

From *The Mirror*

(The punctuation and spelling are as they appeared in the original document.)

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VISIT OF A COLORED DELEGATION TO THE PRESIDENT

A delegation of colored representatives from different States, headed by Fred. Douglass and others, waited on the President on Wednesday last, with the view to set forth the claims of the blacks to civil and political equality. After speeches by Douglass and Downing, President Johnson made the following responses:

The President -- . . . The query came up, whether those two races, situated as they were before, without preparation, without time for passion and excitement to be appeased, and without time for the slightest improvement, when the one should be turned loose upon the other, and be thrown together at the ballot-box with the enmity and hate existing between them? . . . You have spoken about government. Where is power derived from? We say it is derived from the people. Let us take it so, and refer to the District of Columbia by way of illustration. Suppose, for instance, then, in this political community, which, to a certain extent, must have government, must have law—putting it now upon the broadest basis you can put it—take into consideration the relations in which the white race had heretofore borne to the colored race, is it proper to enforce upon this community, without their consent, the elective franchise without regard to color, making it universal? Now, when do you begin? Government must have a controlling power, must have a lodgment. For instance, suppose Congress should pass a law authorizing an election to be had at which all over twenty-one years of age, without regard to color, should be allowed to vote, and a majority should decide at such election that the elective franchise should not be universal, what would you do about it? Do you deny that first great principle of the right of the people to govern themselves? Will you resort to an arbitrary power, and say a majority of this people shall receive a state of things they are opposed to?

Mr. Downing—Apply what you have said, Mr. President, to South Carolina, for instance.

The President—Suppose you go to South Carolina, suppose you go to Ohio, that doesn't change the principle at all. The query to which I have referred still comes up, when Government is undergoing a fundamental change—Government commenced upon this principle—It has existed upon it, and you propose now to incorporate into it an element that did not exist before. I say, the query comes up, in undertaking this theory, whether we have a right to make a change in regard to the elective franchise in Ohio, for instance? Whether we shall not let the people in that State decide the matter for themselves?

Each community is better prepared to determine the depository of its political power than anybody else, and it is for the Legislature, for the people of Ohio to any who shall voted and not for the Congress of the United States. I might go down here to the ballot-box tomorrow to vote directly for universal suffrage, but if a great majority of this people said no, I should consider it would be tyrannical and arbitrary in me to attempt to force it upon them without their will. It is a fundamental text in my creed that the will of the people must be obeyed when fairly expressed. Is there anything wrong or unfair in that?

Mr. Douglass—smiling—A great deal of wrong, Mr. President, with all respect.

The President—It is the people of the States that must, for themselves, determine this question. I do not want to be engaged in a work that will commence a war of races. I want to begin the work of preparation. If a man demeans himself and shows evidence that this new state of things will operate, he will be protected in all his rights and given every possible advantage by the community, when they become reconciled socially and politically to certain things, then will this new order of affairs work harmoniously; but forced upon the people before they are prepared for it will be resisted and work inharmoniously. I feel, too, I feel a conviction that forcing this matter upon the people, upon the community, will result in the injury of both races, and the ruin

of one or the other. God knows I have no desire but the good of the whole human race. I would it were so that all you advocate could be done in the twinkling of an eye, but it is not in the nature of things and I do not assume or pretend to be wiser than Providence, or stronger than the laws of nature.

Mr. Douglass—I have to return you our thanks, Mr. President, for so kindly granting this interview. We did not come here expecting to argue this question with your Excellency, but simply to state what were our views and wishes in the premises. If we were disposed to argue the question and you would grant us permission, of course, we would endeavor to controvert some of the positions you have assumed.

Mr. Downing—Mr. Douglass, I take it that the President, by his kind expression and his very full treatment of the subject, must have contemplated some reply to the views he has advanced, and in which we certainly do not concur, and I say this with due respect.

The President—I thought you expected me to indicate, to some extent, what my views were on the subjects touched upon in your statement.

Mr. Downing—We are very happy, indeed, to have heard them.

The President—I think you will find, so far as the South is concerned that if you will inculcate there the idea in connection with the one you urge, that the colored people can live and advance in civilization to better advantage elsewhere than crowded together in the South, it would be better for them.

Mr. Douglass—But the masters have the making of the laws, and we cannot get away from the plantations.

The President—What prevents you?

Mr. Douglass—We have not the simple right of locomotion through the Southern State now.

The President—If the master now controls him or his actions, would he not control him in his vote?

Mr. Douglass—Let the negro once understand that he has an organic right to vote, and he will raise up a party in the Southern States among the poor who will rally with him. There is this conflict that you speak of between the wealthy slaveholder and the poor man.

The President—You touch right upon the point there. There is this conflict, and hence I suggest emigration. If he cannot get employment in the South, he has it in his power to go where he can get it.

In parting, the President stated that they were both desirous of accomplishing the same end but proposed to do so by the following different routes. Mr. Douglass, on turning to leave, remarked to his fellow-delegates, “The President sends us to the people and we will have to go and get the people right.”

The President—Yes, sir. I have great faith in the people. I believe they will do what is just, and have no doubt they will settle this question right, and hope that it will be submitted to them for full actions.

The delegates then bowed and withdrew.

[Editor Sheetz’s comment: Radicalism in congress and out, now see that they must either abandon their nefarious scheme for tyrannizing over the people or prepare to array themselves in direct antagonism with the Executive of the nation. The President is with the people, and the people will sustain him—notwithstanding Fred. Douglass’ impudent allusion about “getting them right.”]