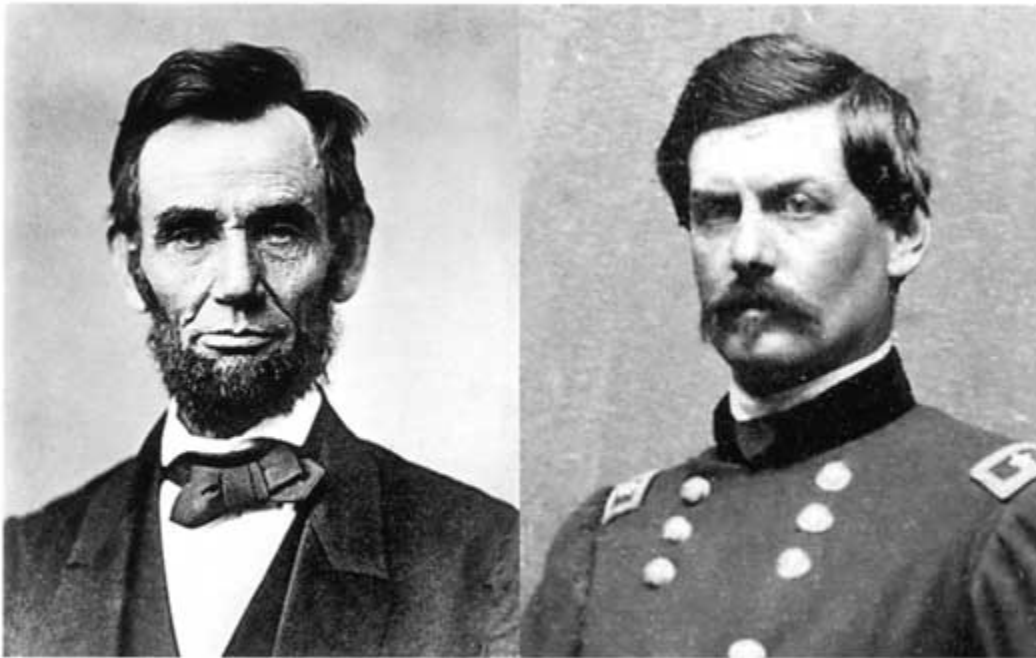


The 1864 Presidential Election: The Candidacy of George McClellan

By: Barry L. Buford, Jr.



**Abraham Lincoln**

**George B. McClellan**

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## The 1864 Presidential Election: The Candidacy of George McClellan

### Prospectus

The 1864 Presidential Election was a compelling political contest. While American history justifiably reveres Abraham Lincoln for the perseverance he embodied during the Civil War and for the emancipation policies the President championed, persons interested in political history may perhaps be surprised that, for all Lincoln's accomplishments, the "Liberator" was quite unpopular in 1864. The Civil War had become a grinding, bloody series of never-ending battles. By the summer of 1864, many northern citizens were dissatisfied with Republican President Lincoln. The seeming inability of Lincoln to end the war, coupled with the President's forceful social agenda regarding slavery, unsettled many voters going into the election that fall. Major General George B. McClellan, the Democratic nominee, offered voters in the twenty-five Union states an alternative to the perceived recklessness of the Lincoln administration, and a possible way out of the war.

Historian Stephen Sears has written extensively on the American Civil War, including a biography on George McClellan. In *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon*, Sears chronicles the professional and political life of the general with special focus on McClellan's nomination in the 1864 election. Research in this paper complements many of the points Sears discusses on the more intimate aspects of McClellan's candidacy. For example, McClellan was willing to renounce emancipation, but he was adamant about restoring the Union. Lincoln, however, insisted that reunion and emancipation must be accomplished simultaneously, without conditions. This ideological difference mirrored the Democratic Party platform language and McClellan's general political philosophy. As McClellan stated prior to the election, "I think that

the original object of the war, as declared by the Govt., viz: the preservation of the Union, its Constitution & its laws, has been lost sight of... & that other issues have been brought into the foreground which either should be entirely secondary, or wrong or impossible of attainment.”<sup>1</sup>

Disagreeing with the President on the fate of slavery was only one problem associated with McClellan’s candidacy. Another problem was the possibility of an armistice offered to the Confederacy without conditions would not go over well with the general electorate. For example, the Democrats hoped to entice the South back by promising to drop the emancipation issue. Getting emancipation off the table had wide appeal to many conservative voters (Democrat and Republican alike). Permitting disunion, however, did not. With no guarantees or assurances to offer, how could northern voters be sure the Confederacy would accept reunion for mere peace?

Joel Silbey is another historian who studies the 1864 Presidential election—particularly from the perspective of the Democratic Party. In his book, *A Respectable Minority*, Silbey analyzes the Democratic Party during the Civil War and examines the overall direction of the Democrats leading up to the election. The election was not squarely confined to the question of war or peace. Constitutional preservation and social conservatism supplied the foundation of the Democrat’s ideals. Silbey does not attempt to focus on the day-to day activities of the party, nor the party leaders. Rather, Silbey emphasizes that understanding the political landscape of the Democratic party during the Civil War can help explain the Democrat’s opportunities, and more importantly, their limitations in the 1864 general election.

Operating as the “opposition party,” the Democrats had several disadvantages from the very beginning that made it difficult to overcome the Republicans in 1864. For example, party

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), 367.

division and inconsistent leadership was symptomatic of the Democratic innerworkings. The Democrat's vision was simply not creative enough for most voters. According to Silbey, the 1864 platform scrapped "the usual Democratic litany on such policy matters as tariffs, banking policy, land distribution, or foreign affairs," and directed their efforts towards attacking the Lincoln administration.<sup>2</sup> Despite these challenges, the Democrats represented a legitimate threat to the Republicans and Lincoln. In picking McClellan, they found a popular war hero; unfortunately, the general made the situation even more untenable by his patent unwillingness to cooperate with the party factions throughout the campaign. Consequently, McClellan did not augur a realistic chance to win in 1864. A truer assessment of McClellan's flawed candidacy is achieved by linking points of collaboration from Sears, Silbey, and others to expose the challenges the Democrats faced, and reveal how these deficiencies collectively worked to undermine McClellan's prospects. Sears and Silbey are just two authors learned in the field of Civil War political history. As this study will show, many other writers complement these two historians, and the research here reflects this additional historiography.

Chapter one of this thesis will provide the general background of each candidate and their respective political philosophies. Because of Abraham Lincoln's deep-rooted sense of morality, the President felt that slavery and democracy could no longer co-exist. In contrast, McClellan did not think social revolution was necessary to achieve reunification with the Confederacy. Early examples of Lincoln as a fledgling politician, and McClellan as a young commander, shed light on the fundamental differences the two men exhibited long before 1864. In his book, *Lincoln and McClellan at War*, Chester Hearn observes several problem areas in the

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<sup>2</sup> Joel Silbey, *A Respectable Minority: The Democratic Party in the Civil War Era, 1860- 1868* (New York: Norton & Company, 1977), 130.

two men's professional relationship.<sup>3</sup> Hearn offers a chronological look of how Lincoln became forced to take a direct role with military affairs because of the internal issues that existed within the War Department and poor decisions exhibited on the battlefield. Throughout the book, Hearn emphasizes the obstinate and distrustful way McClellan dealt with nearly everyone who opposed him. Furthermore, the first chapter will also attempt to uncover what each candidate thought of one another on a personal level.

Chapter two considers the advantages and disadvantages the Democrats faced in 1864. Party mechanics, including a contextual presentation of party personnel integral to the success of the Democratic party, are developed and examined in this section. Important political cleavages within the Democratic party are highlighted, most notably the War Democrats and the Peace Democrats. Chapter two will also define and analyze the direction of the Democratic party, its originally intended message, and McClellan's courtship as the Democratic party nominee.

Chapter three will discuss the importance of the Democratic Party Convention and outline its platform. The three resolutions contained in the platform provide both the boilerplate language and party message to northern voters. Political platforms can be a very effective means of communication with voters. Message, intent, and direction are three components of any platform; therefore, a comparison of the more comprehensive Republican platform, and its aggressive tone, illuminates the stark distinction between the two parties.

Chapter four will examine the viewpoint of the electorate from authors, newspapers, soldiers, politicians, and scholars. Public opinion toward the Democrats was mostly negative. Letters from soldiers to loved ones reflect loyalty to the Union. Opinion editorials in many recognized newspapers across the Northeast cast serious doubt on McClellan's candidacy and

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<sup>3</sup> Chester Hearn, *Lincoln and McClellan at War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012).

tend to ridicule the Democratic party. Chapter four will also seek to identify the pro- McClellan and pro- Lincoln voices surrounding the campaign, especially endorsements from various military officers, notable congressmen, and influential journalists.

Chapter five will engage in a comparative study between soldier and civilian voting in critical states such as New York and Pennsylvania where the stakes were the same, but the reasons were different. Soldiers, having made great sacrifice, had a personal investment in seeing the war through to victory; whereas, the civilian population was motivated by unionism, patriotism, and economic vitality. Historian Gary Gallagher contends that the theme of Unionism, not some moral crusade, fueled the support Lincoln desperately needed from Northern voters in the months leading up to the election.<sup>4</sup> Historian Earl Hess, conversely, believes that self-government and individualism were integral to the preservation of the Union. Although morality did factor into the virtuous ideology that many Northerners slowly began to espouse about its democracy, Hess argues that the threat upon free institutions most likely explains why many citizens exhibited patriotism.<sup>5</sup> Lincoln's radical policies toward the draft, federally sponsored emancipation, and the confiscation of private property tested Northern resolve. Ultimately, the temporary violation of civil liberties became an acceptable price for freedom.

The sixth and final chapter will consider any causal inferences (both independent and dependent variables) that help explain the outcome of the election and the behavior of the voter. The success of the Democrats was determined by the political environment they created during the four years of the Lincoln Administration and at the Convention. Popular voting behavior, including voter perception and reaction, will be surveyed toward the conclusion. Why

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<sup>4</sup> Gary Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Earl Hess, *Liberty, Virtue, and Progress: Northerners and Their War for the Union* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997).

McClellan lost the key battleground states of New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio will provide a substantial portion of the final chapters. Similarly, why Lincoln succeeded in these more heavily weighted electoral states will be theorized. Supporting these claims is made possible by using any available data on record to predict the outcome. This thesis will conclude with commentary on the historical and practical significance of the election results.



