
M E S S A G E
OF THE
PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES,

COMMUNICATING

A letter addressed to him from a committee of gentlemen representing the Freedman's Aid Societies of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati, in relation to the freedmen under the proclamation of emancipation.

DECEMBER 17, 1863.—Read, ordered to lie on the table and be printed.

To the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States:

Herewith I lay before you a letter addressed to myself by a committee of gentlemen representing the Freedman's Aid Societies in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati. The subject of the letter, as indicated above, is one of great magnitude and importance, and one which these gentlemen, of known ability and high character, seem to have considered with great attention and care. Not having the time to form a mature judgment of my own as to whether the plan they suggest is the best, I submit the whole subject to Congress, deeming that their attention thereto is almost imperatively demanded.—

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

DECEMBER 17, 1863.

WASHINGTON, D. C., December 1, 1863.

SIR: We appear before you a committee of gentlemen representing the Freedman's Aid Societies in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Cincinnati, and, in general, the anxieties and sympathies of the American people in regard to the present position and future prospects of the freedmen created by your proclamation of emancipation.

It is not necessary to tell you how wide-spread and deep-seated the interest in this question is. None can know as well as you do, at the very centre of all complaints and of all information, the pressing nature of the subject. The facts in the case are of a kind to force themselves on the dullest observation; nay, they are facts many of which might just as well have been stated before they occurred as since, growing as they do out of the nature of the case. Little is happening among the slaves who have found their freedom with the advance of our armies which was not predicted, or which could have been substantially averted. The very nature of slavery provides with fearful certainty for all the evils attending its own removal. It slowly arms against itself the retribution of heaven and the vengeance of society; and when it calls down, as it always does, sooner or later, civil war and social revolution upon its own domain,

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the tottering pillars of its barbarous civilization fall with terrific weight upon those who escape through the ruins into liberty, bearing equally the dull mark of the chain and the more bloody mark of the struggles by which that chain has been broken. Sir, nothing can prevent the exodus of four million slaves from being through a wilderness. Do the best the united energies of the government and the people can, a fearful percentage of mortality, and even more distressing amount of a suffering that does not mercifully kill, is sure to attend the transition of the oppressed humanity of the negro race from a state of forced labor to a condition of voluntary industry. The prospect of this misery deterred for a generation the sympathies of those who dread physical suffering more than moral wrong, and famine, disease and death, more than intellectual degradation, moral blindness, and spiritual ruin, from lending their countenance to the rising sentiment of liberty for the negro.

But God took that question out of the hands of man; away from prudential, economic, or human calculations, and made it simply a fact and a necessity. The national instincts of self-preservation have precipitated general, if not universal, emancipation upon us a century in advance of merely human arrangement or hopes. With all the misery that attends and must attend the sudden liberation of millions of slaves, God shows that he prefers that misery, with its glorious cause and consequences, to all the ease, comfort, or content which ever accompanied a firmly established and prosperous slave society. It is no longer a matter within our control. Liberty has been proclaimed to three million men, of whom five hundred thousand are already in the possession of it. Every foot our army advances it leaves new freedmen behind it. The late glorious victory near Chattanooga has, probably, loosed fifty thousand freedmen. General Grant is advancing into a region into which it is estimated one million eight hundred thousand slaves have been crowded, under a vain hope of their masters there to hold them safe from our liberating touch. For every mile he makes ten thousand freedmen drop their chains. If the Freedmen's Aid Societies, generous as the support they have received has been, are appalled at the work now on their hands; sickened at their imperfect efforts to meet the necessities created by the dislocation of labor, the separation of families, the destruction of homes with all the utensils of industry; and with the care of the aged, the infirm, and the young, thrown upon those unwonted to their ways, what must be their alarm in facing a future in which this want and misery shall be multiplied a hundred fold?

It is not, Mr. President, that we are seriously in doubt as to the methods to be adopted with the freedmen, for we have not been disappointed in the schemes in their favor we have already planned and executed. It is only that these schemes are small, and must continue so; while the demand for their adoption is large, beyond even our present power to meet it, and growing with prodigious strides every hour. It is the magnitude, not the nature of the work, that appals us, and drives us to the government for aid and support. We have found the freedman easy to manage, beyond even our best hopes; willing and able to fight as a soldier; willing and able to work as a laborer; willing and able to learn as a pupil; docile, patient, affectionate, grateful, and although with a great tribal range of intellect from nearly infantile to nearly or quite the best white intelligence, yet with an average mental capacity above the ordinary estimates of it.

We have no doubts of the aptitude of the slave for freedom under any fair circumstances. But we see that his circumstances must inevitably be unfair under the best arrangements the government can make, and that, independently of a great and paternal care on the part of the government, they will be so bad as to wring cries of shame and indignation from the civilized world, dishearten the friends and advocates of emancipation at home, and give new vitality to the disloyal suggestions of the slaveholders' allies in the north and west.

