

# Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation

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Letter from General George B. McClellan to Lincoln

Headquarters Army of the Potomac,  
Camp near Harrison's Landing, Virginia

July 7, 1862.

Mr. President: You have been fully informed that the rebel army is in our front, with the purpose of overwhelming us by attacking our positions, or reducing us by blocking our river communications. I cannot but regard our condition as critical, and I earnestly desire, in view of possible contingencies, to lay before your Excellency, for your private consideration, my general views concerning the existing state of the rebellion, although they do not strictly relate to the situation of this army, or strictly come within the scope of my official duties. These views amount to convictions, and are deeply impressed upon my mind and heart. Our cause must never be abandoned; it is the cause of free institutions and self-government. The Constitution and the Union must be preserved, whatever may be the cost in time, treasure, and blood. If secession is successful, other dissolutions are clearly to be seen in the future. Let neither military disaster, political faction, nor foreign war shake your settled purpose to enforce the equal operation of the laws of the United States upon the people of every State. The time has come when the Government must determine upon a civil and military policy covering the whole ground of our national trouble. The responsibility of determining, declaring, and supporting such civil and military policy, and of directing the whole course of national affairs in regard to the rebellion, must now be assumed and exercised by you, or our cause will be lost. The Constitution gives you power sufficient even for the present terrible exigency.

This rebellion has assumed the character of a war. As such it should be regarded, and it should be conducted upon the highest principles known to Christian civilization. It should not be a war looking to the subjugation of the people of any State in any event. It should not be at all a war upon population, but against armed forces and political organizations. Neither confiscation of property, political executions of persons, territorial organization of States, or forcible abolition of slavery should be contemplated for a moment.

In prosecuting the war all private property and unarmed persons should be strictly protected, subject only to the necessities of military operations; all private property taken for military use should be paid or receipted for; pillage and waste should be treated as high crimes, all unnecessary trespasses sternly prohibited, and offensive demeanor by the military towards citizens promptly rebuked. Military arrests should not be tolerated, except in places where

active hostilities exist; and on this not require by enactments—constitutionally made—should be neither demanded nor received. Military government should be confined to the preservation of public order and the protection of political rights. Military power should not be allowed to interfere with the relations of servitude, either by supporting or impairing the authority of the master, except for repressing disorder, as in other cases. Slaves, contraband under the act of Congress, seeking military protection, should receive it. The right of the Government to appropriate permanently to its own service claims to slave labor should be asserted, and the right of the owner to compensation therefor should be recognized. This principle might be extended upon grounds of military necessity and security to all the slaves within a particular State, thus working manumission in such State; and in Missouri, perhaps in Western Virginia also, and possibly even in Maryland, the expediency of such a military measure is only a question of time. A system of policy thus constitutional and conservative, and pervaded by the influences of Christianity and freedom, would receive the support of almost all truly loyal men, would deeply impress the rebel masses and all foreign nations, and it might be humbly hoped that it would commend itself to the favor of the Almighty.

Unless the principles governing the further conduct of our struggle shall be made known and approved, the effort to obtain requisite forces will be almost hopeless. A declaration of radical views, especially upon slavery, will rapidly disintegrate our present armies. The policy of the Government must be supported by concentrations of military power. The national forces should not be dispersed in expeditions, posts of occupation, and numerous armies; but should be mainly collected into masses and brought to bear upon the armies of the Confederate States. Those armies thoroughly defeated, the political structure which they support would soon cease to exist.

In carrying out any system of policy which you may form, you will require a commander-in-chief of the army; one who possesses your confidence, understands your views, and who is competent to execute your orders by directing the military forces of the nation to the accomplishment of the objects by you proposed. I do not ask that place for myself. I am willing to serve you in such position as you may assign me, and I will do so as faithfully as ever subordinate served superior.

I may be on the brink of eternity, and as I hope forgiveness from my Maker, I have written this letter with sincerity towards you and from love for my country.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,  
G. B. McCLELLAN,  
Major-General Commanding.

