

Module 03: A Revolution for Whom?

Evidence 3: Alexander Hamilton Supports the Use of Black Soldiers

A

Introduction

British officials were not alone in considering the recruitment of African American soldiers. Rhode Island raised a battalion of black soldiers in 1778, and Henry Laurens, a young South Carolinian, was also interested in the idea. Laurens, anticipating that other South Carolinians might object, asked Alexander Hamilton, then a member of General George Washington's staff, to write to John Jay, a member of the Continental Congress, in an effort to garner congressional support for the plan. South Carolina was unimpressed and refused to accept black recruits.

Questions to Consider

- Why did Hamilton support the idea of recruiting slaves for the American army?
- What opposition did he anticipate the proposal would generate? How did Hamilton answer that opposition?
- What does Hamilton's letter suggest about American racial attitudes?

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[Alexander Hamilton to John Jay, March 14, 1779:]

Col Laurens, who will have the honor of delivering you this letter, is on his way to South Carolina, on a project, which I think, in the present situation of affairs there, is a very good one and deserves every kind of support and encouragement. This is to raise two three or four batalions of negroes; with the assistance of the government of that state, by contributions from the owners in proportion to the number they possess. If you should think proper to enter upon the subject with him, he will give you a detail of his plan. He wishes to have it recommended by Congress to the state; and, as an inducement, that they would engage to take those batalions into Continental pay.

It appears to me, that an expedient of this kind, in the present state of

Southern affairs, is the most rational, that can be adopted, and promises very important advantages. Indeed, I hardly see how a sufficient force can be collected in that quarter without it; and the enemy's operations there are growing infinitely serious and formidable. I have not the least doubt, that the negroes will make very excellent soldiers, with proper management; and I will venture to pronounce, that they cannot be put in better hands than those of Mr. Laurens. He has all the zeal, intelligence, enterprise, and every other qualification requisite to succeed in such an undertaking. It is a maxim with some great military judges, that with sensible officers soldiers can hardly be too stupid; and on this principle it is thought that the Russians would make the best troops in the world, if they were under other officers than their own. The King of Prussia is among the number who maintain this doctrine and has a very emphatical saying on the occasion, which I do not exactly recollect. I mention this, because I frequently hear it objected to the scheme of embodying negroes that they are too stupid to make soldiers. This is so far from appearing to me a valid objection that I think their want of cultivation (for their natural faculties are probably as good as ours) joined to that habit of subordination which they acquire from a life of servitude, will make them sooner become soldiers than our White inhabitants. Let officers be men of sense and sentiment, and the nearer the soldiers approach to machines perhaps the better.

I foresee that this project will have to combat much opposition from prejudice and self-interest. The contempt we have been taught to entertain for the blacks, makes us fancy many things that are founded neither in reason nor experience; and an unwillingness to part with property of so valuable a kind will furnish a thousand arguments to show the impracticability or pernicious tendency of a scheme which requires such a sacrifice. But it should be considered, that if we do not make use of them in this way, the enemy probably will; and that the best way to counteract the temptations they will hold out will be to offer them ourselves. An essential part of the plan is to give them their freedom with their muskets. This will secure their fidelity, animate their courage, and I believe will have a good influence upon those who remain, by opening a door to their emancipation. This circumstance, I confess, has no small weight in inducing me to wish the success of the project; for the dictates of humanity and true policy equally interest me in favour of this unfortunate class of men.

Source:

Harold C. Syrett, et al., eds., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 26 vols. (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1961-79), 2:17-18. Downloaded from *The Founders' Constitution*, vol. 1, ch. 15, doc. 24. <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch15s24.html>.