

What does Greeley Letter show us about Abraham Lincoln's Intention to Abolish Slavery During the American Civil War?

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Abstract:

During the American Civil War, Horace Greeley, the celebrated founder of the biggest newspaper company New York Tribune, wrote a public letter to Abraham Lincoln to criticize his intentions in the American Civil War. Lincoln replied to Horace Greeley also through a public letter¹ as well. Analyzing the two letters, we may notice that Lincoln did everything for his own political reputation and interests,

not because these things were justified and morally correct. These two sources are crucial to interpret Lincoln's intention in the American Civil War because these two letters are public letters seen by the entire nation, and it reflects what Lincoln wanted to present to the public about himself. We will look at the background information and analyze the two letters to illustrate this claim.

Keywords: Horace Greeley, public letter, political interest, American Civil War

1. Background Information

The Union was attacked by the Confederacy from various directions in the American Civil War. To strengthen military force in the North and free the slaves in the Confederacy areas, Abraham Lincoln passed the Confiscation Act, which regulates that any "slaves" that fight for the Union Army shall be freed. This act indeed strengthens the Union Army and laid a foundation to win the American Civil War and sustain the union of America. However, some principles

in the Confiscation Act² were violated by other officials during the war. They discriminate black soldiers from the South and treat them discriminately. This situation led some human right advocates to criticize the force of Confiscation Act and Lincoln's lack of determination to free slaves in the South.

One of these advocates is Horace Greeley. He was

¹ A digital copy is shown here: Lincoln, Abraham. "Letter from Abraham Lincoln to Horace Greeley (1862)." Teaching American History, June 4, 2024. <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/letter-to-horace-greeley/>.

² Here is a website that displays the digital copy of the Confiscation Act: "The First Confiscation Act." The First Confiscation Act, August 6, 1861. Accessed August 29, 2024.

the founder and editor of one of the biggest newspaper companies at the time, the New York Turbine. He wrote a public letter³ to criticize that Lincoln seemed not to aim at freeing the slaves, but only at winning the war regardless of slaves' rights. Lincoln also replied to Horace Greeley through the public letter as well.

Several questions arise when we look at Horace Greeley. First, who is Horace Greeley and why would Horace Greeley help Lincoln in the presidential election, instead of helping Lincoln's opponent? Second, why would Lincoln reply to Horace Greeley at a time that he was so busy? Third, what motivates Horace Greeley to criticize Lincoln during the American Civil War?

Greeley started one of the most influential newspaper companies, the New York Turbine, and began publishing hotly debated events and human rights ideas. This attracted millions of readers and increased his popularity. He was one of the abolitionists who championed black rights, and he would publicly criticize inappropriate actions that went against this principle. During the presidential election, Greeley revenged for his rejection several years ago by the group of Douglas- several years before, they had denied him the Whig nomination for statewide office and Greeley had not forgiven them for their ingratitude for his past services⁴- which made him help Lincoln win the election through championing Lincoln on social media. Lincoln also gave Greeley high applause for his help, saying that Horace Greeley is as useful as "one hundred thousand men", as mentioned in Abraham Lincoln and Horace Greeley by William Robers C.

2. Secondary Source Discussion

Some researchers believe that Lincoln frequently incorporate ideas related to racial equality and human rights, and this explains his purpose to abolish slavery. "Development of his thought on these subjects spanned his entire life and is revealed through his speeches, public statements,

3 The following is the website that has the digital version of this letter: Allen, by: Jonathan R. "The Civil War." Horace Greeley's Open Letter to President Lincoln. Accessed August 29, 2024. <http://www.nellaware.com/blog/horace-greeleys-open-letter-to-president-lincoln.html>.

4 This quote describes the case, from the following link shall be seen: Williams, Robert C. "Abraham Lincoln and Horace Greeley." Abraham Lincolns Classroom. Accessed August 29, 2024. <https://www.abrahamlincolnsclassroom.org/abraham-lincolns-contemporaries/abraham-lincoln-and-horace-greeley/>.

and written works"⁵ by Abraham Scofield illustrated that Lincoln frequently emphasizes the concept of equality and human rights, and this is why he abolished slavery.

