

LINCOLN LORE

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THE CAPTAIN LINCOLN EPISODE

When one hears of an individual apparently acting "out of character" it is always important to discover first of all if the reported statements of his behavior are correct and if so, whether or not the motives which are reported to have prompted the unusual procedure have been carefully scrutinized.

Jim Bishop in his recent book "The Day Lincoln Was Shot" ignores the time element with which he is dealing in the second chapter designated as "8 a.m." to go back and pick up an incident which occurred several months before relating to the Lincoln family's attitude towards Robert, the oldest son, joining the army. Bishop states that after the family had discussed the matter, Mr. Lincoln did something that "for him, was mean. He asked General Grant to give the boy a commission and place him on his personal staff." Bishop then goes on to conclude that the inference was that the President "did not want his son to be in danger."

Although the President has been severely criticized by many authors who have felt he was somewhat "out of character" in this procedure it has not heretofore been affirmed that he was "mean" about it.

Robert Lincoln entered Harvard College in the fall of 1860 and was still a freshman, eighteen years of age, when the first call for volunteers was made in April 1861. The great numbers of men who enlisted during the summer seemed to fill the ranks and Robert started in his sophomore year in the fall. Early in the spring, however, he apparently got the war fever and acquired a book entitled *Cadet Life at West Point* in which he wrote on the flyleaf "R. T. Lincoln, Harvard College, March 1862." The back of the front cover of the book now in the Foundation library bears a book plate of Robert's father-in-law, W. A. Harlan. A month before Robert had acquired this book his brother, William, died in the White House. The mental anguish of his parents at this time would cut short any enlistment plans and he finished his sophomore year while yet in his teens.

The junior year at Harvard began before the draft act was confirmed, but now with its passing Robert had a new argument to warrant his enlistment. Apparently, however, the suggestion that he should finish college took root about this time and he returned to college as a senior in the fall of 1863. Apparently Robert was getting insistent about entering the army, but his mother had not been willing to acquiesce. Emily Todd Helm recorded in her diary while in the White House in November 1863 that Mary was frightened about Robert enlisting. Emily recorded this conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln:

"Of course Mr. Lincoln I know that Robert's plea to go into the Army is manly and noble and I want him to go, but oh! I am so frightened that he may never come back to us." Mrs. Helm then states Lincoln replied, "Many a poor mother, Mary has had to make this sacrifice and has given up every son she had—and lost them all."

Robert Lincoln's entry into the army at any time in 1864 with the Union party convention on June 7 and the election of December 8 coming up would have been unwise. While Robert may have been a "political liability" out of the army, the President would have no part in an enlistment which would be construed by his opponents as a political maneuver to gain votes. This situation may have been party responsible for Robert remaining to graduate.

At this point we may pick up the story from a letter written by Robert Lincoln on March 2nd, 1915 to Winfield M. Thompson. Referring to his father, Robert wrote:

"At the end of the vacation after my graduation from Harvard, I said to him that as he did not wish me to go into the army (his reason having been that something might happen to me that would cause him more official embarrassment than could be offset by any possible value of my military service). I was going back to Cambridge to enter Law School. He said he thought I was right."

Robert entered Harvard Law School on September 5, 1864. The election was over on November 8 and when Robert came home in January 1865 the old question of entering the army came up again. In another paragraph in the letter to Thompson, Robert wrote, still referring to his father: "His letter afterwards to General Grant was the result of my renewed appeal to him."

In this letter to Grant dated January 19, 1865 making known Robert's wish to enter the army the President wrote: "I do not wish to put him in the ranks, nor yet to give him a commission . . . could he without embarrassment to you or detriment to the service go into your Military family with nominal rank, I and not the public furnishing his necessary means." Both the salutation and conclusion of the letter were in apologetic terms and left the matter entirely to Gen. Grant. Grant replied on January 21: "I will be most happy to have him in my Military family in the manner you propose. The nominal rank given is immaterial, but I would suggest that of Capt."

The most important part of Robert Lincoln's letter to Winfield M. Thompson is the sentence within the brackets which were placed there by Robert himself. The statement sets forth the primary reason why the oldest son of the President did not enter the army until near its close and even then was kept from the ranks. Robert clearly states, and he should know the facts, that his failure to enter the army was primarily due to his father's fear of "official embarrassment" which might accrue from Robert's entering the military service.

It is not difficult to visualize several situations in which Robert might have become involved, either through natural procedures or premediated situations purposely created by Lincoln's enemies. He wrote on one occasion, "But I have had men also to deal with, both north and south. . . . I intend keeping my eye on these gentlemen, and to not unnecessarily put any weapons in their hands."

The plans which had been made by corrupt politicians to strike at the President by attempting to compromise his wife would not be soon forgotten and he did not intend to make his son available for ulterior purposes. Even after Robert had been allowed to join the army and was proceeding to his appointment Lincoln apparently became worried and observed in a telegram to Grant: "I have not heard of my son's reaching you." Grant replied immediately and assured the President that his son had arrived.

Mr. Lincoln has been accused of shielding his son from dangers prevalent to warfare, bowing to the pleadings of his mentally ill wife, or relieving himself from sorrow should his son become a casualty. The President's dread of interference with his official duties or contemplated embarrassment to the administration was the fundamental consideration. The great task in which he was engaged, superseded any selfish purpose in his attitude towards his son's enlistment.

Abraham Lincoln may not have been "out of character" after all in this much discussed episode. Certainly he was not "mean" in his request to General Grant and very conscientious about not allowing barriers to obstruct his own task as President of the nation and as commander-in-chief of the armies of the republic.