

Lincoln's last letter to his wife, 1865

Introduction

This letter, written as the Union captured the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia, demonstrates Lincoln's active, hands-on commitment as commander in chief of the armed forces as well as his devotion to his family. It reads like a military dispatch, updating Mrs. Lincoln on the latest developments and noting that he was sending a "Copy to Secretary of War."

In late March 1865, General Ulysses S. Grant invited President Lincoln, his wife Mary, and son Tad to visit the Union headquarters in City Point, Virginia. The family arrived on March 24 and Lincoln spent much of his time meeting with commanders and traveling to view the aftermath of a battle at Fort Stedman. On April 1, Mary and Tad returned to Washington DC, while Lincoln remained with the army. That night, Union general Philip Sheridan's troops won a decisive victory at the Battle of Five Forks, Virginia, and cut off Confederate general Robert E. Lee's best escape route and supply line. The end of the war was imminent.

At the greatest moment of his presidency—the fall of the Confederate capital, Richmond—Abraham Lincoln chose to write to his wife on April 2 before writing to any public official: "Last night Gen. Grant telegraphed that Sheridan with his Cavalry and the 5th Corps have captured three brigades of Infantry, a train of wagons, and several batteries, prisoners amounting to several thousands."

With great optimism, Lincoln also wrote of Grant's intention to order a full attack on Petersburg, not knowing that Grant's campaign had already been successful and Lee was abandoning Petersburg. Later that afternoon Lee sent word to President Davis to evacuate Richmond. On April 3, Richmond fell under Union control.

This is the last known letter between the President and Mary Todd Lincoln.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and study Lincoln's letter. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions. Remember to base your answers, whenever possible, on the information in the document:

1. Why do you think Lincoln took his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, and his son Tad to visit the Union Army headquarters?
2. Briefly describe the significance of the military information Lincoln provided in this letter to his wife.
3. A) How would you characterize Lincoln's mood at the time he wrote the letter?
B) What circumstances contributed to Lincoln's feelings?
4. Why do you think Lincoln provided a copy of this letter to his wife to the Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton?

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Transcript

City. Point, April 2. 7:⁴⁵ 1865M^{rs} A. Lincoln,

Washington, D.C.

Last night Gen. Grant telegraphed that Sheridan with his Cavalry and the 5th Corps have captured three brigades of Infantry, a train of wagons, and several batteries, prisoners amounting to several thousands— This morning Gen. Grant [*inserted*: having ordered an attack along the whole line] telegraphs as follows

“Both Wright and Parks got through the enemies lines— The battle now rages furiously. Sheridan with his Cavalry, the 5th Corps, & Miles Division of the 2nd Corps, which was sent to him since 1. this A.M. is now sweeping down from the West. All now looks highly favorable. Ord is engaged, but I have not yet heard the result on his front”

Robert yesterday wrote a little [*inserted*: chearful] note to Capt. Penrose, which is all I have heard of him since you left. Copy to Secretary of War

A Lincoln

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Image

820 AM.

Head Quarters Armies of the United States,
City Point, April 2, 1865

Mr. Lincoln,
Washington, D.C.

Last night Gen. Grant telegraphed that Sheridan with his Cavalry and the 5th Corps have captured three brigades of Infantry, a train of wagons, and several batteries, prisoners amounting to several thousands. This morning Gen. Grant ^{having ordered an attack along the whole line} telegraphs as follows:

"Both Wright and Parke got through the enemies lines. The battle now rages furiously. Sheridan with his Cavalry, the 5th Corps, & Miles Division of the 2nd Corps, which was sent to him since 1. This Arm. is now sweeping down from the West. All now looks highly favorable. One is engaged, but I have not yet heard the result on his front."

Robert yesterday wrote a little ^{cheerful} note to Capt. Parrow, which is all I have heard of him since you left. Copy to Secretary of War

A. Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln to Mary Todd Lincoln, April 2, 1865. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC08090)