

volunteered." In February 1863 a private of the 66th Indiana wrote from Mississippi that his comrades "will not fite to free the niger . . . there is a Regiment her that say they will never fite untill the proclamation is with drawn there is four of the Capt[ains] in our Regt sent in there Resignations and one of the Liutenants there was nine in Comp. G tride to desert."⁹⁴

Most white soldiers came to abolitionism grudgingly. Some refused to call themselves abolitionists at all. "I am no abolitionist," insisted a 55th Ohio enlistee, "in fact despise the word." But he came to feel that "as long as slavery exists . . . there will be no permanent peace for America. . . . Hence I am in favor of killing slavery." An Indiana sergeant wrote to his wife that although he could not care less for blacks, he would support the Emancipation Proclamation "if it will only bring the war to an end any sooner . . . anything to beat the South."⁹⁵

Jacob Allen, a young abolitionist in the Union army, knew how his comrades felt about blacks and worried that their new antislavery feelings might not last. "Though these men wish to abolish slavery," he wrote to noted abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, "it is not from any motive outside of their own selfishness; and is there not a possibility that at some not very distant day, these old rank prejudices, that are now lulled to sleep by selfish motives, may again possess these men and work evil?"⁹⁶ Frederick Douglass was worried too. What the government could do, it could undo. Might emancipation be in danger if the political winds turned against it? Barely a month after the Proclamation took effect, Douglass voiced his concern before an assembly in New York.

Much as I value the present apparent hostility to Slavery at the North, I plainly see that it is less the outgrowth of high and intelligent moral conviction against Slavery, as such, than because of the trouble its friends have brought upon the country. I would have Slavery hated for that and more. A man that hates Slavery for what it does to the white man, stands ready to embrace it the moment its injuries are confined to the black man, and he ceases to feel those injuries in his own person.⁹⁷

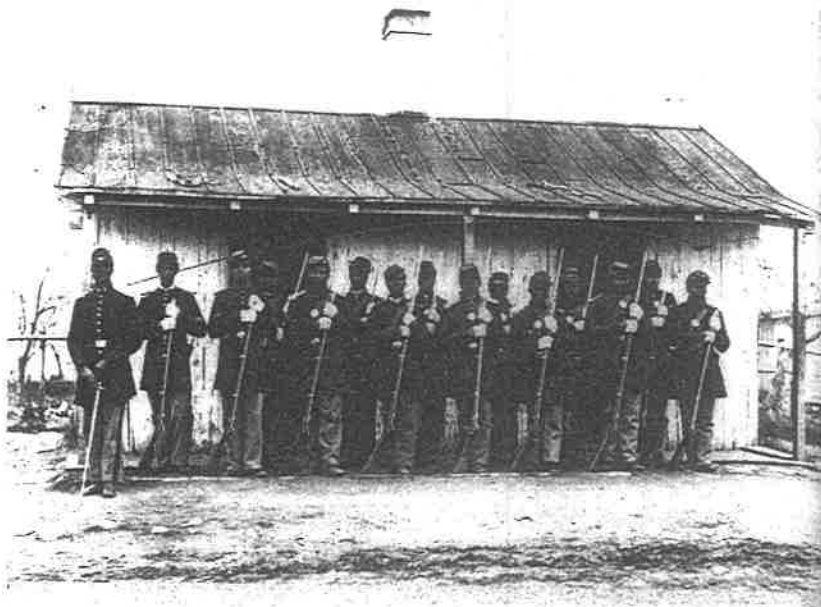
For the moment, though, the greater threat was the Confederate government. On January 5, 1863, four days after Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, Jefferson Davis issued an enslavement proclamation under the heading "An Address to the People of the

Free States." White northerners, he charged, had "degraded" themselves by allying with blacks. His government, on the other hand, would maintain white dignity by robbing all blacks of their freedom. As of February 22, 1863, Davis declared, "all free Negroes in the Southern Confederacy shall be placed on the slave status, and deemed to be chattels, they and their issue forever." Any black Union soldiers captured in combat would be subject to enslavement and their white officers subject to execution as leaders of servile insurrection.⁹⁸