## Introduction

War or Peace? This was the question northern voters confronted in the Presidential election of 1864. As the Civil War dragged on, President Abraham Lincoln's popularity waned. Underwhelming performances by the Union army frustrated the northern electorate. The President was hounded daily by Democrats with allegations of unconstitutional treatment of individual civil liberties. And President Lincoln was endlessly criticized for his social policies, most notably the emancipation of slaves. Lincoln's reelection hopes were in jeopardy. George McClellan and the Democratic Establishment sought to persuade voters to cast Lincoln out of the White House. The Democrats, however, stood in their own way.

Several hot-button topics influenced the voters over the course of the campaign. The proposed Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery was the one big issue of the day no politician could avoid. Interestingly, 1864 saw a transformation in Lincoln's thinking on policy and party politics. For example, the forceful and absolute language regarding emancipation emphasized at the Republican Convention communicated that slavery shall not exist anywhere in the United States. This was an obvious departure from the 1861 Corwin Amendment to Congress stating that "Congress shall have no authority to abolish or interfere with any state regarding slavery."<sup>6</sup>

War weariness was on every northern citizen and soldier's mind heading into November. As the casualty list grew, more voters considered McClellan and peace. The Battle of the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Courthouse, and North Anna were especially devastating from a Union

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<sup>6</sup> Christopher Bryant, "Stopping Time: The Pro-Slavery and "irrevocable" Thirteenth Amendment" *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy*, 26 (2003): 501.

casualty perspective. And the July 18, 1864 enlistment drive calling for 500,000 more men by Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton added to the uneasiness.

Despite the many challenges facing President Lincoln, the choices were clear. In a sense, changing voters' minds was not the goal of the candidates because the voters had already decided who they were voting for. So, the goal became to get as many people to the polls as humanly possible. Lincoln succeeded where McClellan failed. On 8 November 1864, President Lincoln won the electoral college votes by a landslide margin, gained fifty- five percent (55) of the popular vote, and three- fourths of the soldier vote.

Each party's vice- presidential nominee had a substantial impact on the contest. Lincoln's running mate, Andrew Johnson was anti-slavery and a loyal War Democrat from Tennessee. Johnson favored quick restoration of the seceded states to the Union, though he did not guarantee the protection of slaves once freed. Johnson did not think blacks were fit for full citizenship. Comparatively, the Democratic vice- presidential nominee, George Pendleton of Ohio was a staunch advocate of peace and was flexible on Negro equality. These facts seriously handicapped McClellan, a War Democrat himself; Johnson's place on the Lincoln ticket threatened to siphon votes away from the general.

Northern citizens wanted peace, but they also wanted victory. Patriotism was but one motivation considered by voters. The spirit of Unionism was prioritized among the northern electorate. Along with Unionism, economic vitality and free enterprise was a commodity worth fighting the South over. And liberty and virtue seemed to overshadow any alleged constitutional violations decried by the Democrats against Lincoln and his administration.

The election of 1864 was a precedential occurrence. It marked the first time in American political history that a Presidential election occurred during wartime. Also, the 1864 election

was a first where soldiers could vote by absentee ballots. During 1863, nineteen (19) states changed their laws to allow soldiers to vote. The Lincoln administration attempted to flood the ballot boxes with voting soldiers. For example, General William Sherman furloughed about nine thousand (9,000) Indiana troops to the polls. It appears that Democratic party soldiers voted for Lincoln, crippling McClellan's chances of victory even further.

Initially, the chances of the Democrats winning the White House looked promising. Democrats attempted to challenge the Lincoln administration on primarily three fronts: accusing it of constitutional violations, condemning it for authoritarianism, and claiming it had bungled the war effort. However, the Democratic platform did not have the desired effect on the voters. While it promoted a negotiated peace with the Confederacy, the acceptance letter offered by McClellan at the Democratic National Convention suggested a continuation of the conflict. The nominee wanted to preserve the Union. The paradoxical message left many voters, soldiers, and newspaper editors, wondering exactly where the Democrats stood on the war. Moreover, slavery was omitted from the Democratic platform altogether. More than any single variable, the peace plank of the Democratic platform damaged McClellan's electability and helped Lincoln win.

In the end, the distinguishable platforms of the two major parties helped shape the election. The Union military victories at Mobile and Atlanta as the summer of 1864 ended also drastically improved Lincoln's chances of reelection. For the Democrats, however, their platform proved to be the most causal explanation for McClellan's defeat. Specifically, the peace plank of the Democratic Party, and the unilateral and often contradictory message of McClellan, negatively affected the general's candidacy. McClellan did not favor peace with the South unconditionally without the promise of reunion, but the platform on which he was nominated communicated the failure of the war, inferred peace at any price, and implied a

willingness to give ground already won by the Union over to the Confederacy. Fair or not, the Democrats were labeled as traitors. These negative perceptions became increasingly problematic for McClellan. Most northern newspapermen, soldiers, and civilians rallied behind President Lincoln as the northern electorate recaptured the Union spirit that once energized the masses in 1861. The election proved that the preservation of the Union was more important than party politics. Perhaps more importantly, the election demonstrated that the Civil War, with all its baggage, was worth continuing—and winning.

## Chapter One: The Candidates

Abraham Lincoln and Major General George B. McClellan represented two of the more extraordinary figures in the American Civil War. As the Civil War escalated, President Lincoln appointed General McClellan in the fall of 1861 with the hope of reorganizing the Union Army. McClellan would ultimately be the best alternative for Lincoln to replace the aged Winfield Scott, general-in-chief, to address the ill-prepared Union Army because of McClellan's proficient planning and organizational skills. Historian Chester Hearn observes that McClellan was placed in charge of the Army of the Potomac, the largest individual Union army, where he performed superbly in the training of its soldiers.<sup>7</sup> Hearn also reveals the positive effect McClellan's reforms had on the military, which greatly impressed Lincoln. But on the battlefield, McClellan's overly cautious approach confused and frustrated Lincoln. Although McClellan was a great organizer, he was an inept battle commander. Disappointing leadership exhibited by McClellan, most notably in the Seven Days Battle and the Battle at Antietam, caused President Lincoln to lose confidence in McClellan and demote the general.

George McClellan's first serious military test was an important one. The climax to the general's Peninsula campaign, and significance of the Seven Days battle revolved around the fate of the Confederate capital—Richmond, Virginia. Hearn points out that the people of Richmond were determined to defend their city.<sup>8</sup> For Lincoln, protecting the Potomac River and Washington was critical. Equally important for Lincoln was addressing the geographic threat the Confederate army could stage against the North from Richmond. Located approximately one hundred miles away, Richmond possessed vital industrial capabilities. Richmond manufactured,

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<sup>7</sup> Chester Hearn, *Lincoln and McClellan at War* (Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

among other things, war equipment and resources. Thus, the main objective in the Seven Days Battle for the Union was to capture Richmond, thereby decapitating the South politically. By destroying the infrastructure of the southern capital, the Army of Northern Virginia would lie ineffective in combat readiness.<sup>9</sup> A series of six bloody battles ensued from roughly 26 June to 1 July 1862.

The Seven Days Battle pitted two of the more extraordinary field commanders in the Civil War against one another. Over the course of the campaign, General Robert E. Lee displayed an increasingly aggressive battlefield approach than did Major General George B. McClellan. Despite poor unity of command, the bold leadership by Lee prevented McClellan from achieving the Union's main objective of capturing Richmond. Winfield Scott called Lee the finest soldier he had ever seen in the field.<sup>10</sup> The former Mexican War standout was a risk taker whom relentlessly engaged the enemy. McClellan, on the other hand, was often too indecisive. McClellan underestimated Lee's tenacity, failed to seize key opportunities, and ultimately commanded a failed campaign. In a letter to President Lincoln before the battle started, McClellan said he preferred to face Lee because he was "too cautious and weak under grave responsibility—personally brave and energetic to a fault."<sup>11</sup> Ironically, it was McClellan who proved overly cautious. Though outnumbered and outgunned, Lee forced McClellan to run instead of fight.

The retreat of McClellan during the Seven Days Battle is both inexcusable and unexplainable. With the battle barely underway, McClellan ordered his army to abandon its position in front of Richmond and retreat south toward the James River. This was not the plan

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<sup>9</sup> Matt Spruill, *Echoes of Thunder: A Guide to the Seven Days Battle* (The University of Tennessee Press, 2006), xiv.

<sup>10</sup> Brian Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances: The Seven Days Battles* (Indiana University Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

Lincoln nor McClellan had envisioned. Unlike Confederate President Jefferson Davis with General Robert E. Lee, Lincoln expressed reservations to McClellan before the battle ever began. Not pleased with how the war was progressing, he issued a subtle ultimatum to McClellan—either attack Richmond or come back to Washington.<sup>12</sup> If McClellan was indecisive, so was Lincoln for allowing McClellan to continue in command. McClellan's hesitancy to stand firm, or advance, allowed Lee to stay on the offensive throughout much of the campaign. One author stated, "McClellan was a good strategic thinker, but consistently showed indecision and weakness in executing his plans."<sup>13</sup> McClellan's "slow, meticulous, predictable approach" hindered the opportunity to seize his opponent and wipe out Lee at Mechanicsville and Malvern Hill.<sup>14</sup> McClellan did not think in terms of overcoming the enemy, rather mitigating potential losses. McClellan's "haphazard, absentee command" contributed to an unnecessarily high casualty rate.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the Peninsula Campaign was crafted with McClellan in mind. McClellan was faced with two options. He could march in a direct route overland straight to Richmond, fighting the Confederacy face to face. Or, he could utilize his navy by snaking down the Virginia Peninsula, positioning his army closer to Richmond. McClellan chose the second option, but he never got closer than five miles from the Confederate capital.

The Seven Days Battle resulted in mass casualties on both sides. Nearly 36,000 men were either killed, wounded, or missing in action.<sup>16</sup> Though the Confederacy is credited with the victory, the result seems different. The battle casualties demonstrated how resilient large armies had become in how soldiers could suffer, recover, and keep going. The Peninsula campaign was

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>13</sup> John McKensie, *Uncertain Glory: Lee's Generalship Re-Examined* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1997), 83.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1992), 345.

<sup>16</sup> Spruill, *Echoes of Thunder*, 308.

largely considered a failure. One lesson learned from the Seven Days Battle was that it was impossible for the Union to destroy a determined and opposing army. Regardless, the relentless command style of Lee during the battle drove McClellan into retreat and undermined the Union's plan to capture Richmond.

