

Finding a Place for Frémont: Lincoln, North Carolina, and Black Troops in 1863

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When Abraham Lincoln relieved Major General John C. Frémont—known widely among Americans as “The Pathfinder”—from command of the Western Department in October 1861, there seemed little chance the general would return to action. He had offended the president personally and, Lincoln believed, imperiled the war effort by issuing an emancipation proclamation freeing the slaves in Missouri. Lincoln quickly countermanded the order, but the episode planted doubt in the president’s mind concerning Frémont. At the same time, rumors about extensive corruption in Frémont’s Western Department caused grave concern in Washington. Needing verifiable information, Lincoln sent a trusted friend, Major General David Hunter, to Missouri to act as his eyes and ears—and to prepare the ground for a change in command. But Lincoln insisted the emancipation order alone would not lead to Frémont’s dismissal, and he sent multiple envoys to Missouri to gather first-hand information on the state of things.

The Pathfinder’s military incompetence and financial mismanagement led to his losing the patronage of the powerful Blair family, longtime friends who had worked assiduously to win him the command in the first place. After Frémont had Congressman (and Colonel) Francis P. (Frank) Blair, Jr., arrested (twice) for sending letters critical of Frémont to his brother, Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, who shared them with Lincoln, the president had to act. He trusted the Blairs, but had no reason to trust Frémont.

Frémont was removed and replaced by Hunter. But the Pathfinder would rise again. As circumstances changed and the war dragged on—defeats in the field and a clear rejection by the border states of Lincoln’s proposal for compensated emancipation—the president adjusted to the evolving landscape. Most pressing, perhaps, was the need for more men. Casualties continued to mount and recruiting became more difficult. There was talk in some corners of a draft. As

historian William A. Dobak wrote in his history of U.S. Colored Troops, "The North was running out of volunteers." Militarily Frémont was a liability. Politically, Lincoln needed Frémont in a vital role in the Union war effort to placate increasingly vocal abolitionist critics.¹

Though Jessie Benton Frémont wrote that Lincoln "often promised" that her husband "should have certain commands," there's no record of any such promise. The newspapers in 1862 and 1863 were filled with rumors of the famous Pathfinder being appointed Secretary of War or put in command of a force to attack Texas, but any "promise" was more implied than stated. The two most likely destinations for Frémont were as military governor of North Carolina or commander of all Black troops. Lincoln was pressured by vocal allies of Frémont on both those fronts during the first half of 1863.²

The general's wife, embittered as she was by what she saw as Lincoln's rude treatment of her during an audience in September 1861 when she defended her husband's Missouri emancipation order, was partly correct in her surmise that "Lincoln's disinclination to give General Frémont any active duty, was probably based on other reasons than military ones." That is not to say there were no military reasons to deny him command. Frémont entered the war to great acclaim, hailed as a new Andrew Jackson. But he had held and lost two commands by the summer of 1862. First was Missouri. Then, in Virginia, having failed to defeat Stonewall Jackson in the Shenandoah Valley, he asked to be relieved of command when Lincoln promoted Major General John Pope, junior to Frémont in the service, over him. Senior military commanders, particularly West Pointers like Major General Henry Halleck, who later served as general in chief of the Union armies,

1. William A. Dobak, *Freedom by the Sword: The U.S. Colored Troops 1862–1867*, Washington, D.C: Center for Military History (2011; St. John's Press, Alexandria, Va., 2016), 8. Frémont, the Pathfinder, became a household name for his explorations of the West, which he documented in his voluminous writings in the 1840s and 1850s. As the first Republican presidential nominee, he lost the election of 1856, but by a smaller margin than most political observers anticipated. On Frémont and his wife, see Allan Nevins, *Frémont: Pathmarker of the West*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1939); Pamela Herr, *Jessie Benton Fremont: American Woman of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1987); Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder: John Charles Frémont and the Course of American Empire* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2002); Sally Denton, *Passion and Principle, John and Jessie Fremont, The Couple Whose Power, Politics, and Love Shaped Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2007); Steve Inskip, *Imperfect Union: How Jessie and John Frémont Mapped the West, Invented Celebrity, and Helped Cause the Civil War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020).

