

History 211 US Military History Discussion Transcript for February 25, 2021

Main Reading: Lincoln's Writings

This week students reviewed selected letters which Lincoln wrote during the Civil War, particularly a private 1862 note to Reverdy Johnson, a Unionist politician from Maryland, an 1863 letter (which he read aloud) to Gen. Joseph Hooker, and a confidential request sent to Gen. U.S. Grant in early 1865 about his son Robert. The following selections come from student comments:

OVERVIEW

STUDENT COMMENT: Lincoln's letters to Reverdy Johnson, General Hooker, and General Grant all show individually important characteristics of Lincoln throughout the war, both as a leader as well as a man with personal emotions and intuition. One constant between all letters is the seemingly casual nature that Lincoln goes about addressing both senator and general. Lincoln referred directly to principles of friendship in his letters to Johnson and Grant, while complimenting Hooker, even if somewhat backhandedly. That being said, the contents of each letter vary greatly. In his letter to Johnson, Lincoln essentially dismisses the treatment of the people of Louisiana and slave policy implemented by General Phelps. Lincoln rather flatly proclaims "They also know the remedy---know how to be cured of General Phelps. Remove the necessity of his presence." (Lincoln, 1862). In this little remorse is considered by Lincoln, which would have most likely been seen by those within the South and perhaps the larger Union, as a quasi-dictatorial act. Knowing this reputation, when one of Lincoln's Generals in the form of Hooker so claimed "that both the Army and the Government needed a Dictator" Lincoln responded with a deal of spite (Lincoln, 1863). Lincoln then challenges Hooker by actually promoting him and then setting the expectation to succeed in order for this dream to come true. Between these two letters, it could be said the Lincoln was a staunch man solely set on the completion of his ultimate goals of first Union preservation followed closely by emancipation. However, it was his letter to General Grant which showed a completely different light. Here, Lincoln writes to Grant rather humbly, and nearly pleads Grant to allow his son to serve in his "Military family with some nominal rank-" (Lincoln, 1865). This letter is vital as it shows that while Lincoln did act rather harsh or petty manner when dealing with the general state of the war or in dealing with its politics, that he still held very intimate personal value to some aspects of his life. Though these letters give only such a limited look into how Lincoln may have thought and operated, they show that he operated by many different means when contemplating decisions. While some he may deal with in the most effective means despite their ramifications such as the treatment, such as in his letter to Johnson, he is not immune to indulging in both compassion and spite as displayed in his letters to Hooker and Grant when he finds himself compelled a certain way.

STUDENT COMMENT: Unlike the secondary accounts of the American Civil War that we have explored previously, Abraham Lincoln's correspondence with military leaders and family members alike truly sheds new light on the conflict. This primary accounting of the Civil war

removes the historian's interpretation and allows for an intriguing view into Lincoln's outlook on the war as well as his political psyche. I personally found a striking resemblance to the pragmatic and loyal leadership of George Washington. Lincoln seems to truly have the interests of the nation in mind and admits where many could find shortcomings in his political and military strategy. As Lincoln wrote to Gen. Hooker: "What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship." Unlike some historical leadership, ancient or modern, Lincoln stands out as being driven by his end goal of unification of state and government to end the Civil War. The parallels to Washington do not end at their reputations, however, they both shared a very similar relationship to their political and military counterparts. Lincoln keeps military leaders in check while also respecting their expertise that Lincoln may not have had. He respects the office of the Presidency by not abusing his powers and taking into account public opinion holistically.

STUDENT COMMENT: 16th President of the United States Abraham Lincoln served during on the most decisive periods in the nation's history. The nation torn asunder by civil strife Lincoln was tasked with not only running the country, but also with waging war and keeping the country together. During the war, President Lincoln wrote countless correspondence letters to various Generals, Political figures and family members providing a detailed record of his experience throughout the war. In a letter written in 1862 to Reverdy Johnson, Lincoln recounts the civil unrest among civilians in border states about the presence of Union troops in areas such as Baltimore and how the presence of these troops are necessary to ensure that border states remain loyal to the union long enough to elect representatives who would support the union. In another letter written by Lincoln to General Joseph Hooker shortly after Lincoln had appointed him head of the Army of the Potomac. Lincoln had admired Hookers ability to command as well as separate politics with soldering. However, Lincoln felt that General Hooker had previously been hindering the progress of his predecessor as well as suggesting that the army and government be controlled by a dictator. In order to ensure the longevity of the republic, Lincoln wrote General Hooker that only successful generals can install such rulers, and if Hooker was successful, then Lincoln would be risk the dictatorship. In a final letter written to General Ulysses S. Grant, President Lincoln is writing to the General as friend on behalf of his family. As Lincolns eldest son finished his college education he longed for the adventure of war that so many of his peers had embarked on years earlier, in hopes of defending his own son Lincoln wrote general Grant as a friend to implore him to find a rule in the army for his son that would ensure his safety throughout the conflict. The cultural norm of the war had become so engrained in the society that it was considered odd for a young man even the son of the president to not participate in the war.