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Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles's account of  
a conversation during a carriage ride with  
Lincoln and Seward on July 13, 1862:

It was on this occasion . . . that he first mentioned to Mr. Seward and myself that he had about come to the conclusion that, if the rebels persisted in their war upon the Government, it would be a necessity and a duty on our part to liberate their slaves. He was convinced, he said, that we could not carry on a successful war by longer pursuing a temporizing and forbearing policy toward those who disregarded law and Constitution, and were striving by every means to break up the Union. Decisive and extensive measures must be adopted. His reluctance to meddle with this question, around which there were thrown constitutional safeguards, and on which the whole Southern mind was sensitive, was great. He had tried various expedients to escape issuing an executive order emancipating the slaves, the last and only alternative, but it was forced upon him by the rebels themselves. He saw no escape. Turn which way he would, this disturbing element which caused the war rose up against us, and it was an insuperable obstacle to peace. He had entertained hopes that the border States, in view of what appeared to him inevitable if the war continued, would consent to some plan of prospective and compensated emancipation; but all his suggestions, some made as early as March, met with disfavor, although actual hostilities had then existed for a year. Congress was now about adjourning, and had done nothing final and conclusive—perhaps could do nothing on this question. He had since his return from the army the last week called the members of Congress from the border States together, and presented to them [this was on the previous day, July 12, 1862] the difficulties which he encountered, in hopes they would be persuaded, in the gloomy condition of affairs, to take the initiative step toward emancipation; but they hesitated, and he apprehended would do nothing. Attached as most of them and a large majority of their constituents were to what they called their labor system, they felt it would be unjust for the Government which they supported to compel them to abandon that system, while the States

he had given the subject much thought, and had about come to the conclusion that it was a military necessity, absolutely essential to the preservation of the Union. We must free the slaves or he ourselves subdued. The slaves were undeniably an element of strength to those who had their service, and we must decide whether that element should be with us or against us. For a long time the subject had lain heavy on his mind. His interview with the representatives of the border States had forced him slowly but he believed correctly to this conclusion, and this present opportunity was the first occasion he had had of mentioning to any one his convictions of what in his opinion must be our course. He wished us to state frankly, not immediately, how the proposition of emancipation struck us, in case of the continued persistent resistance to Federal authority.

Mr. Seward remarked that the subject involved consequences so vast and momentous, legal and political, he should wish to bestow on it mature reflection before advising or giving a decisive answer; but his present opinion inclined to the measure as justifiable, and perhaps he might say expedient and necessary. These were essentially my views, more matured perhaps, for I had practically been dealing with slavery from the beginning as a wrecked institution. During that ride the subject was the absorbing theme, and before separating the President requested us to give it early, especial, and deliberate consideration, for he was earnest in the conviction that the time had arrived when decisive action must be taken; that the Government could not be justified in any longer postponing it; that it was forced upon him as a necessity—it was thrust at him from various quarters; it occupied his mind and thoughts day and night. He repeated he had about come to a conclusion, driven home to him by the conference of the preceding day, but wished to know our views and hear any suggestions either of us might make.

in flagrant rebellion retained their slaves and were spared the sacrifice. A movement toward emancipation in the border States while slavery was recognized and permitted in the rebel States would, they believed, detach many from the Union cause and strengthen the insurrection. There was, he presumed, some foundation for their apprehension. What had been done and what he had heard satisfied him that a change of policy in the conduct of the war was necessary, and that emancipation of the slaves in the rebel States must precede and that emancipation of the slaves in the rebel States must precede them [the rebels]. Slavery was doomed. This war, brought upon the country by the slave-owners, would extinguish slavery, but the border States could not be induced to lead in that measure. They would not consent to be convinced or persuaded to take the first step. Forced emancipation in the States which continued to resist the Government would of course be followed by voluntary emancipation in the loyal States, with the aid we might give them. Further efforts with the border States would, he thought, be useless. That was not the road to lead us out of this difficulty. We must take a different path. We wanted the army to strike more vigorous blows. The Administration must set an example, and strike at the heart of the rebellion. The country, he thought, was prepared for it. The army would be with us. War had removed constitutional obligations and restrictions with the declared rebel communities. The law required us to return the fugitives who escaped to us. This we could and must do with friends, but not with enemies. We invited all bond and free, to desert those who were in flagrant war upon the Union and come to us; and uniting with us they must be made free from rebel authorities and rebel masters.

