
**"TO BREAK THE FETTERS OF
SLAVES ALL OVER THE WORLD"**
THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE CIVIL WAR,
1850s TO 1865

Every major political gain that African Americans and Latinx people have made has been countered by waves of violence and statutory countermeasures designed to abrogate their human rights and claims to citizenship.¹ To officially end the Mexican War, on February 2, 1848, the United States and Mexico negotiated the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. This accord was designed to confer citizenship rights on Mexicanos in the territories that the United States had seized from Mexico in the wake of the war.² In response to the possibility of Latinx people becoming citizens, however, states passed measures to ensure that most Mexican Americans and their descendants remained permanent outsiders. White vigilantes engaged in armed assaults on Mexican American communities, lynched Mexican Americans, and stole land from rightful owners. While Mexicans were driven off of farms and gold mining claims, African Americans were banned from entire regions.³ The territorial governor of New Mexico advocated the proscription of African Americans, claiming, "Free negroes are regarded as nuisances in every State and Territory in the Union; and where they are tolerated, society is most degraded. . . . The disgusting degradation to which society is subjected by their presence, is obvious to all, and demands a prohibitory act of the severest character."⁴

The West was now, in Alexander Saxton's terminology, a white republic whose fields were patrolled by settler colonialists, as John Steinbeck illustrated in *Grapes of Wrath*:

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Once California belonged to Mexico and its land to Mexi-
cans; and a horde of tattered feverish Americans poured
in. And such was their hunger for land that they took the
land—stole Sutter's land, Guerrero's land, took the grants
and broke them up and growled and quarreled over them,
those frantic hungry men; and they guarded with guns the
land they had stolen. They put up houses and barns, they
turned the earth and planted crops. And these things were
possession, and possession was ownership.⁵

African Americans in the North were besieged by segregation
laws, re-enslavers, and anti-Black race riots.⁶ Dr. John S. Rock, a
Black abolitionist, elicited bitter laughter from his audience when, in
1862, he reminded them,

In Philadelphia, where there is a larger free colored popula-
tion than is to be found in any other city in the free States,
and where we are denied every social privilege, and are not
even permitted to send our children to the schools that we
are taxed to support, or to ride in the city horse cars, yet
even there we pay taxes enough to support our own poor,
and have a balance of a few thousand in our own favor,
which goes to support those "poor whites" who "can't take
care of themselves."⁷

Dr. Rock described slavery as a business that enforced a false unity
between whites of different classes:

The educated and wealthy class despise the negro, because
they have robbed him of his hard earnings, or, at least, have
got rich off the fruits of his labor; and they believe if he gets
his freedom, their fountain will be dried up, and they will
be obliged to seek business in a new channel. Their "occu-
pation will be gone." The lowest class hates him because
he is poor, as they are, and is a competitor with them for
the same labor. The poor ignorant white man, who does
not understand that the interest of the laboring masses is

mutual, argues in this wise: "Here is so much labor to be performed,—that darkey does it. If he was gone, I should have his place."

During the antebellum period, Francisco P. Ramírez mobilized his Los Angeles-based Spanish-language newspaper, *El Clamor Público*, to challenge the march of slavery and white supremacy across the continent. "But here in this fabulous country," Ramírez argued in 1855, "he who robs and assassinates the most is he who enjoys freedom. Certain people have no kind of freedom—this freedom, we say, is that which the courts deny to all individuals of color."⁸ The young editor wielded *El Clamor* as an educational tool to counter the views of the majority of white Angelenos who were ardently proslavery. Ramírez attacked the Supreme Court's *Dred Scott* decision in 1857, in which it was ruled that African Americans had no rights that white people were bound to respect; echoing abolitionist movement warnings, Ramírez predicted that slavery would tear the United States apart.⁹ He "angered whites, many of whom were Southern sympathizers, with his attacks on slavery and calls for racial equality for Mexicans, blacks, Chinese and Indians."¹⁰ *El Clamor Público* posited that slavery was the linchpin of the apocalyptic violence sweeping the continent. As a result of *El Clamor Público*'s agitating, the *San Francisco Herald* labeled *El Clamor Público* as one of the state's "Free Nigger organs," one that endangered white rule.¹¹

