

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Open Letter to Horace Greeley

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

In August 1862, Horace Greeley, a Lincoln supporter and abolitionist, published an editorial in his newspaper, the New York Tribune, in the form of an open letter to the president. The editorial, titled “The Prayer of Twenty Millions,” claimed to speak on behalf of Northern citizens loyal to the Union, and demanded that Lincoln take immediate action against slavery. Lincoln wrote this reply to Greeley, also published in the Tribune, while a draft of the Emancipation Proclamation already lay in his desk drawer.

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Why is Lincoln’s “paramount objective” preserving the Union and not freeing the slaves? What does Lincoln mean by “the Union as it was”? Why might he think he had to first save the Union before emancipation could take place? What distinction does Lincoln make between “official” duty and “personal” wishes?

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 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

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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 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.

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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.