McClellan's ineffective leadership appeared again at Antietam as the general's repeated request for more men and supplies became commonplace.<sup>17</sup> Sears suggests that McClellan's habitual stalls were "a reflexive delaying action against possible criticism or even comment."<sup>18</sup> In fortuitous fashion, a Union soldier found a key piece of Confederate intelligence that was signed by Lee and addressed to his officers outlining the Army's operational plan for the next several days.<sup>19</sup> Special Order No. 191, or the Lost Order, was later determined to be genuine by Union personnel and placed in McClellan's hands. In his collection of correspondence, Sears records that on 13 September 1862, McClellan sent Lincoln a telegraph boasting that "I have the whole Rebel army in front of me... and that his forces were... in motion as rapidly as possible."<sup>20</sup> But as Sears points out, "[n]ot even his remarkable good fortune inspired him to change his deliberate plans."<sup>21</sup> Although his intelligence staff had already examined the genuineness of the Lost Order, it appears that McClellan was still not completely convinced the orders were authentic. Sears explains "[it] confirmed some intelligence reports but contradicted others."<sup>22</sup> Instead of marching ahead and seizing the opportunity to cut Lee's Army in half, McClellan waited to see what the enemy would do next. Once McClellan finally decided to act,

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<sup>17</sup> Ted Alexander, *The Battle of Antietam: The Bloodiest Day* (Charleston: The History Press, 2011), 119.

<sup>18</sup> Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon*, 296.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 280- 82.

<sup>20</sup> Sears, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan: Selected Correspondence, 1860-1865* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989), 453.

<sup>21</sup> Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon*, 283.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.



he ordered a flanking maneuver which depended heavily on complicated timetables. The general's orders, however, were unclear and resulted in miscommunication between his officers; therefore, McClellan squandered another opportunity to defeat Lee.

Another problem with McClellan's generalship is that he regularly delegated the tactical decisions to his generals.<sup>23</sup> Sears observes that instead of communicating by telegraph, as McClellan usually did, he relied almost entirely on couriers at Antietam to communicate through "oral commands and direction to aides."<sup>24</sup> When the Union offensive began under General Joseph Hooker, the Army of the Potomac was in outstanding position. Hooker waited on reinforcements and instructions from McClellan, but neither were issued.

In battle, McClellan was hesitant to move his men forward. Sears states that "[e]ach movement that McClellan ordered at Antietam... had an element of defense attached to it."<sup>25</sup> The attacks went in piecemeal. Reserves were also an integral part to the success of the offensive. Military historian Ted Alexander is critical of McClellan for not utilizing some 25,000 reserves that arguably could have enabled the Army of the Potomac breach Lee's center line.<sup>26</sup> Without support, the separate accounts failed miserably. Lincoln relieved McClellan of his command on 5 November 1862 and recommissioned him to New Jersey.<sup>27</sup> McClellan will likely be remembered for presiding over the "bloodiest day in the Civil War" (17 September 1862), one where the Union army suffered over 12,000 casualties.<sup>28</sup> Sears analyzes that "[h]is failure in those days to write down anything of how he planned to fight the Battle of Antietam

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>24</sup> Sears, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan: Selected Correspondence*, 434.

<sup>25</sup> Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon*, 306.

<sup>26</sup> Alexander, *The Battle of Antietam: The Bloodiest Day*, 141.

<sup>27</sup> Edward H. Bonekemper, *McClellan and Failure: A Study of Civil War Fear, Incompetence and Worse* (London: McFarland & Company, Inc.), 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 139. "Casualties" refers to dead, wounded, and missing in action.

leaves the largest single gap in his contemporaneous military record.”<sup>29</sup> Still, the Union army won.

Despite possessing more men and weaponry, McClellan chose not to engage the Confederacy time and time again. In his book, *Lincoln and His Generals*, T. Harry Williams highlights some of the more glaring problems McClellan had as a field commander. Williams states that McClellan’s “customary timidity and aversion to decision” often perplexed the President.<sup>30</sup> Reasons for McClellan’s habitual delays were never-ending. Poor roads, large enemy number estimates, lack of men or supplies, exhaustion, and the need for more training were just some of the obstacles, or excuses, McClellan found not to fight.

Disagreeing with the President on the best course to fight the war was yet another problem the Lincoln administration encountered when dealing with McClellan. Lincoln wanted to fight the Confederacy aggressively. McClellan, in contrast, simply wanted to display a show of force: inflicting minimal damage to the South. Williams and Hearn agree that Lincoln’s constant meddling into wartime operations irritated McClellan. Lincoln knew little of military affairs, but the President was forced to maintain a hands-on relationship because of the pressure he felt from his party and his cabinet. Lincoln thought as a lawyer. McClellan thought as a soldier and not a politician. These ideological perspectives made for an interesting contrast—and a headache for each candidate’s supporters. Williams points out that Lincoln “had been a civilian all his life.”<sup>31</sup> But because of his sharp mind, Lincoln was a “natural strategist” despite his military inexperience. Lincoln wanted to exploit the superior numerical advantage of the North: men, material resources, and sea power.

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<sup>29</sup> Sears, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan: Selected Correspondence*, 434.

<sup>30</sup> T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1952), 50.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

It is interesting what President Lincoln and General McClellan thought about one another. Personality conflicts, political differences, and failures on the battlefield by McClellan explain the strained relationship between the general and the President. McClellan had an inflated opinion of himself. His interpretation of a “complete” victory at Antietam was not accurate. Williams even goes so far as to say that McClellan “thought of himself as an indispensable man of the Union cause.”<sup>32</sup> Despite McClellan’s arrogance, Williams points out that the President had a personal fondness for McClellan. So conscientious was the President toward his rising young general that he thought he might embarrass McClellan because of the great responsibilities that came as one of his top field commanders. After Lincoln appointed McClellan general-in-chief, Lincoln made daily visits to McClellan’s home, as was customary for the President to venture outside his office. Lincoln sized McClellan up in their visits and studied the general for job strength. Williams notes that McClellan humored the President but did not take Lincoln’s military advice to heart. Instead McClellan thought of Lincoln as “a simpleton and a nuisance.”<sup>33</sup>

While Lincoln displayed friendship toward McClellan, McClellan displayed contempt for his commander in chief. It seems McClellan viewed the President as weak, rather than modest. At the very least, McClellan was snobby. The general sometimes referred to Lincoln as a “bumpkin” or “gorilla.”<sup>34</sup> After the Young Napoleon was decommissioned by Lincoln from the Army, their relationship worsened over time.

Born into poverty in Kentucky, Abraham Lincoln (1809- 1865) was a self- educated man who thrived in law and politics. Lincoln was quick on his feet and possessed a brilliant sense of

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 169- 170.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

humor.<sup>35</sup> Paul Finkelman states that Lincoln’s “droll ways and dry jokes made him the best stump speaker in the West.”<sup>36</sup> Lincoln served eight years in the Illinois House of Representatives and one term in the United States House of Representatives. Historian Chester Hearn observed that Lincoln, as a member of the Whig party, was “radically different from those of Democrats, who sanctioned slavery, and the Republican radicals, who demanded immediate abolition.”<sup>37</sup> Lincoln managed to appeal, or at least appease, both northern moderates and radical abolitionists, two groups from which he needed support. Lincoln opposed the Mexican-American War (1846- 1848), claiming that it accelerated the expansion of slavery. Running as a moderate, Lincoln secured the 1860 Republican Party’s Presidential nomination where he took an aggressive stance on both slavery and secession.

During his time of service, McClellan never completely bought into Lincoln’s idea of emancipation. McClellan strongly advocated the protection of southern property, which extended to slave ownership. According to Sears, McClellan did not want to interfere with southern property rights and did not want the war to become a social revolution.<sup>38</sup> Reunion was McClellan’s sole condition for peace. To George McClellan, emancipation was not just wrong, it was irrelevant. In *Reelecting Lincoln*, historian John C. Waugh offers a broad overview of President Lincoln, the challenges set before the President, and the interaction between he and his generals. Waugh states that McClellan wanted “the constitution as it is, the Union as it was.”<sup>39</sup> According to Williams, McClellan was “violently opposed” to emancipation. Writing to a group of supporters, McClellan fumed, “Help me dodge the nigger—we want nothing to do with

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<sup>35</sup> Paul Finkelman, *Dred Scott v. Sanford: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 183.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. According to Finkelman, *The Chicago Tribune*, the Republican’s paper and known as Lincoln’s paper, routinely wrote about Lincoln’s unimpressive yet highly effective presence as a politician.

<sup>37</sup> Hearn, *Lincoln and McClellan at War*, 38.

<sup>38</sup> Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon*, 79- 80.

<sup>39</sup> John C. Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln: The Battle For the 1864 Presidency* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1997), 27.

him.”<sup>40</sup> McClellan was not alone in his thinking. Fitz John Porter, a friend and subordinate of McClellan, thought Lincoln used the government unconstitutionally to adopt a policy.

The Republican party was evenly divided over the issue of freeing the slaves. And there were others that thought this political controversy would enhance McClellan’s chances of becoming President, if the general chose to run. After a dinner with friends and fellow officers, McClellan initially decided to remain neutral—neither publicly endorsing, nor rejecting Lincoln’s policy. But Williams seems to suggest that McClellan slowly began to indirectly infuse his political views into Army life by publishing an order informing the Union soldiers that “in a democracy the military was subordinate to the civil authority and the objectives of the war were to be determined by the civil authority.”<sup>41</sup>

Near the close of the Seven Days Battle at Harrison’s Landing, McClellan handed Lincoln a letter in person expressing his political views on the present state of military affairs. This private communication to the President gives a researcher valuable insight into McClellan’s political mind. The general favored one universal civil and military policy—the continuation of free institutions and self- government. In his letter to the President on 7 July 1862, McClellan admonished Lincoln for his interference with slavery.<sup>42</sup> McClellan feared that “the rising tide of radicalism” that Lincoln seemed to foster with respect to federally sanctioned emancipation and its threat upon property ownership would not only unbalance the war effort but “disintegrate our present Armies.”<sup>43</sup> McClellan even appealed to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton urging the President to seriously consider adopting a more conservative policy. However, Sears provides

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<sup>40</sup> Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals*, 46. Letter from McClellan to Samuel Barlow, 1 November 1861.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>42</sup> Sears, *Civil War Papers*, 344-5.

