

LINCOLN LORE

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WASHINGTON AND LINCOLN ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

An editorial under the caption "America's Just Cause" appeared in the issue of *Life* magazine for February 26, 1951. The argument asserts that "Washington's admonition to avoid 'entangling alliances' has become a shibboleth for puny minds." Overlooking for the moment the contemptuous reference to those whose opinions may differ with the editor's interpretation of Washington's foreign policy, may we question the authenticity of the expression "entangling alliances." Although it is placed in quotation marks and credited to the father of the country, careful searching reveals no instance where it appears in any of his writings or speeches. The phrase "entangling alliances" is clearly an interpolation and should not be credited to George Washington although it may reveal how he felt about becoming enmeshed in international partnerships.

The word "entangle" was used on one occasion by Washington in a rhetorical question which he submitted and it reveals his mind with reference to the nation's relationship with Europe in his day. Washington enquired:

"Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor, or caprice?"

Washington further supports this viewpoint with this frank and sensible argument.

"Europe has a set of primary interests, which to us have none, or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us, to implicate ourselves, by artificial ties, in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships and enmities."

Not only towards Europe but with respect to foreign influence in general our first President had this to say:

"Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence, (I conjure you to believe me, fellow-citizens,) the jealousy of a free people ought to be constantly awake; since history and experience prove, that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of Republican Government."

The word "entanglements," referring back to its spurious use, is again employed in the same paragraph by the editor of *Life* magazine in this manner: "The entanglements he (Washington) distrusted were entanglements of the moment." It would be difficult to square this assertion with the following principle advocated by the first President of the United States who said:

"The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our COMMERCIAL relations, to have with them as little POLITICAL connection as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements, let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop."

Just the reverse of the editor's conclusions about momentary entanglements is here set forth, as Washington felt that they should "be fulfilled with perfect good faith," but with reference to subsequent entanglements Washington abruptly warns, "Here let us stop." This emphasis clearly sets forth the fact that Washington did "distrust" something more than "entanglements of the moment" as this further course of procedure sets forth:

"It is our policy, to steer clear of Permanent Alliances with any portion of the foreign world; so far, I mean, as we are now at liberty to do it; for let me not be understood as capable of patronizing infidelity to existing engagements."

Certainly the editor of *Life* magazine would not associate Abraham Lincoln with those of "puny minds." Yet in preparation for the memorial observance of February 22, 1862 he selected for reading on that day several

paragraphs from Washington's Farewell Address. He ordered that they "be read to the troops at every military post and at the head of the several regiments and corps of the army." Lincoln must have been in agreement with the conclusions drawn by Washington in the excerpts he selected and to that extent the exhibits which follow express his opinions:

"The name of AMERICAN, which belongs to you in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of patriotism more than any appellation derived from local discrimination. . . . To the efficacy and permanency of your union, a government for the whole is indispensable. No alliances, however strict, between the parts can be an adequate substitute. They must inevitably experience the infractions and interruptions which alliances in all times have experienced. . . . "Observe good faith and justice towards all nations. Cultivate peace and harmony with all. Religion and morality enjoin this conduct; and can it be that good policy does not equally enjoin it? It will be worthy of a free, enlightened, and, at no distant period, a great nation, to give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a people always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence. . . . Harmony and a liberal intercourse with all nations are recommended by policy, humanity, and interest. But even our commercial policy should hold an equal and impartial hand; neither seeking nor granting exclusive favors or preferences. . . . Constantly keeping in view that it is folly in one nation to look for disinterested favors from another—that it must pay with a portion of its independence for whatever it may accept under that character—that by such acceptance it may place itself in the condition of having given equivalents for nominal favors, and yet of being reproached with ingratitude for not having given more. There can be no greater error than to expect or calculate upon real favors from nation to nation. It is an illusion which experience must cure, which a just pride ought to discard."

This same year, 1862, that Lincoln selected these Washington citations, in his annual message to Congress he had this to say about foreign relations:

"We have attempted no propagandism, and acknowledged no revolution. But we have left to every nation the exclusive conduct and management of its own affairs."

On February 15, 1848 Abraham Lincoln wrote a letter to William Herndon at Springfield which is one of his strongest arguments against international meddling. From this letter these excerpts are copied:

"Allow the President to invade a neighboring nation whenever he shall deem it necessary to repel an invasion, and you allow him to do so whenever he may choose to say he deems it necessary for such purpose, and you allow him to make war at pleasure. Study to see if you can fix any limit to his power in this respect, after having given him so much as you propose. If today he should choose to say he thinks it necessary to invade Canada to prevent the British from invading us, how could you stop him? You may say to him, 'I see no probability of the British invading us'; but he will say to you, 'Be silent; I see it, if you don't.'"

"The provisions of the Constitution giving the war-making power to Congress was dictated, as I understand it, by the following reasons: Kings had always been involving and impoverishing their people in wars, pretending generally, if not always, that the good of the people was the object. This our convention understood to be the most oppressive of all kingly oppressions, and they resolved to so frame the Constitution that no one man should hold the power of bringing this oppression upon us. But your view destroys the whole matter, and placed our President where kings have always stood."