Some other researchers, however, interpret this frequency by saying that Lincoln was a liar and constantly published speeches supporting both sides. As a result, people of both sides shall support him. "Lincoln was a master politician, which means he was a consummate conniver, manipulator, and liar"⁶ tells us that Lincoln frequently adjusted his political viewpoint to win the support of the public. "Lincoln's speeches and writings offer support for both sides of many issues"⁷ by DiLorenzo explains why we could easily find speeches from Lincoln supporting human rights and racism, and this is why ideas related to Lincoln raised so many controversies.

This controversy is present, and some other researchers believe that Lincoln was actually a racist and was forced to abolish slavery to win the war. "On at least fourteen occasions between 1854 and 1860, Lincoln said unambiguously that he believed the Negro race was inferior to the White race"⁸, Lerone Bennett argues that Lincoln, as the title of the article said, was forced into glory for abolishing slavery and championing human rights despite that he was a racist.

Secondary sources tell us that Lincoln frequently published ideas supporting both sides to win the support from supporters of both viewpoints, making him successful in his political career, but hard for researchers to figure out his real purpose. In the next few chapters, we will look at Greeley's letter and Lincoln's reply to figure out what Lincoln believed about human rights and equality according to the clues in the letter.

3. Method

We shall look at Horace Greeley's letter to Lincoln to know who Greeley, one of Lincoln's best friends and one

5 In the abstract of Scofield A. Abraham Lincoln: Thoughts on Slavery and Racial Equality[J]. OUR Journal: ODU Undergraduate Research Journal, 2022, 9(1): 8.

6 This quote is taken from Economist Murray Rothbard, Rothbard, Murray N. "America's Two Just Wars: 1775 and 1861." *The Costs of War*, July 5, 2017, 119–33. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315131481-4>. p. 131

7 This quote is from DiLorenzo, Thomas J., and Charles Constant. *The real Lincoln: A new look at Abraham Lincoln, his agenda, and an Unnecessary War*. Old Saybrook, Conn: Tantor Media, 2017.

8 Quoted from Lerone Bennett, Jr., Editor of Ebony Magazine, "Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream" (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 2000), p. 132

of his greatest supporters during the presidential election, interpreted Lincoln's behaviors and motivations. Horace Greeley was familiar with people in the political circle and gathered lots of information related to central counsel. He would be familiar with how Lincoln was affected by public voices and surrounding opinions. What's more, Greeley was a human rights advocate, and we shall see how one of the most influential abolitionists at the time commented on Lincoln's measures during the war. These points reflect that Lincoln was a person who did everything for his own rights. Lincoln's reply to Horace Greeley told us about the purpose that he wanted to present to the public.

4. Primary Source Analysis

But before that, the importance of the Second Confiscation Act must be addressed to understand Horace Greeley's letter. The Second Confiscation Act is crucial to reflect Lincoln's attitude for two reasons. First, when the Second Confiscation Act was published, the North wasn't faced with adversaries in the war field, so the political and military necessity of abolishing slavery was unclear. The enforcement of this law, therefore, reflects Lincoln's actual attitude in abolition of slavery. Second, the Confiscation Act was the only law which regulates that no slavery was allowed in the Union at the time. However, there were also several South states supporting both the Union and slavery at the time, so whether the law was strictly carried out implied Lincoln's determination in abolishing slavery. He absolutely had the power to terminate slavery, because later in Emancipation Proclamation, he authorized himself as the Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy⁹ under Article II, section 2 of the United States Constitution. It's only a matter of how much he desired the abolition of slavery.

