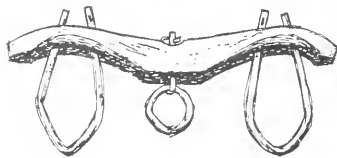


**ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S LETTER
TO MAJOR GENERAL JOSEPH HOOKER
DATED JANUARY 26, 1863**

*A Facsimile Reproduction of the Letter
With Explanatory Text by Paul M. Angle*

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On November 17, 1941, Mr. Alfred W. Stern, a member of The Caxton Club, purchased the most important of the thirty-odd letters written by President Lincoln to General Joseph Hooker—the letter which is generally known as “The Hooker Letter.” In so doing, Mr. Stern has brought to Illinois what is recognized to be one of the finest Lincoln letters in existence, and one of the world’s great masterpieces of letter writing. The Caxton Club congratulates Mr. Stern on his valuable acquisition, and expresses its gratitude for his permission to reproduce the letter here for the members of the Club.

BY PAUL M. ANGLE
LIBRARIAN, ILLINOIS STATE HISTORICAL LIBRARY

ONCE again Abraham Lincoln was faced with the necessity of choosing a commander for the Army of the Potomac. Before him, at the White House, sat Major General A. E. Burnside, who had commanded the Army of the Potomac since early November, 1862. From his headquarters near Fredericksburg, Burnside had brought an order dismissing four of his general officers from the service and relieving six others from active duty. The order was to be effective when approved by the President. The alternative to approval, Burnside made clear, was the acceptance of his own resignation.

Burnside, like McClellan and Pope before him, had failed. He had accepted the command of the Army of the Potomac with reluctance, protesting the incapacity which his faulty generalship at the Battle of Fredericksburg demonstrated a few weeks later. After that battle his lack of confidence in himself spread quickly to the army. By the thousands, officers and men disappeared without leave, while among those who remained there was constant, outspoken criticism. Aware that no commander could win battles with a disaffected army, Burnside chose to make an issue between himself and his principal critics. Either they or he must go. Lincoln was to make the choice.

First among those whom Burnside had marked for dismissal was Major General Joseph Hooker, whom he charged with "unjust and unnecessary criticisms of the actions of his superior officers, and of the authorities," and characterized as "a man unfit to hold an important commission during a crisis like the present, when so much patience, charity, confidence, consideration, and patriotism are due from every soldier in the field." Yet, when Burnside was relieved on January 25, 1863, it was Hooker whom Lincoln assigned to the command of the Army of the Potomac.

The new commander was forty-eight years old. A native of Massachusetts, he had graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1837. Advancement came slowly until the Mexican War when, for distinguished service in action, he was brevetted successively a captain, a major, and a lieutenant-colonel. After the war, he remained in the army for several years, but finally, despairing of promotion in the small peace-time establishment, he resigned his commission and entered civil life.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, Hooker proffered his services. Like many other officers of experience, he was at first ignored. However, on May 17, 1861, he was appointed brigadier-general of volunteers. Valorous conduct in the Peninsular Campaign a year later won him a major-generalcy and the nickname, "Fighting Joe." The second Manassas, South Mountain, and Antietam added to his reputation, and while he protested vigorously to Burnside about his orders at Fredericksburg, he made a magnificent attempt to carry them out when his protest was overruled. His fame, both in and out of the army, was certainly not lessened by his appearance and bearing: tall, robust, handsome, he carried himself with the assurance that has always seemed to be the badge of the natural fighting man.

Having long known that Burnside's dismissal was only a matter of time, Lincoln had decided upon Hooker well in advance of his appointment. The selection, however, was not made without misgivings. When, after the Second Battle of Bull Run, Gideon Welles had mentioned Hooker as a possible successor to Pope, Lincoln had nodded in approval. "But," he added, "I fear he gets excited." To Senator Orville H. Browning, the day after Hooker's appointment, Lincoln confessed that he was not satisfied with Hooker's conduct, but that he did not know what better he could do than to appoint him. The most explicit avowal of his reservations, however, came from his own pen:

EXECUTIVE MANSION,

Washington, January 26, 1863.

Major General Hooker:

General.

I have placed you at the head of the Army of the Potomac. Of course I have done this upon what appear to me to be sufficient reasons. And yet I think it best for you to know that there are some things in regard to which, I am not quite satisfied with you. I believe you to be a brave and a skilful soldier, which, of course, I like. I also believe you do not mix politics with your profession, in which you are right. You have confidence in yourself, which is a valuable, if not an indispensable quality. You are ambitious, which, within reasonable bounds, does good rather than harm. But I think that during Gen. Burnside's command of the Army, you have taken counsel of your ambition, and thwarted him as much as you could, in which you did a great wrong to the country, and to a most meritorious and honorable brother officer. I have heard, in such way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the Army and the Government needed a Dictator. Of course it was not *for* this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the command. Only those generals who gain successes, can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship. The government will support you to the utmost of its ability, which is neither more nor less than it has done and will do for all commanders. I much fear that the spirit which you have aided to infuse into the Army, of criticising their Commander, and withholding confidence from him, will now turn upon you. I shall assist you as far as I can, to put it down. Neither you, nor Napoleon, if he were alive again, could get any good out of an army, while such a spirit prevails in it.

And now, beware of rashness—Beware of rashness, but with energy, and sleepless vigilance, go forward, and give us victories.

Yours very truly

A. LINCOLN

“He talks to me like a father,” said Hooker to a friend when he received Lincoln's letter. “I shall not answer this letter until I have won him a great victory.” To that end he went to work with energy. The Army of the Potomac was reorganized, the depleted ranks were filled, strenuous drill and field exercise were instituted, damaged morale was restored. By April, the troops were again in fighting trim, and ready for the offensive.

Hooker planned the forward movement carefully, and military critics have only praise for his strategy. However, in the ensuing action (the Battle of Chancellorsville, May 2-4) he seemed to be incapable of decisive measures, and never succeeded in utilizing more than a fraction of his strength. The result was a defeat—not as catastrophic as Fredericksburg, but a major reverse nevertheless. Some have attributed his failure to drunkenness—a baseless slander; others to the effect of a blow from a piece of falling timber during the battle. At least as plausible as these explanations is one attributed to Hooker himself: “For once I lost confidence in Hooker, and that is all there is to it.”

After Chancellorsville, Hooker withdrew his army. When Lee began the invasion of the North that ended at Gettysburg, Hooker followed him and maneuvered his troops so skillfully that he received the thanks of Congress. However, when his request for reinforcements was denied, he asked to be relieved of his command. His request was granted, and on June 28 George Gordon Meade took command of the Army of the Potomac.

Instead of being kept inactive, Hooker was given the XI and XII Corps and sent to the Department of the Cumberland. There, under Thomas and Sherman, he fought well. But when McPherson was killed during the siege of Atlanta, and Howard was given his place, Hooker took the appointment as a personal affront, and asked to be relieved. Thus ended his active military service.

In early April, 1863, Lincoln visited Hooker in the field. In his party was an old friend, Dr. Anson G. Henry. Upon returning to Washington, Henry described the visit in a long letter to his wife. “Genl. Hooker,” he wrote, “showed me the letter Mr Lincoln wrote him, when he tendered him the command, & which ought to be printed in letters of Gold— It will be read by our posterity with greater veneration for its author than has ever been shown for any thing written by Washington, or any other man. It breathes a spirit of Patriotic devotion to the country, and a spirit of frankness & candor worthy of Mr Lincolns character, and is peculiarly his own.”

With that appraisal, the whole world agrees.

Executive Mansion,

Washington, January 26. 1863.

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