2. Jessie Benton Frémont, "Manuscript Memoirs," Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 379–380 (hereafter cited as Frémont Papers); *Alexandria Gazette*, January 31 and February 18, 1863; *New York Tribune*, February 17 and March 27, 1863.

were bitterly opposed to Frémont. Jessie Frémont at last interpreted the failure of repeated pleas from supporters as meaning Frémont “was to be given no position during the war again, in which he could become prominent.” Hints of a coming command, from Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton as well as Lincoln, might have been sincere, but were also likely employed as a tactic to string Frémont along to keep him and his supporters quieter than they might otherwise have been.³

Through battlefield defeat and lobbying failure, Frémont’s popularity with the public remained intact. In many circles, he became the military embodiment of emancipation, and remained so even after the Emancipation Proclamation. Simply passing from the Green Room to the East Room during an early March 1863 visit to the White House to discuss the possibility of a new command (Frémont wanted to go to Texas), he was met with “the most tumultuous greeting” from “Generals, Senators, and official dignitaries gathered in a great crowd around him.” His “political friends lionized him,” and the “irrepressible noise and enthusiasm testified to the respect and affection with which the great heart of the people yet envelopes the Pathfinder.” On that occasion, Frémont slipped away from the mansion, but he would remain in contact with the administration about the possibility of future employment. Those talks would follow parallel tracks, as already mentioned—one leading to the command of all Black troops and the other to the position of military governor of North Carolina. Lincoln asked Stanton to intercede with Halleck on Frémont’s behalf. “I promised to try to have him told something definite by this evening,” Lincoln told Stanton after the March 7 meeting. “Please see Gen. Halleck today; and if you can get him half agreed, I agree.” General in Chief Halleck could not be brought to agree, and Lincoln was hesitant to move ahead without his approval.⁴

Lincoln had begun thinking about reconstruction almost as soon as the war began. His vision for reuniting the Union involved the appointment of military governors for seceded states or the parts of those states that came under the control of the Federal army. The governors would be tasked with establishing enough order to reconstitute loyal state governments elected by the minority of loyal citizens.

3. Jessie Benton Frémont, “Manuscript Memoirs,” Fremont Family Papers, 379–380; her account of the meeting with Lincoln is in “Great Events,” Fremont Family Papers, 269–272; Lincoln’s version is in John Hay’s diary entry of December 9, 1863, in Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettliger, *Inside Lincoln’s White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997, 123–124.

4. *New York Tribune*, March 4, 1863; *Daily National Republican*, March 3, 1863; Lincoln to Edwin Stanton, March 7, 1863, in Roy P. Basler, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 6:127 (hereafter cited as CW).

With the exception of East Tennessee, Lincoln's faith in the strength of Southern unionism was stronger nowhere than in North Carolina.

In February and March 1862, Major General Ambrose Burnside led an expedition against the North Carolina coast from Roanoke Island to the Virginia state line. Capture of coastal forts in spring 1862 brought part of eastern North Carolina under Union control, although not far inland and hardly beyond the range of river gunboats. Encouraged by his belief that Unionism remained strong in the state, and at the urging of Secretary of State William Seward and Maryland Senator Reverdy Johnson, Lincoln appointed former North Carolina congressman Edward Stanly as military governor in April. Stanly was a strong Unionist, and much of his old congressional district lay within the territory that Northern armies had already conquered.⁵

When Frémont took command in Missouri in the summer of 1861, he believed Lincoln had granted him "carte blanche" to achieve victory. Stanly's orders were similarly vague, and Stanton told him he would be a virtual "dictator" who could "do what I pleased," according to Stanly. Like Frémont in Missouri, Stanly would soon discover otherwise.⁶

