Executive Mansion,
Washington, August 26, 1867.

Hon. James L. Conkling
My Dear Sir:

Your letter inviting me to attend a mass-meeting of unconditional Union men, to be held at the Capitol of Illinois on the 9th day of September, has been received.

I would be very agreeable to me, to this meet my old friends, at my own home; but I can not, just now, be absent from here, so long as a visit there, would require.

The meeting is to be of all those who maintain unconditional devotion to the Union; and I am sure my old political friends will thank me for tendering, as I do, the nation's gratitude to those other noble men, whom no partisan malice, or partisan hope, can make false to the nation's life.

There are those who are dissatisfied with me. To such I would say: You desire peace; and you blame me that we do not have it. But how can we attain it? There are but three conceivable ways. First, to suppress the rebellion by force of arms.
This I am trying to do. Are you for it? If you are, so far we are agreed. If you are not for it, a second way is to give up the Union. I am against this. Are you for it? If you are, you should say so plainly. If you are not for force, nor yet for dissolution, there only remains some imaginable compromise. I do not believe any compromise embracing the maintenance of the Union, is now possible. All I learn, leads to a directly opposite belief. The strength of the rebellion, is its military army. That army dominates all the country, and all the people, within its range. Any offer of terms made by any man or men within that range, in opposition to that army, is simply nothing for the present; because such man or men, have no power whatever to enforce their side of a compromise, if one were made with them. To illustrate — Suppose self-refugees from the South, and peace men of the North, get together in Convention, and frame and proclaim a compromise embracing a restoration of the Union; in what way can that compromise be used to keep Lee's army out of Pennsylvania? Either Lee's army can keep Lee's army out of Pennsylvania; and I think, can ultimately drive it out of existence.
But no proper Compromise, to which the Controllers of Lee's army are not agreed, can at all affect that army. In an effort at such a Compromise we should waste time, which the enemy would improve to our disadvantage; and that would be all. A Compromise, to be effective, must be made either with those who control the rebel army, or with the people just liberated from the domination of that army, by the success of our own. Now allow me to assure you, that no word or intimation, from that rebel army, on from any of the new controlling it, in relation to any peace Compromise, has ever come to my knowledge or belief. All charges and insinuations to the contrary, are deceptive and groundless. And I assure you, that if any such proposition shall hereafter come, it shall not be repeated, and kept a secret from you. I hereby acknowledge myself the servant of the people, according to the bond of service - the United States Constitution; and that, as such, I am responsible to them.

But, to be plain, you are dissatisfied with me about the negro. Quite likely there is a difference of opinion between you and myself upon that subject, I certainly think that all men could be free, while
I suppose you do not. Yet I have neither adopted, nor proposed, any measure, which is not consistent with your views, provided you are for the Union. I suggested compensated emancipation; to which you replied, you wished not to be taxed to buy negroes. But I had not asked you to be taxed to buy negroes, except in such way, as to save you from greater taxation to save the Union exclusively by other means.

You dislike the emancipation proclamation; and, perhaps, would have it retracted. You say it is unconstitutioal. I think differently. I think the Constitution invests its Commander in Chief, with the law of war, in time of war. The most that can be said, if so much, is, that slaves are property. Is there has there been any question that by the law of war, property, both of enemies and friends, may be taken when needed? And is it not needed whenever taking it helps us or hinders the enemy? Armies, the world over, destroy enemies' property when they can not use it; and love destroying their own to keep it from the enemy. Civilized belligerents do all in their power to help themselves, or hurt the enemy, except a few things regarded as barbarous or cruel.

Among the exceptions are the massacre of vanquished foes, and non-combatants, male and female.

But the proclamation, as law, either is valid, or is not
valid. If it is not valid, it needs no retraction. If it is valid, it cannot be retracted, any more than the dead can be brought to life. Some of you profess to think its retraction would operate favorably for the Union. Why better after the retraction, than before the issue? There was more than a year and a half of time to suppress the rebellion before the proclamation issued, the last one hundred days of which passed under an explicit notice that it was coming, unheeded and unaverted by those in revolt, returning to their allegiance. The war has certainly proceeded as favorably for us, since the issue of the proclamation as before. [Here insert telegram]

You say you will not fight to free negroes. Some of them seem willing to fight for you. But no matter. Fight you, then, exclusively to save the Union. I issued the proclamation on purpose to aid you in saving the Union. Whenever you shall have conquered all resistance to the Union, if I shall urge you to continue fighting, it will be an apt time, then, for you to declare you will not fight to free negroes.

I thought that in your struggle for the Union, to whatever extent the negroes should cease helping the enemy, to that extent it weakened the enemy in his
resistance to you. Do you think differently? I thought
that whatever negroes can be got to do as soldiers, leaves
just so much less for white soldiers to do, in saving
the Union. Does it appear otherwise to you?
But negroes, like other people, act upon motives. Why
should they do any thing for us, if we were to do nothing
for them? If they stake their lives for us, they must
be prompted by the strongest motive — even the promise of
freedom. And the promise being made, must be kept.
The signs look better. The Father of Waters
again goes unimpeded to the sea. Thanks to the great North-
West for it. We yet wholly to them. Three hundred
miles up, they met New England: Empire, Hay-Stone, and
Jersey, heaving their lazy, right and left. The Long South
too, in mere colors than one, also laid a hand. On the
spot, their part of the history was written down in black
and white. The job was a great national one:
and let none be开来 who bore an honorable part
in it. And while those who have cleared the great
river may well be proud, even that is not all. It
is hard to say anything has been more bravely, and
well done, than at Antietam, Manassas, Gettysburg,
and on many fields of lesser note. Nor must Uncle
Sam’s Vet feel he forgotten. At all the costly margins
they have been present. Not only on the deep sea,
the broad bay, and the rapid river, but also up the narrow muddy bayou, and wherever the ground was a little damp, they have been, and made their tracks. Thanks to all. For the great republic - for the principle it lives by, and keeps alive - for man's vast future - thanks to all.

Peace does not appear so distant as it did. I hope it will come soon, and come to stay; and so come as to be worth the keeping in all future time. If it will then have been proved that, among free men, there can be no successful appeal from the ballot to the bullet; and that they who take such appeal are sure to lose their case, and pay the cost. And then, there will be some black men who can remember that, with silent tongue, and clenched teeth, and poise, steady eye, and well-borne bayonets, they have helped mankind on to this great consummation, while I fear, there will be some white ones, unable to forget that, with malignant heart, and deceitful speech, they have shone to hinder it.

Still let us not be too sanguine of a speedy final triumph. Let us be quite sober. Let us diligently apply the means, never doubting that
a just God, in His own good time, will give
us the righteous result.

Yours very truly,

A. Lincoln.