Anglo theft of Mexican and Indian lands was the order of the day. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was supposed to protect the status of the approximately 115,000 former Mexicans who lived within the newly conquered territories of the West.¹² Instead, existing anti-Indian and anti-Black laws were amplified to undermine the human rights of Mexicans who could not prove that they were definitively white. The California Gold Rush and Anglo hunger for land combined to create what the anthropologist Martha Menchaca calls "the racialization of the Mexican population," as state authorities created laws that defined Mexicans overall as an inferior people with minimal claims on citizenship and land tenure.¹³ There were certainly exceptions to this rule. Some wealthy Mexicanos and Tejanos, Mexicans who lived in newly conquered Texas, man-

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aged to hold on to Spanish and Mexican land grants through the
late nineteenth century.¹⁴ However, the overall trend of land loss in
the West was so devastating that the popular image of the typical
Mexican American in mid-twentieth-century America was that of
a landless laborer.¹⁵ Anglo racism against Mexicans, Chinese, Indi-
ans, and free Blacks was interconnected, and numerous state laws
were passed to deny each group basic rights such as due process,
public assembly, and voting rights as well as equal access to property
ownership and employment.¹⁶

The Anglo-Saxon "march of civilization" in the West was accom-
plished through a mix of legal and extralegal measures. In 1850, the
State of California used a "foreign miner's tax" to drive Chinese and
Mexican miners out of precious-metals mining. A few years later,
Francisco P. Ramírez connected the California legislature's anti-
Mexican Vagrancy Law, widely known as the "Greaser Act," with
anti-Black racism and manifest destiny.¹⁷ One historian has written,
"The antivagrancy law provided one more justification for expro-
priating lands belonging to Mexicans in northern California."¹⁸
Though California was admitted to the United States as a "free
state" in 1850, slavery was tacitly tolerated throughout the state, and
California passed a fugitive slave law in 1852.¹⁹ Whites impatient
with the pace of legal disenfranchisement launched assaults against
Mexicans and Indians. In California, hundreds were lynched in the
decades after California statehood, while in Texas, Afro-Mestizo
landowners were driven off of their lands by white usurpers.²⁰ In the
late nineteenth century, from Southern California to Seattle, Wash-
ington, vigilantes and law enforcement launched nearly three hun-
dred pogroms, or organized massacres, against Chinese workers.²¹
California state policy toward Native Americans was indentured
servitude, slave labor, and extermination.²²

The rise of agriculture in the West was premised on the creation of
an impoverished working class unable to defend itself in the courts,
in politics, or in the fields.²³ In an overview of two centuries of agri-
cultural history, Ernesto Galarza argued that twentieth-century
farmworkers were disenfranchised politically and economically
because their ancestors did not own land. Galarza argued, "The
black slave, the sharecropper, the hired hand, the migratory har-
vester, the wetback, the bracero, and all the intermediate types of

land workers in America never had any institutional connections with the government because they had never possessed land."²⁴ In his study of Chicanos in Santa Barbara, California, the historian Albert Camarillo writes, "The incorporation of Mexican workers into the capitalist labor market locked them into the status of a predominantly unskilled/semiskilled working class at the bottom of the occupational structure."²⁵ Oliver Cromwell Cox, a Trinidadian American sociologist, posited that the dynamics of racial inequality were to be found in capitalism's "need for slaves, or peons, or unorganized common laborers—a need for 'cheap, docile labor.'" Furthermore, "The fact of crucial significance is that the racial exploitation is merely one aspect of the problem of the proletarianization of labor, regardless of the color of the laborers. Hence, racial antagonism is essentially a political-class conflict. The capitalist exploiter, being opportunistic and practical, will utilize any convenience to keep his labor and other resources freely exploitable. He will devise and employ race prejudice when that becomes convenient."²⁶ Not hatred but racial capitalism drove this system of exploitation. Indeed, employers not infrequently waxed elegiac about how much they loved "their workers"—so long as they did not complain or go out on strike.

