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The Black Military Experience

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The service of more than 200,000 African American men under arms helped tip the balance decisively in favor of the Union's victory in the Civil War. In sheer numbers alone, they helped to resolve the potential need for soldiers that federal strategists foresaw as early as 1862. But numbers tell only part of the story. Most of these men entered the ranks after the Emancipation Proclamation signaled the Union's emerging war against slavery. Their staunch support for the new policy and its chief spokesperson – President Abraham Lincoln – helped to bolster popular acceptance of abolition; even more important, their steadfast service both in camp and on the battlefield helped to recreate the nation, to envision and enact more inclusive notions of citizenship and suffrage after the war. Some present-day observers might see these outcomes as a logical outgrowth of ideals present since the founding of the country and of the decades-long struggle against slavery, but few who witnessed events during the 1850s would have considered such a result inevitable. Black people in the North and South viewed the war as an opportunity to advance the causes of freedom and equality but held no illusions that ending slavery – no small feat in itself – would resolve the challenges freedpeople faced to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves. They hoped that citizenship and manhood suffrage might increase the odds of success, and military service offered the promise of unlocking those doors.

Thanks largely to the recent Civil War sesquicentennial, public interest in this foundational experience in the creation of modern America has never been higher. Particularly notable has been the level of attention paid to slavery as a central cause for the war and to the major contributions that African Americans, north and south, made to the outcome. This emphasis represents a marked departure from the focus during the centennial years of 1961–5, when scholars and political activists alike struggled to move beyond the narrow emphases on Billy Yank and Johnny Reb to understand how black people's struggles to destroy slavery and its legacies during the 1860s and

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1870s ran parallel to the struggles to destroy segregation and disfranchisement in the 1950s and 1960s. The civil rights movement sparked a revolution in Civil War historiography: the African American role in destroying slavery, saving the Union, and changing founding assumptions about citizenship and the electorate moved from the periphery to the center of attention.[1]

Not surprisingly, this trend sparked a counter-movement among Confederate apologists and assorted other self-styled conservatives, who wished to reinvigorate the myths about the benign if not downright wholesome effects of the peculiar institution on the slaves. For fresh evidence, they argued that slaves as a whole favored the Confederacy because of their strong attachments to their owners. This support took the form of working diligently in fields and households, caring for the masters' families and their belongings, and serving Confederate officers on the battlefield and in camps. It even extended, they insisted, as far as taking up weapons in defense of the Confederacy. Credible contemporary witnesses reported that individual black Southerners in certain circumstances fired weapons with malicious intent at the Yankees, but not in the numbers that latter-day apologists propose. A well-known campaign, led by General Patrick Cleburne and other officers in the Army of Tennessee beginning in the fall of 1863, aimed to convince authorities in Richmond to begin organizing black men as soldiers. When the proposal took on new life the following year, rebel officials, including President Jefferson Davis and General Robert E. Lee, commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, endorsed it, and by the spring of 1865, a battalion of black men had been organized in Richmond, the men uniformed, armed, and partially drilled, when Confederate forces evacuated the capital. Yet at the time of Lee's surrender they were strategically ineffective in staving off defeat. In sum, the notion that thousands of enslaved black Southerners bore arms in defense of the Confederacy is a twentieth-century myth but not a wartime reality.[2]

Understanding the black military experience during the war requires appreciating the varying perspectives through which African Americans

1 John Hope Franklin, *The Emancipation Proclamation* (New York: Doubleday, 1963); and James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964); and James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted during the War for the Union* (New York: Pantheon, 1965).

2 See esp. Robert F. Durden, *The Gray and the Black: The Confederate Debate on Emancipation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1972); Ervin L. Jordan, Jr., *Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995); and Bruce Levine, *Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm Slaves during the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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viewed the contest and its likely future impact. For enslaved persons, whether they lived in a Confederate state or in one of the Border States that remained within the Union (Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri) mattered enormously. Despite a shared interest in achieving freedom, they faced variable chances for success that did not always follow predictable patterns. Presumed liberators could uphold the peculiar institution just as its supposed defenders sometimes undermined it. In the case of antebellum free persons of color, geography also mattered. In Louisiana, *gens de couleur libres*, or free creoles of color, initially found themselves ensnared in the web of Confederate authority, but all that changed when Federal forces under Major General Benjamin F. Butler reasserted control over New Orleans and its environs in April 1862. Black residents of the Northern states and Canada, like enslaved people everywhere, also saw the war as a chance to destroy slavery, but like Louisiana's creoles of color they also wished to improve their economic circumstances and abolish the social, civic, and political constraints that weighed upon them. To varying degrees, black people, north and south, desired that the war would bring freedom and equal enjoyment in all the rights that white citizens enjoyed.

Union strategists viewed black people in the North as observers but not participants in the public life of the nation and, accordingly, as superfluous to the contest. When leaders such as Frederick Douglass and the members of militia companies that black men across the North had formed during the 1850s asked to join the fight, Federal officials turned a deaf ear. Notwithstanding repeated rebuffs, hundreds (if not thousands) did so without formal approval. Men such as H. Ford Douglas, an abolitionist who had escaped from slavery, entered an Illinois volunteer regiment without fanfare. Men with African ancestry but light complexions enlisted on the sly, but darker-skinned men also did so with the connivance of white comrades. Thousands more, including the Pennsylvanians Nicholas Biddle and George E. Stephens, accompanied volunteer regiments southward as officers' cooks and servants.[3]

Black volunteers turned away from serving in the army met no objection to enlisting in the navy based solely on color. From its inception in the 1790s, the US Navy followed the precedent of most of the other world's maritime powers and recruited men with little regard to their color or nationality. During the 1830s, naval officials limited black enlistment to 5 percent of ship's

