

## 9 "A Friend to Justice" Supports the Manumission of Slaves

[*New-Jersey Gazette*, November 8, 1780.]

In challenging the arguments of "A Whig" (see Doc. 8), "A Friend to Justice" in the essay that follows went beyond most critics in his attack upon slavery. There was nothing unusual in his belief that personal liberty was an inviolable right belonging to all people, in the notion that bondage was antithetical to the republican social ideal and contrary to the spirit of the Declaration of Independence, or in the nature of the specific arguments used to confute the contentions of "A Whig." But he broke new ground in suggesting that the thoughts and feelings of slaves were of prime importance. There was something tragic about the propensity for white Jerseymen to discuss the merits and demerits of various abolition proposals almost exclusively within the context of the impact such action would have on white society. And the tragedy continued, for in every instance, whether at the state or national level, slavery was abolished in the United States on terms that best met the needs and interests of freemen rather than those of the men and women who languished in slavery.

[November 8, 1780]

Mr. Collins,<sup>1</sup>

In your paper, No. 145, I find a piece in vindication of slave-holding, and consequently of tyranny and oppression, signed A WHIG. I am sorry to see the name whig so shamefully prostituted, as no doubt it is, by being affixed to so ill-meant a performance. Indeed the author's assuming so respectable a character, puts me in mind of the story of the apples and horse-turd (pardon the expression), when floating down stream they happened to drift near to each other: The latter, you know, assumed an air of equality, and accosted the former by calling out, "we apples;" and I verily think might with as much propriety assume the character of that delicious fruit, as the author of the piece I have mentioned, could take upon him the character or title of a whig. A whig, Sir, abhors the very idea of slavery, let the colour or complexion of a slave be what it may. He is a friend to liberty, and a supporter of the rights of mankind universally, without any regard to partial interests or selfish views. Every pulse of his heart, beats for liberty — and for general, not partial liberty. He therefore who pretends to be a whig, and yet, under any pretence whatsoever, would hold numbers of his fellow-men in slavery, denying them those rights which, in his own case, he deems essential to happiness, must be a dangerous impostor, unworthy the confidence of his fellow-citizens, and should never, in any case, be trusted with power. . . .

The gentleman very gravely tells us, "He hopes no one will do him the injustice to think him an advocate for slavery;" and yet at the same time declares himself utterly opposed to setting our present slaves free. What he means by this kind of jargon, I am rather at a loss to conjecture; unless it is, that the next generation shall

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have his consent to abolish slavery, provided he and his partners in tyranny may have liberty to hold their slaves like their other cattle, and enjoy the profits of their labour during their time.

He goes on however and tells us, "That at this time when many parts of the state in the neighbourhood of the enemy are laid waste and rendered desolate by the ravages of that army, and many families driven from their lands depend in a great measure on the labour of their slaves for a livelihood, it would be unreasonable to deprive them of their only support." That is, in other words, it would be unreasonable to deprive them of that means of support which in reality they never had the least right to enjoy. As well might I say, if I had taken forcible possession of my neighbour's horse seven years ago, and detained him unjustly in my service ever since, that it would be unreasonable at this time to oblige me to deliver him up to his right owner, seeing horses are now so very scarce and dear, that it must put me to great difficulty and expence to supply his place.

In the next place our author affirms, with a degree of boldness peculiar to men deficient in reasoning, "That all slaves are in reality as much the property of their masters as the gold and silver for which they were bought;" and therefore concludes, that if they are set free their masters must be paid their value. Here, the reader will observe, that the master's right to the value is grounded on his right to and property in the person of his slave; and as this right is only ascertained by the gentleman's own assertion, we may perhaps very justly question its existence. If he who first stole or captivated my slave, when in his own country, did not by that wicked act of violence acquire a right to his person, which I suppose no one will presume to say he did, then how came he by that right? By what fuure means could he possibly obtain it? If he never did obtain it, then neither could he convey it to another; and every person claiming under him must have been, and still remain, as destitute of right as was he himself; and of course very little if any less criminal. And indeed in either case the degree of guilt must be almost beyond conception. For if he who steals another man's ox or horse is worthy of death, what must he be who steals or takes by force the man himself, and then holds him and his posterity as his property, to toil for him like oxen and horses?

If the masters of such slaves as were imported into this country never had a right to or property in them, 'tis plain that they could have no right to or property in their offspring as slaves; and then as the whole business of slave-holding must have been without right, and an abominable scene of tyranny and oppression; so the plea of right to restitution, in case they are set free, necessarily falls to the ground.

As to our author's idea of the masters of slaves being vested with a right to them by the laws of the land, it seems to have no other foundation than mere ignorance. It is utterly repugnant to the very nature and spirit of the common law; and no such right has ever yet been attempted to be created or established in this state, either by statute or act of assembly. And indeed if it had, the validity of a law for such a purpose might very justly perhaps be called in question, as being repugnant to the laws of God and nature.