Mr. President, the success of our war is a succession of practical emancipa-

tions for the slaves. With every triumph comes a new care and anxiety, a new privilege and duty. Has the government any moral right to free the slave without seeing to it that, with every chain it breaks, the best within its power is done to keep the freedman from hankering after his master and his bondage, from feeling that his liberty is a burden, his life a curse, and his domestic affections even more fatal to his peace under our flag than beneath the plantation whip? Shall he hunger and thirst, shall he go naked and cold, shall he wander houseless and die unburied, shall his aged parents and his young children be scattered where he cannot find them, and in unspeakable misery lay their bones together, too old and too young to contend with their fate, upon the strange and distant soil to which fear and want have driven them? While anything remains undone within the power of the nation or the government to do to alleviate or diminish this misery, the Christian principle and pity of our people will allow none who are responsible for it to rest in peace.

There is not yet in the public mind any duly awakened sense of the magnitude of the negro question, as for two years there was not of the war itself. The government must know, even better than the people, what the vastness of the question is, and is it not proper for us to ask if, Mr. President, the government is doing, or preparing to do, what is necessary to meet it; to reduce the evils connected with emancipation to their lowest point, and elevate its blessings to the highest; to establish a system, carefully considered and adapted, and executed with energy and zeal, for the thorough and general dealing with the freedmen. It is plain to us, with our experience, that the question is too large for anything short of government authority, government resources, and government ubiquity to deal with. The plans, the means, the agencies, within any volunteer control, are insignificant in their adequacy to the vastness of the demand. Our relief associations have discharged their highest duty in testing many of the most doubtful questions touching the negroes' ability, and willingness to come under direction when direction has lost its authoritative character. They have proved the freedman's diligence, docility, and loyalty, his intelligence, and value as a laborer. They have alleviated much want and misery also. But were their resources ten times what they are, and ten times what they can be made, they would be no substitute for the governmental watchfulness, and provision which so numerous a race under such extraordinary circumstances requires. In our judgment the present and the future of the freedmen demands a kind, and degree of study, of guidance, and of aid, which it is in the nature of things impossible the government should give indirectly, or by means of any existing bureau or combination of bureaus. The case is large enough, serious enough, urgent enough, involving the nation's interest, its humanity, the respect of the people for the administration, and our reputation throughout the world, to require the best ability the country offers, organized in a regularly constituted government bureau, with all the military and civil powers of the government behind it, with all the existing machinery of transportation, commissary stores, and quartermaster's facilities, with all the omnipresence of the national agencies co-ordinated and brought to bear upon the treatment of the case.

We ask, then, your interposition with Congress, recommending the immediate creation of a bureau of emancipation, charged with the study of plans and the execution of measures for easing, guiding, and in every way judiciously and humanely aiding the passage of our emancipated and yet to be emancipated blacks from their old condition of forced labor to their new state of voluntary industry. We ask it for many reasons, but we will content ourselves with stating only two:

1st. It is necessary that there should be a central office, to collect from original investigations, and to receive from investigations already made and making, the now scattered information and varied and undigested testimony respecting the condition, wants, and prospects of the freedman. The amount of knowledge

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now existing in private hands, or local spheres and associations, is already great; but it is nearly useless for want of being arranged and brought into systematic order. If offered to the government, as it constantly is, it is brought to officials already overburdened with care and duties, and laid before departments which are not yet agreed as to the precise sphere within which it falls. The honest differences of departments as to their authority and responsibility in the case have been a chief obstruction to the methods of dealing promptly with the necessities of the freedman. Were a bureau in existence with no other duty but to attend to this vast and ever-expanding class of our fellow-creatures, countrymen, and citizens, it would at once be able to concentrate, and in the shortest possible time to methodize, the now diffused and disjointed testimony in the case, and from its central and commanding point of view to devise plans and measures which would satisfy the humanity and relieve the anxieties of the nation.

2d. It is not merely a central office that is wanted. It must be a government bureau. The various freedman's associations—rich, numerous, and powerful, might unite and establish a central office at Washington, in which should converge all the light and knowledge collected at the most distant points of the circumference, and from which wise and humane plans might originate and radiate in all directions. But such a central office, disconnected from the government, as in that case by the hypothesis it would be, without any right to official information or assistance, would lack the chief illumination now required, which is simply this: a knowledge how the existing machinery of the government in all departments can be brought to bear on the problem of guidance, support, and relief in this temporary though not brief state of the transition of millions of bondmen from forced to free labor. This is a problem in which the vast, costly, omnipresent machinery and agencies of the government already existing, with the least possible additions and the least possible disturbance, are to be economized and applied to the work of starting and aiding a humane process of emancipation.