When Stanly sailed for North Carolina in late May 1862, he took eighteen liberated Tar Heel prisoners of war with him as a gesture of good will. He arrived at his headquarters in New Bern on May 28. Within two weeks, the new governor was warning Stanton that any move toward emancipation would mean "no peace can be restored here for many years to come." At the same time, he was warning his fellow Carolinians that federal troops would eventually make slavery untenable unless they speedily returned to the Union. Already that spring, Lincoln had signed into law a measure emancipating the slaves of the District of Columbia, and had placed before Congress a proposal for compensated emancipation in the states. Congress was debating a stringent Confiscation Act that threatened to strike at the heart of slavery in the states. But North Carolinians ignored Stanly's warning, buttressed in their resistance by the defeat in July of Major General George McClellan's Peninsula Campaign in Virginia.⁷

5. Norman D. Brown, *Edward Stanly: Whiggery's Tarheel "Conqueror"* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1974), 202–203.

6. John C. Frémont, "In Command in Missouri," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vols., (1887; New York: Castle Books, 1956), 1:279; Brown, *Edward Stanly*, 204.

7. *New York Herald*, May 28, 1862; Stanly to Stanton, June 12, 1862, in U.S. Department of War, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols (Washington, D.C.: 1880–1901, Ser. 1, 9:400–401 (hereafter cited as OR); William C. Harris, *With Charity for All: Lincoln and the Restoration of the Union* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 63–65.

Stanly was accused of returning escaped slaves and closing a Black school, and inevitably clashed with abolitionist soldiers. Eventually, radicals in Congress got wind of Stanly's alleged activities. Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner introduced a resolution calling for his ouster, and an investigation was planned. Neither the resolution nor the investigation went anywhere. Stanly explained his side of the story, which cleared up some of the allegations. Things calmed down, but that did not alleviate Stanly's underlying challenge. The Federal army was in control of a tiny portion of North Carolina. Union sentiment was much weaker than either Stanly or the administration believed, even in that small area. And despite the overblown allegations against him, it was true that Stanly stood in opposition to Lincoln's evolving emancipation policy. Still, after a dose of flattery from Lincoln and Stanton, he agreed to stay on even after the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation was issued in September 1862.⁸

As with Frémont in Missouri, it was a clash with the Blairs that effectively sealed Stanly's fate. In December 1862, he challenged a ban on trade instituted by Navy Admiral Samuel Phillips Lee, husband of Elizabeth Blair Lee, and the administration sided with the Navy, which was trying to maintain a blockade. When Stanly threatened to resign, Washington ignored him. When Lincoln issued the final Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, Stanly was convinced any chance of conciliation with North Carolina or anyone else in the South was gone. He also believed his usefulness had come to an end. Two weeks later, he submitted his resignation.⁹

On January 25, 1863, Moncure Conway, a Virginia-born abolitionist minister and editor of an anti-slavery newspaper in Boston, was part of a delegation from Massachusetts (consisting of Wendell Phillips, Samuel Gridley Howe, Francis W. Bird, George L. Stearns, J. H. Stephenson, Elizur Wright, Oakes Ames, and escorted by Senator Henry Wilson) that met with Lincoln. As Conway recorded the meeting in his memoirs, Phillips was first to speak, expressing the group's happiness with the Emancipation Proclamation and asking how it was working. Lincoln replied that he did not expect instant results, but hoped "something would come of it after a while." When Phillips questioned whether emancipation was being carried out effectively by officers and agents in the field, and asserted that this was driving dissatisfaction in the North, Lincoln replied, "my own impression, Mr. Phillips, is that the masses of the country generally are only dissatisfied at our lack of military successes. Defeat and failure in the field make everything seem

