

Chapter Thirty-three

“Hold On with a Bulldog Grip and Chew and Choke
as Much as Possible”:

The Grand Offensive (May-August 1864)

That Americans would conduct a presidential campaign during a titanic civil war amazed German-born Francis Lieber, professor of history and political science at Columbia University. “If we come triumphantly out of this war, with a presidential election in the midst of it,” he wrote in August 1864, “I shall call it the greatest miracle in all the historic course of events. It is a war for nationality at a period when the people were not yet fully nationalized.”¹ Democrats predicted that the administration would cancel the election in a brazen attempt to retain power, but Lincoln would not hear of it. “We can not have free government without elections,” he believed; “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.”²

As dismayed Confederates saw their chances of winning on the battlefield fade, they pinned their hopes on Northern war weariness; if Lincoln could be defeated at the polls, they believed their bid for independence just might succeed. Union military

¹ Lieber to Charles Sumner, New York, 31 August 1864, Sumner Papers, Harvard University.

² Response to a serenade, 10 November 1864, Roy P. Basler et al., eds., The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln (8 vols. plus index; New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953-1955), 8:101.

triumphs alone could prevent that, Lincoln realized, and so in the winter and spring of 1864, he and Grant devised a grand strategy to achieve final victory before the fall elections. The fate of the nation, and the cause of democracy in the world, hung in the balance.³

PLANNING AND LAUNCHING THE SPRING OFFENSIVE

The general later wrote that Lincoln gave him *carte blanche*, but in fact the president rejected parts of his initial proposal, including suggestions to launch a major thrust against Mobile and to attack Richmond's supply lines with an army landed in North Carolina.⁴ But both men agreed on the central principle that Union forces should attack on all fronts simultaneously. Meade would strike southward against Lee's army, Sigel would drive down the Shenandoah Valley then swing eastward toward Richmond, Butler would approach the Confederate capital from the opposite direction by moving up the Peninsula, Sherman would capture Atlanta, and Banks would push toward Mobile after taking Shreveport. Grant was in overall charge of operations, but instead of remaining in Washington, he accompanied the Army of the Potomac, whose tactical moves Meade controlled while Grant dictated its strategy.

It was the sort of coordinated plan that Lincoln had been urging on his generals since early 1862. On the eve of the spring offensive, Lincoln told John Hay that Grant's strategy "powerfully reminded" him of his "old suggestion so constantly made and as constantly neglected, to Buell & Halleck et al to move at once upon the enemy's whole line so as to bring into action to our advantage our great superiority in numbers.

³ They met in early April to finalize plans. Brooks Simpson, U. S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 499n10.

⁴ T. Harry Williams, Lincoln and His Generals (New York: Knopf, 1952), 293-96.

Otherwise by interior lines & control of the interior railroad system the enemy can shift their men rapidly from one point to another as they may be required. In the concerted movement[,] however, great superiority of numbers must tell: As the enemy however successful where he concentrates must necessarily weaken other portions of his line and lose important position. This idea of his own, the Predst. recognized with especial pleasure when Grant said it was his intention to make all the line useful – those not fighting could help the fighting.”

“Those not skinning can hold a leg,” Lincoln remarked.⁵

In addition to approving most of Grant’s plan, Lincoln helped him reform the administration of the army. Congress had provided that staff departments like commissary, ordnance, quartermaster, and the adjutant general report directly to the secretary of war, not the general-in-chief. When Grant asked that these departments be placed under him in the chain of command, the president explained that while he could not unilaterally alter the law, “there is no one but myself that can interfere with your orders, and you can rest assured that I will not.”⁶

The president intervened when Grant clashed with Stanton over troop reductions in the Washington area. The general wanted to transfer as many support men as possible to the front lines, but the war secretary overruled his order to send artillerymen from the defenses of the capital to the Virginia front. “I think I rank you in this matter, Mr. Secretary,” Grant said.

“We shall have to see Mr. Lincoln about that,” came the reply.

⁵ Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettliger, eds., Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 193-94 (entry for 30 April 1864).

⁶ Simpson, Grant, 278.

At the White House, the president ruled in favor of Grant. “You and I, Mr. Stanton, have been trying to boss this job, and we have not succeeded very well with it. We have sent across the mountains for Mr. Grant, as Mrs. Grant calls him, to relieve us, and I think we had better leave him alone to do as he pleases.”⁷

Lincoln did not, however, accede to Grant’s request to merge some of the twenty independent military departments, eliminate extraneous commands, and retire scores of generals. In an election year such steps might have proved politically ruinous. But he did agree to remove Banks from command of the Department of the Gulf and replace him with E. R. S. Canby. The failure of Banks’ Red River campaign in April sorely disappointed the president, who upon receiving word of that debacle “said he had rather cousined up to Banks, but for some time past had begun to think” he was mistaken in doing so. To express his disappointment, he quoted verses from “The Fire-Worshippers” by Thomas Moore:

Oh, ever thus, from childhood’s hour,
I’ve seen my fondest hopes decay;
I never loved a tree or flower
But ’t was the first to fade away.
I never nurs’d a dear gazelle,
To glad me with its soft black eye,
But when it came to know me well
And love me, it was sure to die.⁸

⁷ William Conant Church, Ulysses S. Grant and the Period of National Preservation and Reconstruction (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1897), 248-49. This was told to Church by Grant’s chief of staff.

⁸ Howard K. Beale and Alan W. Brownsword, eds., Diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy under Lincoln and Johnson (3 vols.; New York: W.W. Norton, 1960), 2:26 (entry for 9 May 1864).

Political considerations also affected the choice of Grant's principal subordinates in the East. While Meade, a professional soldier, would remain commander of the Army of the Potomac, the two men most responsible to aid him against Lee – Butler and Sigel – were amateur generals with little military talent. The former had been a prominent Democrat, and Lincoln considered it essential to retain the support of War Democrats; the latter was exceptionally popular with the Germans, an important voting bloc that had shown signs of grave disaffection. (Similarly, Banks was a former Speaker of the U.S. House with a national reputation but without much skill as a field commander.)

On April 30, as Grant was about to launch his offensive, Lincoln wrote him: “Not expecting to see you again before the Spring campaign opens, I wish to express, in this way, my entire satisfaction with what you have done up to this time, so far as I understand it. The particulars of your plans I neither know, or seek to know. You are vigilant and self-reliant; and, pleased with this, I wish not to obtrude any constraints or restraints upon you. While I am very anxious that any great disaster, or the capture of our men in great numbers, shall be avoided, I know these points are less likely to escape your attention than they would be mine. If there is anything wanting which is within my power to give, do not fail to let me know it. And now with a brave Army, and a just cause, may God sustain you.”⁹

Graciously the general replied: “The confidence you express for the future, and satisfaction with the past, in my military administration is acknowledged with pride. It will be my earnest endeavor that you, and the country, shall not be disappointed. From my first entrance into the volunteer service of the country, to the present day, I have

⁹ Lincoln to Grant, Washington, 30 April 1864, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:324.

never had cause of complaint, have never expressed or implied a complaint, against the Administration, or the Sec. of War, for throwing any embarrassment in the way of my vigorously prosecuting what appeared to me my duty. Indeed since the promotion which placed me in command of all the Armies, and in view of the great responsibility, and importance of success, I have been astonished at the readiness with which every thing asked for has been yielded without even an explanation being asked. Should my success be less than I desire, and expect, the least I can say is, the fault is not with you."¹⁰

Among Grant's legions was Burnside's corps, which contained some black regiments. While marching past the White House, those black soldiers waved their caps and heartily cheered "Hurrah for Massa Linkum!" and "Three cheers for the President!" He bowed to them from the balcony with tears in his eyes. To William O. Stoddard he exclaimed in a low voice: "It'll do! It'll do!"¹¹

Awaiting news of the offensive, Lincoln seemed to Albert G. Riddle "like a man worn and harassed with petty faultfinding and criticism, until he had turned at bay, like an old stag pursued and hunted by a cowardly rabble of men and dogs."¹² He did turn on one critic, William Cullen Bryant, whose New York Evening Post had sharply criticized the administration for several things, including its coddling of officials guilty of unethical conduct. When Isaac Henderson, co-owner of the Post with Bryant, was dismissed from

¹⁰ John Y. Simon, ed., The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant (30 vols.; Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-2008), 10:380.

¹¹ William Henry Channing to George B. Cheever, Washington, 26 April 1864, Cheever Family Papers, American Antiquarian Society; Charles C. Coffin, Four Years of Fighting: A Volume of Personal Observation with the Army and Navy, from the First Battle of Bull Run to the Fall of Richmond (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1866), 310-11; William O. Stoddard, "White House Sketches No. 7, New York Citizen, 29 September 1866, in Stoddard, Inside the White House in War Times: Memoirs and Reports of Lincoln's Secretary, ed. Michael Burlingame (1890; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 173.

¹² A. G. Riddle, Recollections of War Times: Reminiscences of Men and Events in Washington, 1860-1865 (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1895), 266. This passage described Lincoln on April 28.

his lucrative post at the New York customs house for taking bribes, Bryant begged the president to restore him. In reply, Lincoln expressed his irritation with the Post: “may I ask whether the Evening Post has not assailed me for supposed too lenient dealing with persons charged of fraud & crime? and that in cases of which the Post could know but little of the facts? I shall certainly deal as leniently with Mr. Henderson as I have felt it my duty to deal with others, notwithstanding any newspaper assaults.”¹³

Huffily Bryant defended himself: “You speak of having been assailed in the Evening Post. I greatly regret that any thing said of your public conduct in that journal should seem to you like an assault, or in any way the indication of hostility. It was not intended to proceed beyond the bounds of respectful criticism, such as the Evening Post, ever since I have had any thing to do with it, has always permitted itself to use toward every successive administration of the government. Nor have I done you the wrong of supposing that any freedom of remark would make you forget what was due to justice and right.”¹⁴

The North held its collective breath as Grant attacked Lee near Chancellorsville on May 5. The armies slugged it out in the dense, tangled wilderness, inflicting heavy casualties on each other. “These are fearfully critical, anxious days,” George Templeton Strong remarked, speaking for millions of his fellow citizens. “The destinies of the continent for centuries depend in great measure on what is now being done.”¹⁵ The first person to bring Lincoln word of the bloody doings was a young New York Tribune reporter, Henry Wing, who briefed the president and cabinet on the morning of May 7.

¹³ Lincoln to W. C. Bryant, Washington, 27 June 1864, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:409-10.

¹⁴ Bryant to Lincoln, New York, 30 June 1864, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁵ Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, eds., The Diary of George Templeton Strong, 1835-1875 (4 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1952), 3:449 (entry for 20 May 1864).

After he had finished describing the various movements and as the cabinet was dispersing, Wing repeated to the president a message Grant had asked him to convey: “whatever happens, there is to be no turning back.” The president, “carried away in the exuberance of his gladness,” kissed the youthful reporter on the forehead.¹⁶

Two days later, when Lincoln read a telegram from Grant saying “I intend to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer,” he told John Hay: “How near we have been to this thing before and failed. I believe if any other General had been at the Head of that army it would have now been on this side of the Rapidan. It is the dogged pertinacity of Grant that wins.”¹⁷

That evening Lincoln addressed serenaders at the White House: “I am very much obliged to you for the compliment of this call, though I apprehend it is owing more to the good news received to-day from the army than to a desire to see me. I am, indeed, very grateful to the brave men who have been struggling with the enemy in the field, to their noble commanders who have directed them, and especially to our Maker. Our commanders are following up their victories resolutely and successfully. I think, without knowing the particulars of the plans of Gen. Grant, that what has been accomplished is of more importance than at first appears. I believe I know, (and am especially grateful to know) that Gen. Grant has not been jostled in his purposes; that he has made all his points, and to-day he is on his line as he purposed before he moved his armies. I will volunteer to say that I am very glad at what has happened; but there is a great deal still to be done. While we are grateful to all the brave men and officers for the events of the past

¹⁶ Henry E. Wing, When Lincoln Kissed Me: A Story of the Wilderness Campaign (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1913), 13, 36-39.

¹⁷ Burlingame and Ettlinger, eds., Hay Diary, 195 (entry for 9 May 1864).

few days, we should, above all, be very grateful to Almighty God, who gives us victory. There is enough yet before us requiring all loyal men and patriots to perform their share of the labor and follow the example of the modest General at the head of our armies, and sink all personal considerations for the sake of the country. I commend you to keep yourselves in the same tranquil mood that is characteristic of that brave and loyal man.”¹⁸

But Grant did not win the Battle of the Wilderness, which was in effect a standoff, though the Army of Northern Virginia withdrew from the field. Unlike previous Union commanders, who retreated toward Washington after being bloodied by Lee, Grant swung around the Confederate right flank and drove toward Richmond.

When it became clear that the Army of the Potomac had taken immense losses, the anguished president asked Schuyler Colfax: “Why do we suffer reverses after reverses? Could we have avoided this terrible, bloody war? Was it not forced upon us? Is it ever to end?”¹⁹ As he observed the wounded in a long procession of ambulances, he pointed to them and sadly remarked: “Look yonder at those poor fellows. I cannot bear it. This suffering, this loss of life is dreadful.” When a friend tried to console him with the assurance that the North would eventually triumph, he replied: “Yes, victory will come, but it comes slowly.”²⁰

Among the Union dead was General James S. Wadsworth, a wealthy New Yorker who had run unsuccessfully for governor of his state in 1862. His loss shook Lincoln badly. Hay noted in his diary: “I have not known the President so affected by a personal loss since the death of [Edward D.] Baker.” Lincoln praised the general highly: “no man

¹⁸ Response to a serenade, 9 May 1864, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:334.

¹⁹ Colfax in Allen Thorndike Rice, ed., Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln, by Distinguished Men of His Time (New York: North American, 1886), 337.

²⁰ Isaac N. Arnold, The Life of Abraham Lincoln (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg, 1885), 375.

has given himself up with such self-sacrificing patriotism as General Wadsworth. He went into the service not wishing or expecting great success or distinction in his military career and profoundly indifferent to popular applause, actuated only by a sense of duty which he neither evaded nor sought to evade.”²¹

Dismayed by the losses, Lincoln “was grave and anxious,” resembling “one who had lost the dearest member of his own family.”²² He nonetheless took heart from the fact that Grant was in charge. He predicted that the general “will not fail us now. He says he will fight it out on that line, and this is now the hope of our country.”²³ On May 15, Nicolay reported that the “President is cheerful and hopeful – not unduly elated, but seeming confident; and now as ever watching every report and indication, with quiet, unwavering interest.”²⁴

Lincoln also derived some consolation from his belief “that every great battle, even if it is a drawn one, is a defeat to the rebels in its necessary consequences. A battle in which thirty thousand men a side were put hors du combat, killed, wounded and missing, but in which neither party could claim a victory, would, nevertheless, drive Lee back to the Lynchburg line, and place Richmond almost at our mercy.”²⁵

THE BOGUS PROCLAMATION

²¹ Burlingame and Ettlinger, eds., Hay Diary, 196 (entry for 14 May 1864).

²² Arnold, Life of Lincoln, 375.

²³ Colfax in Rice, ed., Reminiscences of Lincoln, 338.

²⁴ Nicolay to Therenia Bates, Washington, 15 May 1864, in Michael Burlingame, ed., With Lincoln in the White House: Letters, Memoranda, and Other Writings of John G. Nicolay, 1860-1865 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 141.

²⁵ Washington correspondence, 18 April, New York Examiner, 21 April 1864, in Michael Burlingame, ed., Dispatches from Lincoln’s White House: The Anonymous Civil War Journalism of Presidential Secretary William O. Stoddard (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 222.

On May 18, Lincoln was startled to read in two New York papers – the World and the Journal of Commerce – a bogus presidential proclamation calling for 400,000 more volunteers and designating May 26 as a day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer occasioned by “the situation in Virginia, the disaster at Red River, the delay at Charleston, and the general state of the country.”²⁶ Such language profoundly disheartened a public anxiously awaiting word of Grant’s progress.²⁷ Panic spread throughout the country as the story radiated nationwide via wire services. That day Lincoln told a journalist that the announcement “was a fabrication” and “that he had decided to call for 300,000 in July, not before.”²⁸ He may have suspected that the document he had drafted the previous night to that effect had been leaked. An eyewitness recalled that the publication of the fake proclamation “angered Lincoln more than almost any other occurrence of the war period.”²⁹ Not only did it threaten to depress Northern spirits but it also indicated that the administration harbored a disloyal mole. That the two newspapers which published the forgery were bitter critics of the administration may have predisposed Lincoln to suspect treason. Because the editors of those journals had

²⁶ John A. Dix to Stanton, New York, 18 May 1864, Lincoln Collection, Chicago History Museum.

