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Amnesty Under Lincoln

The war was not yet over—indeed, there were hard battles ahead and calls for revenge were in the air—when President Lincoln began to parole and pardon draft resisters, evaders and even deserters. He found it in his heart to do so while there was a Civil War on, not 10,000 miles away in a foreign jungle but at times only 10,000 yards from the White House.

By official proclamation and by personal letter, he set an example for the divided country by declining to regard his fellow countrymen in resistance or rebellion as enemies to be punished. He was not afraid to be magnanimous and forgiving.

Toward the end of the war, General Grant objected to rebel prisoners being allowed to take the oath and go free. But the President said that as Commander in Chief he would take the responsibility. "On the whole," Lincoln told Grant, "I believe what I have done in this way has done good rather than harm." And he described those freed as "neighbors and neighbors' sons."

Lincoln became known as a pardoning President. The records abound in generous and human phrases: "Please make out pardons for these two boys. . . . Suspend execution of this man under sentence for execution. . . . Let this prisoner be paroled. . . . This boy is pardoned for any desertion. . . . Do not let sentence be executed until further orders from me; meantime send me record of the trial for desertion. . . . I will pardon him for the past."

Many thousands of ex-Confederates who took an oath during the war were granted amnesty, partly for military and political aims but also to heal the wounds of war. "When a man is sincerely penitent for his misdeeds," Lincoln said, "he can safely be pardoned, and there is no exception to the rule."

Finally, in the familiar soaring language of his Second Inaugural, Lincoln called for "malice toward none" and "charity for all" to achieve peace not only with all nations but "among ourselves." This noble expression remains a vision for today.