8. Brown, *Edward Stanly*, 208–214.

9. Brown, *Edward Stanly*, 238–240, 249–250.

wrong." The conversation then shifted to the group's dissatisfaction with Edward Stanly. "Well gentlemen, whom would you put in Stanly's place?" the president asked. One of the men suggested nobody would be better than to have someone acting against the president's policies. Then another suggested Frémont, prompting Lincoln to avow "great respect for General Frémont and his abilities. But the fact is that the pioneer in any movement is not generally the best man to carry that movement to a successful issue. It was so in old times—wasn't it?" Lincoln said, smiling. "Moses began the emancipation of the Jews, but didn't take Israel to the Promised Land after all. He had to make way for Joshua to complete the work. It looks as if the first reformer of a thing has to meet such a hard opposition and gets so battered and bespattered, that afterwards, when people find they have to accept his reform, they will accept it more easily from another man."¹⁰

In reversing General David Hunter's emancipation proclamation of May 1862 covering South Carolina, Florida, and Georgia, Lincoln had written that compensated, gradual emancipation, as he had recently proposed to Congress, "acts not the pharisee," in contrast to the executive edicts promulgated by Frémont and Hunter, who would pharisaically remake Southern society in an instant. In May 1862, Frémont had been a pharisee. Now, in January 1863, he was Moses, which could be considered progress. Soon he would be Joshua.¹¹

It got into the papers that Lincoln was being "strongly urged" to appoint Frémont military governor of North Carolina. "It is thought by those who press the change upon the Government that the name of Frémont would summon in a week almost an army of colored Unionists," the unfriendly *New York Herald* reported. The friendly *New York Tribune* asked, "Who doubts that the presence of Frémont in North Carolina, or any other insurrectionary state, would be welcomed by the negroes as a guaranty of the Proclamation? . . . Frémont's name has been a watchword in every cabin since 1856, and will be heard at once as a war-cry by the slaves waiting to rally under the Union flag. We know of no reason why he should not be summoned to such a task." Lincoln, however, was fairly well convinced that he had jumped the gun in North Carolina and chose not to appoint anyone. His view of the other track—Frémont as commander of Black troops—seemed more promising.¹²

10. Moncure Daniel HHeConway, *Autobiography, Memories and Experiences*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1904), 1:377–380; Jessie Benton Frémont, "Manuscript Memoirs," Fremont Family Papers, 379.

11. "Proclamation Revoking General Hunter's Order of Military Emancipation of May 9, 1862," CW, 5:223

12. *New York Herald*, January 27, 1863; *New York Tribune*, February 12, 1863; Harris, *With Charity for All*, 71.

Earlier in the war, within ten days of the attack on Fort Sumter, John C. Frémont's name was being invoked in support of the formation of Black regiments. Jacob Dodson, a free Black man who had "been three times across the Rocky Mountains in the service of the country with Frémont," wrote to Secretary of War Simon Cameron "of some 300 reliable colored free citizens of this city [Washington, D.C.] who desire to enter the service for the defense of the city." Dodson's effort was in vain. Cameron, who by the end of 1861 would put himself at odds with Lincoln over the question of Black troops, told Dodson, "this department has no intention at present to call into the service of the Government any colored soldiers."¹³

Lincoln had objected when Cameron, in an apparent reversal of the secretary's policy, proposed including a call for Black troops in his 1861 annual report on the War Department. In the summer of 1862, he had been cool to Hunter's enlistment of Black soldiers in South Carolina. By autumn, he had begun to shift. As with emancipation, Lincoln wanted to reserve for himself the momentous decision of whether to arm Blacks, not leave it to generals such as Hunter or Frémont. In early 1863, concurrent with the effort to promote the general as military governor of North Carolina, a concerted effort was begun by his allies to persuade Lincoln to appoint the Pathfinder commander of all or of a large force of Black troops. "In the Gulf States, Frémont is the man," wrote one. Frémont endorsed the broad notion of a commander of all Black troops, but he did not believe he was the right man for the job. That did not stop his supporters from lobbying on his behalf, nor did it stop the rank-and-file from making their voices heard. A private in the famous 54th Massachusetts Regiment, invoked Frémont's name in a poem in praise of Black troops.