²⁷ Menahem Blondheim, “‘Public Sentiment Is Everything’: The Union’s Public Communications Strategy and the Bogus Proclamation of 1864,” Journal of American History 89 (2002):869-99; James G. Randall, Constitutional Problems Under Lincoln (rev. ed.; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1951), 496-99; James G. Randall and Richard N. Current, Lincoln the President: Last Full Measure (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1955), 150-56; Robert S. Harper, Lincoln and the Press (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951), 289-303; Louis M. Starr, Bohemian Brigade: Civil War Newsmen in Action (New York: Knopf, 1954), 315-20; Mary Cortona Phelan, “Manton Marble of the New York World: Champion of the Constitution” (PhD dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1957), 31-38; Benjamin P. Thomas and Harold M. Hyman, Stanton: The Life and Times of Lincoln’s Secretary of War (New York: Knopf, 1962), 301-2, 376-78; Brooks D. Simpson, “Great Expectations: Ulysses S. Grant, the Northern Press, and the Opening of the Wilderness Campaign,” in The Wilderness Campaign, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 28-29; Mark E. Neely, The Union Divided: Party Conflict in the Civil War North (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 111-17.

²⁸ James R. Gilmore to Sydney Howard Gay, Washington, 18 May 1864, Gay Papers, Columbia University.

²⁹ Randall and Current, Lincoln the President, 156, quoting Frank A. Flower to C. F. Gunther, 14 February 1904, Gunther Papers, Chicago History Museum. (In 2006 the author could not find this document in that collection.)

plenty of reason to doubt the genuineness of the bulletin, or at least to make inquiries before running it, Lincoln's anger was understandable.

To combat the dire effects of the bogus proclamation, Lincoln had Seward announce that the “paper is an absolute forgery. No proclamation of that kind or any other has been made or proposed to be made by the President, or issued or proposed to be issued by the State Department or any Department of the Government.” When Seward recommended that the two newspapers be suppressed, Lincoln agreed and through Stanton ordered General John A. Dix to suspend the papers' publication and arrest their editors. It was the only time that Lincoln initiated such action. Over his signature a harshly worded instruction (by Stanton) went to Dix: “Whereas, there has been wickedly and traitorously printed and published this morning, in the ‘New York World’ and New York ‘Journal of Commerce,’ . . . a false and spurious proclamation, purporting to be signed by the President, and to be countersigned by the Secretary of State, which publication is of a treasonable nature, designed to give aid and comfort to the enemies of the United States, and to the rebels now at war against the Government, and their aiders and abettors: you are therefore hereby commanded forthwith to arrest and imprison in any fort or military prison in your command, the editors, proprietors and publishers of the aforesaid newspapers, and all such persons as, after public notice has been given of the falsehood of said publication, print and publish the same, with intent to give aid and comfort to the enemy; – and you will hold the persons so arrested, in close custody, until they can be brought to trial before a military commission, for their offense. You will also take possession by military force, of the printing establishments of the ‘New York

World,’ and ‘Journal of Commerce,’ and hold the same until further order, and prevent any further publication therefrom.”³⁰

Those remarkable orders were carried out promptly but rescinded two days later when it became clear that the prisoners had been duped by a forger, Joseph Howard, Jr., the city editor of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, who hoped to reap profits in the highly speculative gold market. (This was the same Howard who in February 1861 had falsely reported that Lincoln slunk into Washington wearing a scotch cap.) Stanton wired Dix that while the president thought “the editors, proprietors, and publishers of The World and Journal of Commerce are responsible for what appears in their papers injurious to the public service, and have no right to shield themselves behind a plea of ignorance or want of criminal intent,” yet he “is not disposed to visit them with vindictive punishment, and, hoping that they will exercise more caution and regard for the public welfare in the future, he authorizes you to restore them to their respective establishments.”³¹

Meanwhile, Stanton had ordered the apprehension of other journalists as well as some telegraphers, who were also released when the full story became known. Howard was jailed for three months, winning a reprieve only after his former employer, Henry Ward Beecher, appealed in person to Lincoln. The president later remarked “that he had done nothing during the war which had pained him so much” and “that no other man but Henry Ward Beecher could have induced him to be guilty of pardoning Joe Howard.”³²

³⁰ Lincoln to Dix, Washington, 18 May 1864, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:347-48.

³¹ Stanton to Dix, 20 May 1864, in Frank Abial Flower, Edwin McMasters Stanton: The Autocrat of Rebellion, Emancipation, and Reconstruction (New York: W. W. Wilson, 1905), 213.

³² Lincoln told this to an associate of Henry C. Bowen. Henry E. Bowen interviewed in the New York Times, 30 May 1875.

Democrats pointed to these arrests as further evidence that Lincoln behaved tyrannically. Manton Marble, editor of the World, scolded the president: “For the purpose of gratifying an ignoble partisan resentment, you have struck down the rights of the press, you have violated personal liberty, subjected property to unjust seizure, ostentatiously placed force above law . . . and thus, and by attempting to crush the organs of free discussion, have striven to make free elections impossible, and break down all the safeguard of representative government.”³³

Compounding the impression of the administration’s arbitrariness was the arrest of an Ohio editor, Samuel Medary, editor of the ferociously anti-administration Columbus Crisis. Provost marshals, acting on a grand jury indictment for the crime of “conspiracy against the Union,” apprehended him two days after the New York papers were shut down. The charges were eventually dropped, but meanwhile Democrats could cite yet another assault on freedom of the press.³⁴ The Iowa Courier protested that it “has always been a mania with Lincoln to arrest American citizens without warrant and to suppress American papers without authority.”³⁵

Some Republicans thought the administration overreacted to Howard’s hoax. Gideon Welles, who wrote that the “hasty, rash, inconsiderate, and wrong” steps “cannot be defended,” blamed Seward and to a lesser extent Stanton.³⁶ The action does bear the

³³ New York World, 23 May 1864.

³⁴ Robert S. Harper, The Ohio Press in the Civil War ([Columbus]: Ohio State University Press for the Ohio Historical Society, [1961?]), 30.

³⁵ Reed W. Smith, Samuel Medary and The Crisis: Testing the Limits of Press Freedom (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1995), 137-40.

³⁶ Howard K. Beale and Alan W. Brownsword, eds., Diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy under Lincoln and Johnson (3 vols.; New York: W.W. Norton, 1960), 2:38 (entry for 23 May 1864).

hallmarks of Stanton's impetuous, punitive nature and of Seward's rash impatience with those who he thought might undermine the war effort.

FRUSTRATION: THE OFFENSIVE STALLS

As promised, Grant did fight it out all summer, constantly driving southward and battling Lee almost non-stop for six weeks. After the Battle of the Wilderness, the next collision took place at Spotsylvania Courthouse between May 8 and 20. On May 18, when it seemed as if Grant had gained the upper hand, Lincoln told a caller that at the time "my wife had her first baby, the doctor from time to time, reported to me that everything was going on as well as could be expected under the circumstances. That satisfied me he was doing his best, but still I felt anxious to hear the first squall. It came at last, and I felt mightily relieved. I feel very much so about our army operations at this moment."³⁷ But again the news turned bad, for Lee inflicted severe losses before falling back to Hanover Junction, where fighting raged from May 23 to 27, then to Cold Harbor for yet more bloody work (June 1-12), and finally came to a halt after a pitched battle at Petersburg (June 15-18), twenty miles south of Richmond. Lee's skillful maneuvering had kept Grant at bay, inflicting 65,000 casualties and saving the Confederate capital. That total represented 60% of the entire losses that the Army of the Potomac had sustained over the three previous years.³⁸ Grant had little to show for the immense sacrifice of blood and treasure. He was bogged down at Petersburg, which he besieged with no imminent prospect of victory. Meanwhile, Sigel had been repulsed in the Shenandoah Valley, Butler was helplessly bottled up on the Peninsula, and Sherman was

³⁷ James R. Gilmore to Sydney Howard Gay, Washington, 18 May 1864, Gay Papers, Columbia University.

³⁸ James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 742.

making disappointingly slow progress in his campaign against Atlanta. In June, Sherman sustained heavy losses while unsuccessfully assaulting Confederates at Kennesaw Mountain. The grand strategy that had seemed so promising in the spring had stalled.

As these developments unfolded, Lincoln occasionally found respite by attending the theater. “People may think strange of it,” he remarked to Schuyler Colfax, “but I must have some relief from this terrible anxiety, or it will kill me.”³⁹

On July 18, to help fill the army’s depleted ranks, Lincoln called for 500,000 volunteers. When Ohio Republicans urged him to rescind the call lest it defeat the party in the fall, he asked: “What is the Presidency worth to me if I have no country?”⁴⁰ Logically he argued: “We must either have men, or the war must stop; I shall issue the call, and if the old ship goes down, it will be with the colors flying. So whether they come by draft, or volunteering, the nation needs soldiers. These she must have, or else she dies, and then comes anarchy, and the frightful ruin of a dismembered country, or its final surrender to the slave power, against which it now struggles, and calls every freeman to the rescue. Peace! In this struggle that which comes by the sword will be the more lasting, and worthy as a legacy to posterity.”⁴¹ On another occasion, he said: “We must lose nothing even if I am defeated.”⁴² He wanted people to realize that if they reelected him, it “will mean that the rebellion is to be crushed by force of arms.”⁴³ In

³⁹ Colfax, Life and Principles of Abraham Lincoln: Address Delivered at the Court House Square, at South Bend, April 24, 1865 (Philadelphia: J. B. Rodgers, 1865), 12.

⁴⁰ John G. Nicolay and John Hay, Abraham Lincoln: A History (10 vols.; New York: Century, 1890), 9:364.

⁴¹ Washington correspondence by R. S. B., 20 August, Philadelphia Inquirer, 22 August 1864.

⁴² Harold M. Dudley, “The Election of 1864,” Mississippi Valley Historical Review 18 (1932):511.

⁴³ Ida M. Tarbell, The Life of Abraham Lincoln (2 vols.; New York: McClure, Phillips, 1900), 2:195.

response, Democrats howled that “Tens of thousands of white men must bite the dust to allay the Negro mania of the president.”⁴⁴

In mid-June, Lincoln had been encouraged when Grant crossed the James River. “I begin to see it,” he wired the general on June 15. “You will succeed. God bless you all.”⁴⁵ The following day, taking his cue from Grant, Lincoln with steely determination told a Philadelphia audience that the North “accepted this war for an object, a worthy object, and the war will end when that object is attained. Under God, I hope it never will until that time. [Great cheering.] Speaking of the present campaign, General Grant is reported to have said, I am going through on this line if it takes all summer. [Cheers.] This war has taken three years; it was begun or accepted upon the line of restoring the national authority over the whole national domain, and for the American people, as far as my knowledge enables me to speak, I say we are going through on this line if it takes three years more. [Cheers.]”⁴⁶

To help drive home the point that the war might not end quickly, Lincoln enlisted the aid of the press. He solemnly told Noah Brooks, “I wish, when you write or speak to people, you would do all you can to correct the impression that the war in Virginia will end right off and victoriously. To me the most trying thing of all this war is that the people are too sanguine; they expect too much at once. I declare to you, sir, that we are to-day farther ahead than I thought, one year and a half ago, that we should be; and yet there are plenty of people who believe that the war is about to be substantially closed. As God is my judge, I shall be satisfied if we are over with the fight in Virginia within a

⁴⁴ Columbus, Ohio, Crisis, 3 August 1864, in Smith, Medary, 91.

⁴⁵ Lincoln to Grant, Washington, 15 June 1864, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln 7:393.

⁴⁶ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:395.

year. I hope we shall be ‘happily disappointed,’ as the saying is; but I am afraid not – I am afraid not.”⁴⁷

But when Lee fended off a nearly successful assault on Petersburg, the president became alarmed and on June 21 made a two-day visit to the Army of the Potomac. “I just thought I would jump aboard a boat and come down and see you,” he told Grant upon arrival. The general’s aide Horace Porter thought the president resembled “a boss undertaker” in his black suit. “I don’t expect to do any good,” Lincoln modestly remarked to Grant, “and in fact I may do harm but I’ll put myself under your orders and if you find me doing anything wrong just send me [off] right away.”⁴⁸ When Grant asked after his health, the president observed that he was suffering from the aftereffects of seasickness. To a staff member who offered him some champagne that he described as “a certain cure for seasickness,” Lincoln replied: “No, my friend; I have seen too many fellows seasick ashore from drinking that very stuff.”

After inspecting some units, Lincoln took Grant’s suggestion that he “ride on and see the colored troops, who behaved so handsomely in [William F.] Smith’s attack on the works of Petersburg last week.” The president expressed keen interest in doing so, for he had not reviewed any of the United States Colored Troops. He was delighted by reports of their gallantry, which vindicated his controversial decision to allow blacks to enlist. “I think general,” he told Grant, “we can say of the black boys what a country fellow who was an old-time abolitionist in Illinois said when he went to a theater in Chicago and saw Forrest playing Othello. He was not very well up in Shakespere, and didn’t know that the

⁴⁷ Noah Brooks, Washington, D.C., in Lincoln’s Time, ed. Herbert Mitgang (1895; Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 138.

⁴⁸ Horace Porter to his wife, City Point, 24 June 1864, Porter Papers, Library of Congress.

tragedian was a white man who had blacked up for the purpose. After the play was over the folks who had invited him to go to the show wanted to know what he thought of the actors, and he said: ‘Waal, layin’ aside all sectional prejudices and any partiality I may have for the race, darned ef I don’t think the nigger held his own with any on ’em.’” Reflecting on the decision to allow blacks to serve in the army, Lincoln added: “I was opposed on nearly every side when I first favored the raising of colored regiments, but they have proved their efficiency, and I am glad they have kept pace with the white troops in the recent assaults.”⁴⁹

When Lincoln reached the camp of the Eighteenth Corps, hundreds of black troops, “wild with excitement and delight,” rushed to see him, hurraing and cheering. A journalist reported that it “was a spontaneous outburst of love and affection for the man they looked upon as their deliverer from bondage.”⁵⁰ They “received him most enthusiastically, grinning from ear to ear, and displaying an amount of ivory terrible to behold,” Colonel Porter wrote his wife. With “much fervor,” they shouted:

“God bress Massa Linkum!”

“De Lord save Fader Abraham!”

“De day ob jubilee am come, shuah.”

They swarmed about Lincoln, kissing his hands and reverently touching his dust-covered black suit. As he rode bare-headed with tears in his eyes, he bowed left and right and tried to acknowledge their plaudits, but his voice was, according to Porter, “so broken by emotion that he could scarcely articulate the words of thanks and

⁴⁹ Horace Porter, Campaigning with Grant (New York: Century, 1897), 217-20.

⁵⁰ Sylvanus Cadwallader, Three Years with Grant, ed. Benjamin P. Thomas (New York: Knopf, 1955), 233.

⁵⁰ Porter, Campaigning with Grant, 223.

congratulation which he tried to speak to the humble and devoted men through whose ranks he rode. The scene was affecting in the extreme, and no one could have witnessed it unmoved.”⁵¹

The next day Lincoln visited Butler’s command and, upon observing a particularly strong set of works, remarked: “When Grant once gets possession of a place, he holds on to it as if he had inherited it.”⁵² As the party sailed up the James River, every vessel they passed cheered Lincoln. A nervous Gustavus Fox, recognizing that the presidential boat had come within range of Confederate guns, wondered why the enemy did not fire on such an important target.⁵³ Upon returning to City Point, Lincoln had an hour’s conversation with Grant, during which the general confidently assured the president he would eventually gain possession of the Confederate capital: “You will never hear of me farther from Richmond than now, till I have taken it. I am just as sure of going into Richmond as I am of any future event. It may take a long summer day, but I will go in.”⁵⁴ Lincoln said: “I cannot pretend to advise, but I do hope sincerely that all may be accomplished with as little bloodshed as possible.”⁵⁵

Throughout his stay at Petersburg, Lincoln’s conversation “showed the deep anxiety he felt and the weight of responsibility which was resting upon him.”⁵⁶ On the way back to Washington, however, he was “in excellent spirits,” according to Fox, and

⁵¹ Horace Porter to his wife, City Point, 24 June 1864, Porter Papers, Library of Congress; Porter, Campaigning with Grant, 219-220.

⁵² Porter, Campaigning with Grant, 223.

⁵³ Fox to his wife Virginia, Washington, Washington, 25 June 1864, Fox Papers, New-York Historical Society.

⁵⁴ Theodore Calvin Pease and James G. Randall, eds., The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning (2 vols.; Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1925-33), 1:673 (entry for 6 June 1864); Fox to his wife Virginia, Washington, 25 June 1864, Fox Papers, New-York Historical Society.

⁵⁵ Porter, Campaigning with Grant, 223.

⁵⁶ Porter, Campaigning with Grant, 223.

