hubbell wrote: "For practical political reasons, Lincoln did not openly lead the movement toward the enlistment of blacks. Prior to 1863, long before he expressed enthusiasm for the idea, he allowed others to take the first steps; he remained silent, overruled them, or caused them to be overruled. He was always sensitive to political considerations and to the perquisites and powers of his office. Timing, the right moment, was critical - and Lincoln always deemed himself a better judge of the moment than those who advised him formally or informally."²⁰

On July 17, 1862, Congress passed the Militia Act which authorized the use of black soldiers. Dudley Cornish Taylor noted: "But even the Militia Act, radical though it was, did not give David Hunter the full and specific support his experiment needed...It was no solution to the pressing problems that Hunter faced, the practical military problems of appointing military officers to whip the new regiment into shape and to lead it in the field, and of paying the black companies. Lincoln had the authority himself or to delegate it to his erstwhile friend at Hilton Head."²¹ According to Lincoln biographers John G. Nicolay and John Hay: "Though he felt constrained to postpone a systematic organization of negro troops for active campaigns, he nevertheless expressed his willingness 'that commanders should, at their discretion, arm, for purely defensive purposes, slaves coming within their lines'; and on August 25, 1862, the Secretary of War formally authorized General [Rufus] Saxton, in command at Port Royal, to arm, uniform, equip, and drill not exceeding 5000 volunteers of African descent to guard and protect the plantations and settlements at Port Royal and elsewhere."

This authority was given in pursuance of the very guarded provisions which Congress had recently embodied in the Confiscation Act and in an act amending the Force Bill of 1795, both of which laws had been approved by the President on July 17, 1862, the last day of the session. Section 11 of the former empowered the President 'to employ as many persons of African descent as he may deem necessary and proper for the suppression of this rebellion, and for this purpose he may organize and use them in such manner as he may judge best for the public welfare.' Section 12 of the latter was a trifle more specific; but the careful choice of words to say one thing and mean another, gave abundant evidence of the extreme sensitiveness of opinion on the subject, in Congress as well as out of it. The section provided: 'That the President be and he is hereby authorized to receive into the service of the United States, for the purpose of constructing intrenchments, or performing camp service, or any other labor or any military or naval service for which they may be found competent, persons of African descent, and such persons shall be enrolled and organized under such regulations, not inconsistent with the Constitution and laws, as the President may prescribe.' Further significance was given to the language by a clause, in Section 15 of the same act, which read that "persons of African descent, who under this law shall be employed, shall receive ten dollars per month and one ration, three dollars of which monthly pay may be in clothing."²²

Once the final Emancipation Proclamation had been issued on January 1, 1863, the barriers to black recruitment began to fall. "One evening in January [1863], ten officers in uniform, led by the Vice President's son, Cyrus, trooped into [Hannibal] Hamlin's hotel room. Major Hamlin, formerly of [General John C.] Fremont's staff but now looking for a challenging assignment, explained their mission. They wanted to see the Administration arm the freedmen and were willing to command Negro units....The Vice-President assured them that he and [Secretary of War Edwin M.] Stanton had been fighting for the use of Negro troops for some time, but the President had balked because, as he put it, the people were 'not up to it.' Now Hamlin sent a messenger to the White House to request an appointment with Lincoln for nine o'clock the following morning," wrote H. Draper Hunt, biographer of Hannibal Hamlin. Hunt wrote: "Shortly before nine, the Vice President and the officers piled into carriages and drove to the Executive Mansion, where Hamlin introduced his companions and told the President that they had volunteered to officer colored organizations. Lincoln queried each man and then announced that he had finally decided to take the Vice-President's advice and arm the blacks. He

wrote out an order instructing the Secretary of War to form a colored brigade immediately to be officered by white men, with special consideration being given to the men whom Hamlin would introduce to him. The President handed the order to Hamlin, who led his party to the War Department. Stanton received the group cordially, read the President's order, and suddenly embraced the Vice-President, murmuring, 'Thank God for this!'"²³

Historian Ralph Korngold wrote that Pennsylvania Congressman Thaddeus Stevens "concluded that if slaves in the border states were offered the boon of freedom, they would be anxious to enlist and it would not be necessary to draft them. So, on January 12, 1863, less than two weeks after the appearance of the final Emancipation Proclamation, he introduced a bill consisting of two sections. The first section provided that the President was 'authorized and *required* ...to proceed *immediately* to raise, equip and organize one hundred and fifty thousand soldiers, persons of color or free African descent...into infantry, artillery and cavalry.' The second section provided that 'slaves as well as freemen may be enlisted and mustered into service, *and such persons shall never again be slaves, but the United States shall pay for each of them as belong to persons who have not been disloyal during this rebellion.*'"²⁴ Ohio Congressman William Parker Cutler wrote in his diary on February 2, 1863: "After a long contest over Mr. Stevens bill to raise Negro regiments - it finally passed today 83 to 54. The Democrats seemed determined to make capital out of the idea of putting a Negro on an equality with the white man - by making him a soldier. They have made every effort to rouse up the worst prejudices of the army & the People & seem to glory & exult in the opportunity presented to degrade & tread down Gods image in the person of the Negro."²⁵

