

# LINCOLN LORE

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## THE LINCOLN-DOUGLAS 1861 INTERVIEW

There is a general knowledge about Stephen A. Douglas' support of the Union at the opening of hostilities which did much to line up a vast number of his political constituents on the Union side, but the details of the conference are not so well known. Following the publication of the platform adopted at the Democratic convention at Chicago in 1864 Isaac N. Arnold of that city, one of Lincoln's close friends, received a communication from George Ashmun, chairman of the Lincoln notification committee in 1860, which should be laid before the readers of *Lincoln Lore*. It was dated "Springfield, Mass., Oct. 15, 1864." The letter itself contains sufficient information to give it orientation. It appeared in the *Washington Daily Morning Chronicle* for October 26, 1864, just preliminary to the November elections. The account of the episode as recorded by Mr. Ashmun is submitted in full.

### STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS AND COERCION

"On Sunday, April 14, 1861, Washington city was agitated by the spread of the information of the fall of Fort Sumter, the news of which had arrived the night before. Such an event could not but produce a profound feeling at the seat of Government, and discussions largely displaced all the ordinary Sunday ceremonies. The course which the new Administration would take was then quite unknown, and gave ground for much anxiety. For myself, I felt that the occasion was one which demanded prompt action and the cordial support of the whole people of the North, and that this would be greatly insured by a public declaration from Mr. Douglas. The friendly personal relations which had long existed between us justified an effort in that direction on my part; and late in the afternoon I decided to make it. On driving to his house, I found him surrounded by quite a number of political friends, whom he, however, soon dismissed, with an easy grace, on a suggestion of the errand which had brought me there. Our interview lasted an hour or more, and in the course of it, the whole nature of his relations to Mr. Lincoln's Administration, and his duty to the country, were fully discussed. His first impulse was decidedly against my purposes. I desired him to go with me at once to the President, and make a declaration of his determination to sustain him in the needful measures which the exigency of the hour demanded to put down the rebellion which had thus fiercely flamed out in Charleston harbor. I well remember his first reply: 'Mr. Lincoln has dealt harshly with me, in removing some of my friends from office, and I don't know as he wants my advice or aid.' My answer was that Mr. L. had probably followed Democratic precedents in making removals; but the question now presented rose to a higher dignity than could belong to any possible party question; and that it was now in his (Mr. D's.) power to render such a service to his country as would not only give him a title to its lasting gratitude, but would at the same time show that in the hour of his country's need he could trample all partisan considerations and resentments under foot. The discussion, in this vein, continued for some time, and resulted in his emphatic declaration that he would go with me to the President, and offer a cordial and earnest support. But I shall never forget, that before it was concluded, his beautiful and noble wife came into the room, and gave the whole weight of her affectionate influence towards the result which was reached. My carriage was waiting at the door, and it was almost

dark when we started for the President's house. We fortunately found Mr. Lincoln alone, and upon my stating the errand on which we had come, he was most cordial in his welcome, and immediately prepared the way for the conversation which followed, by taking from his drawer and reading to us the draft of the proclamation which he had decided to issue, and which was given to the country the next morning.

"As soon as the reading ended, Mr. Douglas rose from his chair and said: 'Mr. President, I cordially concur in every word of that document, except that instead of a call for 75,000 men I would make it 200,000. You do not know the dishonest purposes of those men (the rebels) as well as I do.' And he then asked us to look with him at the map which hung at one end of the President's room, where, in much detail, he pointed out the principal strategic points which should be at once strengthened for the coming contest. Among the most prominent were Fortress Monroe, Washington, Harper's Ferry, and Cairo. He enlarged at length upon the firm, warlike footing which ought to be pursued, and found in Mr. Lincoln an earnest and gratified listener. It would be impossible to give in detail all the points presented by him, and discussed with the President; but I venture to say that no two men in the United States parted that night with a more cordial feeling of a united, friendly, and patriotic purpose than Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Douglas.

"After leaving and while on our way homeward, I said to Mr. Douglas, 'You have done justice to your own reputation and to the President, and the country must know it. The proclamation will go by telegraph all over the country in the morning, and the account of this interview must go with it. I shall send it, either in my own language or yours. I prefer that you should give your own version.' He at once said, 'Drive to your room at Willard's and I will give it shape.' We did so, and he wrote the following, the original of which now lies before me, in his own handwriting. I copied it, and gave an exact copy to the agent of the Associated Press, and on the next morning it was read all over the North, in company with the President's proclamation, to the great gratification of his friends and the friends of the Government. The original is still preserved, as cherished evidence of the highest character, that whoever else may have fallen by the wayside in the hour of our country's peril from 'false brethren,' Mr. Douglas was not of them:

"DESPATCH TO THE PRESS BY MR. DOUGLAS,  
SUNDAY EVENING, APRIL 14, 1861.

"Mr. Douglas called on the President this evening, and had an interesting conversation on the present condition of the country. The substance of the conversation was that while Mr. D. was unalterably opposed to the Administration on all its political issues, he was prepared to sustain the President in the exercises of all his constitutional functions to preserve the Union, and maintain the Government, and defend the Federal capital. A firm policy and prompt action was necessary.

"The capital of our country was in danger, and must be defended at all hazards, and at any expense of men or money. He spoke of the present and future, without reference to the past.

"All honor, then, to the memory of the man who thus threw party considerations to the winds, and gave himself wholly and unreservedly to his country."