

# LINCOLN LORE

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## THE PRE-CONVENTION OVATION FOR GRANT

(Political Puzzle of 1864 No. 6)

A significant complimentary gathering in New York City on Saturday, June 4, 1864, honoring General Grant was something more than an opportunity to congratulate him on his military achievements. Three factors warrant the conclusion that there was a political atmosphere involved: the timing of the meeting on placing it three days before the Baltimore Convention; the terminology of the resolutions prepared; and the reactions of the press. Some of the promoters at least saw the possibility of using the ovation to inaugurate a "Grant for President" boom which would sweep him on into the Union convention and overwhelm the Lincoln delegates.

As early as December 1863 the name of General Grant was put forth as a possible candidate for the Presidency. A dispatch from a Washington press correspondent dated December 11 and entitled, "The Presidential Canvass" makes this comment about Grant's availability:

"General Grant of course is spoken of, but strange to say, though the strongest man among the people, of all the candidates mentioned he has no Presidential advocates among the members of Congress here except Elihu B. Washburne of Illinois, his personal friend. General Grant before the war was an ardent Democrat, was in favor of popular sovereignty and was a friend of, and voted for, Stephen A. Douglas at the last election. During the war he has carefully refrained from committing himself to either party. . . . His political record up to this time, therefore, is perfect." The same press commentator put forth the supposition that, "The movement started in the Senate to make Grant a Lieut. General is for the purpose of getting him out of the way as a presidential candidate."

Porter L. Foy of St. Louis wrote to Maj. General F. P. Blair on January 31, 1864 a letter containing this observation: "I have just heard that Haw put the question to Grant with whom he is quite intimate, whether he would consent to be a candidate for the Presidency. He answered that under no circumstances would he be a candidate in opposition to Lincoln."

President Lincoln received a letter dated New York, May 27, 1864 from S. Newton Pettis which gave him first hand evidence of the political aspects of the proposed Grant ovation. Pettis wrote in part: "A movement is now on foot among the sore heads to get up a demonstration and a hurrah for Grant in connection with the Presidency. It is to come off soon. Circulars are now being prepared for circulation and distribution. I learned this through a gentleman of character whom I know was identified with the Pomeroy circular, or perhaps I should say, I know to be a sympathizer with the movement."

The Union Convention for many weeks had been scheduled for Baltimore on Tuesday, June 7. One factor supporting the political character of the Grant celebration, its timing, placed it on Saturday, June 4, just three days before the Baltimore gathering. This bit of strategy would allow the anti-administration forces to capitalize on any display of political strength for General Grant which might develop and have a tendency to stampeed the convention for him on the following Tuesday.

As soon as the date for the celebration was set President Lincoln received a letter inviting him to attend the occasion to which invitation he replied on June 3 as follows:

Letter to F. A. Conkling and Others

Executive Mansion, June 3, 1864.

Gentlemen: Your letter inviting me to be present at a mass-meeting of loyal citizens to be held at New York on the fourth instant, for the purpose of expressing gratitude to Lieutenant-General Grant for his signal services, was received yesterday. It is impossible for me to attend.

I approve, nevertheless, whatever may tend to strengthen and sustain General Grant and the noble armies now under his direction. My previous high estimate of General Grant has been maintained and heightened by what has occurred in the remarkable campaign he is now conducting, while the magnitude and difficulty of the task before him do not prove less than I expected. He and his brave soldiers are now in the midst of their great trial, and I trust that at your meeting you will so shape your good words that they may turn to men and guns, moving to his and their support.

Yours truly,  
A. Lincoln.

The most impressive evidence supporting the political aspects of the "ovation" is the wording of the resolution presented at the meeting. It was written by Judge C. P. Daly. An editorial in *Harper's Weekly* takes Judge Daly to task for his attitude towards the term copperheads, which he said should not be used and quite clearly associates the writer of the resolutions with the anti-administration forces. There is no direct mention of the President in the resolutions and plenty of "between the lines" inference. A typical paragraph follows:

"Resolved that having reaped little but disaster from intrusting military commands to civilians who, whatever may be their general capacity, have not the necessary military education or experience, we congratulate the country upon this change in policy and upon the fact that a responsible trust has been placed in the hands of a man who has the universal confidence of the nation."

On the day of the Grant celebration P. M. Wetmore, former secretary and later vice president of the New York Chamber of Commerce, sent to Secretary Seward a copy of the resolutions stating: "I think there is no cause to apprehend any intention of turning the proceedings to political account. Several of the most active of the committees are the faithful friends of the President."

The *New York Herald* on June 7, the day of the convention, made this comment about the delegates.

"The Grant meeting at New York on Saturday night perplexes them. 'What does it mean?' is the constant inquiry. 'Will the committee appointed there call a convention?' . . . The Lincoln men lay great stress upon the point that Grant will not allow his name to be used."

The President had occasion to write a letter to General Hooker on January 26, 1863 in which he commented: "I also believe you do not mix politics with your profession in which you are right." Lincoln probably could have made the same statement about General Grant. There is no evidence that Grant at any time during Lincoln's administrations encouraged any political build-up for himself. The element of politics which entered into the New York celebration was engineered exclusively by the anti-Lincoln constituency. Already rebuffed on three other occasions they could now add a fourth reversal in their attempt to repudiate the Lincoln administration and forestall Lincoln as the nominee of the Union Party.