The New York *Herald* reported: "In this the President found himself in the position of the English gentleman who had a rake for a son, whom he told to take a wife. When the hopeful replied, 'Well, father, whose wife will I take?' The President took a map, pointing to the colored parts representing the sections of the rebel States largely people by colored people. He noted that bordering on Vicksburg in particular, remarking that he hoped for co-operation from the negroes in that section to take Vicksburg and hold it. He had urged upon many generals to take the work of raising an army of colored men; but he could not prevail on them, because they had stars on their shoulders. He further informed the committee that he believed Fr  mont to be the man to do this work and give it effect, on account of his peculiarities and those of the colored people. He assured them that he would do all in his power to forward the movement. Mr. Chase was present during the interview, but never spoke. Senator [Charles] Sumner was also present, and stated that he believed the greatest name to be written in these times will be written by the hand of that man who organizes the colored people into an army for their own deliverance and the restoration of the Union."²⁶ Historian William Marvel noted that: "In February [1863], when the War Department finally authorized the enlistment of black troops under white officers, hordes of privates and noncommissioned officers applied for appointments, and a good many of those applicants privately admitted seeking their commissions for the sole purpose of resigning them and going home."²⁷

Even in 1863 President Lincoln proceeded cautiously, concerned about the impact on Union loyalists in the Border States and elsewhere in the North where anti-black bias was prevalent. Historian Richard J. Carwardine wrote: that "fearing the effect on public opinion, Lincoln was not prepared to move to a general arming of African Americans." According to Carwardine, "The Emancipation Proclamation was quite enough to ask conservative Unionists to digest for the moment; with elections in the offing in the fall of 1862, he would not ask them to swallow black enlistments too."²⁸ Historian Dudley Taylor Cornish wrote: "No integrated policy emerged at once. For the first quarter of 1863 the president and his War Department seemed to grapple with the Negro soldier policy on a sort of catch-as-catch can basis, granting authority for Negro enlistment and organization to individual civil and military officers without any obvious effort to standardize that policy," wrote²⁹ Historian Victor Ullmann wrote that "blacks did not flock to the colors as readily as they would have a year before. By the early months of 1863 unskilled white labor was receiving competition for war production jobs from the blacks who had never had such job opportunities."³⁰

Carwardine noted that "If Lincoln shared the common anxiety that blacks were unequal to the task, it was assuaged by his reading George Livermore's recent pamphlet, a gift from Sumner, on their substantial role as soldiers during the [American] Revolution."³¹ "No regiment is to be seen in which there are not Negroes in abundance; and many of them are able-bodied, strong and brave fellows."³² President Lincoln was also worried about the reaction of Unionists in the Border States, especially Kentucky. Historian John T. Hubbell wrote: "When [General] Ambrose Burnside suggested in June, 1863, that the administration disavow any intention to conscript free blacks in Kentucky, Lincoln concurred that the effort would cost more than it would gain."³³

The situation was different in the North. Massachusetts resident Thomas Wentworth Higginson was named to head the "First South Carolina Volunteers" by General Rufus Saxton in August 1862. Historian James McPherson noted that "Higginson was a true nineteenth century intellectual, a scholar

and author imbued with romantic zeal. A leading contributor to the *Atlantic Monthly*, he was also one of New England's most militant abolitionists. He was excited by the prospect of commanding the first regiment of black men officially mustered into the Union Army. He told the publisher of the *Atlantic Monthly* that he would rather command such a regiment 'than anything else in the world.'" After two black regiments under his leadership assaulted and captured Jacksonville in March 1863, Higginson wrote that "the Cabinet at Washington kept their whole action in regard to enlisting colored troops waiting to hear from us in Florida, and when the capture of Jacksonville was known, the whole question was regarded as settled, the policy avowed."³⁴

Historian James M. McPherson noted that "Within 36 hours of Lincoln's first call for troops, Boston Negroes met and resolved to organize militia units. Philadelphia Negroes began to recruit two regiments. Colored men in New York began drilling in a privately hired hall. In many parts of the North free Negroes were prepared to join the army if the government would accept them."³⁵ Frederick Douglass helped recruit for the Massachusetts regiment being organized by Massachusetts Governor John Andrew. Another prominent African-American recruiter was Martin Delany. Historian Eric Foner wrote: "Emancipation further transformed the black response to American nationality, dealing the death blow, at least for this generation, to ideas of emigration. Symbolic, perhaps, was the fact that Martin R. Delany, the 'father of black nationalism' and an advocate during the 1850s of emigration, recruited blacks for the Union Army and then joined himself."³⁶ Delany biographer Tunde Adeleke, wrote that Delany "was first assigned to assist in recruiting the 54th Massachusetts regiment. No sooner had this unit been filled than he was appointed agent to help recruit the heavy artillery in Rhode Island and Connecticut. His successes there earned him services elsewhere. Through the recommendation of a Rhode Island artillery officer, Delany got the greatest contract of all - state contractor for the western and southwestern states and territories."³⁷ Delany worked in partnership with Chicago businessman John Jones. Edna Greene Medford noted: "On August 29, [1863] Douglass proposed the employment of agents and subagents who would travel to various parts of the South where Union troops were engaging the Confederate forces and coax slaves into the Union lines." Douglass's plan became unnecessary as an increasingly victorious Union military force quieted the clamor for peace."³⁸

The Massachusetts 54th Regiment became a test case for the recruitment of black soldiers and their courage under fire. After the Civil War ended, the New York *Tribune* editorialized that the 54th was the black regiment "on whose good conduct depended for a long time the success of the whole experiment of arming black citizens in defense of the Republic."³⁹ Russell Duncan wrote: "Among the first to join was a former slave from Virginia, William H. Carney. Carney had been born in Norfolk in 1840, the son of William Carney and Ann Dean. Their owner's will freed them in 1854. Two years later, the family left Virginia, having chosen New Bedford over Pennsylvania because, as Carney put it, 'The black man was not secure on the soil where the Declaration of Independence was written.' Strong and brave, William Carney would become the first African American to win the Medal of Honor."⁴⁰ He received the award for his heroism when the Massachusetts 54th attacked Fort Wagner, where he was wounded four times while carrying the regimental colors.

