

Excerpts from “Rules and Regulations for Assistant Commissioners,” 1865

General Oliver Otis Howard, head of the Freedmen’s Bureau, sent the following instructions to his Assistant Commissioners in the South during the summer of 1865, just as the war was ending. These regulations directed the work of Bureau agents throughout the South, though there was no guarantee that individual agents would follow them to the letter. Just as important as revealing the intended work of agents, the document illustrates the principles underlying the Bureau’s efforts: racial justice, economic liberalism, and a swift end to government support.

Relief establishments will be discontinued as speedily as the cessation of hostilities and the return of industrial pursuits will permit. Great discrimination will be observed in administering relief, so as to include none that are not absolutely necessitous and destitute. Every effort will be made to render the people self-supporting. Government supplies will only be temporarily issued to enable destitute persons speedily to support themselves. . . .

In all places where there is an interruption of civil war, . . . the control of all subjects relating to refugees and freedmen being committed to this bureau, the Assistant Commissioners will adjudicate . . . all difficulties arising between negroes themselves, or between negroes and whites or Indians. . . .

Negroes must be free to choose their own employers, and be paid for their labor. Agreements should be free, *bona fide* acts, approved by proper officers, and their inviolability enforced on both parties. The old system of overseers, tending to compulsory unpaid labor and acts of cruelty and oppression is prohibited.

Source: House Ex. Doc., no. 11, 39 Cong., 1 Sess., p. 45. In Walter Fleming, ed. *Documentary History of Reconstruction* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1906), I, 328-30. (Document 4.9.5)