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ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND BLACK COLONIZATION: Benjamin Butler's Spurious Testimony

Mark E. Neely, Jr.

"I CAN HARDLY BELIEVE that the South and North can live in peace, unless we can get rid of the negroes." According to Benjamin F. Butler, President Abraham Lincoln expressed this fear to him in a conversation in Washington sometime after the Hampton Roads Peace Conference of February 3, 1865.¹ Butler's reminiscence, which appeared in *Butler's Book* in 1892, is the only evidence that Lincoln gave any serious thought to colonization after July 1, 1864.² "If . . . substantially correct, as it appears to be," George Fredrickson has said of Butler's story, it proves that "Lincoln continued to his dying day to deny the possibility of racial harmony and equality in the United States and persisted in regarding colonization as the only real alternative to perpetual race conflict."³ Butler's recollection has taken on increased importance and credibility in recent scholarship.⁴ Yet, though many historians cite it as suggesting

¹ Benjamin F. Butler, *Autobiography and Personal Reminiscences of . . . : Butler's Book* (Boston, 1892), 303, (hereafter cited as *Butler's Book*).

² John Jay noted on July 1, 1864 that "the President has sloughed off that idea of colonization." Tyler Lemett (ed.), *Lincoln and the Civil War in the Diaries and Letters of John Jay* (New York, 1939), 203.

³ George M. Fredrickson, "A Man but Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality," *The Journal of Southern History*, XII (Feb., 1975), 57.

⁴ Fredrickson and other scholars are naturally reluctant to take Ben Butler's word for anything, but so have other scholars. I have found good reason to accept his account of this conversation. *Ibid.*, 57. For other particular references, see the works of Herman Belz and Ludwell Lee. Belz found Butler's story "in accord with views Lincoln expressed elsewhere concerning reconstruction," especially, with his "fear of violence and of outraged rights." Belz concluded that "if partial colonization could promote these ends [economic and order] he was willing at least to investigate its possibilities." *Constitutional Union: The Story and the Struggle during the Civil War* (Ithaca, 1969), 282-283. Lee also uses Butler's story in *Lincoln and Equal Rights: The Authenticity of the Van Wert Letter*, *The Journal of Southern History*, XXXI (Feb. 1966), 68.

Even skeptics will not dismiss the story altogether. G. S. Born admitted that "it is possible, although it is probable that there is some truth in Benjamin Butler's later recollections that in 1865, for brief moments, the President entertained the idea only to be told that it was impossible." *The Voyage to the Colony of Lincoln: The Sixteenth President, Black*

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one thing or another about Lincoln's racial ideas, none has studied the story itself to determine its reliability. The anecdote consumes more than three full pages of *Butler's Book*, and it is high time for close study of it.

Butler claimed that though he had lost his army command on January 7, 1865, he afterwards "retained the full confidence of the President" and spoke with him "from time to time when I happened to be in Washington." In a conversation held "after the negotiations had failed at Hampton Roads," Lincoln asked Butler what to "do with the negroes after they are free." Lincoln, Butler asserted, doubted the stability of the Union as long as the freedmen remained in America and wanted especially to "get rid of the negroes whom we have armed and disciplined and who have fought with us, to the amount, I believe, of some one hundred and fifty thousand men."

Lincoln, Butler recalled, had sought the general's advice because of two special qualifications. First, Butler had "been a staunch friend of the race from the time you first advised me to enlist them at New Orleans." Second, Butler had "had a good deal of experience in moving bodies of men by water,—your movement up the James was a magnificent one." With a large navy idled by the end of the war, Lincoln asked, "what, then, are our difficulties in sending all the blacks away?"

"If it is a race war, and it will be at least a gulf stream war because we have taught these men how to fight," Butler remembered Lincoln saying. "Some people think that you shall have trouble with our white troops after they are disbanded," Lincoln went on, "but I don't anticipate anything of that sort, for all the intelligent men among them were good

Colonization, and he defended Mechanism of Avoidance," *The Historian*, XXXI (Aug., 1955), 63. Daniel F. Heitshieffer calls Butler's testimony "dubious" in "Only His Stepchildren: Lincoln and the Negro," *Civil War History*, XX (Dec., 1974), 308. Benjamin Charles *Lincoln and the Negro* (New York, 1952) did not mention the story but Hans Trefous's *Butler: The South's Civil War Hero* (New York, 1957) repeated the story without mentioning its page 179.