The 54th's white commander, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, was a firm believer in discipline. Shaw biographer Russell Duncan wrote: "Shaw knew the stakes were high. Any misstep would be used to embarrass those who already were being ridiculed for believing that blacks would fight. Just after accepting the colonelcy, Shaw wrote his fiancée: 'what I have to do is to prove that a negro can be made a good soldier.' He...believed strongly that most enlisted men acted in excess unless restrained by the educated and civilized officer ranks."⁴¹ He inflicted stern punishments for disciplinary offenses - until he was ordered by superiors to back off.

Most recruitment of black soldiers was not so easy - particularly in areas where white racism was prevalent. Historian Darrel E. Bigham wrote of the experience in the Ohio River valley: "Blacks' offers to enlist initially met stern resistance. Governor William Dennison, like many Republicans, had opposed the extension of slavery on racist rather than moral grounds. However, his successor, David Todd, encouraged John Langston's recruitment of blacks for the 54th Massachusetts. Two southern Ohio black recruits became prominent officers - James Monroe Trotter of Cincinnati, a teacher, who became a lieutenant, and Martin Delany of Wilberforce, who attained the rank of major, the highest reached by any African American in the war." Two black regiments were formed in Ohio.⁴² The President's decision to recruit black soldiers prompted criticism inside and outside the army. Historian John Hope Franklin wrote: "There were many, however, including some of the soldiers, who did not want the Negro to wear the uniform of the Union, feeling that it should be reserved for those who citizenship was unquestioned. Lincoln feared that the border states would take exception to a policy of arming Negroes and that it would seriously alienate support in the North."⁴³

At the national level, recruitment responsibility was placed in the hands of Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas. Although Secretary of War Stanton simply sought to get Thomas out of Washington, President Lincoln sought to use him to organize the recruitment of troops in the Mississippi Valley.

Lincoln wrote Stanton: "I desire that a renewed and vigorous effort be made to raise colored forces along the shores of the Mississippi." President Lincoln wrote Stanton on July 21, 1863. "Please consult the General-in-Chief; and if it is perceived that any acceleration of the matter can be effected, let it be done. I think the evidence is nearly conclusive that General [Lorenzo] Thomas is one of the best, if not the best, instruments for this service."⁴⁴ But President Lincoln continued to be cautious about the sensitivities in the border states. He wrote General Thomas in June 1864: "Complaint is made to me that in the vicinity of Henderson, our military are seizing negroes and carrying them off without their own consent, and according to no rules whatever, except those of absolute violence. I wish you would look into this & inform me, and see that the making soldiers of negroes is done according to the rules you are acting upon, so that unnecessary provocation and irritation [sic] be avoided."⁴⁵

One of the foremost advocates of the use of black soldiers in Congress was Massachusetts Senator Henry Wilson. In October 1863, he wrote: President Lincoln: "Everybody wants to know why we do not raise more Black soldiers. I see why we do not. No one is organizing the movement. If an organizer like [Benjamin F.] Butler, F. Forbes an eminent business man of Boston or some other good organizer had committed to him in the War office this great work and had full power to act he could in the border states and in the conquered portions of the rebel states raise men with great rapidity - fill our armies and destroy [sic] slavery. As it is - no head - we are doing but little and calling for more men here in the loyal states and must suffer by it. I intended that the conscription act should include the colored men free and slave but I do not see that they are enrolled in the Slave states. Our people do not understand this."⁴⁶ Another senator, Iowa's James W. Grimes, wrote: "I regard the employment of colored persons in the Army and Navy as of vastly more importance in putting an end to slavery than all of the confiscation acts that could be devised by the ingenuity of man."⁴⁷

On December 5, 1863, General Benjamin F. Butler issued an order regarding to treatment of black soldiers in Virginia. He began: "The recruitment of colored troops has become the settled purpose of the Government. It is therefore the duty of every officer and soldier to aid in carrying out that purpose, by every proper means, irrespective of personal predilection. To do this effectually, the former condition of the blacks; their change of relation; the new rights acquired by them; the great stake they have in the war; and the claims their ignorance, and the helplessness of their women and children, make upon each of us, who hold a higher grade in social and political life, must all be carefully considered."⁴⁸

Not all Union commanders were enthusiastic about black soldiers. One doubter was General William T. Sherman. President Lincoln wrote the general in Georgia in mid-July 1864: "I have seen your despatches objecting to agents of Northern States opening recruiting stations near your camps. An act of congress authorizes this, giving the appointment of agents to the States, and not to this Executive government. It is not for the War Department, or myself, to restrain, or modify the law, in it's execution, further than actual necessity may require. To be candid, I was for the passage of the law, not apprehending at the time that it would produce such inconvenience to the armies in the field, as you now cause me to fear. Many of the States were very anxious for it, and I hoped that, with their State bounties, and active exertions, they would get out substantial additions to our colored forces, which, unlike white recruits, help us where they come from, as well as where they go to. I still hope advantage from the law; and being a law, it must be treated as such by all of us. We here, will do what we consistently can to save you from difficulties arising out of it. May I ask therefore that you will give your hearty co-operation?"⁴⁹

