

## It's Not Always Easy, to do the Right Thing

Good morning, today's message is a touch history, a touch of art and a lesson in doing the right thing.

This picture, along with a duplicate print were located in the law offices of Louis E. Wirbel (my father) and John W. Fitzgerald, located in downtown Grand Ledge (now housing the Weathered Nest). I inherited this copy of the print, and my friend John Deming has the other copy in his law office here in Grand Ledge.

Here is some background on the original painting this print was based on:

Members of Abraham Lincoln's cabinet gathered at the White House on July 22, 1862 (159 years ago) to hear the president read his draft of the Emancipation Proclamation. The document was written by Lincoln alone, without consultation from his cabinet, the proclamation declared that all persons held as slaves in states that were still in rebellion on January 1, 1863, "shall be them thenceforwards and forever, free."

Initially, Lincoln was concerned only with preserving the Union, but he had become increasingly sympathetic to the call for abolition as the Civil War progressed. Determined to move forward with his cause, the president met with his cabinet on September 22 to refine his July draft and announce what is now known as the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. In this document, he issued an ultimatum to seceded states: Return to the Union by New Year's Day or freedom will be extended to all slaves within your borders. When the secessionist states ignored this warning, Lincoln issued the final proclamation on January 1, 1863 (160 years ago). The proclamation was published that same day and it took effect on January 1, 1863, affirming the emancipation of slaves in all states still in rebellion.

Although it is considered one of the most important documents in American history, the Emancipation Proclamation did not immediately end slavery in this country, that was only achieved with passage of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution of December 18, 1865. The proclamation applied only to slaves living in those states that had seceded; it did not affect those states still in the Union. Most importantly, Lincoln's ability to make good on the EP was dependent on a Union victory.

Now, on to the print you see here: New York artist Francis Bicknell Carpenter believed that the Emancipation Proclamation was "an act unparalleled for moral grandeur in the history of mankind." <sup>1</sup> Carpenter had a deep respect for Lincoln's action, and it was he who had the impulse to capture it on canvas, to exalt the moment of the first reading of the proclamation. About a year after the preliminary proclamation, Carpenter acted on this impulse. He asked Illinois Representative Owen Lovejoy to arrange for him to paint the subject at the White House—in fact, to set up a studio there (eventually, in the State Dining Room). On February 6, 1864, Carpenter met Lincoln, and the project began. His extraordinary extended residence in the White House resulted in the Senate's painting and in the informative, sometimes moving, 1866 memoir, *Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln*.

The painting deals in its subject matter with a significant historical crisis, though the mood is static and calm. To memorably convey the magnitude of this historic decision was beyond the ability of Carpenter, whose ambition was not matched by his artistic talent or training. The quality of the painting does not do justice to the significance of the subject, but not for lack of commitment or energy on Carpenter's part. With the president's full cooperation in his endeavor, Carpenter arranged for the *dramatis personae*—Lincoln and his cabinet—to be photographed in Mathew Brady's studio and again in the White House. He also heard the story of the evolution of the proclamation from President Lincoln himself. In six months he had completed his heroically scaled work. Carpenter intentionally avoided, as he wrote, "imaginary curtain or column, gorgeous furniture or allegorical statue." <sup>4</sup>

Depicted in the painting are, from left to right: **Edwin M. Stanton, secretary of war; Salmon P. Chase, secretary of the treasury; President Lincoln; Gideon Welles, secretary of the navy; Caleb B. Smith, secretary of the interior (standing); William H. Seward, secretary of state (seated); Montgomery Blair, postmaster general; and Edward Bates, attorney general.** The setting is Lincoln's office, which also served as the Cabinet Room. (This is the site and approximate size of the Lincoln Bedroom today.) The president had indicated to Carpenter each person's position in the room on the day of the first reading. The artist had found the placement "fortunately entirely consistent with my purpose."

There were two elements in the Cabinet—the radical and the conservative. Mr. Lincoln was placed at the head of the official table, between two groups, nearest that representing the radical; but the uniting point of both. The chief powers of a government are War and Finance: the ministers of these were at his right—the Secretary of War, symbolizing the great struggle, in the immediate foreground; the Secretary of the Treasury, actively supporting the new policy, standing by the President's side. . . . To the Secretary of State, as the great expounder of the

principles of the Republican party . . . would the attention of all at such a time be given. . . . The . . . chief officers of the government were thus brought in accordance with their relations to the administration, nearest the person of the President, who, with the manuscript proclamation in his hand, which he had just read, was represented leaning forward, listening to, and intently considering the views presented by the Secretary of State. <sup>6</sup>

It took Carpenter six months to create his 15-foot-wide canvas. In an 1866 letter to the artist, Secretary of Treasury Chase remarked on the composition of the work, noting that he and Stanton appear symbolically on Lincoln's right in the painting, having "thoroughly endorsed and heartily welcomed the measure," while those cabinet members who had at first "doubted, or advised delay, or even opposed" the proclamation appear on Lincoln's left. <sup>7</sup>

After completion in 1864, the painting was temporarily exhibited to the general public in the East Room of the White House and then in the Rotunda of the Capitol. It received a good deal of praise in the popular press—although there were dissenters—and it enjoyed a national tour. Lincoln himself declared the painting a success. "In my judgement," he commented, "it is as good a piece of work as the subject will admit of . . . and I am right glad you have done it!" <sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, the government made no move to acquire Carpenter's *First Reading* for the nation. Finally, in 1877, Elizabeth Thompson of New York City bought the canvas from the artist for \$25,000 (which is the equivalent of \$640,940.48 today) and she offered it as a gift to the nation. On February 12, 1878, the 69th anniversary of Lincoln's birth, Congress met in joint session to formally accept the work. Carpenter attended the session, hearing tributes to himself and his benefactors delivered by Representatives James Garfield of Ohio, who had been a major general in the Union army, and Alexander Stephens of Georgia, former vice president of the Confederacy.

In its handsome original frame with the seal of the United States and the rising sun decorating the corners, the painting and all it represents hangs today in the U.S. Capitol over the west staircase in the Senate wing.

Please join me in prayer....thank you lord for guiding us and those that have come before us to make the right decisions.