

MEETING THE PRESIDENT:
WASHINGTON, D.C., AUGUST 1863

Frederick Douglass to George L. Stearns

On August 10 Douglass visited the capital, where, with the help of Senator Samuel C. Pomeroy, a Radical Republican from Kansas, he was able to meet with Secretary Stanton and President Lincoln. In his conversation with Stanton, Douglass agreed to help recruit black troops in Mississippi with the understanding that he would be commissioned as an officer. When the War Department failed to send the commission, Douglass would refuse to go south as a civilian. He wrote about his visit to George L. Stearns, a wealthy Boston abolitionist who had enlisted Douglass in the effort to recruit black soldiers.

Head Quars 1210 Chestnut St
Phila Aug 12th 1863

Maj Geo. L Stearns.
A.A.G. USV &c

Dear Sir.

According to your request I paid a flying visit to Washington. I spent the entire day (Monday) in calling upon the Heads of Depts there and other influential persons. I had the good fortune, early in the morning after reaching there, of meeting with Senator Pomeroy who at once offered to accompany me and facilitate my mission. First I called on Secty Stanton at the War Department who kindly granted me an interview of about thirty minutes which must be considered a special privilege in view of the many pressing demands upon his time and attention. His manner was cold and business like throughout but earnest.

I at once gave him in brief my theory of the elements of negro character which should be had in view in all measures for raising colored troops. I told him that the negro was the victim of two extreme opinions. One claimed for him too much and the other too little. That it was a mistake to regard him either as an angel or a demon. He is simply a man and should be dealt with purely as such. That a certain percentage

of negroes were brave and others cowardly. That a part were ambitious and aspiring and another part quite otherwise and that the theory in practice of the Government in raising colored troops should conform to these essential facts. The Secty instantly inquired in what respect the present conditions of colored enlistments conflicted with the views I had expressed. I answered "In the unequal pay accorded to colored soldiers and in the fact that no incentive was given to the ambition of colored soldiers and that the regulations confined them to the dead level of privates or non-commissioned officers." In answer the Secty went into an interesting history of the whole subject of the employment of Colored Troops briefly mentioning some of the difficulties and prejudices to be surmounted. Gave a history of the bill drawn up by himself, giving equal pay, the same rations, the same uniforms, and equipments, to colored troops as to White, and spoke with much apparent regret that his bill, though passed in the House was defeated in the Senate on what he considered quite an insufficient reason alleging that the President already possessed necessary powers to employ colored troops.

I told Mr Stanton that I held it to be the duty of Colored men to fight for the Government even though they should be offered but subsistence and arms considering that we had a cause quite independent of pay or place. But he quickly responded, "That he was in favor of giving the same pay to black as to white soldiers and also of making merit the criterion of promotion further stating his readiness to grant commissions to any reported to him by their superior officers for their capacity or bravery." The conclusion of our conversation was, that Gen Thomas was now vigorously engaged in organizing colored troops on the Mississippi and that he (the Secty) wished me to report to Gen Thomas and cooperate with him in raising said troops. I told the Secty that I was already at work under the direction of Major Stearns and that I thought that he would still need my services. But the Secty thought I had better report as aforesaid, adding that he would send me sufficient papers immediately. Thus you see, My dear Sir, that you have sent me to Washington to some purpose. Mr Stanton was very imperative in his manner, and I did not know but that you had suggested this prompt employment of me, from

the fact that you inquired as to my willingness to go South in this work. My interview with Mr Stanton was free from compliments of every kind. There was nothing from him to me, nor from me to him, but I felt myself stopped in regard to your own efficient services not so much from his manner as from what I knew to be your own wishes.

From the War Office I went directly to the White House. Saw for the first time the President of the United States. Was received cordially and saw at a glance the justice of the popular estimate of his qualities expressed in the prefix "*Honest*" to the name of Abraham Lincoln. I have never seen a more transparent countenance. There was not the slightest shadow of embarrassment after the first moment. The drift of my communication to the President, except that I thanked him for extending equal protection to Colored Prisoners of War, was much the same as that to the Secty of War. I desired only to say so much as to furnish a text for a discourse from Mr Lincoln himself. In this I was quite successful for the President instantly upon my ceasing to speak proceeded with an earnestness and fluency of which I had not suspected him, to vindicate his policy respecting the whole slavery question and especially that in reference to employing colored troops. I need not here repeat his views. One remark, however, of his was of much significance. He said he had frequently been charged with tardiness, hesitation and the like, especially in regard to issuing his retaliatory proclamation. But had he sooner issued that proclamation such was the state of public popular prejudice that an outcry would have been raised against the measure. It would be said "Ah! We thought it would come to this. White men were to be killed for negroes. His general view was that the battles in which negroes had distinguished themselves for bravery and general good conduct was the necessary preparation of the public mind for his proclamation. But the best thing said by the President was "I have been charged with vacillation even by so good a man as Jno. Sherman of Ohio, but" said he "I think the charge cannot be sustained. No man can say that having once taken the position I have contradicted it or retreated from it." This remark of the President I took as our assurance that whoever else might abandon his anti slavery policy President Lincoln would stand firm to his. My whole

interview with the President was gratifying and did much to assure me that slavery would not survive the War and that the Country would survive both Slavery and the War. I am very sorry my Dear Sir, not to see you before leaving. I should be glad to have a line from you if convenient before I leave Rochester.

With Great Respect and Regard

Your Obt Servant

(Signed) Fredk Douglass