

LINCOLN LORE

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COMPROMITTED BY INFERENCE

The eve of the November election might offer a proper environment for the presentation of three letters of political importance in the archives of the Lincoln National Life Foundation one of these is unpublished and the other two little known. The unpublished note was written during the political campaign of 1860 and aside from a very important historical statement it contains a political expression which one would not likely come across in this day. While Lincoln thought it might be well for his friend Thompson to consult with Winter Davis, he recommended caution in this approach for fear he might be "compromitted by inference."

One of the most persistent but wholly untenable viewpoints expressed by many modern writers would make Lincoln a shrewd, crafty, cunning, subtle, wily politician stooping to any trick which might advance his immediate political fortunes. This is known as the humanizing process which would bring Lincoln down to the level of the common run of people before he can be appreciated. Of course when he is reduced to this status he becomes just another unimpressive individual.

A politician however who would not even be "compromitted by inference" would not in language or action rely upon deceit or misrepresentation to forward or advance his candidacy. While the word "compromitted" is now obsolete, having relinquished part of its meaning to the word compromised, it does contribute to our understanding of Lincoln's straightforward political philosophy.

The contents of the letter with the peculiar but impressive phraseology are herewith submitted in full.

Private

Springfield, Ill., June 18, 1860

Hon. R. W. Thompson

My dear Sir:

Your long letter of the 12th is just received, and read—I write this to thank you for it; and to say I would like for you to converse freely with Hon. Henry Winter Davis—And lest he be compromitted, by inference for this, let me say that he and I never met, or corresponded—

Very truly your friend

A. Lincoln

Another original Lincoln letter in the Foundation collection written by Lincoln to Thompson during the campaign has a very interesting Lincoln reaction to the use of his political record. He also uses in this letter a phrase which would warn his friends not to make too many claims on his behalf. "Due caution and circumspection" are often thrown to the winds in political campaigns. Circumspection is an especially fine word to describe Lincoln's attitude toward all questions which vitally concerned him or the cause he represented. The letter written to Thompson on the question of personal record follows:

Private

Springfield, Ill., July 10, 1860

Hon. R. W. Thompson:

Dear Sir:

Yours of the 6th is received, and for which I thank you. I write this to acknowledge the receipt of it, and to say I take time (only a little) before answering the main matter.

If my RECORD would HURT any, there is no hope that it will be over-looked; so that if friends can HELP any with it they may as well do so. Of course, due caution and circumspection, will be used.

With reference to the same matter of WHICH YOU write, I wish you would watch Chicago a little. They are getting up a movement for the 17th Inst. I believe a line from you to John Wilson, late of the Genl. Land Office (I guess you know him well) would fix the matter.

When I shall have reflected a little, you will hear from me again.

Yours very truly

A. Lincoln.

Burn this.

Still another Lincoln letter owned by the Foundation has an interesting political slant.

There is no finer example of Lincoln's unwillingness to change routine procedure previous to an election than Lincoln's refusal to sidetrack the unpopular draft law until after the voting was over. Although he was anxious about the November contests his major interest was centered upon the effect the October election would have on the conduct of the war. It is almost unbelievable that Lincoln, a candidate for the Presidency, would encourage the immediate return of the soldiers to the front, rather than have them remain at home strengthening the political ranks for the Presidential contest. The letter written to General Sherman just before the state elections follows:

Executive Mansion,

Washington, D. C.

September 19th, 1864.

Major General Sherman,

The State election of Indiana occurs on the 11th of October, and the loss of it to the friends of the Government would go far towards losing the whole Union cause. The bad effect upon the November election, and especially the giving the State Government to those who will oppose the war in every possible way, are too much to risk, if it can possibly be avoided. The draft proceeds, notwithstanding its strong tendency to lose us the State. Indiana is the only important State, voting in October, whose soldiers cannot vote in the field. Anything you can safely do to let her soldiers, or any part of them, go home and vote at the State election, will be greatly in point. They need not remain for the Presidential election, but may return to you at once. This is, in no sense, an order, but is merely intended to impress you with the importance, to the army itself, of your doing all you safely can, yourself being the judge of what you can safely do.

Yours truly

A. Lincoln