ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Re-electing Lincoln: The Election of 1864

By **John C. Waugh**

It was January 1864, the opening month of the third year of the Civil War, and to war weariness was added political angst. It was a presidential election year, and as one jaded skeptic noted, "the quacking" of politicians—"the buzzing of presidential intriguing"—was audible throughout the land.[1]

"Oh, politicians! Oh, race of hell!" he snarled. A "nuisance, a curse, a plague worse than was any in Egypt—Were I a stump speaker I should day and night campaign against the politician, that luxuriant and poisonous weed in the American Eden."[2]

By January 1864, the "race of hell" in the American Eden was deep in speculation about the canvass eleven months away. There had been some thought that there ought not to be an election, not in the middle of a bloody fratricidal war. But the man with the most to lose in such an election, Abraham Lincoln, believed not holding one was inconceivable. He said: "If the rebellion could force us to forego or postpone a national election, it might fairly claim to have already conquered and ruined us."[3]

So the election was going to happen. In three decades no president except Andrew Jackson had run for or won a second term. Indeed, it had become unseemly even to try. But everybody was satisfied that Lincoln, bucking those three decades of tradition, would run again for reelection. "It is no joke," the editors of the *New York Herald* said in disgust, "that President Lincoln is a candidate for another term of four years in the White House."[4]

Lincoln was ambivalent. The thought of four more crushing years in such a thankless job held little charm for him. But the job was unfinished. And he wanted his policies and his conduct of the war—to reunify the Union and end slavery—to be endorsed and continued by the American people.

"There's many a night, Henry," he told his young reporter friend, Henry Wing of the *New York Tribune*, "that I plan to resign. I wouldn't run again now if I didn't know

---

[1] Adam Gurowski, *Diary: 1863-'64-'65*, reprint of 1866 edition(New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), 3:21, 28.
[2] Ibid., 37, 2:180,
[3] Abraham Lincoln, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 8:101.
[4] *New York Herald*, 24 November 1863.

Essential Civil War Curriculum | Copyright 2012 Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech

these other fellows couldn't save the Union on their platforms, whatever they say. I can't quit Henry. I have to stay." He also believed that it was probably best for the country not to be "swapping horses in the middle of the stream." So Lincoln was running again.[5]

The year 1862 had been an unhappy one for Lincoln and his Republican Party, both on the battlefield and at the ballot box. It had been a year of bloody military setbacks — on the Peninsula and at Fredericksburg. The people of the North were weary and impatient. The war was not being won, despite the lives and the millions of dollars being poured into it. The President had unveiled his Emancipation Proclamation in the fall of 1862, which had turned the war for reunion into a war also to free the slaves, which was not popular with many northerners, particularly Democrats.

The general discontent over the un-won war and Lincoln having made it, in part, a struggle for black freedom, had created a political near-disaster for the president and his party in the mid–term elections of 1862. The party lost congressional seats in many states that Lincoln had carried in the presidential election in 1860, and it was generally taken as a harbinger that he could not be reelected in 1864, even if he did run.

But 1863 had been a much better year. There had been Gettysburg and Vicksburg, important victories for Union arms. It looked as if the war was finally turning around. The Confederacy at last looked to be on the ropes. It still had sting, but it was hurting.

And Lincoln, one of the most astute politicians in American history, had been getting his ducks in line. By February he had virtually every delegation to his party's convention in Baltimore in June pledged to him. He enjoyed binding endorsements in Republican caucuses and legislatures in virtually every northern state.

That was not to say that everything was signed, sealed, and delivered for his reelection, however. Far from it. Lincoln's party was deeply split, and he was viewed by many politicians in it—indeed by most of them—as their worst possible candidate. Ranged against him was the radical wing, a band of powerful, angry, vindictive, unhappy, and humorless men bent on revenge against the slaveholding South.