States mercilessly attacked the rights and economic well-being of free Blacks in the North and in the South. Several states and territories, including Illinois, Indiana, and Oregon, passed "exclusion laws" and other anti-immigrant measures prohibiting Black settlement in their jurisdictions.²⁷ Rooted in the racial logic of the 1791 Naturalization Act, such laws made whiteness a valuable birthright.²⁸ Oregon was organized as a white homeland. In 1844, the Provisional Government of Oregon banned slavery and ordered all free blacks age eighteen or older to leave the territory. To enforce Black expulsion, provisional authorities established the "Lash Law," whereby recalcitrant Black Oregonians received twenty to thirty-nine lashings every six months "until he or she shall quit the territory." This punishment was soon replaced by a more profitable penalty: forced labor.²⁹

When Oregon gained statehood, in 1859, its bill of rights contained a Negro Exclusion Law, which remained on the state's law books until 1926. During the Oregon Constitutional Convention

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that preceded statehood, the number of votes against admitting African Americans to the state exceeded even the number of votes against slavery.³⁰ Three years after statehood, Oregon passed a "race tax" that required African Americans, Hawaiians, Chinese, and "Mulattos" (individuals of mixed race) to pay an annual five-dollar penalty for residing in the state.³¹ In 1868, the state legislature abrogated the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution just in case African Americans had not received the message that they were *persona non grata* in the Pacific Northwest.³²

Learned Americans crafted theories of racial hierarchy that were used to promote white supremacy. Dr. Samuel George Morton, known by the *New York Tribune* as the most noted "scientific man in America," published his popular book, *Crania Americana*, in 1839. Ranking human groups by their skull size, Morton argued that Native Americans were inferior because "they are crafty, sensual, ungrateful, obstinate and unfeeling, and much of their affection for their children may be traced to purely selfish motives."³³ Morton collected hundreds of human skulls and measured them for the stated purpose of judging the intelligence of each racial group he named. Remarkably, the skulls perfectly affirmed America's racial order: the white "Teutonic Family" skulls enjoyed the largest cranial capacity, while African Americans and what Morton called the "Toltecan Family" (including Mexicans) ranked near the very bottom. Scientific racism became a well-funded tendency in educated circles, one that endures to this day.³⁴

The duel between enslaved workers and their masters for control of workers' labor was the most important political issue of the antebellum period. This battle for Black labor power determined land values in vast areas of the republic, set profit margins for entire industries, generated new political parties, and drove constitutional debates in the Congress. Slavery exhausted land and bodies at a frightening rate; hence, for survival, it depended on policies of territorial expansion that were justified in terms of imperial manifest destiny. The slave republic mobilized the resources of the nation to maintain chattel bondage by offensive wars, the numerous fugitive slave acts (both state and federal), the suppression of slave revolts, and other expenditures of money and blood.

The investments that were required to sustain and to expand

slavery defy imagination. In 1848, the *North Star*, which became *Frederick Douglass' Paper* a few years later, set the amount from the nation's coffers used to expand slavery at approximately \$227.25 million.³⁵ The *Sacramento Daily Union* contended that the figure was no less than \$100 million by the eve of the Civil War. This included the costs of annexing Texas, invading Mexico, waging war on Indian nations, purchasing millions of acres from Spain and France, and securing slavery's borders. In addition, "from the date of the Constitution until the treaty with Mexico was signed, every foot of territory acquired by purchase and negotiation was, when so acquired, occupied by slaveholders."³⁶

The *Daily Union* described the foundation of the nation's economy in one concise sentence: "In political economy a negro is considered as property—capital invested. He is as much a machine as the spinning jenny, and the profits of his labor are considered as the interest paid to the owner upon the money invested."³⁷ The weaponized labor relations that underwrote this system would color race and class relations in the United States for centuries to come.³⁸

Antislavery's partisans rejected the inhuman calculus of racial capitalism, and they tirelessly built new way stations of the Underground Railroad, eventually connecting Montreal, Pittsburgh, El Paso, Tampa, Mexico City, Haiti, and the Bahamas in a grand trunk line of liberation. In the early 1850s, the Mexican government welcomed Black Seminoles, veterans of the Seminole Wars, as border guards to defend Mexico from Texas Rangers, slave catchers, and outlaws.³⁹ In turn, these veterans began helping scores of slaves find freedom in Mexico in what whites, infuriated by these actions, called "The Mexican Border Troubles."⁴⁰

