



## “What became of our forces?”

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THE LINCOLN TELEGRAM COLLABORATIVE – APRIL 2013

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*“What became of our forces which held the bridge till twenty minutes ago, as you say?” the president of the United States telegraphed a Union army colonel during the 1862 Battle of Second Manassas (Bull Run)...During the first battle, the president followed the lead of his military advisors and patiently awaited the final news from the battlefield. It was different the second time around. Abraham Lincoln was fully engaged, making inquiries and receiving reports from the battlefield. The tool that allowed the president to become so engaged was the telegraph...Abraham Lincoln discovered the power of the telegraph to project his voice, as well as to extend his eyes and ears. As he grew in his role as a national leader, Lincoln simultaneously progressed in how he applied what he sometimes called “lightning messages” to extend that leadership.*

Excerpt from Tom Wheeler’s *Mr. Lincoln’s T-Mails*, Chapter One.

### Summary

This lesson focuses on President Abraham Lincoln’s leadership during the last two years of the Civil War through analyzing select telegrams that he sent to military leaders. Students will begin by reading an overview of the 1972 War Powers. They will use this document to discuss the concept of limitations on presidential leadership. Students will then read seven telegrams sent by Lincoln during the last two years of the Civil War and consider how Lincoln used his authority as president. Students will note the telegram recipient, summarize of the telegram, and describe how Lincoln interacted with the military. This will lead to students answering questions in groups about Lincoln’s leadership and a culminating activity, in which students individually write about Lincoln’s leadership.

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# LESSON OVERVIEW

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## BACKGROUND

Samuel F.B. Morse invented the telegraph in 1837. The technology was still relatively new when the Civil War broke out in the United States, but President Abraham Lincoln knew that the telegraph could be very useful in the war effort. At Lincoln's direction, the War Department set up a headquarters for wartime telegrams, and Lincoln, used the machines regularly to relay messages to his Union commanders and other government officials.

In 1864, the Civil War was entering what would be its final phase. General Ulysses Grant was promoted to be the commander of the Union army. General Grant's first major effort in the east, the Wilderness Campaign proved to be an inconclusive three-day battle against Lee's forces, but he exhausted Lee's troops. In June 1864, Grant's army began a ten-month siege of Petersburg, Virginia. In July 1864, Confederate troops were approaching Washington, but they were driven back. Later in 1864, Lincoln was reelected, and General Sherman began his March to Sea. The war ended in April 1865. Over this year and a half period of time, Lincoln exerted his leadership in what were sometimes controversial ways, while using the telegraph to manage and control the war.

In this activity, students will consider the appropriate bounds of wartime presidential powers, and answer the following question: How was President Lincoln's wartime leadership exhibited in his telegrams sent during the final two years of the Civil War?

## Procedures

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To open the activity, have students read this overview of presidential war powers from the Law Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov/law/help/war-powers.php>). Discuss the War Powers Act in the context of the expanding role of the president in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Include in the discussion some questions about the appropriate role of a president during wartime. Use examples of presidential leadership in other wars and compare to Lincoln's leadership during the Civil War.

Students will read seven telegrams from the Lincoln Telegrams wiki at <http://wiki.lincolnteleggrams.com>.

- June 13, 1864 (2)
- July 10, 1864 (2)
- July 23, 1864
- August 15, 1864
- August 17, 1864
- September 29, 1864
- February 25, 1865

As an opening activity, students should consider the relative importance of the question framing this activity - How was President Lincoln's wartime leadership exhibited in his telegrams sent during the final two years of the Civil War? Ask students why the question is worth answering as well as what they think others have said about the topics addressed in this question.

As they are reading the telegrams, students will fill out the Lincoln Telegrams War Powers Chart.

Students will then discuss the following questions in groups:

- What actions did Lincoln take as communicated in the telegrams? Was he supportive or critical of the people he was addressing?
- Did he give advice or trust the army officers to make their own decisions?
- What does the tone, language, and theme of the telegrams suggest about the state of the war at the time of the telegrams?
- Was he supportive or critical?

As a culminating activity, students will individually answer the opening question in two or three paragraphs: "How was President Lincoln's wartime leadership exhibited in his telegrams sent during the final two years of the Civil War? Students should use evidence, recorded on Lincoln Telegrams – Use of Power Chart, to support the claims they are making. Conclude with a whole class discussion on the question as a class and come up with two or three key words to describe Lincoln's wartime leadership style.

Recommendations for implementation:

- Students should have individual access to a computer to read telegrams. If this is not possible, print out telegrams in advance for students to reference during assignments.
- This lesson could be shortened by giving each group only one or two telegrams to read and discuss during group work.

**Additional Activity:** Using the previously mentioned telegrams as a basis for style, format, and tone, have students write a telegram to Ulysses S. Grant from President Lincoln during the Siege of Petersburg in 1864. Students should try to express Lincoln's leadership style in the telegram by writing in the same ways Lincoln did.

### Sources

Freeman, J. *Time line of the civil war, 1864*. Retrieved from <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/cwphhtml/tl1864.html>.

Law Library of Congress. *War powers: Overview*. Retrieved from <http://www.loc.gov/law/help/war-powers.php>