<sup>43</sup> Sears, *Young Napoleon*, 227-29.

no record of Lincoln ever giving McClellan's diatribe much thought.<sup>44</sup> Williams points out that it was not uncommon for commanding generals to periodically offer their respective political views to newspapers, Congress, or even the President on policy opinion. Nevertheless, the choice of words McClellan used in describing Lincoln's policy as a "political error," only to be corrected by the "action of the people at the polls" was quite interesting.<sup>45</sup> If McClellan's order was not intentionally purposed for negatively commenting on Lincoln's policy, what was the general's intent? Whether McClellan's opinion about emancipation was seen more of as a duty to inform the soldier contingent, and less about showing up the President, is left for interpretation. Regardless, McClellan's detractors saw it as a bid for the Presidential nomination in 1864. McClellan even believed the Army would follow his lead in opposing Lincoln's emancipation policy; thus, demonstrating further evidence of the general's egotism.

The political disconnect between Lincoln and McClellan can be traced back to early life in Illinois. As a conservative Democrat and supporter of Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas, McClellan was an outspoken critic of Lincoln during the 1858 Senate Illinois race. According to Hearn, McClellan believed that "Lincoln was intellectually and socially inferior to Douglas and unfit for public office."<sup>46</sup> Like Douglas, McClellan advocated the idea of popular sovereignty, holding the position that the people should be able to decide for themselves whether to prohibit slavery in the free territories. Finkelman, in his compilation of historical primary documents, illustrates an excellent example of how Lincoln differed from McClellan on the issue of slavery. In his famous "House Divided" speech, Lincoln stated that "the government cannot permanently exist half slave and half free."<sup>47</sup> Lincoln believed politicians like Douglas were attempting to

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>45</sup> Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals*, 172.

<sup>46</sup> Hearn, *Lincoln and McClellan at War*, 11.

<sup>47</sup> Finkelman, *Dred Scott v. Sanford: A Brief History with Documents*, 196.

nationalize slavery. Illinois state politics would represent the first time and place the two men would directly cross paths. Lincoln represented the Illinois Central Railroad as an attorney, and McClellan worked for the same as an engineer. On 7 October 1858, the day of the Illinois Senate election, McClellan was allegedly responsible for stalling a passenger car carrying Lincoln supporters to the polls. Unbeknownst to either man, the railroad stunt would not be the only time Lincoln and McClellan would spar.

Born into a prominent family from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, George McClellan (1826-1885) excelled at engineering and European studies at the United States Military Academy.<sup>48</sup> The friendships with Southern cadets McClellan developed at West Point, and continued later in private life, helped shape his politics. It is unfair to label McClellan as a southern apologist, but he certainly shared many southern attitudes and beliefs. According to Hearn, McClellan's "sympathy with southern attitudes would remain constant with the singular exception of the matter of secession."<sup>49</sup> Hearn suggests that McClellan's southern roommates helped shape his perspectives.<sup>50</sup>

Having distinguished himself in the Mexican War, McClellan positioned himself neatly for an eventual career in either the military or political arena. McClellan was the third-ranking commissioned officer within a specially assembled engineer company tasked with laying out siege lines and erecting mortar barriers along the coast near Vera Cruz, Mexico.<sup>51</sup> In the Mexican War, McClellan received praise for clearing out roads for the infantry to traverse and performing successful land surveys. Despite these accomplishments, however, Sears indicates

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<sup>48</sup> Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon*, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Hearn, *Lincoln and McClellan at War*, 19.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. Ambrose Hill of Virginia and Jeb Stuart of South Carolina were two roommates of McClellan at West Point. Each southerner became officers for the Confederacy and fought against McClellan during the Civil War.

<sup>51</sup> Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon*, 13, 18.

McClellan had problems dealing with disappointment early in his military career.<sup>52</sup> Passed over for a captaincy appointment in Washington, D.C., McClellan learned to resent others whom he felt had little or no experience, especially political appointees. McClellan had a strong opposition to working with non- military personnel and viewed most politicians as inferior. While in Mexico, McClellan openly condemned the commission of civilian officers.<sup>53</sup> But McClellan's personality issues went even deeper. Hearn and Sears, for example, both agree that "McClellan could not work for anyone without engaging in personal conflict...and as later battlefield examples would reveal... [he] resented being challenged."<sup>54</sup> As Williams has previously pointed out, McClellan hated any real exercise of control over him. McClellan usually discredited the comments of others, perceiving any opinions contrary to his own as a usurpation of power and threatening to his own decision-making ability regarding military matters.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, McClellan was dismissive toward his colleagues. As much as McClellan detested politicians, his ambition superseded his distrustful feelings toward elected officials. While serving in the military, McClellan developed the habit of airing grievances in corresponding to family and friends. Quick to blame others for his shortcomings, McClellan was his own worst enemy, according to Hearn.

The personalities of Abraham Lincoln and George McClellan were starkly different. According to Waugh, Lincoln "never pretended to be anything but what he was and was an uncommon man who spoke the vocabulary of the common people."<sup>56</sup> Lincoln was a humble man; whereas, the general was pretentious and arrogant. The President was publicly and

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 16- 17.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>54</sup> Hearn, *Lincoln and McClellan at War*, 23, 42.

<sup>55</sup> Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals*, 45.

<sup>56</sup> Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln*, 84.



conscientiously driven by a moral purpose. McClellan was also God- fearing. But the general's sense of morality seemed to be eerily self- ordained. Waugh characterizes McClellan as "messianic and detached," and the general consistently displayed "his ambivalent attitude toward overtly reaching for power."<sup>57</sup> Military success went to McClellan's head. After McClellan's positive field contributions in the West Virginia theatre early in the Civil War, Sears writes that "many in Washington did indeed see him as the savior of the Republic."<sup>58</sup> McClellan often projected his personal aggrandizement in letters to family members. In a letter to his wife, McClellan wrote, "I almost think that were I to win some small success now I could become Dictator or anything else that might please me."<sup>59</sup> In politics, McClellan's arrogance would resurface in how he cooperated with his fellow Democrats in the months prior to the Democratic National Convention.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 27, 368.

<sup>58</sup> Sears, *The Young Napoleon*, 93, 95.

<sup>59</sup> Sears, *Civil War Papers*, 70. Letter from George McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, 27 July 1861.

## Chapter Two: Democratic Party Mechanics

Half way through the Civil War, political leaders in the Democratic Party began to whisper the name George McClellan. August Belmont, the Democratic Party Chairman, had been courting McClellan as the 1864 nominee since early 1862. Both men were aligned politically with Belmont being “more interested in the practical perils of disunion than in moral and humanitarian objections to slavery.”<sup>60</sup> Samuel L.M. Barlow, a New York corporate lawyer and friend of McClellan, strongly urged Democratic leaders to consider McClellan for the Democratic nomination. Barlow was credited as one of the main architects of the Democratic party platform, and he felt that a running mate as vice president from the border states advocating peace would complement McClellan nicely by balancing the ticket.<sup>61</sup> George Pendleton of Ohio ultimately became the party’s choice as vice presidential nominee, namely because of his ties with Copperhead leader and Peace Democrat Clement Vallandigham. With McClellan’s Harrison Landing letter out in the open, Barlow and other key Democratic leaders baptized the general into the political waters.

In a sense, McClellan bargained for the 1864 Democratic presidential nomination. McClellan’s endorsement of Democratic U.S. House member George Washington Woodward in the Pennsylvania gubernatorial race signaled his first legitimate step into the political arena. The general’s Harrison Landing letter certainly expressed his interest in political opinion, but the Woodward endorsement plunged him deep into the political fray. But to some journalists, the Woodward endorsement spelled political suicide because Woodward’s ties to the peace contingency had the potential of alienating the conservative war faction of the Democratic party

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<sup>60</sup> Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln*, 87.

<sup>61</sup> Silbey, *A Respectable Minority: The Democratic Party in the Civil War Era*, 123.

completely—a bloc of voters McClellan could not afford to lose. The common sentiment of *The New York Times* was that failure as a general equated to an unrealistic chance at political office, irrespective of the general’s endorsement in Pennsylvania.<sup>62</sup> Whether pushed into politics there in Pennsylvania in exchange for the Democratic leadership nominating him for the presidency, or motivated by his own sense of purpose, McClellan was now a political player.

Rumors of a deal offered to McClellan by Montgomery Blair, a cabinet member and advisor to Lincoln, began to swirl surrounding the Democratic courtship. At the President’s behest, Blair supposedly offered to return McClellan to his former status as general-in-chief if “Little Mac,” as McClellan was affectionately known in military circles, would agree to drop out of the race.<sup>63</sup> Neither McClellan nor Lincoln ever seriously considered the dilemma of whether the General should crawl back to Washington or stand up for the Democratic Party because the secretive deal fell through. Nevertheless, the news of Blair’s alleged proposal leaked to the press. In a South Carolina newspaper, McClellan boasted, “I can raise one million to Lincoln’s one hundred thousand.”<sup>64</sup> Although the arrogant remark was tongue-in-cheek, Lincoln was quite aware of McClellan’s rising popularity among northern voters and the President was seriously concerned about losing a second term in the White House.

Meanwhile, McClellan seemed unenthusiastic about the prospect of running for office. In a letter to his mother in late 1863, McClellan wrote, “I feel very indifferent about the White House—for many reasons I do not wish it—I shall do nothing to get it and trust that Providence will decide the matter is best for the country.”<sup>65</sup> Yet, when the time came, McClellan accepted

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<sup>62</sup> *The New York Times*, 14 October 1863.

<sup>63</sup> Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon*, 351.

<sup>64</sup> *The Edgefield Advertiser*, 19 April 1864.

<sup>65</sup> George McClellan to Mary McClellan, 6 December 1863. Stephen Sears, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan: Selected Correspondence* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989), 562.

the nomination. The political climate for the Democrats prior to the general election would indicate whether McClellan had a realistic hope of unseating the President.

The 1862 midterm elections offered a positive glimmer of hope for the Democrats. Largely in response to President Lincoln's inability to provide a quick and decisive victory against the Confederacy, the Democrats made gains in critical electoral states—particularly New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. As a result, Republicans only held onto to a House majority of eighteen seats after the 1862 midterms, and a strong anti- Lincoln sentiment began to grow. If mid-term elections and the unpredictable, or at least inconsistent, status of the war wasn't enough, recent history was not on Lincoln's side. No President had been reelected to office in thirty-two years, or since 1832. Waugh contends that the unsuccessful Union army campaigns in 1862 (especially Second Bull Run) cast doubt on the Lincoln Administration.<sup>66</sup> Despite the Union army turning back Lee at Antietam, and Lincoln amassing praise from the more radical factions of his constituency for issuing the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, the President managed to draw further skepticism among voters for both his policy and his inability to quickly end the Confederate rebellion.