The radicals believed, as Lincoln did, that the war must be pushed to final victory and the rebellion crushed. But Lincoln then wanted a benign, liberal reknitting of the shattered Union, as soon as possible, free from recrimination and driven by forgiveness. The radicals were disinclined to be benign, lenient, or forgiving. They were slavery-hating abolitionists for the most part, who deplored the kind–hearted president's meddlesome, soft–headed approach. They wanted vengeance against the South and its slave-holders, an immediate unconditional freeing of all slaves, and crushing retaliation

---

[5] Ida M. Tarbell, *A Reporter for Lincoln: Story of Henry E. Wing, Soldier and Newspaperman* (New York: Book League of America, 1929), 53-54; Noah Brooks*, Mr. Lincoln's Washington: Selections from the Writings of Noah Brooks, Civil War Correspondent*, ed. P. J. Staudenraus (South Brunswick, NJ: Thomas Yoseloff, 1967), 235.

against their masters—a stern, relentless, pitiless punishment. More importantly, they wanted control of what was to happen. They wanted a South reconstructed and reshaped as they wished it, not as the president wished it. They wanted forever to realign the balance of political power in the Union in favor of their Republican party.

But this well–meaning, kind–hearted, bungling president was standing in their way. It was maddening and frustrating for them. To a man, the radicals were displeased with him. They thought him wholly incompetent, too slow, too hesitant, too weak, and too soft on the South. They believed he lacked backbone, encouraged corruption, squandered millions, was a flat failure, and they were casting about deperately for somebody—anybody—to pit against him.

Lincoln's challenge was to keep his contentious party moving forward to victory, with himself still in the driver's seat at the end. It was not going to be easy. And so much depended on circumstance, particularly how things went on the battlefield.

The opposition party, the Democrats, was, if anything, even more disastrously split into warring wings. One wing, the War Democrats, agreed with Lincoln about the need to first crush the rebellion. That done, they would then shape a peace that restored the Union as it was, with slavery intact—or as they put it, "the Constitution as it is, the Union as it was, and the Negroes where they are." (Which Lincoln liked to edit to read, "the Union as it was, barring the already broken eggs.")[6]

The other wing of the party, the Peace Democrats, also called “copperheads” and likened to venemous snakes poisoning the body politic, wanted an immediate end to the struggle and peace at any price, even if it meant letting the South go its own way. As James Gordon Bennett, the sardonic, cross-eyed editor of the *New York Herald*, put the Democratic dilemma, "They have a peace leg and a war leg, but, like a stork by a frogpond, they are as yet undecided which to rest upon."[7]

The Democratic Party's problem had been relentlessly compounded by wholesale defections. Since the war, thousands of Union–loving War Democrats had jumped to the new National Union Party, which was the Republican Party temporarily reshaped, expanded, and renamed by Lincoln to rally political enemies as well as friends to the Union cause—and to broaden the party's political base.

The two wings of the Democrats still faithful to their party needed one another. It wouldn't be companionable staggering along together, screeching at one another, but it was the only way the party could hope to wrench power back from the Republicans and their highly objectionable president.

---

[6] Eugene H. Roseboom, *A History of Presidential Elections: From George Washington to Richard M. Nixon*., 3rd edition (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 191-92; Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 5:350.
[7] Douglas Fermer, *James Gordon Bennett and the New York Herald: A Study of Editorial Opinion in the Civil War Era, 1854-1867* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 266.

The Democrats had a terrible problem: How to oppose Lincoln without seeming also to oppose the war. In short it must somehow avoid being tarred with treason. Already there was that odor about their arguments; an odor the Republicans never stopped calling attention to. This is not a unique problem for an opposition party in time of war. But never was it as acute as in the election campaign that was shaping in 1864.

The stakes were high and nearly everybody interpreted the election as a watershed in the young nation's history. Elect Lincoln—or any other Union Party candidate—and you would get a war waged to the finish, the rebellion crushed, and a slaveless America. Elect the Democratic candidate and you would get concessions to the South and perhaps a permanently divided nation with slavery still intact. They were talking about what kind of country this was going to be. That is the way many people saw it.