3 On Stephens, see Donald Yacovone (ed.), *A Voice of Thunder: The Civil War Letters of George E. Stephens* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

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crew. That guideline still prevailed at the start of the war, but the Federal blockade of the Confederacy's seaports sent a jolt through the maritime world. As the number of berths on commercial vessels contracted, the expansion of the naval fleet from roughly 60 seaworthy vessels in 1861 to nearly 700 three years later created a huge demand for sailors.[4]

Black volunteers living in the coastal towns and seaports from Maryland to Maine presented themselves at naval rendezvous centers, and, after passing a physical examination, they were mustered into service as landsmen (or new recruits), and on occasion as ordinary seamen or seamen if prior naval sea experience warranted it, and paid at the monthly rates of $12, $14, or $18 for the respective ratings. By common practice, commanding officers appointed selected petty-officers from their crews as needed, so these temporary designations of authority (and their higher rates of pay) did not convey upon transfer to another vessel. In September 1861, as naval operations extended from Chesapeake Bay into Virginia's interior rivers, Navy Secretary Gideon Welles authorized the unlimited enlistment of all able-boded "contrabands" who could be usefully employed. In relatively short order, their numbers increased and their percentage of the enlisted force grew.

Although naval officials did not intend to segregate vessels of the naval service by race, pockets of segregation nonetheless emerged. Enlisted "contrabands," for instance were rated at the equivalent of "boys," the underaged apprentices of the antebellum navy who enlisted with the permission of a parent. They occupied the lowest rung on the ladder and earned $7, $8, or $9 per month based on their qualifications. As the numbers of contrabands grew, the term became more entrenched, lingering until the end of the war, long after it had fallen out of vogue in civilian life. Lingering too was the association with slavery that marked the men as inferior in the eyes of white officers and enlisted shipmates alike. Naval officers also showed a marked preference for black men as servants. Although technically rated and paid as petty officers, cooks and stewards wielded no authority; what is more, they were often on duty around the clock in the endless work of trying to please men who were impossible to please. Ironically, the contrabands, cooks, and

4 David Valuska, *The African American in the Union Navy* (New York: Garland, 1993); Steven Ramold, *Slaves, Sailors, Citizens: African Americans in the Union Navy* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002); Michael J. Bennett, *Black Jacks: Yankee Sailors in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Barbara Brooks Tomblin, *Bluejackets and Contrabands: African Americans and the Union Navy* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009). The pioneering work on the subject is Herbert Aptheker, "The Negro in the Union Navy," *Journal of Negro History*, vol. 32, no. 2 (April 1947): 169–200.

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stewards at times found opportunities for distinction when summoned to general quarters while engaging the enemy. The customary assignment of these men to the duty of powder boys who carried powder and shot from the magazine to the gun deck enabled several to earn the Medal of Honor for bravery under fire.

Practical segregation also affected the assignment of men to vessels. In the Mississippi Squadron, where the climate and associated disease environment took a toll on white sailors, in April 1863 Rear Admiral David D. Porter reiterated Secretary Wells's earlier advice that vessel commanders take advantage of black manpower. Within a matter of months, black men constituted more than one third of the enlisted crewmen on the squadron's gunboats, a proportion that far exceeded that of any other squadron. Their percentage of the crew on individual vessels often exceeded one half. In similar fashion, disproportionately large numbers of black men were assigned to supply ships and colliers that serviced the vessels on blockading duty in the Atlantic and Gulf Squadrons. The work was heavy, dirty, and generally disagreeable. Despite the fact that black men rarely exceeded 10 percent of the crews who manned the sloops-of-war and sleek gunboats that were the work-horses of the blockading fleets, by 1864 they constituted roughly 25 percent of the navy's enlisted force. By the end of the war, more than 18,000 black men had served.[5]

Despite the absence of barriers to enlisting in the navy, few African American leaders advocated naval service as the key to destroying slavery and advancing the case for citizenship. Only the army – and the prospect of facing slaveholders on the field of battle – could serve those dual purposes. The popular prejudice against enlisting black men into the army originated in the law. The second of the two original Militia Acts enacted in May 1792 stated explicitly that militia service was the obligation of white men, a standard that the various state constitutions and laws echoed. For the first year of the war, officials saw little reason for change, but by spring of 1862 and the rise in casualties accompanying the Union's spring offensives, the tide began to turn. In July, Congress added new teeth to the Confiscation

5 Joseph P. Reidy, "Black Men in Navy Blue during the Civil War," *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration*, vol. 33, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 155–67. The number of black men who served in the army was roughly ten times the number who served in the navy, yet the black soldiers' proportion of the total enlisted force reached 10 percent only at the end of the war as the veteran white volunteer units were being mustered out of service.

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Act of the previous summer and passed a new Militia Act, both of which authorized the president to employ black men in any capacity that would serve the national interest. Lincoln chose not to act on this new authority, at least at first.

Foot-dragging among Washington officials did not deter several commanders in the field from stepping boldly forward. James Lane, a US senator from Kansas and a veteran of the antislavery border wars with Missouri during the 1850s, began organizing a regiment consisting mostly of former slaves. In the fall of 1862, they defeated a Confederate force at Island Mound, Missouri, months before the War Department recognized their legitimacy. In the late spring of 1862, Major General David Hunter also began enrolling black men in his Department of the South with the goal of maintaining troop strength against the local disease environment's decimating effect on Northern soldiers. Like Lane, Hunter's repeated requests for authorization went unanswered, and both men turned to impressment when prospective recruits declined to enlist for no pay, thereby also abandoning their families to an uncertain future. By summer, Hunter disbanded all but one company of the regiment. Then, in an abrupt about-face, Secretary Stanton approved building out the unit to full strength and paying the recruits, but with General Rufus Saxton, the department's chief quartermaster, not Hunter leading the effort. The Massachusetts abolitionist and author Thomas Wentworth Higginson assumed command of the first of three South Carolina Colored Volunteer regiments organized that fall. The Louisiana Native Guard offers the last example of men of African ancestry who entered Federal military service before 1863. Shortly after Federal forces under General Butler resumed control over New Orleans in spring 1862, the free-colored militia companies, whose roots extended to French and Spanish colonial days, offered their services. Butler accepted their gift, opening the door for more than 24,000 black Louisianans to enter US military service.

