

# LINCOLN LORE

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## MAGNANIMITY—A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR TO LINCOLN'S RENOWN

Abraham Lincoln's attitude towards those who were opposed to him and his policies demonstrates one of the most unusual traits of character in this outstanding world figure. His magnanimity often brought upon him the reproach of his political allies, as he was openly accused, upon becoming president, of giving the most desirable appointments to his opponents.

When his cabinet had been so reorganized as to contain four Democrats and three Republicans, his political advisors complained that he had given the opposition the majority, to which it is said he calmly replied that he was there to make it even.

One of the most pointed evidences of Lincoln's hesitancy to do anything that would appear like malice was his attitude toward Colfax who is said to have favored Douglas over Lincoln in the senatorial campaign of 1858. After Lincoln had appointed Smith to a place in the cabinet for which Colfax had been a candidate, Lincoln wrote to Colfax explaining his attitude:

"A tender of the appointment was not withheld, in any part, because of anything happening in 1858. Indeed, I should have decided as I did easier than I did, had that matter never existed . . . I now have to beg that you will not do me the injustice to suppose for a moment that I remember anything against you in malice."

In the matter of minor appointments Lincoln did not allow opposition to him within the party ranks to prejudice his decisions. He had made the promise of some office to Walter Davis, and Herndon wrote about it and received this reply from Lincoln:

"I understand, he is of good character, is one of the young men, is of the mechanics, and always faithful, and never troublesome, a Whig and is poor, with the support of a widow-mother thrown almost exclusively on him by the death of his brother. If these are wrong reasons, then I have been wrong; but I have certainly not been selfish in it, because, in my greatest need of friends, he was against me and for Baker."

Lincoln wrote in an autograph book upon one occasion these words: "Consider if you know any good thing that no man desires for himself." There was one thing that Lincoln greatly desired for himself in 1849 and that was the Land Office. There has been much controversy over his attitude in this matter, and the correspondence with reference to it allows us to appraise his sentiments.

On April 7, 1849, Lincoln wrote that he had promised to secure the appointment of Cyrus Edwards to the General Land Office and later on in agreement with Baker subscribed to other arrangements that might be made between Edwards and another candidate. "In relation to these pledges," Lincoln wrote, "I must not only be chaste but above suspicion." It finally developed that the administration would not appoint Edwards and was anxious that Lincoln himself be appointed. Lincoln reacted as follows: "If the office could be secured to Illinois by my consent to accept it and not otherwise, I give that consent."

After Edwards and Lincoln had both been rejected and Butterfield appointed to the rather lucrative office, Lincoln wrote a long letter to Gillespie from which the following excerpts are copied:

"The better part of one's life consists of his friendships; and, of them, mine with Mr. Edwards was one of the most cherished. I have not been false to it. At a word

I could have had the office any time before the Department was committed to Mr. Butterfield—at least Mr. Ewing and the President say as much. That word I forbore to speak, partly for other reasons, but chiefly for Mr. Edwards' sake—losing the office that he might gain it, I was always for; but to lose his friendship, by the effort for him, would oppress me very much, were I not sustained by the utmost consciousness of rectitude . . . I intended to keep, and now believe I did keep, Mr. Edwards above myself . . . I wish the office had been so bestowed as to encourage our friends in future contests, and I regret Mr. Edwards' feelings towards me. These two things away, I should have no regrets—at least I think I would not."

Some of Lincoln's friends were indignant that Butterfield received the appointment over Lincoln, and one of them took occasion in the Illinois Legislature to make an attack on Butterfield and Mr. Ewing who had worked hard for Butterfield's success. In a letter to the editor of the *Chicago Journal* Lincoln, commenting on this speech, wrote as follows:

"When Mr. Butterfield was appointed Commissioner of the Land Office, I expected him to be an able and faithful officer, and nothing has since come to my knowledge disappointing that expectation. As to Mr. Ewing, his position has been one of great difficulty. I believe him, too, to be an able and faithful officer. A more intimate acquaintance with him would probably change the views of most of those who have complained of him."

There is a sequel to the Land Office story which reveals still further Lincoln's magnanimity. A member of Congress representing the Chicago district asked for an appointment in the army on behalf of a son of Mr. Butterfield. Arnold, a friend of Lincoln, claims that when the application was presented the President paused a moment and then said:

"Mr. Justin Butterfield once obtained an appointment I very much wanted, and in which my friends believed I could have been useful, and to which they thought I was fairly entitled, and I have hardly ever felt so bad at any failure in my life, but I am glad of an opportunity of doing a service to his son."

Lincoln's attitude towards his subordinate officers during the war also furnished many instances of his magnanimity. Before Lincoln met General Grant he wrote him a letter complimenting him on his success at Vicksburg. Lincoln had differed with Grant as to the method of attack and in the concluding sentence wrote:

"I now wish to make the personal acknowledgment that you were right and I was wrong."

In the famous letter to General Hooker, Lincoln wrote:

"I have placed you at the head of the Army of the Potomac . . . I have heard, in such way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the army and the Government needed a dictator. Of course it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the command. Only those generals who gain successes can set up dictators."

It is in the concluding paragraph of the Second Inaugural Address that we find the best expression of Abraham Lincoln's magnanimity which sounded a new and unheard note in military statesmanship:

WITH MALICE TOWARDS NONE;  
WITH CHARITY FOR ALL.