Sherman was besieged, however, by complaints of his treatment of freed slaves who thronged around his army as he moved through Georgia. Sherman wrote Secretary of State War Stanton on October 25, 1864: "I do not wish to be considered as in any way adverse to the organization of negro Regiments further than as to its Effects on the White Race. I do wish the Fine Race of men that Peoples our Northern States should rule & determine the future destiny of America: but if they prefer trade and gain, and leave and bought substitutes & negroes the fighting, (the actual conflict,) of course the question is Settled, for those who hold swords & muskets at the end of this war (which has but fairly begun) will have something to say. If negroes are to fight, they too will not be content with sliding back into the status of slave, or Free Negro either."⁵⁰

After Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton visited him, Sherman bitterly complained to General Henry W. Halleck about criticism concerning his treatment of freed slaves. Sherman's patience and tolerance were clearly gone: "Of course that cock-and-bull story of my turning back negroes that Wheeler might kill them is all humbug. I turned nobody back. Jeff. C. Davis did at Ebenezer Creek forbid certain plantation slaves - old men, women, and children - to follow his column; but they would come along and he took up his pontoon bridge, not because he wanted to leave them, but because he wanted his bridge." Sherman was impatient with both Northern politics and Southern blacks: "The South deserves all she has got for her injustice to the negro, but that is no reason why we should go to the other

In January 1865, Sherman wrote General Henry W. Halleck about complaints regarding the thousands of former slaves who thronged to his army. He argued that too much attention was paid to them: "Neither cotton, the negro, nor any single interest or class should govern us." But Sherman defended himself, saying: "I do and will do the best I can for negroes, and feel sure that the problem is solving itself slowly and naturally..." The drain of the refugees was such that they threatened his military operations: "Tell the President that in such an event defeat would have cost him ten thousand times the effort to overcome that it now will to meet this new and growing pressure."⁵²

Ulysses S. Grant gave President Lincoln more enthusiastic support for black recruitment. On August 9, 1863, President Lincoln wrote General Grant about the recruitment of black troops: "A word upon another subject. Gen. Thomas has gone again to the Mississippi Valley, with the view of raising colored troops. I have no reason to doubt that you are doing what you reasonable can upon the same subject. I believe it is a resource which, if vigorously applied now, will soon close the context. It works doubly, weakening the enemy and strengthening us. We were not fully ripe for it until the river was opened. Now, I think at least a hundred thousand can, and ought to be rapidly organized along it's shores, relieving all the white troops there."⁵³ Grant replied on August 23, 1863:

I have given the subject of arming the negro my hearty support. This, with the emancipation of the negro, is the heaviest blow yet given the Confederacy. The South care a great deal about it and profess to be very angry. But they were united in their action before and with the negro under subjection could spare their entire white population for the field. Now they complain that nothing can be got out of their negroes.

There has been great difficulty in getting able bodied negroes to fill up the colored regiments in consequence of the rebel cavalry run[n]ing off all that class to Georgia and Texas. This is especially the case for a distance of fifteen or twenty miles on each side of the river. I am now however sending two expeditions into Louisiana, one from Natchez to Harrisonburg and one from Goodrich's Landing to Monroe, that I expect will bring back a large number. I have ordered recruiting officers to accompany these expeditions. I am also moving a Brigade of Cavalry from Tennessee to Vicksburg which will enable me to move troops to a greater distance into the interior and will facilitate materially the recruiting service.⁵⁴

Historian David Herbert Donald wrote: "At first most Union officials thought black regiments would be useful only for garrison duty, but in bitterly contested engagements such as Fort Wagner and Port Hudson, Milliken's Bend and Nashville, they demonstrated, as Lincoln said, how well, 'with silent tongue, and clenched teeth, and steady eye, and well-poised bayonet,' they could and would fight. The battle record of these black troops did much to change popular Northern stereotypes of the Negro."⁵⁵

General Lorenzo Thomas wrote: "The tenacious and brilliant valor displayed by troops of this race at Port Hudson, Millikens Bend, and Fort Wagner has sufficiently demonstrated to the President and to the country the character of the service of which they are capable."⁵⁶ Service with black soldiers frequently changed the racist attitudes of their white counterparts. One Union officer observed that whites often had "the idea that the entire Negro race are vastly their inferiors. A few weeks of calm unprejudiced life here would disabuse them, I think. I have a more elevated opinion of their abilities than I ever had before. I know that many of them are vastly the *superiors* of those...who would condemn them to a life of brutal degradation."⁵⁷

The Confederacy considered but rejected use of black soldiers until the end of the Civil War. Lincoln biographer William E. Barton wrote: "The question of the employment of negro troops gave concern to both armies. General [Robert E.] Lee favored enlisting negroes in the Southern Army, and so did Jefferson Davis, but the South had reason to pause before putting uniforms on the backs of slaves and giving them guns with which to fight against soldiers of the white race. Negroes thus fighting in the Confederate Army would, of course, receive their freedom as a reward, and they would thereafter live in the South, after having been taught to shoot white men. In the North there was much disinclination to employ negroes as soldiers, but a growing conviction that there was no good reason why white men should die to make black men free and the black men be sheltered from the perils of the war."⁵⁸

African-Americans had reason to have their own doubts about recruitment. Even the process of enlisting could be hazardous to a black man. Historian Darrel E. Bigham wrote that in Illinois: "Following Governor [Richard] Yates's decision to raise a black regiment in Illinois members of the Sons of Liberty and Knight of the Golden Circle intensified their attacks on blacks. They targeted men attempting to enlist at Shawneetown, for example, and attacked seventy-four men en route to Quincy to enlist."⁵⁹ Susan-Mary Grant wrote that "the problem facing both African-American soldiers and their non-combatant spokesmen in the North was that their vision of the meaning of the Civil War clashed

with that of the majority of whites. For blacks, the Civil War offered an opportunity not just to end slavery, but to redefine American national ideals. Their determination to fight in the face of hostility and prejudice left their dedication to these national ideals in no doubt whatsoever." ⁶⁰