From 1861 to 1864, Democrats usually came up short in statewide and congressional elections. Silbey points out that while the war raged on, turnout in popular vote counts dropped in Ohio and New York. In some cases, Democratic voting numbers dropped by as much as twenty percent by comparison to Republicans.<sup>67</sup> Although these national average popular voting trends remained stagnant, the Democrats made significant strides in the 1862 elections—especially in the more populous states. During this cycle, the Democrats added thirty- five

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<sup>66</sup> Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln*, 12.

<sup>67</sup> Silbey, *A Respectable Minority*, 143.

congressional seats.<sup>68</sup> The election of Democrat Horatio Seymour as governor of New York with many new Democratic conservatives voting was equally encouraging. So, what can be made of the 1862 Democratic resurgence leading into the 1864 election? Gains were made, and gaps were narrowed. The thin margins, in even the Democratic strongholds, signaled two things: Republicans did not show up to the polls; and there was no “great swing of the tide.”<sup>69</sup>

Constitutional usurpations by the Lincoln Administration the Democrats alleged apparently started to reflect Republican apathy at the polls. As promising as some of the numbers indicated, however, the Democrats had a larger problem to address—party unity.

By 1864, the Democratic Party was fractured into two groups: War Democrats and Peace Democrats. War Democrats were generally referred to as northerners that supported the war effort but opposed emancipation. The War Democrats wanted a total prosecution of the war and immediate reestablishment of the Union, which was contradictory and diametrically opposite of the Peace Democrats. These Democrats, or Copperheads as they were commonly referred to by conservatives, were a fringe section of the Democratic Party that opposed the war and favored peace at any price, including the perpetuation of slavery. The Midwest and along the Confederate- Union border (especially Ohio) provided the backbone of Copperhead support. One northern newspaper described these liberal democrats “like copperheads and rattlesnakes in winter, cold in their stiff and silent coils...blind and venomous enemies of our government found in our midst.”<sup>70</sup> As it related to the South, the Peace Democrats were willing, if necessary, to let the cotton states form a new nation, and go in peace.<sup>71</sup> The War Democrats had strong support

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>70</sup> *The Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, 4 September 1861.

<sup>71</sup> *The New York Daily Tribune*, 9 November 1860. Horace Greeley was an American author and statesman, and the founder and editor of *The New York Tribune*. Although Greeley was a proponent of emancipation, he was neither a consistent support of McClellan nor Lincoln.

in a key electoral state—New York. The strength of the Peace Democrats was regional; whereas, the War Democrats were conservative American traditionalists. According to historian Christopher Dell, the War Democrats perceived Lincoln as a threat to conservatism because he was radical and revolutionary. Dell states that “they [the War Democrats] regarded Lincoln as a visionary, having vague, unspecific connections with certain radical elements incessantly plotting slave uprisings, wholesale emancipation, and amalgamation of the races.”<sup>72</sup> However, over the course of the war, Lincoln and the War Democrats learned to compromise. This partnership developed out of both necessity and compulsion—especially as the Peace Democrats began to ascend as the opposition party. As sides were chosen, northern voters ultimately had to decide between a continuation of war or electing for peace at any price.

With respect to Republican party unity, Lincoln found the Democrat support he needed early in the mid-term elections. According to Dell, Republicans victories from 1861 to 1863 were all the result of strong Conservative support. In reference to emancipation, Negro troops, and the Wade- Davis Reconstruction Bill, the conservatives insisted, in theory, that the war should be fought to protect the Union, not to tear apart the Constitution.<sup>73</sup> Unlike the Republicans, the Democrats consistently struggled to find common ground.

Joel Silbey further describes how what he calls the Legitimist wing (conservatives) and Purist wing (peace men) struggled to find common ground. In response to Republican radicalism, the Democratic party factions attempted to stay unified. Growing anger and frustration against the war and the “nefarious” antislavery policies of the Lincoln Administration persisted.<sup>74</sup> Despite their internal differences, the Democrats clung to traditional ideology and

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<sup>72</sup> Christopher Dell, *Lincoln and the War Democrats: The Grand Erosion of Conservative Tradition* (New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1975), 10.

<sup>73</sup> Dell, *Lincoln and the War Democrats*, 288, 293.

<sup>74</sup> Silbey, *A Respectable Minority*, 80, 115.

constitutional conservatism. According to Silbey, to achieve victory, the Democrats had to emphasize their “spirit of community.”

The 1864 election tested the “Democrat’s determination to function together as a party.”<sup>75</sup> As early as 1863, the Democrats had difficulty persuading northern voters that the peace faction was still loyal to the Union. Meanwhile, the Legitimists were keenly aware of the strength of unity, but also aware that there were “limits to flexibility.” The Democrats thought that they could seriously challenge the Republicans on such issues as the prolonged war, rampant governmental interferences, black freedom, the draft, and the Republican’s own divisiveness. McClellan, a War Democrat, was tasked with the onus of representing a unified party. However, finding common ground would be nearly impossible. U.S. Representative Clement Vallandigham (D- OH), leader of the Copperheads, was a constant headache for the General. In many northern circles, Vallandigham was viewed as a traitor.<sup>76</sup> At one point, Vallandigham was the Supreme Commander of a peace organization known as the Sons of Liberty. According to Waugh, the Sons of Liberty was “a pro- peace movement based on state’s rights, state sovereignty, and individual freedom.”<sup>77</sup> The organization was semi- military in structure, but not necessarily pro- Confederate; they simply wanted the war to end. Vallandigham publicly protested enlistment, for which he was tried and convicted, then later exiled to Kentucky. Many northerners believed in the Union, and that the war still had purpose. Giving into the Confederacy was widely unpopular, even for most Democrats. Vallandigham eventually found his way to Canada before showing up at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, where he helped to write the anti- plank in the Democratic platform.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>76</sup> Sears, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan*, 578. Vallandigham had been banished to the Confederacy in 1863, supposedly for treasonous utterances.

<sup>77</sup> Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln*, 158.

Party factions were not unique to the Democratic party. The Republicans had their own potentially damaging party disunity. In Missouri, for example, three opposition groups figured largely into the dynamics of state party politics: the Claybanks, the Chocolates, and the Charcoals. Waugh proposes that these three groups had the ability to disrupt Lincoln's chances of reelection, especially if the rest of the country started to align politically with the Missouri radicals.<sup>78</sup> The Claybanks were a group of conservatives that favored emancipation, but in a gradual form. The Charcoals were radicals that wanted immediate emancipation of slaves nationwide. A third, and much less influential group, the Chocolates, were an ineffectual group of individuals who desired neither emancipation nor Lincoln's reelection—they were most likely Democrats. The Charcoals were a thorn in Lincoln's side, much like the Copperheads were to McClellan.

Lincoln and his group of moderate- conservatives squabbled often with the ever-strengthening radical Republicans -mostly comprised of abolitionists. Radicals and Conservative Unionists sought to bounce Lincoln off the ticket at the Republican Convention in favor of John Fremont, an abolitionist and former Republican presidential nominee. Lincoln had to make a move toward the center and pull together the votes. Waugh notes that one of the biggest differences between the two groups was the President's "lenient" idea of the South's reconstruction after the war was fought to a Union victory. Still, "the only thing that gave Lincoln hope in the face of this opposition within his own party was the even deeper split in the Democratic party."<sup>79</sup> How the Democratic and Republican parties managed their internal party challenges in the 1864 election would shape the resolutions set out forth by each party in the Chicago and Baltimore conventions.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 51- 53.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 19.



The Democratic vision for 1864 was not clearly defined because the party had opposing viewpoints. In articulating the party's position on key issues, Belmont and other committeemen at the Democratic national convention in Chicago agreed that slavery was not to be an issue. Initially, winning the war was the main goal for the Democrats. But after party defectors, such as the war-minded Democrats that switched to the new Union party with the Republicans, many became disillusioned and returned to the Democratic party after being off put by Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. The two dissimilar wings remained: "War democrats who faithful to the party and the war cause; and peace democrats who were faithful to the party, but not the cause."<sup>80</sup> The disunity between the two Democratic factions continued into the National Convention.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 89.

### Chapter Three: The Democratic Platform

The Democratic National Convention was the real test for McClellan. Again, finding compromise was essential to the party's success in November. Across the two-hundred-member delegation in attendance, everyone's demands must be heard. According to the *New York Herald*, it was necessary for the Democrats to placate all party factions, and personalities.<sup>81</sup> This included, for example, publicly supporting Pennsylvania Purist George Woodward in that state's gubernatorial race. McClellan already had. Silbey explains that the Purists, fundamentally, "were opposed to the Confederacy and compelled to peace on the basis of the reunion of all the states."<sup>82</sup> Still, the Purists did not exactly know how to further their goals: fight, negotiate, or form an independent party? Something had to give between the nominee and the platform to appease both sides.

At the Convention, the War Democrats were the clear majority. As the majority, the War Democrats determined the chairman of the Convention, the makeup of all committees, and all Convention officials. Perhaps most importantly, the War Democrats oversaw of the Resolutions Committee, comprised of twenty-three members in total: thirteen War Democrats and eleven Peace Democrats.<sup>83</sup> The Resolutions Committee basically drafted the language of the Democratic platform, a platform McClellan would have to both endorse and defend. Vallandigham managed to ram through a resolution calling for a peace conference. Equally damaging to McClellan's candidacy, and his accountability with voters, was vice-president nominee Pendleton's Congressional record of never once voting for war legislation.

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<sup>81</sup> *New York Herald*, 25 April 1864.

<sup>82</sup> Silbey, *A Respectable Minority*, 127.

<sup>83</sup> Dell, *Lincoln and the War Democrats*, 295.

McClellan's letter of acceptance touched off a power struggle between both warring Democratic factions. Dell explains, "War Democrats supporting McClellan wanted him to say that no armistice would go into effect until the Confederate states agreed to reenter the Union. Peace Democrats wanted him to recommend an armistice as a prelude to diplomatic negotiations."<sup>84</sup> While McClellan wanted to go along with the Peace Democrats—a wish encouraged by his handlers for fear that Vallandigham and other peace men might desert the party otherwise—McClellan was strongly encouraged by Barlow to restate the War Democrats' position. McClellan was in a difficult position. Dell continues, "Writing and rewriting his letter of acceptance, [McClellan] sought to patch together something satisfactory to both sides, without success."<sup>85</sup> McClellan's revised letter of acceptance served as a "virtual repudiation of the peace plank." This repudiation "knocked the heart out of the campaign" for many Democrats, including many voters in Ohio—Vallandigham's home state.<sup>86</sup>

The Democratic National Convention convened in Chicago, Illinois on 29 August 1864. At the Convention, Democrats focused on what Sears called "the tyranny of the Lincoln Administration."<sup>87</sup> War weariness was a theme that played well as the Democrats attempted to discredit the Republican-controlled House of Representatives and Senate. Political scientist Donald Johnson notes that, acting as a loyal opposition to the Lincoln administration, "the Democratic minority challenged the Republicans to justify and explain all of their actions and decisions."<sup>88</sup> The trick for the Democrats was to appear united, even though unity was an

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 296.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>87</sup> Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon*, 380- 81.

