

LINCOLN LORE

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THE GENERALS COMPLAIN

It is reported that Lincoln said on one occasion, "I shall not try to read, much less answer all criticisms of me and my associates, else this office might as well be closed for any other business." Nevertheless he was obliged to read and answer most of the complaints which came to him from the officers in the field.

The question of rank was always troublesome and on one occasion Lincoln wrote to a general, "I do not appreciate this matter of rank on paper as you officers do." Again and again jealousies arose between those who were, and those who were not, educated at West Point. Lincoln told one general, "You have constantly urged the idea that you were persecuted because you did not come from West Point . . . this, my dear general, is, I fear, the rock on which you have split."

Political prejudice was continually finding expression in the attitude of the officers and it caused Lincoln the most trouble, with one of his generals finally running against him for president in the campaign of 1864. To another officer he had occasion to say, "I have heard in such a 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. What I ask of you is military success and I will risk the dictatorship."

Excerpts from a few letters which Lincoln wrote to his generals are exhibited to show the difficulties which continually confronted him.

Washington, July 17, 1864

Major-General Hunter, Harper's Ferry, West Virginia:

Yours of this morning received. You misconceive. The order you complain of was only nominally mine, and was framed by those who really made it with no thought of making you a scapegoat. It seemed to be General Grant's wish that the forces under General Wright and those under you should join and drive at the enemy under General Wright. Wright had the larger part of the force, but you had the rank. It was thought that you would prefer Crooks's commanding your part to your serving in person under Wright. That is all of it. General Grant wishes you to remain in command of the department, and I do not wish to order otherwise.

A. Lincoln.

Executive Mansion, Washington, July 14, 1864.

Hon. Secretary of War.

Sir: Your note of to-day inclosing General Halleck's letter of yesterday relative to offensive remarks supposed to have been made by the Postmaster-General concerning the military officers on duty about Washington is received. The general's letter in substance demands of me that if I approve the remarks I shall strike the names of those officers from the rolls; and that if I do not approve them the Postmaster-General shall be dismissed from the Cabinet.

Whether the remarks were really made I do not know, nor do I suppose such knowledge is necessary to a correct response. If they were made, I do not approve them; and yet, under the circumstances, I would not dismiss a member of the Cabinet therefor. I do not consider what may have been hastily said in a moment of vexation at so severe a loss is sufficient ground for so grave a step. Besides this, truth is generally the best vindication against slander. I propose continuing to be myself the judge as to when a member of the Cabinet shall be dismissed.

Yours truly,

A. Lincoln.

Executive Mansion, Washington, August 18, 1863

Major-General Blunt:

Yours of July 31st received. Governor Carney did leave some papers with me concerning you; but they made no great impression upon me, and I believe they are not altogether such as you seem to think. As I am not proposing to act upon them, I do not now take the time to reexamine them.

I regret to find you denouncing so many persons as liars, scoundrels, fools, thieves, and persecutors of yourself. Your military position looks critical, but did anybody force you into it? Have you been ordered to confront and fight 10,000 men with 3000 men? The government cannot make men; and it is very easy, when a man has been given the highest commission, for him to turn on those who gave it and vilify them for not giving him a command according to his rank.

My appointment of you first as a brigadier, and then as a major-general, was evidence of my appreciation of your services; and I have since marked but one thing in connection with you with which to be dissatisfied . . . I take the facts of this case as you state them yourself, and not from any report of Governor Carney, or other person.

Yours truly,

A. Lincoln.

Executive Mansion, Washington, October 14, 1864.

Major-General Butler, Butler's Headquarters, Virginia:

It is said that Captain Joseph R. Findley, of Company F, 76th Pennsylvania Volunteers, has been summarily dismissed the service for supposed skulking. Such representations are made to me of his good character, long service, and good behavior in many battles, as to induce the wish that you would reexamine the case. At all events, send me a statement of it as you have it.

A. Lincoln.

Executive Mansion, Washington, December 24, 1863

Major-General Banks:

Yours of the sixth instant has been received and fully considered. I deeply regret to have said or done anything which could give you pain or uneasiness. I have all the while intended you to be master, as well in regard to reorganizing a State government for Louisiana, as in regard to the military matters of the department; and hence my letters on reconstruction have nearly, if not quite, all been addressed to you. My error has been that it did not occur to me that Governor Shepley or any one else would set up a claim to act independently of you; and hence I said nothing expressly upon the point.

Language has not been guarded at a point where no danger was thought of. I now tell you that in every dispute with whomsoever, you are master . . .

Yours as ever,

A. Lincoln.

Executive Mansion, Washington, August 10, 1863.

My dear General Rosecrans:

Yours of the 1st was received two days ago. I think you must have inferred more than General Halleck has intended, as to any dissatisfaction of mine with you. I am sure you, as a reasonable man, would not have been wounded could you have heard all my words and seen all my thoughts in regard to you. I have not abated in my kind feeling for and confidence in you . . .

And now be assured once more that I think of you in all kindness and confidence, and that I am not watching you with an evil eye.

Yours very truly,

A. Lincoln.