Some earlier writers ignored the Butler story: N. F. N. Cloven, "Some Plans for Colonizing Liberated Negro Slaves in Hispanic America," *Journal of Negro History*, XI (Jan., 1916), 349; Warren A. Butler, "Lincoln and Negro Colonization," *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly*, VI (Sep., 1950), 132-18; and F. Delia Baker, "The LeAache Expedition in Colonization," in Jacob E. Cooke, *Idealistic Years of a Historian* (Norman, 1957), 22-25. Others mentioned it without analysis: Charles L. Wesley, "Lincoln's Plan for Colonizing Freed Negroes," *Journal of Negro History*, IV (Jan., 1919), 2; and Paul J. Scheier, "Lincoln and the Church in Colonization Projects," *Journal of Negro History*, X (Oct., 1915), 49. Scripps noted Claiborne's scepticism and Roy P. Butler's opinion that the story was not accepted by "established" opinion.

None of the scholars mentioned in the previous note analyzed the Butler story to any significant degree, and the argument has not advanced one whit in sixty years. Indeed, in 1922 Scripps published that the interview took place in February, and fourteen years later Lowell Johns said it occurred in April, a month in which it could not possibly have occurred.

¹ *Butler's Book*, 102-103.

² *Ibid.*, 103.

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citizens or they would not have been good soldiers." Lincoln was "to go down to City Point shortly," and he asked Butler to investigate the problem "as soon as you can, because I . . . may meet negotiators for peace there, and I may want to talk this matter over with General Grant if he isn't too busy."

Two days later, Butler told the President that it was impossible to transport the black population to the nearest available place, Santo Domingo. However, Butler suggested that he might take the black soldiers, all of whom still had a year or more to serve in the army, to dig "a ship canal across the Isthmus of Darien" in Central America. While the situation cooled in the United States, this project would keep the black veterans out of the country and out of mischief. Lincoln liked the idea, Butler remembered, but the President wanted the general to consult Secretary of State Seward about its implications for foreign relations. "Some days afterwards," Butler called on Seward, but the Secretary was too busy to see him at his office just then and invited him to dinner that night to discuss the matter. Seward suffered a serious injury in a carriage accident that afternoon, however, and Butler never discussed the plan with him.⁹

This is an anecdote rich in the details which create credibility. The details also offer numerous ways of verifying its accuracy. An examination of the details reveals a multiplicity of impossibilities and questionable aspects which will be grouped here under three major headings: (1) timing, (2) self-serving nature of the reminiscence, and (3) conflicts with Lincoln's views as found in reliable sources.

(1) Butler wrote his memoirs without doing careful research to refresh his memory and without benefit of a diary.¹⁰ The Hampton Roads Peace Conference, for example, did not occur "in the last of January," as Butler stated in his book, but on February 3, 1865.¹¹ The only specific date he mentioned in the anecdote was the day of Seward's carriage accident; though Butler himself did not provide even that calendar date, it was April 5, 1865. According to Butler, the conversation occurred also at a time when Lincoln knew he was to go to City Point. Indeed, Lincoln was at City Point and the Virginia battle front from March 23, 1865 through the time of Seward's carriage accident.¹² Lincoln had responded on March 20 to an invitation from General Grant to visit City Point, saying that he had "already thought of going immediately

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 904, 907-3, 98.

¹¹ Richard S. Wesley, Jr., *Lincoln's Scapegoat General: A Life of Benjamin F. Butler, 1818-1853* (Boston, 1963), p. 410.

¹² *Butler's Book*, 92.

¹³ C. Percy Howe, *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 1809-1865. Volume III: 1861-1865* (Washington, 1960), : 22-3, 7.

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after the next rain" but would "go sooner if any reason for it."¹³ The next day he telegraphed word that he would leave "about One P. M. Thursday," March 23.¹⁴ Since the President allegedly told Butler "I am to go" to City Point, it sounds as though he was sure of the trip. This means that the meeting with Butler was probably on the 20th or after. This seems all the more likely since Butler telegraphed General Halleck from his home in Lowell, Massachusetts on March 20, asking "leave to visit Washington."¹⁵

Fortunately, Butler's whereabouts for the crucial period from March 20-23, 1865 is known. There was a strict rule in the War Department forbidding any officer to come to Washington without prior permission, and Butler ran afoul of it by telling Halleck he was coming and not waiting to receive a reply. Halleck, in fact, turned down Butler's request on March 22. As a result, Butler had to write a long letter of explanation to Secretary of War Stanton. "I left home on the evening of March 20," he said, and "remained in New York till Thursday noon, when I left for Washington." *Butler did not reach Washington until Thursday, March 23, the day Lincoln left for City Point.* Since he left New York at noon, he could not have reached Washington until well after noon, and Lincoln had telegraphed that he would start for City Point at one p.m. Butler could not possibly have seen the President after Lincoln had determined to go to City Point. Nor could he have seen Lincoln before that, while the President was thinking of going but waiting for the next rain, for Butler was in Massachusetts before he left for Washington on March 20.¹⁶

