

On Voting Rights for African Americans

Extending suffrage to African American males was a controversial issue in the years immediately following the Civil War. As you read the passages below, try to identify the reasoning used to support each argument.

FOR VOTING RIGHTS FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS

Thaddeus Stevens, Radical Republican (Pennsylvania), speech in the House of Representatives, January 3, 1867

Have not loyal blacks quite as good a right to choose rulers and make laws as rebel whites? . . . [I]t is a necessity in order to protect the loyal white men in the seceded States. The white Union men are in a great minority in each of those States. With them the blacks would act in a body . . .

If impartial suffrage is excluded in the rebel States then every one of them is sure to send a solid rebel representative delegation to Congress, and cast a solid rebel electoral vote. They, with their kindred Copperheads of the North, would always elect the President and control Congress. . . . I am for negro suffrage in every rebel State. If it be just, it should not be denied; if it be necessary, it should be adopted; if it be a punishment to traitors, they deserve it.

But it will be said, as it has been said, "This is negro equality!" What is negro equality, about which so much is said by knaves, and some of which is believed by men who are not fools? It means, as understood by honest Republicans, just this much, and no more: every man, no matter what his race or color; every earthly being who has an immortal soul, has an equal right to justice, honesty, and fair play with every other man; and the law should secure him those rights. . . .

How do you answer the principle inscribed in our political scripture, "That to secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed?" Without such consent government is a tyranny, and you exercising it are tyrants.

FOR VOTING RIGHTS FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS

President Abraham Lincoln, letter to General James S. Wadsworth, January 3, 1864

You desire to know, in the event of our complete success in the field, the same being followed by a loyal and cheerful submission on the part of the South, if universal amnesty should not be accompanied with universal suffrage.

Now, since you know my private inclinations as to what terms should be granted to the South in the contingency mentioned, I will here add, that if our success should thus be realized, followed by such desired results, I cannot see, if universal amnesty is granted, how, under the circumstances, I can avoid exacting in return universal suffrage, or, at least, suffrage on the basis of intelligence and military service.

FOR VOTING RIGHTS FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS

President Lincoln, to the newly elected governor of occupied Louisiana, March 13, 1864

I congratulate you on having fixed your name in history as the first-free-state Governor of Louisiana. Now you are about to have a Convention which, among other things, will probably define the elective franchise. I barely suggest for your private consideration, whether some of the colored people may not be let in—as, for instance, the very intelligent, and especially those who have fought gallantly in our ranks. They would probably help, in some trying time to come, to keep the jewel of liberty within the family of freedom. But this is only a suggestion, not to the public, but to you alone.