Despite these difficulties, enlistment proceeded. Historian Joseph Glathaar noted: "Many of them [blacks], whether slaves or freedmen, were seeking any opportunity to flee their current conditions, yet they also exhibited a tremendous commitment to the Union war effort. As one of their future commanders noted, 'The negroes feel quite patriotic, they would nearly all enlist about here if they could get the chance.'" ⁶¹ Civil War writer Ernest B. Furgurson wrote: "Black pride glowed on thousands of faces at midday on April 26, [1864] when those troops marched through Washington on the way south. After plodding thirty-plus miles from Annapolis in two days of rain." Burnside's Ninth Corps, which was reviewed by President Lincoln, included seven regiments from the U.S. Colored Troops. ⁶² Presidential aide William O. Stoddard was on Pennsylvania Avenue when one of the first black regiments came up the street. When he asked Secretary of State William H. Seward what he thought "of our black troops," Seward slowly responded: "It grows, it grows." Later in his office, Stoddard went to the window when the same regiment paraded back in front of the White House. As he watched, the President came up behind him. Stoddard asked him a question similar to the one he had asked Seward. Like Seward, he paused before he responded: "It'll do, it'll do!" ⁶³

In his third annual message to Congress in December 1863, President Lincoln said: "Of those who were slaves at the beginning of the rebellion full 100,000 are now in the United States military service, about one-half of which number actually bear arms in the ranks, thus giving the double advantage of taking so much labor from the insurgent cause and supplying the places which otherwise must be filled with so many white men. So far as tested, it is difficult to say they are not as good soldiers as any. No servile insurrection or tendency to violence or cruelty has marked the measures of emancipation and arming the blacks. These measures have been much discussed in foreign countries, and, contemporary with such discussion, the tone of public sentiment there is much improved. At home the same measures have been fully discussed, supported, criticised, and denounced, and the annual elections following are highly encouraging to those whose official duty it is to bear the country through this great trial. Thus we have the new reckoning. The crisis which threatened to divide the friends of the Union is past." ⁶⁴

In Mr. Lincoln's mind the use of black troops solidified the results of the Emancipation Proclamation. Historian Allen C. Guelzo wrote that "black enlistment made the Emancipation Proclamation irrevocable. No one in their right mind could seriously recommend canceling the Proclamation after ordering black soldiers into the nightmare of war." ⁶⁵ Historian James A. Rawley wrote: "The policy of employing Blacks in the army obviously weakened the Confederacy and strengthened the Union. Despite considerable Northern white opposition and continuing discrimination while they wore the blue uniform, Negroes importantly contributed to winning the war and their own freedom." ⁶⁶ Historian Steven Hay wrote: "The black military role in support of the Union made possible a revolution in American civil and political society that was barely on the horizon of official imagination as late as the middle of 1864. The Emancipation Proclamation may well have committed the federal government, if victorious, to abolishing slavery in the Confederacy, and the institution itself may already have unraveled beyond the point of restoration, but there was still much talk of an armistice to end hostilities, of compensation to slaveholders for the loss of their slaves, of gradualist solutions to the emancipation in the border states, and of challenges to the constitutionality of many war measures." ⁶⁷

The presence of black soldiers in the union army acted as a guarantee for the Emancipation Proclamation in Mr. Lincoln's mind. In a letter to a Union meeting in Springfield Illinois in the late summer of 1863, Mr. Lincoln addressed critics of emancipation. Mr. Lincoln said: "You say you will not fight to free negroes. Some of them seem willing to fight for you; but, no matter. Fight you, then exclusively to save the Union. I issued the proclamation on purpose to aid you in saving the Union. Whenever you shall have conquered all resistance to the Union, if I shall urge you to continue fighting, it will be an apt time, then, for you to declare you will not fight to free negroes."

I thought that in your struggle for the Union, to whatever extent the negroes should cease helping the enemy, to that extent it weakened the enemy in his resistance to you. Do you think differently? I thought that whatever negroes can be got to do as soldiers, leaves just so much less for white soldiers to do, in saving the Union. Does it appear otherwise to you? But negroes, like other people, act upon motives. Why should they do any thing for us, if we will do nothing for them? If they stake their lives for us, they must be prompted by the strongest motive--even the promise of freedom. And the promise being made, must be kept." ⁶⁸

Michael Burlingame noted that in an unpublished letter intended to be read at a meeting in Buffalo, Lincoln wrote: "We can not spare the hundred and forty or fifty thousand now serving us as soldiers, seamen, and laborers. This is not a question of sentiment or taste, but one of physical force which may

be measured and estimated as horse-power and Steam-power are measured and estimated. Keep it and you can save the Union. Throw it away, and the Union goes with it. Nor is it possible for any Administration to retain the service of these people with the express or implied understanding that upon the first convenient occasion, they are to be re-enslaved. It *can* not be; and it *ought* not to be."⁶⁹

The promise being made must assuredly be kept. Historian Eric Foner wrote: "The service of black soldiers affected Lincoln's own racial outlook...He insisted that black troops must be treated the same as white troops when captured and he suspended prisoner-of-war exchanges when the Confederacy sought to limit such exchanges to whites."⁷⁰ Mr. Lincoln was anxious to see black soldiers when he visiting City Point in June 1864, saying "I was opposed on nearly every side when I first favored the raising of colored regiments, but they have proved their efficiency, and I am glad they have kept pace with the white troops in the recent assaults. When we wanted every able-bodied man who could be spared to go to the front, and my opposers keep objecting to the Negroes, I used to tell them that at such times it was just as well to be a little color-blind."⁷¹

