93. Letter by the Mother of a Black Soldier (1863)

Source: Ira Berlin et al., eds.*, Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867, *ser. 2 (New York, 1982), pp. 582–83.

Within the Union army, black soldiers were anything but equal to white. Serving in segregated units and ineligible, until the end of the war, to rise to the rank of commissioned officers, they were initially paid less than white soldiers. Even more alarming, the Confederacy announced that it would treat captured black soldiers not as prisoners of war but as fugitives who would be remanded to slavery.

One of the more remarkable letters of the Civil War era was written to President Lincoln by Hannah Johnson, the mother of a black soldier. Although, as she notes, she had enjoyed but a "poor education," Mrs. Johnson eloquently advised the president to insist that black prisoners be treated the same as white and resist pressures to rescind the Emancipation Proclamation. The fact that she felt she had a sympathetic recipient in the White House illustrates the enormous changes American society was undergoing as a result of the Civil War. Mrs. Johnson did not know that the day before she wrote the letter, Lincoln had ordered that, for every captured black soldier enslaved, a Confederate prisoner would be put to hard labor for the duration of the war.

Buffalo [New York] July 31 1863

Excellent Sir

My good friend says I must write to you and she will send it[.] My son went in the 54th regiment. I am a colored woman and my son was strong and able to fight for his country and the colored people have as much to fight for as any. My father was a Slave and escaped from Louisiana before I was born morn forty years agone[.] I have but poor edication but I never went to schol, but I know just as well as any what is right between man and man. Now I know it is right that a colored man should go and fight for his country, and so ought to a white man. I know that a colored man ought to run no greater risques than a white, his pay is no greater his obligation to fight is the same. So why should not our enemies be compelled to treat him the same, Made to do it.

My son fought at Fort Wagoner but thank God he was not taken prisoner, as many were[.] I thought of this thing before I let my boy go but then they said Mr. Lincoln will never let them sell our colored soldiers for slaves, if they do he will get them back quck[.] he will rettallyate and stop it. Now Mr. Lincoln dont you think you oght to stop this thing and make them do the same by the colored men they have lived in idleness all their lives on stolen labor and made savages of the colored people, but they now are so furious because they are proving themselves to be men, such as have come away and got some edication. It must not be so. You must put the rebels to work in State prisons to making shoes and things, if they sell our colored soldiers, till they let them all go. And give their wounded the same treatment. it would seem cruel, but their [is] no other way, and a just man must do hard things sometimes, that shew him to be a great man. They tell me some do you will take back the Proclamation, don't do it. When you are dead and in Heaven, in a thousand years that action of yours will make the Angels sing your praises I know it. Ought one man to own another, law for or not, who made the law, surely the poor slave did not. so it is wicked, and a horrible Outrage, there is no sense in it, because a man has lived by robbing all his life and his father before him, should he complain because the stolen things found on him are taken. Robbing the colored people of their labor is but a small part of the robbery[.] their souls are almost taken, they are made bruits of often. You know all about this[.]

Will you see that the colored men fighting now, are fairly treated. You ought to do this, and do it at once, Not let the thing run along meet it quickly and manfully, and stop this, mean cowardly cruelty. We poor oppressed ones, appeal to you, and ask fair play.

Yours for Christs sake
Hannah Johnson

Questions

1. What is Mrs. Johnson's opinion of slavery and slaveholders?

2. How would you describe the tone Mrs. Johnson adopts in writing to the president?