As the election year opened a very curious thing was shaping in the schism–rent Republican, or National Union Party. One of the president's own cabinet members was running against him. Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Portland Chase, a Republican radical, had long believed that he, and not Lincoln, ought to be president.

He hadn't said as much. But he believed it and he was running, and everybody knew it. As John Hay, one of Lincoln's young secretaries, put it, Chase was busy "laying pipe," shaping his huge army of treasury agents into a powerful dedicated machine for his own candidacy.[8]

A former Ohio governor and U. S. Senator, Chase had longed to be president for years—at least since 1856 when the new Republican Party ran its first candidate for president, who was not Chase, but John Charles Frémont. And when Lincoln was nominated by the Republican Party in 1860 instead of himself, Chase believed it had been some kind of grotesque mistake. He could not conceive that the people could prefer that unknown political bumpkin over himself. Chase considered Lincoln his woeful inferior. But then Chase believed that about most people. Ohio Senator Ben Wade said of Chase, he "is a good man, but his theology is unsound. He thinks there is a fourth person in the Trinity"—those other three guys and himself.[9]

Lincoln had put Chase, an able man, in his cabinet—indeed he had put most of his rivals for the nomination in 1860 into his cabinet—and Chase had begun immediately laying the pipe to get the right man, himself, into the presidency next time. In early 1864 he was the man many radicals were looking to as their best hope for unhorsing Lincoln. And he was willing. As one observer put it the "presidency [was] glaring out of both eyes."[10]

---

[8] John Hay, *Lincoln and the Civil war in the Diaries and Letters of John Hay*, ed. Tyler Dennett (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1939), 130.
[9] Ibid., 53.
[10] Ibid., 107.

Essential Civil War Curriculum | Copyright 2012 Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech

Lincoln was fully aware of this, but professed not to care as long as Chase continued doing his job at Treasury. He told John Hay, "I suppose he will, like the bluebottle fly, lay his eggs in every rotten spot he can find." But if he becomes president, said the ever–forgiving Lincoln, "I hope we may never have a worse man."[11]

Chase certainly looked presidential. He was tall, majestic in figure, of unbending dignity and statuesque bearing. Lincoln himself said of him, "Chase is about one and a half times bigger than any other man that I ever knew." Chase rather believed that of himself. It was rumored that each morning as he squinted at himself in the mirror—he was quite nearsighted—he said, "Good morning, Mr. President."[12]

Chase had a hard time getting a grip on reality. He was self–deluded. And he didn't understand human nature, including his own. As somebody said, "Mr. Chase is near–sighted and does not see men."[13]

His not-so-secret candidacy, never publicly admitted, very publicly fell apart in February, when his followers, no more realistic than he, put out a circular that said in effect that Lincoln was unfit for president and that the logical replacement was Chase. It got wide play in the newspapers and backfired loudly. Chase denied being a party to it and was mortified—and also done for as a candidate. And it forced the radicals to cast somewhere else for somebody to unhorse the president. The Union Party convention was now only three months away, and it looked sewed up already for Lincoln. The radicals were running out of horses and out of time.

And then there were the suicide-prone Democrats. The War Democrats were committed wholesale to George Brinton McClellan, the former general–in–chief of the Union armies. Lincoln had sacked McClellan when that over–cautious general, after failing on the Peninsula, had failed to pursue and crush Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia after the Battle of Antietam. On the shelf and living in New Jersey, he had become the favorite candidate of the war wing of the Democracy. He was perfect in their eyes, the one man they might nominate whom the Republicans could not call a traitor. He was charismatic, popular, and ideologically right—a Democrat, and a Democrat who thought as they did. He was a famous general, and he was thought very electable.