Genevieve Payne Benson, a descendent of Black Seminoles who evacuated from Florida at the end of the Second Seminole War, recounted how generations of her family found freedom in Mexico. In the 1850s, Benson's grandfather, Isaac Garden, dug his way out of a Texas prison along with two of his brothers and received sanctuary in Mexico with the help of sympathetic Tejanos.⁴¹ Zaragosa Vargas notes that Tejanos "rescued runaway slaves, hid them, fed them, and at great risk guided them to safe passage across the Rio Grande at Laredo and Eagle Pass. When the Texas Rangers captured Tejano abolitionists, they immediately executed them."⁴²

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Slave catchers and law enforcement officials faced increasingly determined slaves, free Black communities, and vigilance committees determined to resist recapture—by force of arms if necessary. On November 5, 1850, near Quincy, Illinois, "about fifty negroes, of all ages and sexes, with teams, stampeded from the Missouri side of the river. . . . The slaves were overhauled on Saturday morning, and after a desperate resistance and the loss of their leader, they were captured." The following year, a fugitive slave was apprehended in Syracuse, New York, "but he was rescued by a mob from the officers who had charge of him, and the result was that he escaped to parts unknown."⁴³ In 1857, the efforts of United States marshals to recapture a single fugitive slave from Kentucky led to a series of shootouts and an incident called "the Civil War in Ohio."⁴⁴ Anthony Burns, a man owned by Charles F. Suttle of Alexandria, Virginia, was seized by US marshals in Boston. While Wendell Phillips, Theodore Parker, and other abolitionists were making indignant speeches about the incident at Faneuil Hall, it was suddenly "announced that there was a mob of negroes in Court Square, attacking the Court House where the prisoner was confined." US troops were called out to disperse a reported gathering of over 1,000 people who attempted to free Burns. Church bells in Manchester "and many of the interior towns" tolled in mourning after a final rescue effort failed. Shortly afterward, images of the officials responsible for re-enslaving Burns were wrapped on the flagstaff in Boston Common with the following messages: "I. Marshal FREEMAN. Chief of the Boston Ruffians, Slaveholders and Bloodhounds. II. BENJAMIN F. HALLETT. U.S. District Attorney and Attorney General to the Prince of Darkness. Commissioner LORING, The Ten Dollars Jeffries of 1854."⁴⁵

The resistance of African Americans, Tejanos, and white abolitionists was decisive in the advent of the Civil War. C.L.R. James wrote, "The agitation of the abolitionists, the sensational escapes by the Underground Railway, the ferment among the Negroes, all helped to focus public attention on slavery. But long before the Civil War the great issues were becoming clear."⁴⁶ Antislavery insurgencies gravely threatened racial capitalism and forced the hand of Southern politicians. Southern elites viewed the preservation of slavery and the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act to be nonnegotiable. The leading white women of Broward's Neck, Florida, informed

the *Jacksonville Standard* shortly after the election of 1858, "In our humble opinion the single issue is now presented to the Southern people, will they submit to all the degradation threatened by the North toward our slave property and be made to what England has made white people experience in the West India Islands—the negroes afforded a place on the same footing with their former owners, to be made legislators, to sit as Judges." In the spring of 1860, Democrats in Jacksonville stated that regardless of who was nominated to run for president, "The amplest protection and security to slave property in the territories owned by the General Government" and "the surrender [of] fugitive slaves when legally demanded" were vital to Florida's interests. If these terms were not met, they asserted, "then we are of the opinion that the rights of the citizens of Florida are no longer safe in the Union, and we think that she should raise the banner of secession and invite her Southern sisters to join her."⁴⁷ The following year, John C. McGehee, the president of the Florida Secession Convention, gave the most concise reason why the majority of his colleagues supported secession: "At the South, and with our People of course, slavery is the element of all value, and a destruction of that destroys all that is property."⁴⁸

