

Abraham Lincoln and Horace Greeley Debate Slavery

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As the Civil War erupted, one of the most ardent abolitionist supporters was Horace Greeley, the well-known and outspoken editor of the *New York Tribune*. This peculiar man had come to New York in from New England thirty years before the war began. He wore overcoats even in the hottest weather and always carried an umbrella rain or shine. He preached on social issues through his frequent newspaper columns and was never afraid to take radical stands on social issues. After years of promoting vegetarian diets, better living conditions for the working class and opposition to capital punishment and alcohol, in the 1850's he became especially focused on and vocal about the issue of slavery.

Greeley's writings were of interest to a great many and by the time the Civil War started the circulation of the *Tribune* stood at an impressive 300,000. Ralph Waldo Emerson called Greeley "the right spiritual father of this region". Greeley developed a relationship with Abraham Lincoln and wrote him a number of letters during the first two years of the war, often lecturing him on his conduct of the war. On August 20, 1862, however, Greeley took his main concerns public. He wrote and published a now famous open letter to the president titled "The Prayer of Twenty Millions". In the letter, which Greeley claimed to speak for the American people, he chastised Lincoln for his lack of aggressive attentions toward ending slavery.

In the letter Greeley called on Lincoln to defeat both the Confederates and slavery. He stated that the American people were "sorely disappointed and deeply pained by the policy you seem to be pursuing with regard to the slaves of the Rebels." He also appealed to Lincoln to listen to his foreign ambassadors so that he would understand the deep problems that the

continuation of slavery would mean for the country. He pleaded “Ask them to tell you candidly whether the seeming subserviency of your policy to the slaveholding, slavery-upholding interest, is not the perplexity, the despair of statesmen of all parties”. He ended his letter by imploring the president to uphold the Confiscation Act that gave freedom to all slaves entering Union-held lands. After reading the letter in the *Tribune*, Lincoln knew that American people expected a reply. His eloquent letter to Greeley, published on August 22, 1862, is a masterpiece of common sense statesmanship. Lincoln, who already had a draft of the Emancipation Proclamation on his desk, was determined to preserve the union at all costs. He wrote: “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.’” Later he spoke very plainly to Greeley: “My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and it 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 the Union by freeing all the slaves then 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 the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would 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 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.”

Lincoln’s letter received great acclaim in the North for its forthright sentiments and direct nature. Most historians consider it a masterful stroke of public relations by the president, one that bought him time and good will as he continued to work on his proclamation. That historic proclamation would be issued in a little over four months.