McClellan, however, may have been one of the most apolitical men ever to run for president. A soldier, he hated politicians, loathed them, despised them, detested them. "Don't send any more damned politicians, out here," McClellan told one of his political advisors. "I'll snub them if they come—confound them."[14]

[11] Ibid., 110; Ibid., 100.
[12] Albert Bushnell Hart, *Salmon Portland Chase* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1899), 435; Thomas Graham and Marva Robins Belden, *So Fell the Angeles* (Boston: Little Brown, 1956), 64.
[13] Robert B. Warden, *An Account of the Private Life and Public Services of Salmon Portland Chase* (Cincinnati: Wilstach, Baldwin, 1874), 582.
[14] George B. McClellan, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan: Selected Correspondence, 1860-1865*, ed. Stephen W. Sears (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989), 586.

McClellan held the basic nineteenth century non–politician's belief—particulary common with duty-oriented generals—that no man should openly seek the presidency, but that no true man ought to refuse it either if it was spontaneously offered and he was satisfied he could do the country good by accepting it. McClellan's basic strategy all year up to his nomination in August was to deny that he was a candidate, all the while working behind the scenes to see that the nomination was spontaneously offered so that he could not refuse to accept it.

There was yet another figure in this political equation. In the Republican mix, now that Chase was gone, was John C. Frémont again. Less politically adept even than McClellan, Frémont had been the Republican Party's first candidate for president in 1856 and had lost. He was America's preeminent western explorer, one of its most heroic and romantic figures, and in the war he had been a Union general for a time. He was nearly as inept a general as he was as a politician, and Lincoln also had finally sacked him.

Frémont and the radicals had never forgiven Lincoln for this. He was a darling of the radicals, for early in the war he had unilaterally freed the slaves of all rebels in Missouri, and Lincoln had countermanded the order. Freeing slaves, particularly in a very delicately balanced border state, such as Missouri, simply wasn't an act whose time had yet come. Many radicals loved Frémont for doing this and some had hit on him as a good bet to pit against Lincoln in 1864. In early May a call went out around the country for all men who thought this way to meet in convention in Cleveland—to nominate Frémont.

The convention met on the last day of May. No senior members of the radical movement attended, however, and it was one of the most unstructured political conventions in our history, with no credentials necessary and very little agenda. Anybody could step in off the street and vote. Frémont was nominated, and accepting the nomination, he said he would abandon his candidacy only if the Union Party nominated somebody other than Lincoln.

Lincoln's National Union Party met in convention on June 7, a week after the so–called "bolters" convention in Cleveland nominated Frémont. Many radicals had tried to get the Union Party convention postponed to buy them more time to figure out how to derail the Lincoln express. But that didn't work, and by then it was too late to sidetrack the president's renomination. On the first ballot Missouri stubbornly voted for General Ulysses Simpson (Hiram Ulysses) Grant, who was not a candidate, but then came around on the second and Lincoln was nominated unanimously.

What gave the Union convention its excitement was the vice presidential nomination. And thereby hangs a disputed and very controversial tale.

One version holds that Lincoln had decided he needed a different running mate than Hannibal Hamlin of Maine, his present vice president. Lincoln had nothing against Hamlin. It was just that he believed the ticket would be stronger, more representative, and broader–based with a War Democrat on it, and Hamlin was a radical Republican. In the spring, this interpretation holds, Lincoln had taken a very favorable look at Ben Butler, a

crosseyed War Democrat from Massachusetts, who was also a major–general in the Union army.

There was probably no more inept general in the entire war than that most outrageous of political generals, Ben Butler. But there was probably also no more astute a politician in the country, excepting Lincoln himself, and at the time Butler was very popular in some quarters—not for his generalship, but for his administrative style. He was a gifted, hard–nosed operator who wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice his mother to get something done. He had a cutthroat, hang–em–high mentality that Lincoln wholly lacked, and that endeared him to the radicals. They thought him an excellent potential replacement for Lincoln.