Frémont told them, when it first began,
How to save the Union, and the way it should be done;
But Kentucky swore so hard, and old Abe had his fears
Till every hope was lost but the colored volunteers.¹⁴

13. Jacob Dodson to Simon Cameron, April 23, 1861, *OR Ser. 3*, 1:107; Cameron to Dodson, April 29, 1861, *OR Ser. 3*, 1:133.

14. Paul Kahan, *Amiable Scoundrel: Simon Cameron, Lincoln's Scandalous Secretary of War* (Lincoln, Neb.: Potomac Books, 2016), 200–205; "Memorandum on Recruiting Negroes," July 1862, *CW*, 5:338; *New York Tribune*, March 26, 1863; John T. Hubbell, "Abraham Lincoln and the Recruitment of Black Soldiers," *Papers of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 2 (1980), 14; Michael A. Eggleston, *President Lincoln's Recruiter: General Lorenzo Thomas and the United States Colored Troops in the Civil War* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2013), 134.

Robert Gould Shaw, who would soon give his life as commander of the 54th, was a fervent supporter of Frémont and had even attempted to get attached to his staff earlier in the war. More-notable voices also weighed in. On February 22, 1863, in a speech at Cooper Union celebrating Washington's Birthday, Wendell Phillips praised the Emancipation Proclamation while insisting that more was necessary to give it force. "The negro wants a symbol of freedom," he declared. "How can we give it to him? The quickest way we can give it to him is to put his own color into the United States uniform, with a Minié rifle to their right hand. Send a flesh and blood proclamation in the person of John Charles Frémont to Charleston." That proposal met with "great applause." Phillips had nothing but respect for generals like Hunter and Major General Benjamin F. Butler, who had done their part for emancipation. He believed, too, in Major General Joseph Hooker. "But we are pressed for time. We cannot manufacture reputation. The name of Frémont has been a household word in the slave's hut ever since he believed, in 1856, that his election was to be the jubilee of his freedom. He has cherished it like the name of his Savior. He knows it; and if he heard he was there, he would not need the evidence of a written proclamation to believe that he bore freedom with his eagles." In another address a few weeks later, the spirit carried Phillips even further, when he likened Frémont to George Washington, "the bright consummate flower of our earlier civilization, and Frémont the ripe fruit of our noonday." This was too much for the Democratic *Washington Evening Star*, which observed, "Even Jessie must have laughed at that."¹⁵

Lincoln might have been expected to reject this effort. He had little reason to have any faith in Frémont. He had rejected Hunter's emancipation effort and his enlistment of Black troops, and he had more faith in Hunter than the Pathfinder. Hunter had been his choice to replace Frémont in 1861. But circumstances had changed, and Lincoln changed with them. When he had once rejected Frémont's argument of "military necessity" to justify emancipation, he reversed himself and justified his own Emancipation Proclamation by citing military necessity. Now he entertained the notion of giving Frémont yet another command.

In Washington, Frémont met with allies from the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War in March 1863 to discuss plans for his return,

15. Robert Gould Shaw to Susannah Shaw, September 17, 1861, in Russell Duncan, ed., *Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 142; *The Liberator*, January 30, 1863; *Washington Weekly National Intelligencer*, March 19, 1863; *Washington Evening Star*, March 28, 1863.

