

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 684

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

May 18, 1942

THE HAMLIN vs. JOHNSON CONTEST

The atmosphere of political primaries recalls one of the most interesting convention contests for the Vice-Presidency of the United States which has been waged during the history of American politics. The part that Mr. Lincoln played, if any, in selecting the Vice-Presidential nominee of the Baltimore Convention of the Union Party in 1864, has always been the chief point of discussion.

Several political leaders claim to have had conferences with Mr. Lincoln about the Vice-Presidential nomination and their conclusions are summarized in the following testimonies.

The Field

William M. Stone alleged he had an interview about the Vice-President with Lincoln who acknowledged that the unselfish devotion to the Union by loyal Democrats "should be recognized." Stone said, "He then in about the following order proceeded to name General B. F. Butler of Massachusetts, Joseph Holt of Kentucky, Generals John A. Dix, Daniel S. Dickinson and Lyman Tremain of New York, and Andrew Johnson of Tennessee and some others of less note. . . . He shrewdly avoided expressing any preference among the number that was named over." It will be observed that the field remembered by Stone does not contain the name of the supposed favorite, Hamlin.

Hannibal Hamlin

A. J. Waterman recalled that on the night before the convention Henry Wilson came to the headquarters of the Massachusetts delegation and stated that he had "full authority to represent the views of President Lincoln privately, and that it was the earnest desire of Mr. Lincoln that Hamlin should be nominated." Noah Brooks, a Hamlin supporter, said he had "anxiously given Mr. Lincoln many opportunities to say whether he preferred the renomination of the Vice-President; but he was craftily and rigidly non-committal, knowing as he did what was in my mind concerning Mr. Hamlin." John G. Nicolay claimed that Lincoln's "personal feelings were for Hamlin's renomination."

Judge Holt

John Hay gave this version in the Nicolay and Hay biography, "For several days before the convention the President had been besieged by inquiries as to his personal wishes in regard to his associate on the ticket. He had persistently refused to give the slightest intimation of such wish. . . ." Hay also mentions that Leonard Swett, an intimate friend of Lincoln's, was at the convention urging Joseph Holt for the Vice-Presidency. Although Lincoln's secretary, Nicolay, who was at Baltimore, was acquainted with the non-committal attitude of Lincoln, he was persuaded by delegates to get a written comment on Swett's loyalty and Holt's candidacy. This was the endorsement on the back of Nicolay's note of inquiry, "Swett is unquestionably all right. Mr. Holt is a good man, but I had not heard or thought of him for the V. P. wish not to interfere about V. P. cannot interfere about platform. Convention must judge for itself."

Daniel S. Dickinson

Mr. Thurlow Weed claimed that "Daniel S. Dickinson was the choice of Mr. Lincoln and that he would have been nominated had not Mr. Curtis in presenting him to the New York delegation avowed that the object of the nomination was hostility to Mr. Seward." Mr. Curtis, however, made it plain later that it was not his purpose to injure Dickinson's prospects.

Benjamin F. Butler

It was noised about that Hamlin would not be a candidate for the office in 1864. Upon the strength of this

supposition Simon Cameron had an interview with Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, who reporter Cameron's conversation as follows:

"The President, as you know, intends to be a candidate for re-election, and as his friends indicated that Mr. Hamlin is no longer to be a candidate for Vice-President and as he is from New England, the President thinks that this place should be filled by some one from that section. . . . he hopes that you will allow your friends to cooperate with him to place you in that position."

Andrew Johnson

When Cameron's initiative in the Butler interview was smothered by Butler's refusal to accept the suggestion, Seward and his political adviser, Thurlow Weed, came to the front with the Andrew Johnson proposal. To contact Johnson they used John W. Forney as the keyman who stated that "Lincoln, on the whole, preferred Johnson first and Holt next."

S. Newton Pettis gave the most interesting version, he said: "Immediately before leaving for Baltimore I called upon Mr. Lincoln in his study and stated that I called especially to ask him whom he desired put on the ticket with him as Vice-President. He leaned forward, and in a low but distinct tone of voice said, 'Governor Johnson of Tennessee.'"

Gideon Welles in commenting on the preliminaries in the Vice-President contest stated that there seemed to be no leading candidate up to the time of the convention and suggested, "Mr. Lincoln felt the delicacy of his position and was, therefore, careful to avoid the expression of any opinion, but it was known to those who enjoyed his confidence that he appreciated the honesty, integrity, and self-sacrificing patriotism of Andrew Johnson of Tennessee."

Charles A. Tinker, a telegraph operator in Washington at the time of the convention of New York, claimed that when Abraham Lincoln was in the War Department telegraph office when he received the message announcing Johnson had been nominated for Vice-President, and that he soliloquized aloud, "Well, I thought possibly he might be the man. Perhaps he is the best man, but—" To Tinker, at least, it seemed, inasmuch as Lincoln opened his important reaction to Johnson's nomination with "perhaps" and closed it with "but" that he was not the author and promoter of Johnson's candidacy.

Aside from Lincoln's own endorsement on the Nicolay note he clearly stated he did not wish to interfere with the nomination. There is one further testimony which should at least establish Lincoln's attitude toward the prospective nominees. Less than one month after the Baltimore Convention Lincoln had occasion to rebuke John L. Scripps for using his official power to try and defeat Mr. Arnold's nomination to Congress. Lincoln wrote to Scripps, "The correct principle, I think, is that all our friends should have absolute freedom of choice among our friends. My wish, therefore, is that you will do just as you think fit with your own suffrage in the case, and not constrain any of your subordinates to (do) other than (as) he thinks fit with his. This is precisely the rule I inculcated and adhered to on my part, when a certain other nomination, now recently made, was being canvassed for."

In writing this letter to Scripps it seems most likely that the nominations before the convention at Baltimore and his own attitude toward the many candidates for the Vice-Presidency were still fresh in his mind. It is almost unthinkable that Abraham Lincoln would secretly advocate the selection of any one of the several candidates who claimed through their friends to have the sanction of the President.