If there was no constitutional authority in the Government to emancipate the slaves, neither was there any authority, specified or reserved, for the slaveholders to resist the Government or secede from it. They could not at the same time throw off the Constitution and invoke its aid. Having made war upon the Government, they were subject to the incidents and calamities of war, and it was our duty to avail ourselves of every necessary measure to maintain the Union. If the rebels did not cease their war, they must take the consequences of war. He dwelt earnestly on the gravity, importance, and delicacy of the movement, which he had approached with reluctance, but he saw no evidence of a cessation of hostilities; said

ever 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 every where could be free. Yours,

A. LINCOLN

<sup>1</sup> ALS, Wedsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, Connecticut. Greeley's communication of August 19, printed in the *Tribune* of August 20, 1862, under the headline "The Prayer of Twenty Millions" expressed disappointment with "the policy you seem to be pursuing with regard to the slaves of Rebels. . . . I. We require of you . . . that you EXECUTE THE LAWS. . . . II. We think you are strangely and disastrously remiss . . . with regard to the emancipating provisions of the new Confiscation Act. . . . III. We think you are unduly influenced by the counsels . . . of certain fossil politicians heiling from the Border Slave States. . . . IV. We think timid counsels in such a crisis calculated to prove perilous. . . . V. We complain that the Union cause has suffered . . . from mistaken deference to Rebel Slavery. . . . VI. We complain that the Confiscation Act which you approved is habitually disregarded by your Generals. . . . VII. Let me call your attention to the recent tragedy in New-Orleans. . . . A considerable body of . . . men, held in Slavery by two Rebel sugar-planters . . . made their way to the great mart of the South-West, which they knew to be in the undisputed possession of the Union forces. . . . They came to us for liberty and protection. . . . They were set upon and maimed, captured and killed, because they sought the benefit of that act of Congress. . . . VIII. On the face of this wide earth, Mr. President, there is not one disinterested, determined, intelligent champion of the Union cause who does not feel that all attempts to put down the Rebellion and at the same time uphold its inciting cause are preposterous and futile. . . . IX. I close as I began with the statement that what an immense majority of the Loyal Millions of your countrymen require of you is a frank, declared, unqualified, ungrudging execution of the laws of the land. . . .

Greeley printed Lincoln's letter in the *Tribune* on August 25 and followed with a lengthy response, of which the following provides the core: "I never doubted . . . that you desire, before and above all else, to re-establish the now derided authority . . . of the Republic. I intended to raise only this question-- Do you propose to do this by recognizing, obeying, and enforcing the laws, or by ignoring, disregarding, and in effect denying them?"

<sup>2</sup> At this point Lincoln crossed out the following proceeds the more will be broken. "never be mended, and the longer the breaking proceeds the more will be broken."

## To Horace Greeley<sup>1</sup>

Hon. Horace Greeley:

Executive Mansion,  
Washington, August 22, 1862.