“expressed himself delighted.”⁵⁷ Gideon Welles thought his brief visit to the front had done “him good, physically, and strengthened him mentally.”⁵⁸ Edward Bates believed that Lincoln was “encouraged by Grant’s persistent confidence,” but was nonetheless “perceptably, disappointed at the small measure of our success.”⁵⁹

Many others shared his disappointment, including the troops. Lincoln was blamed by some of them, including an Ohio colonel who expressed “great confidence in the integrity and unselfishness of the President” but regretted that he lacked “force” and “prompt efficient will” and was “controlled by circumstances instead of taking them by the forelocks and giving direction to them.” If the North were to prevail, its leader must have “power” and “will,” but Lincoln was “too kind-hearted to offend anybody” and “too unselfish and unambitious to want to magnify himself or exalt his power.” Commendable though such modesty was in theory, it was “terribly disastrous to our operations in the field.”⁶⁰

The friendship between Grant and Lincoln was growing warmer as each came to admire the strengths of the other. During the Wilderness battle, Lincoln praised Grant’s “coolness and persistence of purpose.” The general, he said, “is not easily excited, – which is a great element in an officer, – and he has the grit of a bulldog! Once let him get his ‘teeth’ in, and nothing can shake him off.”⁶¹ Murat Halstead reported Lincoln saying:

⁵⁷ Fox to his wife Virginia, Washington, 25 June, 1 July 1864, Fox Papers, New-York Historical Society.

⁵⁸ Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 2:58 (entry for 24 June 1864).

⁵⁹ Howard K. Beale, ed., The Diary of Edward Bates, 1859-1866 (Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1930, vol. IV; Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1933), 378 (entry for 25 June 1864).

⁶⁰ Alvin C. Voris of the 67th Ohio Infantry to J. H. Chamberlin, Bermuda Hundred, Virginia, 4 July 1864, typescript, Voris Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

⁶¹ Francis B. Carpenter, The Inner Life of Abraham Lincoln: Six Months at the White House (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1867), 283.

“Grant is the first General I have had. You know how it has been with all the rest. As soon as I put a man in command of the Army, he’d come to me with a plan of campaign and about as much to say, ‘Now, I don’t believe I can do it, but if you say so, I’ll try it on,’ and so put the responsibility of success or failure on me. They all wanted me to be the General. Now, it isn’t so with Grant. . . . I am glad to find a man that can go ahead without me. . . . He doesn’t ask impossibilities of me.”⁶² By this time, Lincoln had come to insist on having a voice in the formulation of strategy but not tactics. At one point he said “Whatever objection may be urged as to the talents, or culture, or sobriety and military skill of Grant, or his evident stubborn[n]ess of purpose, or his alleged recklessness of means, it must be confessed that after repeated trials and failures with other Generals, he alone had the faith, the confidence and the persistence to compel success.”⁶³

PRESIDENT UNDER FIRE: A CONFEDERATE RAID ON WASHINGTON

Two weeks later, Lincoln’s anxiety increased when Jubal Early’s 15,000 Confederate troops swept down the Shenandoah Valley and seriously menaced Washington. On July 6, Early crossed the Potomac, brushed aside a Union detachment along the Monocacy River, and within days was a scant four miles from the Soldiers’ Home, where the Lincolns were then staying. The capital was so panicky that U.S. Treasurer Francis E. Spinner bagged up all the money from the treasury department vaults and arranged to have it taken to a tugboat.⁶⁴ The incursion threatened not only

⁶² Church, Grant, 231-2.

⁶³ Nicolay memorandum, n.d., Nicolay-Hay Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

⁶⁴ Reminiscences of A. G. Richmond in “The ‘Watch Dog of the Treasury,’” College and School, April [1891?], clipping pasted in scrapbook, Crofutt Collection of Spinner Papers, Library of Congress.

Washington but also Lincoln's political standing. Franklin B. Sanborn, a Radical journalist, thought "it shows that Grant's campaign has had no substantial results. If this is made to appear clearly, it will be fatal to Lincoln's reelection." Sanborn feared that "we are to suffer the penalty of Lincoln's misgovernment for years and years."⁶⁵

On July 10, Stanton, alarmed for the president's safety, dispatched a carriage to bring the First Family back to the White House. Stanton himself arrived around 11 p.m. to demand that the president return. Lincoln "said he didn't think there was any danger, but he went along."⁶⁶ Noah Brooks recalled that Lincoln was "very much irritated." Similarly, the president was "greatly discomposed and annoyed" upon learning that Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus Fox had stationed a small boat in the Potomac to whisk him to safety in case Early's men penetrated the city's defensive cordon.⁶⁷

When Grant offered to direct the defense of Washington, Lincoln replied that "we have absolutely no force here fit to go to the field. . . . Now what I think is that you should provide to retain your hold where you are certainly, and bring the rest with you personally, and make a vigorous effort to destroy the enemy's force in this vicinity. I think there is really a fair chance to do this if the movement is prompt. This is what I think, upon your suggestion, and is not an order."⁶⁸ Grant thought better of it and instead sent his best unit, the Sixth Corps, scurrying northward to protect the capital. While it was en route, an improvised force of 8,000 militiamen, dismounted cavalry, invalids,

⁶⁵ F. B. Sanborn to Moncure D. Conway, Worcester, 13 July 1864, Conway Family Papers, Dickinson College.

⁶⁶ Willard Cutter to Elizabeth Cutter, 11 July 1864, in Matthew Pinsker, Lincoln's Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldiers' Home (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 136.

⁶⁷ Washington correspondence, 12 July, Sacramento Daily Union, 10 August 1864, in Michael Burlingame, ed., Lincoln Observed: Civil War Dispatches of Noah Brooks (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 126; Brooks, Washington, D.C., in Lincoln's Time, ed. Mitgang, 160.

⁶⁸ Lincoln to Grant, Washington, 10 July 1864, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:437.

government clerks, convalescents, and regular troops assembled to man the city's fortifications, including Fort Stevens on the Seventh Street road, down which Early was marching. By July 11, the Confederates came within a few hundred feet of that bastion, but the arrival of the Sixth Corps gave Early pause. The next day, as he withdrew, he took a parting swipe at the Federals.

On July 11, eager to observe the action first-hand, Lincoln hastened to Fort Stevens, where he became the first and only sitting American president to come under serious enemy fire. (He had been exposed less dangerously during the Norfolk Campaign in the spring of 1862). He stood gazing at the action from the parapet until a "soldier roughly ordered him to get down or he would have his head knocked off." Excited, Lincoln returned to the War Department and vividly described to the telegraphers all the action he had seen. That evening the president was "in very good feather." Hay recorded that he was "not in the least concerned about the safety of Washington. With him the only concern seems to be whether we can bag or destroy this force in our front." The next day he revisited Fort Stevens, accompanied this time by his wife. As he again watched the fighting from the parapet, an army surgeon standing nearby – Dr. C. C. V. Crawford of the 102nd Pennsylvania Volunteers – was shot in the thigh.⁶⁹ At the urging of General Horatio Wright, commander of the Sixth Corps, Lincoln stepped down.⁷⁰

As Early withdrew, Lincoln thought that Union forces should "push right up the river road & cut off as many as possible of the retreating raiders." Though he urged

⁶⁹ Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 221 (entry for 11 July 1864); Pinsker, Lincoln's Sanctuary, 138; David T. Bull to his wife, 14 July 1864, in John Henry Cramer, ed., Lincoln Under Enemy Fire: The Complete Account of His Experiences During Early's Attack on Washington (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1948), 26-27.

⁷⁰ Wright's reminiscences, written ca. 1870, in Cramer, ed., Lincoln under Enemy Fire, 30; P. H. Kaiser, "Lincoln at Fort Stevens," National Magazine 31 (February 1910):525-26.

Halleck to see that it was done, the Confederates managed to slip across the Potomac unmolested. The president was “evidently disgusted” at Wright, an engineer with “no special predilection for fighting.” Sarcastically, Lincoln remarked that the general halted his pursuit and “sent out an infantry reconnaissance, for fear he might come across the rebels & catch some of them.”⁷¹ Shades of McClellan after Antietam and Meade after Gettysburg! He was also mad at Halleck, telling Noah Brooks that Old Brains’ “manifest desire to avoid taking any responsibility without the immediate sanction of General Grant was the main reason why the rebels, having threatened Washington and sacked the peaceful farms and villages of Maryland, got off scatheless.” Brooks recalled that during the next several months “Lincoln frequently referred to the escape of Early as one of the most distressing features of his experience in the city of Washington.”⁷² A day before Early entered Maryland on his way to Washington, Lincoln had predicted that “with decent management” Union forces could “destroy any enemy who crosses the Potomac.”⁷³

Lincoln once confessed to Noah Brooks “that he lacked physical courage,” but added that “he had a fair share of the moral quality of that virtue.” Brooks considered the president’s action at Fort Stevens “ample proof that he would not have dropped his musket and run, as he believed he certainly would, at the first sign of physical danger.”⁷⁴

Early’s men had burned Montgomery Blair’s elegant home in Maryland, causing the postmaster general to declare that “the officers in command about Washington are

⁷¹ Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 222, 223 (entries for 13, 14 July 1864); Dana, Recollections, 191; Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 2:88 (entry for 26 July 1864).

⁷² Brooks, Washington, D.C., in Lincoln’s Time, ed. Mitgang, 162.

⁷³ Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 219 (entry for 4 July 1864).

⁷⁴ Brooks, Washington, D. C., in Lincoln’s Time, ed. Mitgang, 162.

poltroons,” that “there were not more than five hundred rebels on the Silver Spring road and we had a million of men in arms,” and that “it was a disgrace.”⁷⁵ Taking understandable offense, Halleck, who had become chief of staff of the Union armies when Grant was named general-in-chief, wrote a heated letter demanding Blair’s dismissal. When Stanton handed that document to Lincoln, the president replied firmly: “I do not consider what may have been hastily said in a moment of vexation at so severe a loss, is sufficient ground for so grave a step. Besides this, truth is generally the best vindication against slander. I propose continuing to be myself the judge as to when a member of the Cabinet shall be dismissed.”⁷⁶ He penned a similarly stern memo for the cabinet as a whole: “I must myself be the judge, how long to retain in, and when to remove any of you from, his position. It would greatly pain me to discover any of you endeavoring to procure another’s removal, or, in any way to prejudice him before the public. Such endeavor would be a wrong to me; and much worse, a wrong to the country. My wish is that on this subject, no remark be made, nor question asked, by any of you, here or elsewhere, now or hereafter.”⁷⁷

Mary Lincoln shared her husband’s irritation at Early’s escape. When Stanton told her that he intended to commission a painting of the president on the ramparts of Fort Stevens, she snapped: “That is very well, and I can assure you of one thing, Mr. Secretary, if I had had a few ladies with me the Rebels would not have been permitted to get away as they did!”⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:440n.

⁷⁶ Lincoln to Stanton, Washington, 14 July 1864, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:439-40.

⁷⁷ Memo read to cabinet, [14 July] 186[4], Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:439.

⁷⁸ Carpenter, Six Months at the White House, 302.

Like the Lincolns, the country was disgusted by Early's escape and by the lack of military success elsewhere. In Washington, a treasury department clerk lamented that "we are humbled in the in the eyes of the world. Everybody here feels it."⁷⁹

"If something is not done by the President to retrieve this blunder of omission," Benjamin Brown French told his son, "he will find 'a hard road to trappel I believe,' to get, again, into the Presidential chair. The curses all around are long and deep as to the inefficiency somewhere, and I have had quite a talk with the President since the invaders left, which was anything but satisfactory to me. I do not think the President regards the whole affair with sufficient seriousness. He talks and laughs, and tells stories just as if nothing of moment had happened. I am warmly, most warmly, his friend, but would, were it proper, pray him to weigh this matter with all the seriousness that so grave an affair deserves."⁸⁰ From New York, George William Curtis reported that as a result of the Confederate incursion, "the sense of absurdity and humiliation is very universal. These things weaken the hold of the administration upon the people and the only serious peril that I foresee is the setting in of a reaction which may culminate in November and defeat Lincoln as it did [James S.] Wadsworth in this state [in 1862]."⁸¹ To add even more humiliation, on July 30, Early's forces burned the town of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, after its residents failed to meet the Confederates' demand for \$50,000. This event further

⁷⁹ J. W. Schuckers to Chase, Washington, 15 July 1864, Chase Papers, Library of Congress; Britton A. Hill to Thomas Ewing, Washington, 14 July 1864, Ewing Family Papers, Library of Congress.

⁸⁰ B. B. French to his son Frank, Washington, 17 July 1864, French Family Papers, Library of Congress.

⁸¹ Curtis to Charles Eliot Norton, North Shore, New York, 12 July 1864, George William Curtis Papers, Harvard University.

eroded support for Lincoln. A lawyer visiting the capital observed of the president:

“These raids hurt him badly, and his star is declining.”⁸²

VOTER DISENCHANTMENT

That same day, the disastrous Battle of the Crater at Petersburg further depressed Northern spirits. Pennsylvania miners had dug a tunnel, placed kegs of gunpowder directly beneath enemy lines, and detonated a huge explosion, whereupon 15,000 Union troops blundered by poring into the resulting crater rather than going around it. The Rebels easily slaughtered them and stymied the attack. Like the country, Lincoln “was very much disturbed.” The following day, he held a five-hour interview with Grant at Fort Monroe. They evidently discussed the need to find a new commander to deal with Early and the Shenandoah Valley, where Sigel and Hunter had conspicuously failed. Among the possibilities considered were Meade, McClellan, and William B. Franklin, but those senior generals were passed over in favor of the very junior Philip Sheridan, only thirty-three years old. (At this time Francis P. Blair, Sr., urged McClellan to announce that he would not run for president; in return, Blair would press Lincoln to give Little Mac a command in the field. Blair insisted that he acted without Lincoln’s knowledge or authorization. When informed by Blair of this action, Lincoln responded courteously, but indicated neither approval nor disapproval.)⁸³ The president was “reassured & consequently felt better,” for Grant had confidently predicted “that he

⁸² Britton A. Hill to Thomas Ewing, Washington, 29 July 1864, Ewing Family Papers, Library of Congress.

⁸³ Blair to the editor of the Washington National Intelligencer, Silver Spring, 5 October 1864, New York Tribune, 11 November 1864. Later Blair reportedly changed his story, saying Lincoln had authorized him to make overtures to McClellan. Elbert B. Smith, Francis Preston Blair (New York: Free Press, 1980), 344.

should meet with several rebuffs but that he would finally get the place [Petersburg].”⁸⁴

After the meeting, Grant assigned Sheridan to pursue Early “to the death. Wherever the enemy goes let our troops go also.”⁸⁵

Those steely instructions delighted Lincoln, but he feared that the war department, which looked askance at the appointment of so young a general, might not fully cooperate. So he wrote Grant on August 3: “I have seen your despatch in which you say ‘I want Sheridan put in command of all the troops in the field, with instructions to put himself South of the enemy, and follow him to the death. Wherever the enemy goes, let our troops go also.’ This, I think, is exactly right, as to how our forces should move. But please look over the despatches you may have rece[i]ved from here, ever since you made that order, and discover, if you can, that there is any idea in the head of any one here, of ‘putting our army South of the enemy’ or of following him ‘to the death’ in any direction. I repeat to you it will neither be done nor attempted unless you watch it every day, and hour, and force it.”⁸⁶

A few days later, Grant told Lincoln that he was reluctant to break his hold on the Confederate army at Petersburg. The president replied in words that spoke volumes about his iron resolution: “Hold on with a bull-dog grip, and chew & choke, as much as

⁸⁴ George Harrington to William P. Fessenden, Washington, 1 August 1864, Lincoln Collection, Yale University; Simpson, Grant, 367; David S. Sparks, ed., Inside Lincoln's Army: The Diary of Marsena Rudolph Patrick, Provost Marshall General, Army of the Potomac (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1964), 409-410 (entry for 5 August 1864); George R. Agassiz, ed., Meade's Headquarters, 1863-1865: Letters of Colonel Theodore Lyman from the Wilderness to Appomattox (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1922), 204 (journal entry for 1 August 1864).

⁸⁵ Grant to Halleck, City Point, Virginia, 1 August 1864, OR, I, 37, 2:558.

⁸⁶ Lincoln to Grant, Washington, 3 August 1864, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:476.

possible.”⁸⁷ Grant did just that at Petersburg, and Sheridan in September and October routed the enemy in the Shenandoah Valley.

Lincoln may have felt better after his July 31 visit with Grant, but the voters did not. As public morale sank, the president began to worry about his reelection chances. Gloomily he predicted to General Andrew J. Hamilton, provisional governor of Texas, that he would be “badly beaten unless some great change takes place.” The people of the North, he told Hamilton, “promised themselves when Gen. Grant started out that he would take Richmond in June – he didn’t take it, and they blame me, but I promised them no such thing, & yet they hold me responsible.”⁸⁸ He predicted to Thomas Corwin: “I am a beaten man, unless we can have some great victory.”⁸⁹

RADICAL CHALLENGE: THE WADE-DAVIS BILL AND MANIFESTO

Radicals were among those most disenchanted with Lincoln, especially after his pocket-veto of a bill written by Benjamin F. Wade and Maryland Congressman Henry Winter Davis which laid out a Reconstruction program different in some ways from the president’s. Both plans shared in common the requirement that the Confederate states emancipate their slaves and both stipulated that the federal government would appoint

⁸⁷ Lincoln to Grant, Washington, 17 August 1864, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:499.

