

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 1187

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

JANUARY 7, 1952

STANTON—A SAGACIOUS APPOINTMENT

The appointment of Edwin A. Stanton as Secretary of War was one of the most sagacious selections of personnel in the President's entire administration. With the possible exception of Seward in the cabinet and Grant in the military ranks it does not seem as if any other assignment made by Mr. Lincoln had such far reaching consequences as the naming of Stanton to succeed Cameron.

Possibly Secretary Chase deserves some credit for the President's favorable reaction towards Edwin M. Stanton for the war portfolio. Mr. Lincoln is said to have inquired of Chase if any prominent Democrat had approved his decision with respect to the Trent affair and he was advised that Stanton had upheld the action. The fact that Stanton while a member of Buchanan's cabinet had demonstrated his loyalty to the Union by opposing a proposal by the Secy. of War Floyd to withdraw troops from forts in Charleston harbor, may have been a more important consideration in Stanton's favor. On the very day of Stanton's appointment Joseph Holt, who had also been a member of Buchanan's cabinet, sent this congratulatory note to the President:

"I cannot repress the desire I feel as an American citizen to thank you, which I do from my heart, for the appointment of the present secretary of war. In him you will find a friend true as steel and a support which no pressure from within or from without will ever shake. It was my fortune to know him during the darkest days of the late administration and I think I know him well. With his great talents he is the soul of honor, of courage and of loyalty. In the progress of the terrible events, inseparable from the struggle for the life of our country in which you are heroically engaged, you can assign to Edwin M. Stanton no duty however stern, or solemn or self sacrificing, which he will not nobly and efficiently perform."

Among other letters of commendation which reached the President was one from Fernando Wood, mayor of the city of New York which must have surprised Mr. Lincoln by its complimentary tone. It follows:

"Your highly patriotic and conservative course meets with the hearty concurrence of the Democratic mayors in this state. We will sustain you fully and you may rely upon my best exertions in behalf of the administration of which you are the noble head. The late change in the cabinet was opportune. It has given the best proof of your own ability to govern and also of your executive power and will."

It would appear as if the appointment of Stanton contributed much to lining up of the loyal Democrats back of the war effort although some of the Republican leaders must have raised their eyebrows when it was observed that both McClellan, the ranking officer in the army, and Stanton, the Secretary of War, were Democrats and apparently on very intimate terms.

On January 27, less than two weeks after Stanton's appointment, the President now ready to take the offensive in the contest issued what was called war order number one. It anticipated a movement of all army and navy units with Washington's Birthday 1862 as the time when operations would begin. Lincoln designated in his order these military units which would participate:

"The army at, and close to, Fortress Monroe
The army of the Potomac
The army of Western Virginia
The army near Munfordsville, Kentucky

The army and Flotilla at Cairo and a travel force in the Gulf of Mexico."

The order apparently was issued primarily to get General McClellan to move his great army of the Potomac forward. Lincoln might have anticipated McClellan would immediately react unfavorably to the proposal and set up a counter plan which would invalidate the united effort. The letter which McClellan wrote four days later on January 31 and directed to the President and Secretary of War contained 22 closely written pages. On February 3 Lincoln replied:

"You and I have distinct and different plans for a movement of the army of the Potomac—yours to be down the Chesapeake, up the Rappahannock to Urbana, and across land to the terminus of the railroad on the York River; mine to move directly to a point on the railroad southwest of Manassas. If you will give me satisfactory answers to the following questions I will gladly yield my plan to yours:

1. Does not your plan invoke a greatly larger expenditure of time and money than mine.
2. Wherever is a victory more certain by your plan than mine.
3. Wherever is a victory more valuable by your plan than mine.
4. In fact would it not be less valuable in this that it would break no great line of the enemies communications while mine would.
5. In case of disaster would not a safe retreat be more difficult by your plan than by mine."

It is interesting to observe that McClellan, himself, earlier in the war effort had suggested the advance by the way of Manassas which Lincoln now approved and although the President must have had difficulty in understanding his general's shift of strategy he graciously withdrew his suggestions although it meant throwing out of gear the comprehensive drive he had anticipated on all fronts. Lincoln's recommendations submitted to McClellan have however, been given the preference over the generals proposal by modern military technicians.

By this time the whole north was aroused to the non-combatant attitude of McClellan and the feeling is best expressed in a letter to Lincoln by Joseph Medill who wrote as early as February 9, 1862 as follows:

"One thing more, Gen. McClellan has almost ruined your administration and the country. Keep his mischievous fingers out of the movement of the western troops. He is a do-nothing. He is thinking of the Presidency in 1864. He is placating the rebels: he is dreaming of reconstruction of the Country on the basis of the Montgomery constitution. That's what ails him. Depend upon it."

Even Stanton whose friendly gestures towards McClellan were noticeable during the early days of their association began to be less sympathetic towards McClellan's reluctance to fight. It is doubtful if Mayor Wood of New York who had already started grooming McClellan as the Democratic nominee for the presidential race in 1864 looked with so much optimism on the appointment of Stanton. While Lincoln was still having some difficulty in finding a general worthy of the great army he had brought together, he had succeeded in calling to the aid of the nation Edwin M. Stanton who became with Grant and the President the military triumvirate which preserved the Union.