

## Abraham Lincoln papers

From Frederick Douglass to Abraham Lincoln<sup>1</sup>, August 29, 1864

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<sup>1</sup> The following letter was written after the second meeting between Douglass and Lincoln. During their interview, Lincoln had asked Douglass to help him devise a plan for aiding the escape of slaves from the Confederacy. Lincoln's request reveals the grave doubts he had in August regarding his prospects for reelection and the future of the Emancipation Proclamation. The Democrats adopted a platform at their national convention that called for a cessation of hostilities and denounced Lincoln for usurping the Constitution. A negotiated peace brokered by a Democratic president would in all likelihood include a provision to allow the rebellious states to maintain the institution of slavery. Lincoln's plan aimed to aid the escape of as many slaves as possible before such a negotiated settlement could be put in place. Lincoln's prospects began to improve in September for a variety of reasons, such as the capture of Atlanta and General John C. Fremont's withdrawal from the presidential campaign. As Lincoln's reelection seemed more certain, the plan he had discussed with Douglass seemed less important and was never implemented. Though the plan was never put into action, David Blight notes that, "it would have forged an unprecedented alliance between black leadership and federal power for the purpose of emancipation." See David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 183-184. For evidence of pessimism regarding Lincoln's chances for reelection, see Henry J. Raymond to Lincoln, August 22, 1864; Lincoln, Memorandum Concerning Probable Failure of Reelection, August 23, 1864; and Thurlow Weed to William H. Seward, August 22, 1864.

Rochester: N. Y. August 29th 1864

Sir: Since the interview with wh. Your Excellency was pleased to honor me a few days ago, I have freely conversed with several trustworthy and Patriotic Colored men concerning your suggestion that something should be speedily done to inform the slaves in the Rebel states of the true state of affairs in relation to them sho and to warn them as to what will be their probable condition should peace be concluded while they remain within the Rebel lines: and more especially to urge upon them the necessity of making their escape. All with whom I have thus far spoken on the subject, concur in the wisdom and benevolence of the Idea, and some of them think it practicable. That every slave who escapes from the Rebel states is a loss to the Rebellion and a gain to the Loyal Cause, I need not stop to argue the proposition is self evident. The negro is the stomach of the rebellion. I will therefore briefly submit at once to your Excellency — the ways and means by which many such persons may be wrested from the enemy and brought within our lines:

1st Let a general agt. be appointed by your Excellency charged with the duty of giving effect to your idea as indicated above: Let him have the means and power to employ twenty or twenty five good men, having the cause at heart, to act as his agents: 2d Let these Agents which shall be selected by him, have permission to visit such points at the front as are most accessible to large bodies of slaves in the Rebel States: Let each of the said agts have power — to appoint one subagent or more in the locality where he may be required to operate: the said sub agent shall be thoroughly acquainted with the country — and well instructed as to the representations he is to make to the slaves: — but his cheif duty will be to conduct such squads of slaves as he may be able to collect, safely within the Loyal lines: Let the sub agents for this service be paid a sum not exceeding two dolls— per day while upon active duty.

3dly In order that these agents shall not be arrested or impeded in their work —let them be properly ordered to report to the General Commanding the several Departments they may visit, and recieve from them permission to pursue thier vocation unmolested. 4th Let provision be made that the slaves or Freed men thus brought within our lines shall receive subsistence until such of them as are fit shall enter the service of the Country or be otherwise employed and provided for: 5thly Let each agent appointed by the General agent be required to keep a strict acct of all his transactions, — of all monies recieved and paid out, of the numbers and the names of slaves brought into our lines under his auspices, of the plantations visited, and of everything properly connected with the prosecution of his work, and let him be required to make full reports of his proceedings — at least, once a fortnight to the General Agent.

6th Also, Let the General Agt be required to keep a strict acct of all his transactions with his agts and report to your Excellency or to an officer designated by you to recieve such reports. 7th Let the General Agt be paid a salary sufficient to enable him to employ a competant Clerk, and let him be stationed at Washington — or at some other Point where he can most readily receive communications from and send communications to his Agents: The General Agt should also have a kind of roving Commission within our lines, so that he may have a more direct and effective oversight of the whole work and thus ensure activity and faithfulness on the part of his agents—

This is but an imperfect outline of the plan — but I think it enough to give your Excellency an Idea of how the desirable work shall be executed.

Your Obedient Servant

Fredk Douglass