

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 1127

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

November 13, 1950

THE CHICAGO DEMOCRATIC CONVENTION

(Political Puzzle of 1864 No. 10)

Abraham Lincoln's 1864 political fortunes, which were struck a severe blow by the Wade-Davis manifesto in early August and continued to decline during the month, were rehabilitated to a large extent by the proceedings of the Democratic Convention at Chicago on August 29. The spectacle of a war candidate running on a peace platform was a comedy which many delegates to the convention could not applaud. Members of the peace faction are reported to have taken the position that "if a war man is to be nominated Lincoln is good enough for them."

The nominating of George B. McClellan for the presidency provided an adversary for Lincoln which in itself was a contributing check to Lincoln's waning popularity. The candidate-platform contrariety of the Democrats had a tendency to unite the factions among the Republicans. Henry Wilson, Massachusetts radical, advised Lincoln, "I write to say our friends are fighting up in New England. The Chicago convention has aroused them to some extent."

There seems to be a well confirmed conclusion that as early as October 6, 1862, Fernando Wood and W. H. Aspinwall had approached General George B. McClellan with respect to his availability as the Democratic candidate for the presidency in 1864. One of McClellan's friends advised him that his favorable reaction to this proposal looked like treason. Shortly after this, just following the local November elections of 1862 John Nicolay, Lincoln's private secretary, stated in a personal letter: "It is barely possible that the secession element of the Democratic Party will endeavor to make him (McClellan) a leader of an opposition party movement."

The reluctance with which many Union officers led their troops into combat at the beginning of the war caused Lincoln to take some action in the matter and on November 24, 1862 he wrote to Major John J. Key in part: "I had been brought to fear that there was a class of officers in the army, not very inconsiderable in numbers, who were playing a game not to beat the enemy when they could, on some peculiar notion as to the proper way of saving the Union and when you were proved to me, in your presence to have avowed yourself in favor of that game and did not attempt to controvert the proof, I dismissed you as an example and warning to that supposed class."

From evidence now available it appears that McClellan might well have been one of the officers "playing a game not to beat the enemy when they could" and that attitude undoubtedly had much to do with the curtailing of his military powers in 1862.

It soon became apparent that McClellan's political friends were opposed to the Lincoln administration, and this general knowledge made it difficult for the President to take any action with respect to McClellan's military inactivity without making it appear like a political thrust. The time came, however, when public sentiment demanded McClellan's removal, but even then, greatly to the detriment of the administration cause, Lincoln waited until after the November election of 1862, before complying with the public demand. By the following spring McClellan's political ambition had become generally known and on March 4, 1863 the editor of *Harper's*

Weekly stated: "Trading upon his (McClellan's) military name and popularity they (political backers) hope to make him President and use him as their tool." In the fall of 1863 at the off year elections, McClellan supported the Democratic candidate for governor of Pennsylvania, Judge G. W. Woodward, who is reported to have said: "If the Union is to be divided I want the line of separation drawn north of Pennsylvania."

Lincoln, throughout the summer of 1864, was convinced that confederate leaders taking refuge in Canada, were exerting what political influence they could on the forthcoming Democratic Convention at Chicago. The President wrote to Abraham Wakeman on July 25, 1864 a letter in which he asked this question concerning these southern politicians: "Does any one doubt that what they are empowered to do, to assist in selecting and arranging a candidate and a platform for the Chicago convention." The Lincoln Papers contain a telegram which indicates, however, that they were not pleased with either the presidential candidate or the platform, but did favor Pendleton as the vice presidential nominee and were pleased with the convention speeches.

Noah Brooks at the "expressed wish of the President" attended the convention and reported its progress in correspondence with John Nicolay. He stated in his pre-convention letter that, "It is a foregone conclusion that he (McClellan) will be nominated. The Northwestern states are not generally in his favor but a majority of New York are and a powerful outside influence is at work for him. August Belmont with plenty of money heads the McClellan interests."

An assembly of delegates known as conservatives met in convention previous to the general assembly and headed by Amos Kendall nominated McClellan as their choice, which fact indirectly put his name favorably before the convention. The Vallandigham faction or peace constituency, as reported by Brooks, "lack union on any one candidate, they are not able to present a strong front." Both groups however were in favor of an armistice. Brooks advised Nicolay that "every seat in the convention was supplied with a printed copy of an article on tract paper written by Casper Butz who appeals to the Chicago Convention to nominate Fremont." Brooks also observed that "the people vigorously applauded 'Dixie' when it was played but never once true patriotic airs."

The report of the convention proper by Brooks deals with the undercover activities in part as follows: "It had been early considered that a border state should have the Vice Presidency in the event of McClellan's nomination, but to secure the 'peace' men it was necessary to give it to Pendleton who traded for it by bringing over his forces for McClellan." The Illinois delegation according to Brooks was brought into the McClellan fold by promising Judge Catron, the seat of Chief Justice Taney, upon his resignation. Brooks claimed that Horatio Seymour was willing to sell out his dubious chance for the presidential nomination, for Seward's place in the next cabinet.

Governor Seymour, president of the convention, in his keynote speech stated in part: "The administration cannot save this Union. We can. Mr. Lincoln views many things above the Union. We put the Union first of all. He thinks a proclamation worth more than peace. We think the blood of our people more precious than the edicts of the President. There are no hindrances in our path to Union and Peace . . . Four years ago it (the Republican Party) had its birth upon this spot. Let us see that by our action it will die here where it was born."