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**Jamestown Journey: The South's Use
of Slaves in War II**

Lead: At the beginning of the Civil War South faced a quandary. Should it use its slaves or not and how.

Intro.: Dan Roberts and *A Moment in Time with Jamestown - Journey of Democracy*, tracing the global advance of democratic ideals since the founding of Jamestown, Virginia in 1607.

Content: Both north and south were ambivalent about the role African-Americans would play in the

coming conflagration. With emancipation the road seemed clear for black participation in the Union effort. The issues were much more complex. They were philosophical and practical. From a practical point of view, they could be an effective human resource in the absence of whites who went off to war. They could use for municipal projects and could be used in the construction of defensive placements in front of vulnerable southern cities such as Vicksburg Richmond Petersburg.

Unfortunately, the South's problem was not construction projects, its major at once too many Yankee soldiers with rifles in their hands. This then posed the

philosophical question. What would happen if you offered the slaves their freedom in exchange for defending the South? What would happen if you put a gun in a black man's hand? Would it disprove the southern theory about the sub-humanity of Africans? Instead of fighting for the South suppose the newly recruited and armed slaves turned their guns on white Southerners?

Philosophically, much of argument prior to the War from southern partisans in support of slavery was that blacks were inferior, sub-human and therefore not capable of active citizenship or the kind of participation in civic life that marks the service of a warrior. With

hundreds of thousands of white southerners deserting the armies of the Confederacy in 1864 and early 1865, the leaders in Richmond faced an formidable choice, independence or slavery?

On one hand were the die hard white supremacists such as Howell Cobb of Georgia spoke for many when he warned, "use all the Negroes you can get, as hewers of wood and drawers of water, but don't arm them. If slaves will make good soldiers, our whole theory of slavery will be proved wrong."

On the other there were the pragmatists such as Robert E. Lee who had the task of fending off a huge Union army marvelously equipped and

freshly trained. After much debate the Confederate congress passed a bill in early 1865 to make soldiers of black slaves.

This signaled the end to slavery even in the south and it was, of course, too late to help the Southern cause. Most slaves were not going to take the bait. Freedom was in the air and it would not come from the Southern Congress, but a triumphant Union.

This series is supported by the Jamestown 400th Federal Commission with its International Conference Series on the Foundations and Future of Democracy, see jamestownjourney.org, at the

**University of Richmond, this is Dan
Roberts.**

Resources

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