A fellow Union general said of him, "I always think of old Ben as a cross–eyed cuttle–fish swimming about in waters of his own muddying."[15]

Butler's talent for muddying the waters was prodigious. While the military governor of New Orleans in 1862, he had outraged the South and insulted Southern chivalry by calling the ladies of the city ladies of the night. The South called him Beast Butler and Confederate President Jefferson Davis issued a standing order to execute him on the spot if captured.

But they loved Butler in the North. He was a man who got things done, acted decisively and in innovative ways. Lincoln respected him as a politician, and covertly, Butler later testified, the president offered him the vice presidency—through an intermediary. Butler reported turning the offer down, jesting that he would take the job only if the president would give him bond with sureties, in the full sum of his four years' salary that he would die or resign within three months after his inauguration. Butler swears this happened. Some doubt it.[16]

Lincoln, the story goes, then fixed on Andrew Johnson of Tennessee. Johnson was a popular War Democrat who was governor of that part of Tennessee that was now Union–held. Johnson had endured in the very furnace of the rebellion, and had proved himself courageous and able.

Unlike modern presidential candidates, Lincoln didn't announce his choice of a running mate publicly ahead of time—or ever. Such things were not done then. Indeed, nobody is sure Lincoln actually favored dumping Hamlin for Johnson, although many contemporaries testified he did—and told them personally that he did. Some of them testified that he not only favored Johnson, but sent them to the Union Party convention in

[15] Lew Wallace, *An Autobiography*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1906), 2:674.
[16] For testimony that this indeed happened, see Alexander McClure, *Abraham Lincoln and Men of War Times*: *Some Personal Recollections of War and Politics during the Lincoln Administration* (Philadelphia: Times Publishing Co., 1892), 442-43; Allen Thorndike Rice, *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time*, (New York: North American Review, 1885), 157-60; Benjamin Butler, *Autobiography and Personal Reminiscences of Major-General Benjamin F. Butler: Butler's Book*(Boston: A. M. Thayer, 1892).

Baltimore to make it happen. We don't know for certain. What we do know is that Johnson was nominated and Hamlin was dropped.

After the Baltimore convention, through the long hot summer, almost nothing went right for Lincoln. Union arms met one disappointment after another on the battlefield. Union General-in-Chief U. S. Grant failed to crush Lee's army in the Wilderness, at Spotsylvania, and Cold Harbor, and finally had settled for a debilitating siege at Petersburg. Major General William Tecumseh Sherman was making agonizingly slow progress toward Atlanta. War weariness had become almost more than the North could bear. The Republican radicals, buoyed by the general pessimism, were making plans for a new convention in Cincinnati to nominate another in Lincoln's stead.

Lincoln himself came to believe by the eve of the Democratic convention in late August that he could not win and wrote a sealed memorandum to that effect. The Democrats met in Chicago on a wave of euphoria, believing they had this thing wrapped up and won if only they could get their two warring wings united behind George McClellan on a platform on which he could comfortably stand.

The platform, of course, was the problem. The worrisome thing about it was that the platform committee was in the hands of the Peace Democrats, mainly the most infamous copperhead in the country, Clement Laird Vallandigham of Ohio. In the end the War Democrats got their nominee, McClellan, and the Peace Democrats designed the platform—and put in it a plank that turned out to be monumentally disastrous. The plank called the war a failure and demanded immediate peace negotiations with the South.

To compound this political schizophrenia a copperhead congressman from Ohio, George Hunt Pendleton, was named McClellan's running mate, to balance the ticket, and the convention adjourned. As the delegates filed out, one of them was overheard mumbling that "the nominee for president is a nobody and the candidate for vice president a putty head."[17] Whatever they were, they were the Democratic Party's ticket.

The very next day, as the War Democrats were leaving Chicago holding the repugnant war failure plank at arm's length and wondering what to do with it, an election-shaking landmark event occurred; Sherman took Atlanta.

