

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

A P R E S I D E N T ' S V I S I O N

PRIMARY SOURCE WORKSHEET

ABRAHAM LINCOLN TO HORACE GREELEY, AUGUST 22, 1862.

Transcribed and annotated by the Lincoln Studies Center, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois.

On August 19, 1862, Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, wrote an editorial titled “The Prayer of Twenty Millions” that criticized Lincoln and his policies for not making emancipation a priority. The following is Lincoln’s response to Greeley’s editorial. Lincoln communicates his priorities and constitutional obligations as president. What Lincoln does not reveal, however, is that a draft of the Emancipation Proclamation already lay on his desk as he wrote this letter on August 22.

EXECUTIVE MANSION,
Washington, August 22, 1862.

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 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 this 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.

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.

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QUESTIONS

Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. What was the state of the Union at the time Lincoln wrote this letter?
2. According to this letter, what was Lincoln's primary goal as president?
3. What does Lincoln proclaim are his views on emancipation?
4. Lincoln was known for his way with words. How many times does Lincoln use the word "union" in this brief letter? Why did he repeat this particular word so many times?
5. Lincoln writes, "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." What evidence do you have that these claims are true? In 1862, did one claim seem more accurate than the other?
6. What have you learned that explains why, early in the war, Lincoln felt emancipation could hurt chances of a Union victory? By the end of 1862, what do you think had changed Lincoln's calculations about emancipation and Union victory?
7. How does Lincoln's statement compare to the "personal wish" he states at the end of the letter? Why do you think he added his "personal wish"? How would you characterize Lincoln's views on slavery after reading this?

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