⁸⁸ Jesse Ames Marshall, ed., Private and Official Correspondence of Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, During the Period of the Civil War (5 vols.; Norwood, Massachusetts: Plimpton Press, 1917), 5:35. The editor of the Butler papers and the Fehrenbachers mistakenly identify the informant as Schuyler Hamilton.

⁸⁹ Henry Winter Davis reported that this remark at a meeting of dissidents on August 30 in New York. Francis Lieber to Charles Sumner, New York, 31 August 1864, Sumner Papers, Harvard University. On September 6, Nicolay told Theodore Tilton that there was “no truth whatever in the report that Mr. Lincoln said he was a ‘beaten man.’ I felt quite sure of it when I saw you, though of course I could not positively know the fact as I do now. We have encouraging news from all quarters. The Atlanta victory alone ought to win the Presidential contest for us.” Nicolay to Tilton, Washington, 6 September 1864, Miscellaneous Manuscripts, New-York Historical Society. But since both Corwin and Hamilton testified that he did say it, and since in his memorandum to the cabinet he acknowledged that he would probably lose, it seems plausible that Lincoln did say it.

governors to preside over the Reconstruction process. Neither plan allowed blacks to vote. Unlike Lincoln's scheme, which called for military governors to be appointed by the president, the Wade-Davis bill authorized the appointment of provisional civilian governors. Passed on July 2, the bill mandated that when armed resistance ended within a state, the provisional governor (named by the president) was to enroll adult white males and permit them to take an oath of allegiance to the Constitution. Once a majority of those registered (not 10%, as Lincoln's plan called for) had taken the oath, the governor would facilitate the election of a state constitutional convention. Only those taking an "iron-clad" oath that they had never fought against the Union could vote for the constitutions or serve as delegates to the constitutional conventions. (This was much more stringent than Lincoln's plan, which called for an oath of prospective, not retrospective, loyalty.) The new constitutions must repudiate all debts incurred in support of the war, disqualify from voting and office-holding all high ranking members of the Confederate military or civilian governments, and abolish slavery. The Wade-Davis bill forever denied all citizenship rights to prominent Confederates who continued supporting the war after the bill's adoption. Once these requirements were met, the state could be readmitted to the Union, vote in presidential elections, and choose members of Congress. Under Lincoln's plan, blacks were to be educated and their rights protected, but the states were to determine how these goals were to be met. Congress demanded that blacks and whites be treated equally before the law, that blacks enjoy the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus, and that white kidnappers of blacks be harshly punished. The Wade-Davis bill envisioned Reconstruction as a post-war process, whereas Lincoln wanted it to begin while the fighting still raged.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Herman Belz, Reconstructing the Union: Theory and Policy During the Civil War (Ithaca: published for

This measure did not satisfy many abolitionists, who objected to its failure to enfranchise blacks. Wade explained that while he supported black suffrage, “this amendment, if adopted, will probably jeopardize the bill; and as I believe that the provisions of this bill outweigh all such considerations, and at this stage of [the] proceedings that there is no time for discussion upon it, although I agreed to this amendment in committee I would rather it should not be adopted, because, in my judgment, it will sacrifice the bill.”⁹¹ In May 1864, Senator John P. Hale voiced the sentiments of many fellow Radicals when he wrote: “I entirely disagree with those who hold that the right of voting is a right which belongs to the catalogue of a man’s natural rights & that it is quite as wrong to withhold that from him as it is to keep him in a state of bondage. That is not so, it is not a natural right but a political one bestowed by those who frame the political institutions of a Country. If it were a natural right it would belong to women as well as to man [sic], & society in forming its institutions and organizations has a right to withhold it from any person or class of persons who it believes cannot exercise it understandingly & in a manner that will subserve and promote the best interests of society.”⁹² (As noted above, behind the scenes Lincoln at this time was pressing the Louisiana government to grant at least some blacks the vote.)

Eager to have Reconstruction proceed as a means to help shorten the conflict, Lincoln had proposed that a 10% minority could inaugurate the process. The requirement that a majority had to take the oath effectively meant that Reconstruction would be

the American Historical Association by the Cornell University Press, 1969), 198-243.

⁹¹ Congressional Globe, 38th Congress, 1st session, 3449 (1 July 1864).

⁹² Hale to his wife, 29 May 1864, in Richard H. Sewell, John P. Hale and the Politics of Abolition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 210.

strictly a postwar process.⁹³ And the oath was retrospective, to Lincoln’s dismay. “On principle I dislike an oath which requires a man to swear he has not done wrong,” he told Stanton. “It rejects the Christian principle of forgiveness on terms of repentance. I think it is enough if the man does no wrong hereafter.”⁹⁴

When the Radicals realized that the president was not going to sign the Wade-Davis bill (thus killing it with a pocket veto), they erupted in indignation. On the House floor, Lincoln’s most vehement critic, Henry Winter Davis, excoriated Lincoln. To one journalist, Davis seemed “to be ever wandering about dragging an imaginary coat upon the floor of the House and daring any one to tread upon it,” and a fellow Maryland Radical exclaimed that the congressman “lives on wormwood & gall and aloes!”⁹⁵ The self-righteous, vain, and impulsive Davis regarded those who disagreed with him as “fools,” “chattering, whining, and timorous merchants,” “mutton heads,” and “rattlesnakes.”⁹⁶ In November 1864, Lincoln remarked that Davis “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.”⁹⁷ With characteristic magnanimity, the president said of Davis’s assault against him: “it appears to do him good, and as it does me no injury, (that is I don’t feel that it does) what’s the

⁹³ Belz, Reconstructing the Union, 210.

⁹⁴ Lincoln to Stanton, Washington, 5 February 1864, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:169.

⁹⁵ Washington correspondence, 28 February, Chicago Tribune, 3 March 1864; Worthington G. Snethen to Wendell Phillips, Baltimore, 25 August 1864, Phillips Papers, Harvard University.

⁹⁶ Gerald S. Henig, Henry Winter Davis: Antebellum and Civil War Congressman from Maryland (New York: Twayne, 1973), 9; Davis to S. F. Du Pont, 20 December 1859, 26 April 1863; n.d. 1860; June 1862; 11 November 1859, Du Pont Papers, Hagley Museum.

⁹⁷ Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 245 (entry for 8 November 1864).

harm in letting him have his fling? If he did not pitch into me he would into some poor fellow whom he might hurt.”⁹⁸

Davis’s anger resulted in part from Lincoln’s unwillingness to help him gain control of the Maryland Republican party, which the Blairs dominated. In late January 1864, the congressman asked Lincoln to appoint Donn Piatt or John S. Berry as military commander of the Middle Department. The president declined “with more than usual bluntness,”⁹⁹ saying he viewed the Maryland contretemps as “a personal quarrel & would do nothing to aid them to vent their spite on one another.” Davis “instantly” left in a huff, thinking “no retort was proper” since the president’s remark precluded further discussion. When Justice David Davis informed his cousin the following day that the president wished to be on good terms with him, Winter Davis insisted that Lincoln had insulted him and that the president was “thoroughly Blairized.” The result was that the Blair forces and the Maryland secessionists would probably band together. If such an alliance was struck, Winter Davis said he was resolved to deny Lincoln the electoral votes of Maryland in 1864.¹⁰⁰

Recounting this sad tale, Lincoln recalled that during the 1862 election campaign in Maryland, he had helped Davis win by exerting “himself effectually to keep Mr. D’s Union opponent from coming out as an independent candidate.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Washington correspondence, 28 February, Chicago Tribune, 3 March 1864.

⁹⁹ Montgomery Blair to Augustus W. Bradford, Washington, 26 January 1864, Bradford Papers, Maryland Historical Society.

¹⁰⁰ Davis to Du Pont, n.p., 16 [misdated 9] January 1864, John D. Hayes, ed., Samuel Francis Du Pont: A Selection from His Civil War Letters (3 vols.; Ithaca, N.Y.: Published for the Eleutherian Mills Historical Library by the Cornell University Press, 1969), 1:324n; Charles Wagandt, The Mighty Revolution: Negro Emancipation in Maryland, 1862-1864 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964), 190.

¹⁰¹ Lincoln told this to Albert G. Riddle in the spring of 1864. Riddle, “Interview with Prest. Lincoln,” 12 December [no year indicated], manuscript in the Riddle Papers, Western Reserve Historical Society.

A Buffalo newspaper speculated that “if Mr. Lincoln had granted Winter Davis what he modestly asked a year ago – the control of all the military and civil appointments for Maryland,” the congressman would not have opposed the administration.¹⁰²

But more than personal pique fueled the clash between the president and Congress. The central difference was rooted in conflicting interpretations of the Constitution’s “guarantee clause,” which stated that “The United States shall guarantee to every State in this Union a Republican Form of Government” but did not specify which branch of the government was empowered to carry out the guarantee. Along with his allies, Davis, an old Whig who strove to limit the power of the executive branch, argued that in 1849 the Supreme Court had determined that Congress had sole power to do so; in Luther vs. Borden the Taney court ruled that “it rests with Congress to decide what government is the established one in a State. For as the United States guarantee to each State a republican government, Congress must necessarily decide what government is established in a State before it can determine whether it is republican or not.”

Davis had not always championed black freedom. He opposed the Emancipation Proclamation because only “ignorant fanatics prate about decrees of emancipation” and because it set a dangerous precedent whereby “Lincoln would be my master & could take my home & imprison me at pleasure.”¹⁰³ He thought “loyal states were obligated to observe the slavery clauses of the Constitution” and feared “extreme people who run ahead of events into dream land or utopia.” He hoped “people would remember other

¹⁰² Buffalo Morning Express, 24 August 1864.

¹⁰³ Henig, Davis, 167, 174.

interests besides the Negro.”¹⁰⁴ A former Whig and Know-Nothing, he hated Democrats more than he hated slavery.

More extreme Radicals wanted to reconstruct the South on the basis of Charles Sumner’s “state suicide” theory, which would allow Congress to treat the rebellious states as though they had reverted to the status of territories. But most Republicans rejected that approach in favor of relying on the guarantee clause of the Constitution.

When rumors circulated that Lincoln might veto the Wade-Davis bill, congressmen and senators – among them Charles Sumner, Henry Winter Davis, Thaddeus Stevens, and Zachariah Chandler – expressed their dismay to the president. On July 4, as Lincoln sat in the capitol affixing his signature to various bills, Chandler accosted him saying a veto “would make a terrible record for us to fight.”

“Mr. Chandler, this bill was placed before me a few minutes before Congress adjourns,” Lincoln replied. “It is a matter of too much importance to be swallowed in that way.”

“If it is vetoed it will damage us fearfully in the North West. It may not in Illinois, but it will in Michigan and Ohio. The important point is that one prohibiting slavery in the reconstructed states.”

“That is the point on which I doubt the authority of Congress to act.”

“It is no more than you have done yourself.”

“I conceive that I may in an emergency do things on military grounds which cannot be done constitutionally by Congress.”

¹⁰⁴ Davis to Du Pont, 11 July 1862; July 1862; 20 March 1861, Du Pont Papers, Hagley Museum.

(Lincoln was not being entirely candid. The bill had been passed two days earlier and had been under discussion for months.)

When Chandler left, Lincoln told three cabinet members, “This bill and this position of these gentlemen seems to me to make the fatal admission (in asserting that the insurrectionary states are no longer states in the Union) that states whenever they please may of their own motion dissolve their connection with the Union. Now we cannot survive that admission I am convinced. If that be true I am not President, these gentlemen are not Congress. I have laboriously endeavored to avoid that question ever since it first began to be mooted & thus to avoid confusion and disturbance in our own counsels. It was to obviate this question that I earnestly favored the movement for an amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery I thought it much better, if it were possible, to restore the Union without the necessity of a violent quarrel among its friends, as to whether certain states have been in or out of the Union during the war: a merely metaphysical questions and one unnecessary to be forced into discussion.” When John Hay opined that the Radicals had lost touch with public opinion, Lincoln said: “If they choose to make a point upon this I do not doubt that they can do harm. They have never been friendly to me & I don[’]t know that this will make any special difference as to that. At all events, I must keep some consciousness of being somewhere near right: I must keep some standard of principle fixed within myself.”¹⁰⁵

In his July 8 veto message – which was superfluous, since the Constitution does not require the president to justify a pocket veto – Lincoln said that he was “unprepared, by a formal approval of this Bill, to be inflexibly committed to any single plan of

¹⁰⁵ Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 218-19 (entry for 4 July 1864).

restoration.” Nor was he prepared “to declare, that the free-state constitutions and governments, already adopted and installed in Arkansas and Louisiana, shall be set aside and held for nought, thereby repelling and discouraging the loyal citizens who have set up the same, as to further effort.” Though he doubted that there was “constitutional competency in Congress to abolish slavery in States,” he was “at the same time sincerely hoping and expecting that a constitutional amendment, abolishing slavery throughout the nation, may be adopted.” Notwithstanding these objections, Lincoln in a conciliatory vein added that he was “fully satisfied with the system for restoration contained in the Bill, as one very proper plan for the loyal people of any State choosing to adopt it” and was “prepared to give the Executive aid and assistance to any such people, so soon as the military resistance to the United States shall have been suppressed in any such State, and the people thereof shall have sufficiently returned to their obedience to the Constitution and the laws of the United States,— in which cases, military Governors will be appointed, with directions to proceed according to the Bill.”¹⁰⁶

Davis called the veto “a gross usurpation of legislative power” which “must be rebuked by supporters of the administration,” and Thaddeus Stevens cynically scoffed: “What an infamous proclamation! The Prest. is determined to have the electoral votes of the seceded states – at least of Tenn[essee] Ark[ansas] – Lou[isiana] & Flor[ida] – Perhaps also of S. Car[olina]. The idea of pocketing a bill and then issuing a proclamation as to how far he will conform to it, is matched only by signing a bill and

¹⁰⁶ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:434-35.

then sending in a veto. How little of the rights of war and the law of nations our Prest. knows! But what are we to do? Condemn privately and applaud publicly!”¹⁰⁷

Davis chose to condemn publicly. In the House chamber, “pale with wrath, his bushy hair tousled, and wildly brandishing his arms,” he “denounced the President in good set terms.”¹⁰⁸ On August 5 he, along with the co-author of his defunct bill, Benjamin F. Wade, issued a scathing manifesto excoriating the president. Echoing Stevens, they cynically ascribed Lincoln’s opposition to political expediency: he wanted to win reelection with the help of electoral votes from reconstructed Southern states like Arkansas and Louisiana, whose representatives Congress had refused to seat. “That judgment of Congress which the President defies was the exercise of an authority exclusively vested in Congress by the Constitution to determine what is the established Government in a State, and in its own nature and by the highest judicial authority binding on all other departments of the Government.” Heatedly, Wade and Davis declared that a “more studied outrage on the legislative authority of the people has never been perpetrated. Congress passed a bill; the President refused to approve it, and then by proclamation puts as much of it in force as he sees fit, and proposes to execute those parts by officers unknown to the laws of the United States and not subject to the confirmation of the Senate!” Lincoln “has greatly presumed on the forbearance which the supporters of his Administration have so long practiced, in view of the arduous conflict in which we are engaged, and the reckless ferocity of our political opponents. But he must understand that our support is of a cause and not of a man; that the authority of Congress is

¹⁰⁷ Davis to George Cheever, Baltimore, 21 July 1864, Cheever Family Papers, American Antiquarian Society; Stevens to Edward McPherson, [Lancaster?], 10 July 1864, in Beverly Wilson Palmer, ed., The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens (2 vols.; Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997-98), 1:500.

¹⁰⁸ Brooks, Washington, D. C., in Lincoln’s Time, ed. Mitgang, 154.

paramount and must be respected; that the whole body of the Union men of Congress will not submit to be impeached by him of rash and unconstitutional legislation; and if he wishes our support, he must confine himself to his executive duties – to obey and execute, not make the laws – to suppress by arms armed Rebellion, and leave political reorganization to Congress. If the supporters of the Government fail to insist on this, they become responsible for the usurpations which they fail to rebuke, and are justly liable to the indignation of the people whose rights and security, committed to their keeping, they sacrifice.” Darkly they hinted at impeachment: “Let them consider the remedy for these usurpations, and, having found it, fearlessly execute it.”¹⁰⁹ The New York World thought the charge “amounts to an impeachment, and may be followed by one.”¹¹⁰ The New York Herald did not go that far, but it did predict that Lincoln could not hope “under any circumstance” to be reelected.¹¹¹

Lincoln told Gideon Welles that from what he had heard about the manifesto, “he had no desire” to read it and “could himself take no part in such a controversy as they seemed to wish to provoke.”¹¹² But Lincoln did allow Seward to read him the manifesto. After hearing it through, he wondered aloud “whether these men intend openly to oppose my election – the document looks that way.”¹¹³ After a White House interview, the Quaker abolitionist B. Rush Plumly reported that Lincoln’s “blood is up on the Wade &

¹⁰⁹ The American Annual Cyclopaedia and Register of Important Events of the Year 1864 (New York: D. Appleton, 1865), 310.