The United States drove itself to civil war because the society valued profits over Black humanity, as the following story illustrates. When plantation owners vacationed in the North, they often brought their slave servants with them, and many Northern communities became dependent on Southern tourist dollars. The town of Manchester, New York, near Niagara Falls, was a popular destination. Allegedly, local African Americans approached one Southern tourist's female servant in the first week of July 1847 to help her escape. Local whites mobilized in opposition. They beat the African Americans who were involved in the rescue effort, and it was reported that members of law enforcement led the attack. One correspondent noted, "The mobocrats however were not satisfied with beating the men, who for the sake of the liberty of a woman would run the risk of injuring the business of the village. They gathered together again in the evening, and tore down the grocery shop of J. M. Anderson, destroyed his goods, and broke up his furniture."⁴⁹ The correspondent who wrote about the riot emphasized the pecuniary impetus behind the mob's actions: "The people of that

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neighborhood, it seems, take a peculiar interest in the support of the
 system of Slavery, flattering themselves, of course, that it is a patri-
 otic love of the Union, and of justice, but like all the patriotism that
 goes by the name now-a-days, it is easily resolved into a base love of
 dollars and cents."

The *Christian Recorder* explained the coming of the Civil War as
 a culmination of decisions made by the nation's leaders at the found-
 ing of the nation:

The slave power has always ruled the continent. It ruled
 the colonies, it ruled the British cabinets as long as we were
 colonies; it was no small element in causing the revolution,
 as Jefferson said in his declaration. . . . The Constitution
 recognized it. Washington signed a fugitive slave bill, and
 Jefferson annexed Louisiana in its interest. It caused the
 war of 1812, the war with Mexico, and the present war. It
 is met to-day on its own merits. Our statesmen do not yet
 avow it, but they feel it. We may have to fight for political
 existence, for personal liberty even.⁵⁰

"UNTIL FREEDOM IS PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WORLD"

Because their resistance to slavery had occurred on an international
 stage, many African Americans viewed the Civil War through a
 global lens. Black Southerners' and Northerners' "self-activity"—
 self-determined activism in their own behalf—in waging a war for
 liberty radically enlarged the meaning of the war. Ideas of emanci-
 pation without borders were grounded in everyday flesh-and-blood
 struggles. The truth of this was personified in the Civil War odyssey
 of Garland H. White. White was a slave of Senator Robert Toombs
 of Georgia. In explaining the reason for his state's secession from
 the Union, Toombs, a future Confederate general, vowed: "We want
 no negro equality, no negro citizenship; we want no negro race to
 degrade our own; and as one man [we] would meet you upon the
 border with the sword in one hand and the torch in the other."⁵¹

White escaped from Toombs in 1860 and reached Canada. A
 few years later the former slave returned to the United States and

recruited African Americans to the Union Army.⁵² "It is no longer a question of doubt as to what the American people think of us," White, now chaplain of his regiment, wrote from Corpus Christi, Texas, in 1864. "From Fortress Monroe to the Rio Grande, colored pickets can be seen watching the approach of every ship, and the nation intends to use us in restoring peace, order and national tranquility. The very position we occupy to-day in the army of our country has a voice much louder than the organs of a thousand demoralized cities."⁵³ This man, a slave only five years earlier, now dreamed of an international liberation struggle. Reflecting on his regiment's triumphant march into Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy, in the spring of 1865, Chaplain White stated, "I was with them, and am still with them, and am willing to stay with them until freedom is proclaimed throughout the world. Yes, we will follow this race of men in search of Liberty through the whole Island of Cuba."⁵⁴

The French invasion of Mexico in 1861 raised alarm bells in African American and Mexican American communities across the continent. An emperor, Maximilian I of Mexico, had been imposed on Mexico by France. The popular assumption in the abolitionist press was that Maximilian's ultimate goal was to reestablish slavery in Mexico, as well as to negotiate an alliance with the Confederate States of America.⁵⁵ The Black press echoed the tenor of the *Hartford Daily Courant's* headline "Brilliant Achievements of the Mexicans" in resisting the French invasion.⁵⁶ At times, coverage of the French invasion preempted reporting on American Civil War battles. The *Christian Recorder* published "A letter from Vera Cruz," which reported "that the Mexicans, after holding out so long, and fighting with desperate bravery, are now taking the offensive. . . . Twice the French were driven from the city. The Mexicans have fought admirably, and the French are depressed by their defeat."⁵⁷

