On the day he met Abraham Lincoln, Sergeant Lucien Waters was fed up. He was fed up with the suffocating summer heat, which to his northern sensibilities felt close to 120 degrees. He was fed up with the Union’s frustrated advances in Virginia, which left his men demoralized and his horses exhausted. Most of all he was fed up that more than a year into the conflict the country’s noblest goals were far from being met. The South was still in rebellion, the slaves were still in bondage, and thousands of patriotic young men were mired in a war that seemed to be waged for little more than naked belligerence. “War for the sake of war is hellish,” Waters confided to his family, voicing his fear that a nation dedicated to true liberty was fast fading from view. In August 1862 Sergeant Waters decided he would run these thoughts by the president—and when he did so he left us a remarkable sketch of a leader under pressure.

Lucien Parkhurst Waters was twenty-four years old when he joined a New York cavalry regiment in the spring of 1862. The youngest son of a Presbyterian preacher’s large family, he was working in Yonkers as a supervisory mechanic when the war broke out. Service records describe Waters as five foot six inches tall, of fair complexion, with hazel eyes and
sandy hair, though a wartime daguerreotype shows him sporting dark curls. Waters described himself as possessing “a loving & earnest heart . . . an ordinary education, & a practical knowledge of several trades & departments of business, having of late had charge of quite a number of men.”

He was also an unhesitating Republican who used stationery with a beardless “Honest Abe” adorning the letterhead. Fiercely opposed to slavery, Waters originally hoped to serve his country by going to the Sea Islands of South Carolina to teach African-Americans who were under the protection of the occupying Union army.

Instead, a charismatic colonel named James B. Swain persuaded Waters to join the regiment he was just forming. Swain was working at the behest of Assistant Secretary of War Thomas A. Scott, and the 890 men he enlisted came to be known as “Scott’s 900.” Initially they were attached directly to the 1st U.S. Cavalry, but were later redesignated the 11th New York Volunteer Cavalry. In early 1862 Swain was on the lookout for sharp men, for he understood that they would be assigned as special forces. Scott wanted this regiment to scout, to surprise and intercept civilians aiding the rebels, and to interrupt irregular behavior by Union troops. As part of Washington, D.C.’s defense system, they were to act generally as the eyes and ears of the government. “Were the secret history of the regiment written,” Swain later recalled, “even those most intimate with its Colonel would be astonished at the extent and character of the secret service he was detailed to perform.”

Lucien Waters was attracted by the promise of adventure and by the opportunity to strike a personal blow against slavery. Accordingly,

3. Seventh Decennial Census of the United States (1850), Ward 12, New York, New York, National Archives and Records Administration; Lucian [sic] P. Waters’s Certificate of Service, Adjutant General’s Office, March 31, 1917, Civil War Pension Records, RG 94, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Waters is also at times referred to as Lucius in these and other records; Waters to the Committee for the Relief of the Contrabands at Port Royal and Elsewhere, Plainfield, New Jersey, February 21, 1862, Waters Papers. Waters must have either attended or read about the February 20, 1862, meeting held at Cooper Union by the American Missionary Association to jump-start the work with the freedmen, for his letter offering to volunteer is dated the following day. See Willie Lee Rose, Rehearsal for Reconstruction (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 41.

4. Waters to parents, March 20, 1861; Waters to the Committee for the Relief of the Contrabands, February 21, 1862; Waters to parents, Port Tobacco, Maryland, June 18 and July 13, 1862.

on March 28, 1862, he was mustered in for three years, with the rank of private (Figure 1). A month later he was promoted to sergeant of Company G, a position that entitled him to bed and board and $17 per month. Dressed in new blue uniforms and yellow blouses, Scott’s 900 appeared a dashing outfit when it left in early May on what Waters called their “patriotic pilgrimage to the Land of Freedom.”6 They were assigned to Camp Relief, a comparatively luxurious post on high ground north of the Capitol building. Waters had a recruit’s typical reaction to the camp, complaining to his family about the food (evidently sutlers were selling pies made from rat meat) and the confinement of

6. Waters Certificate of Service; Calvert, Reminiscences, 60; Smith, Story of a Cavalry Regiment, 11–12; and Waters to parents, Camp Relief, May 11, 1862.
camp life. He also found that with direct responsibility for nearly one hundred men, his work was not light. The long days were crowded with supervising drills, looking after the soldiers’ health, maintaining proper conditions in the stables, and ensuring day to day—sometimes minute by minute—discipline. “My duties crowd so thick upon me,” Waters told his parents, that he spent more time breaking up fights than patrolling.7

One thing Waters did not grouse about was the quality of the horses. The regiment had unusually fine steeds, with Company G riding spirited iron grays. There was a reason for this privilege: not only was Scott’s 900 charged with maintaining peace along the Potomac, it was assigned as escort for President Lincoln. A group of five or six men sometimes guarded the White House carriageway or rode at the president’s side as he made calls around town, but their particular duty was to accompany him when he traveled to and from his summer home, three miles from the White House. Lincoln hated the escort, and grumbled about it to anyone who would listen. “I do not believe that the President was ever more annoyed by anything than by the espionage that was necessarily maintained almost constantly over his movements,” recalled another member of the regiment. “Nearly every day we were made aware of his feelings upon the matter.” Lincoln told one acquaintance that the guard made so much clatter that he could not carry on a conversation with his wife and that he “was more afraid of being shot by the accidental discharge of one of their carbines or revolvers, than of any attempt upon his life.” But the real reason he disliked the escort was the conspicuousness of it and the intrusion on his privacy.8

Lincoln may have resented the presence of his bodyguards, but the unit was charmed by what they termed his “oddities” and by his politeness to them. Lucien Waters reported that the president bowed solemnly and awkwardly to the troops as he rode by, and others recalled that occasionally he would come into camp and chat with the men. They in turn sometimes took advantage of their unusual access.