Butler could not have seen the President a good deal earlier in March, for he says that it was only "Some days afterwards" that he saw Seward, and that had to be on April 5, the day of Seward's accident. Even on Butler's spurious timetable, two weeks elapsed between the alleged meeting with Lincoln and the meeting with Seward, and it seems very doubtful that more weeks than that could realistically be called "Some days" rather than "some weeks." Besides, Butler's correspondence contains only one other request to visit Washington in early 1865, and that bears the date of January 13, well before the Hampton Roads Peace Conference. Butler was back in Lowell by the January 30 and did not return to Washington until March 23.¹⁷

(2) The self-serving nature of Butler's reminiscence makes it even

¹³ Lincoln to Ulysses S. Grant, Mar. 2, 1865 in Rev. P. F. Slater (ed.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, 1953), VII, 367.

¹⁴ Lincoln to Robert Todd Lincoln, Mar. 21, 1865 in *ibid.*, 369.

¹⁵ Butler to Henry W. Halleck, Mar. 20, 1865 in *Private and Official Correspondence of Gen. Benjamin F. Butler During the Period of the Civil War* (Norwood, Mass., 1977), V, 573.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 575, 587.

¹⁷ Butler to Lincoln, Jan. 13, 1865 and to General Westzel, Jan. 30, 1865 in *ibid.*, 483, 518. Butler's whereabouts in February and March was determined by checking the inside address of his published letters for the period.

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more unlikely to be accurate. The overall purpose of the anecdote in *Butler's Book* is to show that Butler was still in good standing with Lincoln in 1865. Therefore, Butler pictured the President as seeking his advice because of Butler's early suggestion that New Orleans blacks be enlisted to fight and because of his special skills in moving troops by water (in particular, up the James River in Virginia).

Historians have failed to question this crucial part of the story because of Butler's inflated reputation as a radical. At New Orleans, however, Butler was not a radical on every question; he at first *opposed* training blacks as soldiers. When General John W. Phelps requested arms to train blacks outside New Orleans on July 30, 1862, Butler thought he had "gone crazy," and he directed Phelps to employ the men as laborers.¹⁸ Phelps resigned in protest, and Butler sent Christian Rozelius on July 30 to tell the President "the wishes, opinions, feelings and thoughts of the people of the State of Louisiana, upon the Question of Slavery as interwoven with the integrity of the Union."¹⁹ Doubtless, Rozelius told Lincoln that Louisiana did not think highly of black soldiers. About three weeks later, Butler needed soldiers badly and decided to recruit free Negroes, giving an order to that effect on August 22, 1862. But the impulse to enlist blacks came from the administration to Butler. On July 31, 1862, Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase told Butler that he had "heard intimations from the President that it may possibly become necessary, in order to keep the river open below Memphis, to convert the heavy black population of its banks into defenders."²⁰ Thereafter, until relieved of command, Butler was in a position to call attention to his successful experiment with black troops, but none of his letters to Lincoln from New Orleans especially did so.²¹

It is for Butler's "magnificent" move up the James River in May of 1864, the move itself may have shown his skills in amphibious operations, but any glory was quickly obliterated by the disastrous campaign which ensued at Bermuda Hundred after Butler had landed his troops. Grant was so disgusted when Butler's men were bottled up by an inferior force that on July 1, 1864 he urged General Halleck to find some "administrative" command for Butler. General Butler had shown "a want of knowledge how to execute" military operations; he was not "a soldier by education or experience." Halleck responded with alacrity,

¹⁸ Louis S. Gertei, *From Contraband to Freedman: Federal Policy Toward Southern Blacks, 1861-1865* (Westport, Conn., 1973), 71.

¹⁹ Butler to Lincoln, July 30, 1862, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁰ Salmon P. Chase to Butler, July 31, 1862, in *Private and Official Correspondence of . . . Butler*, 1:131-132.

²¹ Butler's letters to the President from New Orleans in the Abraham Lincoln Collection, Library of Congress, do not especially recommend organizing black soldiers. Butler did ask for some "communication approving of that organization" in a letter to General Halleck of Nov. 7, 1862, printed in *Private and Official Correspondence of . . . Butler*, II, 459.