Historian Brooks Simpson wrote: "The president got his first look at black soldiers in the field when he visited Baldy Smith's camp in 1864. 'The black troops received him most enthusiastically, grinning from ear to ear, and displaying an amount of ivory terrible to behold.' [Grant aide Horace] Porter observed. They cheered wildly, crowding around Lincoln, kissing his hand, brushing his coat or his horse so that they could tell others that they had touched the president. And Lincoln was touched. His eyes brimming with tears, his voice broke as he talked with the men; the encounter reminded everyone what was at stake."⁷²

Black soldiers returned the President's loyalty. Civil War journalist Sylvanus Cadwallader reported a carriage ride by President Lincoln: "The noticeable feature of the ride was the passing a brigade of negro troops. They were lounging by the roadside, and when he approached came rushing by hundreds screaming, yelling, shouting: 'Hurrah for the Liberator; Hurrah for the President,' and were wild with excitement and delight. It was a genuine spontaneous outburst of love and affection for the man they looked upon as their deliverer from bondage. The President uncovered as he rode through their ranks, and bowed on every hand to his sable worshipers."⁷³

Blacks in the Union faced structured racism. Most offensively, they were paid at a lower wage than white soldiers during 1863 and the first half of 1864. Historian David W. Blight wrote: "Black troops began to refuse their pay altogether while it remained unequal, some regiments accepting no wages at all well into 1864."⁷⁴ Historian Edna Green Medford wrote: "While affording them an opportunity to prove their manhood and become liberators of their people, the military experience nevertheless demoralized many men of color. Acceptance as soldiers in the Union army exposed them to excessive fatigue duty (nonmilitary labor such as well and trench digging, unloading vessels, erecting breastworks, and draining marshes), unserviceable equipment and harassment from fellow soldiers and the civilian population."⁷⁵ Historians David Brion Davis and Steven Mintz wrote: "Within the ranks, black troops faced repeated humiliations; most were employed in menial assignments and kept in rear-echelon, fatigue jobs. They were punished by whipping or by being tied by their thumbs; if captured by the Confederates, they faced execution. But despite these trials, African-American soldiers won their battle for equal pay (in 1864), and in 1864 they were allowed to serve as line officers. Drawing upon the education and training they received in the military, many former troops became community leaders during Reconstruction."⁷⁶ Historian David W. Blight wrote: "The inequality in the army was a tough pill for some to swallow while risking their lives for the hope of more complete justice down the road." Blight noted: "As individuals, black soldiers had few certainties and much to fear from military service."⁷⁷ Historian John F. Marszalek wrote: "Black troops endured the worst fatigue duty possible, much beyond what white soldiers faced. When in contact with white units, they suffered unrelenting prejudice. Some of their white officers treated them in a harsh manner reminiscent of slavery, but sometimes the officers and men developed close bonds with each other. Medical care was shockingly inadequate for the black soldiers, and they received the worst weapons and equipment."⁷⁸ Historian Susan-Mary Grant noted: "The fact that blacks had shown that they could fight in no way diminished the prejudice they experienced in the Union army. Nor did it resolve the crux of the issue which was that the war for many of the black troops, was in essence a very different conflict from that experience by the whites. In purely practical terms, the conditions experienced by African-American troops were far inferior to those experience by some white ones."⁷⁹

The pay dispute had a particularly strong impact on the 54th Massachusetts Regiment. Protests by black soldiers, Colonel Edward N. Hallowell, believed "to be entirely right, morally and yet military necessity has compelled me to shoot two of them."⁸⁰ Blight wrote: "Black protest reached heroic and tragic proportions in the fall of 1863, when whole units threatened mutiny. In November, led by Sergeant William Walker, the men of one company of the 3rd South Carolina Volunteers stacked their rifles in front of the tent of their regimental commander. Colonel Augustus G. Bennett, refused to do further duty until the pay controversy was settled. Bennett was sympathetic, but he pressed charges of

mutiny nonetheless. In February, one of the ugliest episodes of the war, a firing squad executed Walker in front of his entire brigade."⁸¹

Historian James G. Randall and Richard N. Current wrote: "'Sometime during the year 1864,' according to a memoir left by Henry Samuels, several representatives of the Committee for Recruiting Colored Troops were ushered into the President's private room by Secretary Stanton. 'The President was seated at his desk with his long legs on the top of it, his hands on his head and looking exactly like a huge katydid or grass-hopper.' He quietly listened until his petitioners had finished, then 'turned his head and jocularly said, with one of those peculiar smiles of his': 'Well, gentlemen, you wish the pay of 'cuffie' raised.' The youthfully brash and earnest Samuels objected: 'Excuse me, Mr. Lincoln, the term 'Cuffie' is not in our vernacular. What we want is that the wages of the American Colored Laborer be equalized with those of the American White Laborer.' Lincoln replied: 'I stand corrected, young man, but you know I am by birth a Southerner and in our section that term is applied without any idea of an offensive nature. I will, however, at the earliest possible moment do all in my power to accede to your request.' About a month later the war department issued an order requiring the Negro teamsters and other laborers employed by the army be paid at the same rate as the white men doing the same kinds of work."⁸²

Black soldiers were generally excluded from officer commissions in the Union Army. Historian Joseph T. Glatthaar wrote that "in late 1862 and throughout the most of 1863, the employment of black soldiers was still in the experimental stage. To ensure its continuation and success, for the benefit of all blacks, many believed it was best to give them the finest officers available - who happened to be white veterans. Once the public began to accept black soldiers and acknowledge their war time contributions, then they could resurrect the idea of black officers.

