

Letter to Horace Greeley

Written during the heart of the Civil War, this is one of Lincoln's most famous letters. Horace Greeley, editor of the influential New York Tribune, a few days earlier had addressed an editorial to Lincoln called "The Prayer of Twenty Millions." In it, he demanded emancipation for the country's slaves and implied that Lincoln's administration lacked direction and resolve.

Lincoln wrote his letter to Greeley when a draft of the Emancipation Proclamation already lay in his desk drawer. His response revealed the eagle-like vision he possessed, which soared beyond immediate, crucial issues to the principal one -- the preservation of the Union. The letter, which received universal acclaim in the North, stands as a classic statement of Lincoln's constitutional responsibilities.

Executive Mansion, Washington, August 22, 1862.

Hon. Horace Greeley: Dear Sir.

I have just read yours of the 19th. addressed to myself through the New-York Tribune. If there be in it any statements, or assumptions of fact, which I may know to be erroneous, I do not, now and here, controvert them. If there be in it any inferences which I may believe to be falsely drawn, I do not now and here, argue against them. If there be perceptible [sic] in it an impatient and dictatorial tone, I waive it in deference to an old friend, whose heart I have always supposed to be right.

As to the policy I "seem to be pursuing" as you say, I have not meant to leave any one in doubt.

I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution. The sooner the national authority can be restored; the nearer the Union will be "the Union as it was." If there be those who would not save the Union, unless they could at the same time save slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time destroy slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union. I shall do less whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause. I shall try to correct errors when shown to be errors; and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views.

I have here stated my purpose according to my view of official duty; and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed personal wish that all men everywhere could be free.

Yours, A. Lincoln.