

# LINCOLN LORE

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## SLAVERY LETTER—LINCOLN TO HODGES

Those who have available microfilm copies of the Robert Lincoln Papers in the Library of Congress can testify to the highly supplemental value of the manuscripts. Correspondence of Abraham Lincoln can be more fully understood now that we have letters before us that reveal the circumstances which drew from the President his unique and pointed communications. No finer example of this contribution is offered than the preliminary and aftermath comments on one of the most famous of Lincoln's writings—the slavery letter written on April 4, 1864 to H. G. Hodges of Frankfort, Kentucky.

Mr. Hodges was editor of The Frankfort Commonwealth which was classified by the editor as "a loyal newspaper." The salutation paragraph of the letter in question indicates that Governor Bramlette, Senator Dixon and Mr. Hodges had previously paid Lincoln a visit at Washington. One would surmise from the letter that it was just the report of a conference where Lincoln made a few comments on the slavery question. However, a letter written to Lincoln by Hodges on May 10, 1864, after receiving the copy of the remarks on slavery throws a different light on its origin.

Mr. Hodges referred to "your views in regard to slavery, as set forth in that little speech in your reception room." Here we have Lincoln in a new role, that of an interpreter, which so impressed the listeners that they considered it a speech. Mr. Hodges further states that he "could not resist the temptation to ask the favor of you to write it out for me." Mr. Hodges reveals that he had received "the thanks of many old and young friends in Kentucky for having obtained your mind as set forth in that letter."

Horace Greeley had the same Lincoln letter called to his attention and commented on it in the New York Tribune for April 29, 1864, in part as follows: "As we are known not to favor his (Mr. Lincoln's) renomination, we cannot be blinded by partiality in our judgment that few men have ever lived who could have better explained and commended his course and attitude with regard to Slavery than he has done in his late letter to Mr. Hodges of Kentucky."

The letter follows:

Executive Mansion, April 4, 1864.

My dear Sir: You ask me to put in writing the substance of what I verbally said the other day in your presence, to Governor Bramlette and Senator Dixon. It was said about as follows:

I am naturally antislavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I cannot remember when I did not so think and feel, and yet I have never understood that the presidency conferred upon me an unrestricted right to act officially upon this judgment and feeling. It was in the oath I took that I would, to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States. I could not take the office without taking the oath. Nor was it my view that I might take an oath to get power, and break the oath in using the power. I understand, too, that in ordinary civil administration this oath even forbade me to practically indulge my primary abstract judgment on the moral question of slavery. I had publicly declared this many times, and in many ways. And I aver that, to this day, I have done no

official act in mere deference to my abstract judgment and feeling on slavery. I did understand, however, that my oath to preserve the Constitution to the best of my ability imposed upon me the duty of preserving, by every indispensable means, that government—that nation, of which that Constitution was the organic law. Was it possible to lose the nation and yet preserve the Constitution? By general law, life and limb must be protected, yet often a limb must be amputated to save a life; but a life is never wisely given to save a limb. I felt that measures otherwise unconstitutional might become lawful by becoming indispensable to the preservation of the Constitution through the preservation of the nation. Right or wrong, I assume this ground, and now avow it. I could not feel that, to the best of my ability, I had even tried to preserve the Constitution, if, to save slavery or any minor matter, I should permit the wreck of government, country, and Constitution all together. When, early in the war, General Fremont attempted military emancipation, I forbade it, because I did not then think it an indispensable necessity. When, a little later, General Cameron, then Secretary of War, suggested arming of the blacks, I objected because I did not yet think it an indispensable necessity. When, still later, General Hunter attempted military emancipation, I again forbade it, because I did not yet think the indispensable necessity had come. When in March and May and July, 1862, I made earnest and successive appeals to the border States to favor compensated emancipation, I believed the indispensable necessity for military emancipation and arming the blacks would come unless averted by that measure. They declined the proposition, and I was, in my best judgment, driven to the alternative of either surrendering the Union, and with it the Constitution, or of laying strong hand upon the colored element. I chose the latter. In choosing it, I hoped for greater gain than loss; but of this, I was not entirely confident. More than a year of trial now shows no loss by it in our foreign relations, none in our home popular sentiment, none in our white military force—no loss by it anyhow or anywhere. On the contrary it shows a gain of quite a hundred and thirty thousand soldiers, seamen and laborers. These are palpable facts, about which, as facts, there can be no caviling. We have the men; and we could not have had them without the measure.

And now let any Union man who complains of the measure test himself by writing down in one line that he is for subduing the rebellion by force of arms; and in the next, that he is for taking these hundred and thirty thousand men from the Union side, and placing them where they would be but for the measure he condemns. If he cannot face his case so stated, it is only because he cannot face the truth.

I add a word which was not in the verbal conversation. In telling this tale I attempt no compliment to my own sagacity. I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me. Now, at the end of three years' struggle, the nation's condition is not what either party, or any man, devised or expected. God alone can claim it. Whither it is tending seems plain. If God now wills the removal of a great wrong, and wills also that we of the North, as well as you of the South, shall pay fairly for our complicity in that wrong, impartial history will find therein new cause to attest and revere the justice and goodness of God.

Yours truly,  
A. LINCOLN.