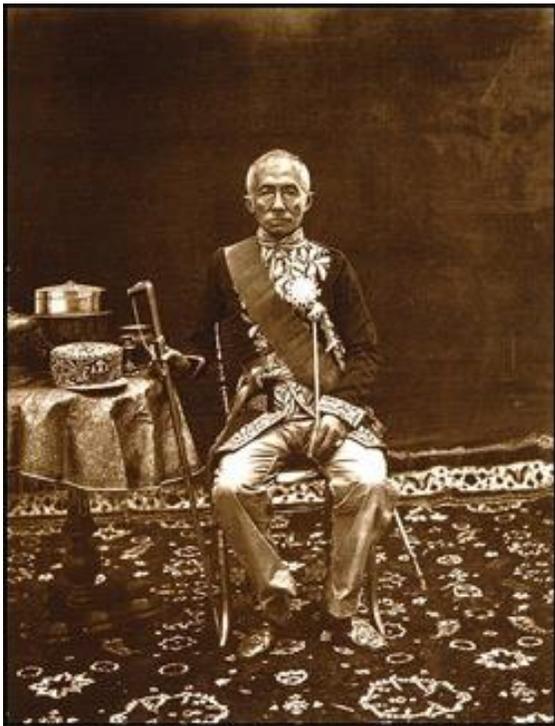


Lincoln Rejects the King of Siam's Offer of Elephants

FEBRUARY 3, 1862

In one of the more humorous events of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln politely rejected an offer of elephants from the King of Siam. While the letter from Rama IV (aka Mongkut) was addressed to former President James Buchanan, it was up to Lincoln and his Secretary of State William Seward to politely decline this offer from afar. As Lincoln points out in his reply, steam power had overtaken the need for heavy animal power of this kind.

This friendly exchange has elicited many fanciful "what-ifs." What if the Union or Confederate army had use of battalions of war elephants during the Civil War? Could there have been herds of angry pachyderms at Pickett's Charge or emerging from the forest lines at Shiloh?



King Rama IV of Siam (Wikimedia)

To the King of Siam
February 3, 1862

Abraham Lincoln,
President of the United States of America.

To His Majesty Somdetch Phra Paramendr Maha Mongut,

King of Siam,

&c., &c.

Great and Good Friend: I have received Your Majesty's two letters of the date of February 14th., 1861.

I have also received in good condition the royal gifts which accompanied those letters,---namely, a sword of costly materials and exquisite workmanship; a photographic likeness of Your Majesty and of Your Majesty's beloved daughter; and also two elephants' tusks of length and magnitude such as indicate that they could have belonged only to an animal which was a native of Siam.

Your Majesty's letters show an understanding that our laws forbid the President from receiving these rich presents as personal treasures. They are therefore accepted in accordance with Your Majesty's desire as tokens of your good will and friendship for the American People. Congress being now in session at this capital, I have had great pleasure in making known to them this manifestation of Your Majesty's munificence and kind consideration.

Under their directions the gifts will be placed among the archives of the Government, where they will remain perpetually as tokens of mutual esteem and pacific dispositions more honorable to both nations than any trophies of conquest could be.

I appreciate most highly Your Majesty's tender of good offices in forwarding to this Government a stock from which a supply of elephants might be raised on our own soil. This Government would not hesitate to avail itself of so generous an offer if the object were one which could be made practically useful in the present condition of the United States.

Our political jurisdiction, however, does not reach a latitude so low as to favor the multiplication of the elephant, and steam on land, as well as on water, has been our best and most efficient agent of transportation in internal commerce.

I shall have occasion at no distant day to transmit to Your Majesty some token of indication of the high sense which this Government entertains of Your Majesty's friendship.

Meantime, wishing for Your Majesty a long and happy life, and for the generous and emulous People of Siam the highest possible prosperity, I commend both to the blessing of Almighty God.

Your Good Friend, ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

Washington, February 3, 1862.

By the President:

WILLIAM H. SEWARD, Secretary of State.

Annotation

QUESTIONS for reflection

1. What gifts did the King of Siam send to the President?
2. Why couldn't the President keep these gifts personally?
3. What did the King of Siam offer the President to help in the war effort?
4. Why did the President turn down the offer?
5. If you were the President, would you have accepted the elephants? Why or why not?