Congress Debates "The Slavery Question"

--This, without doubt, will be the most difficult problem with which Congress will have to grapple. And yet it can not be neglected. As was clearly foreseen at the outbreak of hostilities, wherever our armies march slavery disappears before them. Not that our troops are necessarily abolitionists. But the slaves run away or are abandoned as the troops approach. An old negro found at Hampton by one of our regiments, the other day, being asked if he had run away from his master, replied, “No; massa ran away from me!” It must be so throughout the revolted section of the country. As our armies advance the masters will run away from the slaves, or the slaves will run away from the masters. In either event the result will be the same. Now so long as we are on the border of Virginia, and the runaways and derelicts amount to a few hundred in number, it is easy to provide for them, and to keep books of account with their reputed owners. But when the refugees are counted by thousands and tens of thousands what is to be done with them? This is a question which should not be left to the discretion of the Federal commanders. Men’s opinions will differ: Government should have a uniform policy. The people of the North, moreover, who will be sorely taxed to provide means to put down this rebellion, have a right to know whether any part of their money will be used for the support of thousands of fugitive slaves who, after the war, are to be returned to their conquered owners. The question, we admit, is very embarrassing. Every possible solution presents grave difficulties. But it is the duty of Congress to decide it one way or another, and we trust members will go to Washington prepared to assume the responsibility.

Harper’s Weekly, July 6, 1861.