That was, of course, assuming that black regiments would ever see combat. So strong was prejudice against their abilities among most Union generals that it seemed as if black soldiers might never be used for any but menial tasks. "I won't trust niggers to fight," insisted General William T. Sherman. "Can they improvise bridges, sorties, flank movements, etc., like the white man?" he asked. "I say no." Blacks should, he said, "be used for some side purposes and not be brigaded with our white men." Many other officers felt the same way. They used black soldiers as a labor force for building fortifications, hauling carts, or digging latrines—anything that might rob them of an opportunity to earn the respect that came with service in combat. In some regiments, the colonel was "Ole Massa." Squads were work "gangs" and their officers "nigger drivers." The soldiers may as well have been slaves.⁹⁹

"Heroic Descendants of Africa"

Still, some commanders of black regiments were committed to earning respect for their men and pushed hard for combat assignments. They made the most of their opportunities when they came. On May 27, 1863, the Louisiana Native Guard, composed for the most part of recently freed blacks, participated in an assault against Confederate fortifications on the Mississippi River at Port Hudson, twenty-five miles north of Baton Rouge. In an after-action report, one of the guard's white lieutenants admitted that he had entertained some fears as to his men's "pluck." "But I have now none," he added. "Valiantly did the heroic descendants of Africa move forward cool as if Marshaled for dress parade, under a most murderous fire from the enemies guns . . . these men did not swerve, or show cowardice. I have been in several engagements, and I never before beheld such coolness



The 107th U.S. Colored Troops at Fort Corcoran in Arlington, Virginia. Though at first opposed to enlisting blacks, Lincoln finally came to realize that he could not do without them. With white enlistments insufficient to win the war, Lincoln had to support emancipation and call on blacks to help achieve it. "Any different policy in regard to the colored man," Lincoln wrote, "deprives us of his help. . . . Keep it and you can save the Union. Throw it away, and the Union goes with it." (Library of Congress)

and daring. Their gallantry entitles them to a special praise. And I already observe, the sneers of others are being tempered into eulogy."¹⁰⁰

A few days later on June 7, two regiments of newly freed blacks fended off attacking Rebels at Milliken's Bend, a Federal stronghold on the Mississippi River just north of Vicksburg. "I never more wish to hear the expression, 'the niggers won't fight,'" wrote Union captain M. M. Miller after the battle. One official reported to the War Department that "the sentiment in regard to the employment of negro troops has been revolutionized by the bravery of the blacks in the recent Battle of Milliken's Bend. Prominent officers, who used in private sneer at the idea, are now heartily in favor of it."¹⁰¹

The notion that blacks lacked the discipline for soldiering was dealt a further blow on July 16 when the 54th Massachusetts fought off a Rebel charge on James Island just south of Charleston, South Carolina. The regiment suffered nine killed, thirteen wounded, and seventeen

missing in action—but it held fast. "It is not for us to blow our own horn," Corporal James Henry Gooding wrote back home to Boston, "but when a regiment of white men gave us three cheers as we were passing them, it shows that we did our duty as men should." An even tougher test came two days later when the 54th spearheaded an assault on Fort Wagner, which guarded the southern approach to Charleston harbor. Gooding later recalled that when the charge sounded,

we went at it, over the ditch and onto the parapet through a deadly fire; but we could not get into the fort. We met the foe on the parapet of Wagner with the bayonet—we were exposed to a murderous fire from the batteries of the fort, from our Monitors and our land batteries, as they did not cease firing soon enough. . . . The color bearer of the State colors was killed on the parapet. Col. [Robert Gould] Shaw seized the staff when the standard bearer fell, and in less than a minute after, the Colonel fell himself. When the men saw their gallant leader fall, they made a desperate effort to get him out, but they were either shot down, or reeled in the ditch below.

Though the effort to take Wagner failed, it was not from a lack of trying. Six hundred men of the 54th went in on the assault. Forty percent of them were captured, killed, or wounded. One of the most severely injured was Sergeant William Carney, who had retrieved a U.S. flag and carried it back with him despite wounds to his head, chest, right leg, and arm. He became the first of twenty-three black soldiers awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor during the war.¹⁰²

Blacks sometimes received grudging admiration even from Confederates. After the engagement at Milliken's Bend, one Rebel soldier wrote that his black foes fought "with considerable obstinacy, while the white or true Yankee portion ran like whipped curs." Such observations provide evidence that the respect soldiers often displayed across the lines could be displayed toward black soldiers as well. One Yankee wrote of his surprise when Confederates agreed to a picket-line truce with black soldiers facing them. "The rebels and our colored soldiers now converse together on apparently very friendly terms, and exchange such luxuries as apples, tobacco, and hard tack, by throwing them to each other. It was hardly deemed possible that the enemy could be induced to refrain from firing on black troops wherever they could be seen."¹⁰³