hoping for the long-discussed assignment to Texas. Committee member George Washington Julian visited Lincoln and urged the president to find a place for Frémont. Lincoln told Julian that Frémont's case "reminded him of the old man who advised his son to take a wife, to which the young man responded, 'Whose wife shall I take.'" Julian insisted that restoring Frémont to duty "would stir the country as no other appointment could." Lincoln replied that "it would stir the country on one side, and stir the other way on the other. It would please Frémont's friends, and displease the conservatives; and that is all I can see in the *stirring* argument. My proclamation was to stir the country; but it has done about as much harm as good." Lincoln told Illinois politician Isaac Arnold something similar. "In the early Spring, Gen. Frémont sought active service again; and, as it seemed to me, sought it in a very good, and reasonable spirit. But he holds the highest rank in the Army, except McClellan, so that I could not well offer him a subordinate command," he wrote in May. He would later observe to Major General Carl Schurz, who had served under Frémont, "with a Major General once out, it is next to impossible for even the President to get him in again."¹⁶

A Black regiment recruited in Poughkeepsie, New York, and dubbed the Frémont Legion, visited the Pathfinder and Lincoln together in the White House in mid-March, bringing with them prepared statements they presented to both men. "We have been called cowards," they told the president. "We deny the charge. It is false." They asked Lincoln to accept the Frémont Legion into service. To Frémont they wrote: "We . . . feel to give you an expression of our gratitude; not forgetting the love you bear for suffering humanity, your generosity and sympathy for God's poor, will ever remain a lasting proof of that innate goodness, for which you have long and justly been celebrated." And then the appeal: "As a patriot and general, you have our confidence. We have offered the services of ten thousand men to his Excellency, the President, called the Frémont Legion, believing that you are the Joshua to lead us to the field of battle. We pray that you will accept."¹⁷

The restoration of Frémont's military reputation, damaged by his failures in Missouri and Virginia, received a boost when the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War released its report on the Western Department, Bull Run, and Ball's Bluff on April 3. The Missouri section

16. George W. Julian, *Political Recollections: 1840–1872* (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg & Co., 1884), 229–230; Lincoln to Isaac Arnold, May 26, 1863, *CW*, 6:230; Lincoln to Carl Schurz, March 13, 1864, *CW*, 7:243

17. *Washington National Republican*, March 18, 1863.

was characterized even in the Democratic press as “generally exculpatory of the conduct of Gen. Frémont.” The general was emboldened enough to go public with a suggestion for using the thousands of freed slaves from the Mississippi Valley to help build and guard the line of the recently approved transcontinental railroad. This lent further credence to the rumors of Frémont leading Black troops.¹⁸

In the first week of May, the *New York Tribune* reported that a Black minister in New York had received assurances from Lincoln that “if 10,000 colored troops were raised they would be accepted, and that General Frémont would be assigned to the command,” and “that he had seen Gen. Frémont, and received from him a promise that he was willing to accept such a command.” Thaddeus Stevens expressed his “hope Frémont may accept it, and beat all the white troops in action, and thereby acquire glory.”¹⁹

On May 22, the War Department issued General Orders 143, creating a bureau to process recruits for the U.S. Colored Troops. The chief recruiter was Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas, who had played a central role in gathering evidence leading to Frémont’s removal from command in Missouri in 1861. But that did not quell the rumors of Frémont’s return. Days later, a committee of New Yorkers that included *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley, Peter Cooper, founder of the Cooper Institute, and two former members of Congress lobbied Lincoln to appoint Frémont to lead those recruits, and received assurances that Lincoln was amenable. When they returned to New York, they met with Frémont to inform him of the president’s support for giving him authority to “organize and lead to the field an army of black men.”²⁰

The committee told Lincoln that free Blacks in the North “are willing to volunteer for the Service upon the requisite assurance that they will be placed under leaders in Sympathy with the movement. Indeed, such is their intense enthusiasm and patriotism, that if the assurance can be given them, that upon their enlistment they will be in active Service under the command of Major General John C. Frémont, your memorialists are confident that a force of at least 10,000 could be placed under enlistment within Sixty days, forming a Grand Army of Liberation, Swelling in numbers as they pass along, thus

18. *Washington Evening Star*, April 10, 1863; *Washington National Republican*, April 10, 1863; *Alexandria Gazette*, April 27, 1863.