7. Smith, Story of a Cavalry Regiment, 11, 15–16; Calvert, Reminiscences, 19; Waters to parents, Camp Relief, n.d. [Spring 1862]; quotation in Waters to parents, Camp Relief, May 10, 1862. Waters’s duties increased in August 1863 when he was given charge of all teams and teamsters as wagon master of the regiment. Waters to parents, Camp Relief, August 25, 1863; Waters pension file in Civil War Pension Records.
The escort’s camp was so close to the first family’s cottage that their boisterous talk could be heard from the veranda. Lincoln would rise and ask them to lower the racket, and when he did so they would regale him with complaints of poor equipment and inedible rations. He apparently took their words seriously, addressing every one of the grievances, and once ripped apart a pair of shoddy socks with his powerful hands and stuffed them into his pocket to use in a protest to the War Department. “The great man, bending beneath the weight of the Republic and its gigantic war, found time amid all his cares to be just to the common soldier,” wrote one of the amazed men.9

In addition to protecting the president, Scott’s 900 was ordered to keep an eye on the activities of Southern sympathizers who lived near Washington, D.C. Those who sided with the Confederacy were spiriting supplies into Virginia, secretly recruiting rebel units, and passing information to Jeff Davis’s army. Company G drew duty in both Maryland and northern Virginia, where they broke up local “secesh” rings, patrolled polling places, and intercepted smuggled goods. On this assignment Waters seized the chance to begin working toward his ideal of emancipation. He had abhorred slavery from afar; when he encountered its reality he was disgusted. After riding through several plantations near Port Tobacco, Maryland, he told his parents he believed God frowned on the nation while it indulged in the “damnable stinky curse of protecting the institution of Slavery!” and that his own resolve to fight for a true land of liberty was doubled. “The issues are becoming sharper,” he exclaimed, “& it behoves the people of the North to awake from their supiness [sic] to save, what I hope in the future we may call ‘great freedom’s land,’ but which at present does not answer to that name.”10

Like many army units in slaveholding territory, Scott’s 900 attracted blacks who hoped to find a safe haven within the Union lines. From the early days of the war the policy had been to shelter these runaways, sometimes allowing them to work for the army (Figure 2). Congress sanctioned the practice with the Confiscation Act of July 1861, which prescribed forfeiture of any property—including slaves—being used to aid the Confederacy. Lincoln had reluctantly allowed the bill to become law, though he thought its constitutional soundness dubious, and feared

9. Waters to parents, Port Tobacco, July 13, 1862; Calvert, Reminiscences, 20; quotation on page 21.
10. Smith, Story of a Cavalry Regiment, 22–24,32, 45, 70–71; quotation in Waters to parents, Camp Relief, August 5, 1862.
its potential to irritate the loyal slave states of Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, and Missouri.11

Once in Yankee camps, the “contraband”—as the refugees became known—had a variety of experiences. Officers like Colonel Willis A. Gorman of the 1st Minnesota protected every black person who came within his jurisdiction, declaring that he would not “be at all displeased to see the whole slave population run away.” (By the summer of 1862 Lincoln tacitly agreed with this philosophy, though he drew the line at enticing slaves to escape.)12 Many Northern soldiers, however, used their charges in a manner that differed little from the bondage they were fleeing, working them harshly for meager food and clothing, or treating them as court jesters who would sing, dance, or have head-butting contests for the amusement of the troops. Both Waters and one of his comrades from Company F noted that this was


12. See Lincoln’s statement to Orville Hickman Browning, July 1, 1862, that “No negroes necessarily taken and escaping during the war are ever to be returned to slavery—No inducements are to be held out to them to come into our lines for they come now faster than we can provide for them and are becoming an embarrassment to the government.” *The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning, 1850–1864*, ed. Theodore Calvin Pease and James G. Randall (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Society, 1925), 1:555.
the case in their camp, where the men would “throw the darkies up in blankets” for fun or steal from the refugees. Colonel Swain was sympathetic to the slaves, but Waters was annoyed that Company G’s captain made a point of contacting masters to retrieve the runaways that came within their lines.¹³

Frustrated by what he believed was near sinful inaction in the face of a national moral crisis, Sergeant Waters decided to move on the issue personally. Although for many of his compatriots emancipation was a secondary war goal, from the beginning of the conflict Waters had known that he was fighting for freedom. He not only fervently believed in liberation for the individual bondsman, but also in liberation of the country from the political straitjacket of slavery.¹⁴ Unable to see swift movement in his government’s policies, Waters became a kind of self-appointed emancipator, seeking out slaves he could help.

