

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 1130

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

December 4, 1950

THE FREMONT WITHDRAWAL

(Political Puzzle of 1864 No. 11)

Historians have given much attention to the withdrawal of presidential candidate, John C. Fremont, from the political campaign of 1864. Neither at the time of his nomination nor during the intervening months up to his retirement, did he have any considerable number of followers, but he did personify the opposition to the administration. His own personal hostility to Mr. Lincoln kept him in the race until the growing strength of the President swept aside nominal opposition. The fact that the announcement of Fremont's withdrawal from the contest on September 21, was followed two days later by the retirement of Montgomery Blair as Secretary of the Treasury has led many historians to support the thesis that some deal was made between the President and Fremont with Thad. Stevens presumably holding the stakes. The friends of Fremont deny this and anyone who believes in the integrity of Lincoln and then reads his reply to Stevens on this same subject will have difficulty in concluding that any preliminary promises were made.

As early as March 9, 1864 J. Woodruff wrote to Abraham Lincoln a word of warning about his retaining members of the Blair family in his cabinet. He stated: "You will be politically ruined if you hold on to the Blair tribe much longer. They never had anything to do with any one unless they left their sting. I am afraid you will find this out too late. If you will kick them out of your presence you will be our next President and otherwise you will not." Such warnings reached Lincoln periodically throughout the summer months of 1864 from the many enemies of the prominent Maryland family and there is no doubt that he realized the Blairs were a political debit long before Fremont's entrance into the contest.

It is apparent that up to the very hour of the opening of the Chicago Democratic Convention on August 29 Fremont was more or less hopeful of running against the President in 1864. With the little show of interest manifested in his candidacy by the Union Party he began to court the Democrats and when the delegates took their seats at Chicago they found in each chair a circular advocating Fremont's nomination. His failure to receive any recognition by the convention paved the way for his fading out of the political picture.

The strange procedure of the Chicago Convention which nominated a war candidate to run on a peace platform prohibited the enemies of the administration from throwing their strength to the Democrats as the influential Thurlow Weed had proposed to do. The action of the Convention caused the Astor House clique in New York City to call another meeting which attempted to bring all the forces, critical of the administration, together. Weed wrote to Seward that he had been invited to collaborate with the group that contained many of his personal enemies. He also advised the Secretary of State that the last meeting of the anti-Lincoln junto "was held last week in the house of Dudley Field. It was attended by H. Greeley, Goodwin, Wilkes, Tilman, Opdyke, Curtis, Noyes and twenty-five others of the same stripe."

Apparently one of the projects developed by the group was the sending out of a questionnaire to the governors

of the various states attempting to learn the political strength of the President. These are the three questions which were submitted:

1. In your judgment is the re-election of Mr. Lincoln a probability?
2. In your judgment can your own state be carried for Mr. Lincoln?
3. In your judgment do the interests of the Union Party, and so the country, require the substitution of another candidate in the place of Mr. Lincoln?

Governor James T. Lewis of Wisconsin answered the third question in these words: "In my judgment the interests of the Union Party, the honor of the nation, and the good of mankind demands that Mr. Lincoln should be sustained and re-elected." However as late as September 18 a note was written to Montgomery Blair and shown to Lincoln which submitted this problem: "With such men as Belmont, Sherman and Corwin and other millionaires against us you can see how easily it would be to get a corruption fund of ten or twenty million greenbacks put up by parties who if successful would gather four times the amount." On the same day Thurlow Weed wrote to Seward that: "Raymond says Mr. Lincoln is refusing to avail of an element of strength. This if it be needed is not wise, is not well, if all is right without it, then let it go. But I would hold the power until after the October elections." This reference may have been to the Fremont support.

There can be no question but what the withdrawal of Fremont and the subsequent resignation of Blair clarified the political situation and presented a united front for administration forces. While the followers of Fremont and the anti-Lincoln constituency which used Fremont as a threat were pacified, Montgomery Blair and his followers were not offended. The Lincoln Papers in the Library of Congress contained a letter written immediately after the resignation by Francis Preston Blair, Jr., in answer to a letter from his father, F. P. Blair. It hints that possibly Montgomery Blair was a voluntary sacrifice on the altar of Lincoln's political success in 1864.

Here are some of the junior F. P. Blair's reactions to his brother Judge Montgomery Blair's resignation: "Indeed before I received your letter my instinct told me that my brother had acted his part for the good of the country and for the reelection of Mr. Lincoln in which the safety of the country is involved. I believe that the failure to reelect Mr. Lincoln would be the greatest disaster that could befall the country and the sacrifice made by the judge to arrest this is so incomparatively small that I felt it would not cost him a pang to make." The brother of the retiring Postmaster General concluded his letter with this comment: "I have no fears if Mr. Lincoln's election is assured, no matter what his personal disposition may be towards us or what his political necessities may compel him to do."

Lincoln received many comments on the withdrawal of Blair and one writer suggested that Horace Greeley should be his successor. An Albany correspondent states, "Sheridan's victory is glorious but it is excelled by the removal of Blair." Still another critic felt that, "The change will be worth thousands of votes to you and our country's cause."