Sherman wired Lincoln that "Atlanta is ours, and fairly won." It was a stunning stump speech, perhaps the most telling political one–liner ever uttered in American politics. In no American election before or since, have the prospects flip–flopped so suddenly, so drastically, so dramatically, and so devastatingly, following so few simple words—Atlanta is ours and fairly won.[18]

[17] Brooks, *Mr. Lincoln's Washington*, 378-79.
[18] United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies.* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 38, part 5, p. 777.

No plank ever looked as hollow as the war failure plank the Democrats had just adopted and were now stuck with. From utter pessimism the Republicans were catapulted overnight into heady optimism. This had turned the election into a whole new ball game.

McClellan, after agonizing over six rewrites of an acceptance statement, repudiated the plank but then accepted the nomination—another stunning political first. Lincoln ordered a day of national thanksgiving—not for McClellan's nomination, but for Sherman's taking of Atlanta.

By the end of September the field in both parties had been cleared and somewhat tidied up. The Republican radicals, thoroughly outmaneuvered by Lincoln, with help from Sherman, and left with no alternative, climbed reluctant and grumbling aboard his bandwagon. The Peace Democrats and copperheads, with their war failure plank repudiated by their candidate, also with nowhere else to go, came out of their sulking tents to campaign reluctantly for McClellan. And Frémont was persuaded, grudgingly, to call off his third party candidacy.

The tracks were cleared and now the mud started to fly.

The Democrats grabbed one issue after another to throw, and absolutely nothing was sticking. They called Lincoln a tyrant and a usurper of civil rights. They called the Republicans a band of miscegenists, and complained of voting fraud. The Republicans, on the other hand, pounded away at one simple issue—treason. They painted the entire Democratic Party with the label and it was sticking.

The campaign itself was down and dirty. All the crack orators of both parties hurled invective from every stump and platform. Even the Confederates were stumping—out of Canada—and had been for months. They were trying to influence peace–minded voters, trying to incite insurrection, trying to buy northern editors—anything to get a change of administration in the North that would give them a chance to win the independence they were failing to win on the battlefield. They knew they were losing the war. Their only hope now—a slim one at best—was to unhorse Lincoln.

One of the young Republican orators, Abram Dittenhoefer, described the campaigning: "Night and day, without cessation, young men like myself, in halls, upon street corners, and from cart–tails, were haranguing, pleading, sermonizing, orating, arguing, extolling our cause and our candidate, and denouncing our opponents. A deal of oratory elocution, rhetoric, declamation, and eloquence"—Dittenhoefer said—"was hurled into the troubled air by speakers of both sides."[19]

The major newspapers in the country were in the middle of it, shoveling out unsolicited criticism, advice, and editorial opinion, much of it against Lincoln. Newspaper editors were not just editorializing. Many of them were in the thick of the

[19] Adam J. Dittenhoefer, How We Elected Lincoln: Personal Recollections of Lincoln and Men of His Time (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1916), 87-88.

campaign as political activists. The Union Party chairman and Lincoln's campaign manager was Henry Jarvis Raymond, the editor of the *New York Times*. Lincoln called him "my lieutenant-general in politics." The editor of the Democratic *New York World*, Manton Marble, was one of McClellan's political brain trust. Horace Greeley, the editor of the *New York Tribune*, was a Republican stump speaker.[20]

The only two men in the country not campaigning were the two candidates themselves. Both Lincoln and McClellan were shut–mouthed, and had been from the minute the campaign began. They were staying out of it.

And everybody understood. It was thought unseemly in those days for a presidential candidate to make public speeches in his own behalf, lest he be betrayed into saying something indiscreet. All the political dirty work, rabbit–punching, and eye–gouging were done by others. That's the way it was then.

However, Lincoln, the master politician who didn't like leaving anything to chance, pulled every lever he could grab behind the scenes. In that day such tactics as compelling all government workers to kick ten percent of their salaries back into the party that gave them their jobs, were accepted practice. And Lincoln would see to it that his legion of government workers would have the day off to go home and vote—presumably for him. He also put government employees to work in government offices sending out campaign literature. If the Democrats had been in power, they would have been doing the same thing.