<sup>88</sup> Donald Bruce Johnson, *National Party Platforms* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 34.

illusion. McClellan became the solution. Waugh observes that “he could challenge the Lincoln Administration on its execution of policy without casting any doubt on the party’s patriotism.”<sup>89</sup>

The Democrats charged Lincoln with abuse of administrative and executive powers. Alleged constitutional and individual rights violations had Democrats labeling the President as a “tyrant” and a “dictator.” Waugh adds that the three collateral, but equally important, issues of arbitrary arrests, imprisonments, and violations of habeas corpus by the Lincoln camp gave Democrats the fuel it needed to stoke the fire.<sup>90</sup> The Democrats opposed the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln’s total war policies, the unconstitutional handling of the legal right to be fairly tried once an individual was indicted for a crime, and the Republicans meddling in state elections. Lincoln’s war powers, sustained by the Republican victories in Ohio and Pennsylvania in 1863, provided the Democrats with evidence of unlawful leave, railroad passes, and troop furloughs—all aimed at getting people to the polls.<sup>91</sup> The Democrats also accused Lincoln of unconstitutionally legislating selective service minded policies. Conscription, or the draft, was both a significant and controversial issue for many voters. This, and every other alleged violation, was “contrary to the American experience and destructive of liberty, another step by an autocratic government unconstitutionally to control individuals and their behavior.”<sup>92</sup> With respect to Southern rights and property interest, many Democrats opposed any notion of party aggrandizement or social revolution. All these concerns served as the backdrop in the Democratic platform.

In its platform, the Democrats set forth three key resolutions: end the war immediately, resist further Federal Government intrusion, and restore the Union. The language of the

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<sup>89</sup> Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln*, 93.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

Democratic platform communicated peaceful negotiations with the Confederacy. However, McClellan's bellicose acceptance letter to the Democratic National Convention signaled more war, not peace. McClellan wrote at least six drafts before finalizing his letter of acceptance. In each one, the general carried a tone of war. But Barlow watered down the "war" verbiage to appease the Peace Democrats. Sears states, however, in each draft McClellan "consistently rejected an unconditional armistice and made reunion a precondition for any peace settlement with the Confederacy."<sup>93</sup> Committed to the fight, McClellan exclaimed, "I could not look in the face of my gallant comrades of the Army and Navy, who have survived so many bloody battles, and tell them that their labors, and the sacrifice of so many of our slain and wounded brethren had been in vain."<sup>94</sup> Despite McClellan's convictions and loyalty to his former soldiers, by accepting the Democratic nomination, the general would endorse the entire Democratic platform once written at the Convention, including the peace plank.

Silbey states, "platforms served an important purpose in American party warfare in the nineteenth century."<sup>95</sup> Platforms are written to furnish signals to voters. The utilization of "favorite symbols" and "easily understood phrases" are intended to create negative images of the other party—all methods of mobilizing voters.<sup>96</sup> It was here at the formation stage of the platform process, that compromise between the war and peace Democrats was most visible. Bar Vollandigham first introduced a moderate peace policy. Barlow and most of the War Democrats went along by toning down the martial language. Most of the Democrat's platform dealt with constitutional violations during the war initiated by Lincoln upon the Union citizenry. The "Union subversion of the Constitution" and the "unswerving fidelity to the Union under the

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<sup>93</sup> Sears, *Young Napoleon*, 375.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Silbey, *A Respectable Minority*, 71.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

Constitution” was highlighted in the first resolution along with violations of civil liberties, economic calamity, and racial equality.<sup>97</sup> Interference with free elections in the border states set a revolutionary tone under the second resolution. The third, and perhaps most interesting resolution, included language that endorsed both state’s rights and the preservation of the Union. Failing to adequately explain the seemingly contradictory third resolution to the voters would undoubtedly become the Democrats biggest challenge.

The first resolution of the Democratic platform demanded “that immediate efforts be made for a cessation of hostilities.”<sup>98</sup> According to Silbey, the peace faction of the Democratic Party went too far for most voters. Most northerners wanted to see the war end but wanted to see it won. The “cessation of hostilities” clause contained in the first resolution of the Democratic platform was not marketed nor explained well. Indeed, Barlow underestimated the effect of the platform language. Inserting a plank with reference to negotiation and reconciliation, to Barlow, seemed reasonable, and perhaps innocuous, if worded properly. Sibley explains, “So long as the restoration of the Union remained in full view the drafters of the platform could do no harm by advocating [a] ...convention or any other... extraordinary measures looking for peace.”<sup>99</sup> But on what terms were the peace men willing to accept a war candidate? The peace Democrats preferred either Governor Tom Seymour of Connecticut or Governor Horatio Seymour of New York. Sibley observes that both these men were “clear symbols of opposition to the war policies of the administration.”<sup>100</sup> At the convention, the peace democrats threatened to leave the party if McClellan was nominated, but the measure was defeated in conference by a two- to- one margin.

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>98</sup> Edward McPherson, *The Political History of the United States of America during the Great Rebellion* (Washington, D.C.: Philip & Solomons, 1865), 417.

<sup>99</sup> Silbey, *A Respectable Minority*, 128.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 129.

McClellan was slowly gaining popularity nationwide; therefore, the pragmatic move for the committee leadership was to keep the entire Democratic party intact. Surprisingly, peace strongholds in the West leaned toward McClellan—especially in Indiana and Illinois. Ohio, Vallandigham’s turf, was split by a delegate margin of seventeen for McClellan, four for Governor Seymour, and twenty-one for Tom Seymour. Vallandigham did not stand in the way for unified talks. He and perhaps other peace men realized that the 1863 state election losses by Democrats created a need, however intolerable, to collaborate with the War Democrats, or at least temper their demands.

The second resolution of the Democratic platform contained a revolutionary element. It stated, “the direct interference of the military authorities of the United States in the recent elections held in Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, and Delaware, was a shameful violation of the Constitution...and future acts...in the approaching election will be held as revolutionary, and future acts will be resisted with all the means under our power and control.”<sup>101</sup> A New York newspaper stressed the need for a clean majority win by Lincoln by resorting to fear-mongering. The newspaper reminded their readership of the Democrats’ second resolution by citing a statement made by a notable Copperhead, John McKeon, who said, “If Abraham Lincoln is reelected, there will be a bloody revolution in the North and West.”<sup>102</sup> The paper went even further by predicting that states voting for McClellan would “promptly secede from the Federal Union, and form a military alliance with the Confederates” should Lincoln win.<sup>103</sup> How serious these bombastic threats were are not completely known.

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<sup>101</sup> Johnson, *National Party Platforms*, 130.

<sup>102</sup> *The New York Times*, 5 October 1864.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

The third resolution of the Democratic platform continued the barrage of alleged violations committed upon the citizenry by the Lincoln Administration. Wrongful imprisonments and several other “subversions” of the Federal government were outlined as the resolution called attention to the First Amendment and the due process rights of individuals. At the same time, the third resolution was probably the most damaging to the Democrats and their effort to win the 1864 Presidential election because it offered a curious contradiction of sorts to northern voters. The resolution stated, “the aim and object of the Democratic Party is to preserve the Federal Union and the rights of the States unimpaired.”<sup>104</sup> Both the peace men and McClellan wanted to preserve the Union, regardless of the difference of opinion on conditions. But how exactly the Democrats expected to achieve reunion and concurrently allow the Confederate States to operate “unimpaired” remained an unanswered question throughout the course of the campaign.

The ambiguous language of the Democratic platform did not escape the attention of some newspapers in the North. One Pennsylvania editor was highly critical of McClellan’s candidacy altogether. C. D. Brigham wrote that McClellan was “the tool of the vilest traitor in the country... and he and his running mate George Pendleton were notoriously disloyal.”<sup>105</sup> Brigham noted that the Democratic Convention address failed to mention the Rebellion, or even slavery. This “friendly forbearance” as Brigham called it, led many Lincoln supporters to accuse pro-McClellan voters of being Confederate sympathizers. Brigham added that “the [Democratic] platform is of the surrender-to-the rebels sort, and the proceedings, as a whole, might as well be in Richmond as anywhere else.”<sup>106</sup> On the whole, the Democrats appeared too soft on the

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<sup>104</sup> Johnson, *National Party Platforms*, 130.

<sup>105</sup> *The Pittsburgh Daily Commercial*, 1 September 1864.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*



Confederacy. The perception that McClellan was a waffler would always confuse voters. Perhaps more importantly, the Democrats platform represented an opening to peaceful communication with the South. Because of its vague language, explaining the true meaning of the Democratic platform to the voters would be nearly impossible.

The Republican platform, on the other hand, presented a clear and more forceful agenda. Held in Baltimore, Maryland, on 7 June 1864 the National Union National Convention (the main faction of the Republican party) addressed more issues than did the Democrats. Many provisions of the eleven resolutions defended notions of Constitutional justice and justified the war with the Confederacy. The second and third points of the Republican platform were perhaps the most relevant. The second resolution stated, “we approve the determination of the Government of the United States not to compromise with Rebels, or to offer them any terms of peace, except such as may be based upon an unconditional surrender of their hostility and a return to their just allegiance to the Constitution and laws of the United States...”<sup>107</sup> The uncompromising language of the Republicans was the polar opposite from what the Democrats were messaging. The refusal to compromise on the war was a stark distinction between the parties.

The Republican Party was also unequivocal in its stance toward slavery. The third resolution stated, in part, “slavery was the cause, and now constitutes the strength of this Rebellion, and as it must be, always and everywhere, hostile to the principles of the Republican Government...we are in favor, furthermore, of such an amendment to the Constitution, to be made by the people in conformity with its provinces, as shall terminate and forever prohibit the existence of the slavery within all the limits of the United States.”<sup>108</sup> President Lincoln had always believed slavery was antithetical to democracy. He once said, “As I would not be a slave,

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<sup>107</sup> Johnson, *National Party Platforms*, 134.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy.”<sup>109</sup> Historian Gary Gallagher notes that Lincoln stayed true to his convictions regarding his plan for reunion. The President announced earlier in 1863 that he intended the Rebels “take an oath of allegiance and accept all proclamations and legislation then in force regarding slavery.”<sup>110</sup> The Republican party’s resolve motivated many northern voters to remain loyal to Lincoln.