19. *Alexandria Gazette*, May 7, 1863; Thaddeus Stevens to unknown, June 9, 1863, quoted in T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and the Radicals* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 279.

20. *Washington National Republican*, June 2, 1863

giving effectiveness to the Proclamation of January, 1863." They asked Lincoln to appoint Frémont to a "suitable command" and empower him to accept the Black volunteers into service. Lincoln told the New Yorkers he "would gladly receive into the service not ten thousand but ten times ten thousand colored troops" and "would with all his heart offer it to Gen. Frémont."²¹

Democratic papers were dismissive of both the troops and the would-be commander. "It is proposed that Gen. Frémont take command of all the nigger regiments raised," the *Washington Evening Star* reported. "But if we enroll niggers at all, why not give the poor devils half a chance?"²²

In the face of such derision, Lincoln persevered despite his own concerns. "While it is very objectionable, as a general rule, to have troops raised on any special terms, such as to serve only under a particular commander, or only at a particular place or places, yet I would forego the objection in this case, upon a fair prospect that a large force of this sort could thereby be the more rapidly raised," he told Charles Sumner, who was acting as a go-between for the president and the general. Lincoln laid out the conditions that would make such a scheme work. "I would very cheerfully send them to the field under Gen. Frémont, assigning him a Department, made or to be made, with such white force also as I might be able to put in." That might have to wait, though, because there were no such troops available at the moment and no "justifiable ground to relieve the present commander of any old one." The president also noted that the same rules for recruitment would apply to any such force, requiring "the same consents of Governors . . . as in case of white troops." Frémont could take charge of organizing the force, or he could come in after it was assembled. Either way was fine with Lincoln.²³

While Lincoln persevered, Frémont flagged. Presented with a genuine opportunity to get back in the fight, and in a way that aligned perfectly with his political beliefs, Frémont balked. When Sumner showed Frémont Lincoln's letter, the general told the senator, "I beg you will say to the President that this movement does not, in the remotest way originate with me. On the contrary when the Committee called upon me I declined positively to enter into it, or to consent to having my name mentioned to the President in connection with it."

21. New York City Citizens Committee to Lincoln, May 28, 1863, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as Abraham Lincoln Papers, LC; "Remarks to New York Committee," May 30, 1863, CW, 6:239.

22. *Washington Evening Star*, June 6, 1863.

23. Lincoln to Charles Sumner, June 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln Papers, LC.

The committee had ignored that admonition, and now the ball was in Frémont's court. He argued that he "disapproved the project of raising and sending to the field, colored troops in scattered and weak detachments. That it would only result in disaster to the colored troops & would defeat effectually the expectations of the Govt. to mass them in a solid force against the rebellion."²⁴

What he told the New York committee was that if he had been given the Texas command as he had discussed with Lincoln and "in which I should have had a suitable field for this organization and white troops to protect it—and ensure its success—I could have undertaken it & have undoubtedly organized a formidable force imminently dangerous to the Confederacy." But that was merely a hypothetical to inform the committee of his thinking, he insisted. It was not a commitment to take any post. He asked Sumner to tell Lincoln, "I have no design to embarrass him with creating a Dept. for me."²⁵

Then he got to the heart of the matter. "This whole business is as dangerous and difficult as it is important. It demands ability and great discretion and a fixed belief in the necessity of the work and should only be undertaken upon some plan which would embrace the whole subject and then be entrusted only to some officer of ability and judgment to whom the President would be willing to give the necessary powers. He must have power and the President's confidence. Therefore I do not propose myself for this work."²⁶

