

JUNIOR HISTORIANS

Colonization: George Vashon

Transcript

To His Excellency ABRAHAM LINCOLN, President of the United States of America

HIGHLY HONORED AND RESPECTED SIR:

The papers announce that on the 14th of August you had an interview with a committee of colored men, and addressed them in reference to the propriety of the expatriation of their class. As a colored man, I am deeply interested in this matter; and feel that under the circumstances, I ought to be excused for the liberty which I take in making answer to you personally.

In the first place, sir, let me say, that I do not put myself in opposition to the emigration of Colored Americans, either individually, or in large masses. I am satisfied, indeed, that such an emigration will be entered upon, and that too, to no inconsiderable extent. Liberia, with the bright and continually growing promise for the regeneration of Africa, will allure many a colored man to the shores of his motherland. Haiti, with her proud boast, that, she alone, can present an instance in the history of the world, of a horde of despised bondmen becoming a nation of triumphant freeman, will by her gracious invitation, induce many a dark hued native of the United States to go and aid in developing the treasures stored away in her sun-crested hills and smiling savannahs. And, Central America, lying in that belt of empire which Destiny seems to promise to the blended races of the earth, will, no doubt, either with or without federal patronage, become the abiding place of a population made up, in great measure, of persons who will have taken refuge there from the oppression which they had been called upon to undergo in this country.

But, entertaining these views, and almost persuaded to become an emigrant myself, for the recollections of a thirty months' residence in Haiti still crowd pleasantly upon my memory. I am confident that, in thus feeling, I am not in sympathy with the majority of my class—not in sympathy either with the great body of them. Those men are doubtless aware that many comforts and advantages which they do not now enjoy here, await them elsewhere. No feeling of selfishness, no dread of making sacrifices (as you intimate), detains them in the land of their birth. They are full conscious of the hatred to which you have adverted, they endure its consequences daily and hourly; tremblingly too, perhaps, lest the utterances of their Chief Magistrate may add fuel to the fire raging against them, but buoyed up by the knowledge that they are undeserving of this ill usage, and sedulously endeavoring to perform the various duties that are incumbent upon them, they enjoy, amid all their ill, a species of content, and echo back,

by their conduct, your own words, that "It is difficult to make a man miserable while he feels he is worthy of himself, and claims kindred to the great God who made him." Thus, they have schooled themselves "to labor and wait," in the hope of the coming of a better time. And, this hope is based in the innermost convictions of their religious nature, in the trust which is not to be shaken, that the God who rules the Universe is a God of fixed, and immutable justice, under whose dispensations the proud and defiant ones of today become invariably the peeled and broken ones of the morrow; while those who were despised and rejected, find themselves, in turn, the recipients of abundant and overflowing "mercies."

These men, too, have another reason for clinging to the land of their nativity; and that is, the gross injustice which must necessarily be, in the highest degree, revolting to their every sense of right. Who and what are these men? Their family records in this land, in almost every instance, antedate our revolutionary struggle, and you, sir, will read in your country's history, unlike the ignorant and rapid reporters who, from time to time, in their marketless and pen free calumny of a race, detail from our camps the lie that "the negro will not fight"—you, sir, know that black Americans fighting shoulder to shoulder with white Americans, in the contest which confirmed our nationality, merited and received the approbation of Washington; and that the zealous and fleet-footed slave of that time did, for the partisan bands of Sumter and Marion, the same kind of offices which the travel-worn and scarcely tolerated "contraband" of our days has done for the armies of Burnside and McClellan. And now, what reward is offered by republican gratitude? Now, forsooth, when the banquet of Freedom has been spread, when the descendants of the men who fought under Howe and Clinton, under Cornwallis and Burgoyne, have with ostentatious liberality been invited to the repast, the children of the patriotic blacks who periled their lives at Bunker Hill, at Red Bank, and on many another hard fought field, must be requested, not merely to take a lower seat, but to withdraw entirely from the table.

But setting aside the injustice of a policy which would expatriate black Americans, let us examine for a moment its expediency. Cicero has declared, in his principal ethical treatise, that, "no greater evil can happen to humanity than the separation of what is expedient from that which is right." Let us suppose, however, that he was wrong in thus teaching; and that the antipathy existing between the white and black races—somewhat of a one-sided antipathy, by the by—would justify the removal of the latter one from this country. It might be, indeed, a matter for discussion, whether this antipathy is as extended and as exacting as you allege; whether, instead of being a permanent instinct, it is not rather a temporary sentiment which will gradually pass away, when once its cause—the slavery and wrong imposed upon the descendants of Africa—will have been removed. But, let that pass. Would it be wise, sir, when Denmark and France and England are looking with envious eyes upon our liberated slaves, and regarding them as important acquisitions to their West India possessions, to denude our southern States of that class of laborers? Has not the experience of our heart-stricken armies—an experience which has prompted the yielding up of the spade to the black man, while the musket is withheld from him—sufficiently indicated that negro cultivators are absolutely required for that portion of the Union?

But, sir, it is not enough that the policy which you suggest should be expedient. It should also be feasible. You have, doubtless, looked at this matter with the eye of a statesman. You have reflected, that to remove entirely this "bone of contention" demands the expatriation of nearly

one-sixth portion of the Union. You have, after mature thought, settled the physical possibility of so large an expatriation; and calmly calculated the hundreds of millions of dollars which its accomplishment will add to our national liabilities—large now, and growing larger daily under the exigencies of our civil war. Have you also considered that the meager handful of negroes under Federal rule constitutes, so to speak, only the periosteum, while “the bone” itself projects over into territory arrayed against your authority, and may yet be employed by unhallowed Rebellion, grown desperate in its extremity, as a vast and terrible weapon for the attainment of its ends? Whether this be a probability, or not, it is clear that the difficulties in the way of your suggested enterprise are such as entitle it to be termed Herculean. Herculean? I fear, sir, that we must glance at another of the pages of mythology to find an epithet with which to characterize it. Africa, in the days of your administration, as in those of the line of Belus, may be called upon to witness the retribution dealt out to wrong by the Eternal Powers. The States of this Union, having assassinated in the person of the negro all the principles of right to which they were wedded, may, like the Danaides, be condemned to expiate their crime; and this scheme of expatriation may prove, for them, the vain essay to fill a perforated “cistern which will hold no water.”

President of the United States, let me say in conclusion that the negro may be “the bone of contention” in our present civil war. He may have been the occasion of it; but he has not been the cause. That cause must be sought in the wrongs inflicted upon him by the white man. The white man’s oppression of the negro, and not the negro himself, has brought upon the nation the leprosy under which it groans. The negro may be the scab indicative of the disease, but his removal, even if possible, will not effect a cure. Not until this nation, with hands upon its lips, and with lips in the dust, shall cry repentantly, “Unclean! unclean!” will the beneficent Father of all men, of whatever color, permits its healing and purification.

I have the honor, sir, to be, with all the consideration due to your high office, Most Respectfully, Your Obedient Servant,

George B. Vashon

