

Lincoln and the Civil War

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February 12, 2002

In his annual message to Congress in 1862, Abraham Lincoln wrote, "In times like the present, men should utter nothing for which they would not be responsible through time and in eternity."

Mr. Lincoln was careful in what he wrote after an unfortunate experience two decades earlier that nearly led to a duel. His public statements as president were carefully crafted. His virtual silence between his Cooper Union address in February 1860 and his arrival in Washington a year later as president-elect was often misinterpreted, but Mr. Lincoln understood that words rashly spoken could be cause for even worse consequences.

On Dec. 6, 1864, President Lincoln sent his fourth and final message to Congress, a message good for his time and ours. Mr. Lincoln was kind-hearted, but on this occasion he was a tough realist. "For myself, I have no doubt of the power and duty of the executive, under the law of nations, to exclude enemies of the human race from an asylum in the United States," he wrote. "In a great national crisis, like ours, unanimity of action among those seeking a common end is very desirable — almost indispensable. ..."

As the struggle to defeat the Confederacy entered its final months, Mr. Lincoln maintained, "We are gaining strength and may, if need be, maintain the contest indefinitely." He noted, "Material resources are now more complete and abundant than ever. The national resources, then, are unexhausted and, as we believe, inexhaustible ..."

Keeping Lincoln's promise

Mr. Lincoln drew a circle around the nation's friends. He also drew a clear line between the Union and its opponents. President Lincoln observed, "That no attempt at negotiation with the insurgent leader could result in any good. He does not attempt to deceive us. He affords us no excuse to deceive ourselves. ... Between him and us, the issue is distinct, simple, and inflexible. It is an issue which can only be tried by war, and decided by victory."

President Lincoln knew that the Civil War had implications far beyond America's borders. The Civil War was a conflict about the future of democracy and equality of opportunity the world over. "Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history," he wrote in his 1862 message to Congress. "The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation. We say we are for the Union. The world will not forget that we say this. We know how to save the Union. The world knows we do know how to save it. We — even we here — hold the power, and bear the responsibility. In giving freedom to the

slave, we assure freedom to the free, honorable alike in what we give and what we preserve."

The stakes in the Civil War were high. On occasion, Mr. Lincoln sought to answer critics who thought his policies were too hard or too soft. He sent a letter to James C. Conkling on Aug. 26, 1863, to be read at a meeting of Union supporters in Springfield, Illinois on Sept. 8.

"There are those who are dissatisfied with me," President Lincoln wrote. "To such I would say, 'You desire peace; and you blame me that we do not have it. But how can we attain it? There are but three conceivable ways. First to suppress the rebellion by force of arms. This I am trying to do. Are you for it? If you are, so far we are agreed. If you are not for it, a second way is to give up the Union. I am against this.'"

Then Mr. Lincoln laid out a third way: retraction of the Emancipation Proclamation. But Mr. Lincoln rejected that route, saying, "I think the constitution invests its commander-in-chief, with the law of war, in time of war." He went on to tweak his critics of emancipation, "You say you will not fight to free negroes. Some of them seem willing to fight for you. ..." He strongly defended the inclusion of black soldiers in the Union Army, saying, "Why should they do any thing for us, if we will do nothing for them? If they stake their lives for us, they must be prompted by the strongest motive — even the promise of freedom. And the promise, being made, must be kept."

Mr. Lincoln kept his promise. No one wanted peace as much as the president. But he knew that victory and peace came at a price. "Neither party" to the Civil War, explained Mr. Lincoln in his Second Inaugural address, "expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding."

Mr. Lincoln was unrelenting in his resolve to maintain the fight until the evil "offense" of slavery was obliterated. Only five weeks before the Confederate surrender at Appomattox, the president told those assembled at the Capitol, "Fondly do we hope — fervently do we pray — that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's 250 years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said 3,000 years ago, so still it must be said, 'The judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.'"

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