Based on his experience in Missouri and Virginia, Frémont had reason to believe that he did not hold, or could not keep, Lincoln's confidence. After months of private lobbying and public pressure, the president had finally agreed to put Frémont back in the field, and the general had abjured. Lincoln and Frémont surely both feared the potential political implications of Frémont being named commanding general of Black troops. Lincoln seemed willing to put his fears and his past problems with Frémont behind him. He knew that success for the general could create a wave of political support for a potential rival. Failure would raise questions about why the president, having already been twice burned, went back to the fire a third time. In the end, Frémont was less willing than the president to forget past slights. Perhaps he also considered what a third failure in the field could do to his reputation, and his admonition to Sumner about the need for

24. Frémont to Charles Sumner, June 9, 1863, Abraham Lincoln Papers, LC.

25. Frémont to Charles Sumner, June 9, 1863, Abraham Lincoln Papers, LC.

26. Frémont to Charles Sumner, June 9, 1863, Abraham Lincoln Papers, LC.

white troops hinted at a lack of faith in the battle-worthiness of Black men.

There was another aspect that Frémont might not have wanted to make a public case about in the summer of 1863. On May 27, *Der Pionier*, a German-language paper based in Boston, had endorsed Frémont for president, arguing that he had “saved the honor of the Republic” with his emancipation proclamation. Other German papers across the country quickly followed suit. German-Americans in Washington, D.C., were organizing a national convention to meet in Cleveland in October. Their agenda included waging hard war against the South and endorsing a constitutional amendment abolishing slavery, equal political rights for freed Blacks, and confiscation of rebel property to be distributed to the freemen via a homestead policy.²⁷

Frémont knew of these efforts, though he had not yet taken any official steps to encourage them. But if he was already thinking about challenging Lincoln for the 1864 Republican presidential nomination, or pondering a third-party candidacy if that failed, he would not have wanted to be tied down in the field. He also knew there was considerable opposition to the raising of Black troops, and fear among northern whites about what such service might mean for legal equality when the war was over.

Elizabeth Blair Lee spoke for many when she commented on the subject in a letter to her Navy officer husband. “Think how it must hurt Jessie—for no Southern woman could fail to feel some bitterness,” she wrote in what might have been a keen observation about conservative Republican politics of the kind endorsed by her father and brothers, but which revealed that she didn’t really know her lifelong friend at all. Her references to “the abolition horde in the North” and “John Brownites” were telling phrases, and her disdain for “Frémont proclivities” showed the wildly different world views of the Blairs and the Frémonts, who surely considered themselves to be part of the abolition horde. But the Blair philosophy remained a viable path to political success.²⁸

Frémont’s concerns about Lincoln’s faith in him or about how Black troops would be deployed were genuine. He also might have already chosen a political rather than a military path. Jessie wrote to one of his former staff aides in July in regard to the “irresponsible” Lincoln

27. Carl Wittke, *Against the Current: The Life of Karl Heinzen (1809–80)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), 189–191.

28. Elizabeth Blair Lee to Stephen Phillips Lee, March 20, 1863, in Lee, *Letters*, 254; Elizabeth Blair Lee to Stephen Phillips Lee, October 16, 1861, 86 (“abolition horde”); December 17, 1861, 93 (“John Brownites”); May 26, 1862, 152 (“Frémont proclivities”).

administration: “thank Heaven & the Constitution that limits them to four years, & more than two are over now.” Perhaps Frémont saw an intimate association with Black troops as a political dead end, knowing, as Lincoln had told Julian in March, that it would divide Northern opinion into those for it and those against it. It would be nearly two years before Lincoln, in a February 1865 meeting with Martin Delany, fully endorsed the idea of “an army of blacks, commanded entirely by black officers, except such whites as may volunteer to serve.” Whatever the reasons, the famous Pathfinder, who had entered military service in 1861 with such great promise and hope attached to his name, passed up what might have been his best opportunity to make a difference on the battlefield in the Civil War.²⁹

29. Jessie Benton Frémont to John T. Fiala, July 10, 1863, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, eds., *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 354; Frank A. Rollin, *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1883), 168.