¹¹⁰ New York World, in Randall and Current, Last Full Measure, 209.

¹¹¹ New York Herald, 6 August 1864.

¹¹² Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 2:98 (entry for 8 August 1864).

¹¹³ J. K. Herbert to Benjamin F. Butler, 6 August 1864, Correspondence of Butler, ed. Marshall, 5:8-9.

Winter Davis protest.”¹¹⁴ Hurt as well as angry, the president told Noah Brooks: “To be wounded in the house of one’s friends is perhaps the most grievous affliction that can befall a man. I have tried my best to meet the wishes of this man [Davis], and to do my whole duty by the country.” When Brooks speculated that Davis might be crazy, Lincoln observed: “I have heard that there was insanity in his family; perhaps we might allow the plea in this case.”¹¹⁵

In a more mellow mood, Lincoln declared that the Manifesto “was not worth fretting about.” He was reminded “of an old acquaintance, who, having a son of a scientific turn, bought him a microscope. The boy went around, experimenting with his glass upon everything that came 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.’”¹¹⁶ (Mary Lincoln testified that when her husband was told what critics said of him, he replied: “Do good to those who hate you and turn their ill-will into friendship.”)¹¹⁷

The manifesto backfired, in part because Congress was out of session.¹¹⁸ James G. Blaine said it “was so powerful an arraignment of the President that of necessity it rallied his friends to his support with that intense form of energy which springs from the instinct

¹¹⁴ Plumly to N. P. Banks, Washington, 9 August 1864, Banks Papers, Library of Congress.

¹¹⁵ Brooks, Washington, D.C., in Lincoln’s Time, ed. Mitgang, 156.

¹¹⁶ Carpenter, Six Months at the White House, 145.

¹¹⁷ Mary Todd Lincoln interviewed by Herndon, [September 1866], Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 358, 361.

¹¹⁸ Henig, Davis, 216-17.

of self-preservation.”¹¹⁹ After the New York World (the most prominent Democratic paper) lauded the manifesto, the New York Times denounced it as “by far the most effective Copperhead campaign document thus far issued.”¹²⁰ E. A. Stansbury, an insurance broker in New York, expostulated that “nobody has done such an infamous thing since the war began” and predicted that it would help “bring in the virtual supremacy of the very traitors we are fighting at such cost.”¹²¹ He urged Lincoln to respond, for the “incessant attacks of traitors, aided by such infamous assaults as this, are having an effect which it is of the first importance to counteract.”¹²² In Wade’s home district, Republicans denounced the “improper, ill-timed, ill-tempered, and ill-advised” manifesto.¹²³ Noah Brooks called it “a matter of regret that a man of so much oratorical ability and legal sharpness as Henry Winter Davis should be so much of a political charlatan as he is; but he is, like the Blairs, insatiate in his hates, mischievous in his schemes and hollow hearted and cold blooded. It is not supposed he honestly differs in opinion with any member of the present Cabinet, except Blair, but he has seized upon every occasion to quarrel with nearly every one of them, and he stands to-day in an attitude of such intense hostility to Lincoln that he is ready to jeopardize the success of the Union party in the campaign about opening, simply that he may gratify his personal malice toward the President. Revengeful, sore-headed and proud, Davis, like others of his

¹¹⁹ James G. Blaine, Twenty Years of Congress: From Lincoln to Garfield (2 vols.; Norwich, Connecticut: Henry Bill, 1884-86), 2:43-44

¹²⁰ New York Times, 12 August 1864.

¹²¹ E. A. Stansbury to Sumner, New York, 10 August 1864, Sumner Papers, Harvard University.

¹²² E. A. Stansbury to Lincoln, New York, 9 August 1864, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹²³ Hans L. Trefousse, Benjamin Franklin Wade, Radical Republican from Ohio (New York: Twayne, 1963), 227, 228.

sort here [in Washington], appears to forget that the defeat of Lincoln . . . would necessarily be the triumph of a Copperhead minority.”¹²⁴

Secretary of the Interior Usher thought Wade, Davis, and the other Radicals were most ungrateful. “Lincoln has,” he noted, “to the neglect of his true friends tried to propitiate and oblige this class of men and they never will be satisfied. Of all the acts of his administration they had the least cause & reason to assail him.”¹²⁵ Another Hoosier, John D. Defrees, gently chided Wade, pointing out that Conservatives accepted the Emancipation Proclamation only reluctantly while Radicals applauded it. “Is it not a little strange,” Defrees asked the Ohio senator, “that most of the opposition to Mr. Lincoln, among Union men, is to be found among the very men who were loudest in their commendations of the proclamation of freedom, as they called it?”¹²⁶

Not all Radicals disparaged Lincoln. Minnesota Congressman Ignatius Donnelly praised him while disagreeing with his Reconstruction policy. The president, Donnelly told his colleagues, “is a great man. Great not after the old models of the world, but with a homely and original greatness. He will stand out to future ages in the history of these crowded and confused times with wonderful distinctness. He has carried a vast and discordant population safely and peacefully through the greatest of political revolutions with such consummate sagacity and skill that while he led he appeared to follow; while he innovated beyond all precedent he has been denounced as tardy; while he struck the shackles from the limbs of three million slaves has been hailed as a conservative! If to

¹²⁴ Washington correspondence, 1 July, Sacramento Daily Union, 26 July 1864, in Burlingame, ed., Lincoln Observed, 120.

¹²⁵ Usher to R. W. Thompson, Washington, 14 August 1864, R. W. Thompson Papers, Lincoln Museum, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

¹²⁶ John D. Defrees to Benjamin F. Wade, Washington, 7 August 1864, copy, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

adapt, persistently and continuously, just and righteous principles to all the perplexed windings and changes of human events, and to secure in the end the complete triumph of those principles, be statesmanship, then Abraham Lincoln is the first of statesmen.”¹²⁷

Gerrit Smith protested against the Wade-Davis manifesto, arguing that “the country cannot now afford to have the hold of Mr. Lincoln on the popular confidence weakened.”¹²⁸

Conservatives applauded Lincoln’s veto. “No doubt the President was right in the controversy with Wade & Davis,” fumed Orville H. Browning. “The bill was an outrage, and its approval would have disgraced him.”¹²⁹ Some Conservatives urged that all office holders appointed at Wade’s request be fired, but Lincoln ignored their counsel.

Disappointed by the response to the Manifesto, Davis complained two weeks after it appeared: “Wilkes’ Spirit of the Times is the only decided paper now! All the rest are trimming – none heartily for Lincoln, all afraid to speak, all tied by local elections which complicate the Presidential elections. None attack our protest but the [New York] Times – none venture to controvert or approve it.”¹³⁰

ATTEMPTS TO DUMP LINCOLN

The Manifesto was designed in part to trigger a dump-Lincoln movement before the Democratic convention met in late August.¹³¹ In July, Henry Winter Davis proposed that abolitionists persuade both Frémont and Lincoln to withdraw: “If the people shall en masse desert Lincoln & demand a new candidate & Fremont be induced to stand aside,

¹²⁷ Congressional Globe, 38th Congress, 1st session, 2038 (2 May 1864).

¹²⁸ New York World, 15 August 1864.

¹²⁹ Browning to Thomas Ewing, Washington, 4 October 1864, Ewing Family Papers, Library of Congress.

¹³⁰ Davis to Samuel F. Du Pont, n.p., 18 August 1864, in Hayes, ed., Du Pont Letters, 3:370.

¹³¹ Belz, Reconstructing the Union, 228n.

then I see some hope for the country & the cause. Fremont has no more capacity or character than Lincoln. He may defeat Lincoln, but he cannot be himself elected; & the difference between the two is not worth the struggle.”¹³²

Other Radicals favored that course. Chase said that his fears about Lincoln “arise from the manifestations I see of a purpose to compromise, if possible, by sacrificing all that has been done for freedom in the rebel states – to purchase peace for themselves – the whites – by the re-enslavement of the blacks.”¹³³ Charles Sumner thought the president should step down to make way for “any one of 100 names,” among them “half the Senate.”¹³⁴ On August 6, disenchanted Republicans in Hamilton, Ohio, criticized Lincoln’s “indecision of character,” “disposition to temporize,” and “the large preponderance of that peculiar element known as the milk of human kindness, in his disposition.” The Buckeyes debated a call for a new nominating convention to meet at Buffalo on September 22 and a recommendation that both Frémont and Lincoln withdraw.¹³⁵ The New York Evening Post endorsed the proposal but added that a new convention might prove unnecessary if the Democrats nominated a pro-war candidate on a platform demanding only the restoration of the Union.

On September 2, Greeley, Parke Godwin, and Theodore Tilton wrote jointly to several governors asking if Lincoln should be replaced.¹³⁶ Richard Yates of Illinois

¹³² Henry Winter Davis to Henry Cheever, Baltimore, 21 July 1864, Cheever Family Papers, American Antiquarian Society.

¹³³ Chase to his daughter Kate, Washington, 17 September 1864, John Niven, ed., The Salmon P. Chase Papers (5 vols.; Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1993-1998), 4:432.

¹³⁴ Sumner to John Bright, 27 September 1864, Beverly Wilson Palmer, ed., The Selected Letters of Charles Sumner (2 vols.; Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 2:253.

¹³⁵ Cincinnati Commercial, 8 August, copied in the New York World, 10 August 1864.

¹³⁶ Greeley et al. to John A. Andrew, New York, 2 September 1864, Andrew Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

replied emphatically: “The substitution of another man at this late day would be disastrous in the highest degree. It is too late to change now.” The governors of Ohio, Vermont, Maine, Rhode Island, West Virginia, Minnesota, Michigan, and Delaware shared Yates’s view. So did Joseph Medill of the Chicago Tribune and Senator Jacob Collamer of Vermont.¹³⁷

Other governors concurred, but only with marked reluctance. John A. Andrew of Massachusetts hoped Lincoln would lead but concluded that he could not do so because “he is essentially lacking in the quality of leadership, which is a gift of God and not a device of man.” The country, Andrew told Greeley and his colleagues, would be better off “under the more magnetic influence of a positive man, of clear purpose and more prophetic nature.” Still, he assured them, the Bay State “will vote for the Union cause at all events and will support Mr Lincoln so long as he remains its candidate.” In neighboring New Hampshire, Governor Joseph A. Gilmore predicted that even though the president “has disappointed the expectations of the people and has no hold on their affections,” he would carry the state in November. Lincoln, he added, “has not run the machine according to God’s time-table as I try to run my rail-roads.” William Buckingham of Connecticut said he could “name a score of gentlemen whose qualifications and personal fitness for the Presidency would be more in accordance with my judgment than Mr Lincolns,” but none of them could win half the votes that the

¹³⁷ Yates to Greeley et al., Springfield, 6 September 1864, Tilton Papers, New-York Historical Society; John Brough to Theodore Tilton, Columbus, 5 September 1864, ibid.; Stephen Miller to Tilton et al., Saint Paul, 9 September 1864, ibid.; Austin Blair to Tilton et al., Lansing, 11 September 1864, ibid.; William Cannon to Tilton et al., Wilmington, 12 September 1864, ibid.; J. Gregory Smith to Tilton et al., St. Albans, Vermont, 7 September 1864, ibid.; Arthur J. Boreman to Tilton et al., Wheeling, West Virginia, 8 September 1864, ibid.; Sam Casey to Tilton, Augusta, Maine, 5 September 1864, ibid.; James Y. Smith to Tilton et al., Providence, R.I., 3 September 1864, ibid.; John Brough to Andrew, Columbus, [7?] September 1864, Andrew Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society; Augustus Bradford to Greeley et al., 6 September 1864, copy, Bradford Papers, Maryland Historical Society.

president would receive. Thomas Carney of Kansas reported that “the shock to Mr Lincoln[']s popularity, even in Kansas, within the last six months, has been severe.” In the far west, “every thing has been sadly and most corruptly managed.” Carney said he would be happy to see another candidate fielded in place of Lincoln if there was a chance the newcomer would win, but that seemed unlikely. In Iowa, William M. Stone doubted that Lincoln, “running solely on his own merits or personal popularity,” could win, but since the people appreciated “the mighty issues at stake and the disastrous consequences which would inevitably result from his defeat,” he would likely prevail.¹³⁸

Only Andrew G. Curtin of Pennsylvania thought that Lincoln would lose. He speculated that “an unobjectionable candidate divested of the antagonisms which surround President Lincoln was present the State would be entirely safe.”¹³⁹

“Lincoln’s best friends,” according to Henry Winter Davis, “are impressed with his loss of strength and will be induced easily to urge him to get out of the way.”¹⁴⁰ One of those was Richard Smith, editor of the Cincinnati Gazette, who on August 27 wrote that the “people regard Mr. Lincoln’s candidacy as a misfortune. His apparent strength when nominated was fictitious, and now the fiction has disappeared, and instead of confidence there is distrust.”¹⁴¹ That same day, former Congressman Lewis D. Campbell of Ohio urged the governor of Massachusetts to lead a dump-Lincoln movement: “Our

¹³⁸ Andrew to Greeley et al., Boston, 3 September 1864, Theodore Tilton Papers, New-York Historical Society; Joseph A. Gilmore to Theodore Tilton, Concord, 5 September 1864, ibid.; Buckingham to Theodore Tilton et al., Norwich, 3 September 1864, ibid.; Thomas Carney to Theodore Tilton et al., Leavenworth, 12 September 1864, ibid.; William M. Stone to Tilton et al., Des Moines, 9 September 1864, ibid.

¹³⁹ [Andrew G. Curtin] to Tilton et al., Saratoga Springs, 8 September 1864, Theodore Tilton Papers, New-York Historical Society.

¹⁴⁰ Davis to S. F. Du Pont, n.p., 18 August 1864, Hayes, ed., Du Pont Letters, 3:370

¹⁴¹ New York Sun, 30 June 1889.

Union people are against Mr. Lincoln and cannot unite on Fremont. If we must be driven to the vote, . . . the Copperheads will carry the State. We do not believe that if Mr Lincoln could be elected the country could survive four years more of his stupid and imbecile management.” To Campbell it appeared that the administration was dominated by pressure from “fanatical men such as Beecher, Sumner et al.”¹⁴² A Republican paper in Albany warned that the only way for the party to win in November was “to have President Lincoln decline the nomination, his successor to be either Generals Hancock, Grant, Sherman, or Butler.”¹⁴³

That month Lincoln dejectedly remarked that the only Republican congressman “in whose personal and political friendship he could be absolutely confide” was Isaac N. Arnold.¹⁴⁴ (On March 19, Arnold had praised Lincoln extravagantly in a speech on the floor of the House.)¹⁴⁵ Wendell Phillips alleged that only five senators and proportionally even fewer congressmen supported Lincoln for reelection.¹⁴⁶ One of the discontented congressmen, James Ashley of Ohio, tried to enlist War Democrats and dissatisfied Republicans in an attempt to nominate Butler and force Lincoln to step aside. After consulting with Thurlow Weed, Congressman John Hickman, Thomas Corwin, and others, Ashley assured Butler that there was strong support for his candidacy and issued a call for a meeting at Cooper Union on August 17. But that document was so radical that it attracted few adherents. Still, Ashley plugged away, making common cause with New

¹⁴² Lewis D. Campbell to John A. Andrew, Hamilton, Ohio, 27 August 1864, Andrew Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society; Lewis D. Campbell to Thurlow Weed, Hamilton, Ohio, 12 November 1864, Weed Papers, University of Rochester.

¹⁴³ Albany, New York, Statesman, n.d., copied in the Bridgeport, Connecticut, Farmer, n.d., copied in the La Crosse, Wisconsin, Daily Democrat, 30 August 1864.

¹⁴⁴ Alexander K. McClure, Abraham Lincoln and Men of War-Times (Philadelphia: Times, 1892), 125-26.

¹⁴⁵ Congressional Globe, 38th Congress, 1st session, 1196-99.

¹⁴⁶ Phillips to Moncure D. Conway, n.p., 16 March 1864, Conway Papers, Columbia University.

Yorkers like David Dudley Field, George Opdyke, George Wilkes, George B. Cheever, Horace Greeley, and Butler’s principal aide, John W. Shaffer. Meanwhile, John A. Andrew, Henry Winter Davis and others banded together to attain the same end.¹⁴⁷ After a series of meetings, it was decided to hold a new Republican convention in Cincinnati on September 28. Greeley, Parke Godwin, and Theodore Tilton drafted the call. Boston Radicals, led by George Luther Stearns, publicly endorsed the idea and urged both the president and Frémont to withdraw. On August 25, the *Pathfinder* wrote that he would quit if Lincoln did also.¹⁴⁸ (His equivocal letter did not please Stearns: “What an abortion Fremont[’]s letter is, cold as winter,” he told Wendell Phillips. “I wonder the thermometer has not fall[en] to 40°. Well, we have done all we could for the good honest man, but he is constitutionally unable to do his part.”)¹⁴⁹

In early August, Weed reportedly said: “Lincoln can be prevailed upon to draw off.” Leonard Swett shared Weed’s view.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, Weed told a friend in mid-August that he would support the Democrats’ nominee for president if that party would declare its support for reunion and opposition to emancipation and to the subjugation of the South.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ John Austin Stevens to Henry T. Cheever, New York, 25 August 1864, Cheever Family Papers, American Antiquarian Society.