Using secret paths and hideaways known to the bondsmen, Waters encouraged many to run away, smuggling some to Washington aboard U.S. gunboats that plied the Potomac River. He wrote false passes, told tall stories to slaveholders, and collaborated with like-minded sailors to conceal his freedom-seekers. In one instance Waters helped a runaway fashion a halter from a grapevine when his owner, fearful that his property would flee, denied him the use of leather equipment. He hid another fugitive in the weeds for days, then taunted the master when he came looking for his slave until the man stamped away in anger. Among the black people, Waters became known as the “bobolition Sergeant.” Among whites he gained a reputation for being a “damned abolitionist.” He did not mince words in their company, however, and stoutly told his parents that he would “fawn on no man, neither do I play the sycophant to any superior officer & for the sake of his good will & pleasure sacrifice my manhood by hiding my true sentiments.” Risking the ire of both plantation lords and his own authorities, and believing that in this war there was “only one object which each man should have in view,” he continued his freelance manumissions to the very end of the struggle. By the summer of 1862, Waters was luring dozens at a time away from their masters. “My hand is in at stealing darkies,”


he confessed. “I have traveled on foot & on horse & have brought & protected them to Camp secretly. . . . My name is without a mistake, a terror to the planters, & a talisman of good to the slave. The first they enquire for is Sgt. Waters & he never proves untrue to them.” Lucien Waters had taken morality and the law into his own hands.¹⁵

* * *

Waters mistakenly thought he was pursing his Moses-like mission with the blessing—indeed, under the orders—of the commander he called “Uncle Abe.”¹⁶ So it was not for approbation that he sought out the president in early August. Rather, his plan was to get Lincoln’s approval for a furlough. Waters called it a discharge, though it was meant to be temporary—the idea was that he would go on a recruiting expedition in New York, sign up twenty men for his regiment, and gain a lieutenancy by doing so. The matter was small, and the moment unpropitious, but Lucien was an impatient young man and despite the doubts of his colonel, he wanted to press forward. By the time sergeant and commander-in-chief met, both men had been under weeks of pressure; they were as flammable as dry tinder. The meeting that Waters recorded was, therefore, a startling one.¹⁷

Waters appears to have waylaid the president sometime during the second week of August 1862, for he described the encounter to his brother on August 12 but made no mention of it in letters of July 31 or August 5. He intercepted Lincoln on the portico of the White House and handed over his request for a temporary discharge. Lincoln, who virtually never turned a petitioner away—and certainly not a blue-clad soldier—took the paper and unceremoniously plopped down on the floor of the portico, leaning back against a column, his knees drawn up “as high as his head.”¹十八 It was his characteristic pose, awkward but engagingly unselfconscious; the essence of a man without pretense.

¹⁵. Waters to parents, Washington, D.C., June 18, 1862; Port Tobacco, July 13, 1862; Washington, D.C., August 5, 1862; Chapel Point, November 15, 1862; Chapel Point, December 10, 1862; Chapel Point, February 10, 1863.

¹⁶. Waters to parents, Washington, D.C., June 18, 1862.

¹⁷. Waters to parents, Camp Relief, July 21; Waters to Bro. Lemuel, Camp Relief, August 12, 1862.

¹⁸. Waters to parents, Camp Relief, July 31, 1862, and August 5, 1862; Waters to Bro. Lemuel, Camp Relief, August 12, 1862. Many people described Lincoln’s reluctance to turn away those who wished to speak to him; see for example, Joshua Speed to William H. Herndon, January 12, 1866; John Hay to William H. Herndon, September 5, 1866; and Henry Wilson to William H. Herndon, May 30, 1867, all in Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., Herndon’s Informants (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 156, 331, and 561–62; Carpenter, Six Months, 281.
There are many accounts of the lanky Midwesterner lounging in this way, or balanced uncomfortably on the chairs that never seemed to fit him. Friends, family, and strangers commented on the way Lincoln’s legs would swing across chair arms or how he would tell stories in his office, “reaching out with his long arms to draw his knees up almost to his face.” Others remarked on how his feet and legs wandered all over the floor in front of him, until guests “had serious apprehensions that they would go through the wall into the next room.”

Waters was amused enough that he drew a sketch of the president for his brother (Figure 3). It is just a little scribbled cartoon, but it wonderfully captures the informality of the scene. There sits Abraham Lincoln, with a familiarity almost unimaginable today, legs folded and tall hat in place, looking for all the world like a cricket perched

Figure 3. Sketch of Lincoln on the White House portico made by Lucien Waters. Collection of the New York Historical Society.

on the nation’s front porch. And Waters is there in the drawing too, replete with dress hat and saber, striking a daring pose. It might have been a whimsical situation, but then Lincoln rather spoiled its charm. Before he bothered to read the sergeant’s request, he turned up his head and remarked moodily that the paper had “probably something to do with the damned or Eternal niggar, niggar.”

“That spoke volumes to me,” Waters remarked, and in retelling the story he placed two exclamation marks after Lincoln’s words. Contemporary readers will likely share Waters’s surprise and disappointment. Did Lincoln, known for his eloquence and his marks of respect to African-Americans, speak this way? Why did he assume the issue was about slavery before he had even read the cavalryman’s petition? Did the soldier perhaps make up or embellish the story to impress his brother? The evidence suggests that the encounter took place just as Waters described it. We know that a certain coarseness was a feature of Lincoln’s character and that he could be brusque when he was displeased or under pressure. One friend recalled that generally Lincoln had a very good nature, though “at times, when he was roused, a very high temper . . . it would break out sometimes—and at those times it didn’t take much to make him whip a man.”