McClellan could not promote the Democrat’s platform, at least not with a clear conscience. In response, the Democrats wanted a “clarifying letter” from McClellan adopting a stronger stance (especially on the peace notions toward the Confederacy), but the peace faction wanted to leave the platform as it was. As the pressure mounted, McClellan soon found himself in a no-win situation. McClellan campaigned against the peace plank, but his message to the voters lacked consistency. Pressure to incorporate an unconditional armistice into the campaign became problematic for McClellan. Men of incongruent political ideologies agitated the general. For example, McClellan did not take the advice of notable Copperhead George Morgan (Ohio) with any great sincerity concerning an absolute cease-fire. McClellan told his supporters, “I have received so many suggestions that I have determined to follow my own judgement in the matter. Morgan is very anxious that I should write a letter suggesting an armistice!!!! If these fools will ruin the country I won’t help them.”<sup>111</sup> Ultimately, the peace plank of the Democrat’s platform would doom McClellan’s chances of winning in the general election because northern voters and Union soldiers could not make sense of the ideological inconsistencies offered by the

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<sup>109</sup> Terence Ball, *Lincoln: Political Writings and Speeches* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 224.

<sup>110</sup> Gary Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 91.

<sup>111</sup> Sears, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan*, 586.

first and third resolutions set forth at the Convention. Criticism of the Democrats began to eat away at McClellan's chances of winning.

#### Chapter Four: Reaction to the Democratic Convention

The Democratic Convention created a hotbed of criticism in political circles and in the press. Overshadowing the anti-Lincoln rhetoric of the Democratic platform was the reaction to the nomination of McClellan's running mate, McClellan's indifference toward slavery, and the general's contrasting war-toned message. Whether McClellan should appear tough on the Confederacy, or amicable toward his peace party constituents on a "no-condition, peace at all cost" became the general's Achilles heel. It was a no-win situation for McClellan.

The Chicago Convention offered a variety of views. On the second day of the Convention, to a rousing ovation, Governor Horatio Seymour of New York stated, "Mr. Lincoln values many things above the Union, and he thinks a proclamation worth more than peace: we think the blood of our people more precious than the edicts of the President."<sup>112</sup> Governor Seymour, however, embodied a defeatist mentality at odds with McClellan. None of the three resolutions contained in the Democratic platform insisted on restoring the Union as a precondition to peaceful negotiation. But General McClellan insisted on a qualified victory by stating, "the union is the one condition of peace. We ask no more."<sup>113</sup> While McClellan repeatedly rejected an unconditional armistice with the South, and made reunion a precondition, Seymour countered, "we demand no conditions for the restoration of our Union."<sup>114</sup> The Democratic party, again, appeared disunited for the moment.

Frustrating McClellan's electability even further was the decision by the Democrats to choose U.S. Representative George Pendleton (D- OH) as McClellan's running mate. Pendleton

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<sup>112</sup> Francis Newton Thorpe, *Official Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention, 1864* (Chicago: Times Steam Book and Job Printing House, 1864), 23.

<sup>113</sup> Gallagher, *The Union War*, 91.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

opposed the war, voted against field materials for the soldiers, and was cast as a southern sympathizer by the more conservative pro-war electorate of the Democratic Party. McClellan attempted to distance himself from Pendleton and the Democratic platform. In fact, *The Lancaster Gazette* reported that “The friends of General McClellan endeavored to secure the nomination of [James] Guthrie...and others... for Vice-President.”<sup>115</sup> However, the Democratic Party (nominees and delegates) were the Democratic choice—all united in support of the ticket. Silbey notes that the Legitimist wing of the Democratic party supposedly wanted lawyer and party politician James Guthrie as its first choice for the vice-presidential candidate. But Barlow and other New York leaders thought that an Ohio nominee who was “central and symbol of the Peace Purist perspective” would be a more pragmatic choice as McClellan’s running mate.<sup>116</sup> The Ohio paper wrote, “A vote for McClellan is also a vote for Mr. Pendleton.”<sup>117</sup> McClellan could not separate himself from the peace men, and the disconnect between the message and the voter pervaded.

The “Chicago platform” was viewed by some newspapermen as a peace platform. Should the Democratic Party be defined by the actions of its Convention? Whether a deal was worked out among the delegates prior to the convention such as “candidate in return for platform,” Silbey maintains that “the evidence is not conclusive.”<sup>118</sup> Regardless, the Copperhead Pendleton was forced upon McClellan. While choosing the more peace-centric and less conservative Pendleton as McClellan’s running mate certainly seemed like a reasonable compromise, it was perhaps the Democrat’s most critical mistake. Both the Democratic platform

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<sup>115</sup> *The Lancaster Gazette*, 27 October 1864. James Guthrie was a U.S. Senator from Kentucky, and chairman of the Committee on Resolutions at the Democratic Convention. He was a Legitimist, espousing general conservatism; therefore, considered a moderate within his own party.

<sup>116</sup> Silbey, *A Respectable Minority*, 134.

<sup>117</sup> *The Lancaster Gazette*, 27 October 1864.

<sup>118</sup> Silbey, *A Respectable Minority*, 132.

and their vice- presidential nominee got railed in the press. Rather than giving the ticket balance, the peace plank of the Democrat's platform unintentionally created the perception that the Democrats were disloyal to the Union. One newspaper characterized the Democratic ticket by stating, "The platform offends the patriotism of every loyal elector."<sup>119</sup> The *New York Daily Tribune* called the McClellan-Pendleton ticket an oxymoron, stating "A peace Democrat! When our country is fighting for existence is rather a novelty."<sup>120</sup>

McClellan never thought of himself as a puppet, but that was what he was becoming. The general wanted to leave the politics to the politicians, but his naïve refusal to be manipulated by his own party's platform was both unrealistic and exposed. Still, McClellan displayed moral courage in standing his ground. The general once wrote "I feel now perfectly free from any obligation to allow myself to be used as a candidate."<sup>121</sup> Frustrated by the infighting among party members, McClellan stated, "I sit upon the bank & patiently watch the wind!"<sup>122</sup> However, McClellan soon realized that if he wanted the Presidential nomination, he would have to bend a little on his conservative ideals. The peace faction needed McClellan in order to secure the bloc of war Democrats; and McClellan needed the Copperhead vote in the Midwest. McClellan and company knew that these peace Democrats were still strong in Illinois, Indiana, and the border states. And the war Democrats held considerable strength in Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey. The old axiom that politics makes strange bed fellows was never truer than in the case of the 1864 Democratic Presidential nominee selection.

Meanwhile, Republicans seized the opportunity to gain political traction off the remarks Seymour made, which seemed to indicate a noncommittal attitude on slavery. Referring to the

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<sup>119</sup> *The Lancaster Gazette*, 27 October 1864.

<sup>120</sup> *The New York Daily Tribune*, 20 January 1864.

<sup>121</sup> George McClellan to Manton Marble, 25 June 1864, Sears, *The Civil War Papers of George McClellan*, 579-80.

<sup>122</sup> George McClellan to Francis Blair, 22 July 1864, Sears, *The Civil War Papers of George McClellan*, 583-5.

South, Seymour said, “We demand from them what we demand for ourselves—the full recognition of the rights of States.”<sup>123</sup> Ongoing disagreements within the Democratic Party on the conditions of armistice left the Republicans looking more unified, and appealing.

Voters observed the War and Peace Democrats quarreling over key issues. McClellan did such a poor job of emphasizing whether recognition of the Union by the Confederacy was “absolutely necessary” that members of the peace faction threatened to drop their support for McClellan and back Governor Seymour. Consequently, McClellan drafted several acceptance speeches that he hoped would convey his most important message—reunion. Historian Charles Wilson mirrors Dell’s earlier argument that McClellan and his advisors could not bring the War and Peace Democrats together. Wilson cites a fundamental problem with McClellan’s position by stating, “he had failed again to impose any conditions as a preliminary to the general armistice.”<sup>124</sup> Suddenly, a shift occurred in McClellan’s thinking toward negotiation with the Confederacy: instead of agreeing to the conditions, then peace, McClellan suggested an armistice. If the South did not accept this, McClellan reasoned, then the Union would resume the war. The Republicans argued that the Democrats could not have it both ways. McClellan was no doubt appealing to a war-weary electorate, but the inconsistencies were becoming more transparent. As the peace men continued to meddle in McClellan’s affairs, the general wrote Barlow, “I am sick of the whole thing.”<sup>125</sup>

According to historian Larry Nelson, southerners waited with great interest to learn the results of the Democratic convention. Excitement among some Confederate officials grew after a prominent Richmond, Virginia newspaper reported that McClellan had been named the

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<sup>123</sup> *The Lancaster Gazette*, 27 October 1864.

<sup>124</sup> Charles Wilson, “McClellan’s Changing Views on the Peace Plank of 1864” *The American Historical Review*, 38 (1933): 503.

<sup>125</sup> Wilson, “McClellan’s Changing Views,” 500.

nominee.<sup>126</sup> One Confederate War Department clerk recorded in his diary that “Our people take a lively interest in the proceedings of the Chicago Convention, hoping for a speedy termination of the war.”<sup>127</sup> Confederate President Jefferson Davis also studied the developments of the Northern presidential campaign. Although the prospect of Lincoln’s defeat intrigued some, Davis had reservations regarding McClellan’s candidacy. Davis had an uncompromising devotion to Confederate independence and he believed that peace would be a failure. It seems Davis did not trust McClellan’s open letter as it repudiated parts of the 1864 Democratic platform. Some of Davis’s possible mistrust came after one his Confederate commissioners in Canada, Clement Clay, relayed that Union victories in Mobile and Atlanta “had produced a dramatic change of feelings in the North, and there was now serious speculation that those events caused McClellan to ignore the platform or the construction given it by the peace men in his letter of acceptance.”<sup>128</sup> To Davis, McClellan was a threat because the general explicitly opposed recognition of the Confederacy. Therefore, Davis’s unenthusiastic support for McClellan stemmed from the fact that Davis was primarily concerned with southern independence, not state’s rights or slavery, and certainly not reconstruction.<sup>129</sup> Jefferson Davis believed that any action for peace on the basis of individual states would be divisive and the product of great harm to the cause of Confederate independence. Nelson argues that a McClellan win would see conciliatory policies while guaranteeing some southern states might leave the

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<sup>126</sup> *The Richmond Dispatch*, 1 September 1864.