The combined weight of the congressional authorization plus these successful precedents still stopped short of tipping the balance in favor of wholesale black enlistment. On January 1, 1863, that changed. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation not only declared free the persons held as slaves in the rebellious states but also stated the government's intention to recruit black men "to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places" and to serve on naval vessels. In late March 1863, Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas began a pilgrimage among the Federal forces south of Memphis to jump-start

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recruiting in the heartland of the cotton plantation belt. The US Colored Troops were born.

The Emancipation Proclamation also swept away the opposition against enlisting black regiments in the Northern states. The first such unit was the fabled 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry (Colored). Working closely with the War Department, the state's abolitionist governor John A. Andrew employed recruiters who ranged far beyond the state's borders. Notwithstanding the limited role that the Emancipation Proclamation had prescribed for black troops, the leaders of the movement lobbied to engage rebel slaveholders on the field of battle. Only in that way, they reasoned, would they demonstrate their manhood and make an irrefutable case for full citizenship. They did not have to wait long. In July 1863, the 54th took the lead in the ill-advised attack on Battery Wagner, near Charleston, South Carolina, wherein their commanding officer, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, scion of a prominent Boston family, died. Confederates contemptuously buried him at the foot of the parapet with his fallen men. Their deaths made them martyrs to the cause and fired their surviving comrades with new passion to press on until victory was won.[6]

Despite this auspicious beginning, the 54th Massachusetts soon encountered pitfalls and obstacles in the quest to clear a new path for Americans of African descent. For months and even years afterward, men in other black regiments took inspiration from their bravery and aimed to replicate it. Yet at times, other black troops envied their notoriety and questioned their motives. The men themselves often yearned for a more active role in the fight, frustrated with their assignment to the Department of the South where they often served in company-sized units posted to remote locations as picket guards. Their morale suffered accordingly, as did their health. They came together again to take part in the attempt to reestablish Union rule in Florida, which culminated in the Battle of Olustee in February 1864, another

6 James C. Hollandsworth, Jr., *The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience during the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995); James M. Paradis, *Strike a Blow for Freedom: The 6th United States Colored Infantry in the Civil War* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Books, 1998); Martin H. Blatt, Thomas J. Brown, and Donald Yacovone (eds.), *Hope and Glory: Essays on the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001); William Seraile, *New York's Black Regiments during the Civil War* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Stephen V. Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty: The Story of Two Black Regiments that Changed the Course of the Civil War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008); Richard M. Reid, *Freedom for Themselves: North Carolina's Black Soldiers in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Ian Michael Spurgeon, *Soldiers in the Army of Freedom: The 1st Kansas Colored, the Civil War's First African American Combat Unit* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014).

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operation of questionable strategic value. In the fall of that year, the unit fought at Honey Hill, South Carolina, and then served credibly in the operations following the fall of Charleston early in 1865. After the war, the heroic image of the 54th settled comfortably into the folklore of the war, particularly in Massachusetts and in black communities throughout the North. The acclaimed sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens unveiled his larger-than-life bronze relief tribute to Colonel Shaw and his men in marching formation on Boston Common in 1897, and nearly a century later, the feature film *Glory* (1989) breathed new life into their heroic tale.[7]

The War Department's decision to organize black soldiers in segregated all-black units commanded by white officers created a degree of uniformity in the men's experiences that cut across the variations in their backgrounds and in the units with which they served. Segregated black regiments both reflected and reinforced prevailing racial stereotypes and, as such, constituted an imperfect weapon for overturning them. While black men appreciated the chance to demonstrate their loyalty and mettle collectively, they questioned why the War Department refused to commission black men as officers when no such similar restriction applied to Irish and German regiments. Washington officials saw no need to offer elaborate explanations, but their responses to requests to remove the restrictions offer insights. If, at times, they appeared to question whether black men possessed the intellect and moral character to serve as leaders, at other times, their actions clearly demonstrated the intent to prevent black men from wielding power and authority over white men.

The government's awkward approach to the matter of commissioning black men as military officers clearly defined the limits that the Lincoln administration would not transgress even as it conceded the military and political necessity of enlisting black soldiers. The navy's refusal to commission a single man of African descent as an officer offers some perspective. The hide-bound nature of the naval officer corps helps to explain why no black man was admitted into the fraternity until World War II. Still, the opposition against permitting black men to occupy positions of authority on naval vessels had limits. In the coastal waters from Virginia to Louisiana, knowledgeable black men – many of whom were former slaves – served as contract pilots. They directed the movements of naval vessels in the shallow and otherwise treacherous waters with which they were familiar, unopposed

7 Blatt, Brown, and Yacovone (eds.), *Hope and Glory*.

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by naval officials or the officers and enlisted men whose lives were in their hands.

