Encounter

Nathaniel Hawthorne Disses Abe Lincoln

By Peter Carlson

"I have shaken hands with Uncle Abe," Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote in a letter to his wife on March 16, 1862. He was referring, of course, to President Lincoln. That day, Hawthorne left the White House feeling ambivalent about Lincoln. But that wasn't surprising. Hawthorne tended to feel ambivalent about almost everything.

At 57, the great Yankee novelist, author of *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*, was also ambivalent about the Civil War. Like the Confederates, Hawthorne was a diehard Democrat. In fact, he'd written the official campaign biography of his friend Franklin Pierce, the Democrat who won the presidency in 1852. ("If it makes Pierce out to be a great man or a brave man," Hawthorne's brother-in-law Horace Mann quipped, "it will be the greatest work of fiction he ever wrote.") When the war erupted in 1861, Hawthorne sided with the Union but admitted in a letter to a friend that "I don't quite understand what we are fighting for." In February 1862, he was still baffled. "It would be too great an absurdity," he wrote in another letter, "to spend all our Northern strength, for the next generation, in holding on to a people who insist on being let loose."

A month later, Hawthorne left his family in Concord, Mass., and headed south so he could "look a little more closely at matters with my own eyes." Traveling with his publisher, William Ticknor, Hawthorne arrived in Washington while the city nervously awaited the great clash of armies that would come six months later at the Second Battle of Bull Run. With no fighting to watch, Hawthorne and Ticknor toured the Capitol. Later, they were invited to join a delegation from a Massachusetts whip factory, which was scheduled to present the president with a gift whip the next morning.

"Nine o'clock had been appointed as the time for receiving the deputation, and we were punctual to the moment, but not so the President, who sent us word that he *was eating* his breakfast, and would come as soon as he could," Hawthorne wrote. "His appetite, we were glad to think, must have been a pretty fair one; for we waited about half an hour in one of his antechambers."

While cooling their heels, Hawthorne and the whip makers met Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase, who were also waiting to see Lincoln. "By-and-by, there was a stir on the staircase and in the passage-way," Hawthorne wrote, "and in lounged a tall, loose-jointed figure, of an exaggerated Yankee port and demeanor, whom (as being about the homeliest man I ever saw, yet by no means repulsive or disagreeable,) it was impossible not to recognize as Uncle Abe."

Lincoln apologized for arriving late and joked about the length of his breakfast. Then he circled the room, shaking hands.

"There is no describing his lengthy awkwardness, nor the uncouthness of his movement; and yet it seemed as if I had been in the habit of seeing him daily and had shaken hands with him a thousand times in some village street," Hawthorne wrote. "If put to guess his calling and livelihood, I should have taken him for a country schoolmaster."

After the president greeted his visitors, they presented him with the ceremonial horsewhip, which was adorned with an ivory handle and a presidential seal. Lincoln gave the whip a quick flourish, as if snapping it on the rump of a dawdling carriage horse. The visitors anticipated that a president presented with a whip during wartime would utter, as Hawthorne put it, "some declaration, or intimation, or faint foreshadowing of policy in reference to the conduct of the war." Unfortunately, Hawthorne couldn't remember exactly *what* Lincoln said, although he later recalled that "the gist of the reply was, that he accepted the whip as an emblem of peace, not punishment."

At that, the president said goodbye and moved on to more pressing business. The encounter probably lasted no more than 10 minutes. But that was long enough to provide the sharp-eyed novelist with fodder for a scathing description of his president.

"He was dressed in a rusty black frock-coat and pantaloons, unbrushed, and worn so faithfully that the suit had adapted itself to the curves and angularities of his figure," Hawthorne wrote. "He had shabby slippers on his feet. His hair was black, still unmixed with gray, stiff, somewhat bushy, and had apparently been acquainted with neither brush nor comb that morning, after the disarrangement of the pillow; and as to a nightcap, Uncle Abe probably knows nothing of such effeminacies....The whole physiognomy is as coarse a one as you would meet anywhere in the length and breadth of the States; but, withal, it is redeemed, illuminated, softened, and brightened, by a kindly though serious look out of his eyes, and an expression of homely sagacity, that seems weighted with rich results of village experience."

Lincoln's hair had 'apparently been acquainted with neither brush nor comb,' Hawthorne wrote

The portrait was catty and condescending, but Hawthorne softened it with his conclusion: "On the whole, I liked this sallow, queer, sagacious visage, with the homely human sympathies that warmed it; and, for my small share in the matter, would as lief have Uncle Abe for a ruler as any man it would have been practicable to put in his place."

For the next few days, Hawthorne toured Union-occupied Virginia, visiting an army camp and Harpers Ferry and a naval base, where he observed the North's ironclad ship, the *Monitor*. Along the way, he encountered captured Confederate soldiers and escaped slaves, and he later described both groups with the same bemused condescension he exhibited in his portrait of the president. The imprisoned Confederates were "simple bumpkin-like fellows...peasants, and of a very low order." The ragged slaves "seemed a kind of creature by themselves, not altogether human but perhaps quite as good, and akin to the fauns and rustic deities of olden times."

Returning to Concord, Hawthorne wrote a long, chatty account of his trip for the *Atlantic Monthly*, the prestigious Boston literary magazine. His friend James Field, the *Atlantic*'s editor, agreed to publish the piece in his July 1862 issue but he refused to print Hawthorne's impious description of the commander in chief.

Irked, Hawthorne protested that the Lincoln section was "the only part of the article really worth publishing." That complaint echoes the eternal lament of the aggrieved writer: The damn idiot editor cut out my best stuff. But Fields insisted, knowing that insulting the president during wartime would enrage readers.

To placate Hawthorne, Fields let the novelist write a footnote explaining the excision: "We are compelled to omit two or three pages, in which the author describes the interview, and gives his idea of the personal appearance and deportment of the president. The sketch appears to be written in a benign spirit, and perhaps conveys a not inaccurate impression of its august subject, but it lacks *reverence*."

Still, Hawthorne remained peeved about Field's censorship. "What a terrible thing it is," he grumbled, "to try and let off a little bit of truth into this miserable humbug of a world!"