

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN EXEMPLAR OF DISCRETION

Abraham Lincoln has reached such an exalted place in the thinking of the American people that he has become an exemplar by which the acts of other men in political life and especially those of Presidents are judged.

His correspondence has been put forth as a fine example not only of brevity but of circumspection as well. Few men in the public eye could join with him in the assertion, "I care very little for the publication of any letter I have written."

One of the most important characteristics of Abraham Lincoln which contributed to his qualifications of statesmanship was his sense of discretion. This invaluable adjunct to his personality so necessary in dealing with society found expression in an unusual degree of tact which he exhibited continually. When he became elevated to the presidency the same attitude in approaching matters of international importance gave him a dexterity in his mental perceptions that blossomed out during the Civil War with a diplomacy of unusual merit.

Possibly his frame of mind as a lawyer was partly responsible for cultivating the art of discretion. He mentioned this basic principle, "In law it is good policy never to plead what you need not, lest you oblige yourself to prove what you cannot."

It was a matter of wise procedure and discreet political behavior which placed Lincoln in a favorable position to win the Republican nomination for the presidency at the Wigwam Convention in Chicago in 1860. A few weeks before the convention he replied to a letter from Samuel Galloway of Ohio, "My name is new in the field, and I presume I am not the first choice of a very great many. Our policy, then, is to give no offense to others, —leave them in a mood to come to us if they shall be compelled to give up their first love. This, too, is dealing justly with all, and leaving us in a mood to support heartily whoever shall be nominated."

Just four days before the convention we find Lincoln displaying the same type of discretion in answering a supporter who wished to have him emphasize his position in writing on a question of political controversy. He replied, "I really have no objection to these views being publicly known but I do wish to thrust no letter before the public now on any subject. Save me from the appearance of obtrusion, and I do not care who sees this or any former letter."

The campaign of 1860 found the Republican nominee for the presidency following a closed mouth policy, refusing to make any political speeches. He claimed his viewpoints on debatable subjects were available through the published debates with Douglas. To one correspondent he replied, "I consider it would be both imprudent and contrary to the reasonable expectations of my friends for me to write or speak anything upon doctrinal points now." Here Lincoln's discretion had evolved into a tactfulness in political procedure which at no time placed him on the defensive.

J. D. Prentice, editor of the *Louisville Journal*, wrote to Lincoln one week before the election in 1860 requesting him to write a letter setting forth his "conservative views and intentions." In refusing to comply with this request for further repetition of his oft repeated views, Lincoln replied on October 29, "I have had men to deal with, both North and South; men who are eager for something new upon which to base new misrepresentations; men who would like to frighten me, or at least fix upon me the character of timidity and cowardice. They would seize upon almost any letter I could write as being an 'awful coming down.' I intend keeping my eye upon these gentlemen, and to not unnecessarily put any weapons in their hands."

One of the most disturbing factors which confronted Abraham Lincoln in 1863 was the controversy carried on between the two factions of Union sympathizers in Missouri. As a means of breaking up this prolonged quarrel among themselves Lincoln removed General S. R. Curtis, head of one of the factions, and appointed General John M. Schofield in his place. A paragraph from the May 27th letter referring to his appointment follows: "It is a difficult role, and so much greater will be the honor if you perform it well. If both factions, or neither, shall abuse you you will probably be about right. Beware of being praised by one and assailed by the other." Apparently Schofield was not able to keep this neutral attitude which caused Lincoln to send him this significant note on July 13.

"I regret to learn of the arrest of the 'Democratic' editor. I fear this loses you the middle position I desired you to occupy. I have not learned which of the two letters I wrote you it was that the 'Democrat' published, but I care very little for the publication of any letter I have written."

A story is told about the comments Lincoln made upon reading a scorching letter one of his cabinet members had written, and was preparing to send to a critic. Lincoln read it over and made some comment about the writer's ability to tell the addressee what he thought of him. The President also complimented the secretary for getting his feelings out of his system and down on paper. When the secretary started to seal the letter for forwarding the President remarked, "Oh you are not going to send the letter are you?"

In a modified form the President found himself in a somewhat similar situation at one time. The Battle of Gettysburg had been fought and won but Lincoln felt that General Meade should have followed through upon Lee's retreat and brought the war to a close. Most military authorities now agree this could have been done. Of course Lincoln was greatly disappointed and Meade learned of his dissatisfaction and asked to be relieved of his command. Lincoln drafted a letter of some length to General Meade and written with great care and precision. But recognizing the great service Meade had rendered laid aside the written page and endorsed on the envelope in his own hand "To General Meade, never sent or signed."