LINCOLN'S TONE

STUDENT COMMENT: I found these letters written by Lincoln that we read for class to be very interesting. It was a different side to Lincoln that what I am used to reading about. Lincoln in these letters seems to be very confident and assertive. In the first letter to Reverdy Johnson Lincoln's emotions and determination can be noticed. His determination was not only demonstrated through his words with the statement "What I cannot do, of course I will not do;

but it may as well be understood, once for all, that I shall not surrender this game leaving any available card unplayed,"but it was also demonstrated in his punctuation. Right before Lincoln stated how he would not give up without trying every viable option, he reminded Reverdy Johnson about how even after he placed troops in Maryland after the Baltimore mob in April 1861, and it was thought that Union support and sentiment would decrease as a result, there "was Union feeling enough left to elect a Legislature the next autumn which in turn elected a very excellent Union U. S. Senator!" I would not say I view Lincoln as being weak, but when I think of him, I usually think of a calm, cool, and collected man, even during a time of such brutal war. It was interesting to see his emotions in this letter and how riled up or excited he got when writing this. This letter also showed he is not weak, which some believed, because of his refusal to give in to what the southern unionists in Louisiana wanted, which was to remove the abolitionist Phelps. Rather, he reversed the role by saying that there would be no need for Phelps if they would join the Union Army, and that they would join if they truly were for the Union and the government.

STUDENT COMMENT: In the letters written to Reverdy Johnson, Joseph Hooker, and Ulysses S. Grant, it is evident that Lincoln shared a common connection with his "contemporaries," as suggested by House Divided. Responding to Johnson, Lincoln expresses sincerity when addressing his concern for the fate of the nation and established his interest to take any possible initiative. In his letter to Hooker, Lincoln compliments the general for being an eloquent and exemplary leader, but also critiquing his "efforts to undermine confidence" and opinions on dictatorship. In the letter to Grant, however, he cordially requests to have his twenty-two year-old son to be enlisted as part of his staff (How did Lincoln's contemporaries respond to his leadership?).

FATHER ABRAHAM

STUDENT COMMENT: In all of the letters we read it is abundantly clear how much Abraham Lincoln's contemporaries viewed him as an almost fatherly figure. The letter that showcased this the best was his letter to General Joseph Hooker. In the letter Lincoln admonishes Hooker for his insubordination while serving under the previous General, General Burnside, but in a way that is very akin to a father scolding his son. He also greatly praises General Hooker for his prowess and success on the battlefield. Even Hooker thought that it was "just such a letter as a father might write to a son. It is a beautiful letter, and although I think he was harder on me than I deserved, I will say that I love the man who wrote it." (How Historians Interpret Hooker Letter 1) Despite the fact he was almost fatherly sometimes he still was willing to do what he thought needed to be done. That fact is exemplified in his letter to Reverdy Johnson, a Maryland Senator, who thought that Lincoln's support of abolitionist General John W. Phelps was driving Louisiana Unionists away and crushing their support for reunification. Lincoln's response was firm, that he wouldn't stand for that and he was willing to do what needed to be done. As I said in the beginning the letters show that Lincoln was not only a fatherly, paternal figure to many, he was also a steady hand at the tiller guiding America through one of its most trying times.

UNIONIST

STUDENT COMMENT: Through his letters, Lincoln showed his commitment to the Union and the preservation of the United States of America. Lincoln also showed extreme honesty. Lincoln did not hide his thoughts behind flowery rhetoric. In the letter to Reverdy Johnson, Lincoln addressed Reverdy Johnson's and Louisianians' concerns about abolition and the Union presence in Louisiana. Lincoln questions the loyalty of "friends" like Reverdy Johnson. Lincoln drove home his ultimate commitment to preserving the Union at the end of his letter: "Still I must save this government if possible. What I cannot do, of course I will not do: but it may as well be understood, once for all, that I shall not surrender this game leaving any available card unplayed." (Abraham Lincoln to Reverdy Johnson)

STUDENT COMMENT: The interplay between Lincoln's character and his commitment to the Union is perhaps best seen in his letter to Grant regarding his son Robert. Lincoln writes to Grant as a friend seeking a favor, to grant his son an opportunity to support the war effort. Lincoln, like all of us, has self-interest, but his character is shown in how he tempers his self-interest against his selfless commitment to the union. Lincoln stresses that he wishes his son not a position "to which those who have already served long, are better entitled, and better qualified to hold." This shows again the importance of loyalty to Lincoln, as he desperately wants to avoid taking something away from a loyal soldier. Perhaps the most revealing quotation about Lincoln's character comes not from the letter, but from the interpretation article. In response to his wife's misgivings about allowing their son to serve in the war Lincoln replies that "many a poor mother has given up all her sons, and our son is not more dear to us than the sons of other people are to their mothers." In a truly revealing quote, Lincoln shows an unimaginable amount of empathy towards those young men and their families that have been affected by the war. This is likely his most important trait as a leader, as he is able to firmly commit himself to union victory while also maintaining a degree of empathy with those who were injured or killed that would crush the soul of any ordinary man.