The *Christian Recorder* exulted in the gallant Mexican defense at Puebla between 1862 and 1863 and marveled at the besieged garrison's ability to hold out against French artillery. "It is reported that the French army has been again repulsed and driven back from before Puebla with great loss," the *Recorder* reported on January 31, 1863. "General Berthier's van-guard, 4000 strong, was completely surprised by 800 Mexican cavalry, and about 2000 of the French

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were killed and wounded. Several French officers were taken by the lasso and dragged off. The prospects of the French look exceedingly bad."⁵⁸ Even after Puebla—after most of the country had fallen to the French onslaught—the *Christian Recorder* quoted sources that claimed, "Over seventy guerilla bands, of about two hundred men each, harass the roads leading to [Mexico City]. The renegade Mexicans are rapidly deserting the French."⁵⁹ The popular holiday Cinco de Mayo, initiated by Mexican American Union Army veterans in the Southwest to commemorate the Mexican victory over the European invaders, joined together themes of Mexican independence, resistance to imperialism, and slavery abolition. It would become a major commemoration in American culture more than a century later.

David E. Hayes-Bautista writes, "Slavery, many Latinos understood, was the major issue of the Civil War." Francisco P. Ramírez used the pages of *El Nuevo Mundo* in California to denounce the Confederacy's support of the French invasion of Mexico:

It is not strange that the rebels of the South in the United States should be in favor of the establishment of Maximilian's imperial power in Mexico; for men fanatically attached to the slavery system—who have rebelled against the most liberal republican government in the world and started the current war . . . are capable of anything. . . . Napoleon III, Maximilian, and Jefferson Davis maintain relations of the closest friendship. They support one another, for all of them have an interest in dominating the people, though it be over the bodies of the dead and through rivers of blood.⁶⁰

As Emperor Maximilian's invading army cut a destructive path through Mexico, the Reverend Henry McNeal Turner urged the United States to raise an army to drive the European monarch back across the Atlantic Ocean. "I believe this government can drown Jeff Davis and his hosts in the Red Sea, and send three hundred thousand men to Mexico to welcome Maximilian to his imperial throne, with as much canister and grape as would blow him into another region."⁶¹ Turner's invasion plan was never enacted, but small num-

bers of African American soldiers, including the future historian George Washington Williams, crossed the border to join republican forces in the struggle against the European emperor.⁶²

The *New Orleans Tribune*, a Black newspaper, coupled the fate of people in the United States with that of the citizenry of Mexico in its moment of crisis: "For us, men of African Descent, we cannot forget that this undertaking was coupled with the attempt to perpetuate slavery and the Black Code in the United States. We cannot forget that the prospect was to re-establish servitude in Mexico."⁶³ A few months after the end of the Civil War, the *South Carolina Leader*, a Black newspaper based in Charleston, waxed enthusiastic about the prospects of abolition in Cuba but warned about the threat of slavery reemerging in Mexico under Emperor Maximilian's rule. What happened in Cuba and Mexico mattered greatly to Black South Carolinians as they mapped out their own strategies for freedom.⁶⁴

Black military service changed the very meaning of the war. Northern leaders marveled at the élan of Black troops and the willingness of African American civilians to risk their lives for the Union in a variety of capacities, from fighting on land and sea to providing the United States' most dependable wartime military intelligence network in the South.⁶⁵ Secretary of State William Seward observed, "Everywhere the American General receives his most useful and reliable information from the Negro who hails his coming as the harbinger of Freedom."⁶⁶ After the Army of the Potomac seized the high ground at Gettysburg thanks to the intelligence of a Black spy, General Robert E. Lee lamented, "The chief source of information to the enemy is through our Negroes."⁶⁷

