

Address on Colonization to a Deputation of Negroes [\[1\]](#)

August 14, 1862

This afternoon the President of the United States gave audience to a Committee of colored men at the White House. They were introducedPage 371 by the Rev. J. Mitchell, Commissioner of Emigration. E. M. Thomas, the Chairman, remarked that they were there by invitation to hear what the Executive had to say to them. Having all been seated, the President, after a few preliminary observations, informed them that a sum of money had been appropriated by Congress, and placed at his disposition for the purpose of aiding the colonization in some country of the people, or a portion of them, of African descent, thereby making it his duty, as it had for a long time been his inclination, to favor that cause; and why, he asked, should the people of your race be colonized, and where? Why should they leave this country? This is, perhaps, the first question for proper consideration. You and we are different races. We have between us a broader difference than exists between almost any other two races. Whether it is right or wrong I need not discuss, but this physical difference is a great disadvantage to us both, as I think your race suffer very greatly, many of them by living among us, while ours suffer from your presence. In a word we suffer on each side. If this is admitted, it affords a reason at least why we should be separated. You here are freemen I suppose.

A VOICE: Yes, sir.

The President---Perhaps you have long been free, or all your lives. Your race are suffering, in my judgment, the greatest wrongPage 372 inflicted on any people. But even when you cease to be slaves, you are yet far removed from being placed on an equality with the white race. You are cut off from many of the advantages which the other race enjoy. The aspiration of men is to enjoy equality with the best when free, but on this broad continent, not a single man of your race is made the equal of a single man of ours. Go where you are treated the best, and the ban is still upon you.

I do not propose to discuss this, but to present it as a fact with which we have to deal. I cannot alter it if I would. It is a fact, about which we all think and feel alike, I and you. We look to our condition, owing to the existence of the two races on this continent. I need not recount to you the effects upon white men, growing out of the institution of Slavery. I believe in its general evil effects on the white race. See our present condition---the country engaged in war!---our white men cutting one another's throats, none knowing how far it will extend; and then consider what we know to be the truth. But for your race among us there could not be war, although many men engaged on either side do not care for you one way or the other. Nevertheless, I repeat, without the institution of Slavery and the colored race as a basis, the war could not have an existence.

It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated. I know that there are free men among you, who even if they could better their condition are not as much inclined to go out of the country as those, who being slaves could obtain their freedom on this condition. I suppose one of the principal difficulties in the way of colonization is that the free colored man cannot see that his comfort would be advanced by it. You may believe you can live in Washington or elsewhere in the United States the remainder of your life [as easily], perhaps more so than you can in any

foreign country, and hence you may come to the conclusion that you have nothing to do with the idea of going to a foreign country. This is (I speak in no unkind sense) an extremely selfish view of the case.

But you ought to do something to help those who are not so fortunate as yourselves. There is an unwillingness on the part of our people, harsh as it may be, for you free colored people to remain with us. Now, if you could give a start to white people, you would open a wide door for many to be made free. If we deal with those who are not free at the beginning, and whose intellects are clouded by Slavery, we have very poor materials to start with. If intelligent colored men, such as are before me, would move in this matter, much might be accomplished. It is exceedingly important thatPage 373 we have men at the beginning capable of thinking as white men, and not those who have been systematically oppressed.

There is much to encourage you. For the sake of your race you should sacrifice something of your present comfort for the purpose of being as grand in that respect as the white people. It is a cheering thought throughout life that something can be done to ameliorate the condition of those who have been subject to the hard usage of the world. 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. In the American Revolutionary war sacrifices were made by men engaged in it; but they were cheered by the future. Gen. Washington himself endured greater physical hardships than if he had remained a British subject. Yet he was a happy man, because he was engaged in benefiting his race---something for the children of his neighbors, having none of his own.

The colony of Liberia has been in existence a long time. In a certain sense it is a success. The old President of Liberia, Roberts, has just been with me---the first time I ever saw him. He says they have within the bounds of that colony between 300,000 and 400,000 people, or more than in some of our old States, such as Rhode Island or Delaware, or in some of our newer States, and less than in some of our larger ones. They are not all American colonists, or their descendants. Something less than 12,000 have been sent thither from this country. Many of the original settlers have died, yet, like people elsewhere, their offspring outnumber those deceased.

The question is if the colored people are persuaded to go anywhere, why not there? One reason for an unwillingness to do so is that some of you would rather remain within reach of the country of your nativity. I do not know how much attachment you may have toward our race. It does not strike me that you have the greatest reason to love them. But still you are attached to them at all events.

The place I am thinking about having for a colony is in Central America. It is nearer to us than Liberia---not much more than one-fourth as far as Liberia, and within seven days' run by steamers. Unlike Liberia it is on a great line of travel---it is a highway. The country is a very excellent one for any people, and with great natural resources and advantages, and especially because of the similarity of climate with your native land---thus being suited to your physical condition.