And by August 1862, Lincoln himself admitted he was so overwhelmed that he was more or less living day to day. His aides noted that he had grown “sensitive and even irritable,” especially on the subject of slavery’s future. That summer the president snapped at a Union officer who came to ask him for permission to bring his wife’s body from the South, and when he later apologized, Lincoln acknowledged that he was “utterly tired out” and had become “savage as a wildcat.” A conversation nearly identical to the one with Waters took place around the same time, when William A. Buckingham, the governor of Connecticut, made a call to present a petition from antislavery activists in his state. Before Buckingham could speak, Lincoln said “abruptly, and as if irritated by the subject: ‘Governor, I suppose what your people want is more nigger’.” Lincoln evidently changed to a

20. Waters to Bro. Lemuel, Camp Relief, August 12, 1862.
21. Waters’s placement of the exclamation points outside the quotation marks seems to indicate that the emphasis was on his reaction, not Lincoln’s tone of voice. The author is grateful to Richard Carwardine for suggesting this point.
more conciliatory tone when he saw that Buckingham was startled, but his initial reaction had its impact.23

The source of Lincoln’s discomfort was his own confliction over the seemingly irresolvable problem of emancipation. He was as troubled by the plight of the bondsman as was Lucien Waters, but was disinclined to approve the kind of precipitous action that his young sergeant favored. Lincoln had long felt a moral repugnance at slavery, but he had a competing attachment for the Constitution, which set the United States apart from all other nations in the great experiment of democracy. That document specified that the federal government should not interfere with the prerogatives of the states—and slavery was one of those prerogatives. Lincoln’s formula for the elimination of the offensive institution was to persuade the states to relinquish it themselves, gradually, and with compensation. He hesitated to move too quickly lest he outpace public opinion or alienate the border states, whose fragile support was essential. “I hope I have God on my side, but I have to have Kentucky,” he is famously reported to have said. Provocative exploits like those of Lucien Waters were exactly what he believed might push Unionist slaveholders toward secession.24

Lincoln wanted to move on the slavery issue, but he wanted to move cautiously and deliberately. No perfectionist, he preferred to embrace the art of the possible in his politics.25 He also understood

25. See for example, Leonard Swett to William H. Herndon, January 17, 1866, and Joseph Gillespie to William H. Herndon, December 8, 1866, both in Wilson and Davis, Herndon’s Informants, 162 and 507; Speech at Chicago, Illinois, July 10,1858, Collected Works, 2:501.
the value of careful timing. In one homely anecdote, the president described his anxiety over abolition as if he were a man waiting for pears to mature in a frustratingly slow season. “Let him attempt to force the process, and he may spoil both fruit and tree,” he noted. “But let him patiently wait, and the ripe pear at length falls into his lap!”

He had a keen appreciation of the difficulty most people have in accepting great change, and he knew that no matter how prudent the course, emancipation, either as a moral policy or a military tool, was a revolutionary act. Like all experimental weapons it had the advantage of novelty—but also the liability of being untried and therefore the potential to backfire.

There were many, like Lucien Waters, who were exasperated that the president did not act swiftly to right a monstrous wrong. Senator Charles Sumner badgered him every few weeks, promoting the idea that emancipation was necessary to win the war. Horace Greeley, the feisty editor of the New York Tribune, loudly proclaimed similar views, as did “preachers, politicians, newspaper writers and cranks who virtually dogged his footsteps, demanding that he should ‘free the slaves’.”

His generals got ahead of him, trying to jump-start liberation in their military districts, and had to be reined in. African-American voices were also heard within the din. On August 1, 1862, a group of freedmen gathered in front of the White House for a prayer meeting. “One old chap with voice like a gong prayed with hands uplifted,” recalled a witness. “‘O Lord command the sun & moon to stand still while your Joshua Abraham Lincoln fights the battle of freedom.’”

Others tried to second-guess or outmaneuver the president. Illinois Senator Orville Hickman Browning began conspiring with Lincoln’s cabinet to force his hand on critical matters such as a second Confiscation Act. Meanwhile cabinet members were doing some extracurricular work of their own with the legislature, the press, and the military.

28. Lincoln to John C. Frémont, September 2, 1861, Collected Works, 4:506; and “Proclamation Revoking General Hunter’s Order of Military Emancipation of May 9, 1862,” Collected Works, 5:222–24; Quarles, Lincoln and the Negro, 71; quotation is from Dillard C. Donnohue interview with Jesse W. Weik, February 13, 1887, in Wilson and Davis, Hern- don’s Informants, 602.
29. The Second Confiscation Act, among other provisions, stated that all slaves of masters aiding the rebellion who took refuge behind Union lines were captives of war.
Congress decided to push the edges of its authority, passing bills that freed the slaves in the District of Columbia, forbade slavery in United States territories, and closed a treaty with Great Britain for suppression of the slave trade. While Lincoln was not necessarily opposed to these acts, he disliked the heedlessness with which some measures were passed, as well as the power plays by Congress. “Sumner thinks he runs me,” he sarcastically told a friend.30

