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A Blot on Lincoln Historians

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Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) National Archives. This letter, signed by Abraham Lincoln, pardoned Private Patrick Murphy, a Civil War soldier in the Union Army.

These facts remain true: on April 14, 1864, President Abraham Lincoln sent a routine, one-sentence, handwritten order to Joseph Holt, the judge advocate general, pardoning a California soldier, Private Patrick Murphy, who had been sentenced to be shot for desertion. “This man is pardoned, and hereby ordered to be discharged from the service,” the president wrote.

The original manuscript was never a secret, nor, until recently, a particularly well-known document. It has long resided at the National Archives in Washington, and it appeared in print more than half a century ago as part of the eight-volume “Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln” (Volume 7, Page 298, to be exact). It is one of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of pardons Lincoln issued during the Civil War to commute the death sentences of accused deserters, sleeping sentries and other offenders.

Yet for the last decade, the Murphy order has been just about the most famous Lincoln pardon of all, because its apparent date, April 14, 1865, made it one of the last things Lincoln wrote before his assassination at Ford’s Theater. Its significance was pointed out in 1998 by Thomas Lowry, a Virginia psychiatrist, who was immediately lauded as a leading Lincoln scholar. But in the last two days the document has become even more famous — as an egregious fake, or more accurately, an authentic document allegedly “doctored” to make it seem more than it really was.

Yesterday, the National Archives announced that Dr. Lowry had admitted that he had used ink to change the date “1864” to the more dramatic “1865.” Dr. Lowry, it seems, simply wanted the publicity for “unearthing” a relic testifying to Lincoln’s compassion and reverence for life even hours before his own death.

Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) National Archives
 A detailed view of the altered date.
 To complicate matters further, [Dr. Lowry later insisted](#) a reporter from this paper that his confession had been coerced by burly security officers, and that he had admitted deception only to end their relentless hours of questioning. Nonetheless, the National

Archives has banned Dr. Lowry from its premises for life, effectively ending an acclaimed research career. Those who have known this gifted scholar for years — myself included — are left scratching their heads, searching their souls, and burning up e-mail threads wondering how he could have gone so wildly astray.

But why is anyone shocked? The entire historical profession should be ashamed for heralding Dr. Lowry without doing a moment's worth of due diligence. Indeed, the episode speaks to Americans' insatiable yearning to have their myth-nourished clichés about Lincoln confirmed afresh, and repeatedly — and that goes for historians as well as the general public.

No Lincoln book is complete without reference to his inclination to clemency, often, it is alleged, against the will of military commanders and courts struggling to maintain order and discipline in a huge army of volunteers and conscripts. Stubbornly tender, Lincoln supposedly took every opportunity to commute capital sentences, arguing that his “boys” were better off spared than executed, and might well learn a lesson from their close brush with a firing squad.

What we've tended to ignore in this miasma, and what Dr. Lowry's deception has helped us overlook, is a harder and less popular truth about Commander in Chief Lincoln: that he was overall a rather brutal warrior, ready to deploy the most advanced and lethal weaponry to win the war. He proudly backed General Ulysses S. Grant against critics who said he took too many casualties in his relentless attacks on Confederate forces. And he was prepared to see Atlanta and Richmond sacked and burned if it would restore the Union more quickly.

Under Lincoln, Union troops developed and exploded huge mines, perfected rifled artillery that boasted long range and deadly aim, deployed monstrous ironclad warships and even dabbled in the use of niter — a sort of primitive napalm — to clean out rebel positions.

None of this seemed to tug at Lincoln's conscience the way Private Murphy allegedly did. But in reality, as he put it once, “those who make a causeless war should be compelled to pay the cost of it.” A war to suppress an enormous rebellion, he insisted coldly, could not be waged with mere “elder squirts, charged with rose water.”

No one, not even Dr. Lowry, has ever attempted to quantify Lincoln's full record as a pardoner, or to weigh it alongside his willingness to employ devastating weaponry. Nor has anyone compared Lincoln's batting average in clemency cases to that of, say, wartime presidents like James K. Polk, Woodrow Wilson or Franklin D. Roosevelt.

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Now, unfortunately, the record will be further clouded by the aroma of fraud, complacency and disgrace: the sad truth that someone tampered with an unremarkable pardon to make it burnish a legend; that no one noticed the out-of-synch “5” that now seems so obviously a discordant blob on the original; that none of us bothered to check the Lincoln archive to cross-reference a long-known document; and that no one has taken a closer look at Abraham Lincoln’s overall attitude toward clemency in war.

Shame on whoever tried to make of the Murphy order more than it is. And shame on all of us in the Lincoln studies profession for accepting it without question.

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