As a result of this policy decision, the Federal government avoided the elevation of blacks to officers' rank. With hesitation, the War Department assented to the commission of some black chaplains and surgeons, but in the early stages of black units the federal government made it clear that only white men would serve as combat officers. Those free black militia officers in New Orleans whom Maj. Gen. Benjamin Butler had accepted into federal service in September 1862 were rapidly weeded out for purposes of racial purity by his successor."⁸³

In Louisiana General Nathaniel P. Banks effectively reversed Butler's decision to commission black officers. Banks biographer Fred H. Harrington wrote that the "officers had been men of intelligence and education - the pick of Louisiana's Negro aristocracy, men free before the war. Banks, however, came to feel that their appointment as officers 'converts what...is capable of much usefulness into a source of constant embarrassment and annoyance.' He therefore declined to commission Negroes,' dropped some Butler appointees after efficiency examinations,' and forced most of the rest to resign. The Union army thus lost some able commanders, and Banks gained the ill will of a politically important block of Negro leaders."⁸⁴ "Perhaps the most dramatic such celebration, one that became for many African Americans emblematic of the meaning of black service and sacrifice, was the New Orleans funeral of Captain André Callous in August 1863. The *Christian Recorder* judged the event 'one of the most extraordinary exhibitions brought forth by this rebellion.' And exhibition it was: of black courage, accomplishment, and solidarity, as well as the strength of a black claim to citizenship in a restored American nation."⁸⁵

Banks did make effective use of black troops, however, in key combat roles, Historian Michael Burlingame wrote: "They represented a departure from Lincoln's original plan to use black soldiers only in supporting roles. To Charles Sumner he earnestly explained his intention 'to employ African troops to hold the Mississippi River, and also other posts in the warm climates, so that our white soldiers may be employed elsewhere.' Lincoln believed that the 'immense black population resident on the great river will, when freed and armed, be amply sufficient to protect peaceful commerce from molestation.'"⁸⁶

One exception to officer commissions for blacks was recruiter Martin Delany, the black nationalist and advocate of emigration who was out of the country at the beginning of the Civil War. Historian Donald Yacovone wrote that "the Emancipation Proclamation changed everything. Delany returned to the United States eager to help fill the ranks of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment and any units that the government might permit blacks to raise."⁸⁷ Biographer Dorothy Sterling wrote: "Delany returned to the United States aching to get into the struggle himself. At fifty he was past the military age for enlisted men. He applied for the post of surgeon in a black regiment. The War Department replied, unpromisingly, that his application was 'on file.' Hearing nothing further he accepted the job of recruiting a regiment of black artillerymen for the state of Rhode Island." Delany wrote Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton in December 1863: "I have been successfully engaged as a Recruiting Agent for Massachusetts 54th Regt. And from the commencement as the Managing Agent in the West and South-West for Rhode Island Heavy Artillery, which is now nearly full, and now have the Contract from

the State Authorities of Connecticut for the entire West and South-West, in raising Colored Troops to fill her quota."⁸⁸ In mid-winter, Delany went to Washington to seek an appointment with the President as well as a commission as an officer. "There is no official report of Martin Delany's interview with Abraham Lincoln in the White House...on February 8. Nor is there any inkling as to how he managed to get the appointment, and get it so rapidly. It is possible that Lincoln had heard or read of Delany, for many of his lectures on Africa had been fully reported," wrote Delany biographer Victor Ullmann.⁸⁹

The more prominent recruiter, Frederick Douglass, had been promised but had not received an Army commission. "Why did Delany succeed where Douglass had failed? One reason might have been the passage of time for Lincoln's timorous policy to develop. Another could have been the fact that between Douglass' disappointment and Delany's appointment, Lincoln had won re-election. The risk of losing the support of Republican anti-Negro votes was no longer a political consideration. Lincoln could now commission a black officer with impunity," wrote Ullmann. Another factor, according to Ullman was that "Delany had more to offer - a fighting unit, a 'packaged' plan, whereby former slaves would become military units self-sufficient as to training, officers and, in addition, they would be recruiters as well as fighting men. Delany promised a black army within three months, not just black recruits."⁹⁰

"Delany never knew how he lived through the suspense of the following days," wrote biographer Dorothy Sterling. His old mentor, Dr. William Elder, was in Washington, heading the Bureau of Statistics. When Delany sought him out to report on his interview with Lincoln, Elder volunteered to speak to Stanton in his behalf. "You'll get the appointment," Elder was sure." With Elder's help, Delany did get the appointment and a commission to work with General Rufus Saxton. "For the better part of a week, Delany was quizzed by an examining board, thumped by a surgeon, and given endless forms and papers to fill out. On February 26, 1865, Foster brought him back to Stanton's office so that the Secretary could sign the piece of parchment that transformed Martin R. Delany, free black, into a major in the Army of the United States," wrote Sterling.⁹¹ Biographer Victor Ullman wrote: "There was bitter scorn on the part of Delany's fellow white officers who were as committed to Negro inferiority as their counterparts in the confederate Army. As for the blacks, their admiration for this first Negro line officer in the Union Army and for his high rank amounted to adulation."⁹²

Historian Drew Gilpin Faust noted: "For Confederates, black troops represented an intolerable provocation. To permit blacks to serve as soldiers, Howell Cobb of Georgia declared, suggested 'our whole theory of slavery is wrong.' These inferior beings, he believed, were incapable of the courage required for battle. But for white southerners, the issue was not primarily one of racial theories. The terrifying actuality of a force of armed black men seemed equivalent to a slave uprising launched by the federal government against the South."⁹³

President Lincoln reacted to protect black soldiers from Confederate violence. He released General Order No. 233 on July 30, 1863: "It is the duty of every Government to give protection to its citizens, of whatever class, color, or condition, and especially to those who are duly organized as soldiers in the public service. The law of nations, and the usages and customs of war, as carried on by civilized powers, permit no distinction as to color in the treatment of prisoners of war as public enemies. To sell or enslave any captured person on account of his color, is a relapse into barbarism, and a crime against the civilization of the age.

