

1862. Horace Greeley and the Debate over Emancipation

Horace Greeley, a white man, was the founder of the *New York Tribune* and edited the newspaper for over thirty years. Greeley took a strong moral tone in his newspaper and campaigned against alcohol and tobacco use, gambling, prostitution and capital punishment. However, his main concern was the abolition of slavery. In 1860, Greeley supported the presidential campaign of Abraham Lincoln, but was unhappy with Lincoln's attitude toward emancipation. He wrote an open letter to the President on August 19, 1862, complaining about the Union army's unwillingness to free slaves in captured territory.

In the letter, Greeley criticized Lincoln for failing to make slavery the dominant issue of the war and compromising moral principles for political motives. Lincoln replied on August 22, 1862 that, "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or 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."

1. Horace Greeley, letter to President Abraham Lincoln, August 19, 1862

I do not intrude to tell you, for you must know already, that a great proportion of those who triumphed in your election, and of all who desire the unqualified suppression of the rebellion now desolating our country, are solely disappointed and deeply pained by the policy you seem to be pursuing with regard to the slaves of the Rebels.

We think you are strangely and disastrously remiss in the discharge of your official and imperative (necessary) duty with regard to the emancipating provisions of the new Confiscation Act. Those provisions were designed to fight slavery with liberty. They prescribe that men loyal to the Union, and willing to shed their blood in the behalf, shall no longer be held, with the nation's consent, in bondage to persistent, malignant (poisonous) traitors, who for twenty years have been plotting and for sixteen months have been fighting to divide and destroy our country. Why these traitors should be treated with tenderness by you, to the prejudice of the dearest rights of loyal men, we cannot conceive.

We ask you to consider that slavery is everywhere the inciting cause and sustaining base of treason. . . It seems to us the most obvious truth that whatever strengthens or fortifies slavery in the border states strengthens also treason and drives home the wedge intended to divide the Union.

We complain that the Union cause has suffered and is now suffering immensely from mistaken deference to Rebel slavery. . . . We complain that the officers of your armies have habitually repelled rather than invited the approach of slaves who would have gladly taken the risks of escaping from their Rebel masters to our camps, bringing intelligence often of inestimable value to the Union cause.

2. President Abraham Lincoln, letter to Horace Greeley, August 22, 1862

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 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 do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that.

Questions

1. Why was Greeley's position as editor of the *New York Tribune* an important platform for challenging slavery?
2. Greeley used the Tribune to campaign against alcohol and tobacco use, gambling, prostitution, capital punishment and slavery. In your opinion, are there connections between these issues?
3. Why did Greeley challenge Lincoln after supporting him in the election?
4. How did Lincoln respond to Greeley?