¹⁴⁸ G. L. Stearns, et al., to Frémont, Boston, 20 August 1864; Fremont to Stearns et al., Nahant, 25 August 1864, Boston Daily Advertiser, 27 August 1864; Robert F. Horowitz, The Great Impeacher: A Political Biography of James M. Ashley (New York: Brooklyn College Press, 1979), 100-1; James M. McPherson, The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 281.

¹⁴⁹ George Luther Stearns to Wendell Phillips, Boston, 26 August 1864, Wendell Phillips Papers, Harvard University.

¹⁵⁰ J. W. Shaffer to Benjamin F. Butler, New York, 17 August 1864, in Correspondence of Butler, ed. Marshall, 5:68; Weed to Abram Wakeman, n.p., n.d., National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 29 October 1864.

¹⁵¹ Weed to Abram Wakeman, n.p., n.d., National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 29 October 1864.

But Lincoln would not draw off. As he told Carl Schurz: “They urge me with almost violent language to withdraw from the contest, although I have been unanimously nominated, in order to make room for a better man. I wish I could. Perhaps some other man might do this business better than I. That is possible. I do not deny it. But I am here, and that better man is not here. And if I should step aside to make room for him, it is not at all sure – perhaps not even probable – that he would get here. It is much more likely that the factions opposed to me would fall to fighting among themselves, and that those who want me to make room for a better man would get a man whom most of them would not want in at all. My withdrawal, therefore, might, and probably would, bring on a confusion worse confounded. God knows, I have at least tried very hard to do my duty – to do right to everybody and wrong to nobody. And now to have it said by men who have been my friends and who ought to know me better, that I have been seduced by what they call the lust of power, and that I have been doing this and that unscrupulous thing hurtful to the common cause, only to keep myself in office! Have they thought of that common cause when trying to break me down? I hope they have.”¹⁵²

In July, while discussing the clamor for peace, Lincoln told a visitor: “I have faith in the people. They will not consent to disunion. The danger is, they are misled. Let them know the truth, and the country is safe.” Looking exhausted, he was asked if he worked too hard. “I can’t work less, but it isn’t that – work never troubled me. Things look badly, and I can’t avoid anxiety. Personally I care nothing about a re-election; but if our divisions defeat us, I fear for the country.”¹⁵³

¹⁵² Schurz, The Reminiscences of Carl Schurz (3 vols.; New York: McClure, 1907-1908), 3:103-104.

¹⁵³ Boston Evening Journal, n.d., copied in the Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 18 April 1865.

The lowest point in Lincoln's presidency arrived in August, when he and many party leaders became convinced that he would lose. "Lincoln has done every thing that a man could do to deserve to be beaten," growled a pessimistic New York attorney.¹⁵⁴ On Long Island, a Republican paper praised Lincoln's honesty but concluded that "he is not a man for the times – too easy, forbearing, and shortsighted. We need a man of sterner stuff, and possessed of deeper penetration."¹⁵⁵ The people were "coming to think that something more than good intentions are demanded of a national leader in such a crisis," observed the Concord, New Hampshire, Monitor.¹⁵⁶ Thurlow Weed concluded that Lincoln's "re-election was an impossibility."¹⁵⁷ Some faint-hearted Republicans argued that it might be wise to give up the war effort on the assumption that it would better to have two countries, one of which was free. Lincoln's 1860 campaign manager, David Davis, noted that the public was "getting tired of the war." If the North did "not have military successes soon, & the democrats at Chicago act with wisdom, we are in danger of losing the Presidential election," he warned.¹⁵⁸

Davis's friend Leonard Swett, who was consulting with Weed at the time, shared his pessimism. "Unless material changes can be wrought, Lincoln's election is beyond any possible hope," he wrote in early September. "It is probably clean gone now." Swett was alarmed to find the New Yorkers inert and demoralized, especially Republican national chairman Henry J. Raymond, whom Lincoln called "my lieutenant general in

¹⁵⁴ Erasmus Peshine Smith to Henry C. Carey, Pittsfield, 21 September 1864, Henry C. Carey Papers in the Edward Carey Gardiner Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹⁵⁵ Suffolk Herald (New York), n.d., copied in the La Crosse, Wisconsin, Daily Democrat, 17 August, 1 September 1864.

¹⁵⁶ Concord, New Hampshire, Monitor, n.d., copied in the La Crosse, Wisconsin, Daily Democrat, 23 August 1864.

¹⁵⁷ Weed to Seward, New York, 22 August 1864, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁵⁸ Davis to Julius Rockwell, Bloomington, 4 August 1864, Davis Papers, Library of Congress.

politics” and who had just published a long campaign biography of the president. Goaded by Swett, Raymond decided to call a meeting of the national committee in Washington with the understanding that Swett would prepare the way by visiting the president to see if he “understood his danger and would help to get things in motion.”¹⁵⁹

When Swett asked Lincoln if he expected to win reelection, the president responded gloomily: “Well, I don[’]t think I ever heard of any man being elected to an office unless some one was for him.”¹⁶⁰ To the lieutenant governor of Illinois, Lincoln sadly remarked that he understood Westerners’ anxiety: “Well, they want success and they haven’t got it; but we are all doing the best we can. For my part I shall stay right here and do my duty. Traitors will find me at my table.” Pointing to a tall maple on the White House grounds, he added: “They can come and hang me to that tree if they like.”¹⁶¹ When a private secretary to one of his cabinet members told him of the widespread pessimism in New York, Lincoln paced the floor and finally “with grim earnestness of tone and manner” said: “Well, I cannot run the political machine; I have enough on my hands without that. It is the people’s business, – the election is in their hands. If they turn their backs to the fire, and get scorched in the rear, they’ll find they have got to ‘sit’ on the ‘blister’!”¹⁶² In mid-August, when Governor Francis Pierpont of loyal Virginia told Lincoln that the Copperheads were waging “a very unfair campaign and it needed attention,” he replied: “Yes, but we need military success more – and without it I doubt the result. If the election had come off two weeks after I was nominated

¹⁵⁹ Swett to his wife, Washington, 8 September 1864, in Tarbell, Lincoln, 2:201-2.

¹⁶⁰ Swett interviewed by Nicolay, Washington, 16 October 1878, in Michael Burlingame, ed., An Oral History of Abraham Lincoln: John G. Nicolay’s Interviews and Essays (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 58.

¹⁶¹ William Bross, Biographical Sketch of the Late B. J. Sweet (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg, 1878), 16.

¹⁶² Carpenter, Six Months in the White House, 275.

at Baltimore, I think I should have carried every state that will vote this fall, but if it should come off tomorrow I hardly feel certain of what state I should carry. The people seem despondent, and our opponents are pressing the howl that the war is a failure and it has had its effect in the army and among the people. We must have military success.”¹⁶³

At that same time, several Republican leaders met in Boston and concluded that something must be done to appease those demanding peace. Treasury Secretary Fessenden feared that otherwise he would be unable to carry out his duties and would feel compelled to resign. Senator Henry Wilson conveyed their message to Lincoln.

Intensifying Lincoln’s gloom was another message, this one from Henry J. Raymond, offering a dismal forecast: “I am in active correspondence with your staunchest friends in every State and from them all I hear but one report. The tide is strongly against us. Hon. E. B. Washburne writes that ‘were an election to be held now in Illinois we should be beaten’. Mr. Cameron writes that Pennsylvania is against us. Gov. Morton writes that nothing but the most strenuous efforts can carry Indiana.” New York “would go 50,000 against us to-morrow. And so of the rest. Nothing but the most resolute and decided action, on the part of the Government and its friends, can save the country from falling into hostile hands. Two special causes are assigned for this great reaction in public sentiment, – the want of military successes, and the impression in some minds, the fear and suspicion in others, that we are not to have peace in any event under this Administration until Slavery is abandoned. In some way or other the suspicion is widely diffused that we can have peace with Union if we would. It is idle to reason with this belief – still more idle to denounce it. It can only be expelled by some authoritative act, at

¹⁶³ Undated memo by Francis Pierpont, Pierpont Papers, West Virginia University.

once bold enough to fix attention and distinct enough to defy incredulity & challenge respect.”¹⁶⁴ Even such a stout supporter of the administration as John W. Forney’s Washington Chronicle declared that it “would be glad to see Mr. Lincoln out of the canvass, with all our attachment to his person and his sense of his prescience, if by such a surrender would could save the country from the election of a dishonorable peace on the basis of separation.”¹⁶⁵

THE NIAGARA MANIFESTO

“The people of the North,” Thurlow Weed remarked, “are wild for Peace. They are told that the President will only listen to terms of Peace on condition that Slavery be ‘abandoned.’”¹⁶⁶ The despairing public had good reason to believe that Lincoln would not end the war until slavery was eliminated. In the summer of 1864, Confederate leaders, aiming to capitalize on Northern war weariness and to fuel growing demands for a negotiated peace, floated bogus peace overtures which the gullible Horace Greeley took seriously.

The Tribune editor alerted Lincoln that he had received word from one William C. “Colorado” Jewett that two emissaries from Jefferson Davis were in Canada, fully authorized to negotiate for peace. (Jewett, whom Edward Bates called “a crack-brained simpleton,” reportedly was a notorious Lothario known for stiffing creditors and committing fraud.¹⁶⁷ He had sent abusive letters to Lincoln, prompting John Hay to write a crushing response: “In the exercise of my duties [as] secretary in charge of the

¹⁶⁴ Henry J. Raymond, The Life and Public Services of Abraham Lincoln (New York: Derby and Miller, 1865), 255; Raymond to Lincoln, New York, 22 August 1864, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁶⁵ New York World, 18 August 1864.

¹⁶⁶ Weed to Seward, New York, 22 August 1864, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁶⁷ Beale, ed., Bates Diary, 388 (entry for 22 July 1864).

President's correspondence, it is necessary for me to use a certain discretion in the choice of letters to be submitted to the personal inspection of the President. In order to avoid a further waste of time on your part, I have to inform you that your letters are never so submitted. My proceeding in this matter has the sanction of the President.”¹⁶⁸ In forwarding this news, Greeley patronizingly told Lincoln: "I venture to remind you that our bleeding, bankrupt, almost dying country also longs for peace – shudders at the prospect of fresh conscriptions, of further wholesale devastations, and of new rivers of human blood. And a wide-spread conviction that the Government and its prominent supporters are not anxious for Peace, and do not improve proffered opportunities to achieve it, is doing great harm now, and is morally certain, unless removed, to do far greater in the approaching Elections. It is not enough that we anxiously desire a true and lasting peace; we ought to demonstrate and establish the truth beyond cavil.”¹⁶⁹

The rivers of blood ran especially deep that summer. Four days prior to the Republican convention, Grant had lost 7000 men in a frontal attack against entrenched Confederates at Cold Harbor. “I regret this assault more than any one I have ever ordered,” the general said in the evening.¹⁷⁰

Though Lincoln rightly assumed that Jefferson Davis had given no authority to those men in Canada, he knew that Greeley was correct in stating that the administration could not afford to seem indifferent to peace feelers, even if made by emissaries whose goal, he accurately noted, “was to inflame the peace sentiment of the North, to embarrass

¹⁶⁸ Hay to Jewett, Washington, 17 July 1863, Burlingame, ed., At Lincoln's Side, 88. There are eighteen letters from Jewett in the Lincoln Papers. An especially insulting one is dated London, 29 August 1863.

¹⁶⁹ Greeley to Lincoln, New York, 7 July 1864, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁷⁰ McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, 735.

the administration, and to demoralize the army.”¹⁷¹ Because he could not treat the peace negotiators as representatives of a legitimate government, he shrewdly asked Greeley to act as an unofficial mediator to deal with them. On July 9, he authorized the editor to bring to Washington for consultation “any person anywhere professing to have any proposition of Jefferson Davis in writing, for peace, embracing the restoration of the Union and abandonment of slavery.”¹⁷² Six days later, the president told Greeley: “I not only intend a sincere effort for peace, but I intend that you shall be a personal witness that it is made.”¹⁷³ When James Ashley protested Greeley’s mission, Lincoln said: “Don’t worry; nothing will come of it.”¹⁷⁴ To Iowa Senator James Harlan he explained: “Greeley kept abusing me for not entering into peace negotiations. He said he believed we could have peace if I would do my part and when he began to urge that I send an ambassador to Niagara to meet Confederate emissaries, I just thought I would let him go up and crack that nut for himself.”¹⁷⁵ The Tribune editor, said Lincoln, “means right” but “makes me almost as much trouble as the whole southern confederacy.”¹⁷⁶

When John Hay presented Lincoln’s letter to Greeley, the editor modestly described himself as “the worst man that could be taken for the purpose” and predicted that “as soon as he arrived there, the newspapers would be full of it” and that “he would be abused & blackguarded.” Nonetheless he accepted the mission and at Niagara Falls

¹⁷¹ Chauncey M. Depew, My Memories of Eighty Years (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1922), 62.

¹⁷² Lincoln to Greeley, Washington, 9 July 1864, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:435.

¹⁷³ Lincoln to Greeley, Washington, 15 July 1864, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:442.

¹⁷⁴ Ashley, Address of Hon. J. M. Ashley, at the Fourth Annual Banquet of the Ohio Republican League (New York: N.Y. Evening Post, 1891), 13.

¹⁷⁵ Tarbell, Lincoln, 2:198.

¹⁷⁶ Shelby M. Cullom, Fifty Years of Public Service: Personal Recollections of Shelby M. Cullom, Senior United States Senator from Illinois (Chicago: McClurg, 1911), 101.

met with the Confederate agents, James P. Holcombe, George N. Sanders, Clement C. Clay, and Jacob Thompson, whom he grievously misled by failing to make it clear that Lincoln insisted on “the restoration of the Union and abandonment of slavery.” He thought the president should not propose terms but instead let the Confederates do so.¹⁷⁷ When the Confederate emissaries told Greeley that they were not in fact officially accredited to negotiate with the Lincoln administration, the editor requested further instructions from Washington. In reply, the president sent John Hay with a document that was to shock Northern peace advocates: “To whom it may concern: Any proposition which embraces the restoration of peace, the integrity of the whole Union, and the abandonment of slavery, and which comes by and with an authority that can control the armies now at war against the United States will be received and considered by the Executive government of the United States, and will be met by liberal terms on other substantial and collateral points, and the bearer or bearers thereof shall have safe conduct both ways.”¹⁷⁸ Democrats called this “the Niagara Manifesto.”

Because of Greeley’s failure to inform them initially of the president’s conditions for negotiations, the Confederate agents were surprised by this document and erroneously believed that Lincoln had shifted his stance. Gleefully they accused him of acting in bad faith. The New York Daily News protested that the Manifesto “is in such marked contrast with the previous spirit of the correspondence that it resembles the caprice of a foolish girl trifling with her submissive lover.”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Burlingame and Ettlinger, eds., Hay Diary, 224-25 (entry for ca. 21 July 1864).

¹⁷⁸ Lincoln to “whom it may concern,” Washington, [1]8 July 1864, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 8:63.

¹⁷⁹ New York Daily News, 22 July 1864.

Resenting the false position in which Greeley had put him, Lincoln asked the editor to publish their correspondence, with minor omissions. Greeley refused to run anything but the entire text, with its melodramatic analysis of the state of the country. Lincoln decided to drop the matter rather than have the “discouraging and injurious” parts of Greeley’s letters appear in print.¹⁸⁰ Vexed by the editor’s intransigence, Lincoln compared him to an old shoe. “In early life,” he told the cabinet, “and with few mechanics and but little means in the West, we used to make our shoes last a great while with much mending, and sometimes, when far gone, we found the leather so rotten the stitches would not hold. Greeley is so rotten that nothing can be done with him. He is not truthful; the stitches all tear out.”¹⁸¹ Several months later, speaking of Greeley’s unwillingness to allow the publication of a lightly edited version of their correspondence, Lincoln offered a less harsh judgment: “In some respects Mr. Greeley is a great man, but in many others he is wanting in common sense.”¹⁸²

When some of the correspondence nonetheless appeared in newspapers, Greeley was made to look foolish as he deceitfully tried to blame Lincoln for the misunderstanding. Radicals praised the “to whom it may concern” letter as “one of the most dignified and appropriate acts in the records of the war.” The Radical Congregational minister Jacob M. Manning told his Boston flock that the president “exactly struck the pulse-beat of the nation in his note ‘to whom it may concern’ which

¹⁸⁰ Lincoln to Henry J. Raymond, Washington, 15 August 1864, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 8:494.

¹⁸¹ Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 2:172 (entry for 19 August 1864).