The Government of the United States will give the same protection to all of its soldiers, and if the enemy shall sell or enslave any one because of his color, the offense shall be punished by retaliation upon the enemy's prisoners in our possession. It is, therefore ordered, for every soldier of the United States, killed in violation of the laws of war, a rebel soldier shall be executed; and for every one enslaved by the enemy, or sold into slavery, a rebel soldier shall be placed at hard labor on the public works, and continued at such labor until the other shall be released and receive the treatment due to prisoners of war."⁹⁴

Historian Susan-Mary Grant noted that "a greater proportion of wartime atrocities were directed at the coloured regiments."⁹⁵ On April 4, 1864, a Confederate force under General Nathan Bedford Forrest attacked and overran a Union garrison at Fort Pillow, Tennessee. At the time, investigations by the War Department and Congress turned up evidence that black soldiers had been massacred and some perhaps even buried alive. Several cabinet meetings in early May were devoted to what course of action to take and whether or not to authorize retaliation against Confederate troops. After an exhaustive examination of both Southern and Northern testimony on the capture of Fort Pillow, historian Albert Castel concluded: "The Union troops at Fort Pillow were massacred - massacred in the sense that they were shot down in great numbers without being able to offer effective resistance or to inflict casualties commensurate to their own losses. Out of a garrison of about 560 men, an estimated 231 were killed and approximately 100 more seriously wounded. Confederate losses, in contrast, were 14 killed and 86 wounded. Quite possibly, as the Confederates contended, a high proportion of the

Union losses occurred during the storming of the fort and the flight of the garrison to the riverbank and hence may be considered 'legitimate.' But even so, there can be little doubt that in a great many individual instances - many more than the Confederates cared to admit - Union soldiers were shot after they, personally, had stopped fighting and were trying to surrender."⁹⁶ Historian John Cimprich wrote: "Partly spurred by the black troops' sacrifices at Fort Pillow and elsewhere, the U.S. government moved toward policy revisions. One congressman mentioned the incident when favoring the abolition of slavery through the proposed 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and Congress approved equal pay and bounties for black soldiers in 1864."⁹⁷

Despite these traumas, African-American service in the Civil War was often transforming for soldiers. Historian Eric Foner wrote: "Service in the Union army offered access to education ('the cartridge box and spelling book are attached to the same belt,' wrote one observer) and established men as community leaders, opening a door to political advancement. Out of the army came many of the leaders of the Reconstruction era. At least 130 former Union soldiers served in political office after the Civil War."⁹⁸

Historian David W. Blight wrote that "the participation of the black soldier was perhaps the most revolutionary feature of the Civil War. Thousands of ex-slaves strutting down southern roads to do battle with their former masters was a sight that at the outset of the war few Americans expected to see, nor did many expect to witness a crack black regiment, recruited in northern communities by abolitionists, march through Boston Common to the cheers of twenty thousand on-lookers. By 1863 the war to save the Union had irrevocably become as well the war to free the slaves, and black soldiers came to symbolize their people's struggle for freedom, a recognition of their humanity, the rights of citizenship, and a sense of belonging in a new nation."⁹⁹

"Weighed in the scale of the Civil War, these 190,000 black soldiers and sailors (and probably a larger number of black army laborers) tipped the balance in favor of Union victory," wrote Civil War historian James M. McPherson. "Even deep in the Confederate interior remote from the fighting fronts, with the departure of masters and overseers to the army, leaving women and old men in charge, the balance of power gradually shifted in favor slaves, undermining slavery on farms and plantations far from the line of battle."¹⁰⁰ The American Navy did not exclude blacks before the Civil War - so it became it a natural opportunity for blacks during the Civil War. In addition those serving in the army, there were 29,000 black men who served in the Union navy. There were 68,178 black men who died or were lost in the conflict. Military historian Mackubin T. Owens wrote that black soldiers "constituted 120 infantry regiments, 12 regiments of heavy artillery, 10 batteries of light artillery, and seven cavalry regiments."¹⁰¹ Historian John F. Marszalek noted that "Black soldiers participated in 41 large engagements and 449 lesser ones and were awarded sixteen Medals of Honor."¹⁰² David Brion Davis and Steven Mintz wrote: "Three fifths of all black troops were former slaves. The active participation of black troops in the fighting made it far less likely that African Americans would remain in slavery after the Civil War."¹⁰³

Black soldiers transformed themselves and transformed the country. Susan-Mary Grant wrote that "the problem facing both African-American soldiers and their spokesmen in the North was that their vision of the meaning of the Civil War clashed with that of the majority of whites. For blacks, the Civil War offered an opportunity not just to end slavery, but to redefine American national ideals....their experience of the Civil War gave them a far more expansive, optimistic and demanding vision of the nation's future than it did many whites."¹⁰⁴ Historian Mark Neely wrote that "when Lincoln accepted freedmen as soldiers on January 1, 1863, he guaranteed a biracial future for the country because no President could ask a man to fight for his country and then tell him it was no longer his country."¹⁰⁵

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