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 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."<sup>2</sup> 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 *all* the slaves 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* when-

Accounts of the meeting of President Lincoln with his Cabinet, September 22, 1862, in the diaries of Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase and Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles:

### Chase Diary

The President then took a graver tone and said:—

"Gentlemen; I have, as you are aware, thought a great deal about the relation of this war to Slavery; and you all remember that, several weeks ago, I read you an Order I had prepared on this subject, which, on account of objections made by some of you, was not issued. Ever since then, my mind has been much occupied with this subject, and I have thought all along that the time for acting on it might very probably come. I think the time has come now. I wish it were a better time. I wish that we were in a better condition. The action of the army against the rebels has not been quite what I should have best liked. But they have been driven out of Maryland, and Pennsylvania is no longer in danger of invasion. When the rebel army was at Frederick, I determined, as soon as it should be driven out of Maryland, to issue a Proclamation of Emancipation such as I thought most likely to be useful. I said nothing to any one; but I made the promise to myself, and (hesitating a little)—to my Maker. The rebel army is now driven out, and I am going to fulfill that promise. I have got you together to hear what I have written down. I do not wish your advice about the main matter—for that I have determined for myself. This I say without intending any thing but respect for any one of you. But I already know the views of each on this question. They have been heretofore expressed, and I have considered them as thoroughly and carefully as I can. What I have written is that which my reflections have determined me to say. If there is anything in the expressions I use, or in any other minor matter, which anyone of you thinks had best be changed, I shall be glad to receive the suggestions. One other observation I will make. I know very well that many others might, in this matter, as in others, do better than I can; and if I were satisfied that the public confidence was more fully possessed by any one of them than by me, and knew of any Constitutional way in which he could be put in my place, he should have it. I would gladly yield it to him. But though I believe that I have not so much of the confidence of the people as I had some time since, I do not know that, all things considered, any other person has more; and, however this may be, there is no way in which I can have any

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other man put where I am. I am here. I must do the best I can, and bear the responsibility of taking the course which I think I ought to take."

The President then proceeded to read his Emancipation Proclamation, making remarks on the several parts as he went on, and showing that he had fully considered the whole subject, in all the lights under which it had been presented to him.

After he had closed, Gov. Seward said: "The general question having been decided, nothing can be said further about that. Would it not, however, make the Proclamation more clear and decided, to leave out all references to the act being sustained during the incumbency of the present President; and not merely say that the Government 'recognizes,' but that it will maintain, the freedom it proclaims?"

I followed, saying: "What you have said, Mr. President, fully satisfies me that you have given to every proposition which has been made, a kind and candid consideration. And you have now expressed the conclusion to which you have arrived, clearly and distinctly. This it was your right, and under your oath of office your duty, to do. The Proclamation does not, indeed, mark out exactly the course I should myself prefer. But I am ready to take it just as it is written, and to stand by it with all my heart. I think, however, the suggestions of Gov. Seward very judicious, and shall be glad to have them adopted."

The President then asked us severally our opinions as to the modifications proposed, saying that he did not care much about the phrases he had used. Everyone favored the modification and it was adopted. Gov. Seward then proposed that in the passage relating to colonization, some language should be introduced to show that the colonization proposed was to be only with the consent of the colonists, and the consent of the States in which colonies might be attempted. This, too, was agreed to; and no other modification was proposed. . . .

"That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.

"That the Executive will, on the first day of January aforesaid, by proclamation, designate the States and parts of States, if any, in which the people thereof, respectively, shall then be in rebellion against the United States; and the fact that any State, or the people thereof, shall on that day be, in good faith, represented in the Congress of the United States by members chosen thereto at elections wherein a majority of the qualified voters of such State shall have participated, shall, in the absence of strong countervailing testimony, be deemed conclusive evidence that such State, and the people thereof, are not then in rebellion against the United States."

Now, therefore I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, by virtue of the power in me vested as Commander-in-Chief, of the Army and Navy of the United States in time of actual armed rebellion against authority and government of the United States, and as a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing said rebellion, do, on this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty three, and in accordance with my purpose so to do publicly proclaimed for the full period of one hundred days, from the day first above mentioned, order and designate as the States and parts of States wherein the people thereof respectively, are this day in rebellion against the United States, the following, to-wit:

Arkness, Texas, Louisiana, (except the Parishes of St. Bernard, Plaquemines, Jefferson, St. John, St. Charles, St. James,) Assumption, Terrebonne, Lafourche, St. Mary, St. Martin, and Orleans, including the City of New-Orleans) Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South-Carolina, North-Carolina, and Virginia, (except the fortyeight counties designated as West Virginia, and also the counties of Berkeley, Accomac, Northern Neck, Elizabeth-City, York, Princess Ann, and Norfolk, including the cities of Norfolk & Portsmouth ( )); and which excepted parts are, for the present, left precisely as if this proclamation were not issued.

