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War Against Slavery Without a Black Soldier in Sight?

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Abstract

I've been lying to people. OK, not exactly lying, just not telling the whole truth. One of my favorite lines to use when I worked in Washington at the [Lincoln Cottage](#) was that the, "most important part of the Emancipation Proclamation came near the end, where it says that black men, the former slaves, can serve in the army and navy, that they can fight for their very own freedom." [*excerpt*]

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Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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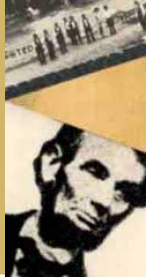
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THURSDAY, JANUARY 31, 2013

I've been lying to people. OK, not exactly lying, just not telling the whole truth. One of my favorite lines to use when I worked in Washington at the [Lincoln Cottage](#) was that the, "most important part of the Emancipation Proclamation came near the end, where it says that black men, the former slaves, can serve in the army and navy, that they can fight for their very own freedom."

I was wrong. The Proclamation does say that, does proclaim that. But the route to that becoming real, to real black men fighting in real blue suits against real American traitors was actually born of a long struggle in the early weeks of 1863. It all came down to a bill

authorizing black soldiers, a rousing Congressional fight on February 2nd, 1863 and a few final words from the Great Commoner to seal the deal.

The debate over the bill in the House of Representatives was harsh. Northern radical Republican delegate had spoken their piece. The darker men of America should, in their estimation, be allowed to fight for their own freedom. Their opposition had spoken their piece.

As debate wound down, finally Thaddeus Stevens had command of the floor. Anxious to get the vote in before the day was over, he was loath to yield the floor one last time to Henry May, representing Maryland's 4th Congressional District, otherwise known as the City of Baltimore. In 1861, as war was breaking out, May was swept up in the dragnet that captured potentially disloyal Marylanders and deposited them in Federal prisons to keep the Old Line State in the Union.

But now he was serving in the House. And Thaddeus Stevens yielded the floor.

"To us who are familiar with the characteristics of the African race," May announced to the floor, "these theories that sentimental gentlemen on the other side so frequently present but serve to amuse." In spite of the fervor of the former slaves and freedmen begging to join the army and fight for freedom, May knew for a fact that, "the domesticated African," had only qualities unfit for the army. "His inert nature, his slovenly habits, his clumsiness, his want of vigilance, and his timidity,"

GETTYSBURG, PA.
MONDAY MORNING, FEB. 9, 1863.
Thaddeus Stevens' negro soldier bill passed the House on Monday, after an animated discussion, the Democrats and Border State men strenuously opposing it, and Stevens, Lovejoy, Dunn, and other Abolitionists, warmly supporting it. The yeas were 84, and the nays 54. All the Republicans voted for it but Messrs. Kellogg, Granger, Hale, Horton and Woodbury, who are conservative. The bill provides that the President may arm such number as he may deem necessary for a term not

It's not the Emancipation Proclamation, but a bill in 1863 that really let black folks fight. And who better to spearhead it than Thaddeus Stevens?



The Great Commoner, or as a good friend has taken to calling him recently: Agent K.

only served to show the men of Maryland that, "of all human beings he presents the least qualifications for a soldier."

But May's words ran deeper than a racial tirade. There were veiled threats. His home, his state was not happy with, "the fatal policy that a blind fanaticism has directed here and from the White House." The Emancipation Proclamation was now, "next to the fall of Adam the greatest evil that had afflicted man."

Stevens patiently listened as May called forth a resolution to make immediate peace with and recognize the Confederacy, rather than continue the war or employ negro soldiers.

Then the embodied bolt of lightning stood to speak. His tongue was sharp. He gestured to the Democrats, snidely quipping that there were some, "on that side of the House whom I am not at liberty to deem disloyal, but whose arguments and acts compel the belief that they are strong sympathizers with their 'wayward sisters.'"

Stevens had a way to spin the story so that arguing was nary impossible. "Is it wise, is it humane, to send your kindred to battle and to death," Stevens asked, a sneer almost palpable in the transcript, "when you might put the colored man in the ranks and let him bear a part of the conflict between the rebel and his enfranchised slave?" The Congressman was using racism *against* racists, prejudice *against* the prejudiced.

"Why," Stevens asked, "should these bloody graves be filled with our relatives rather than with the property of traitors slain by their own masters, who, in their turn, would fall by the hands of the oppressed?" And white soldiers would be crazy not to allow black men in the ranks. "It would be a strange taste that would prefer, themselves, to face the death-bearing heights of Fredericksburg," Stevens exclaimed, "and be buried in trenches at the foot of them, than to see it done by colored soldiers."

Would black soldiers lead to black equality? Again the abolitionist spun the story: "The only place where they can find equality is in the grave. There all God's children are equal."

But Stevens' dreams did slip through his mostly tempered words. When a colleague complained that fighting would lead to freedom, Stevens rage bled through. "He says that he fights *only* for the freedom of his own white race.... That patriotism that is wholly absorbed by one's own country is

narrow and selfish. That philanthropy which embraces only one's own race, and leaves the other numerous races of mankind to bondage and to misery, is cruel and detestable."

On February 9th, a week after the vote, Gettysburg's loyal opposition paper, *The Compiler*, with Henry J. Stahle at the helm, [chided the bill and Stevens](#). "Thaddeus Stevens' negro soldier bill passed the House on Monday," Stahle wrote, "the yeas were 84, and the nays 54." But to Stahle, jokingly, the bill was, "an insult to the darkeys," that they couldn't be officers over white troops. Petty politics and a deep-seated institutional racism seemed ever-present in Gettysburg's streets, be it 1863 or 1865. Some things never change.

The calendar that February, though, kept being flipped forward, each new date one day closer to doomsday in South-central Pennsylvania.