At the same time, the White House was attuned to nervous rumblings from slaveholding Unionists like Congressman Horace Maynard of Tennessee, who counseled the president not to “make slaves freemen, but to prevent free men from being made slaves.” Washington’s National Intelligencer served up a daily dish of news about riots perpetrated against free blacks in Ohio, St. Louis, and Brooklyn—reports that can only have reinforced the chief executive’s concerns about a post-emancipation society. Under pressure from all sides, Lincoln likened himself to the great aerialist Charles Blondin, who had crossed the thundering chasm of Niagara Falls on a tightrope. It was not necessarily helpful, the president dryly noted, to have the public screeching “Blondin, a step to the right! Blondin, a step to the left!” as he made his perilous crossing.31

In a remarkable show of fortitude, Lincoln did not lose his balance. Instead, he used his political finesse to form a policy that satisfied his own complex requirements and could be made to satisfy those of his diverse constituency. Although Lucien Waters and most of the rest of America did not yet know it, by mid-summer 1862 Lincoln had decided to give an order as commander-in-chief that would free the slaves and enlist their aid for the Union army. General George B. McClellan’s failure in the Seven Days battles a few weeks earlier had left the Union army in crisis, and Lincoln believed “we had about played our last card, and must change our tactics, or lose the game!” He had already written a

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draft proclamation when he called his cabinet together on July 21 and 22 to discuss the new policy (Figure 4). But on reading the edict aloud, the president again met with a frustrating variety of opinion. Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton gave his immediate and hearty approval; Post Master General Montgomery Blair wrote a disapproving letter that ran to nine pages. The comments that had the greatest resonance for Lincoln, however, were those of Secretary of State William Seward, who wanted to be perfectly sure they had the citizens’ backing for this radical action. Lincoln agreed that such a daring political move, made while the war news was discouraging, might appear to be the “last shriek, on the retreat.” So for the remaining months of summer, amid the stifling national malaise, the president kept quiet about the proclamation. Tensely gauging public opinion, he waited for victory.32

* * *

If Lincoln had already determined his course toward emancipation, why would he make such an easily misconstrued remark to Lucien Waters a few weeks later? Most likely he was still testing the strength of popular support. One of the reasons he rarely turned the lines of petitioners away was because it helped him to hear their views. Immersion in the throngs became what Lincoln later called his “public-opinion baths.” As he listened, he could measure the effect of the war on the national psyche—and also influence it. Attorney General Edward Bates made a diary notation of his belief that “Public Opinion is never spontaneous with the people—It is always a manufactured article” and went on to say that bold leaders made it their business to mold it. Lincoln, who was a shrewd judge of public sentiment and did not hesitate to be manipulative, elusive, or even disingenuous when it served his purposes, would have agreed. Unwilling to reveal his hand at this critical time, even to favored cronies, he was not about to confide in an unfamiliar cavalryman.33


Lincoln had no intention of feeding the robust Washington rumor mill by letting his plan out piecemeal. Rather he was looking to shape a platform that could be widely accepted in the spirit of national interest. To consolidate support he often floated positions that rose above parochialism, promoting a larger ideal that could be embraced by everyone. Sometimes he did it through his famous cornpone parables, and sometimes by directly challenging his interlocutors to view a situation from his perspective. He used this latter ploy a few days before he encountered Lucien Waters. When Cuthbert Bullitt, the U.S. marshal for Louisiana, passed on complaints that the administration’s contraband policies were disadvantaging Unionist slaveholders in the state, the president retorted: “What would you do in my position? . . . Would you give up the contest leaving any available means unapplied?” Then, in a masterful argument, he subordinated all other interests to the prime goal. Everything he did, Lincoln protested, was done for one reason: to uphold the Union. “The truth is, that what is done, and omitted, about the slaves, is done and omitted on the same
military necessity. . . . I shall not do more than I can, and I shall do all I can to save the government, which is my sworn duty as well as my personal inclination.” A few weeks later, Lincoln again moved to manage the public mindset when he published a similar response to a particularly critical New York Tribune piece by Horace Greeley, once more raising the Union above any other consideration. Understanding that much of the citizenry needed justification for an action as bold as liberating the slaves, Lincoln made the one argument with which most everyone could agree. 34

There was yet another public issue tormenting the president. As an observant abolitionist pointed out, Lincoln dreaded “the magnitude of the social question” and wondered whether the slaves could be freed without rending the nation’s civil fabric. Two days after Waters penned his account of their tête-à-tête, Lincoln would meet with a group of African-American leaders and propose that after liberation all blacks should be removed to another country. It appears that the session may have been in part a public performance, meant to reassure nervous Northerners that perhaps they would not have to absorb the freedmen. But this issue had infinite complications, for not only were blacks unwilling to emigrate, the cost and logistics were prohibitive. Ultimately the painful plight of the freedmen would force Lincoln to change and adapt—to take a leap in the dark by accepting that inevitably American society would become multiracial. The social dislocation he hoped to avert was, in fact, unavoidable.35

No wonder, then, that the president Lucien Waters encountered was in a testy mood. The critical deliberations of that over-heated summer and the necessity to keep mum; to wait and hope and meanwhile absorb criticism; to be disingenuous when he prized candor; to endlessly explain himself—all this weighed on Lincoln and caused him to snarl uncharacteristically. With pressure from every side and slavery on his mind, it is not surprising that he assumed Waters would add another noisy opinion to the cacophony around him. Lincoln’s rude comment may also have been an attempt to evade the troublesome issue of slavery altogether, by closing the conversation before it began. But why the choice of words, the offensive expletive about the “Eternal niggar?”

