

LINCOLN LORE

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POLITICAL PUZZLE OF 1864

INTRODUCTORY

About a year ago Lincoln Lore presented a series of monographs under the general caption "Steps to the Wigwam." This was an attempt to set forth in chronological order certain events which revealed Abraham Lincoln's strategy in gaining the Republican nomination for the presidency in 1860. As a companion project, preliminaries to Lincoln's reelection or the "Political Puzzle of 1864" would seem to offer an opportunity to present, chronologically, certain movements which either contributed to, or had a tendency to thwart, Lincoln's political objective.

The disintegration of the Union and the breaking out of Civil War shortly after Lincoln's inauguration in 1861 completely disrupted all political alliances. The four parties in the field during the 1860 campaign for the presidency began to shift positions, make new pronouncements, or disappear from the scene entirely. The contest of arms, for the time being, smothered the interest in the ballot box.

The first of these political groups to be submerged by war was the Constitutional Union Party. John Bell, the presidential nominee, led his southern associates into the Confederacy and vice presidential candidate, Edward Everett, and his constituency threw their support to the Union. This was the end of the die hard remnants in the Old Line Whig party.

The already divided Democrats were more deeply embroiled by the withdrawal from the Union of the southern states and the further challenge of loyalty to the Union in the north. The Douglas wing of the party lost their dynamic leader by death within three months after the inaugural but not until he had placed himself squarely behind the administration in its effort to preserve the Union.

The Buchanan element in the Democratic party of 1860 which had nominated Buchanan's Vice President John C. Breckenridge as a standard bearer to advance the colors against Douglas, as well as Lincoln and Bell, had found its chief strength in the states which had now withdrawn from the Union.

The Republican body coming into power for the first time also had its homogeneity disturbed by the influx of loyal adherents to the Union from the disintegrating parties. It found itself rapidly developing new characteristics and its pre-election motto "no extension of slavery" was changed to "the Union must be preserved." It also changed its name from "Republican" to "Union" and in some instances "Unconditional Union."

This political chaos which became more and more a labyrinth of confused groups as time went on is best described by Senator S. C. Pomeroy in a speech delivered in the Senate of the United States as late as March 10, 1864. He said in part: "Great and radical changes are transpiring in this country. Theories of long standing are exploded and positions believed to have been well taken are abandoned—rendered obsolete by the events of a single year: From the nature of things, political parties cannot be immutable . . .

"All parties have had a hand at trying to make something out of Slavery . . . The old Whig party with its gifted and immortal leaders struck upon this rock and was rent in fragments . . . The Democratic party became ultimately the ally of the slave power and the embodiment of its interests . . . In the canvass of 1860—running two candidates, neither of whom was for freedom—the two factions struck against each other and were destroyed in the concussion . . . The mission of the Republican party was ended when its work was accomplished. That work was to stay the progress of slavery and preserve the republic domain to freedom . . .

"Partisan democracy early perished through the alliance and corruption of its leaders with slavery, partisan republicanism aiming only at the restraint of slavery, and never once asking its extinction, was shattered by the first gun aimed at Fort Sumter. *No party now exists which has ever been seen in a national convention.*"*

The speech of Pomeroy's was made by the senator in support of the "Pomeroy Circular" which he has issued as chairman of the National Executive Committee and which we will have occasion to bring before our readers in one of the monographs in the series. The chief purpose of the above excerpts, however, is to reveal how thoroughly disorganized, from the viewpoint of national politics, the various political groups were at the beginning of the Presidential election year of 1864.

The Robert Lincoln papers in the Library of Congress, now available to the editor by means of a microfilm copy, will greatly assist in placing before the reader an objective study of the many obstructions placed in the way of Lincoln's final achievement in the 1864 election. These papers are supplemented by selections from papers of the John A. Stevens, Jr., collection in the library of the New York Historical Society and other documentary data which has not been widely circulated.

The overall political picture of 1864 has little in common with the more colorful panorama of 1860. The Wigwam Convention of the Republican party might be called the highest point of interest in the entire campaign as it was a foregone conclusion that the nominee at Chicago would eventually become the President Elect. The canvass by the candidates which followed furnished but an anticlimax. Not so with the Union convention of 1864, the convention city, Baltimore, and the more obscure assembly place "Front Street Theatre" play but a minor part in the dramatic campaign which was to follow. Whereas Mr. Lincoln's election in 1860 seemed almost certain before the canvass really began, yet in the very midst of the 1864 campaign he wrote, "It seems exceedingly probable that this administration will not be reelected."

One reading the issues of Lincoln Lore dealing with "Steps to the Wigwam" may keep up with the tempo of Lincoln's political strategy by following him through the campaign of 1864 to his final triumph.

*Editor of Lincoln Lore responsible for italics.