

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S REPLY TO GREELEY'S OPEN LETTER

During the latter part of August, 1862, eighty-five years ago, the famous Greeley-Lincoln open letter correspondence took place. The appearance of a recently published book, *Horace Greeley and the Republican Party* by Jeter A. Isely, further adds to the seasonable timeliness of the reprinting of Lincoln's reply to Greeley in this early September issue of Lincoln Lore. Lincoln's retort to the *New York Tribune* editor's attack is one of the classics in Lincoln literature. Although copied verbatim from the holograph writing some liberties are taken with the original paragraph arrangement as well as the use of typographical variations for emphasis as it appears in this issue of Lincoln Lore.

Executive Mansion

Washington, August 22, 1862

Hon. Horace Greeley:

Dear Sir,

I have just read yours of the 19th addressed to myself through the *New York Tribune*.

If there be in it any statements, or assumptions of fact, which I may know to be erroneous, I do not, now and here, controvert them.

If there be in it any inferences which may believe to be falsely drawn, I do not now and here, argue against them.

If there be perceptible (sic) in it any impatient and dictatorial tone, I waive it in deference to an old friend, whose heart I have always supposed to be right.

As to the policy I "seem to be pursuing" as you say, I have not meant to leave any one in doubt.

I would save the Union.

I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution.

The sooner the national authority can be restored; the nearer the Union will be "the Union as it was."

(Broken eggs can never be mended, and the longer the breaking proceeds the more will be broken).

If there be those (any) who would not save the Union, unless they could at the same time save slavery, I do not agree with them.

If there be those (any) who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time destroy slavery, I do not agree with them.

My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery.

If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it.

And if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it.

And if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that.

What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union.

And what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union.

I shall do less whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause.

And I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause.

I shall try to correct errors when shown to be errors.

And I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views.

I have here stated my purpose according to my view of official duty; and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed personal wish that all men everywhere could be free.

Yours,

A. Lincoln.

Lincoln's open letter reply dated but two days after Greeley's remonstrance first appeared in *National Intelligence* for August 23, 1862. The words in brackets relating to "broken eggs" were deleted by Lincoln on the recommendation of the editor of the paper.

The most important preliminary to the Greeley open letter editorial entitled "Prayer of Twenty Million" was the passing by Congress on July 12, 1862, of the Confiscation Act. The law dealt with the punishment for treason; defined the crime of rebellion and fixed a penalty for it; directed the President to cause real and personal property of civil and military officers of the Confederacy to be seized and after due notice properties of all directly or indirectly engaged in armed rebellion; freed slaves of those convicted of treason or rebellion; revised the Fugitive Slave Act; encouraged colonization; authorized the President to employ negroes as soldiers; and extended his amnesty powers.

Greeley's long open letter to Lincoln on August 20 is briefly summarized in the *History of the United States* by Rhodes in the following language:

"All who supported your election, he said, and desire the suppression of the rebellion, are sorely disappointed by the policy you seem to be pursuing with regard to the slaves of rebels. 'We require of you, as the first servant of the republic, charged especially and preeminently with this duty, that you EXECUTE THE LAWS. We think you are strangely and disastrously remiss

in the discharge of your official and imperative duty with regard to the emancipating provisions of the new Confiscation act; (that) you are unduly influenced by the counsels, the representations, the menaces of certain fossil politicians hailing from the border slave States; (that) timid counsels in such a crisis (are) calculated to prove perilous and probably disastrous. We complain that the Union cause has suffered and is now suffering immensely from your mistaken deference to rebel slavery. We complain that the Confiscation act which you approved is habitually disregarded by your generals, and that no word of rebuke for them has yet reached the public ear. Fremont's proclamation and Hunter's order were promptly annulled by you, while Halleck's No. 3, with scores of like tendency, have never provoked even your remonstrance. We complain that a large proportion of our regular army officers with many of the volunteers evince far more solicitude to uphold slavery than to put down the rebellion. I close as I began, with the statement that what an immense majority of the loyal millions of your countrymen require of you is a frank, declared, unqualified, ungrudging execution of the laws of the land, more especially of the Confiscation act."

Five days later on August 24 in answer to Lincoln's reply in another open letter to the President Greeley stated that he did not anticipate or seek a reply to his former epistle and that he did not question Lincoln's devotion to the saving of the Union, but criticized his method. Greeley then emphasized the necessity of freeing and protecting "human beings in slavery" and the duty to "strike treason this staggering blow."

In the concluding part of the letter the editor of the *New York Tribune* implied that Lincoln was blind to the needs of the hour, "I beseech you," he said, "to open your eyes to the fact that all the devotees of Slavery everywhere . . . are today your enemies." With reference to the conclusions he submitted Greeley continued "You cannot safely approach the great and good end you so intently mediate by shutting your eyes to them" and he continued the figure of speech by suggesting to the President that "your deadly foe is not, blinded by any mist in which your eyes may be enveloped."

Greeley concludes with this appeal "That you may not unseasonably perceive the vital truths as they will shine forth on the pages of history . . . is the fervent and anxious prayer of yours truly."