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CHASE AND THE POMEROY CIRCULAR

(Political Puzzle of 1864 No. 3)

Senator Samuel Clarke Pomeroy, Chairman of the National Executive Committee, and Salmon Portland Chase, Secretary of the Treasury, played the leading roles in the political drama enacted during February 1864. The circular issued by Pomeroy attacking President Lincoln and advocating Mr. Chase as his successor offered the chief topic of conversation for several weeks. The candidacy of Chase, heretofore promoted under cover, was brought out into the open by the distribution of the circular.

Put forth as a prominent candidate for the presidency in 1860 Mr. Chase was never able to smother his ambition to occupy the chair of the chief executive. This desire was greatly accentuated by the encouragement of his popular and influential daughter, Kate. Apparently he was anxious to cast his lot with parties which, for the hour, seemed to be on the ascendancy. This attitude may be revealed in a tabulation of his many shifts of political interest: Whig, 1840; Liberty, 1841; Free Soil, 1848; Democratic, 1855; Republican, 1857; and Union, 1864. That this political vacillation continued is evident from a note written to Lincoln by P. Rush Plumley as late as July 16, 1864. He advised Lincoln that the Democrats would possibly nominate the ex-governor of Ohio "if they make a platform on which Chase can stand. He will step on it if they 'will let him'."

Just how early Chase started an organized effort to gain the 1864 presidential nomination of some political party is not known. However, soon after his appointment by Mr. Lincoln to the cabinet, the patronage which flowed through the office began to take on a "Chase for President" complexion. The Treasury Department soon formed the nucleus for what later became a formidable political organization. Ex-Governor Tod of Ohio on February 26, 1864 advised Mr. Lincoln, "Mr. Chase has been laboring for the past year at least with an eye single to promote his own selfish purposes, totally regardless to the consequences to the government."

Previous to April 9, 1863 Chase had been in correspondence with an anti-Lincoln political leader in New York named John A. Stevens, Jr. On the above date Chase advised Stevens, "I have written the letter you requested me to write and addressed it as directed to James A. Roosevelt Esq." Chase advised Stevens that he might think the letter "too explicit and direct" and continued "but it seems to me that the times require plainness of speech."

The presidential election year, 1864, had no sooner dawned than L. E. Chittenden, Register of the Treasury, on January 2 wrote to Stevens: "I do not feel that it would be judicious under the circumstances to have Mr. Sessions, or any one else, come here now and act as the recognized agent of Gov. Chase's immediate friends . . . cannot the matter be arranged to Mr. Greeley's entire satisfaction, by Mr. Gay." The most influential journalist back of the Chase movement was Horace Greeley.

Three days later Stevens replied to Chittenden in part as follows: "It is very unfortunate for the interests of Mr. Chase that there is any doubt about the chief justice-ship. You will not find many persons disinterested enough to battle in a cause of a chieftain who may at any moment disconnect himself from the success of that cause . . . Nor do I entirely concur in your view that Mr. Lincoln cannot be defeated in convention by any other than Mr. Chase." As early as this Chase also had his eyes on the chief justiceship anticipating the demise of the aged Taney. Chase was reluctant to openly break with Lincoln, for fear of injuring his prospects for this appointment, in case his presidential boom failed to materialize.

The candidacy of Mr. Chase was officially announced by the appearance of the Pomeroy circular, so called. It was in the mails as early as February 6. Ward H. Lamon visiting in New York wrote Mr. Lincoln under the above date that a banker, H. G. Fant, had received that very morning from Washington under the frank of Mr. Ashley, M. C. of Ohio "a most scurrilous and abusive pamphlet about you, your administration and the succession." Lamon further stated that Fant had given the circular to Leonard Swett who was leaving for Washington.

Secretary Usher wrote to R. W. Thompson on February 17 with respect to the circular: "I suppose you have seen the Pomeroy circular and have been amazed that Mr. Chase should have allowed such a paper to go to the public . . . Lincoln says but little, finds fault with none and judging from his deportment you would suppose he was as little concerned as anyone about the results."

Apparently the circular was so timed that it would reach the various political leaders throughout the country just previous to the state conventions in February. This move was primarily to forestall the selection of delegates to the national convention being instructed for Lincoln. DeWitt C. Chipman of Noblesville, Indiana enclosed in a letter to Lincoln one of the Pomeroy circulars he had received, franked by Henry Taylor Blow, M. C. from Missouri. Chipman advised Mr. Lincoln that the circular was sent to all government collectors in Indiana and he continued, "It was understood then and there that Secretary Chase would remove all who did not actively take the field for him and against you." The sequel to this move in the State of Indiana to capture the delegates at the state convention is found in a telegram sent by R. W. Thompson to Sec'y. Usher in which he states, "Convention has unanimously nominated Lincoln. The counter movement entirely a fizzle."

It was not until February 21, after some newspaper publicity had been given to the Pomeroy movement, that Chase wrote a letter of explanation to Mr. Lincoln about his part in the procedure and concluded by stating, "I would not wish to administer the Treasury Department one day without your entire confidence." This brought forth in reply one of Mr. Lincoln's most characteristic letters in which he stated in part with respect to the circular: "I have not read it, and I think I shall not. I was not shocked or surprised by the appearance of the letter, because I had had knowledge of Mr. Pomeroy's committee, and of secret issues which I supposed came from it, and of secret agents who I supposed were sent out by it, for several weeks. . . . Whether you shall remain at the head of the Treasury Department is a question which I will not allow myself to consider from any standpoint other than my judgment of the public service, and, in that view, I do not perceive occasion for a change."

Although the Pomeroy movement for Chase gradually faded out by the close of February, Simon Cameron wrote as late as March 7: "The Pomeroy circulars still continue to encumber the mails." Such letters as one written to Pomeroy by E. Perkins of Cleveland on February 24 must have informed Pomeroy of the failure of his proposal to arouse the people in favor of Chase. Perkins stated:

"We are united in both measures and men. We are in entire harmony with the great popular current which points so unmistakably to Abraham Lincoln as the Union nominee for 1864. In my judgment there are not a dozen Union men in this city who are not unequivocally for Honest Old Abe."

While we shall find a summer revival of Chase's presidential aspiration this more aggressive and exclusive movement in February to place him in the President's chair was sidetracked by the state conventions. Almost unanimously they instructed their delegates to support Abraham Lincoln for reelection in 1864.