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noting Butler's "total unfitness to command in the field."²² Butler survived the attempt to oust him, but it seems clear that Lincoln would not even have brought up the touchy and potentially embarrassing question of Butler's James River campaign. Butler brought the subject up in his book years later, however, because his being "bottled up" at Bermuda Hundred had been repeatedly used against him by political enemies.²³ Butler could get the President on his side only posthumously; Lincoln was not in the habit of complimenting Butler's military abilities, only his patriotism and political importance. In sum, then, there was no reason for Lincoln to think Butler the best person to ask about a colonization scheme.

Most important was the self-serving purpose that lay in focusing attention on Butler's alleged position as advisor on racial matters to the President while he was in Washington in 1865. This served to obscure the real reason for Butler's trip to Washington: he was under fire from the Treasury Department for alleged irregularities in his accounts. Butler's "vouchers were original receipts which I was very loth to trust by mail," he explained to the Secretary of War; therefore, to "prevent the threatened suit" Butler rushed to Washington without waiting for an answer to his request for permission to come. After all, he pleaded, "I was summoned there under threat of suit."²⁴

(3) Butler's anecdote is at odds with Lincoln's known views on two major points. First, Lincoln thought of black soldiers as a group especially deserving of privilege, not as a group especially deserving exile. Publicly, Lincoln admitted his personal preference that the franchise be "conferred . . . on those [colored men] who save our cause as soldiers" on April 11, 1865.²⁵ Privately, he had expressed the desire as early as March 13, 1863, telling Louisiana Governor Michael Blain that some "colored people" should be "let in" to the elective franchise, "especially those who have fought gallantly in our ranks." Significantly, Lincoln looked forward to a long future for them in the United States, for he said that they "would probably help, in some trying time to come, to keep the jewel of liberty within the family of freedom."²⁶ If anything, Butler's story would be more plausible if it pictured Lincoln as wishing to colonize blacks who were *not* soldiers; in the form it takes in *Butler's Book* it is not plausible at all.

Second, Butler's assertion that Lincoln expressed confidence in the peaceful nature of the white soldiers to be discharged at war's end is at odds with Lincoln's view on that subject as well. According to Gideon

²² West, *Lincoln's Escape*; *dat General*, 246-247.

²³ Trefousse, *Ben Butler*, 159.

²⁴ Butler to Stanton, Apr. 3, 1865 in *Pittsford: Official Correspondence of . . . Butler*, V, 55-587.

²⁵ Butler, *Collected Works of Lincoln*, VIII, 103.

²⁶ Lincoln to Michael Blain, Mar. 13, 1863 in *ibid.*, VII, 243 (italics mine).

Welles' diary entry of willingness to convey his anxiety for a speaker or society would be robber hands and gu 1892 reminiscence in white men are reliable black men whose loyalty and shunned. This w

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²⁷ Howard K. Beale (ed.), *and Johnson* (New York,

Welles' diary entry for April 13, 1865, President Lincoln explained his willingness to convene the disloyal Virginia legislature as a function of his anxiety for a speedy reestablishment of "courts, and law, and order, or society would be broken up, the disbanded armies would turn into robber bands and guerillas, which we must strive to prevent."²⁷ Butler's 1892 reminiscence is sort of *fin-de-siècle* racial fantasy in which any white men are reliable, whether they be traitors in arms or not, and even black men whose loyalty had been proven in battle were to be distrusted and shunned. This was Butler's fantasy, not Lincoln's.

In fact, Butler's "interview" with Lincoln is entirely a fantasy. It could not have occurred when Butler said it did or at any time near the date. To have complimented Butler's military skill in the James River-Bermuda Hundred campaign would have been to insult the political general with bitter irony. If Lincoln harbored doubts about America's biracial future, and there is no evidence he did in 1865, the one group he did not have doubts about was black veterans. He knew exactly what to do with them: reward them with the franchise. On the other hand, the President did fear the possibility of guerilla activities by Confederate veterans. Lincoln's sentiment for colonization poses a complex problem for historians, and it merits more study. Such study, however, need not concern itself with the possibility that Lincoln's interest survived up to the last days of his administration, for Butler's reminiscence, the only evidence of such interest, simply is not true.

²⁷ Howard C. Beale (ed.), *Diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy Under Lincoln and Johnson* (New York, 1900), II, 279.



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CW History Vol 25 (March 1979)

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