¹⁸² Joseph E. McDonald, interview in the Pittsburgh Commercial, n.d, copied in the New York Times, 28 December 1882.

so effectually demolished some would-be negotiators.”¹⁸³ The Philadelphia Bulletin praised Lincoln for showing “wisdom, humanity, and genuine patriotism.”¹⁸⁴ From Kansas, Mark W. Delahay reported to Lincoln that the document “was a fortunate thing; it has disarmed a class of Democrats of one important weapon, all who preached up, that you would not be for, or yield your assent to an honorable peace.”¹⁸⁵

Lincoln did not escape unscathed, however. Conservatives objected that he was transforming a war to preserve the Union into an abolitionist crusade. The Democratic Cincinnati Enquirer called the letter “a finality, which . . . will preclude any conference for a settlement. Every soldier . . . that is killed, will lose his life not for the Union, the Stars and Stripes, but for the negro.”¹⁸⁶ To the Detroit Free Press, it was proof positive that Lincoln was “bound hand and foot to the dogmas of the extreme abolitionists.”¹⁸⁷ George Templeton Strong deemed Lincoln’s “to whom it may concern” letter a “blunder” that “may cost him his election. By declaring that abandonment of slavery is a fundamental article in any negotiation for peace and settlement, he has given the disaffected and discontented a weapon that doubles their power of mischief.”¹⁸⁸ One of the discontented, Maryland Senator Reverdy Johnson, asked rhetorically of that letter: “could there be a refusal so insane, so reckless, so inhuman, so barbarous?”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸³ Jacob M. Manning in the Christian Advocate and Journal, 4 August 1864, in Victor B. Howard, Religion and the Radical Republican Movement, 1860-1870 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 80; Boston Daily Journal, 5 August 1864.

¹⁸⁴ Philadelphia Bulletin, n.d., copied in the New York World, 29 July 1864.

¹⁸⁵ Mark W. Delahay to Lincoln, Leavenworth, 8 August 1864, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁸⁶ Cincinnati Enquirer, 25 July 1864.

¹⁸⁷ Detroit Free Press, n.d., copied in the New York World, 29 July 1864.

¹⁸⁸ Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, eds., The Diary of George Templeton Strong, 1835-1875 (4 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1952), 3:474 (entry for 19 August 1864).

¹⁸⁹ Speech of Hon. Reverdy Johnson, of Maryland, Delivered before the Brooklyn McClellan Central Association, October 21, 1864 (Brooklyn: Brooklyn McClellan Association, 1864), 7.

Democratic newspapers called it proof positive that “our flippant, cunning undignified despot” was prosecuting the war to “liberate the negro and rivet their chains upon white freemen.”¹⁹⁰ Some conservative Republican papers were also critical.¹⁹¹ In Illinois, Democrats predicted that the letter would add 50,000 votes to their total in the fall.

Despite the criticism, Lincoln thought that his involvement in the bungled affair was worthwhile. At least, he remarked, it would “shut up Greeley, and satisfy the people who are clamoring for peace.”¹⁹² When some of those clamorers expressed dismay at his insistence on abolition as a precondition for peace, he said: “there has never been a time since the war began when I was not willing to stop it if I could do so and preserve the Union, and earlier in the war I would have omitted some of the conditions of my note to the rebel Commissioners, but I had become satisfied that no lasting peace could be built up between the States in some of which there were free and in others slave institutions, and, therefore, I made the recognition of the abolition of slavery a sine qua non.”¹⁹³

In early August, Lincoln solemnly assured George M. Gill, a member of the Baltimore city council who had four sons in the army, “that he would never consent to an armistice, or to peace, or any other terms but the explicit abolition of slavery in all the Southern States; that he was satisfied that if any other candidate except himself should be elected, that the result of such an election would be an immediate armistice, which would

¹⁹⁰ Reading, Pennsylvania, Gazette and Democrat, 30 July 1864, and Johnstown, Pennsylvania, Democrat, 17 August 1864, in Arnold M. Shankman, The Pennsylvania Antiwar Movement, 1861-1865 (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1980), 180.

¹⁹¹ Troy, New York, Daily Whig, n.d., copied in the La Crosse, Wisconsin, Daily Democrat, 19 August 1864.

¹⁹² Noah Brooks, Abraham Lincoln and the Downfall of American Slavery (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1894), 402.

¹⁹³ Joseph E. McDonald, interview in the Pittsburgh Commercial, n.d, copied in the New York Times, 28 December 1882.

be followed by peace; that he considered peace, without the abolition of slavery, to be a great deal worse calamity than a separation of the South from the North would be; that, in plain terms, he preferred such a separation to a peace which would leave the South in the enjoyment of that institution, and that therefore he felt it to be his duty to oppose, by all means in his power, the election of any other candidate, and that he intended to do so.”

He added “that he was determined to prosecute the war with all the means at his command till the rebels were conquered or exterminated, even if it took four years more.”¹⁹⁴

Lincoln’s moral sense dictated this bold insistence on emancipation as a basis for peace. If he had been motivated by political expediency alone, he could simply have avoided mentioning the slavery issue; he knew that the Confederates would reject any peace terms denying them independence.¹⁹⁵

While Greeley went about his abortive mission in Canada, another peace effort was being undertaken in Richmond. It was the brainchild of Colonel James F. Jacquess, a Methodist minister commanding the 73rd Illinois regiment. In 1863, he had obtained from General Rosecrans a furlough, which Lincoln approved, in order to consult with Jefferson Davis. When the Confederate president learned that Jacquess had no authorization to speak for the administration, he refused to see him. (Lincoln approved a similar mission in the fall of 1863, undertaken by his chiropodist and trouble shooter, Issacher Zacharie,

¹⁹⁴ Baltimore correspondence, 17 August, New York Daily News, n.d., copied in the National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 24 September 1864.

¹⁹⁵ Michael Vorenberg, “‘The Deformed Child’: Slavery and the Election of 1864,” Civil War History 47 (2001):248.

who did meet with Confederate cabinet members. The details of this venture are murky, and nothing came of it.)¹⁹⁶

Though Jacquess's sojourn in the Confederacy proved futile, the colonel managed to win the sympathy of a journalist, James R. Gilmore, who wrote under the pen name Edmund Kirke. A year later, when those two men requested official permission to repeat the experiment, Lincoln granted them a pass but no official sanction to negotiate on his behalf. They met with Davis, who said that no terms were acceptable save complete independence for the Confederacy.¹⁹⁷ (Here Davis blundered, for if he had hinted that a negotiated settlement were possible, he might well have jeopardized Lincoln's reelection chances.)¹⁹⁸ When Gilmore reported this conversation to Lincoln, the president saw at once that it would help nullify criticism of his handling of the Greeley mission. He told Gilmore that "it is important that Davis's position should be known at once. It will show the country that I didn't fight shy of Greeley's Niagara business without a reason This may be worth as much to us as half a dozen battles." Charles Sumner, who was present at the interview, suggested that Gilmore write a brief account of his mission for a Boston paper and a fuller account for the Atlantic Monthly. Lincoln concurred, and on July 22 the Boston Transcript carried Gilmore's report, which closely resembled the one prepared by Judah P. Benjamin, the Confederate secretary of state. The Atlantic Monthly ran a longer version in September. Both items were widely copied in the Northern press.

¹⁹⁶ Fred Harrington, "A Peace Mission of 1863," American Historical Review 46 (1940):76-86; Bertram W. Korn, American Jewry and the Civil War (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1951), 194-202. Zacharie was widely condemned as a corrupt braggart, a fixer, and a spy working on behalf of Seward. Philip Ripley to Manton Marble, New Orleans, 25 June 1863, Marble Papers, Library of Congress; "Corn Cutting Extraordinary," galley proofs of an undated editorial in the New York World, *ibid*.

¹⁹⁷ Lester L. Swift, "Col. Jacquess' Second Peace Mission," Lincoln Herald 71 (1969):3-13.

¹⁹⁸ Larry E. Nelson, Bullets, Ballots, and Rhetoric: Confederate Policy for the United States Presidential Contest of 1864 (University: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 173.

“We can negotiate only with the bayonet,” Gilmore assured his readers. “We can have peace and union only by putting forth all our strength, crushing the Southern armies, and overthrowing the Southern Government.”¹⁹⁹

On July 25, Lincoln wrote a letter to Abram Wakeman intended for the eyes of James Gordon Bennett, whose New York Herald proclaimed that the Niagara Manifesto had doomed Lincoln’s reelection chances. Though the president believed that it was “important to humor the Herald,” he would not invite the editor to the White House, evidently because he shared John Hay’s view that Bennett was “too pitchy to touch.”²⁰⁰ (When it was suggested that Bennett be asked to call at the Executive Mansion, the president hesitated, saying: “I understand Mr. Bennett has made a great deal of money, some say not very properly; now he wants me to make him respectable.” Since Lincoln had never invited William Cullen Bryant or Horace Greeley, he refused to extend Bennett a special invitation. If, however, the editor wished to visit the White House, he would be received.)²⁰¹ But as the political skies darkened that summer, Lincoln grew more willing to accommodate Bennett. In his letter to Wakeman, the president contended that Jefferson Davis had made no bona fide peace feelers: “The men of the South, recently (and perhaps still) at Niagara Falls, tell us distinctly that they are in the confidential employment of the rebellion; and they tell us as distinctly that they are not empowered to offer terms of peace. Does any one doubt that what they are empowered to do, is to assist in selecting

¹⁹⁹ Edmund Kirke [James R. Gilmore], “A Suppressed Chapter of History,” Atlantic Monthly, April 1887, 435-48; James R. Gilmore, Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War (Boston: L. C. Page, 1898), 289.

²⁰⁰ Burlingame and Ettlinger, eds., Hay Diary, 230 (entry for 23 September 1864).

²⁰¹ Swett to Herndon, Chicago, 17 January 1866, in Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 164.

and arranging a candidate and a platform for the Chicago convention? Who could have given them this confidential employment but he who only a week since declared to Jaquess and Gilmore that he had no terms of peace but the independence of the South – the dissolution of the Union? Thus the present presidential contest will almost certainly be no other than a contest between a Union and a Disunion candidate, disunion certainly following the success of the latter.” In closing, Lincoln hinted that Bennett might be rewarded if he supported the Republican ticket: “The issue is a mighty one for all people and all time; and whoever aids the right, will be appreciated and remembered.”²⁰²

Wakeman read this letter to Bennett, who said, “after some moments of silence, that so far as it related to him, ‘it did not amount to much.’” The editor clearly wanted a more specific pledge of a quid pro quo. Earlier in the war he had offered the government a ship of his. To help close a deal between the president and the Herald, Wakeman suggested as intermediary William O. Bartlett, a well-known New York lawyer and journalist whom he called “a curious genius.”²⁰³

Lincoln was eager to enlist the support of the cynical, egocentric Bennett, who had been trumpeting Grant while sneering at the president as an “imbecile joker,” the “head ghoul,” a “Political abolitionist failure,” and condemning his “nigger-worshipping policy.”²⁰⁴ Iowa Senator James Harlan told John Hay “that Bennett’s support is so important especially considered as to its bearing on the soldier vote that it would pay to offer him a foreign mission.”²⁰⁵ Horace Greeley concurred, telling Bartlett that “if the

²⁰² Lincoln to Wakeman, Washington, 25 July 1864, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:461.

²⁰³ Wakeman to Lincoln, New York, 12 August 1864, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁰⁴ New York Herald, 1 February 1864.

²⁰⁵ Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 229 (entry for 23 September 1864).

President should see the way clear to tend to the Editor of the Herald some important diplomatic post in recognition of his services to the country in sustaining the Union at all hazards, but especially in upholding the Draft, I think a very good and extensive influence would thereby be exerted.”²⁰⁶ Also working behind the scenes was Mrs. Lincoln, who in August paid a call on Bennett’s wife in New York. The two women had been friendly, and this meeting helped facilitate the Herald’s change of editorial course.

Bartlett shuttled back and forth between Bennett and Lincoln. On November 1, Bartlett told the president: “There are but few days now before the election. If Mr. Bennett is not certainly to have the offer of the French Mission, I want to know it now. It is important to me.” According to Bartlett, Lincoln “concluded with the remark that in regard to the understanding between him and me, about Mr. Bennett, he had been a 'shut pan, to everybody'; and that he expected to do that thing (appoint you to France) as much as he expected to live. He repeated: ‘I expect to do it as certainly as I do to be reelected myself.’”²⁰⁷ This was somewhat curious, for the incumbent minister to France, William L. Dayton, had no intention of resigning. Lincoln may have planned to replace him after the election.

During the final week of the campaign, Bennett toned down his criticism of Lincoln but did not endorse him, merely telling readers of the Herald that it made little difference how they voted. The editor believed that he could best help the president simply by not mentioning him in the paper. In February 1865, Bennett was offered the French post made vacant by the death of William Dayton two months earlier. He turned it

²⁰⁶ Greeley to W. O. Bartlett, New York, 30 August 1864, Greeley Papers, New York Public Library.

²⁰⁷ Oliver Carlson, The Man Who Made the News: James Gordon Bennett (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1942), 370.

down, for he craved recognition and deference more than a diplomatic assignment.²⁰⁸

When sounded out in the fall about his willingness to back the Republican ticket, the self-styled “Napoleon of the American Press” asked: “Will I be a welcome visitor at the White House if I support Mr. Lincoln?”²⁰⁹ Bennett was doubtless gratified that he had been offered a more prestigious post than any tendered to rivals like Horace Greeley, Henry J. Raymond, James Watson Webb, and William Cullen Bryant.²¹⁰

When news of the bargain leaked out, Gideon Welles was disgusted at Lincoln’s willingness to give the French mission to “an editor without character for such an appointment, whose whims are often wickedly and atrociously leveled against the best men and the best causes, regardless of honor or right.”²¹¹

REACHING THE NADIR: THE BLIND MEMORANDUM

On August 23, the despairing Lincoln wrote one of his most curious documents, a memorandum revealing his belief that a Democratic victory was likely: “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.”²¹² He folded and sealed this

²⁰⁸ W. O. Bartlett to Lincoln, New York, 20 October 1864, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress; John J. Turner, Jr., and Michael D’Innocenzo, “The President and the Press: Lincoln, James Gordon Bennett, and the Election of 1864,” Lincoln Herald 76 (1974): 63-69; Douglas Fermer, James Gordon Bennett and the New York Herald: A Study of Editorial Opinion in the Civil War Era, 1854-1867 (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986).

²⁰⁹ Burlingame and Ettlinger, eds., Hay Diary, 230 (entry for 23 September 1864).

²¹⁰ James L. Crouthamel, Bennett’s New York Herald and the Rise of the Popular Press (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1989), 148.

²¹¹ Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 2:259 (entry for 16 March 1865).

²¹² Memorandum, 23 August 1864, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:514.

document and then, inexplicably, asked his cabinet to sign it without knowing its contents. It became known as the “blind memorandum.” Lincoln may have feared that its contents would be leaked to the press if the cabinet had been allowed to read it.

Four days earlier, Lincoln had explained his pessimism to Commissioner of Indian Affairs William P. Dole and a pair Wisconsin Republican leaders, Judge Joseph T. Mills and Alexander W. Randall. He assured them that “there is no program intended by the democratic party but that will result in the dismemberment of the Union.” When his visitors objected that George McClellan would probably be the Democratic nominee and he was “in favor of crushing out the rebellion,” Lincoln replied that the “slightest acquaintance with arithmetic will prove to any man that the rebel armies cannot be destroyed with democratic strategy. It would sacrifice all the white men of the north to do it. There are now between 1 & 200 thousand black men now in the service of the Union. These men will be disbanded, returned to slavery & we will have to fight two nations instead of one. I have tried it. You cannot concilliate the South, when the mastery & control of millions of blacks makes them sure of ultimate success. You cannot concilliate the South, when you place yourself in such a position, that they see they can achieve their independence. The war democrat depends upon conciliation. He must confine himself to that policy entirely. If he fights at all in such a war as this he must economise life & use all the means which God & nature puts in his power. Abandon all the posts now possessed by black men surrender all these advantages to the enemy, & we would be compelled to abandon the war in 3 weeks. We have to hold territory. Where are the war democrats to do it. The field was open to them to have enlisted & put down this rebellion by force of arms, by concilliation, long before the present policy was inaugurated. There

have been men who have proposed to me to return to slavery the black warriors of Port Hudson & Olustee to their masters to conciliate the South. I should be damned in time & in eternity for so doing. The world shall know that I will keep my faith to friends & enemies, come what will. My enemies say I am now carrying on this war for the sole purpose of abolition. It is & will be carried on so long as I am President for the sole purpose of restoring the Union. But no human power can subdue this rebellion without using the Emancipation lever as I have done. Freedom has given us the control of 200,000 able bodied men, born & raised on southern soil. It will give us more yet. Just so much it has sub[t]racted from the strength of our enemies, & instead of alienating the south from us, there are evidences of a fraternal feeling growing up between our own & rebel soldiers. My enemies condemn my emancipation policy. Let them prove by the history of this war, that we can restore the Union without it.”²¹³

These remarks were recorded in the diary of Judge Mills, who had expected to find Lincoln little more than a joker. Instead, the president impressed him as “a man of deep convictions,” the “great guiding intellect of the age,” whose “Atlantian shoulders were fit to bear the weight of [the] mightiest monarchies.” Lincoln’s “transparent honesty, his republican simplicity, his gushing sympathy for those who offered their lives for their country, his utter forgetfulness of self in his concern for his country” made him seem to the judge “Heaven[’]s instrument to conduct his people thro[ugh] this red sea of blood to a Canaan of peace & freedom.”²¹⁴

²¹³ Interview with Alexander W. Randall and Joseph T. Mills, 19 August 1864, Basler ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:506-7.