Black men in the ranks drew from their experiences to frame the broader significance of the war. Private William B. Johnson of the Third United States Colored Infantry was one such soldier. As he wrote toward the end of the war, "One particular and interesting feature in Lake City [Florida], is a pond about a mile from town, where the rebels drove the Blacks into, in the summer of '64, to keep our scouts from bringing them into our lines. Many lost their lives in this way; but thank God they had their time, and now comes ours." Johnson believed that the Civil War must have a redemptive meaning: "By good behavior, we will show them that we are men,

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and able to fill any position in life that we may be placed in. There is only one thing I want, that is my vote; let us see what time will do."⁶⁸

Junius Browne, a Northern war correspondent who escaped from a Confederate prison camp, recognized Black civilians for saving his life and the lives of Union soldiers. African Americans had created a new branch of the Underground Railroad which aided US prisoners of war: "God bless the negroes! say I with earnest lips. During our entire captivity and after our escape, they were ever our firm, brave unflinching friends. We never made an appeal to them that they did not answer. They never hesitated to do us a service at the risk even of life; under the most trying circumstances revealed a devotion and a spirit of self-sacrifice that were heroic."⁶⁹

Harriet Tubman, whom John Brown had called General Tubman, performed all of these duties and more. Harriet Tubman helped lead troops into battle in a series of daring raids in the Sea Islands region of South Carolina, where US forces destroyed plantations, liberated slaves, and recruited the former "contrabands" (slaves) into the Union Army.⁷⁰ Toward the end of the war Tubman traveled to Camp William Penn in Pennsylvania to talk with the soldiers there about her exploits. One observer noted,

During her lecture, which she gave in her own language, she elicited considerable applause from the soldiers of the 24th regiment, U.S.C.T., now at the camp. She gave a thrilling account of her trials in the South, during the past three years, among the contrabands and colored soldiers, and how she had administered to thousands of them, and cared for their numerous necessities.⁷¹

Tubman's effectiveness as a recruiter was rooted in her ability to create a discourse of the dispossessed. She drew slaves away from the plantations by proclaiming, "Uncle Sam is rich enough to give you all a farm," affirming her people's belief that their labor had built the nation.⁷²

Senator John Sherman of Ohio depicted the impact of Black troops and civilians—men and women—in battle and behind the lines to achieve victory for the United States: "These slaves have won their freedom by their devotion to our cause. They have from the beginning been true friends. They have borne our flag in battle.

They have carried our arms. They have been slaughtered for our cause. They have aided our sick and wounded. They have fed our soldiers when in prison, and have guided their escape. They have performed the humble offices of the camp and the hospital."⁷³ Senator Sherman wanted it clearly understood that Black war service was saving the Union: "They have never fought against us. They have relied upon our promise, and have performed their part. Without them, and without their presence as a weakness to the enemy, we might not have succeeded." Sherman argued that Negro manhood suffrage was a minimal precondition for the Reconstruction of the South: "If we put negro regiments there and give them the bayonets, why can't we give votes? They have joined in putting down the Rebellion; and now to place them at the mercy of those they have helped us to subdue—to deny them all political rights—to give them freedom but leave them entirely subject to laws framed by Rebel masters—is an act of injustice against which humanity revolts."⁷⁴

The political significance of Black military service became clearer with each passing day. Abraham Lincoln was deeply moved—and transformed—by the sacrifice of African American men on the field of battle. He told John T. Mills, a Delaware judge, "There have been men base enough to propose to me to return to slavery the Black warriors of Port Hudson and Olustee, and thus win the respect of the masters they fought." Lincoln flatly refused. "Should I do so, I should deserve to be damned in time and eternity. Come what will, I will keep my faith with friend and foe. My enemies pretend I am now carrying on this war for the sole purpose of abolition. So long as I am President, it shall be carried on for the sole purpose of restoring the Union."⁷⁵ President Lincoln wanted Mills and his readers to understand that the hope of a Union victory in the Civil War was now inextricably bound up with Black emancipation and freedom. Facing the prospects of losing the presidency in the 1864 election, he told Frederick Douglass that he wanted him to organize a slave revolt in the South, what one historian calls his "John Brown plan."⁷⁶ It was now the only way Lincoln could see of saving the United States in its moment of deepest crisis.