And by virtue of the power, and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforward shall be

[Here, Secretary Welles takes up the discussion in his *Diary*.] It [the Proclamation] was then handed to the Secretary of State to publish to-morrow. After this, Blair remarked that he did not concur in the expediency of the measure at this time, though he approved of the principle, and should therefore wish to file his objections. He stated at some length his views, which were that we ought not to put in greater jeopardy the patriotic element in the border States,—that the results of this Proclamation would be to carry over those States *en masse* to the Secessionists as soon as it was read, and that there was a class of partisans in the free States endeavoring to revive old parties, who would have a club put into their hands of which they would avail themselves to beat the Administration.

The President said he had considered the danger to be apprehended from the first objection, which was undoubtedly serious, but the objection was certainly as great not to act:—as regarded the fact, it had not much weight with him. The question of power, authority in the Government was not much discussed at this meeting, but had been canvassed individually by the President in private conversation with the members. Some thought legislation advisable but Congress was clothed with no authority on this subject—nor is the Executive, except under the war power,—military necessity, martial law—when there can be no legislation.

### Emancipation Proclamation'

January 1, 1863  
By the President of the United States of America:

#### A Proclamation.

Whereas, on the twentieth day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty two, a proclamation was issued by the President of the United States, containing, among other things, the following, to-wit:

free; and that the Executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons.

And I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defence; and I recommend to them that, in all cases when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages.

And I further declare and make known, that such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.

And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the City of Washington, this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty three, and of the Independence of the United States of America the eighty-seventh.

By the President:

WILLIAM H. SEWARD, Secretary of State.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

To John A. McClelland

Executive Mansion,

Washington, January 8. 1863.

Major General McClelland  
My dear Sir Your interesting communication by the hand of Major Scales is received. I never did ask more, nor ever was willing to accept less than for all the States, and the people thereof, to take and hold their places, and their rights, in the Union, under the Constitution of the United States. For this alone have I felt authorized to struggle; and I seek neither more nor less now. Still, to use a coarse, but an expressive figure, broken eggs can not be mended. I have issued the emancipation proclamation, and I can not retract it.

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After the commencement of hostilities I struggled nearly a year and a half to get along without touching the "institution"; and when finally I conditionally determined to touch it, I gave a hundred days fair notice of my purpose, to all the States and people, within which time they could have turned it wholly aside, by simply again becoming good citizens of the United States. They chose to disregard it, and I made the peremptory proclamation on what appeared to me to be a military necessity. And being made, it must stand. As to the States not included in it, of course they can have their rights in the Union as of old. Even the people of the states included, if they choose, need not to be hurt by it. Let them adopt systems of apprenticeship for the colored people, conforming substantially to the most approved plans of gradual emancipation; and, with the aid they can have from the general government, they may be nearly as well off, in this respect, as if the present trouble had not occurred, and much better off than they can possibly be if the contest continues persistently.

As to any dread of my having a "purpose to enslave, or exterminate, the whites of the South," I can scarcely believe that such a dread exists. It is too absurd. I believe you can be my personal witness that no man is less to be dreaded for undue severity, in any case.

If the friends you mention really wish to have peace upon the old terms, they should act at once. Every day makes the case more difficult. They can so act, with entire safety, so far as I am concerned.

I think you would better not make this letter public; but you may rely confidently on my standing by whatever I have said in it. Please write me if any thing more comes to light. Yours very truly  
A. LINCOLN.