“Whenever we establish the fact that they are a military race, we destroy our whole theory that they are unfit to be free.”
- Georgia governor Joseph E. Brown

The issue of the colored man during the civil war was not one of just slavery, but also an issue of whether or not to allow these people to fight on either side of the fence. On one side, there was freed men, who cared about a cause, and wanted for their other people to be free as well, and then on the other side there were the slaves who fought for the promise of freedom. The risks were large, but many dared to risk death for the dream of freedom. An estimated three hundred thousand black soldiers fought with either the Union or the Confederate armies, and quickly became the “very heart of the Civil War.” The idea of using colored soldiers did not come into effect until the middle of the war because northern whites did not want to fight next to them or the general view of southerners was the same as the Georgia governor, Joseph E. Brown, when he stated that, “Whenever we establish the fact that they are a military race, we destroy our whole theory that they are unfit to be free.”

The beginning of the fight for the recruitment of colored troops was not started by either side, but instead was begun by a group of runaway slaves:

“Since whites refused to thrust slavery into the forefront, blacks forced the issue. It all began on a quiet May night in 1861 near Fort Monroe in Virginia. Three slaves, hired out as laborers on a Confederate fortifications project, slipped away from quarters, commandeered a canoe, and paddled into Union lines. The following morning a

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2 Boritt 140.
Confederate officer approached the fort under a flag of truce. He came, he stated, to claim the runaways based on the fugitive slave law. The federal commander, Brig. Gen. Benjamin Butler refused to hand over the slave. A shrewd courtroom lawyer and prominent politician before the war, Butler insisted that since Virginia had seceded from the Union, the fugitive slave law was inapplicable. Furthermore, since Confederates had used theses men strictly for military purposes, they were contraband of war and therefore subject to confiscation. … In one eventful day, Butler had, in effect, freed three slaves and then employed them to work for the Union army.”

With his act of “defiance” Union General Butler, started a war for recruitment that, towards the end of the war would become a very important focus for the Confederate military leader, General Robert E. Lee.

The act of treason towards the Confederacy of the United States by General Butler becomes an issue that even the President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, addresses. On December 24th, 1862 President Davis make a proclamation regarding Benjamin Butler, and how he should be treated. Jefferson Davis strongly “do pronounce and declare the said Benjamin F. Butler to be a felon deserving of capitol punishment.”

He is also to be treated as an “outlaw and common enemy of mankind.” Davis’ proclamation of Butler ads to the complicated issue, for the south, by turning the faults of three of the Confederate’s “soldiers” onto the man that merely allowed them to stay for shelter. The most important order of Jefferson Davis’ proclamation is the third, in which he commands, “That all Negro slaves captured in arms be at once delivered over to the executive authorities of the respective states to which they belong to be dealt with

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3 Boritt 140-141.
according to the laws of said states.” This order holds true with the firm Confederate belief of state’s rights. This order immediately takes the responsibility away from the Confederate federal government and places it on the states. Jefferson Davis Proclamation was just the first step in an ever-growing support for the use of slaves as troops.⁴

The highly paternalistic view of the Confederate States, forbade them from pursuing the enlistment of slaves very early in the war. Many people had suggested the idea before, but the Confederate government was not ready to accept fighting next to their barbaric slaves. Early on slave owners, recognizing the greater need for more men, whether they are black or white, on the warfront, petitioned the Confederate War Department to allow them to arm their slaves. One slave owner, W.S. Turner, called for “arms, clothing, and provisions,” and proceeds to say that they are easily disciplined and are better behaved than whites in camp. The Chief Bureau of War, A.T. Bledsoe, responded with a very buttered up no. He says that the Secretary of War sees no necessity to form black regiments, but “is not doubted that almost every slave would cheerfully aid his master in the work of hurling back the fanatical invader.”⁵ This view of having to protect the poor slave “child” slows down a process, which if begun sooner could have aided the Confederacy in winning a war, in which they were already heavily outnumbered.

A latter idea for the use of slaves for the good of the Confederacy was for the immediate emancipation of all slaves. This idea, though only shared by a few, is best

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expressed in a letter to President Jefferson Davis from J.H. Stringfellow. Stringfellow’s proposal is based upon the idea that the soldiers cannot do everything:

“Southern soldiers are the best that ever drew a blade in the cause of liberty, but there are some things which they cannot do; they cannot fight our battles against overwhelming numbers, and raise the necessary supplies for the Army and the women and children at home; and yet, sir, this is what they will be called upon to do if this war is protracted for two years longer. I ask, sir, then, In view of these facts, if the prompt abolition of slavery will not prove a remedy sufficient to arrest this tide of disaster?”

The more popular idea of handling slaves, who fought for the confederacy, was to grant them their freedom if they served for three years of the duration of the war.