But Lincoln turned down all invitations to speak anywhere and he went nowhere. He believed the people knew where he stood and what the stakes were and that saying anything more would be counter–productive.

McClellan was even less obtrusive. Hating politics and politicians, he was drawn out into the public only three times as the campaign thundered along, the first time early in the canvass when his neighbors in Orange, New Jersey held a large demonstration of support and he briefly responded. Later in September he showed himself at a rally in Newark, at which he did not speak. He was not seen again in public for nearly two months until at a giant McClellan rally in the streets of New York City three days before the election when for two and a half hours he silently reviewed his marching political army from the balcony of the Fifth Avenue Hotel.

On Election Day November 8, Lincoln won—by 411,000 votes of the more than four million cast—about 55 percent. The Electoral College vote, the one that really mattered, Lincoln won by a landslide. McClellan got but 21 electoral votes, carrying only New Jersey, Kentucky, and Delaware. Lincoln got 212, showing strength in most cities of the north, excepting New York. He did poorly among Catholic immigrants everywhere, particularly Irish and Germans, who were loath to support a war for black freedom. He was strong with Protestants. He carried rural America and the agricultural

[20] Francis Brown, *Raymond of the Times* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1951), 255.

areas inhabited by the native born. He won the vote of skilled urban workers and professionals. And he swept New England, the seedbed of abolitionism in the country. McClellan was strongest with the immigrant proletariat in the big cities, who were staunch Democrats to begin with, and in some rural areas with big foreign majorities.

Most devastating for McClellan, Lincoln carried the votes of the general's beloved soldiers. The franchise for soldiers in the field away from their home states was an innovation of the Civil War. And the soldiers voted for Lincoln virtually en mass. McClellan won only three of ten votes in the armies of the East and fared even worse in the armies of the West, where but two in ten soldiers voted for him. The soldiers just couldn't abide the copperhead company their onetime adored general was keeping. They could not abide the war failure plank, even though McClellan had repudiated it. They could not stomach any party that wished to appease the Confederates whom they were fighting on the battlefields of the war.

Despite all the rancor, the election was the first successful democratic election ever conducted anywhere in the world in the midst of a civil war. Francis Lieber, a political theorist and Republican of the time, called it, “one of the greatest national acts in all history.” General Grant called it ”a victory worth more to the country than a battle won.”[21]

The common wisdom says that the election was won for Lincoln when Sherman took Atlanta and when General Philip Sheridan routed the Confederates in the Shenandoah Valley in mid-September. Events seem to support the common wisdom.

The victories on the battlefield certainly changed the prospects for Lincoln and his party. But the president might have won anyhow. Often overlooked, because there were no polls in that day, was a deep reservoir of support and affection for him among the common people in the country. There was something about that ungainly, honest, and kindly man that resonated with the little man of the North. This feeling was reflected in many of the small newspapers of the country, who never lost faith in him. And there was that disastrous war failure plank.

Lincoln had his own take on why he won. "I am here," he told a friend after the election, "by the blunders of the Democrats. If, instead of resolving that the war was a failure, they had resolved that I was a failure, and denounced me for not more vigorously prosecuting it, I should not have been reelected." However, that was exactly the strategy of Lincoln's enemies in his own party, and it hadn't done them much good.[22]

The bottom line; Lincoln’s enemies had matched political wits with one of the most astute politicians of the ages and come off second best.

[21] Frank Freidel, “The Loyal Publication Society: A pro-Union Propaganda Agency.” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 26 (December 1939): 376; Ulysses S. Grant, *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, ed. John Y. Simon, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1995), 12:398.
[22] Helen Nicolay, *Personal Traits of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Century Co., 1912), 289.

Essential Civil War Curriculum | Copyright 2012 Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech