

ABRAHAM LINCOLN RESOURCES

Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) Impact and Legacy

In 1982, forty-nine historians and political scientists were asked by the Chicago Tribune to rate all the Presidents through Jimmy Carter in five categories: leadership qualities, accomplishments/crisis management, political skills, appointments, and character/integrity. At the top of the list stood Abraham Lincoln. He was followed by Franklin Roosevelt, George Washington, Theodore Roosevelt, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Woodrow Wilson, and Harry Truman. None of these other Presidents exceeded Lincoln in any category according to the rate scale. Roosevelt fell into second place because he did not measure up to Lincoln in character. Washington, close behind, ranked third because of his lesser political skills. It is the general opinion of pollsters, moreover, that the average American would probably put Lincoln at the top as well. In other words, the judgment of historians and the public tells us that Abraham Lincoln was the nation's greatest President by every measure applied.

Interestingly, had the average Union citizen been asked the same question in the spring of 1863, there can be no doubt but that Lincoln would have fared poorly. Not much more could have been said for him even a year later, when Lincoln thought that he would lose his bid for reelection. It would take Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse and his own death a week later to propel Lincoln into the pantheon of presidential greatness.

And Lincoln's canonization began almost immediately. Within days of his death, his life was being compared to Jesus Christ. Lincoln was portrayed to a worshipping public as a self-made man, the liberator of the slaves, and the savior of the Union who had given his life so that others could be free. President Lincoln became Father Abraham, a near mythological hero, "lawgiver" to African Americans, and a "Masterpiece of God" sent to save the Union. His humor was presented as an example of his humanity; his numerous pardons demonstrated his "great soul"; and his sorrowful demeanor reflected the burdens of his lonely journey as the leader of a "blundering and sinful" people.

Historians, mindful of Lincoln's mythic place in American popular culture, accord him similar praise for what he accomplished and for how he did it. Because he was committed to preserving the Union and thus vindicating democracy no matter what the consequences to himself, the Union was indeed saved. Because he understood that ending slavery required patience, careful timing, shrewd calculations, and an iron resolve, slavery was indeed killed. Lincoln managed in the process of saving the Union and killing slavery to define the creation of a more perfect Union in terms of liberty and economic equality that rallied the citizenry behind him. Because he understood that victory in both great causes depended upon purposeful and visionary presidential leadership as well as the exercise of politically acceptable means, he left as his legacy a United States that was both whole and free.

As the most activist President in history, Lincoln transformed the President's role as commander in chief and as chief executive into a powerful new position, making the President supreme over both Congress and the courts. His activism began almost immediately with Fort Sumter when he called out state militias, expanded the army and navy, spent \$2 million without congressional appropriation, blockaded

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southern ports, closed post offices to treasonable correspondences, suspended the writ of habeas corpus in several locations, ordered the arrest and military detention of suspected traitors, and issued the Emancipation Proclamation on New Year's Day 1863.

To do all of these things, Lincoln broke an assortment of laws and ignored one constitutional provision after another. He made war without a declaration of war, and indeed even before summoning Congress into special session. He countered Supreme Court opposition by affirming his own version of judicial review that placed the President as the final interpreter of the Constitution. For Lincoln, it made no sense "to lose the nation and yet preserve the Constitution." Following a strategy of "unilateral action," Lincoln justified his powers as an emergency authority granted to him by the people. He had been elected, he told his critics, to decide when an emergency existed and to take all measures required to deal with it. In doing so, Lincoln maintained that the President was one of three "coordinate" departments of government, not in any way subordinate to Congress or the courts. Moreover, he demonstrated that the President had a special duty that went beyond the duty of Congress and the courts, a duty that required constant executive action in times of crisis. While the other branches of government are required to support the Constitution, Lincoln's actions pointed to the notion that the President alone is sworn to preserve, protect, and defend it. In times of war, this power makes the President literally responsible for the well-being and survival of the nation.

Lincoln's legacy of executive authority did not last beyond his death, and over the next forty years both Congress and the courts overshadowed the White House in power and influence. Still, the most lasting accomplishments attributed to Lincoln are the preservation of the Union, the vindication of democracy, and the death of slavery, all accomplished by the ways in which he handled the crisis that most certainly would have ended differently with a lesser man in office. His great achievement, historians tell us, was his ability to energize and mobilize the nation by appealing to its best ideals while acting "with malice towards none" in the pursuit of a more perfect, more just, and more enduring Union. No President in American history ever faced a greater crisis and no President ever accomplished as much.

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Evidence for The Unpopular Mr. Lincoln THE PEOPLE AT THE POLLS 1860-1864

BY LARRY TAGG; HALLOWED GROUND MAGAZINE, SPRING 2009

"The illustrious Honest Old Abe has continued during the last week to make a fool of himself and to mortify and shame the intelligent people of this great nation. His speeches have demonstrated the fact that although originally a Herculean rail splitter and more lately a whimsical story teller and side splitter, he is no more capable of becoming a statesman, nay, even a moderate one, than the braying ass can become a noble lion. People now marvel how it came to pass that Mr. Lincoln should have been selected as the representative man of any party. His weak, wishy-washy, namby-pamby efforts, imbecile in matter, disgusting in manner, have made us the laughing stock of the whole world. The European powers will despise us because we have no better material out of which to make a President. The truth is, Lincoln is only a moderate lawyer and in the larger cities of the Union could pass for no more than a facetious pettifogger. Take him from his vocation and he loses even these small characteristics and indulges in simple twaddle which would disgrace a well bred school boy."

Written as Abraham Lincoln approached Washington by train for his 1861 presidential inauguration, this tirade was not the rant of a fire-eating secessionist editor in Richmond or New Orleans. It was the declaration of the Salem Advocate, a newspaper printed in Lincoln's home ground of central Illinois. The Advocate had plenty of company

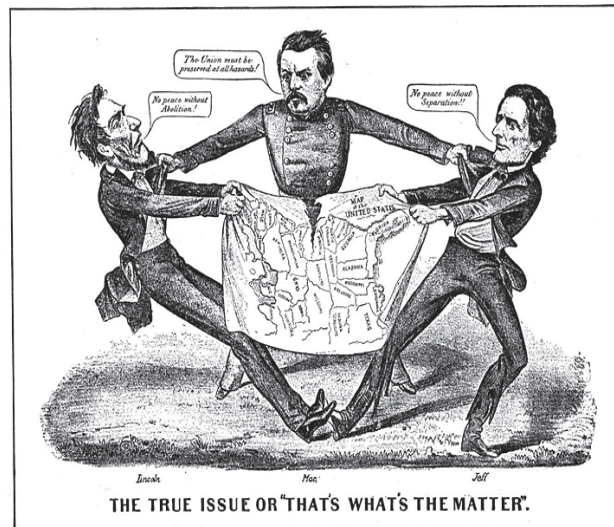
among Northern opinion makers. The editor of Massachusetts's influential Springfield Republican, Samuel Bowles, despaired in a letter to a friend the same week, "Lincoln is a 'simple Susan.'"

The most esteemed orator in America, Edward Everett, wrote in his diary: "He is evidently a

person of very inferior cast of character, wholly unequal to the crisis." From Washington, Congressman Charles Francis Adams wrote, "His speeches have fallen like a wet blanket here. They put to flight all notions of greatness." Then, at the end of his journey a few days later, Lincoln was forced to sneak into the capital on a secret midnight train to avoid assassination, disguised

in a soft felt hat, a muffler and a short bobtailed coat.

After Lincoln's unseemly arrival, the contempt in the nation's reaction was so widespread, so vicious and so personal that it marks this episode as the historic low point of presidential prestige in the United States. Even the Northern press winced at the president's undignified start. Vanity Fair observed, "By the advice of weak men, who should straddle through life in petticoats instead of disgracing such manly garments as pantaloons and coats, the President-elect disguises himself after the manner of heroes in two-shilling novels, and rides secretly, in the deep night, from Harrisburg to Washington." The Brooklyn Eagle, in a column



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titled "Mr. Lincoln's Flight by Moonlight Alone," suggested the president deserved "the deepest disgrace that the crushing indignation of a whole people can inflict." The New York Tribune joked darkly, "Mr. Lincoln may live a hundred years without having so good a chance to die."

Known almost exclusively by his got-up nickname "The Railsplitter," Lincoln had won the 1860 election in November with 39.8 percent of the popular vote. This absurdly low total was partly due to the fact that four candidates were on the ballot, but it remains the poorest showing by any winning presidential candidate in American history. In fact, Lincoln received a smaller percentage of the popular vote than nearly all the losers of two-party presidential elections. Immediately, however, even this scant total dropped in the panic of the Secession Winter, as seven Southern states left the Union and worried Northerners repented their votes for the Illinoisan.

At the time he was sworn in, Lincoln's "approval rating" can be estimated by examining wintertime Republican losses in local elections in Brooklyn, Cincinnati, Cleveland and St. Louis, and state elections in Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island; by the observations of Henry Adams (of the presidential Adamses) that "not a third of the House" supported him; and by the published reckoning of the New York Herald that only 1 million of the 4.7 million who voted in November were still with him. All these indications put his support in the nation at about 25 percent — roughly equivalent to the lowest approval ratings recorded by modern-day polling.

How could a man elected president in November be so reviled in February? The insults heaped on Lincoln after his arrival in Washington were not the result of anything he himself had done or left undone. He was a man without a history, a man almost no one knew. Because he was a blank slate,

Americans, at the climax of a national crisis 30 years in coming, projected onto him everything they saw wrong with the country. To the opinion makers in the cities of the East, he was a weakling, inadequate to the needs of the democracy. To the hostile masses in the South, he was an interloper, a Caesar who represented a deadly threat to the young republic. To millions on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line, he was not a statesman but merely a standard bearer for a vast, corrupt political system.

Lincoln had never administered anything larger than a two-person law office, and historians have often excused his mismanagement of the war effort during his first eighteen months in office as a period of growing into his job. It was the Emancipation Proclamation in September of 1862, according to the modern view, that signals the disappearance of the novice Railsplitter and marks the emergence of the ultimate statesman — the Great Emancipator.

This, however, was not the view at the time. The Chicago Times, for example, branded the Emancipation Proclamation "a monstrous usurpation, a criminal wrong, and an act of national suicide." An editorial in Columbus, Ohio's The Crisis asked, "Is not this a Death Blow to the Hope of Union?" and declared, "We have no doubt that this Proclamation seals the fate of this Union as it was and the Constitution as it is.... The time is brief when we shall have a DICTATOR PROCLAIMED, for the Proclamation can never be carried out except under the iron rule of the worst kind of despotism."

While the Northern press howled, angry letters piled up on Lincoln's desk and spilled onto the floor. William O. Stoddard, the secretary in charge of reading Lincoln's mail, wrote:

"[Dictator] is what the Opposition press and orators of all sizes are calling him. Witness, also, the litter on the floor and the heaped-up wastebaskets.

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There is no telling how many editors and how many other penmen within these past few days have undertaken to assure him that this is a war for the Union only, and that they never gave him any authority to run it as an Abolition war. They never, never told him that he might set the negroes free, and, now that he has done so, or futilely pretended to do so, he is a more unconstitutional tyrant and a more odious dictator than ever he was before.

They tell him, however, that his venomous blow at the sacred liberty of white men to own black men is mere brutum fulmen [empty threat], and a dead letter and a poison which will not work. They tell him many other things, and, among them, they tell him that the army will fight no more, and that the hosts of the Union will indignantly disband rather than be sacrificed upon the bloody altar of fanatical Abolitionism."

Indeed, there were enough angry letters home from soldiers to give color to the rumors of military revolt hinted at by Stoddard. A New York Herald correspondent attached to the Army of the Potomac felt its temper and feared for the Republic:

"The army is dissatisfied and the air is thick with revolution.... God knows what will be the consequence, but at present matters look dark indeed, and there is large promise of a fearful revolution which will sweep before it not only the administration but popular government."

Less than two months later, in the midterm election of 1862, Northerners handed down their judgment on the Emancipator. It was a condemnation, a thumping Republican defeat — what the New York Times called "a vote of want of confidence" in Abraham Lincoln. The middle states that had swept the Railsplitter into the presidency in 1860 — Illinois, Indiana, New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania — had now deserted him. All of them sent new Democratic majorities to Congress. To them

was added New Jersey, which was a Republican donnybrook. In all, the number of Democrats in the House almost doubled, from 44 to 75, cutting the Republican majority from 70 percent to 55 percent. Heartsick at the Republicans' ruin, Alexander McClure of Pennsylvania wrote, "I could not conceive it possible for Lincoln to successfully administer the government and prosecute the war with the six most important loyal States declaring against him at the polls."

When the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on January 1, 1863, Lincoln was pilloried again in the Northern press, and desertions by disgusted soldiers climbed into the thousands. Seeing no slaves freed, even abolitionists were soured by the Proclamation's impotence. As the cold, hard rains of winter announced the approach of the third year of the war's unimaginable sorrow, Lincoln was isolated and alone. Congressman A. G. Riddle of Ohio wrote that, in late February, the "criticism, reflection, reproach, and condemnation" of Lincoln in Congress was so complete that there were only two men in the House who defended him: Isaac Arnold of Illinois and Riddle himself. Author and lawyer Richard Henry Dana, after a visit to Washington in February 1863, reported to Charles Francis Adams:

"As to the politics of Washington, the most striking thing is the absence of personal loyalty to the President. It does not exist. He has no admirers, no enthusiastic supporters, none to bet on his head. If a Republican convention were to be held to-morrow, he would not get the vote of a State."

Suddenly, warnings were everywhere that, just as Lincoln's election had sparked the secession of the South out of fear that he would abolish slavery, the Emancipation Proclamation would spark the secession of the Old Northwest — the states of Illinois, Indiana and Ohio — now that the fear had been made real. Army recruitment came to a halt in those states. In response, Congress rushed through

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the Draft Law, the first federal conscription act in the history of the nation. To many, the appearance of United States enrollers going from house to house was visible proof that the tentacles of Lincoln's government were curling around every American.

The popular revolt, when it reached its violent culmination, came not in the Northwest but in the nation's largest metropolis. In July 1863, in the wake of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Draft Law, riots broke out in New York City, a conflagration that, aside from the Civil War itself, was the largest insurgency in American history. Meade's victory over Lee at Gettysburg and Grant's capture of Vicksburg in the summer of 1863 stopped the erosion of Lincoln's popular support that had climaxed with the riots, but Northerners maintained a wait-and-see attitude until the spring campaigns of 1864. When spring came, the horrible carnage of Grant's Overland Campaign in the wildernesses of Virginia sent Lincoln's popularity again into eclipse.

Lincoln secured his renomination at the party convention in early June 1864, but there was no enthusiasm for him; he won by using the spoils system practice of stacking the party convention with appointees — delegates who owed their jobs to him. Attorney General Edward Bates noted in his diary, "The Baltimore Convention ... has surprised and mortified me greatly. It did indeed nominate Mr. Lincoln, but ... as if the object were to defeat their own nomination. They were all (nearly) instructed to vote for Mr. Lincoln, but many of them hated to do it" The Chicago Times sneered that Lincoln could lay his hand on the shoulder of any one of the "wire-pullers and bottle-washers" in the convention hall and say, "This man is the creature of my will." James Gordon Bennett, in the columns of the New York Herald, declared, "The politicians have again chosen this Presidential pigmy as their nominee."

Things got worse over the election summer. There was the embarrassment of the near-capture of Washington in July 1864 by a rebel detachment under Lt. Gen. Jubal Early. The price of gold soared as speculators betted against a Union victory. Seeing Lincoln wounded, the Radical Republicans went in for the kill — on August 5, the New York Tribune devoted two columns to a sensational Radical declaration, known as the Wade-Davis Manifesto, that charged their own nominee with "grave Executive usurpation" and "a studied outrage on the legislative authority." It was the fiercest, most public challenge to Lincoln's — or, for that matter, any president's — authority ever issued by members of his own party. With the appearance of this surely fatal blow, everyone considered Lincoln a beaten man, including the president himself. The Democratic New York World savored the spectacle of the Lincoln's demise, reprinting an editorial from the Richmond Examiner: "The fact ... begins to shine out clear," it announced, "that Abraham Lincoln is lost; that he will never be President again.... The obscene ape of Illinois is about to be deposed from the Washington purple, and the White House will echo to his little jokes no more."

In late August, however, the Democrats nominated George McClellan on a platform that declared, "The War Is a Failure. Peace Now!" Suddenly, as bad as Lincoln may have seemed for many Republicans, he could never be as bad as McClellan. The general who battled the Republicans more fiercely than he ever had the rebels now peddled peace at any price. And then, on September 3, only three days after the Chicago convention adjourned, a second, even more amazing deliverance arrived at the White House in the form of a telegram from Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman in Georgia: "Atlanta is ours and fairly won."

Its six simple words translated a military victory

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in Georgia into a political miracle unequalled in American history. Senator Zachary Chandler called it "the most extraordinary change in public opinion here that ever was known within a week." Lincoln's friend A.K. McClure sketched the election year in a stroke when he wrote, "There was no time between January of 1864 and September 3 of the same year when McClellan would not have defeated Lincoln for President." On September 4, the tide was, incredibly, reversed. The providential fall of Atlanta was followed by more Union victories in the Shenandoah Valley during September and October, and Republicans unified around Lincoln in time to win a huge electoral triumph in November: 212 electoral votes to 21.

The popular vote for Lincoln, however, was disappointing. After four years in the presidency, even in the spread-eagle patriotism of a civil war, Lincoln had only barely improved his popular showing in the North, from the 54 percent who voted for the unknown Railsplitter in 1860 to the 55 percent who voted for the Great Emancipator in 1864, when the war was almost won. In nine states — Connecticut, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Vermont — his percentage of the vote actually went down. Lincoln lost in all the big cities, including a trouncing of 78,746 to 36,673 in New York. In the key states of New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio, with their 80 electoral votes, only one half a percentage point separated Lincoln and McClellan. A shift of 38,111 votes in a few selected states, less than 1 percent of the popular vote, would have elected McClellan.

After Sherman's capture of Atlanta, a New York Republican had predicted, "No man was ever elected to an important office who will get so many unwilling and indifferent votes as L[incoln]. The cause takes the man along." Even after his reelection, plenty of Republicans were skeptical of Lincoln's contribution to the victory. According

to Ohio Rep. Lewis D. Campbell, "Nothing but the undying attachment of our people to the Union has saved us from terrible disaster. Mr. Lincoln's popularity had nothing to do with it." Rep. Henry Winter Davis insisted that people had voted for Lincoln only "to keep out worse people — keeping their hands on the pit of the stomach the while!" He called Lincoln's reelection "the subordination of disgust to the necessities of a crisis." Of the seven presidential elections he had participated in, said Rep. George Julian, "I remember none in which the element of personal enthusiasm had a smaller share."

And now hatred of Lincoln developed a new, deadlier character, as dissenting Northerners and ground-under-heel Southerners woke to the awful dawn of four more years of Lincoln's "abuses." This short period culminated in Lincoln's assassination on April 14, 1865. It was only with his death that Lincoln's popularity soared. Lincoln was slain on Good Friday, and pastors who had for four years criticized Lincoln from their pulpits rewrote their Easter Sunday sermons to remember him as an American Moses who brought his people out of slavery but was not allowed to cross over into the Promised Land. Secretary of War Stanton arranged a funeral procession for Lincoln's body on a continental scale, with the slain president now a Republican martyr to freedom, traversing in reverse his train journey from Springfield to the nation's capital four years earlier. Seeing Lincoln's body in his casket, with soldiers in blue standing guard, hundreds of thousands of Northerners forgot their earlier distrust and took away instead an indelible sentimental image of patriotic sacrifice, one that cemented the dominance of the Republican Party for the rest of their lives and their children's.

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Abraham Lincoln and the Election of 1864

Featured Book

Jennifer Weber , *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North*
(Oxford University Press, 2006)

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No American President had been reelected since Andrew Jackson had defeated Lincoln hero Henry Clay in 1832. Abraham Lincoln determined to break that three-decade long curse. Meeting with President Lincoln in the summer of 1863 Benjamin Rush Cowen recalled that President Lincoln “talked of the pending political campaign with great intelligence and interest, and had many pertinent inquiries to make as to the political situation in Ohio. His anxiety as to the result of the election, however, seemed less on his own account than because of the effect his defeat might have on the issue of the war.”¹ There is ample evidence from Mr. Lincoln’s interactions with friends like Leonard Swett and Alexander K. McClure that Mr. Lincoln took an active interest in his own reelection. He told one Presbyterian delegation that he “had his hand in” and wanted to remain in the presidency until the Civil War was won.²

A few months later, California journalist Noah Brooks reported: “There is no longer any need of concealing or ignoring the fact that Lincoln is a candidate for renomination. Your correspondent has the highest authority for saying that he does not seek the nomination, but really desires it at the hands of the loyal people of the United States. In this desire, a natural ingredient, is his hope that he may receive the suffrages of the people as an approval of the policy with which he has conducted an Administration through a long and arduous struggle. It is true that other Presidents may have asked the same on the same ground, but Lincoln has been called upon to administer the Government in strange and perilous times, and, as it is conceded that a change in the Administration during the present war would be, to say the least, risky, or, to use Lincoln’s own phrase, would be ‘swapping horses in the middle of the stream’ it

would be a direct rebuke to the present incumbent of the Presidential chair to rotate him out of office while affairs are in such a situation.”³

Brooks, who had easy access to the President, reported: “He is no seeker for a renewal of office, busies himself with no thought of his own future, and never bestows favors with any reference whatever to the relations of an applicant for office toward himself. But patient, patriotic, persevering, and single-hearted, he goes right on with his duty, ‘pegging away,’ just as though, as he has said to me, his own life were to end with his official life, content to leave his earnest labors and conscientious discharge of duty to the disposal of God and his country.”⁴

There were serious impediments to President Lincoln’s reelection, however. “During four years of administration, Mr. Lincoln had made many enemies, among those who had originally supported him; and the democratic party were not scrupulous in the use of means to bring him into disrepute with the people. Many republicans suffered under private grievances. Their counsels had not been sufficiently followed; their friends had not been properly served,” wrote early Lincoln biographer Josiah G. Holland. “Some thought Mr. Lincoln had been too fast and too severe in his measures; others thought that he had been too slow.”⁵ Historian Harold M. Dudley wrote: “Many of Lincoln’s critics credited him with honesty and good intentions but indicted his judgment, his lack of system, and his failure to act promptly.”⁶

Democratic conservatives and Republican radicals maneuvered to find an alternative to the incumbent. The difficulty which radicals had in choosing a candidate to oppose President Lincoln was

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similar to President Lincoln's need for a general. Not just anybody would do. Salmon P. Chase had the presidential bug and he had an ego to match. He believed his had the gravitas and the background necessary for the Presidency. President Lincoln and his close relationship with Secretary of State William H. Seward grated on him. President Lincoln's policies grated on Chase's followers in Congress who organized behind his candidacy. Chase biographer Frederick J. Blue wrote: "Exactly when Chase was informed of the organization of the campaign group is not known, but in mid-January he wrote that a number of 'the clearest headed and most judicious men here...have determined to submit my name to the people in connection with the next Presidency.' Moreover, he 'consented to their wishes.' Several of the members had personal grievances against Lincoln in addition to political differences."⁷

Interior Secretary John Palmer Usher remembered that "Senator Pomeroy, of Kansas, put out a circular saying that Mr. Lincoln was not qualified to manage the affairs of this country and to successfully conduct the war then raging. It was signed by Kansas men with others. It was...broadcast all over the country under the frank of the treasury department, this privilege being used by the bureau officers, one or more, of the treasury department. Many of the circulars were returned directly to President Lincoln."⁸

The document was distributed by Senator Samuel C. Pomeroy's in February 1864. "This circular was marked 'strictly private,' and gave to Pomeroy, whose initials were S.C., the nickname of 'Secret Circular Pomeroy.'" wrote Lincoln aide William O. Stoddard, but 100,000 "secret" documents were printed. Stoddard noted that "its main propositions...were that the renomination of Lincoln was not only undesirable but impossible; that the honor of the nation and the cause of liberty and union would suffer in consequence of his reelection; that

the 'one-term principle' was essential to the safety of republican institutions; that Salmon P. Chase had more of the qualities needed in a President at that critical time than any other man; and that the discussion of Chase's availability had surprised his warmest admirers by the development of his strength."⁹

The publicity around the Pomeroy Circular forced Chase to pen an awkward letter of apology – and resignation – to President Lincoln, who denied that he had read the document although he had been shown the circular. President Lincoln wrote that he "did not perceive occasion for change" in Chase's job. On March 5, Chase renounced his presidential ambitions. By mid-March, Nicolay was writing: "Chase having retired from the Presidential contest, the tide continues to set as strongly as ever to Lincoln, and politicians therefore have but little to intrigue about. A few malcontents in the Republican party are stewing around, trying to make Butler, Fremont, or anybody they can get, the nucleus of a little faction in opposition to Lincoln but there is not the remotest prospect that their eggs will hatch."¹⁰

Chase's decision was forced not just by the ineptitude of his own supporters but also by the shrewd maneuvering of Lincoln supporters and patronage holders, engineering resolutions of support for his reelection, beginning in New Hampshire in January. Frederick J. Blue wrote: "The president had skillfully used his own patronage to build up his support and retain the backing of most party leaders. The ill-timed, intemperate appeal of the Chase committee thus precipitated a rush of politicians to join the Lincoln bandwagon and urged his renomination."¹¹

Political intrigue did not cease, however. The names of Union generals were prominently mentioned. President Lincoln preferred not to show his political hand but he had been active in sounding out the intentions of possible presidential oppo

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nents such as Generals Ulysses S. Grant and Benjamin Butler. He sent personal representatives to sound them out. Historian Mark Scroggins argued that President Lincoln “knew that his machination would have to be kept secret. It was not that Hannibal Hamlin was a popular vice president. In fact, he cut a rather dull figure in the office. Nor was it because Hamlin had a hard core of support in New England. Lincoln had to be covert because if the Radical Republicans knew that he was considering a Southern War Democrat for the ticket, they would have done everything in their power to demolish his nomination.”¹²

John Hay recorded in his diary in May 1864:

I said to the President today that I thought Butler was the only man in the Army to whom power would be dangerous. McClellan was too timid & vacillating to usurp. Grant was too sound and cool headed & too unselfish; Banks also. Fremont would be dangerous if had more ability & energy.

“‘Yes,’ says the Ancient, ‘he is like Jim Jett’s brother. Jim used to say that his brother was the biggest scoundrel that ever lived, but in the infinite mercy of Providence he was also the biggest fool.’”¹³

Butler was an opportunist in the best and worst senses. He saw that his political ambitions were cultivated. Biographer Richard S. West, Jr., wrote: “Colonel J. Wilson Shaffer, a Western newspaperman and politician, who had adopted Butler as his favorite candidate for the Presidency and had devoted most of the past year to pushing that project, was rewarded with the spot of Chief of Staff. Shaffer became a sort of roving liaison officer to present to officials in New York, Baltimore and Washington the military problems of Butler’s command – a post in which he continued his political machinations.”¹⁴

President Lincoln was dismissive of the Frémont challenge. Treasury official George S. Boutwell

recalled: “When the proceedings of the convention of dissenting Republicans, which assembled at Cleveland in 1864, were mentioned to him and his opinion sought, he told the story of two fresh Irishmen who attempted to find a tree-toad that they heard in the forest, and how, after a fruitless hunt, one of them consoled himself and his companion with the expression, ‘An’ faith it was nothing but a noise.’”¹⁵ Recalling the same story, Benjamin Rush Cowen said Mr. Lincoln added: “A good many things in this world at which timid people become greatly alarmed are found on nearer approach to be mere noise.”¹⁶ When Mr. Lincoln was informed that only 400 persons had attended the Cleveland convention, he pulled out a Bible and read the verses from I Samuel 22:2: “And every one that was in distress, and every one that was in debt, and every one that was discontented, gathered themselves unto him; and he became a captain over them; and there were with him about four hundred men.”¹⁷

A little more than a week after the Cleveland convention, Republicans gathered in Baltimore for what they called a National Union Party convention. Lincoln aide John Hay wrote to colleague John G. Nicolay in Baltimore at the start of the convention: “The President wishes not to interfere in the nomination even by the confidential suggestion. He also declines suggesting anything in regard to platform or the organization of the Convention. The Convention must be guided in these matters by their own views of justice & property.”¹⁸

Lincoln’s nomination was opposed only by a radical delegation from Missouri, which the President clearly wanted seated despite its opposition to him. They cast their votes for General Ulysses Grant before moved that Lincoln’s renomination be unanimous. Pandemonium erupted. Attorney General Edward Bates complained: “The Baltimore Convention (National Union I believe, it’s called

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itself) has surprised and mortified me greatly. It did indeed nominate Mr. Lincoln, but in a manner and with attendant circumstances, as if the object were to defeat their own nomination. They were all (nearly) instructed to vote for Mr. Lincoln, but many of them hated to do it, and only 'kept the word of promise to the them hated to do it, and only 'kept the word of promise to the ear' doing their worst to break it to the hope. They rejected the only delegates from Mo. who were instructed and pledged for Lincoln, and admitted the destructive, who were pledged against Lincoln, and, in fact, voted against him, falsely alleging that they were instructed to vote for Grant! The conservative was chosen in a manner more legitimate and regular than the destructive Radicals; for the Radical convention in Mo. (which appointed those delegates) was, substantially annulled, by the defection of the whole German element, they preferring to go to Cleveland and support Fremont, rather than go to the packed Lincoln gathering, at Baltimore." He wrote that those who did not defect directly to Fremont "resolved to send delegates to Baltimore, because they could better serve the destructive cause, and support Fremont, at Baltimore than at Cleveland. And they judged rightly – for they 'are wiser, in their generation than the children of light.'"¹⁹

Then, the Republican-Union convention turned its attention to the nomination for vice president. Among those nominated were Vice President Hannibal Hamlin, former New York Senator Daniel S. Dickinson, and Tennessee Governor Andrew Johnson. Controversy has swirled about what role President Lincoln played in replacing Vice President Hannibal Hamlin with Johnson. Lincoln's secretaries denied his involvement; Pennsylvania newspaper editor Alexander K. McClure swore by it. At the time, John G. Nicolay wrote that he had told the chairman of the Illinois delegation "I thought Lincoln would not wish even to indicate a preference for V.P. as the rival candidates were

all friendly to him." President Lincoln had written on the letter "Wish not to interfere about V.P."²⁰ Journalist Noah Brooks said that President Lincoln told him he would have been happy with Hamlin's renomination. He added: "Some of our folks referring, as I believed, to Republican leaders had expressed the opinion that it would be wise to take a War Democrat as candidate for Vice-President, and that, if possible, a Border State man should be the nominee." President Lincoln pronounced his approval by saying: "Andy Johnson, I think, is a good man." But according to Brooks, "I have always have been confident that Lincoln, left to himself, would have chose that old ticket of 1860 – Lincoln and Hamlin – should be placed in the field."²¹ When asked about his preferences for Vice President, Mr. Lincoln informed the Illinois delegation that Kentuckian Joseph "Holt is a good man, but I had not heard or thought of him for V.P. Wish not to interfere about V.P. Can not interfere about platform. Convention must judge for itself."²²

Governor Johnson had a clear lead on the first ballot but was well short of nomination. Hamlin's renomination may have been doomed by political jealousies. Hamlin Biographer Mark Scroggins wrote: "The excitable governor of Iowa, William Stone, suddenly leaped out of his seat and announced that his delegation would give his state's entire vote to Johnson. Governor Stone had no authority to take this action; he was not even an elected delegate. He was only filling a vacancy. Most of the Iowa delegation opposed Johnson. The spokesman, Daniel D. Chase, tried frantically to signal Chairman Dennison. But Governor Dennison was either confused or did not hear Chase's protests. Before Chase could get the floor, Kentucky announced that she was changing her vote to Johnson too. This swung the pendulum and state after state abandoned Hamlin and threw their votes to Johnson."²³

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At President Lincoln's request, the Republican Convention endorsed a constitutional amendment to end slavery. The Republican Platform proclaimed: "That as Slavery was the cause, and now constitutes the strength, of this rebellion, and as it must be always and everywhere hostile to the principles of Republican Government, justice and the national safety demand its utter and complete extirpation from the soil of the Republic; and that we uphold maintain the acts and proclamations by which the Government, in its own defense has aimed a death-blow at this gigantic evil. We are in favor, furthermore, of such an amendment to the Constitution, to be made by the people in conformity with its provisions, as shall terminate and forever prohibit the existence of Slavery within the limits or jurisdiction of the United States."²⁴

Ohio Governor William Dennison led a national delegation from the Baltimore convention to the White House. "I know no reason to doubt that I shall accept the nomination tendered; and yet perhaps I should not declare definitely before reading and considering what is called the Platform," President Lincoln told the delegation informing him of his nomination: "I will say now, however, that I approve the declaration in favor of so amending the Constitution as to prohibit slavery throughout the nation. When the people in revolt, with a hundred days of explicit notice, that they could, within those days, resume their allegiance, without the overthrow of their institution, and that they could not so resume it afterwards, elected to stand out, such an amendment of the Constitution as is now proposed, became a fitting, and necessary conclusion to the final success of the Union cause. Such alone can meet and cover all cavils. Now, the unconditional Union men, North and South, perceive its importance, and embrace it. In the joint names of Liberty and Union, let us labor to give it legal form, and practical effect."²⁵ It was a somewhat disingenuous statement from a President who worked hard behind the scenes to achieve just that

result at the Republican convention.

With the convention behind him, President Lincoln ran into a series of increasingly troubling political difficulties. Journalist Noah Brooks recalled: "Political discussion in Washington during the months immediately preceding the second nomination of Lincoln was exceedingly animated. Although, as we afterward found, the country at large really thought of no name but Lincoln's, Washington politicians were all agog over a variety of compromises that would placate the ultra-radicals of the Republican party, and keep in line the conservatives."²⁶ Those radicals and abolitionists unhappy with President Lincoln were not pacified by his renomination. Other Republicans grew increasingly worried about his reelection prospects. Historian Christopher J. Olsen wrote: "The incomplete nature of William T. Sherman's accomplishment [in Georgia dealt another blow to Lincoln and the Republicans. On July 18, Lincoln had called for another five hundred thousand volunteers, and Peace Democrats rejoiced. By September 1, the Union had suffered more than one hundred thousand casualties since May, and the Confederates still held Richmond, Petersburg, and Atlanta. The Union Army under Nathaniel Banks was stalled in southern Mississippi, Benjamin Butler never got up the peninsula in Virginia, and the Confederates controlled Texas and most of Arkansas. After starting the year with such high hopes, Union voters now despaired. The July 1864 draft call produced the most no-shows of any single Union drafter...."²⁷

The Democratic prospects of General George B. McClellan seemed to be rising. In March, former President Millard Fillmore wrote McClellan's wife: "As a general rule I am not in favor of electing military chieftains to the Presidency but all general rules have their exceptions and in my humble judgement, this is a crisis in the affairs of the nation, when a truly patriotic and skillful mili-

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tary man of disinterested devotion to his country can do more than save it from ruin than any other and I believe General McClellan to be that man and hence my desire to see him President.”²⁸ Many Americans agreed with Fillmore as spring turned to summer. Historian Harold M. Dudley wrote: “The summer of 1864 was an exceedingly gloomy period for the union cause and a time of depression for the president. The resignation of Secretary Chase, the mounting price of gold with the evident lack of national credit, the failure to recruit the army by volunteers making necessary a presidential call for half a million men in the draft order of July 19, the Wade-Davis Manifesto of August 5 with its heavy burden of criticism directed in full force against the President, the lack of cooperation manifested by Horace Greeley in the Niagara Falls peace proposals of early August, together with open rebellion in Ohio led by Vallandigham, and the rabid attacks printed in the New York World, which led to a temporary suspension of its publication, all pointed to the tremendous pressure which bore down upon the administration during July and August.”²⁹

Historian Hans L. Trefousse wrote: “Lincoln himself was also depressed by the Manifesto. It was sad ‘to be wounded in the house of one’s friends,’ as he put it, and he wondered whether Wade and Davis intended to oppose his election openly. But the President realized that the authors had probably overshot their mark. Commenting that he had not and probably would not read the Manifesto, he told a characteristic story. ‘It is not worth fretting about,’ he said. ‘It reminds me of an old acquaintance who, having a son of a scientific turn, bought a microscope. The boy went around, experimenting with his glass upon everything that came in his way. One day, at the dinner table, his father took up a piece of cheese. ‘Don’t eat that, father,’ said the boy; ‘it is full of wrigglers.’ ‘My son,’ replied the old gentleman, taking, at the same time, a huge bite, ‘let ‘em wriggle; I can stand it if they can!’”

“Lincoln’s story was apt. He could stand the Manifesto, as the reaction of the country was beginning to show. His supporters in Washington did not even bother to print the document in their Daily Morning Chronicle; the Tribune’s strictures upon it made much better copy. And when, three days later, news of Farragut’s victory at Mobile reached the North, they could well afford to disregard the Manifesto altogether. The skies are again brightening,’ they wrote.”³⁰

Maine Congressman James G. Blaine wrote: “Although they might have won Republican approval on the specific constitutional issues involved, Wade and Davis seriously misjudged the political situation. So far from hurting Lincoln, the protest actually seemed to help him. As Blaine put it, the ‘very strength of the paper was...its special weakness. It was so powerful an arraignment of the President that of necessity it rallied his friends to his support.’”³¹ Many Republicans and Republican newspapers rushed to the President’s defense – including Wade’s own local Ashtabula Sentinel. The county Republican convention resolved “That the recent attack on the President by Wade and Davis is, in our opinion, ill-timed, ill-tempered, and ill-advised, carrying great and undisguised joy to rebel camps in the South and rebel sympathizers in the North...” The New York Times charged it was designed to “aid the success of the Democratic party.” However, noted Davis biographer Gerald Henig wrote, “a number of party members...firmly sided with Wade and Davis. William Cullen Bryant of the New York Evening Post vigorously argued that the congressmen were entitled to speak out when the President, at his own whim, put aside the action of Congress and ‘left the restoration of the rebel states...wholly unprovided for, except by methods which the Executive might think proper to dictate.’” The editor of the Principia, an aboli

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tionist paper published in New York, regarded the manifesto as a ‘manly protest’ against Lincoln’s desire ‘to sacrifice, upon the altar of personal ambition, the liberties not only of four millions of native colored Americans, but, through the subversion of our republican institutions, the liberties also of thirty millions of whites.’”³⁴

Later in August, Republicans panicked. The Army of the Potomac was stalled outside Richmond after a series of bloody defeats in battle. Americans seemed to be wearying of the war effort and Republicans were wearying of their standard-bearer who in July had pocket-vetoed the Wade-Davis Bill on reconstruction. Lincoln friend Alexander K. McClure wrote that “three months after his re-nomination in Baltimore his defeat by General McClellan was generally apprehended by his friends and frankly conceded by Lincoln himself.”³⁵ Republican National Chairman Henry J. Raymond wrote: “I hear but one report – the tide is setting against us.”³⁶

Two events changed the political tide: the capture of Atlanta by General Sherman and the nomination of General McClellan on a peace platform. Historian Fawn Brodie wrote: “The moment, however, that George B. McClellan was nominated to oppose Lincoln on the Democratic ticket, Thaddeus Stevens and other Radicals, recognizing a real enemy, began to work feverishly for Lincoln’s victory. As Charles Sumner put it privately, ‘Lincoln’s election would be a disaster, but McClellan’s damnation.’ Thaddeus Stevens quietly urged Carl Schurz to repair the split in the Republican Party by swinging the Frémont Radicals to Lincoln’s side. And Zachary Chandler finally succeeded in getting Frémont to withdraw from the race. Stevens exacted a price for this, however – the Conservative, anti-Negro Montgomery Blair went out of the Cabinet.”³⁷

During the summer, President Lincoln had met with Simon Cameron and Thaddeus Stevens of

Pennsylvania. Stevens pressured him to promise to remove Postmaster General Blair from his Cabinet. Mr. Lincoln refused, saying: “It would be degrading to my manhood to consent to any such bargain – I was about to say it is equally degrading to your manhood to ask it.” Then he added: “I confess that I desire to be re-elected. God knows I do not want the labor and responsibility of the office for another four years. But I have the common pride of humanity to wish my past four years Administration endorsed; and besides I honestly believe that I can better serve the nation in its need and peril than any new man could possibly do.”³⁸

The Democrats had postponed their own convention until the end of the summer. Returning home to Illinois in August 1864, John Hay wrote back to the White House: “We are waiting with the greatest interest for the hatching of the big peace Snakes at Chicago. There is throughout the country, I mean the rural districts, a good healthy Union feeling & an intention to succeed, in the military & the political contests, but everywhere in the towns, the copperheads are exultant and our own people either growing & despondent or sneakily apologetic.”³⁹ The next day, Hay expanded his field report:

It is reported here that Horace Greeley Henry J. Raymond & the Ex. Com. Are trying to run Lincoln off, having give up beat. Most of our people are talking like damned fools. My father on the contrary is the most sanguine man I have met. He says we will carry this State with a fair working majority. Some of the Dutch [Germans] are bit with the Fremont mania. But the returned soldiers are all for Lincoln, if they can be kept right till November.”⁴⁰

Historian Jennifer L. Weber wrote: “Copperheads continued hammering away at the themes that had become their rhetorical centerpieces: The financial and human costs of the war, the suspension of

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habeas corpus, the presence of the draft, the fact that this had become a war of emancipation. Lincoln was a tyrant who had only contempt for the Constitution.”⁴¹ The Democrats in New York City formed a “Society for the Diffusion of Political Knowledge” in early 1863. As the 1864 election drew near, the opposition tracts became increasingly vicious against President Lincoln as a pamphlet battle began .

The Democratic campaign truly kicked off in December 1863 with the publication of a *Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro*. It was an attempt to confuse supporters and opponents of Abraham Lincoln. Journalists at the New York World concocted the pamphlet to make it appear that it had been written by an abolitionist who favored the mixing of races – and thus create a controversy. Historian Sidney Kaplan wrote: “This pamphlet, a curious hash of quarter-truths and pseudo-learned oddities, was to give a new word to the language and a refurbished issue to the Democratic Party – although its anonymous author for good reason perhaps, never came forward to claim his honors. In the welter of leaflets, brochures, cards, tracts and cartoons struck off by all parties during the Civil War, it stands out as centrally significant.”⁴² In late December, the booklet was mailed off to prominent abolitionists in the hope that some would endorse its thesis and thereby fuel a political bonfire. Later, they placed advertisements for the pamphlet in abolitionist periodicals in an attempt to fuel political mischief.

Given northern racism, it was a reasonable, if dishonest, political tactic. Even in President Lincoln’s Illinois, anti-black prejudice was strong and animosity to any immigration of former slaves into the state was stronger. Historian Bruce Tap wrote: “Many Midwesterners believed blacks were indolent, shiftless, and incapable of surviving on their own. Inevitably they would become a burden on society. On the other hand, the common complaint

of white laborers was the fear that their economic well-being would be harmed due to the presence of cheaper black labor. There was also the concern of the negative social consequences of the mingling of the two races, that an inferior’ race would lower the standards of the superior race.”⁴³ Democrats tried to harness this racism against President Lincoln and the Republicans.

Congressman Samuel C. Cox, a leading Ohio Democrat, lambasted the spurious miscegenation pamphlet in a major speech in Congress on February 17, 1864. His speech in turn received wide distribution, further fueling anti-black and therefore anti-Republican sentiment.⁴⁴ Historian Jennifer Weber wrote that “Democrats... pounced on the tract as evidence of the administration’s perverse and hidden agenda. Representative Cox of Ohio gave a lengthy address on February in the House. Abolitionists and Republicans ‘used to deny, whenever it was charged, that they favored black citizenship; yet now they are favoring black suffrage in the District of Columbia, and will favor it wherever in the South they need it for their purposes.’ This and other evidence ‘ought to convince us that that party is moving steadily forward to perfect social equality of black and white, and can only end in this detestable doctrine of – miscegenation!’”⁴⁵

Kaplan wrote that author’s new word, “miscegenation,” became a real issue for Democrats and Republicans: “From January to November 1864 the Democratic press would tear this ‘issue’ to tatters.”⁴⁶ According to Kaplan, “right up to the November allotting – although the World alone among the Democratic sheets would speak in whispers on the subject – the national press would bandy word and issue in an unending saturnalia of editorial, caricature and verse.”⁴⁷

Democratic prospects waxed and waned during 1864 as did the relative dominance of War Democrats and Peace Democrats, often known as Cop

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perheads. The Democratic battle cry was “The Union as it was, and the Constitution as it is,” a paraphrase of a statement made by New York Governor Horatio Seymour.⁴⁸ “The Democrats,” noted Noah Brooks, “were irreconcilably divided. Although they were noticeably quiet during the weeks preceding the assembling of the Union Republican National Convention at Baltimore that summer, it was clear that the ‘Peace’ and ‘War’ factions of the party could not possibly be made to harmonize. The two hostile camps occasionally fired a shot at each other even in the infrequent sittings of congress. S. S. Cox was one of the more talkative and vivacious representatives who led the War Democrats pledged to the cause of McClellan, and New York Congressman Fernando Wood was the acknowledged leader in Congress of the Peace faction, whose affections were fixed on New York Governor Horatio Seymour.”⁴⁹

Most Democratic hopes rested on General George B. McClellan, who had been dismissed as commander of the Army of the Potomac in November 1862 and since then had awaited a new command that never came. In the fall of 1863, General McClellan ventured into politics. “Charles Mason, the Iowa judge managing McClellan’s campaign in the nation’s capital, implored him to visit Pennsylvania before the critical state and congressional elections there in mid-October. Mason wrote McClellan on October 3 that his mere presence ‘at some of the great political meetings which will be held next week would greatly promote their interest...’” wrote Lincoln chronicler John Waugh.⁵⁰ By endorsing an anti-war Democrat, McClellan tarnished his credentials as a War Democrat. He was uncomfortable as a politician, a discomfort that increased as his nomination neared as the Democratic candidate for President in 1864.

Historian Jennifer L. Weber wrote: “McClellan’s certain nomination was predicated on the belief that he would draw thousands of votes from sol-

diers in the field. Even though he was politically viable and shared conservatives’ opposition to emancipation, McClellan was too moderate for the peace faction. In July a splinter group of Philadelphia hard-liners tried to nominate Millard Fillmore or Franklin Pierce, both former presidents, as the party candidate. The effort went nowhere, but peace men across the North nodded in approval.”⁵¹ Navy Secretary Gideon Welles remembered: “The democratic national convention met at Chicago on the 29th of August, to nominate a candidate for president, and to lay down the programme or platform of political principles which the managers professed to believe best for the country, and by which they and their associates were governed. Until within a few days of the meeting of the convention circumstances had favored them. Scarcely a cheering ray had dawned upon the administration after the renomination of Mr. Lincoln until about the time the democratic delegates convened at Chicago. Except the success of the navy in the destruction of the rebel cruiser Alabama by the Kearsarge in June, and the passage of the forts of Mobile Bay by David Farragut in August, there had seemed a pall over the Union cause, and all efforts, civil and military, of the administration. Information of the surrender of Fort Morgan was received on the day the democratic convention assembled. That convention pronounced the war a failure. Not only did rambling party declaimers harangue crowds against the despotic and arbitrary measures of the government, which, they said, was alienating the South, but men of eminence, some of whom had enjoyed public confidence and held high official position, participated in the assaults upon the president, who, while thus attacked, was struggling against reverses and armed resistance to the Union.”⁵²

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The Peace Democrats then concentrated on the party platform. Worried about a possible threat by New York Governor Seymour, McClellan’s allies underestimated the competence of Vallandigham who inserted language in the platform that said “justice, humanity, liberty and the public welfare demand that immediate efforts be made for a cessation of hostilities, with a view to an ultimate convention of the States, or other peaceable means, to the end that at the earliest practicable moment peace may be restored on the basis of the Federal Union of the States.” McClellan’s allies lost a crucial subcommittee vote that would have made reunion a prerequisite for peace negotiations. They decided against contesting the platform at the level of either the full committee or full convention. It was a critical mistake. New York Republican Chauncey M. Depew observed: “The platform committee, and the convention afterwards, permitted to go into the platform a phrase proposed by Clement C. Vallandigham, of Ohio, the phrase being, ‘The war is a failure.’ Soon after the adjournment of the convention, to the victories of Farragut and Sherman was added the spectacular campaign and victory of Union General Philip Sheridan in the valley of the Shenandoah. The campaign at once took on a new phase.”⁵⁴

On August 31, McClellan was nominated with a clear majority on the first ballot with a strong

peace Democrat, George H. Pendleton, as his running mate. For many in the North, the Democratic Party effectively demonstrated its unreadiness to lead the country by passing a party platform at odds with the opinions of its presidential nominee. He was placed in a difficult dilemma — how to accept the nomination but reject the platform’s peace plank. Historian Christopher Dell wrote that “A struggle began, between the War and Peace factions, concerning the presidential candidate’s traditional letter of acceptance. War Democrats supporting McClellan wanted him to say that no armistice would go into effect until the Confederate states agreed to reenter the Union. Peace Democrats wanted him to recommend an armistice as a prelude to diplomatic negotiations. McClellan wanted to go along with the Peace faction. He had been warned by Vallandigham and others that failure to do so would result in their mass desertion. Moreover, he believed that if negotiations failed, the armistice could end and the war could recommence without difficulty.”⁵⁵

McClellan attempted to fudge the differences, but ended up rejecting the position of the Peace Democrats. Like the platform, McClellan’s response was vague and imprecise. Nevertheless, McClellan’s acceptance letter – and rejection of the platform – was the high point of his campaign, but it came too late to erase the image of the convention. McClellan used his pen to some advantage for the rest of the campaign but avoided personal involvement. He proved as difficult a candidate as he had been a general. “Don’t send any politicians out here — I’ll snub them if they come — confound them,” he wrote a friend.

By comparison with the activist incumbent, McClellan was a very passive candidate. McClellan’s managers based in New York City tried to mobilize the Tammany machine there and the Copperhead network around the country behind McClellan. Biographer Stephen W. Sears wrote:

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was expected that the general's great popularity with the men in the ranks during his time in command would be reflected in the 1864 balloting. He sought out officers friendly to him to distribute Democratic campaign literature to the troops, and encouraged the formation of such military clubs as the McClellan Legion to rally ex-soldiers and men home on furlough and sick leave to his cause. Despite these efforts, however, no other segment of the electorate rejected his candidacy so strongly. In the final election counting Lincoln would capture 55 percent of the vote; among the soldiers the president's count was 78 percent. In spite of his acceptance letter, Northern soldiers perceived General McClellan as representing the party advocating peace at any price, and they turned against him by an overwhelming margin."⁶⁵ By a 3-1 margin, soldiers who voted in the field rejected their former commander and supported their commander-in-chief.

President Lincoln realized that the future of the war effort depended on the future of his campaign. And although he prepared for the worst, he fully intended to work for his reelection. On August 23, President Lincoln wrote a sealed memorandum which he had the members of his Cabinet sign. He had been convinced by the negative reports of Republican leaders that he would lose in November. The memo read: "This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to so co-operate with the President elect, as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration; as he will have secured his election on such ground that he can not possibly save it afterwards."⁶⁶

In September, President Lincoln yielded to political reality and asked for the resignation of Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, who had repeatedly infuriated more radical Republicans. Although there was no explicit quid pro quo, John

C. Fremont simultaneously withdrew his presidential candidacy. The Republican Party, which seemed hopelessly splintered in August, came quickly together. Dissident Republicans and newspaper editors in New York dropped their efforts to field another candidate and fell in behind President Lincoln. Federal employees were actively solicited for campaign contributions. Only Navy Secretary Gideon Welles resisted such efforts. The President contributed his advice to the officials running the campaign from Congress such as Iowa Senator James Harlan and New York Senator Edwin D. Morgan. The party's control of patronage assured it of an army of loyal supporters. Deviators complained that they were punished, but their punishment was mitigated whenever President Lincoln learned of specific complaints. Fawn Brodie wrote that Radical Republican Congressman "Stevens then campaigned vigorously for Lincoln in Pennsylvania, telling the voters that the president had risen above 'the influence of Border State seductions and Republican cowardice.' 'Let us forget, he said, 'that he had ever erred, and support him with redoubled energy.'"⁶⁷

"As the war news improved and the Democrats searched for identity there was a movement of disgruntled Republicans back to Lincoln's candidacy," wrote historian Larry T. Balsamo.⁶⁸ Mr. Lincoln was not passive in this process. Historian Harold M. Dudley wrote: "Though Lincoln was adamant in upholding the union cause, yet he was not unwilling to use diplomacy to bring to himself the crown of success in the November. The removal of Montgomery Blair from the cabinet to propitiate Chase, the tender of Blair's office to Horace Greeley, the proffer of the French mission to James Gordon Bennett, critical editor of the New York Herald, presidential endorsement of New York Congressman Roscoe Conkling, brother-in-law of Horatio Seymour and Lincoln's avowed enemy, together with Blair's attempt to induce McClellan to withdraw from the campaign

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by offering him a military position – all indicate the policy of Lincoln and his friends to present a united front in the interest of Republican success at the November election.”⁶⁹ Republican prospects brightened throughout the fall. McClellan’s candidacy failed to capture the public imagination as Union military victories – such as the victory of General Philip Sheridan in the Shenandoah Valley in October reignited northern faith in an eventual Union triumph. Even President Lincoln’s faith in his own reelection was strengthened though he remained conservative in his estimation of the northern states he would carry.

“Denunciation of Lincoln by Democratic spellbinders was of the bitterest character,” remembered New York Republican Abram J. Dittenhoefer. “Newspapers affiliated with the anti-war party criticized every act of the administration and belittled the conduct of the war by Federal generals in the field. Therefore, Republican speakers did not mince words in criticism of the Democratic Presidential candidate, Gen. George B. McClellan.” Dittenhoefer himself said in a speech at Cooper Union on September 27: “The battle that will be fought in November between the Union and the Confederate forces north of the Potomac will end in the destruction or exhaustion of the Southern Confederacy. Abraham Lincoln is the commander of the Union forces. I will now prove that George B. McClellan is the leader of the Confederate forces.” Dittenhoefer later admitted: “Read in the calmness of to-day my language appears unwarrantedly aggressive, but at that time it seemed conservative.”⁷⁰

The actual election seemed almost an anticlimax. “Election day was dull, gloomy and rain; and as if by common consent, the White House was deserted, only two members of the Cabinet attending the regular meeting of that body,” reported California journalist Noah Brooks, a close friend of Mr. Lincoln. “The President took no pains to conceal

his anxious interest in the result of the election then going on all over the country, but just before the hour for Cabinet meeting he said: ‘I am just enough of a politician to know that there was not much doubt about the result of the Baltimore Convention, but about this thing I am far from being certain; I wish I were certain.’”⁷¹

The President and his aides went to the telegraph room of the nearby War Department to await the results. War Department official Charles Dana recalled: “November 8th, election day, I went over to the War Department about half past eight o’clock in the evening, and found the President and Mr. Stanton together in the Secretary’s office. General Thomas Eckert, who then had charge of the telegraph department of the War Office, was coming in constantly with telegrams containing election returns. Mr. Stanton would read them, and the President would look at them and comment upon them. Presently there came a lull in the returns, and Mr. Lincoln called me to a place by his side.

‘Dana,’ said he, ‘have you ever read any of the writings of Petroleum V. Nasby?’

‘No, sir,’ I said; ‘I have only looked at some of them, and they seemed to be quite funny.’

‘Well,’ said he, ‘let me read you a specimen’; and, pulling out a thin yellow-covered pamphlet from his breast pocket, he began to read aloud. Mr. Stanton viewed these proceedings with great impatience, as I could see, but Mr. Lincoln paid no attention to that. He would read a page or a story, pause to consider a new election telegram, and then open the book again and go ahead with a new passage. Finally, Mr. Chase came in, and presently somebody else, and then the reading was interrupted.⁷²

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Secretary Stanton was not amused. Dana recalled that “Mr. Stanton motioned to me to come with him into General Eckert’s room, and when the door was shut he broke out in fury: ‘God damn it to hell,’ said he, was there ever such nonsense? Was there ever such inability to appreciate what is going on in an awful crisis? Here is the fate of this whole republic at stake, and here is the man around whom it all centers, on whom it all depends, turning aside from this monumental issue to read the God damned trash of a silly mountebank!” Dana wrote:

This fiery speech of the enraged Secretary was interrupted by General Eckert, who had another telegram which he showed to him, and with which we all went back into Mr. Stanton’s own office, in order that the President might see it. Hardly had he begun to read it, however, when a new occasion of irritation arose. The messenger brought in a card and handed it to the President, who said at once, as he passed the card over to the Secretary, ‘Show him in!’ Stanton read it, and turning to me, exclaimed in a low voice: ‘God in heaven, it is Whitelaw Reid!’ I understood at once the point of this explosion. Mr. Reid, who was then the correspondent of the Cincinnati Gazette and a great friend of Secretary Chase in Washington, was not liked by the Secretary of War. This dislike had gone so far that the doorkeepers at the War Department had received directions that Mr. Reid was not to be admitted. But when he sent his card in to the President, they could not refuse it. Mr. Reid came in and was greeted by Mr. Lincoln, but not by the Secretary. His purpose was merely to obtain from headquarters and from the highest authority the assurance that the election had certainly gone in favor of Lincoln; and after expressions of thanks and congratulations he withdrew. Just then Judge David C. Cartter

came in with two or three other gentlemen, among Mr. Gustavus V. Fox of the Navy Department, and the reading of Petroleum V. Nasby from the Confederate Cross Roads was not resumed.⁷³

Aide John Hay wrote in his diary: "We went into the Secretary's room. Mr. Wells and Fox soon came in. They were especially happy over the election of Rice, regarding it as a great triumph for the Navy Department. Says Fox, 'There are two fellows that have been especially malignant to us, and retribution has come upon them both, John Hale and Henry Winter Davis.' 'You have more of that feeling of personal resentment than I,' said Lincoln. 'Perhaps I may have too little of it, but I never thought it paid. A man has not time to spend half his life in quarrels. If any man ceases to attack me. I never remember the past against him. It has seemed to me recently that Winter Davis was growing more sensible to his own true interests and has ceased wasting his time by attacking me. I hope for his own good he has. He has been very malicious against me but has only injured himself by it. His conduct has been very strange to me. I came here, his friend, wishing to continue so. I had heard nothing but good of him; he was the cousin of my intimate friend Judge Davis. But he had scarcely been elected when I began to learn of his attacking me on all possible occasions. It is very much the same with Hickman. I was much disappointed that he failed to be my friend. But my greatest disappointment of all has been with Iowa Senator James W. Grimes. Before I came here, I certainly expected to rely upon Grimes more than any other one man in the Senate. I like him very much. He is a great strong fellow. He is a valuable friend, a dangerous enemy. He carries too many guns not to be respected in any point of view. But he got wrong against me, I do not clearly know how, and has always been cool and almost hostile to me. I am glad he has always been the friend of the Navy and generally of the Administration.'"⁷⁴

