

# LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor  
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 720

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

January 25, 1943

## WAR AND POLITICAL AVAILABILITY

Political availability is a compensation not usually listed among the benefits derived from military service, nevertheless it is a valuable asset for one who hopes to be looked upon with favor by a post-war electorate. Patriotic fervor creates a demand for representatives who have succeeded in military enterprises. Usually the fighting men of today are the law makers of tomorrow, and very often an officer of high rank becomes the Chief Executive of the Nation. The Revolutionary War gave us Washington, the War of 1812 discovered Jackson, the Mexican War introduced Taylor, the Civil War elevated Grant to the Presidency, the Spanish War called attention to Theodore Roosevelt and the relief enterprises directed by Herbert Hoover in the first World War were likely most responsible for his political advancement.

When Lincoln was serving in Congress in 1848, the Mexican War was just being brought to a close, and much political capital had been made and lost during the enterprise. The Whigs had evaluated the political availability of General Zachary Taylor, whose potentiality as a vote gatherer was given sufficient consideration to favor him over the veteran, Henry Clay. The Democrats had selected General Cass as their standard bearer and were playing up his military achievements in the War of 1812 as an offset to Taylor's Mexican exploits.

As is usually the case, the presidential contest began on the floor of Congress and this gave Lincoln an opportunity to make what is known as his speech on "Military Heroes." It is doubtful if Lincoln ever used the power of ridicule and sarcasm with such telling force as he did on this occasion. He seemed to reach a climax in one part of his speech which he designated "military coat-tails" when he accused his opponents of running the last five presidential candidates under "the ample military coat-tail of General Jackson."

His matchless ability to use illustrations with telling effect was brought into play here with this story: "A fellow once advertised that he had made a discovery by which he could make a new man out of an old one, and have enough of the stuff left to make a little yellow dog." Here was his application

of the story: "Just such a discovery has General Jackson's popularity been to you. You not only twice made President of him out of it, but you have had enough of the stuff left to make Presidents of several comparatively small men since; and it is your chief reliance now to make still another."

It was just here that the Democrats who had accused the Whigs of "taking shelter under General Taylor's military coat-tail," admitted defeat in the forensic contest at least, and one of their members interrupted Lincoln with these words, "We give it up."

Possibly the more humorous remarks are found in that part of the address where Lincoln refers to his own military service in the Black Hawk War and compares it with the reputed military experience of General Cass.

"Speaking of General Cass's career reminds me of my own. I was not at Stillman's defeat, but I was about as near it as Cass was to Hull's surrender; and, like him, I saw the place very soon afterward. It is quite certain I did not break my sword, for I had none to break; but I bent a musket pretty badly on one occasion. If Cass broke his sword, the idea is he broke it in desperation; I bent the musket by accident. If General Cass went in advance of me in picking huckleberries, I guess I surpassed him in charges upon the wild onions. If he saw any live, fighting Indians, it was more than I did; but I had a good many bloody struggles with the mosquitoes, and although I never fainted from the loss of blood, I can truly say I was often very hungry. Mr. Speaker, if I should ever conclude to doff whatever our Democratic friends may suppose there is of black-cockade federalism about me, and therefore they shall take me up as their candidate for the presidency, I protest they shall not make fun of me, as they have of General Cass, by attempting to write me into a military hero."

After Lincoln was elected to the Presidency and found himself the Commander in Chief of the Army in a great Civil War, he came to learn the tremendous power of "political availability" as it found expression in military achievements.

His Secretary of War was the first to come under fire and Lincoln found it necessary to advise Editor Bennett, "I wish to correct an erroneous impression of yours in regard to the Secretary of War. He mixes no politics whatever with his duties."

Col. William Morrison wrote a letter to Lincoln in which he revealed suspicion of a political bias on the part of the President in making military promotions. Lincoln replied, "In considering merit, the world has abundant evidence that I disregard politics."

In one of the most famous letters Lincoln ever wrote, his note to General Hooker on January 26, 1863, he commented, "I also believe you do not mix politics with your profession in which you are right," yet having heard that the general had made a statement that "both the army and the government needed a dictator," Lincoln advised Hooker, "Only those generals who gain successes can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success and I will risk the dictatorship."

A real test of political availability in military circles came in the campaign for the Presidency in 1864. It appeared to Lincoln just a short time before the election that he must surely bow to an opponent, who had been at one time his highest ranking general, and who had come out against him on the opposition ticket as a candidate for the Presidency.

His fears of defeat were groundless, however, as McClellan lacked the one outstanding requisite for "political availability" among military men, and that was some remarkable display of courage, or a notable victory, neither of which McClellan had achieved.

Lincoln was not slow to recognize the honor due to the men in the ranks and the compensations rightfully theirs, but he also honored men who contributed in any way to the one great objective of winning the war. In no place did he more clearly express himself in this respect than in a letter written to George Opdyke and others on December 2, 1863: "Honor to the soldier and sailor everywhere who bravely bears his country's cause. Honor also to the citizen who cares for his brother in the field, and serves, as he best can, the same cause—honor to him, only less than to him who braves, for the common good, the storms of heaven and the storms of battle."