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'Stand Firm': Lincoln's Advice to a Nurse, the Union and Himself

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"Large crowds have gathered in the streets. The pervading spirit among the masses is resistance to Lincoln's administration, and everywhere that determination is manifest."

—Lancaster (S.C.) Ledger
Nov. 14, 1860

In February 1862, Abraham Lincoln's two youngest boys, Willie and Tad, fell sick with typhoid fever, probably contracted from the polluted water of the nearby Washington Canal. Willie, 11, died Feb. 20, eight days after the president's birthday on Feb. 12. An army nurse had been recruited from a military hospital to care for 8-year-old Tad. When he recovered, his nurse, Rebecca Pomroy, asked to return to her military hospital to take care of her "soldier boys."

President Lincoln insisted on taking her. On the way, the presidential carriage got stuck in Washington's notorious mud. Lincoln asked the White House driver to hold the horses while the president himself found rocks to put next to the carriage so that Mrs. Pomroy could safely step down.

"Now, Mrs. Pomroy, if you will please put your feet just as I tell you, you can reach the sidewalk in safety," said Lincoln. He took her hand and guided her from the carriage to the walkway before adding, "All through life, be sure and put your feet in the right place, and then stand firm."

Lincoln followed his own advice.

Throughout his political career, he was careful to place his feet—and his arguments—squarely on sound footing to stand firm behind the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. In his seminal three-hour antislavery campaign speech at Peoria of mid-October 1854, Lincoln stood firm: "I do not . . . propose to destroy, or alter, or disregard the Constitution. I stand to it, fairly, fully, and firmly." During the following six years, his prelude to greatness, Lincoln would inspire Americans to stand firm in

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support of the Union and against the extension of slavery. In his 1863 Gettysburg Address, Lincoln stood firm on the meaning of America's founding documents—that "all men are created equal" and the Union was indissoluble.

Lincoln was a consummate political strategist and a co-founder of the new Republican Party. To a Republican ally he would recommend a formal gathering of the new party. "Let us have a state convention, in which we can have a full consultation: and till which, let us all stand firm." In June 1858, he delivered his "House Divided" speech to unite the

Illinois Republican State Convention against the extension of slavery. "The result is not doubtful. We shall not fail; if we stand firm, we shall not fail."

In November 1858, for a second time, Lincoln would lose the Illinois Senate election to Stephen Douglas. But he remained convinced that victory would come to his party. When the Southern Democrats embraced Douglas's presidential campaign the following year, Lincoln declared in Cincinnati: "We, the Republicans and others forming the Opposition of the country, intend to 'stand by our guns,' to be patient and firm, and in the long run to beat you whether you take him [Douglas] or not."

After Lincoln won in 1860, Southern radicals threatened to secede from the Union. Many Northerners, even Republicans, sought a compromise to accommodate the extension of slavery to avoid a split in the Union. The president-elect held fast, writing Sen. Lyman Trumbull of Illinois: "Let there be no compromise on the question of extending slavery. If there be, all our labor is lost, and ere long, must be done again. . . . Have none of it. Stand firm. The tug has to come, and better now than at any time hereafter."

And the war came, dividing those who stood firm for the Union from those who did not. "I hope to stand firm enough to not go back," the prudent Lincoln told a radical Republican critic, "and yet not go forward fast enough to wreck the country's cause." Lincoln stood firm

behind his Union loyalists in his Special Message to Congress of July 1861: "Great honor is due to those officers who remain true, despite the example of their treacherous associates, but the greatest honor, and most important fact of all, is the unanimous firmness of common soldiers, and common sailors."

Lincoln's faith in the American people and the Constitution did not waver, even though he had won less than 40% of the popular vote. As his friend Joshua F. Speed observed, Lincoln "had an abiding faith in the good sense and intuitions of the people, especially in those loyal to the republic and its constitutional provisions."

After his re-election in November 1864, President Lincoln would write his final Message to Congress: "The most reliable indication of public purpose in this country is derived throughout our popular elections. Judging by the recent canvass and its result, the purpose of the people, within the loyal States, to maintain the integrity of the Union, was never more firm, nor more nearly unanimous, than now."

Lincoln stood firm. The Union prevailed. Slavery was abolished.

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