We need not tell you, sir, that the co-ordination of bureaus and departments of our government is a matter which novices cannot understand, and by which outsiders cannot, to any great extent, profit.

There is no such thing as a semi-official connexion with the government, and all efforts to create such an anomaly are vain. The very essence of government authority is completeness within its sphere; a half authority is none at all.

If the sanitary commission be deemed any exception to this rule, it is known that that body has gradually resigned most of its dependence on government, abandoned the largest portion of its claims to any rights under government, and thrown itself mainly upon the protection of individual generals, who grant it opportunities, privileges, and temporary rights, wholly according to their individual sense of the necessity of the case, and their immediate feeling of dependence on extra governmental aid for their sick and wounded. This is as it should be, and as a better acquaintance with administration necessities would have taught at the start. Moreover, let not the success of the sanitary commission, as a national enterprise, delude the public with the idea that a parallel exists in the case of the freedman's aid societies, however centralized they might be.

The sanitary commission owes its chief success to the fact that it attracted itself as an outside assistance to an existing government bureau—the Medical Bureau—to which it carried its complaints, proffered the counsels of its humane constituency, lent the aid and assistance it could render through the existing machinery of the Medical Department, and thus without disturbance found a normal channel for its chief work.

What is outside of that channel is carried on by independent machinery, very costly and very laborious, and wholly without any privileges except such as the necessities of the army extort from generals in the field, without any special authority from the War Department for what they do.

Now, there is no such bureau to which the friends of emancipation and of the freedman can carry their complaints, their suggestions, or their supplementary assistance. This is precisely what is needed.

There is no reason to think that the private outside humanity of the nation will be withheld from the aid and comfort of our suffering freedmen; but their aid and comfort must be supplementary to that which the government gives through its ubiquitous agencies and its national resources. You do not expect the people of this country to undertake the care of your medical department, to build your hospitals, or man them with surgeons. They may pour seven millions of stores through the sanitary commission into the battle-fields, and the hospitals and soldiers' homes, but if the government were not, through a special bureau, directing and guiding medical affairs, and expending on the sick and wounded a hundred millions—taking commissary stores, transportation, buildings, medicines, and surgeons' wages, and nurses' wages into account, what would all the volunteer benevolence of the country be able to effect by its fractional, supplementary aid? And can it be expected that any outside national beneficence or zeal should do more for the freedman than it has done for the national invalid soldier? What then must become of him if left to outside care? That care will not cover more than a small fraction of his necessities, when pushed to its utmost extent. It is not an expenditure of hundreds of thousands, but of millions, that must be faced in this business. Shall the government, which will be forced by pity, shame, necessity, to expend a large amount of money before the case passes beyond its care, spend it ignorantly, at haphazard, without system or method, without the aid of the best wisdom that can be brought to bear on the subject, and without studying the best and noblest material and moral economies in the case? How can all this be effected except by a government bureau, in which all the scattered lights on the subject are concentrated, the opportunities and facilities afforded by existing machinery studied, and the operations of the government thoroughly co-ordinated? The case seems fully made out. There ought to be, on grounds of economy, humanity, and necessity, a government Bureau of Emancipation.

Sir, if you bring this great subject to the attention of Congress, will you not attract their notice to the fact that the question of expense in this business is one which is not relieved by covering it up? The government is already at expense (seemingly great expense) in feeding and clothing the freedmen thrown on its hands. But this expense is very largely balanced by the cheaply paid labor it secures, and it is doubtful whether the nation is really not saving money by its humanity.

In one district in Tennessee, where four thousand freedmen are in government employ, it is computed that, after paying their wages, supplying their rations and their raiment, the government actually saves forty-two thousand dollars per month, considering what it would be compelled to pay for this necessary labor were it done by white hands. But, in a larger view, the economy of preserving the lives of the women and the children of the freedmen, even if of great immediate expense to the government, is of the most urgent utility.

Labor is, in the future, destined to be the great want of the country over which we are extending our victorious dominion. Be sure that every negro life which can be preserved in this transition state is a life which, at any reasonable or probable cost, it is in the highest degree economical to preserve.

But, apart from political economy, there is a moral economy to be considered. It is really a matter of small consequence whether the humane and successful exodus of the negro cost more or less. The honor, the dignity, the moral and religious character of this nation is at stake. Our duties to God and man are not to be sacrificed to any mere peculiar considerations. We are bound by the highest spiritual obligations to make the process of emancipation for the slaves

as safe and as little unhappy and destructive to them as possible. Again, apathy, an indifference to human life—the terrible accompaniment of a state of war—is demoralizing in the extreme to civil and social order. White life is not safe when negro life is held cheap.