34. Lincoln to Cuthbert Bullitt, July 28, 1862, Collected Works, 5:344–46; quotation on page 346. For a discussion of Lincoln’s reply to Horace Greeley, see Wilson, Lincoln’s Sword, 143–61.

The record is clear that nigger—and its second cousin cuffee—were part of Lincoln’s vocabulary. Those who knew him recalled that he used the coarse epithets in anecdotes and stories. He hugely enjoyed David Ross Locke’s satirical Nasby Papers, which featured a poor white preacher named Petroleum V. Nasby, who lived at “Confedrit X Roads” and quoted pearls of wisdom such as “Niggers was ordained 2 be bondmen from the very day Noah took a overdose uv the Great Happyfier. . . .” Journalists who attended Lincoln’s speeches during the 1850s reported him frequently evoking the word, though it is not always apparent how much of this was the speaker and how much the scribe. The citations are numerous enough, however, that there can be little doubt that Lincoln employed the attention-grabbing pejorative.

And there is no question that the word nigger was a derogatory term during Lincoln’s lifetime, not considered a part of a gentleman’s speech. Already by 1837, a visitor to the United States, commented that “‘Nigger’ is an opprobrious term employed to impose contempt upon [blacks] as an inferior race.” Antislavery champion William Seward was reportedly so offended by the extensive use of the expression by Senator Stephen A. Douglas that he once berated him by saying “Douglas, no man who spells Negro with two gs will ever be elected President of the United States.” In one instance Lincoln tried to explain his choice of the word cuffee by saying that he was a Southerner by birth “and in our section that term is applied without any idea of an offensive nature.” It may well be that class distinctions were so commonly accepted that such talk became unconscious. Even Senator Benjamin F. Wade, the most aggressive critic of Lincoln’s slowness on emancipation, called Washington a “god-forsaken Nigger rid[d]en place.” Yet this obliviousness to the degrading connotation of the words itself makes a political statement.

36. For Lincoln’s delight in Petroleum V. Nasby see, for example, Hay, Diaries, October 11, 1864, 228; quotation in David Ross Locke, The Nasby Papers (Indianapolis: C. O. Perrine, 1864), 31.
37. Speeches at Ottawa, Illinois, August 21, 1858; Carlinville, Illinois, August 31, 1858; Clinton, Illinois, September 2, 1858; Paris, Illinois, September 7, 1858; Edwardsville, Illinois, September 11, 1858; Council Bluffs, Iowa, August 13, 1859; Clinton, Illinois, October 14, 1859, all in Collected Works, 3:20, 27, 77, 81, 91, 94, 396, 487; Speech at Hartford, Connecticut, March 5, 1860, Collected Works, 4:4–5. At Council Bluffs, Lincoln used the same phrase Waters recorded, stating that he intended to speak “about the ‘eternal Negro’.”
40. Lincoln quoted in Phillip Shaw Paludan, “Greeley, Colonization, and a ‘Deputa-
Like all profanity, nigger was meant to show the speaker’s irreverence and to shock his audience. Grabbing attention seems to be what Lincoln frequently wanted to achieve by using such a loaded expression. He had more than a little of the thespian in him and was a gifted writer: he knew the value of words. Without excusing the crudeness of his choice, it is evident he often said it when he wanted to mock those who used the term without irony—in other words, to belittle the belittlers. Lincoln regularly called on sarcasm to make his sharpest points.Earnest and eloquent speech sometimes fell flat with the masses, and what better way to point up the vulgarity of the bigot than by putting his words into the mouth of a man who was known to have taken a serious stand on the side of humanity? Moreover, Lincoln was an accomplished mimic. Many of his references to niggers were in speeches lampooning Stephen A. Douglas for his fable of the Negro and the crocodile, in which black folks were said to be to the white man as reptiles were to Africans. The joke was on Douglas in these performances, not on blacks. Interestingly, Lincoln was just as capable of cruelly imitating pompous New Englanders as he was Southern racists. In one hilarious impersonation, he caught the exact tone of a Democrat who was trying to blame a shoe-factory strike on the conflict over slavery: “I cannot dawt thot this strike is the thresult of the onforchunit wahfar brought aboat boy this sucktional controvussy!”