Had the Lincoln administration wished to support rather than stymie the cause of black officers, history offered the examples of Hannibal and Toussaint L'Ouverture, whom black Americans held up as proof that persons of African ancestry could lead entire armies to victory. Closer to home, the experimental black units organized in 1862 suggested possibilities. In Senator Lane's Kansas initiative, two black men, William D. Matthews and Patrick H. Minor, played an especially important role in recruiting and training the enlistees. The regimental commander recommended the two for commissions as company officers, but the War Department refused to act.[8] In Louisiana, the freemen of color, whose military traditions stretched to the eighteenth century, held the potential for demonstrating the viability of black men serving as commissioned officers. At the start of the war, Confederate authorities called them into service as a home guard with the customary privilege of having fellow *gens de couleur* serve as company officers (with white men serving as field officers). In the summer of 1862, following the restoration of Federal authority in southern Louisiana, General Butler accepted their offer to serve the Union, continuing the practice and, in fact, going one step farther. When an impending Confederate attack prompted him to organize a second regiment, he appointed the senior captain, Francis Dumas, to the rank of major, a precedent that went unmatched until much later in the war. In the end, more than seventy free black men served as commissioned officers in the three so-called Native Guard regiments.

At the end of the year, Major General Nathaniel P. Banks, the prewar Republican governor of Massachusetts, replaced Butler as commander of the Department of the Gulf, and trouble soon began for the creole officers. Despite his prewar abolitionist leanings, Banks proved far less willing than Butler to exploit the potential that the war presented for undermining the old racial order. Convinced "that the appointment of colored officers is detrimental to the Service," Banks began systematically purging them.[9] At Port Hudson, Louisiana, in May 1863, those who were still with their units led their men in the assault, and Captain André Cailloux died at the head of his

8 Spurgeon, *Soldiers in the Army of Freedom*.

9 N. P. Banks to L. Thomas, Feb. 12, 1863, in Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland (eds.), *The Black Military Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), ser. II, vol. I of *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867* (various editors; 4 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982–93; and 2 vols. to date, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008–), p. 316.

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company. The hero's funeral that the creole community conducted did little to convince either General Banks or officials in Washington that black officers could lead effectively.[10]

The downward trajectory of the black officers in southern Louisiana did not bode well for the prospects that black men might receive commissions as officers in the new units being organized in the North and in other Union-held areas of the Confederacy. Indeed, Secretary Stanton pointedly instructed Massachusetts Governor Andrew not to commission any black officers, and no Northern official felt inclined to press the point. One exceptional case involved William Nikolaus Reed, whom the abolitionist General Edward A. Wild appointed lieutenant colonel in Colonel James C. Beecher's regiment of his African Brigade in 1863. The rumors that Reed was born of a Danish father and an enslaved mother on Saint Croix appear not to have invalidated his fitness based on prior service as an officer in the Danish army during the 1840s and 1850s.

Despite its opposition to employing black men as line officers, the War Department granted commissions to a small number of chaplains and surgeons, staff positions with equivalent ranks of captain and major, respectively, but without command responsibilities. Perhaps the most notable of these was Major Alexander T. Augusta, a surgeon appointed to the 7th US Colored Infantry, who at the end of the war became the highest-ranking black officer when he received the brevet rank of lieutenant colonel in March 1865. But Augusta endured insults throughout his military service. He was assaulted on a train in Baltimore, ejected from a streetcar in Washington, and reassigned from his duties as senior surgeon in General William Birney's black brigade when white surgeons with less seniority than he protested against being subordinate to a black man.[11] Early in 1865, Washington officials agreed to commission as lieutenants a token number of senior sergeants in the Massachusetts infantry units. The first was Sergeant Stephen A. Swails of the 54th, who had been serving as lieutenant for over a year; five other men received their commissions only after hostilities ended. In March, when the Ohioan John M. Langston, a prominent black attorney and abolitionist, sought a colonel's commission, Washington officials dawdled until mid-May before replying disingenuously that "there is no

10 Besides Hollandsworth, *Louisiana Native Guards*, see Stephen J. Ochs, *A Black Patriot and a White Priest: André Cailloux and Claude Paschal Maistre in Civil War New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

11 Surgeon J. B. McPherson et al. to President Abraham Lincoln, [Feb. 1864], in Berlin, Reidy, and Rowland (eds.), *Black Military Experience*, pp. 356–7.

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vacancy to which you can be appointed" because "recruiting has ceased." For more than fifty years thereafter, the War Department steadfastly opposed commissioning black men as officers out of the same unfounded fears that the bravery of André Cailloux and Stephen Swails should have dispelled during the Civil War.[12]

As a result, black soldiers negotiated the war's myriad challenges from within a rigidly hierarchical institution wherein white men wielded all the power, from the company through the regiment, brigade, division, and corps all the way to the commander-in-chief. Though structurally uniform, this arrangement was not monolithic. White officers varied considerably in terms of their backgrounds and motives, even from one to the next within the same regiment. Abolitionists numbered among the first men to volunteer to lead black troops. In addition to the fighting Quaker Hallowell brothers, Edward N. and Norwood P., of the 54th and 55th Massachusetts Volunteers, and Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson of the 1st South Carolina Colored Infantry, there was General Wild, who commanded the so-called African Brigade in North Carolina, the first regiment of which was commanded by Colonel Beecher, half-brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe. In the best of cases, antislavery officers treated their men with respect, making clear their hatred of slavery and their desire to help the men and their families achieve the goals of freedom and citizenship. These officers also fostered the men's advancement, even going so far as creating regimental schools to teach the men basic literacy skills. Black officers, particularly chaplains, took great interest in the moral and intellectual improvement of the men in the regiments they served.

Yet even the strongest antislavery partisans often carried the heavy baggage created by the habits of white racial superiority that permeated the larger culture. Higginson, for instance, viewed emancipation and the participation of black soldiers in the war to free the slaves and restore the Union as much a romantic adventure as a social revolution. Not surprisingly, he took exception to the heavy-handed tactics of Colonel James Montgomery, the veteran of the bloody Kansas border wars of the 1850s who commanded the 2nd South Carolina Colored Volunteers. While Higginson and his men took as much delight in freeing enslaved people as Montgomery and his men did, Higginson stopped short of Montgomery's liberal application of the torch to the slaveholders' other property. Black soldiers also had reason to question Montgomery's motives. The men in the 54th Massachusetts, for instance,

12 Lewis H. Douglass et al. to E. M. Stanton, Jan. 1865, ibid., pp. 340–1; John M. Langston to E. M. Stanton, Mar. 20, 1865, enclosed in J. A. Garfield to E. M. Stanton, Mar. 28, 1865, and C. W. Foster to Langston, May 17, 1865, ibid., pp. 346–7.

