

LINCOLN LORE

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THE PRESIDENT'S SON AND THE WAR

There has appeared at intervals in Lincoln Lore, monographs discussing current criticisms of Lincoln and his policies. No charge preferred against the President seems to have been so well supported as the allegation that "He kept his son out of the war for many months while other men's sons were giving their lives for the country." This attitude is so contradictory to Lincoln's very nature that one wonders just what did delay the military service of Lincoln's oldest boy.

A letter which Abraham Lincoln wrote to Grant on January 18, 1865, and Grant's reply serve as two of the most important exhibits relating to this question. They follow:

Lincoln's Letter to Grant, Jan. 19, 1865

"Please read and answer this letter as though I was not President, but only a friend. My son, now in his twenty-second year, having graduated at Harvard, wishes to see something of the war before it ends. I do not wish to put him in the ranks, nor yet to give him a commission, to which those who have already served long are better entitled and better qualified to hold. Could he, without embarrassment to you or detriment to the service, go into your military family with some nominal rank, I, and not the public furnishing his necessary means? If no, say so without the least hesitation, because I am as anxious and as deeply interested that you shall not be encumbered as you can be yourself."

Grant's Reply Dated Jan. 21, 1865

"Your favor of this date in relation to your son serving in some military capacity is received. I will be most happy to have him in my military family in the manner you propose. The nominal rank given him is immaterial, but I would suggest that of captain, as I have three staff-officers now, of considerable service, in no higher grade. Indeed, I have one officer with only the rank of lieutenant who has been in the service from the beginning of the war. This, however, will make no difference, and I would still say give the rank of captain.—Please excuse my writing on a half sheet. I have no resource but to take the blank half of your letter."

Besides these two letters we have another source of information which throws some light on the subject. Emilie Todd Helm, widow of the Confederate general, Ben Hardin Helm, spent about one week in the White House in the fall of 1863 and kept a diary which is invaluable. The editor of Lincoln Lore had the pleasure of knowing Mrs. Helm and feels the notes she made at the time of her visit to her sister, Mrs. Lincoln, can be accepted as absolutely reliable.

We are interested in the reactions of three people towards Robert Lincoln's military service—Robert himself, his father, and his mother.

The Boy

Robert Lincoln would have been an abnormal boy indeed if he had not wanted to enter the service at the first call for volunteers.

This excerpt from the diary of Emilie Helm made at the White House in November, 1863, reveals that he had been appealing to his parents to allow him to enlist:

"She (Mrs. Lincoln) is frightened about Robert going into the army. She said today to Brother Lincoln (I was reading in another part of the room but could not help overhearing the conversation): "Of course, Mr. Lincoln, I know that Robert's plea to go into the army is manly and noble and I want him to go, but oh! I am so frightened he may never come back to us!"

No one has ever questioned Robert Lincoln's bravery. When he was elected Supervisor in Chicago in 1876 and fought the "ringsters" of South Chicago his mettle was proven. The appointment as Secretary of War in two cabinets would hardly have been given to one who was a coward or a slacker. It appears that Robert Lincoln should be relieved from any accusation that might be placed against him for lack of patriotism, and it is significant to note that when he became of age he joined the service on

his own volition as indicated by the President's letter to Grant.

The Father

What was President Lincoln's attitude towards Robert's tardy military career? The critics have charged that the President kept him out of the service. In the diary of Mrs. Helm, President Lincoln appears in the role of a pleader for Robert in his desire to enter the army. Mrs. Helm says that when Mrs. Lincoln was worrying about her son not coming back if he enlisted, Mr. Lincoln said to his wife: "Many a poor mother, Mary, has had to make this sacrifice and has given up every son she had and lost them all."

Those who imply that there is impropriety in Lincoln's letter to Grant, a request for favoritism and an attempt to shield his son from danger, will not detect in Grant's reply any indication that the General so understood Lincoln.

Robert Lincoln was a man twenty-one years of age at the time this letter to Grant was written. He was a graduate of America's leading university at an early period when a very small percentage of American youths were sent to college. It appears that he was qualified to be something more than a private.

Cyrus Hamlin, son of the vice-president, entered the army from Colby University as a captain and aide-de-camp on the staff of General Fremont and Robert Lincoln was to become a captain on the staff of General Grant. One biographer has summarized his military history as follows:

"A subordinate staff appointment was given to Robert Lincoln as such appointments were given to hundreds of other bright young men and there all 'parental favoritism' terminated. He served until the end of the war. He was at the fall of Petersburg and also with the army in the pursuit and capture of Lee's army. He was at Appomattox when General Lee surrendered."

The Mother

Mrs. Lincoln's attitude towards Robert's enlistment is very clearly set forth in a statement which Emilie Helm set down in her diary on her memorable visit there in 1863.

While Mrs. Helm was visiting in the White House General Sickles and Senator Harris called. After they had made some remarks to the widow of the Confederate general about northern victories and had received from her a reply that angered them, according to Mrs. Helm's diary, "Senator Harris turned to Mrs. Lincoln abruptly and said: 'Why isn't Robert in the army? He is old enough and strong enough to serve his country. He should have gone to the front some time ago.' Sister Mary's face turned white as death and I saw that she was making a desperate effort at self-control. She bit her lip, but answered quietly, 'Robert is making his preparations now to enter the Army, Senator Harris; he is not a shirker as you seem to imply for he has been anxious to go for a long time. If fault there be, it is mine, I have insisted that he should stay in college a little longer as I think an educated man can serve his country with more intelligent purpose than an ignorant.'" "

This statement by Mrs. Lincoln supplemented by Mr. Lincoln's appeal on Robert's behalf, already mentioned, should allow the reader to conclude that Robert Lincoln was no slacker in spirit at least and that his father was no party in his failure to enter the service earlier in the war. Neither do we feel that Mrs. Lincoln, at this time on the verge of insanity, should be too severely criticised in the attitude she may have taken about her son's enlistment.

Mr. Lincoln told Emilie Helm in 1863: "I feel worried about Mary. Her nerves have gone to pieces; she cannot hide from me that the strain she has been under has been too much for her mental as well as her physical health." Mrs. Keckley, writing in 1862, said that Mrs. Lincoln's grieving over the death of her son, Willie, was so prolonged and profound that Mr. Lincoln once put his arm around her and, pointing towards a hospital for the insane which lay in view, remarked, "Mary, if you do not control yourself we will have to put you over there."