The neglect of the negro is self-neglect; and his abuse, or his needless decimation, is certain to produce murder and arson, and violent crimes at home. We cannot escape the vengeance inhabiting violated laws. We are members one of another, and if one of the members suffer all the members suffer with it. It is therefore, with an instinct of self preservation, as well as with a fear of the righteous retribution of God, that the moralized and intelligent, the humane and Christian people of this country, cry out to their national government that the forced and military emancipation of the negro shall be made as humane as the difficult and serious circumstances of the case will permit. The Christian heart, the moralized brain of the nation, will not suffer their government to do less than the utmost in the ordering of this great and solemn matter.

Let not this anxiety for a "Bureau of Emancipation," as an expression and organ of government solicitude and care, be confounded with a disposition to overdo the care of the freedmen; to come between them and the natural laws of political economy; to substitute supervision and direction for their own latent energies and self-helpfulness. The utmost extent to which the ordinary principles of free light and labor can be applied to the blacks should be insisted on; the least possible done for them, the most possible expected of them; as little difference made as can be between them and other laborers—their treatment always leaning rather to too little than too much aid and direction. It is to learn by careful inquiry the utmost extent to which this sound canon of civilization can be applied to the freedmen that the first study of the Bureau of Emancipation would be directed. But experience has already taught that it cannot be applied to at least a million of them further than it is applied to our own children. If, in obedience to the general principle that all aid and direction is weakening to human beings, we are ready to cast our own offspring at a tender age upon their own resources, we may think it wise to deal with like Spartan severity with the freedmen, of whom so many are children in character when not children in years. We must lend leading strings to these babes of liberty, and, would we have them go alone, see that they do not dash out their brains before they learn to walk.

Mr. President, we humbly decline here to indicate the precise organization of the Bureau of Emancipation. We do not ask for a new department, sufficient as the occasion might be to justify it, but only a new bureau. It is because the proper organization of this bureau requires a knowledge, which we do not possess, of all the governmental and administrative and military questions relating to it, that we do not presume to dogmatize on the subject. A proper congressional committee, authorized to call for persons and papers, might very soon collect information and wisdom sufficient to guide it discreetly and successfully through this preliminary matter of what the bureau should be and in what department placed. The exceptional nature of its duties would call for exceptional resources, and if it had even a divided allegiance to several departments, or were even an independent bureau, like a free city beside the great states of Europe, considering that its existence might be in the act creating it limited to five or ten years, it would not introduce a dangerous precedent, or disturb the organic harmony of the general government.

One thing, however, which happily falls within your own responsibility, the personnel of such a bureau, we may in a final word be permitted to advert to. The success of the measure would depend largely upon the person placed at the head of the bureau. Moses himself required heavenly wisdom to guide the ancient people out of Egyptian bondage. The nation's official guide of the freedmen through their wilderness certainly would need a wisdom, a purity, a vigor,

and a humanity as great as is ever vouchsafed to merely human instruments. The piety, the sense, the humanity of the American people, will ask for nothing short of the most consummate ability, the purest integrity, the broadest and tenderest humanity, the most profound economical and political wisdom, at the head of a bureau which, if it is created, more than other, will be the birth of our Christian civilization, the object of the gratitude, the support, the watchful attention, and the earnest prayers of the nation. We beg of you, Mr. President, to lend your great influence and guidance to the creation of a "Bureau of Emancipation," and, next, your most firm, and patient, and conscientious attention to the selection of the wisest and ablest head the nation affords, for the chief of the new organization.

Imploring the blessing of God on the nation, the freedman, the country's cause, and the President of the United States, we are, with profound respect, your excellency's fellow citizens and fellow countrymen.

STEPHEN COLWELL, *President of Joint Committee.*

EDWARD ATKINSON,
 GEORGE CABOT WARD, } *Secretaries.*
 J. M. WALDEN,

FRANCIS GEORGE SHAW,
President National Freedman's Relief Association, of New York.

HENRY WARD BEECHER, *of New York.*

HENRY W. BELLOWES, *of New York.*

GEORGE CABOT WARD, *of New York.*

C. R. ROBERT, *of New York.*

STEPHEN COLWELL, *of Philadelphia.*

J. WHEATON SMITH, *of Philadelphia.*

ELLIS YARNALL, *of Philadelphia.*

FRANCIS R. COPE, *of Philadelphia.*

ADAM POE,

President "Western Freedman's Aid Committee," of Cincinnati.

EDWARD HARWOOD, *of Cincinnati.*

LEVI COFFIN, *of Cincinnati.*

J. M. WALDEN, *of Cincinnati.*

J. M. FORBES, *of Boston.*

EDWARD ATKINSON, *of Boston.*