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who were serving under his command in June 1863 participated only reluctantly in the destruction of Darien, Georgia, that he ordered. The following September, the same men stood awestruck when he delivered an impromptu speech in their camp, upbraiding them as soldiers and demeaning all persons of African descent.[13]

Black soldiers lived daily amidst such contradictions. In North Carolina, for instance, not even the strong advocacy of General Wild and Colonel Beecher could counteract the biased command structure to relieve their men from a disproportionately large burden of fatigue duty. The same was true in the case of General Daniel Ullmann's brigade of the Corps d'Afrique in Louisiana, with particularly adverse consequences on the men.[14] Officers without abolitionist leanings often assigned work details as a way to keep their men occupied or as a punitive exercise. When labor encroached upon time that should have been devoted to mastering the drill, the downward spiral began. The men's discipline, morale, and health suffered. The crudest of officers became evermore spiteful, denouncing their subordinates as morons, cursing and kicking them, striking them with swords, and imposing other demeaning physical punishments as though they were slaves. Tensions escalated, frequently to the point of violence. To be sure, the War Department's insistence on maintaining an all-white officer corps as the number of United States Colored Troops units continued to grow generated new tensions between officers and men. In the worst cases, the most outspoken – who were often noncommissioned officers – were charged with mutiny and court-martialed. Despite the impartiality of these judicial proceedings, especially in comparison with what black defendants experienced in civil courts, men were still convicted and executed. What the military brass viewed as creating a necessary atmosphere of respect and obedience struck many a soldier as punishing the victims of a racially charged system that penalized black men's independence and self-assertion. Black soldiers discovered fresh evidence to question why qualified black officers instead of incompetent white ones were not commanding black troops.[15]

13 See Sergeant George Stephens's account of this incident in Yacovone (ed.), *A Voice of Thunder*, pp. 277–84.

14 Paul E. Steiner, *Medical History of a Civil War Regiment: Disease in the Sixty-Fifth United States Colored Infantry* (Clayton, MO: Institute of Civil War Studies, 1977). See also Margaret Humphreys, *Intensely Human: The Health of the Black Soldier in the American Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

15 Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: Free Press, 1990); Christian G. Samito, *Becoming American under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship during the Civil War Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

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Such accidents as the time and place of organization and the theater of war and operational responsibilities to which a unit was assigned also contributed to the variety of experiences among men who shared such other attributes as slave or free status before the war. Take the time and place of organization. In the summer of 1863, when the battles of Gettysburg and Vicksburg helped to turn the momentum of the fighting significantly to the advantage of the United States, only a handful of black units were fully operational beyond the dozen or so regiments of General Banks's Corps d'Afrique in Louisiana. Two of General Butler's original Native Guard regiments acquitted themselves well at Port Hudson in May 1863, despite their impossible mission and the heavy casualties they suffered. So did the barely organized 9th Louisiana Infantry (African Descent), which helped to repulse the unsuccessful Confederate attack on Milliken's Bend in June 1863, again with high casualties.[16] The only Northern black regiment in the field was the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, which had just arrived in South Carolina.

Black men who lived in Northern states where Democrats controlled the statehouse discovered that officials might obstruct recruitment even as the movement gathered steam in states with Republican governors. After months of inaction on the part of New York's Governor Horatio Seymour, an independent organization of businessmen in New York City won the War Department's approval to form a regiment only in December 1863. The resulting unit, the 20th US Colored Infantry, departed New York City in March 1864 for service in Louisiana, where it remained for the rest of the war. Two more regiments soon followed, making a total of more than 4,100 black Federal soldiers from the Empire State.[17]

The loyal Border Slave States occupy an especially important – although often underappreciated – chapter of the black military experience during the war. Three circumstances account for this distinction. First, proslavery economic and political forces, particularly in Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri, effectively stymied the Lincoln administration from recruiting black men until the fall of 1863 in Maryland and only beginning in 1864 in Missouri and Kentucky. Second, undermining slavery recruitment enabled home-grown emancipation movements to make headway that was impossible earlier. Maryland and Missouri abolished slavery in November 1864 and January 1865, respectively, and even though Kentucky slaveholders dug

16 Noah Andre Trudeau, *Like Men of War: Black Troops in the Civil War, 1862–1865* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1998); Linda Barnickel, *Milliken's Bend: A Civil War Battle in History and Memory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013).

17 Seraile, *New York's Black Regiments*.

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in their heels, military authorities took deliberate steps to topple their anachronistic system. Third, the various enlistment incentives the government devised proved to be remarkably effective and none more so than the congressional resolution of March 1865 that freed the enslaved family members of black recruits. To be sure, owners devised obstructionist tactics, often holding family members as pawns in the battle to prevent recruiting, but in the end more than 42,000 of the army's 179,000 black enlisted men (23 percent) were credited to the Border States, chiefly Maryland and Kentucky. Another 99,000 men (55 percent of the total) were raised in the Confederate states. Of the remainder, 33,000 (18 percent) were from the free states and territories of the North and another 6,000 (3 percent) from states and territories unknown.[18]

Hard on the heels of the Emancipation Proclamation, Frederick Douglass issued a call challenging "Men of Color, to Arms!" In this widely distributed rallying cry, the influential abolitionist predicted that "one gallant rush from the North" would liberate the slaves. Hyperbole aside, Douglass accurately foresaw that black men would contribute decisively to the war's outcome. In the face of rising casualties and the imposition of a national draft, black recruits stepped forward to suppress the rebellion and destroy slavery. With the strong likelihood that they might eventually number 200,000, not one of whom would doubt the new commitment to emancipation, they helped tip the balance significantly in the Union's favor.[19]

When units raised in the North took to the field in such places as Virginia and the Carolinas, they aspired to free slaves in the flesh and not just in the abstract. At every available opportunity, they spread the gospel of freedom, often escorting enslaved people by the hundreds to safety. When operational constraints prevented such active interventions, Northern soldiers directed black refugees to safety, often with the help of the teamsters whose wagons hauled supplies to the front. Northern black sailors attacked slavery with similar zeal. George Reed, a drummer with the Potomac Flotilla, recounted their exploits in Virginia, participating in on-shore landing parties that clashed with Confederate guerrillas and liberated slaves. Formerly enslaved soldiers and sailors brought special zeal to this work. From the summer of 1862, when the first black recruits entered the regiments being formed in Kansas, South Carolina, and Louisiana, the men signaled their desire to rescue loved ones and free other captives. Corporal Robert Sutton of the 1st South Carolina

18 Berlin, Reidy, and Rowland (eds.), *Black Military Experience*, p. 12.

19 "Men of Color, To Arms!" *Douglass' Monthly* (Mar. 1863), p. 801. Douglass's call was printed as a broadside and distributed widely across the North.

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Volunteers guided Federal expeditions along Florida's Atlantic coast; on one such mission his enslaved wife was among the scores of persons freed. While falling short of the rhetorical heights that Douglass had described, these actions succeeded in undermining slavery and transforming the lives of the freedpeople.[20]

Battle loomed large in the experience of all soldiers and sailors. Although pitched naval battles were rare, they were memorable for the participants. And the mundane work of blockading the Atlantic and Gulf coasts of the Confederacy and patrolling inland waterways posed hazards, particularly when men took part in operations wherein small boats ferried men to pursue the enemy on shore. Because of the timing of their entry into service, black regiments played a disproportionately large role in occupying territory retaken from the Confederates, especially in the Mississippi Valley. Black regiments also participated in active operations against Confederate forces in the Carolinas and Florida, and especially in Tennessee and Virginia, often at the front lines rather than the rear guard. In particular battles, the inordinately high casualties among the black units resulted from poor leadership (for instance, in the Battle of the Crater at Petersburg, Virginia, in July 1864) or Confederate vindictiveness (for instance, at Olustee in February 1864 and Fort Pillow in April 1864). Relatively few black units suffered a greater ratio of deaths from combat to deaths from disease than all army units did, that is, 0.47. In the 1st Kansas Infantry the ratio was 1.11 and in the 54th Massachusetts Infantry 0.65. Overall, the ratio was 10.10, that is, for each man who died of combat-related injuries, ten men died of disease. Black soldiers found germs to be far deadlier than bullets.[21]

Engaging the enemy constituted only a small fraction of the experience of Civil War soldiers and sailors, regardless of color. Much of the remainder consisted of preparing for combat. Soldiers and sailors alike spent countless hours drilling in the proper use of their weapons and in the fine maneuvers required to coordinate their actions with those of their fellows. Sailors worked round the clock operating their vessels, and soldiers, too, often labored day and night maintaining camps, digging defensive works, moving

20 Reed's letters to the *Christian Recorder* are reprinted in Edwin S. Redkey (ed.), *A Grand Army of Black Men: Letters from African-American Soldiers in the Union Army, 1861–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 272–6. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (Boston: Fields, Osgood and Co., 1870), pp. 41, 62–96.

21 Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion: Compiled and Arranged from Official Records of the Federal and Confederate Armies, Reports of the Adjutant Generals of the Several States, the Army Registers, and Other Reliable Documents and Sources* (Des Moines: Dyer Publishing Co., 1908).

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supplies, and performing the countless other chores necessary to sustain armies in the field.

Yet men in both branches of the service also had time at their disposal to relax, to socialize, and in certain circumstances to interact with civilians. On naval ships, they sang and danced, told stories, played games, and even organized dramatic performances. Men who served on oceangoing vessels crossed the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, visiting memorable places and meeting fascinating people. The free black Virginian Charles B. Fisher, for instance, visited France, Spain, and the Atlantic Islands, and the slave-born North Carolinian William B. Gould acted the part of the American tourist when his ship anchored at Amsterdam and other European seaports.[22] For their part, soldiers frequently organized schools and held religious meetings, with regimental chaplains and other such sympathetic officers offering aid. Literate men, a category that in the US Colored Troops often overlapped that of noncommissioned officers, read newspapers aloud, and composed letters on behalf of individual comrades to their loved ones and protests on behalf of larger groups to military and civilian authorities. They wrote long and often detailed letters to hometown newspapers and particularly to the New York *Anglo-African* and the African Methodist Episcopal Church's *Christian Recorder*, published in Philadelphia. This correspondence helped to build networks of supporters linking the men with their families and acquaintances, the publishers and readers of newspapers (including the abolitionist press and the major metropolitan dailies that reprinted material from the black weeklies), and Radical Republicans in the states and in Washington. Thus, the national conversation about the long-term implications of black men's service – both for black communities and the nation at large – began long before the war ended.[23]

Undergirding this conversation stood the new relationship between the government of the United States and the black men who wore its uniform.

22 Paul E. Sluby, Sr., and Stanton L. Wormley (eds.), *Diary of Charles B. Fisher* (Washington, DC: Columbian Harmony Society, 1983); William B. Gould IV (ed.), *Diary of a Contraband: The Civil War Passage of a Black Sailor* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

23 Yacovone (ed.), *A Voice of Thunder*; R. J. M. Blackett (ed.), *Thomas Morris Chester, Black Civil War Correspondent: His Dispatches from the Front* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989); Virginia Matzke Adams (ed.), *On the Altar of Freedom: A Black Soldier's Civil War Letters from the Front, Corporal James Henry Gooding* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991); Edwin S. Redkey (ed.), *A Grand Army of Black Men: Letters from African-American Soldiers in the Union Army, 1861–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Noah Andre Trudeau (ed.), *Voices of the 55th: Letters from the 55th Massachusetts Volunteers, 1861–1865* (Dayton: Morningside House, 1996).

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As active contributors to the defense of the Union, they expected to be recognized as men and be treated equally. Most also believed they had a special relationship with President Lincoln, not only as head of the government and their commander-in-chief but also as the latter-day version of the biblical Abraham, progenitor of the Israelites with whose tribulations they identified and in whose ultimate triumph they hoped to share. They expected Lincoln's government to champion the cause of freedom and not to countenance, much less condone, inequality based solely on color. As controversies over the soldiers' pay and their status as legitimate prisoners of war illustrated, the men had to practice patience and endurance.

The former erupted like a volcano in June 1863, when the War Department ruled that the 1862 Militia Act limited the monthly pay of all persons of African descent who were employed in the nation's service to $10 per month, $3 of which might be paid in clothing, instead of the $13 per month plus a clothing allowance that white privates earned. Over the following weeks, as paymasters distributed accrued earnings under these guidelines, the Massachusetts soldiers considered the gesture insulting and refused to accept the lesser amount. Chaplain Samuel Harrison petitioned for redress on behalf of officers whose pay was reduced even more drastically under this ruling than that of private soldiers. Corporal James Henry Gooding communicated directly to President Lincoln the men's sense of betrayal by the government they had sworn to serve, insisting that they be paid as "american SOLDIERS, not as menial hierlings."[24]

Men in other units also refused to accept the lower pay; among these were the formerly enslaved men who served in the regiments Generals Hunter and Saxton organized in the Department of the South. Following an incident in which men from the 3rd South Carolina Volunteers stacked their arms and refused to perform further duty, Sergeant William Walker was tried, convicted, and executed for leading a mutiny. As Gooding and Walker demonstrated, noncommissioned officers served as more than just the translators or mediators between the white commissioned officers and the enlisted men; they helped lead the development and articulation of the soldiers' case for equality, a responsibility and privilege for which Walker paid his life.[25]

As congressional leaders squabbled over provisions for corrective legislation, the families of the men suffered, and soldiers debated among themselves

24 James Henry Gooding to Abraham Lincoln, Sept. 28, 1863, in Berlin, Reidy, and Rowland (eds.), *Black Military Experience*, p. 386.

25 Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*; Samito, *Becoming American under Fire*.

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the continued efficacy of the protest. Finally, the army's appropriation bill that Congress passed in June 1864 removed the invidious distinction going forward and provided for retroactive payments to the beginning of the year. Eventually, men who were free at the start of the war received the adjustment dating to their date of enlistment. To highlight the absurdity of the whole affair, the Hallowell brothers of the 54th and 55th Massachusetts Volunteers devised a "Quaker oath," whereby each enslaved man swore to his eligibility for the full amount of back pay because no man had a right to his services at the start of the war. More ironic still, black sailors did not experience the degradation of inferior pay that their army brothers did. Despite the Militia Act's explicit reference to naval service, naval officials paid each man according to his rating regardless of color or nationality.

The soldiers' protest took a fearful toll on both the men and their families. The men's protests eloquently referenced the suffering of their families, yet the Massachusetts regiments pointedly chose not to relieve it in their refusal to accept Governor Andrew's offer to make up the deficiency from state funds. Unlike their loved ones, the men drew daily rations and clothing as needed, which gnawed at the minds of many and put still others on edge. Men from the 54th Massachusetts clashed with the regimental sutler and his agents when promised lines of credit were not honored to the men's satisfaction. The soldiers of one Pennsylvania unit agreed that comrades with needy families might accept the lower pay, and they seethed with resentment when an outspoken advocate of the boycott slunk into the paymaster's tent. Both officers and enlisted men in black regiments that did not engage in the boycott at times looked down on the Massachusetts men, questioning their patriotism, given that they appeared to be fighting for money rather than to free the slaves and to save the Union. Tension surrounding the pay controversy lingered long after Congress resolved the matter.

Perhaps no aspect of black men's service under arms better illustrated the fragility of their relationship to the federal government as men and as equals with their white comrades than the Confederacy's reluctance to treat them as legitimate prisoners of war. Between the fall of 1862 and the spring of 1863, Confederate leaders reached consensus around the principle that African Americans who wore the uniform of the United States were the practical equivalent of antislavery insurrectionists who should be treated accordingly. In December 1862, President Jefferson Davis ordered that captured black soldiers be remanded to state authorities for prosecution under relevant state laws (which required the death penalty), and in May 1863, the Confederate

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Congress denounced the North's enlistment of black men as "inconsistent with the spirit of those usages which in modern warfare prevail among civilized nations" and reiterated Davis's mandate that such fomenters of "servile war" be delivered to the states.[26]

Not to let the Confederates gain the upper hand on this matter, on July 30, 1863, President Lincoln declared that the United States would retaliate for the ill-treatment of black soldiers and their white officers until such time as they were accorded prisoner of war status consistent with international protocols. Seizing the mantle of civilization that Confederate congressmen had earlier draped over themselves, Lincoln asserted that enslaving black prisoners constituted "a relapse into barbarism, and a crime against the civilization of the age." Declaring the US government's intent to protect all its soldiers equally, he ordered that for every Union soldier killed a Rebel soldier "shall be executed" and for each one who is enslaved a Rebel soldier "shall be placed at hard labor." That same day, Hannah Johnson, the mother of a soldier in the 54th Massachusetts Volunteers implored the president to assure "fair play" for black soldiers by retaliating for rebel abuses.[27]