Analysis of Horace Greeley in the letter reveals to us that Lincoln's priority was his political interest and reputation. Horace Greeley started his letter by directly accusing Lincoln of "discharge of his official and imperative duty" because he didn't "execute the laws". Greeley explained this phenomenon by noting that Lincoln was "unduly in-

fluenced by the counsels from the Border Slave States"¹⁰. This shows that Lincoln didn't execute the laws that proposed abolition of slavery because he didn't want to offend advocates of slavery in the counsels. These objections would bring him danger in the counsel, and make his leadership challenged. Of course, he was able to enforce the law quite well, as in Emancipation Proclamation, but at this time, the North was not in danger, so the several South states that still support slavery disagreed with the policy to abolish slavery completely, so Lincoln had to allow them to make exceptions. The Second Confiscation Act and the Emancipation Proclamation had the same content, except the second was enforced nationally, but Lincoln chose to republish the law, implying that the Second Confiscation Act was not enforced strictly. Thus, Lincoln didn't strictly follow the Confiscation Act entirely for his own political interests. Greeley exemplified Lincoln's disobedience of the law with "the recent tragedy in New Orleans"¹¹. Horace Greeley publicly mentioned this point, claiming that he was negatively affected by the counsel because of his soft and undetermined attitude. Horace Greeley also inferred about Lincoln's disingenuity, saying that "A great proportion of those who triumphed in your election" was now "disappointed and deeply pained by the policy you seem to be pursuing with regard to the slaves of the Rebels"¹². Lincoln told abolitionists that he would champion equality and human rights after the election to win their support, and published the Confiscation Act to satisfy these people. However, Lincoln didn't strictly supervise this act to satisfy people who champion for non-equality between different races as well. These behaviors illustrate that Lincoln did everything just to win more supporters during the election, supporters of both abolitionists and advocates of non-equality between different races, not because of his determination to free the slaves and support equality between different races. Lincoln did everything to win supports from other people and validate his leadership in America.

The purpose Lincoln described in his letter also indicates

10 These quotes are from Horace Greeley's open letter to Lincoln, in the following link: Allen, by: Jonathan R. "The Civil War." Horace Greeley's Open Letter to President Lincoln. Accessed August 29, 2024. <http://www.nellaware.com/blog/horace-greeleys-open-letter-to-president-lincoln.html>.

11 In this case, two sugar-planters from the south were discriminated by soldiers in the North, which raised public anger at the time. This also disobeys the Confiscation Act, see footnote 1.

12 In the first and third paragraph by Horace Greeley's open letter to Lincoln.

9 From the following website is a copy of Emancipation Proclamation: "Transcript of the Proclamation." National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed September 6, 2024. <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/emancipation-proclamation/transcript.html>.

that his primary goal is to establish a justified political figure and win political support. In Lincoln's letter, Lincoln didn't address the problem of whether he would propose slavery. He emphasized that he "would save the union" multiple times to avoid this problem. He said that "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". He reserved the right to change his orientations regarding the abolishment of slavery. This action would make him always stand on the perspective that most people agree with. When someday in the future, dominant popularity required the abolition of slavery, he would abolish slavery and further validate his position as the president. Saying that he would abolish slavery or he wouldn't support abolitionists would put him in danger at the time, as a large group of people would disagree with him. Thus, Lincoln replied to this letter ambiguously by reserving the right, and he didn't provide a way to determine whether abolishing slavery would save the country at that time. This makes him capable of standing at any perspective with justified reasons. The ideas in this letter, thus, prevent people from disagreeing with Lincoln and attacking him, winning Lincoln his own political interests instead of deciding what was good for the entire society. Lincoln also established an ambiguous and positive figure to win supporters in the letter, suggesting a political purpose. Lincoln qualified himself as the person who would "save the union" and "save it the shortest way under the Constitution". This established a positive figure for the entire society in the open letter. People in American society all supported the union of the country, no matter if they were abolitionists or racists. Additionally, he didn't describe how to judge which is "the shortest way under the Constitution", making his actual decision ambiguous and undecided. As a result, he would change his political viewpoint at any point to win support of both sides.

5. Conclusion

To summarize, Lincoln was a historical figure that is hotly debated, mainly because he proposed contrasting ideas in his speech to win the support of the majority of the population. Greeley's letter showed us that Lincoln would break his promise to abolitionists to win other people's support, and he would do everything to validate his position in America and eliminate disagreements towards him. He also established himself as a person who advocates for the union of the country, an ambiguous position supported by the entire society. These all show that he did everything for his own political interests, not for human rights, not for the Constitution, but for himself to have more supporters in the country.

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