

January Patriotic Instructor Message

As we enter the new year, we are also embarking on a celebration of sesquicentennial events, which will commemorate the lives of the "Boys in Blue." This month my message will look at the events of December 1860 through January 1861 and the converging clouds of conflict, which swirled and churned with the winds of fate as the nation slid toward disunion and war.

The months of December 1860 and January 1861 saw tensions mount as the deep south states of Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas joined with the fire-eaters of South Carolina in succeeding from the Union. In Springfield Illinois, Abraham Lincoln took refuge from hordes of office seekers. Working at his brother-in-law's store he began writing what would become his first inaugural address. For references, in preparing that address, Lincoln used four documents: Henry Clay's 1850 Speech on compromise, Daniel Webster's reply to Hayne, Andrew Jackson's proclamation against nullification, and the U.S. Constitution. In analyzing his choice of documents, we can obtain an insight into Lincoln's future governance of the nation. Lincoln's approach will be to seek compromise if possible, take a firm stand on principles, preserve of the union, and anchor policies on constitutional law. In Lincoln's correspondence during the months of December and January we can see how Lincoln used his beliefs in a series of initiatives and letters through which, he sought to preserve the union.

Lincoln's correspondence from the middle of December through January shows that he is already dealing with the number one issue that propelled southern secession, slavery. In a letter, dated 18 December 1860, to John D. Defrees, a republican supporter, Lincoln says "I am sorry any republican inclines to dally with Pop. Sov. [Popular Sovereignty] of any sort. It acknowledges that slavery has equal rights with liberty and surrenders all we have contended for.¹ Clearly Lincoln does not desire to see popular sovereignty become the accepted policy for determining the validity of slavery.

We can examine Lincoln's intense feeling on the connection between Constitutional Union and personal liberty [rights]; by reviewing a fragment of his written thoughts on the idea of liberty and the foundational nature of the constitutional union. In the following statement, Lincoln postulates that; "Without the *Constitution* and the *Union*, we could not have attained . . . our great prosperity." Lincoln further writes that "there is something back of these, entwining

itself more closely about the human heart. That something, is the principle of "Liberty to all"—the principle that clears the *path* for all—gives *hope* to all—and, by consequence, *enterprise*, and *industry* to all. The *expression* of that principle, in our Declaration of Independence, was most happy, and fortunate. *Without* this, as well as *with* it, we could have declared our independence of Great Britain; but *without* it, we could not, I think, have secured our free government, and consequent prosperity. No oppressed, people will *fight*, and *endure*, as our fathers did, without the promise of something better, than a mere change of masters."ⁱⁱ Evidently Lincoln believes that personal liberty is the key to American Democracy.

In keeping with the search for compromise, on 22 December 1860, in a letter written to Alexander Hamilton Stephens, future Vice President of the Confederacy, we can see that Lincoln is actively seeking to allay the fears of the southern states when he writes "I fully appreciate the present peril the country is in, and the weight of responsibility on me. Do the people of the South really entertain fears that a republican administration would, directly, or indirectly, interfere with their slaves, or with them, about their slaves? If they do, I wish to assure you, as a friend, and still, I hope, not an enemy, that there is no cause for such fears. You think slavery is right, and ought to be extended; while we think it is wrong and ought to be restricted. That I suppose is the rub. It certainly is the only substantial difference between us."ⁱⁱⁱ In this letter, Lincoln seems to be offering Stephens a compromise; there will be no need for southern succession; the institution of slavery would be allowed to remain in those places where slavery already exist but the south will have to accept that slavery would not be allowed to expand beyond its current boundaries.

Lincoln's dedication to the ideals of Constitutionalism is put on display in late December 1860. Lincoln received word of a proposed Congressional act which included the following: ART. 13. No amendment shall be made to the Constitution which will authorize to give to Congress the power to abolish or interfere within any State with the domestic institutions thereof, including that of persons held to labor or service by the laws of said State.^{iv} On December 28th Lincoln wrote to General Duff Green on the topic of making an amendment to the Constitution. "My Dear Sir: I do not desire any amendment of the Constitution. Recognizing, however, that questions of such amendment rightfully belong to the American people, I should not feel justified nor inclined to withhold from them, if I could, a fair opportunity of expressing their will

thereon through either of the modes prescribed in the instrument.^v This letter offers proof that Lincoln was a man of the Constitution and was always prepared to let the Constitutional processes do their job. He believed that people should exercise their rights under that document, and he was willing to submit to their judgment as to the direction the nation would take on slavery.

By late January 1861, Lincoln had come to understand that there could be no compromise with the southern leadership, and Like Webster, Lincoln began to realize he had to stand firm on his principles. Revealing his angst for the southern leadership Lincoln told Presbyterian Minister Albert Hale the following, "Compromise is not the remedy, not the cure. The South (that is, the leaders) don't want it — won't have it — no good can come of it. The system of compromise has no end. Slavery is the evil out of which all our other national evils and dangers have come. It has deceived and led us to the brink of ruin, and it must be stopped. It must be kept where it now is." As January came to an end, Lincoln was standing on his beliefs. However, Lincoln did not seek to create controversy; hoping rather that the south would not secede and accept the constraints on the expansion of slavery he offered them" Writing to John Gilmer, a southern Democrat, on the topic of slavery's expansion into the western territories Lincoln said " on the territorial question, I am inflexible." This is evidence that Lincoln was not going to negotiate the expansion of slavery.

One hundred and Fifty years ago Abraham Lincoln faced a serious challenge. His election had incited a southern rebellion against the institutions which he had come to see as the best hope of man. The first months following his election are traumatic but Lincoln showed exceptional leadership in pursuing his plan for dealing with southern secession. Lincoln saw the threat of succession over slavery as a repudiation of the ideals upon which the United States was created. He understood that these ideals were the key to success as a democratic nation. Therefore, Lincoln's course was clear. He would strive to preserve the Union by the best means available. Inevitably the legacy of Clay, Webster, Jackson, and the founding fathers, to which Lincoln ascribed, proved the greatest influence on Lincoln's actions as President elect and later President.

In conclusion, we can see the greatness of Lincoln coming into focus as December turns into January that winter one hundred and fifty years ago. Greatness in the case of Lincoln evolves from his commitment to a Constitutional Republic and the personal rights of its citizens. Only the intransigence of the south stood in the way of a peaceful resolution of the matter. That resistance will result in limiting Lincoln's options for preserving the Union and ultimately cause the Civil War.

ⁱ Abraham Lincoln "His Speeches and Writings" ed. Roy P. Basler, Da Capo Press, Cambridge, 2001p. 566 [unabridged republication of the edition published in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1946]

ⁱⁱ Fragment on the Constitution and Union by Abraham Lincoln (c ...
<http://www.ashbrook.org/constitution/fragment.html> (accessed January 9, 2011).

ⁱⁱⁱ Abraham Lincoln "His Speeches and Writings" ed. Roy P. Basler, Da Capo Press, Cambridge, 2001p. 567 [unabridged republication of the edition published in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1946]

^{iv} Ghost Amendment: The Thirteenth Amendment That Never Was,
<http://ghostamendment.com/index.html> (accessed January 9, 2011).

^v Lincoln's Stories and Speeches, Ed. Edward Frank Allen, Books Inc., New York, No Copy
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