Lincoln’s use of such pejorative speech also points to the power of environment on even the largest intellect. There is no reason to doubt his assertion that he believed slavery was intrinsically wrong and that he could not remember a time he did not feel so. Casually referring to niggers reflected cultural boorishness rather than hypocrisy. Americans had woven such an intricate pattern of racial relationships, such a set of conflicting principles and interactions, that few escaped the contradictions. Robert E. Lee, for example, was never known to have uttered the word nigger and thought such language

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41. Lincoln had a field day with Douglas’s tale of the crocodile and the Negro, using it in many addresses. One example is his speech at Hartford, Conn., March 5, 1860, Collected Works, 7:281–82.
vulgar; yet he treated the slaves under his control with harsh disdain. When Lincoln slipped into coarse speech or guffawed over Nasby’s preposterous pronouncements, he was reflecting a way of acting he had absorbed almost by osmosis, not a politically motivated code of conduct. Indeed, given his impoverished frontier upbringing, it is striking how rarely he let prejudice prevail.43

It is also notable that Lincoln never used the word *nigger* in letters or official texts, and rarely in serious extemporaneous speech. Perhaps he simply thought it inappropriate for more formal writing. But he also understood the difference between the transience of mere talk and the lasting quality of the written word. Casual words, as Lincoln’s friend Joshua Speed once reminded him, are “forgotten . . . passed by—not noticed in a private conversation—but once put your words in writing and they Stand as a living & eternal Monument against you.”44

Whatever Lincoln’s motives, his pronouncement failed to impress Waters, who viewed it as proof that the president was under the “insidious [sic] & snaky influences” of Washington’s many Southern sympathizers. Lincoln had no idea, of course, of Lucien’s political leanings, and that makes his outburst the more striking. Waters was offended, but he did not chastise the president, though he admitted that he would have liked to give him “a ‘right smart’ talking to.” The sergeant, however, had an object to achieve with his petition and therefore kept “a close mouth.”45

And what of that petition? Did Waters receive his furlough? It appears not. The timing was disastrous since one of the many questions vexing Lincoln was how to invigorate his military machine. The Union army was suffering stalemate in the West and before Charleston, and was outmaneuvered in Virginia. Losses in recent battles had been stunning. The size of the Confederate force near Washington, D.C., was a subject of anxious discussion, with rebel strength greatly exaggerated. By early August the president had approved a change of command and a controversial draft of three hundred thousand men, with serious penalties for those trying to dodge their responsibility. The new influx of green soldiers would need supervision. Colonel Swain had warned

45. Waters to Bro. Lemuel, Camp Relief, August 12, 1862.
Waters that the army chiefs were looking to keep seasoned men and that his plan was therefore unlikely to be approved. Swain had his ear to the ground: the commander-in-chief himself valued the veteran units and said that “one recruit into an old regiment is nearly . . . equal in value to two in a new one.” Under such circumstances, the president could ill afford to indulge one soldier’s self-serving schemes. In the end, military records show that Lucien Waters served throughout the war without a single day of furlough (Figure 5).

An acquaintance of Lincoln once remarked that he was “an artful man.” Lucien Waters could not have guessed on that August day the extent to which “Uncle Abe” was practicing his art, balancing on the

Figure 5. Service Record for Lucien P. Waters. National Archives.

46. For the anxious discussion of troop numbers, see e.g. August Belmont to Thurlow Weed, July 20, 1862, in Thurlow Weed Barnes, Memoir of Thurlow Weed (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1884), 2:420–22; Lincoln’s concern about the size of his force and slow Union enlistments is mentioned in Earl Schenck Miers, ed., Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology (Washington, D.C.: Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission, 1960), August 8, 1862, 3:132; “War Department,” August 5, 1862, and “An Important Order,” August 9, 1862, Daily National Intelligencer; Waters to parents, Camp Relief, July 21, 1862; Lincoln to Edwin Stanton, July 22, 1862, Stanton Papers; Waters Certificate of Service.
cusp of history. Although it was a brief exchange, Waters experienced the president in all his complexity: the crude backwoodsman; the harried public servant; the dedicated champion of American-brand democracy who passionately believed that the people must have access to power; the hard-headed politician; the gangly, near gargoyl

e of a man. Waters thought perhaps he should have taken Lincoln to task for his crass speech, but he was astute enough to perceive the great pressure under which the president was laboring and ultimately rationalized and forgave the outburst. What is remarkable is the directness and confidence with which these men faced each other. Lincoln did not hesitate to let his time be interrupted by the concerns of a common citizen, and Lucien showed no fear in the presence of the nation’s leader.

In a way it is too bad that they did not have a richer dialogue, for the two had much in common. Both were distressed by the awful sore of slavery; both wanted to lance the boil. Both cherished a belief in democracy’s innate practicality and goodness. In their short conversation they were living out the fundamental principles of the republic: that in a nation of the people the dialogue between governor and governed is essential; that where all men might rise there can be no pretense—no undue deference from a simple sergeant; no arrogance or intimidation from his commander. Waters belonged to a unit charged with protecting the president, but the president understood instinctively that he must not be too protected, lest he become isolated—an island of power without a public causeway to keep him honest and responsive and relevant. When he wrote of their meeting, Lucien Waters had only meant to give his brother a little picture of an eccentric leader in an unguarded moment. What he left us was a lasting image of direct democracy, in all its roughness and grandeur.

The following is the text of Lucien Waters’s letter to his brother Lemuel Waters, with its original punctuation and grammar.