W.E.B. Du Bois interpreted the mass exodus of slaves from Southern plantations as the first national general strike in US history and emphasized that "without the blacks the war would not have

have been slaughtered for our wounded. They have fed our aided their escape. They have camp and the hospital."⁷³ Sena-ood that Black war service was fought against us. They have performed their part. Without a weakness to the enemy, we argued that Negro manhood for the Reconstruction of the there and give them the bayo-ave joined in putting down the at the mercy of those they have all political rights—to give them bject to laws framed by Rebel st which humanity revolts."⁷⁴ c military service became clearer incoln was deeply moved—and rican American men on the field elaware judge, "There have been e to return to slavery the Black tee, and thus win the respect of flatly refused. "Should I do so, time and eternity. Come what nd and foe. My enemies pretend the sole purpose of abolition. So carried on for the sole purpose at Lincoln wanted Mills and his oe of a Union victory in the Civil up with Black emancipation and losing the presidency in the 1864 ss that he wanted him to organize e historian calls his "John Brown r Lincoln could see of saving the pest crisis. the mass exodus of slaves from ational general strike in US history e blacks the war would not have

been won."⁷⁷ Du Bois asserted, "This was not merely the desire to stop work. It was a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work. It was a general strike that involved directly in the end perhaps a half million people."⁷⁸ C. L. R. James fleshed out the political significance of the slaves' general strike: "What I want to emphasize is that it was not only that the blacks brought their forces into the Northern army and gave labour. It was that the policies that they followed instinctively were the policies ultimately that Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet had to use in order to win the war."⁷⁹

This rising of the workers was a hundredfold more important than enlightened statecraft; it was the motive force compelling Emancipation and the remarkable period of Reconstruction that followed after the end of the Civil War. At no time in American history has the working class occupied such a position of awesome power. In a speech given toward the end of 1863, Frederick Douglass made it clear that Lincoln's leadership would not win the war: "We are not to be saved by the captain this time, but by the crew. We are not to be saved by Abraham Lincoln, but by the power behind the throne, greater than the throne itself."⁸⁰ Without the uprising of the plantation workers, the nation would have been permanently broken in two: they were not merely heroes—they were the saviors of the republic.⁸¹

The movement of ordinary African Americans doing extraordinary things fired the nation's imagination. One writer juxtaposed the bravery of Black troops on battlefields like Fort Pillow with their precursors in Latin America:

In the United States, *Nat Turner* . . . Port Hudson, Fort Wagner, Fort Pillow, etc., in Spanish America, against the Spanish hordes during the War of Independence; in Cuba Aponte, Placido, the greatest Cuban poet; F. Vargas Captain of the Cuban Colored Militia . . . and hundreds coldly murdered by Gen. O'Donnell—some of them on the scaffold, and the great majority under the terrible lash; and above all, the numberless victims slain in Hayti by the French soldiery; that most noble specimen of the human race, Toussaint L'Ouverture, murdered by the first Napoleon in the dark dungeon of Fort Joux!⁸²

In invoking the name Plácido—nom de plume of Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, an Afro-Cuban poet executed by the Spanish for his role in the so-called Ladder Conspiracy—the writer was drawing connections between the massacre of Black Union soldiers at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, and the Spanish suppression of Cuban antislavery insurgents in 1844.⁸³ This act of historical imagination linked the progress of democracy not to events in Europe but to those taking place in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In a speech given to an African American audience in Boston in the final weeks of the war, Wendell Phillips pointed to the global implications of Black self-activity: “In the hands of the four millions of blacks in the Republic was the fate of the black race all over the world. With the ballot the colored men could ensure not only their own redemption but also that of their race from Cuba to Ethiopia. From this rebellion the black men would clutch the power to break the fetters of slaves all over the world.” The atmosphere that evening was electric: “Repeated bursts of enthusiastic applause testified the admiration of the audience during Mr. Phillips’s brilliant oration.” Like Harriet Tubman in South Carolina’s Sea Islands, Wendell Phillips spoke the language of his hopeful listeners; the great abolitionist had captured the zeitgeist of emancipatory internationalism. At the dawning of Emancipation, the Day of Jubilee, African Americans were ready to raise the bar of emancipation higher than ever.⁸⁴