

1779. Alexander Hamilton Proposes Recruiting Enslaved Africans as Soldiers

Sources: <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/WWhamiltonA.htm>

<http://www.vindicatingthefounders.com/library/index.asp?document=14>

http://c250.columbia.edu/c250_celebrates/remarkable_columbians/alexander_hamilton.html

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/ham/hamback1.html>

Alexander Hamilton was born on the island of Nevis in the British West Indies in 1757. As an adolescent and young man, he witnessed the brutal system of slavery on the sugar plantations and slave resistance. Hamilton moved to New York City in 1772 where he attended King's College (Columbia University). In 1776, Hamilton joined the Continental Army and became the aide-de-camp to George Washington. During the Revolutionary War, Hamilton argued that Africans had the same natural abilities as Europeans and that slaves should be recruited as soldiers and given "their freedom with their muskets." After the war, Hamilton studied law, served as a member of the Continental Congress and the New York State Assembly and co-authored *The Federalist Papers*. Although Hamilton served as an officer of the New York Manumission Society, he favored compromise with the South on issue of slavery to strengthen national union. George Washington appointed Hamilton as Secretary of the Treasury in the first federal government. In 1804, Hamilton fought a duel with Aaron Burr in Weehauken, New Jersey. Hamilton was shot and died the next day. He is buried at Trinity Church in Manhattan.

1779. Letter from Alexander Hamilton, aide-de-camp to General George Washington, to John Jay, President of the Continental Congress, March 14, 1779

Source: Kurland, P. and Ralph Lerner, R. ed., (1987) *The Founders' Constitution*, 1:527.

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. . . 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.