But Rebel commanders usually wanted their men to kill as many black troops as possible, at times including those who could have been taken prisoner. Despite the government's official policy that captured blacks were to be enslaved, the unofficial policy of many Confederate officers was that blacks in uniform should be shot on sight—even those trying to surrender. Some rank-and-file Rebels balked at such barbarism. At Milliken's Bend, they took dozens of blacks prisoner rather than murder them in cold blood. One officer recalled hearing his men shout during the battle that surrendering blacks should be spared. When General Edmund Kirby Smith heard that so many blacks had been captured alive, he told one of his commanders: "I hope this may not be so, and that your subordinates who may have been in command of capturing parties may have recognized the propriety of giving no quarter to armed negroes and their officers." Rebel deserters later testified that three days after the battle, they saw black prisoners of war executed.¹⁰⁴

Such atrocities took place in numerous engagements. In Arkansas at the Battle of Poison Springs, eyewitnesses reported black prisoners of war being "murdered on the spot." The same occurred at the Battle of Saltville in Virginia. When Fort Williams fell to the Rebels in North Carolina, a Union lieutenant recalled that "the negro soldiers who had surrendered were drawn up in line at the breastworks and shot down as they stood." During the Battle of the Crater outside Petersburg, Virginia, attacking Confederates ran their bayonets through wounded black soldiers. After his men slaughtered their surrendered black prisoners at Tennessee's Fort Pillow, an enthused Nathan Bedford Forrest called it a clear demonstration that "negro soldiers cannot cope with Southerners."¹⁰⁵

After the Battle of Olustee west of Jacksonville, Florida, victorious Confederates roamed among the wounded Federals shooting every black soldier they could find. When William Penniman of the 4th Georgia Cavalry rode up to ask what the men were doing, an officer replied, "Shooting niggers, Sir." Penniman protested that it was shameful to murder wounded prisoners, but the killings continued. One Georgia soldier later recalled: "How our boys did walk into the niggers, they would beg and pray but it did no good." The next day, Penniman rode over the battlefield. "The results," he said, "of the previous night became all to[o] apparent. Negroes, and plenty of them,

whom I had seen lying all over the field wounded, and as far as I could see, many of them moving around from place to place, now . . . all were dead. If a negro had a shot in the shin another was sure to be in the head."¹⁰⁶

Ultimately, the take-no-prisoners policy worked more against Confederates than for them. When word of the murders spread, black soldiers began to fight with a fiery rage that astonished friend and foe alike. The Rebels, recalled one Union officer, "fear them more than they would fear Indians." A white cavalryman from Maine wrote home after one engagement that he saw black troops shooting Confederates who were trying to surrender. "The officers had hard work to stop them from killing all the prisoners," he recalled. "When one of them would beg for his life the niggers would say remember Port Hudson." After a company of black cavalrymen surrounded a band of Confederate guerrillas, someone shouted "Remember Fort Pillow." The blacks captured seventeen prisoners, then shot them dead. A white officer in one black regiment wrote home to his wife that some of his men had killed five captured Confederates. "Had it not been for Ft Pillow," he lamented, "those 5 men might be alive now. . . . It looks hard but we cannot blame these men much."¹⁰⁷

Indeed, few of their comrades faulted black soldiers for giving no quarter to men that they believed would give them none. The general rule was kill or be killed. Even for those blacks who survived initial captivity, life as a prisoner of war was always brutal and often brief. Private Joseph Howard of the 110th Colored Infantry wrote of his experience: "We were kept at hard labor and inhumanely treated. . . . If we lagged or faltered or misunderstood an order we were whipped and abused. . . . For the slightest causes we were subjected to the lash [and] we were very poorly provided for with food." Medical care for black prisoners was even more poorly provided. Often they could not get any at all. An inmate at Andersonville witnessed the treatment of one black captive who fell into Rebel hands after the Battle of Olustee: "One fellow had a hand shot off and some deranged brutes had cut off his ears and nose. The doctors refused to dress his wounds or even amputate his shattered arm; he was naked in the prison and finally died from his numerous wounds." Blacks held in Confederate prison camps died at a rate of 35 percent, more than twice the average for white captives.¹⁰⁸