Early in 1865, with Confederate losses reaching outrageous numbers, the Confederate government finally decided to look into the recruitment of slaves. J.P. Benjamin, Confederate Secretary of State proposes in a letter addressed to General Robert E. Lee, “that those slaves only who might volunteer to fight for their freedom should be at once sent the trenches.” This idea and need for more men was soon shared by General Lee who became the most important supporter of the use of slaves for the good of the Confederacy. Many officers wanted the enlistment of black soldiers simply to fill the places left by the many dead white soldiers. Finally, Confederate Congress

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listened to its military leaders, and on March 23, 1865 passed an act to increase the military force of the United States.

“The Congress of the Confederate States of America do enact, That, in order to provide additional forces to repel invasion, maintain the rightful possession of the Confederate States, secure their independence, and preserve their institutions, the President be, and he is hereby, authorized to ask for and accept from the owners of slaves, the services of such number of able-bodied Negro men as he may deem expedient, for and during the war, to perform military service in whatever capacity he may direct.”

This Congressional act enabled General Lee to do what he had been trying to accomplish for a while, and that was to attain more troops in order to push back the Union army. He immediately calls for all the Negroes of Virginia between the ages of 18 and 45 to enlist pleading, “The services of theses men are now necessary to enable us to oppose the enemy.” The idea of enlisting slaves may have come too late, because the Confederate army found it very hard to advance the raising of Negro troops. Many slaveholders were reluctant to give up their slaves, believing that the war could still be won without them. While the sources to increase the size of their army was always there, the Confederate States of America decided not to act on it until it was too late, however, their enemies to the north took full advantage of the extra men.

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The recruitment of colored soldiers came easy for the Union, which offered a refuge as well as freedom. Thousands and thousands of slaves escaped from their owners in the south in order to fight for the cause. Around ten percent, between 180,000 and 200,000, of the Union army was black. This high number of black volunteers aided to the eventual win of the Union, by not only, adding to the size of their army, but by also making the southern slave owners highly insecure about having runaways, and therefore keeping them from volunteering their slaves for the Confederate effort.

One of the key documents regarding the Union’s acquisition of colored troops is General Benjamin Butler’s order relative to colored troops. In General Orders, No. 46, General Butler explains, “The recruitment of colored troops has become the settled purpose of the government.” One of the Generals strongest statements regards that of the equality of the colored troops with the white troops. Every enlisted man shall be issued the same supplies, clothing, and living space as a white soldier in the same branch of service. General Butler goes even further to say “The colored man fills an equal space in ranks while he lives, and an equal grave when he dies.” The General orders also are important in the creation of a new government office to oversee the recruitment and plight of the colored soldier, a General Superintendent of Negro Affairs. The Orders further outline the duties of the Superintendent, including pay. Finally, General Butler calls for the immediate distribution of these orders by making one available to every officer, and the officers are then responsible for reading them aloud to their company of detachment. These Orders were vital to the revitalization of the Union army. Another

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significant event in the role of the colored soldier came with the emergence of a new recruitment camp, Camp Nelson in Kentucky.\textsuperscript{11}

Camp Nelson quickly emerged as a recruitment center, and because of its location in the border state of Kentucky, a refugee camp for the families of the Negroes wishing to enlist in the effort. The runaways in reality had no choice but to runaway with their families to the north. If left alone with the slaveholders they would be subject to excessive cruelty and violence at the hands of the angry slave owner. The camp was a very central site for the advancement of colored troops for the war effort. Camp Nelson had a school where both the families of and the soldiers would attend, it had a church for spiritual guidance, and it also had a large hospital. The idea equal treatment that was received by the troops was quickly spread throughout the countryside and the camp would receive more and more runaways as soldiers daily. There were eight regiments of United States Colored Troops founded at Camp Nelson, and three more were trained at the facilities, making Camp Nelson the third largest African-American recruitment camp in the nation, but more importantly the largest in the border state of Kentucky.\textsuperscript{12}

The inclusion of African-Americans in the armed forces of both the Union and Confederate States of America was a turning point in the war and in society. For the north, these blacks were now even more of an equal because they were allowed to fight as equals. In the south, the blacks inclusion gave them a way out, an end to the establishment of slavery; fight for the South and you gain independence. Lincoln’s

Emancipation Proclamation opened the floodgates for blacks in the north that wanted to fight for the human rights of all men to be granted. As Joseph T. Glatthaar explains:

“It was a bold military stroke. In one swoop he (Lincoln) deprived the Confederacy of a great resource and converted it into one for the Federals. Not only would the Union take slaves, it would arm and train them to fight for the Confederacy’s defeat.”\textsuperscript{13}

Though not directly linked to the victory of the Union, the black soldier fought valiantly and with great courage and certainly was a very important piece of the puzzle. Union Major Martin Delany best summarizes the role of the African-American in the Civil War. Shortly after Appomattox Delany asked, “Do you know that if it was not for the black men this war never would have been brought to a close with success to the Union, and the liberty of your race if it had not been for the Negro?”\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13} Boritt 150.
\textsuperscript{14} Boritt 162.
Bibliography