If there is such a thing as a right to restitution in case our slaves are set free, it appears to me to be in favour of the slaves themselves; they seem to have an equitable claim upon their masters for at least the clear profits of all their past labour. And were they to receive this, it would not only tend to set them on foot in the world, but to encourage them to future exertions in order to acquire more property, and

become useful members of society. The old and decrepit too might in this way, upon the plainest principles of justice, be furnished in most cases with an ample support. So far therefore from proving burdensome or injurious to the community would the emancipating of those unhappy people be likely to prove, that it would most probably, in its present and remote consequences, prove highly beneficial to the state at large.

Indeed, if they are to be free at all, justice to ourselves as well as to them, seems now to call for their emancipation; in order that they may engage in the service of their country, and assist in defending those rights, which, as freemen they will be entitled to enjoy. Why, let me ask, should they thus be kept from the dangers of the field, when we ourselves are so daily exposed? What can induce us to be so very frugal of their blood, and at the same time so lavish with our own? If they are to partake of the benefits resulting from the war, let them also pay their proportion of the price. Why should our blood ransom both them and us? Why should it alone stain the fields of our affliction, and as it were manure the ground, in order to raise vines and fig-trees for them to sit under?

Our author's last objection against freeing our slaves is, "because they are treated with a humanity unknown to other parts of the world, and are better off than the generality of the white poor, who are obliged, those who have families, from their necessities to work harder than the slaves in general in this state." This objection however must really appear laughable when we view it as having fallen from the pen of a gentleman who has just told us, as mentioned above, that he "hopes no one will do him the injustice to think him an advocate for slavery." He is not willing it seems to be thought an advocate for slavery, and yet is opposed to setting our negroes free so long as they are well used. According to this doctrine, we must commence devils towards our slave in order that it may become our duty to do them justice. They can never hope for freedom whilst they feel themselves kindly treated. And does the gentleman really imagine that such a change in our conduct would afford them a promising prospect? Could they possibly view it as a prelude to their wished for deliverance?

In short the writer, if we may judge from his own reasoning, seems to be but very little acquainted with the most noble and lovely feelings of the human heart. In his opinion, it seems, our slaves may rest contented in their servile state, provided they are not obliged to work harder than some of their neighbouring whites. He appears to have no idea of the intolerable mortification that must incessantly arise from being wholly subservient to the will of another — from being a mere machine in his hands, utterly deprived of the greatest of all human enjoyments, the privilege of judging for himself, and of acting pursuant to his own judgment. When in reality, compared with this, the greatest afflictions that can be supposed to result from hard labour or poor fare, would scarcely be thought worthy the attention of a great and generous mind.

The man who only abhors tyranny when it points at himself, is altogether unworthy the esteem of the virtuous; and can never, until he becomes a new creature, merit the confidence of a free people. A good man loves liberty, because liberty tends to render mankind happy; and the more general it is, the more he feels himself pleased; — he even participates in the felicity of those who enjoy it, and fancies all their happiness his own. The love of liberty is indeed a god-like virtue — it pervades the whole world, and delights in the joy of all.

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But to conclude; we may expect that our negro-masters in general, like drowning men, will catch at every twig, at every shadow, to prolong, if possible, their reign over their black subjects. And in this point of light we may view those, who, ashamed to object generally against emancipating our slaves, have recourse to the plea of its being at present inexpedient. A wretched plea indeed! How can it be inexpedient to embrace the earliest opportunity to do justice? We have heretofore thrown the blame of the slave-trade, and our holding our negroes in bondage, upon the King and Parliament of Great-Britain.<sup>2</sup> But this pretext will serve us no longer. We are now at liberty to do them justice — to do to them as we would they should do to us were we in their situation. And if we withhold from them this justice, not only the stigma, but the iniquity must forever rest upon our own heads.

If our author has anything further to say upon the above subject, let him give us his name, or be treated with silent contempt; let him come forth from his lurking hole that we may be able to judge of the colour of his skin — that every true whig may have the pleasure of pointing at him when-ever he sees him pass, and of saying, There goes the wretch, who, even in this land of liberty, has the effrontery to vindicate tyranny.

A FRIEND TO JUSTICE.

1. Isaac Collins, publisher of the *Gazette*.
2. On several occasions in the eighteenth century the British government disallowed colonial laws which would have abolished the international traffic in slaves in America. Thomas Jefferson tried in vain to insert a paragraph in the Declaration of Independence blaming George III for the slave trade. In truth the argument is specious: regardless of the laws on the books, Americans were not forced to import or purchase black Africans and enslave them.

### 10 “Homo Sum” Advocates Gradual Emancipation Rather than Immediate Abolition

[*New-Jersey Gazette*, March 21, 1781.]

Even among the most vigorous opponents of slavery, only a few dared propose an immediate abolition of the iniquitous institution (see Doc. 6). Most favored a gradualist approach to black liberation. However, many citizens believed otherwise and thus opposed the antislavery movement because of the dire consequences that would supposedly result if the 10-12 percent of the population in slavery were suddenly given their freedom (see Doc. 8). In the essay below, “Homo Sum” sought to allay such apprehensions by assuring the public that those who had recently petitioned the legislature to abolish slavery