

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN AND PATRONAGE

One of the great burdens of administration, which rested on Lincoln as president, was the problem of patronage. At times he seemed to be submerged by the rush of office seekers, who descended on him in great droves and made life miserable for him until some of them, at least, got what they wanted.

A friend of Lincoln, witnessing one of these charges by men seeking office, who seemed indifferent to the dangers which threatened the government, heard Lincoln remark: "I seem like one sitting in a palace assigning apartments to importunate applicants while the structure is on fire and likely soon to perish."

There were times, however, when Lincoln had occasion to exercise his humor as he faced the horde of office seekers. On one occasion, when he had a slight attack of smallpox, he said to one of his secretaries, "Tell all the office seekers to come at once for now I have something I can give to all of them."

During Lincoln's political experience, he was compelled by changing conditions to look at patronage from at least three different viewpoints. As a provincial politician, partisan bias seems to have influenced him. Upon his election to the presidency, national expediency determined his appointments to a large extent. After the war had begun to make its ravages and left in its wake so many helpless individuals, the question of patronage was approached through military recognition.

Partisan Bias

Lincoln and his contemporaries of the early Illinois days looked upon patronage as one means of rewarding those who had rendered political service or as an incentive to further party loyalty.

While a member of Congress, Lincoln had his first real experience with the question of patronage. He wrote to the Secretary of the Treasury that he and his colleague, Col. Baker, were the only Whig members of Congress from Illinois, and that they were held responsible to some extent for the appointments which might be made. He further stated, "I therefore hope I am not obtrusive in saying in this way, for him and myself, that when a citizen of Illinois is to be appointed in your department, to an office either in or out of the state, we most respectfully ask to be heard."

In 1849, a letter written to the Secretary of the Navy reveals how closely he watched patronage in relation to the success of the party. Apparently most of the government advertising had been given to Democratic papers, whereupon he wrote: "This gives offense to the Whig papers, and if persisted in, will leave the administration without any newspaper support whatever."

In another letter written to the Secretary of the Interior at this time, Lincoln assured him, "I will take pains to avoid imposing any unworthy man on the department." It must not be assumed that Lincoln nominated men for positions he did not think they were qualified to fill. Even his own relatives could receive no offices through his solicitation, where it was evident they were unprepared for the tasks assigned.

National Expediency

The transition from recommending applicants primarily from partisan loyalty to appointing offices that the nation might best be served was a difficult one to make because of the political pressure brought to bear on Lincoln as president.

The cabinet appointments caused the first great struggle about patronage. Lincoln immediately took the posi-

tion that it was more important that the Union be preserved than that some political party be accommodated. It was not long before his cabinet consisted of four Republicans and four Democrats, and this brought down upon his head much criticism.

To one noted editor who complained about Stanton, a Democrat, Lincoln wrote: "I wish to correct an erroneous impression of yours in regard to the Secretary of War. He mixes no politics whatever with his duties."

There was an office in the department of Mr. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury, called The Superintending Architect of the Treasury Department. Lincoln was urged to make an appointment for this office. He wrote a note to the Secretary, inquiring if the present incumbent should be removed and, if so, should a candidate for the place, a Mr. Adams, be appointed. Lincoln then put into the letter some of the humor with which so many of his otherwise serious letters are colored. He wrote:

"Mr. Adams is magnificently recommended; but the great point in his favor is that Thurlow Weed and Horace Greeley join in recommending him. I suppose the like never happened before, and never will again; so that it is now or never. What say you?"

In all branches of the government it might be said that as far as Lincoln's influence was concerned the public good was paramount in the making of appointments. To General Hooker he wrote: "I believe you to be a brave and skillful soldier, which of course I like. I also believe you do not mix politics with your profession, in which you are right."

Military Recognition

While the subject of patronage was reduced to a minimum in the Army and merit alone served as a way of promotion, out of the military service there did spring up a new approach to the question. Lincoln sets it forth in a very clear way in the following letter to the Postmaster-General, written on July 24, 1863:

"Yesterday little indorsements of mine went to you in two cases of postmasterships sought for widows whose husbands have fallen in the battles of this war. These cases occurring on the same day brought me to reflect more attentively than I have before done, as to what is fairly due from us here, in the dispensing of patronage, towards the men who, by fighting our battles, bear the chief burden of saving our country. My conclusion is that, other claims and qualifications being equal, they have the better right; and this is especially applicable to the disabled soldier, and the deceased soldier's family."

As late as March 1, 1865, about a month and a half before his assassination, Lincoln wrote the following letter:

To Lieutenant-Governor Winfield Scott, President;
Howard Potter, Wm. E. Dodge, Jr., and Theo.
Roosevelt:

Gentlemen: I have received your address on the part of the bureau for the Employment of Disabled and Discharged Soldiers which has recently been established in connection with the Protective War Claim Association of the Sanitary Commission.

It gives me pleasure to assure you of my hearty concurrence with the purposes you announce, and I shall at all times be ready to recognize the paramount claims of the soldiers of the nation in the disposition of public trusts. I shall be glad also to make these suggestions to the several heads of departments.