Whether due to Lincoln's promise of retaliation or to other motives, Confederate captors did not always execute the black prisoners or sell them as slaves. The Massachusetts men captured at Battery Wagner, for instance, remained jailed in Charleston until the city was retaken by Union forces early in 1865. In 1864, Richmond's Libby Prison became home to black men captured at the abortive Battle of the Crater at Petersburg, Virginia. At the notorious Andersonville Prison in southwest Georgia, black prisoners often suffered the same fate as their white comrades. Corporal William Henry Gooding, for instance, the champion of equal pay from the 54th Massachusetts Volunteers, died from the lack of medical attention to the wounds he suffered at Olustee in February 1864. Ironically, Confederate guards' racial prejudice had an unexpected positive effect. By placing black men to work on labor details, they afforded those captives access to physical activity and extra rations that resulted in a lower mortality rate than white

26 For Davis's order, see General Orders, No. 111, Adjutant and Inspector General's Office, Dec. 24, 1862, United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 127 vols., index, and atlas (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880–1901), series II, volume 5: 795–7 (hereafter cited as *OR*); for the Joint Resolution of the Confederate Congress, approved May 1, 1863, see ibid., II, 5: 940–1. See also John Fabian Witt, *Lincoln's Code: The Laws of War in American History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012).

27 General Orders No. 252, War Department, Adjutant General's Office, July 31, 1863, and Hannah Johnson to Hon. Mr. Lincoln, July 31, 1863, in Berlin, Reidy, and Rowland (eds.), *Black Military Experience*, pp. 582–3.

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prisoners experienced.[28] Notwithstanding these departures from official policy, soldiers and sailors who wore the blue uniform had good reason to fear the worst if captured. After all, Federal officials did not execute a single Confederate prisoner in retaliation for the death of a black Union captive.

The most notorious case of Confederate abuse of captured black soldiers occurred at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, in April 1864, when cavalry forces under General Nathan Bedford Forrest, the antebellum slave trader and postbellum founder of the Ku Klux Klan, murdered several hundred US Colored Troops and white Tennesseans serving in Union regiments. Survivors described a blood-curdling scene of slaughter. With their worst fears confirmed, black soldiers learned to expect no quarter from the enemy. In turn, many vowed to grant no mercy to captured Confederates, and reports suggested that black soldiers executed captured Rebels on occasion. The Fort Pillow Massacre illustrated the fundamental contempt that Confederate combatants had for black soldiers as legitimate foes and as men. "Remember Fort Pillow!" became the battle cry of black soldiers, and their white comrades had little trouble understanding why.[29]

In the fall of 1864, the Confederates' refusal to permit the release of black prisoners resulted in a breakdown of prisoner exchanges, which had been off-again-on-again repeatedly since the original exchange cartel was signed in the summer of 1862. (Indeed, Federal authorities had terminated the exchanges on several prior occasions, including in the aftermath of Davis's order of December 1862 and the Confederate congressional resolution of March 1863.) General Butler, commander of the Army of the James, had been appointed the official agent of exchange in December 1863. After learning that Confederate authorities had released black prisoners from Libby Prison to work on Richmond's fortifications where they were exposed to US artillery fire, Butler ordered imprisoned Confederate officers to work on his canal project at Dutch Gap where they would undergo similar exposure. When the Rebels objected, Butler suspended exchanges. The infuriated Confederate Secretary of War James A. Seddon refused to negotiate directly with the perceived outlaw Butler and instructed Robert E. Lee to communicate with his Federal counterpart Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant to rein in Butler.

28 William Marvel, *Andersonville: The Last Depot* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

29 Andrew Ward, *River Run Red: The Fort Pillow Massacre in the American Civil War* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

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Grant did not, but he and Lee agreed to resume prisoner exchanges after the new year with the stipulation that black soldiers be included.[30]

As the last Confederate strongholds began succumbing to Union forces early in 1865, the Northern public, black and white, read accounts of the jubilant receptions that the black inhabitants of such places as Wilmington, North Carolina, and Richmond gave to the Colored Troops. In May, reporters who covered the Grand Review of Major General William T. Sherman's western armies in Washington sent a very different message. Instead of the head of the line, black participants occupied the rear, where, in fact, it was not soldiers who marched but pioneers, teamsters, and cooks who had accompanied the troops across Georgia and the Carolinas. Yet the picture was not entirely bleak. Black Americans could take some consolation that the general public was coming to understand the mandate for change that this service required. An 1865 illustration by Thomas Nast, of *Harper's Magazine* fame, took for granted that slavery was dead and pressed the point that the black soldiers' sacrifices had purchased a claim on the national government for citizenship and the suffrage. When the veterans returned home, they carried with them back into their homes and communities the lessons they learned from helping to vanquish the rebellion and overcoming the prejudice of their white comrades and the invidious distinctions imposed by the government they served. Most important, they knew from experience that collective action could move mountains. So armed for civilian life, they were well prepared to translate the abstract notion of freedom into practice, steeled in the knowledge that they would face obstacles and setbacks along the way.

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30 See James A. Seddon to R. E. Lee, Oct. 15, 1864, Lee to U. S. Grant, Oct. 19, 1864, Grant to Lee, Oct. 20, 1864, Lee to Honorable Secretary of War, Oct. 23, 1864, with endorsements by J. A. Seddon, Oct. 24, 1864, and Jeff'n Davis, Oct. 25, 1864, *OR*, II, 7: 990-1, 1010–12, 1018–19, 1029–30.

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