

Abraham Lincoln papers

From Abraham Lincoln to Horace Greeley [Newspaper Clipping]¹, August 22, 1862

¹ Lincoln published the following in response to Greeley to Lincoln, August 19, 1862 (*q. v.*), a New York *Tribune* editorial entitled "The Prayer of Twenty Millions. In that letter, Greeley complained that Lincoln had not proclaimed emancipation as he was required to do by the Second Confiscation Act, and asserted that all attempts to put down the rebellion while at the same time upholding slavery were "preposterous and futile."

Since Lincoln had already read a preliminary version of the Emancipation Proclamation to his cabinet on July 22, this letter has seemed disingenuous to some. In it, however, Lincoln makes it clear to the public that though he considers his primary constitutional duty to be to save the Union, partial or even total emancipation might well be the necessary means to attain that end. Lincoln needed to make his position completely clear without tipping his hand on emancipation prematurely.

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.