The particular place I have in view is to be a great highway from the Atlantic or Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean, and thisPage 374 particular place has all the advantages for a colony. On

both sides there are harbors among the finest in the world. Again, there is evidence of very rich coal mines. A certain amount of coal is valuable in any country, and there may be more than enough for the wants of the country. Why I attach so much importance to coal is, it will afford an opportunity to the inhabitants for immediate employment till they get ready to settle permanently in their homes.

If you take colonists where there is no good landing, there is a bad show; and so where there is nothing to cultivate, and of which to make a farm. But if something is started so that you can get your daily bread as soon as you reach there, it is a great advantage. Coal land is the best thing I know of with which to commence an enterprise.

To return, you have been talked to upon this subject, and told that a speculation is intended by gentlemen, who have an interest in the country, including the coal mines. We have been mistaken all our lives if we do not know whites as well as blacks look to their self-interest. Unless among those deficient of intellect everybody you trade with makes something. You meet with these things here as elsewhere.

If such persons have what will be an advantage to them, the question is whether it cannot be made of advantage to you. You are intelligent, and know that success does not as much depend on external help as on self-reliance. Much, therefore, depends upon yourselves. As to the coal mines, I think I see the means available for your self-reliance.

I shall, if I get a sufficient number of you engaged, have provisions made that you shall not be wronged. If you will engage in the enterprise I will spend some of the money intrusted to me. I am not sure you will succeed. The Government may lose the money, but we cannot succeed unless we try; but we think, with care, we can succeed.

The political affairs in Central America are not in quite as satisfactory condition as I wish. There are contending factions in that quarter; but it is true all the factions are agreed alike on the subject of colonization, and want it, and are more generous than we are here. To your colored race they have no objection. Besides, I would endeavor to have you made equals, and have the best assurance that you should be the equals of the best.

The practical thing I want to ascertain is whether I can get a number of able-bodied men, with their wives and children, who are willing to go, when I present evidence of encouragement andPage 375 protection. Could I get a hundred tolerably intelligent men, with their wives and children, to "cut their own fodder," so to speak? Can I have fifty? If I could find twenty-five able-bodied men, with a mixture of women and children, good things in the family relation, I think I could make a successful commencement.

I want you to let me know whether this can be done or not. This is the practical part of my wish to see you. These are subjects of very great importance, worthy of a month's study, [instead] of a speech delivered in an hour. I ask you then to consider seriously not pertaining to yourselves merely, nor for your race, and ours, for the present time, but as one of the things, if successfully managed, for the good of mankind---not confined to the present generation, but as

``From age to age descends the lay,
To millions yet to be,
Till far its echoes roll away,
Into eternity."

The above is merely given as the substance of the President's remarks.

The Chairman of the delegation briefly replied that ``they would hold a consultation and in a short time give an answer." The President said: ``Take your full time---no hurry at all."

The delegation then withdrew.

Annotation

[1] New York Tribune, August 15, 1862. An act ``releasing certain persons held to labor in the District of Columbia" and providing \$100,000 for colonization, became law on April 16, 1862, and an act approved on July 16, freed slaves in the hands of the army and granted \$500,000 for colonization. Since October, 1861, the Chiriqui Project for colonization had been under cabinet consideration (see Lincoln to Smith October 23 and 24, 1861, supra). The appointment of Reverend James Mitchell of Indiana as agent of emigration is not listed in the Official Register, but contemporary records indicate that he operated in the Department of Interior as early as May 28, 1862, when he sent Lincoln his long letter on colonization printed by the Government Printing Office. His activity in July and August brought the matter of colonization to a head with the arrangement for an interview between Lincoln and the committee of Negroes headed by Edward M. Thomas on [←](#) August 14. Thomas was president of the Anglo-African Institute for the Encouragement of Industry and Art. The committee's reception of Lincoln's views is indicated by a letter from Thomas written on August 16:

``We would respectfully suggest that it is necessary that we should confer with leading colored men in Phila New York and Boston upon the movement of emigration to the point recommended in your address.

``We were entirely hostile to the movement until all the advantages were so ably brought to our view by you and we believe that our friends and colaborers for our race in those cities will when the subject is explained by us to them join heartily in sustaining such a movement. . . ." (DLC-RTL).

Subsequent developments, however, indicated that Negroes in the District of Columbia received the colonization proposal with hostility. A Negro meeting held at Union Bethel Church was reported in the Baltimore Sun on August 23 as protesting against the plan: ``Such dissatisfaction had been manifested in regard to the course of the committee who lately waited on the president . . . that they did not attend. It was hinted that they had exceeded their instructions."

Plans were fully matured in August, however, to send Senator Samuel C. Pomeroy with ``500 able-bodied negroes as the first colony" to be settled on a site on the Isthmus of Chiriqui to be selected by Pomeroy (New York Tribune, September 15, 1862). A letter of authority from Lincoln to Pomeroy was prepared for Lincoln's signature, probably by the State Department, under date of September 10, 1862, but remains unsigned in duplicate copies in the Lincoln Papers. The project was abandoned when first Honduras and later Nicaragua and Costa Rica protested the scheme and hinted that force might be used to prevent the settlement.

<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln5/1:812?rgn=div1;singlegenre=All;sort=occur;subview=detail;type=simple;view=fulltext;q1=August+14>