Camp Relief “Scotts 900”
Washington D.C. Aug 12 ’62

Very dear Bro. Lemuel & Family:

I have only a few moments in which to answer your two very kind missives, lately received from New York & The Catskill. You will excuse me if I do not as extensively reply to your patriotic & metaphysical suggestions as The importance of The Themes would seem to demand. I am not in The best of health These days, & having very arduous tasks to perform in keeping my Co. straight in
The absence [of] my superior officer, I have not time to devote to any Thought on any subject disconnected with my duties or even to read The news of The day. After The duties of the day are over, I try to keep awake by The Camp fire & Think over The past with its many pleasing recollections, to Think of the gigantic issues which are growing out of This nations present convulsions, & Throes to rid itself of its many hellish corruptions, & to plant my feet on The only ground on which I have ever cared to stand; & That is to labor & suffer alone with The Thought That my motive was right & Though The issue was not as sharp & desisive as The more advanced & patriotic minds would have it, & Though incompetency & tretchery characterized The heads of The government, yet I try to draw a balm from our present ills, & trust The all-wise controller of events to so shape our reverses as to awake The canaille47 of America, to Their rights & The rights of Africa’s trodden race. I would here rehearse a conversation which I had with President Lincoln as I presented a petition for him to sign in conjunction with my Col. for my discharge from The Army. He in his characteristic style but not in a very dignified manner, took the said petition & sitting down on The marble pavement of the portico of The white House with his back against one of The south pillars, & with his feet drawn close up under him Thereby elevating his Knees as high as his head, [picture drawn here] turned his head up & said that it had probably something to do with “The damned or Eternal niggar, niggar.”!!. That spoke volumes to me as to the influences by which he was constantly surrounded, & which influences are the same as have for the past Thirty years made slaves to The aristocratic minds of the South, of every Executive who has occupied a place at the head of the nation.

A man has much to contend with, that would keep pure where such insidious & snaky influences are constantly brought to bear. I should have given him a “right smart” talking to had I not an object to gain. For policies sake I for once kept a close mouth, & not through fear. With all respect for his office, I should like to have given him a dressing down as father sometimes says. I pity the man from my heart for he is nearly worked to death. His private hours are scarcely kept sacred to his repose & comfort, & he may have been vexed & tormented with a hundred that very

47. Waters almost certainly means canaille, defined in the 1862 edition of Noah Webster’s American Dictionary of the English Language as “the lowest class of people; the rabble; the vulgar.”
day who were trying to worm something out of the government for their own personal agrandizement. Charity, Charity should be our watch word as well as the keen acumen of criticism.

Please to write soon & send me “on tick” a few more postage stamps, as mine were all stolen the other day with quite a number of valuable receipts. I will agree to send on letters until our next pay day, if you will pay the postage, my money being all spent for little additional articles for my comfort & protection which were absolutely necessary & for fruit & vegetables & milk which I had bought previous to pay day & for which I was in debt. You cannot rightly appreciate my condition unless you are here to see & experience. Our Co. is greatly fatigued with the night scouting which we have had to do of late in the Old Dominion. I cannot stop to begin to tell for it would be an agrivation to commence & not finish. I trust I may get a permit to go north & recruit for a 2d Lieutenancy, & if I do, rest assured that I shall try & put on an old woman’s gassifying hat & talk and twaddle from sun rise until sun set. Much I know of interest but as you see from the beautiful composition & writing cannot now stop to relate (You cannot write a letter as quick if you should try.) I hope I may not be as much hurried next time. The Stable calls have sounded & I must see that my men attend to their horses.

You do not know what hot weather is up your way. We have to drill in the sun when it is at 120° & 101° in the coolest shade & where it is the most sheltered.

Love to all

Your loving brother Lucien

Write soon it gives me great pleasure to hear from you & to receive your papers. They are about the only reading I have except those papers which Bro. James is kind enough to send. Don’t neglect the poor Soldier, for he craves reading matter as well as those [at] home, though at all times he has not the time to read. Lucien

48. Epilogue: Sergeant Lucien Waters continued to serve with the 11th New York Volunteer Cavalry Regiment until 1865. After several years of lobbying, in 1864 Colonel Swain finally got the men of Scott’s 900 transferred to the field. Their new assignment was to scout and interrupt “disloyal” behavior, first in Louisiana and later in Tennessee and Arkansas. It was punishing work among a hostile citizenry. Spirited guerilla fighters, such as Nathan Bedford Forrest, challenged the regiment, as did the harsh climate. Sickness took its toll as well; Scott’s 900 lost an astonishing 819 men to disease, at least in part due to the incompetence of Union army doctors. Waters wrote bitterly of the deprivations suffered by the men. Nevertheless, he was determined to continue
his fight for “the priceless legacy of human freedom which the future imperatively demand[s] of us.” He also continued to work on behalf of the freedmen, helping many to escape the lingering burdens of servitude, and writing at least one long report about the disgraceful treatment blacks received at the hands of their former masters. It was perhaps an indication of the hardship of his duty that Waters left the army on March 28, 1865, just weeks before the end of the war and exactly three years to the day from his enlistment.

After he was mustered out, Waters returned to his fiancée, Mary G. Smith, and his career in Brooklyn. He planned to be married in late May 1866. When Waters failed to appear at the wedding his bride tracked him down at his brother’s house and discovered that he had suffered a stroke, falling in the street just after purchasing a wedding ring. Mary and Lucien were married as he lay in bed. Lucien Waters died a few days later, on June 10, 1866.