²¹⁴ Interview with Alexander W. Randall and Joseph T. Mills, 19 August 1864, Basler ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:506-7.

In November, Lincoln read his August 23 memo to the cabinet and explained its genesis. “[Y]ou will remember that this was written at a time (6 days before the Chicago nominating convention) when as yet we had no adversary, and seemed to have no friends,” he said. “I then solemnly resolved on the course of action indicated above. I resolved, in case of the election of General McClellan[,] being certain that he would be the Candidate, that I would see him and talk matters over with him. I would say, ‘General, the election has demonstrated that you are stronger, have more influence with the American people than I. Now let us together, you with your influence and I with all the executive power of the Government, try to save the country. You raise as many troops as you possibly can for this final trial, and I will devote all my energies to assisting and finishing the war.’”

Seward remarked, “And the General would answer you ‘Yes, Yes’; and the next day when you saw him again & pressed these views upon him he would say, ‘Yes – yes’ & so on forever and would have done nothing at all.”

“At least,” Lincoln replied, “I should have done my duty and have stood clear before my own conscience.”²¹⁵

JOHN BROWN’S RAID REDIVIVUS: LINCOLN RECRUITS FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Above all, Lincoln quite rightly feared that a Democratic victory would mean the preservation of slavery. To meet that contingency, he wanted to gather as many slaves as possible under the tent of freedom. The Emancipation Proclamation would liberate all who had escaped to Union lines by March 4, 1865. In August, Lincoln told Colonel John

²¹⁵ Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 248 (entry for 11 November 1864).

Eaton, superintendent of freedmen in the department of the Tennessee and the state of Arkansas, “that he wished the ‘grapevine telegraph’” which kept slaves informed about the progress of the war “could be utilized to call upon the Negroes of the interior peacefully to leave the plantations and seek the protection of our armies.” When Eaton mentioned Frederick Douglass’s recent criticism of administration policy, Lincoln modestly asked if Douglass might be persuaded to come to the White House for a discussion. Eaton, who knew Douglass well, facilitated the meeting.

On August 19, Lincoln and Douglass met for the second time. Among other things, they discussed a recent letter that the president had drafted but not sent to a War Democrat, Charles D. Robinson, who had criticized the Niagara Manifesto. Defending that document, the president in his letter to Robinson appeared to renege on its insistence that abolition would be a prerequisite for peace. In a lawyerly quibble, he maintained that “it seems plain that saying re-union and abandonment of slavery would be considered, if offered, is not saying that nothing else or less would be considered, if offered.” He reminded Robinson that “no one, having control of the rebel armies, or, in fact, having any influence whatever in the rebellion, has offered, or intimated a willingness to, a restoration of the Union, in any event, or on any condition whatever. . . . If Jefferson Davis wishes, for himself, or for the benefit of his friends at the North, to know what I would do if he were to offer peace and re-union, saying nothing about slavery, let him try me.” He then summarized the arguments he made to his Wisconsin visitors that same day: “I am sure you would not desire me to say, or to leave an inference, that I am ready, whenever convenient, to join in re-enslaving those who shall have served us in consideration of our promise. As matter of morals, could such treachery by any

possibility, escape the curses of Heaven, or of any good man? As matter of policy, to announce such a purpose, would ruin the Union cause itself. All recruiting of colored men would instantly cease, and all colored men now in our service, would instantly desert us. And rightfully too. Why should they give their lives for us, with full notice of our purpose to betray them?" The employment of black troops "is not a question of sentiment or taste, but one of physical force, which may be measured, and estimated as horsepower, and steam power, are measured and estimated. And by measurement, it is more than we can lose, and live. Nor can we, by discarding it, get a white force in place of it. There is a witness in every white mans bosom that he would rather go to the war having the negro to help him, than to help the enemy against him."²¹⁶

While he heartily agreed with Lincoln's arguments regarding the importance of black soldiers, Douglass emphatically objected to the implied backsliding on emancipation as a sine qua non for peace. He urged the president not to send the letter to Robinson, for it "would be given a broader meaning than you intend to convey; it would be taken as a complete surrender of your anti-slavery policy, and do you serious damage. In answer to your Copperhead accusers, your friends can make the argument of your want of power, but you cannot wisely say a word on that point."²¹⁷ Taking that advice, Lincoln decided to leave the missive in his desk, unsigned and unsent. He may also have been influenced by Dole and Randall, who had criticized the letter.

(Yet the gist of the Robinson letter leaked out when Henry J. Raymond, after conferring with Lincoln, wrote in the New York Times that the president "did say that he

²¹⁶ Lincoln to Charles D. Robinson, Washington, 17 August 1864, draft, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:500.

²¹⁷ Douglass to Theodore Tilton, Rochester, 15 October 1864, in Philip S. Foner, ed., The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass (4 vols.; New York: International Publishers, 1950), 3:423.

would receive and consider propositions for peace coming with proper authority, if they embraced the integrity of the Union and abandonment of slavery. But he did not say the he would not receive them unless they embraced both these conditions.” The editor of the Albany Evening Journal ran a similar report of a conversation with Lincoln. The Democrats sneered at the president’s evident waffling as “the dodge of a political trickster.”)²¹⁸

Lincoln had not meant to suggest that he would abandon emancipation; his “try me” dare was merely a ploy to make it clear that the Confederates would accept nothing short of independence. While a retraction of his antislavery pledge might gain him some support from Conservatives, he said it would “lose ten times as much on the other side.”²¹⁹

Turning to the danger presented by a Democratic victory, Lincoln told Douglass that the “slaves are not coming so rapidly and so numerously to us as I had hoped.” (The situation had changed since 1862, when he had informed Orville Browning that the flood of escaped slaves posed a significant problem.)

Douglass “replied that the slaveholders knew how to keep such things from their slaves, and probably very few knew of his Proclamation.”

With “great earnestness and much solicitude,” the president said: “I want you to set about devising some means of making them acquainted with it, and for bringing them into our lines.” (In a letter written days after their conversation, Douglass referred to the president’s “suggestion that something should be speedily done to inform the slaves in the Rebel states of the true state of affairs in relation to them” and “to warn them as to

²¹⁸ New York World, 15, 19 August 1864.

²¹⁹ Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 238 (entry for 11 October 1864).

what will be their probable condition should peace be concluded while they remain within the Rebel lines: and more especially to urge upon them the necessity of making their escape.”) Months later, Douglass recalled that Lincoln’s words that day “showed a deeper moral conviction against slavery than I had ever seen before in anything spoken or written by him.” Lincoln said: "Douglass, I hate slavery as much as you do, and I want to see it abolished altogether.”²²⁰ The black orator agreed to help organize an effort to recruit a band of black scouts “whose business should be somewhat after the original plan of John Brown, to go into the rebel states, beyond the lines of our armies, and carry the news of emancipation, and urge the slaves to come within our boundaries.”²²¹

Douglass also asked Lincoln to discharge his ailing son Charles from the army. "Now, Mr. President – I hope I shall not presume to[o] much upon your kindness – but I have a very great favor to ask. It is not that you will appoint me General Agent to carry out the Plan now proposed – though I would not shrink from that duty – but it is, that you will cause my son Charles R Douglass . . . now stationed at 'Point Lookout' to be discharged – He is now sick – He was the first colored volunteer from the State of New York – having enlisted with his Older Brother in the Mass- 54th partly to encourage enlistments – he was but 18. When he enlisted – and has been in the service 18. months. If your Excellency can confer this favor – you will lay me under many obligations[.]”²²² Lincoln granted the request for Charles’s discharge, but nothing came of the plan to create a kind of underground railroad encouraging slaves to flee to freedom.

²²⁰ Douglass, speech at Rochester, 18 April 1865, Washington Daily Morning Chronicle, 27 April 1865.

²²¹ Douglass to Theodore Tilton, Rochester, 15 November 1864, in Foner, ed., Life and Writings of Douglass, 3:422-424.

²²² Douglass to Lincoln, 29 August 1864, unpublished letter in the National Archives, New York Times, 16 February 2002.

After the interview at the White House, Douglass excitedly told General Eaton that the president “treated me as a man; he did not let me feel for a moment that there was any difference in the color of our skins! The President is a most remarkable man. I am satisfied now that he is doing all that circumstances will permit him to do.” The feeling was mutual, for Lincoln told Eaton “that considering the conditions from which Douglass rose, and the position to which he had attained he was, in his judgment, one of the most meritorious men in America.”²²³

NO BACKSLIDING: COMMITMENT TO EMANCIPATION REAFFIRMED

Douglass was not the only one fearful that Lincoln might backslide on his commitment to abolition. In Henry J. Raymond’s letter of August 22, he had urged the president “to appoint a Commission, in due form, to make distinct proffers of peace to Davis, as the head of the rebel armies, on the sole condition of acknowledging the supremacy of the Constitution, – all other questions to be settled in convention of the people of all the States.” To make such “an offer would require no armistice, no suspension of active war, no abandonment of positions, no sacrifice of consistency.” Raymond predicted that if “the proffer were accepted (which I presume it would not be,) the country would never consent to place the practical execution of its details in any but loyal hands, and in those we should be safe.” On the other hand, if “it should be rejected, (as it would be,) it would plant seeds of disaffection in the South, dispel all the delusions about peace that prevail in the North, silence the clamorous & damaging falsehoods of the opposition, take the wind completely out of the sails of the Chicago craft, reconcile

²²³ John Eaton, Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen: Reminiscences of the Civil War with Special Reference to the Work for the Contrabands and Freedmen of the Mississippi Valley (New York: Longmans, Green, 1907), 175-76.

public sentiment to the War, the draft, & the tax as inevitable necessities, and unite the North as nothing since firing on Fort Sumter has hitherto done.”²²⁴

When word of this advice leaked out, Charles Eliot Norton asked incredulously: “What does Raymond mean? . . . Is he hedging for a reconstruction with slavery? If so he is more shortsighted and more unprincipled than I believed.”²²⁵ Defending the president’s insistence on the “abandonment of slavery” in the Niagara Manifesto, Charles A. Dana told Raymond that if Lincoln “had left slavery out of his letter, he would have done himself and his party a great injury, hopelessly alienating the great part of the Radicals. As you are very well aware, he is more or less under suspicion of a want of earnestness upon this supreme question and if in such a communication he had omitted all reference to it, people would have taken for granted that he was willing to sacrifice his emancipation proclamation, and let the Southern States come back with their old power.”²²⁶

Along with the rest of the Republican national executive committee, Raymond called at the White House on August 25. Nicolay reported that “Hell is to pay. The N. Y. politicians have got a stampede on that is about to swamp everything. . . . Everything is darkness and doubt and discouragement. Our men see giants in the airy and unsubstantial shadows of the opposition, and are about to surrender without a fight. I think that today and here is the turning-point in our crisis. If the President can infect R[aymond] and his committee with some his own patience and pluck, we are saved.” Three days later,

²²⁴ Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

²²⁵ Charles Eliot Norton to George William Curtis, Ashfield, Massachusetts, 24 July 1864, Sara Norton and M. A. De Wolfe Howe, eds., Letters of Charles Eliot Norton (2 vols.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 1:274.

²²⁶ Dana to Raymond, Washington, 26 July 1864, George Jones Papers, New York Public Library.

Nicolay rejoiced that Lincoln and the cabinet had convinced Raymond “that they already thoroughly considered and discussed his proposition; and upon showing him their reasons, he very readily concurred with them in the opinion that to follow his plan of sending Commissioners to Richmond, would be worse than losing the Presidential contest – it would be ignominiously surrendering it in advance.” (Lincoln said Raymond’s plan to send a commission to Richmond “would be utter ruination” and that “our military prospects and situation would not allow it [an armistice] at present.”) According to Nicolay, Raymond and his colleagues “found the President and Cabinet wide awake to all the necessities of the situation, and went home much encouraged and cheered up.”²²⁷

Lincoln did not show his visitors a letter that he had drafted to Raymond the previous day instructing the editor to “proceed forthwith and obtain, if possible, a conference for peace with Hon. Jefferson Davis, or any person by him authorized for that purpose,” to “address him in entirely respectful terms, at all events, and in any that may be indispensable to secure the conference,” to “propose, on behalf this government, that upon the restoration of the Union and the national authority, the war shall cease at once, all remaining questions to be left for adjustment by peaceful modes.” If Davis rejected this offer, then Raymond was to “request to be informed what terms, if any embracing the restoration of the Union, would be accepted” and report back to Washington. These instructions remained in the president’s desk.²²⁸ He doubtless hoped to make Davis state

²²⁷ Nicolay to John Hay, Washington, 25 August 1864; Nicolay to Therenia Bates, Washington, 28 August 1864, Burlingame, ed., With Lincoln in the White House, 152-54; H. A. Tilden to [Samuel J. Tilden], Wash[ington], 26 August 1864, Tilden Papers, New York Public Library.

²²⁸ Lincoln to Raymond, Washington, 24 August 1864, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 7:517.

unequivocally that he would accept no peace terms denying independence to the Confederacy.

Many Republicans shared Lincoln's view that any attempt to hold peace talks would be ruinous. Rumors that the administration might be willing to accept a compromise settlement were "paralyzing the Republican and the Union party," John Murray Forbes noted. He feared that if "the milk and water policy of trying to negotiate with the rebels while their armies exist is attempted, earnest men will feel that it is a mere contest for party power, and that perhaps the war Democrats may react upon the peace party, and make McClellan just as likely to save the Union as we should be." The Confederates would take advantage of a truce to "arm and make treaties with foreign nations, and negotiate with our border and Copperhead States for free trade seduction."²²⁹ Negotiating with the Confederates "means defeat."²³⁰ Forbes believed that if Lincoln had sent commissioners to Richmond, the party would have been forced to name a new ticket.²³¹

It is not clear if Lincoln seriously toyed with the idea of backsliding on emancipation. He was probably just trying to smoke out Jefferson Davis and thus undo the harm done by the Niagara Manifesto, which the Democrats reprinted under the headline "The Republican Platform." But if he did consider abandoning emancipation as a prerequisite for peace, it is not to be wondered at, for he may well have believed that if

²²⁹ Forbes to Gustavus V. Fox, Yacht Azela, bound to New Bedford, 6 September 1864, in Sarah Forbes Hughes, ed., Letters and Recollections of John Murray Forbes (2 vols.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1899), 2:102-3. Forbes asked Fox to read this letter to the president, which he did.

²³⁰ John Murray Forbes to John A. Andrew, New Bedford, 3 September 1864, and Naushon, 5 September 1864, Andrew Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

²³¹ Forbes to Charles Eliot Norton, Washington, 16 September 1864, Charles Eliot Norton Papers, Harvard University.

he insisted on it as a war aim, the Democrats would win the election. To him it may have seemed preferable to save the Union by abandoning emancipation rather than losing both reunion and abolition by insisting on the latter. If such thoughts did occur to him, his keen moral sense trumped them. He hated slavery just as he hated to renege on promises. Even if it meant his defeat, he would not abandon emancipation. Lincoln may not have been thinking along these lines, but if he was, it is noteworthy that he made his decision before the tide turned in favor of the Republicans.²³²

Gustavus Fox thought Lincoln's "playing with 'peace negotiations' in 1864 was a repetition of that profound and secretive policy which marked his course with regard to Fort Sumter in 1861. Many of the leaders, even those close to him, thought him to be a 'simple-minded man.'" Fox knew better. To him, Lincoln seemed "the deepest, the closest, the cutest, and the most ambitious man American politics has produced."²³³

In late August, John Murray Forbes, who had earlier favored postponing the Republican convention, warned that it was too late to field another candidate.²³⁴ "We cannot change our Candidate," even though the Democrats might win, he told Charles Eliot Norton. If the Peace Democrats "keep in the background & let the opposition put up some one at Chicago who can catch the votes of the war & peace opposition men we shall have a hard time in electing Lincoln. Were we free today we could nominate [John

²³² William C. Harris, Lincoln's Last Months (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1-17.

²³³ Memorandum by Fox, Washington, 29 March 1883, in Hughes, ed., Letters and Recollections Forbes, 2:105.

²³⁴ John Murray Forbes to John A. Andrew, New York, 2 September 1864, Andrew Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

A.] Dix or Butler and elect him by a strong vote.” But the time for such a change had past.²³⁵

As August drew to a close, the future looked bleak indeed.

²³⁵ Forbes to Charles Eliot Norton, Naushon, 25 August 1864, Charles Eliot Norton Papers, Harvard University.