

A letter from afar by A. Lincoln

As received by David North
19 May 2026

The following letter, signed “A. Lincoln” but without a return address or subject line, appeared in my email this morning. No sooner had I made a copy of the letter than it disappeared from my inbox. Despite its strange and unexplained origin, the signature demands that attention be given to the letter; and, for this reason, it is being made available to readers of the WSWS.

In the century and a half since my untimely passing, during which I have witnessed from afar, and with no small measure of amazement, my transformation from a tough-minded and fallible politician into a secular saint, I have been aware of efforts to surmise what I would have said about one or another American problem and crisis. Circumstances have made it impossible to object publicly to such speculation. Moreover, even if I could, I would be reluctant to advance solutions to the problems of an age very different from those that presented themselves in my lifetime. But on this one occasion, given the fact that the residence that I inhabited for just over four years is now occupied by a man who in a just world would be, for the sake of humanity, confined in a penitentiary, I have requested and received permission from the Almighty to state my views on the present situation.

In my own day I named the cause of our great Civil War plainly. I did not say it came of misunderstanding, nor of hot words between brothers, nor of the tariff, nor of states and their dignities. I said the cause was slavery, and that all knew it to be somehow the cause. I had spent my life learning that a wrong wishes above all things not to be named, and that to name it exactly is the half of defeating it.

So I will not flatter the present age by pretending its trouble has no name, or that it is merely the wickedness of the man now in my old house. He is a symptom and an instrument; he is not the disease. To curse the fever and make peace with the plague is no physic at all.

The thing itself is this. In my time, one man was permitted to own the body of another and to take, by the lash, the whole fruit of his labor. We abolished that ownership, and rightly, and I went to my death believing the work substantially done. I see now that I saw only the crudest

form of an older thing. For there grew up beside the chattel, and outliving him, a system in which a few need not own the laborer’s body because they own the field, the forge, the rail, the mine, the roof above him and the tools in his hands—so that he must sell his days to them or not eat, and they keep the difference between what his labor makes and what they are pleased to return to him, and call the keeping by the name of profit, and the arrangement by the name of liberty. The whip is retired; the wage does the work of the whip, and is thought gentle because it draws no blood the eye can see. This is the cause of the present crisis, as slavery was the cause of mine: a form of exploitation, lawful, respectable, defended from every pulpit of wealth, and for that respectability the harder to name.

From this root the rest grows as the branch from the trunk. Wealth so gathered cannot rest; it must seek to own the government framed to bridle it, for a government it does not own is a danger it will not abide. Beyond its borders, wealth so gathered must seek markets and matter beyond the sea, and so it sends the nation’s sons to make the world safe for its increase, and dresses the errand in the flag, and calls conquest by the name of defense. And the citizen, told each evening by instruments the wealthy own that he is free and that his unease is his own fault, grows used to it, and christens his custom peace. The plutocrat, the disreputable client in my house, the armies abroad, the people taught to mistrust their own discontent—these are not four troubles. They are one trunk and its branches.

Once, in a message to the Congress in the dark winter of the war, I said that the dogmas of the quiet past were inadequate to the stormy present, that the occasion was piled high with difficulty, and that we must disenthral ourselves, and then we should save our country. I repeat that call across the years; but the dogma that must now be dispensed with is the notion that the only tolerable economic order is one founded upon the private ownership of the productive forces and the motive of profit.

In 1861 it was a slavocracy that sought to overthrow democracy. Now, the war against democracy is being waged by a ruling oligarchy that possesses wealth on a scale that would astound even the slaveowners of my time. Capitalism

is as intolerable in the present world as slavery was in mine. I would not pretend to a conversion I did not undergo: I could not have been a socialist in 1860, the word and the thing being then but dimly before me. I had not yet encountered the work of Mr. Marx and his association of working men until they saw fit to address me upon my reelection in 1864. Yet even then I said, and I meant it, that labor is prior to capital and independent of it, that capital is only the fruit of labor and could never have existed if labor had not first existed, and that labor is the superior of capital and deserves the higher consideration. I said the acorn; I will now own the oak. Today I would be found among the socialists, and I do not say it to startle, but because the logic I held in life has, in death, completed itself.

Now I will say the hard thing, as I said it before, when I judged that the war might fitly continue until every drop of blood drawn by the lash was paid by another drawn with the sword. I do not believe a people is permitted to build its comfort upon the unrequited labor of its own and the spoil of others, and to keep that comfort forever, and to keep its liberty besides. The account is kept whether men acknowledge it or not. What is taken by the few from the many is a debt; and debts of this kind have always, in the history of nations, been collected—if not in justice freely rendered, then in a harder coin, and at the creditor's chosen hour, not the debtor's.

Yet I did not return to prophesy ruin, for I have seen, as plainly, the other thing. There is a rising in the workshops, the warehouses, the mines, and the fields—not yet a flood, but rising—among men and women who own nothing but the strength of their hands and the hours of their days, and who are beginning, slowly and stubbornly, to know it. I see in that knowing the same fire I once saw kindle among those who had been told their bondage was the natural order of things, and who one day ceased to believe it. These working people begin to see that the men of 1776 did not pledge their lives that liberty might mean only the liberty of the strong to gather without limit, and of the weak to consent to it. That cause was not finished in 1776, nor at Appomattox. It was entrusted; and it is entrusted now to them, and to you who read this.

I will say one thing more on this head, which I could only dimly see in life but which death has made plain. The struggle I describe is not the struggle of one nation. When I led the Union through its war against the slaveholders, I knew that working men across the sea were watching and had pledged themselves to our cause. The workers of England, whose very livelihood depended upon the cotton our blockade had cut off, yet refused to let their government take the side of the Confederacy. Mr. Marx, in his letter to me, spoke on behalf of those workers—men who chose

solidarity with the enslaved over bread for their own tables. That act taught me something I have not forgotten: that the men and women who labor under capital's yoke in one country are the brothers and sisters of those who labor under it in every other, and that the power which exploits them is likewise no respecter of national borders. A cause that is not international is not, in the end, a cause—it is only a faction.

Let me then close with the resolve I would urge, were urging mine to do. That the thing be called by its name, openly, and not frightened into silence. That the labor of the many shall not be forever the tribute of the few, in whatever lawful and respectable form the tribute is exacted. That the working men and women of this and every country shall come to know their common interest and act upon it in common. And that this nation, which survived the sword, shall not be surrendered to negligence, nor to fear, nor to the soft and well-fed counsel that bids it call its bondage peace.

The reckoning will come, as it came before, for so it must. Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of exploitation—and the men it raises to power over us—will speedily pass away; yet whether it comes as justice freely done or through bloody strife, the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

One word more, and I have done. As I was kindled by the spirit of '76, and built what political philosophy I had upon Jefferson's immortal words—that all men are created equal, and that government holds its powers only by the consent of the governed—so I would have you carry that fire forward. The two hundred and fiftieth year of that first revolution is now at hand. Let the nation not keep it as men keep a tomb, with garlands and forgetting, but as men tend a flame they mean to pass on undimmed. May that celebration give rise to a new birth of freedom—not in the United States alone, but wherever men and women labor under another's yoke and have been taught to call it liberty—so that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

— *A. Lincoln, by permission, and against his own long silence*



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