

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN'S 1863 MESSAGE TO CONGRESS

Four annual messages to Congress were delivered by President Abraham Lincoln during the course of his first administration. The manuscript read to Congress on December 8, 1863 differs from the others, primarily, by the attachment of a proclamation which caused more comment than the main body of the argument itself. The proclamation also was a document of two parts as it contained an oath of allegiance.

There were some interesting incidents associated with the circulation of the official message which are worth mentioning. Members of the press were very anxious to secure preliminary copies of the address for their papers and approached John Nicolay, Lincoln's private secretary, with a view of obtaining them. Mr. Nicolay advised them that they would not be available until the day of the delivery of the message and directed them as follows: "Meet me at the door of the Senate, gentlemen, immediately after the message is presented to that body, and you will receive your copies of it."

Promptly at 12:25 p.m. on December 8 John Nicolay and his assistant John Hay were observed approaching outside the Senate chambers with their arms full of large white envelopes which contained the promised copies of the address. A representative of the *Washington Chronicle* gives this account of the rapidity with which the address was made available to the public. The copy was rushed to the office where new type had been provided for the setting of the message. Just 57 minutes after the copy had been received in the capitol from Nicolay and Hay, it had been set in type. Five minutes later, it was being run off on the presses and immediately grabbed up by the newsboys and sold on the streets. The time elapsing from the reception of the copy to the sale of the printed extra was but two minutes over one hour.

Almost as phenomenal for that day was the sending of the message by telegraph so that newspapers in other cities might have it immediately. One paper in Washington reported: "The President's message containing 7,769 words was telegraphed over the American line to the cities of Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York in the space of thirty-two minutes. Eight operators were engaged on the message." This would allow papers in these other cities to have the copy of the address half an hour after the papers in Washington had recorded it.

Another incidental which caused much comment in the press was the release of the annual message by Jefferson Davis at the same time President Lincoln's manuscript appeared. One editor made this comment:

"In one we see power and benignity, kindness to foreign nations, compassion for the misguided rebels, a spirit of charity and love. In the other we see hatred and animosity and bitterness."

Abraham Lincoln's annual message dated December 8, 1863 conveyed in its opening paragraph something

of the Thanksgiving spirit, which was everywhere prevalent while the document was in preparation: "Another year of health, and of sufficiently abundant harvests has passed. For these, and especially for the improved condition of our national affairs, our renewed, and profoundest gratitude to God is due." There follow comments on foreign affairs, territorial problems, monetary system, development of the navy, postal service, public lands, Indian tribes, transportation, agriculture, and of course most important of all, the rebellion.

The most interesting item under the political phase of the war looking towards reconstruction calls attention to the proclamation already mentioned. Mr. Lincoln refers to it in the message in these words:

"Looking now to the present and future, and to a resumption of national authority within the States wherein that authority has been suspended, I have thought fit to issue a proclamation, a copy of which is transmitted. On examination of this proclamation it will appear, as I believe, that nothing is attempted beyond what is amply justified by the constitution. True, the form of an oath is given, but no man is coerced to take it. . . ."

The appended document, bearing the same date as the message, to which the President refers is called the Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction and the Amnesty Oath contained therein is submitted in full in the center column of this bulletin. This is the famous oath of December 8, 1863 which Lincoln so often mentions in his hundreds of holograph copies of his pardons now in the hands of so many collectors of Lincolniana. Most of these are worded in some such language as the following original in the Foundation collection.

"Let this man be discharged on taking the oath of December 8, 1863."

"A. Lincoln.

"April 10, 1865."

The main body of the message is brought to a close in the same spirit of thoughtfulness that characterizes the opening sentences. The President concludes:

"In the midst of other cares, however important, we must not lose sight of the fact that the war power is still our main reliance. To that power alone can we look, yet for a time, to give confidence to the people in the contested regions, that the insurgent power will not again overrun them. Until that confidence shall be established, little can be done anywhere for what is called reconstruction. Hence our chiefest care must still be directed to the army and navy, who have thus far borne their harder part so nobly and well. And it may be esteemed fortunate that in giving the greatest efficiency to these indispensable arms, we do also honorably recognize the gallant men, from commander to sentinel, who compose them, and to whom, more than to others, the world must stand indebted for the home of freedom disenthralled, regenerated, enlarged, and perpetuated."