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The news that night was almost uniformly positive. — except early reports from New York which awarded it to McClellan. Historian Larry T. Balsamo wrote that “just over four million sovereign voters went to the polls to help decide the nation’s destiny. The results were an overwhelming referendum of approval and support for Lincoln, his party and the policies of his administration.”⁷⁵ Eventually, the President would win about 55 percent of the vote and all but three states — Kentucky, Delaware, and New Jersey. Dana remembered: “The first gun came from Indiana, Indianapolis sending word about half-past six in the evening that a gain of fifteen hundred in that city had been made for Lincoln. At seven o’clock, accompanied only by a friend, the President went over the War Department to hear the telegraphic dispatches, as they brought in the returns, but it was nearly nine o’clock before anything definite came in, and then Baltimore sent up her splendid majority of ten thousand plus. The President only smiled good-naturedly and said that was a fair beginning. Next Massachusetts send word that she was good for 75,000 majority (since much increased), and hard upon her came glorious old Pennsylvania, Forney telegraphing that the State was sure for Lincoln. ‘As goes Pennsylvania, so goes the Union, they say,’ remarked Father Abraham, and he looked solemn, as he seemed to see another term of office looming before him. There was a long lull, and nothing heard from New York, the chosen battle ground of the Democracy, about which all were so anxious. New Jersey broke the calm by announcing a gain of one Congressman for the Union, but with a fair prospect of the State going for McClellan; then the President had to tell a story about the successful New Jersey Union Congressman, Dr. Newell, a family friend of the Lincolns, which was interrupted by a dispatch from New York City, claiming the State by 10,000. ‘I don’t believe that,’ remarked the incredulous Chief Magistrate, and when Greeley telegraphed at midnight that we should have the state by about four thousand, he

thought that more reasonable. So the night wore on, and by midnight we were sure of Pennsylvania, the New England States, Maryland, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, and it then appeared that we should have Delaware. Still no word came from Illinois, or Iowa, or any of the trans-Mississippi States, and the President was specially concerned to hear from his own State, which sent a dispatch from Chicago about one o’clock in the morning, claiming the State for Lincoln by 20,000 and Chicago by 2,500 majority. The wires worked badly on account of the storm, which increased, and nothing more was heard from the West until last night, the 10th, when the President received two days’ dispatches from Springfield, claiming the state by 17,000 and the Capital by 20 majority, Springfield having been heretofore Democratic. By midnight the few gentlemen in the office had had the pleasure of congratulating the President on his re-election. He took it very calmly - said that he was free to confess that he felt relieved of suspense, and was glad that the verdict of the people was so likely to be clear, full and unmistakable, for it then appeared that his majority in the electoral college would be immense. About two o’clock in the morning a messenger came over from the White House with the intelligence that a crowd of Pennsylvanians were serenading his empty chamber, whereupon he went home, and in answer to repeated calls came forward and made one of the happiest and noblest little speeches of his life...”⁷⁶

Hay recalled: “Towards midnight we had supper, provided by Eckert. The President went awkwardly and hospitably to work shoveling out the fried oysters. He was most agreeable and genial all the evening in fact. Fox was abusing the coffee for being so hot — saying quaintly, it kept hot all the way down to the bottom of the cup as a piece of ice staid cold till you finished eating it.”⁷⁷

President Lincoln told serenaders that night: “All who have labored to-day in behalf of the Union

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organization, have wrought for the best interests of their country and the world, not only for the present, but for all future ages. I am thankful to God for this approval of the people.”⁷⁸ Historian David E. Long wrote: “Lincoln generally fared well in the cities. Outside of New York State, where McClellan outpolled him in every major city except Rochester, the only Northern cities where the president did not poll a majority were Detroit and Milwaukee. Milwaukee, where he received the lowest percentage of votes of any Northern city, contained a large number of German Catholics. Lincoln did poorly with Catholic immigrants, among whom support for the war was weakest. They felt little attachment to a war being waged for the freedom of blacks. Almost universally he lost the Irish vote. Pundits viewing the election went to great lengths to establish that the source of Lincoln’s support was in the soil, the rural areas where hard-working, honest Protestant farmers lived the same life that young Lincoln had. The facts do not necessarily bear that out. In very few places did the president not do better than he did in Cook County, Illinois, where he won more than 81 percent of the vote. In Boston, Providence, Pittsburgh, Cleveland and St. Louis, he received more than three of every five ballots. In Cincinnati, he won 56 percent; Philadelphia, 55 percent; and Rochester, 53 percent. Also, before going too far in pursuit of the idea that Lincoln’s strength was with ‘men of the soil,’ it should be remembered that most Confederate soldiers were yeoman farmers.”⁷⁹

Historian William Frank Zornow wrote: “The President polled 339,308 more votes in 1864 than he had in his first election. He had 55.08 per cent of the vote cast, and thereby removed from his shoulders the stigma of being a minority president. He carried five more states than in his first election: Missouri, Maryland, West Virginia, Kansas, and Nevada. Delaware and Kentucky voted against him on both occasions, and in the second elec-

tion they were joined by New Jersey, which had given Lincoln four of its electoral votes in 1860. In 1864, Kansas, West Virginia, and Nevada voted in the presidential race for the first time. In four states – Maine, New Hampshire, Michigan, and Wisconsin – the President polled fewer votes than in 1860, and nine states (the above four plus Connecticut, Minnesota, New York, Pennsylvania, and Vermont) his percentage of the votes polled was diminished.”⁸⁰

The morning after the election, aide Edward D. Neill saw the President busy at work when he reported for duty and went into Mr. Lincoln’s office. “Entering the room, I took a seat by his side, extended my hand, and congratulated him upon the vote, for my country’s sake and for his own sake. Turning away from the papers which had been occupying his attention, he spoke kindly of his competitor...”⁸¹ George McClellan responded to the result by writing privately: “I was fully prepared for the result and not in the slightest degree overcome by it. For my country’s sake, I deplore the result but the people have decided with their eyes wide open and I feel a great weight removed from my mind.”⁸²

Two days later after the election, President Lincoln delivered a more considered response to a serenade gathered outside the North Portico of the White House. He had written out his remarks in advance and an aide held a candle so he could read them to the crowd:

It has been a grave question whether any government, not too strong for the liberties of its people, can be strong enough to maintain its own existence, in great emergencies.

On this point the present rebellion brought our republic to a severe test; and a presidential election occurring united, in regular course during the rebellion added not a

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little to the strain. If the loyal people, were put to the utmost of their strength by the rebellion, must they not fail when divided, and partially paralyzed, by a political war among themselves, but the election was a necessity.

We can not have free government without elections; and if the rebellion could force us to forego, or postpone a national election, it might fairly claim to have already conquered and ruined us. The strife of the election is but human-nature practically applied to the facts of the case. What has occurred in this case, must ever recur in similar cases. Human-nature will not the change. In any future great national trial, compared with the men of this, we shall have as weak, and as a strong; as silly and as wise; as bad and good. Let us, therefore, study the incidents of this, as philosophy to learn wisdom from, and none of them as wrongs to be revenged.

But the election, along with its incidental, and undesirable strife, has done good too. It has demonstrated that a people's government can sustain a national election, in the midst of a great civil war. Until now it has not been known to the world that this was possible. It shows also how sound, and how strong we still are. It shows that, even among candidates of the same party, he who is most devoted to the Union, and most opposed to treason, can receive most of the people's votes. It shows also, to the extent yet known, that we have more men now, than we had when the war began. Gold is good in its place; but living, brave, patriotic men, are better than gold.

But the rebellion continues; and now that the election is over, may not all, having a

common interest, re-unite in a common effort, to save our common country? For my own part I have striven, and shall strive to avoid placing any obstacle in the way. So long as I have been here I have not willingly planted a thorn in any man's bosom. While I am deeply sensible to the high compliment of a re-election; and duly grateful, as I trust, to Almighty God for having directed my countrymen to a right conclusion, as I think, for their own good, it adds nothing to my satisfaction that any other man may be disappointed or pained by the result.

May I ask those who have not differed with me, to join with me, in this same spirit towards those who have?

And now, let me close by asking three hearty cheers for our brave soldiers and seamen and their gallant and skilful commanders.⁸³

Review

Fred Barnes, The Weekly Standard: "Weber's highly readable account of the short life span of the Copperheads is especially valuable because it redresses a historical oversight, and also points intriguingly to a current political struggle. The oversight was to give Copperheads short shrift by minimizing their role in the Civil War and the trouble they caused Lincoln."

More on the Author

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