<sup>127</sup> Larry Nelson, *Bullets, Ballots, and Rhetoric: Confederate Policy for the United States Presidential Contest of 1864* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1980), 112.

<sup>128</sup> Nelson, *Bullets, Ballots, and Rhetoric*, 127. Clement Clay was a former United States Senator from Alabama who worked in the Confederate War Department under President Jefferson Davis as a secret agent who was assigned to Canada to coordinate support for Southern sympathizers, some of whom were members of Vallandigham’s Sons of Liberty.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.



South and reenter the Union.<sup>130</sup> For these reasons, Jefferson Davis did not support McClellan's pledge of peace.

Nothing was included in the Democratic Party platform, nor McClellan's letter accepting the Democratic nomination, regarding the issue of slavery. The omission was not accidental. Lincoln opposed slavery as a national evil and felt that emancipation would tend to promote future security. Sears writes that "President Lincoln had stated the two conditions for a peace settlement as reunion and the abolition of slavery."<sup>131</sup> McClellan disagreed. The general stated, "I do not think that forcible abolition should be made an object of the war or a necessary condition of peace and reunion."<sup>132</sup> In writing to members of the Democratic National Committee on 8 September 1864, McClellan repeated his position by stating, "the preservation of our Union was the sole avowed object for which the war was commenced."<sup>133</sup> Manton Marble, the editor of the *New York World*, editorialized that the "character of the war will have so changed" given a McClellan victory in the general election, explaining that "They [the southern people] will then see that submission to the Union does not involve the overthrow of their institutions, the destruction of their property, industrial disorganization, social chaos, negro equality, and the nameless horrors of servile war... On the election of General McClellan... a peace party will spring up, as if by magic, in every part of the South."<sup>134</sup>

While McClellan wanted to preserve the Union, he was not interested in destroying or reorganizing southern society in the process. McClellan had always been against wartime emancipation, believing that freeing the slaves would prolong the war. Key Democratic leaders

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Sears, *Young Napoleon*, 376.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 502.

<sup>133</sup> Gallagher, *Union War*, 91.

<sup>134</sup> Sears, *Young Napoleon*, 376.

shared these views. State Representative Robert Winthrop of Massachusetts, a spokesman for McClellan and perhaps the Democratic party's most effective spokesman, said "forcible emancipation" will only lead to "mischief and misery" for blacks and whites.<sup>135</sup> Ironically, many Union soldiers seemed to support emancipation. The soldiers were against slavery, not for moral reasons, but out of patriotic duty and economic leverage. Gallagher writes that "the idea of ending slavery—not necessarily because it was the right thing to do but often because it would deal the secessionists a blow—would become increasingly popular among Northern soldiers and civilians."<sup>136</sup> Economic reasons had as much to do with southern resentment as anything because southern slave labor undercut market prices in the North. In *The Union War*, Gallagher offers new research that emancipation during the war, particularly in 1864, was secondary to "the continuance of a war to save the Union," and support for emancipation became "a tool to restore the Union."<sup>137</sup> In any event, McClellan chose not to politicize the issue of slavery.

Further encouraging McClellan to "dodge the nigger" is that a racist strain existed within both prongs of the Democratic party. Democrats implored voters that if Lincoln were to win reelection slaves would overrun the North, occupy or seize land, be enlisted in the Army, compete with whites for jobs, and enter the practice of miscegenation. These racial and stereotypical fears and concerns were all initiated by the Democrats to preserve the conservative status quo. Democrats felt that Lincoln was motivated by politicizing social policy, using the Civil War to further his own agendas of emancipation and authoritarianism and not by any true sense of morality.

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 381.

<sup>136</sup> Gallagher, *The Union War*, 40.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 78, 76. According to Gallagher, economic variables superseded moral justifications for ending slavery.

Notable abolitionists Frederick Douglass, Gerrit Smith, and Wendell Phillips all criticized the Democrats for their racism. These political voices were perhaps predictable. Douglass, for example, took to newspapers, speeches, and political conversations to address the disservice white photographers gave black subjects in capturing the Negro likeness. Art historian Laura Wexler maintains that on the lecture circuit, Douglass used the theme of slavery and negative photographic imagery as a vehicle to dispel and contradict the negative stereotypes generated by whites. Wexler also points out that Lincoln initially “sought to persuade the Confederacy that he would not interfere with the right to own slaves.”<sup>138</sup> Although the President later changed his stance on slavery, Douglass, a former slave, repeatedly reminded his audience that in his first inaugural address, Lincoln said, “I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so.”<sup>139</sup> Despite the Republican party’s former racist overtones, Douglass accepted the new direction of the Lincoln administration in the following years, while continuing to castigate the Democrats (and McClellan) for promising to negotiate with the slave power. One year after the election, in his Boston address, Douglass denounced the “peace” candidate by stating, “What the country thinks of [halfness] and half measures is seen by the last election. We repudiate such men and all such measures. The people said to the Chickahominy hero—we do abhor and spurn you and all those whose sympathies are like yours...and to Abraham Lincoln, they say go forward, don’t stop where you are, but onward.”<sup>140</sup> At the same time, both Douglass and Phillips admired their (the Democrats) resiliency despite the party’s

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<sup>138</sup> Laura Wexler, *A More Perfect Likeness: Frederick Douglass and the Images of the Nation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 22.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-6.

differences, comparing the Democratic party to “a raft that no storm, however violent, was able to sink.”<sup>141</sup>

In contrast, by 1864, slavery was the greatest threat to the Union in Lincoln’s mind. The uncompromising attitude Republicans displayed toward the Confederacy, and slavery, played well among the more radical voices of the Republican Party. Gerrit Smith, a New York politician and abolitionist, criticized the Democrats in his perceptive analysis on McClellan’s nomination. In Smith’s view, the Democratic Convention blamed the North and the Republican Convention blamed the South; in short, McClellan was a “servant of the South.”<sup>142</sup> Smith also argued that the Democratic platform was fundamentally flawed. The Constitutional violations the Democrats alleged in the platform did not exist because the Constitution provided for free speech. Smith argued that the North was not responsible for the war, as Democrats espoused. Rather, Democrats helped the South “tighten the chains of the slaves” by not cooperating with the President on his emancipation policy.

The New Yorker (Smith) reasoned that just because many Northerners didn’t believe in southern secession, this did not equate to Union oppression. Referring to McClellan as the “standard-bearer of the South,” Smith proposed several reasons why McClellan should be perceived as a disingenuous Union supporter. For instance, McClellan’s acceptance letter went easy on the South, and it was silent on Confederate injustices, such as the torture and starvation of Union prisoners of war at Andersonville, Georgia. As a proponent of restoration, Smith believed that the Confederacy had to be “compelled” to return to the Union. Smith explained that the “traitorous and hypocritical platform” of the Democratic Party and their candidate was

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<sup>141</sup> *New York World*, 25 December 1863. Wendell Phillips was an abolitionist and advocate for women’s rights. Phillips made several speeches on civil and political rights for slaves while observing the 1864 Presidential election.

<sup>142</sup> Gerrit Smith, *McClellan’s Nomination and Acceptance* (New York: The Loyal Publication Society, 1864), 2.

“void for inconsistency.”<sup>143</sup> For example, the Democrats insinuated that the “reserved” portion of the platform should afford the South the same Constitutional rights now in war against the Union that they had enjoyed before secession “and all the way through the war.” The position seemed illogical. Regardless, not everyone agreed with Smith, or the President. A Wisconsin editor and War Democrat, Charles D. Robinson, wrote to Lincoln, “If [the abandonment of slavery] was indeed the president’s position, Robinson wrote, he and his fellow War Democrats would not support Lincoln’s reelection.”<sup>144</sup> The President defended his position on emancipation by responding, “What I do about slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union.”<sup>145</sup>

Public opinion on both candidates varied greatly. For example, Manton Marble’s *New York World* shed a more positive light on McClellan by lashing out daily against Lincoln’s war.<sup>146</sup> Waugh states that Marble intended his paper “to do all it possibly can to unite every Democrat in solid column to break down the present administration.”<sup>147</sup> Marble’s paper was an independent religious sheet, and the Democratic Party’s leading voice. Another leading Democratic paper was the *Journal of Commerce*. William C. Prime, as editor of this paper, portrayed the general as a brilliant field commander and political visionary. Both Marble and Prime became McClellan’s friends and advisors. McClellan’s field command was often the topic of journalistic coverage. The battle of Antietam, for example, was evidence of divided newspaper opinion. Both Democratic newspapers highlighted the general’s role in winning the

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 14, 12.

<sup>144</sup> Charles Robinson to President Lincoln, 7 August 1864. Terence Ball, *Lincoln: Political Writings and Speeches*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 206.

<sup>145</sup> President Lincoln to Charles Robinson, 17 August 1864. Ibid., 207.

<sup>146</sup> Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln*, 26.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 26.

important Battle of Antietam: “a triumph gained over superior [Confederate] numbers and a “victory...the product of...the splendid management of Gen. McClellan.”<sup>148</sup>

The *New York Tribune*, a traditionally Republican newspaper (more widely distributed and reprinted than any pro- McClellan newspaper) ironically complemented both leading Democratic papers (*The New York World* and the *Journal of Commerce*) by presenting a lie that the Lincoln Administration hamstrung McClellan at Antietam by denying reinforcements in the battle—calling it “a crime against the nation...in the refusal of to reinforce McClellan.”

Although visibility of the article was widespread, the column, written by Samuel Wilkerson, was ultimately discredited by Horace Greeley, editor of the influential *New York Tribune*. Joining the chorus of newspapers defending McClellan’s military reputation, *The New York Herald* assigned blame for McClellan’s failures during the Peninsula campaign to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and his purposeful intentions to prevent McClellan from succeeding on the battlefield.<sup>149</sup>

Although traditionally a War Democrat newspaper, *The New York Herald* was neither a pro-McClellan nor pro- Lincoln newspaper. James Gordon Bennett, editor of the *Herald*, sensationalized many controversial subjects of the day, including politics. Waugh states, “His paper had the largest circulation of any newspaper in the country, even greater than [Horace] Greeley’s, and was nearly as potent as the latter in shaping public perceptions in the North.”<sup>150</sup>

Writing one editorial opinion, Bennett commented, “Lincoln is a joke incarnated. His election was a very sorry joke. His intrigues to secure a re-nomination as the hopes he appears to entertain of a re-election are, however, the most laughable of all jokes.”<sup>151</sup>

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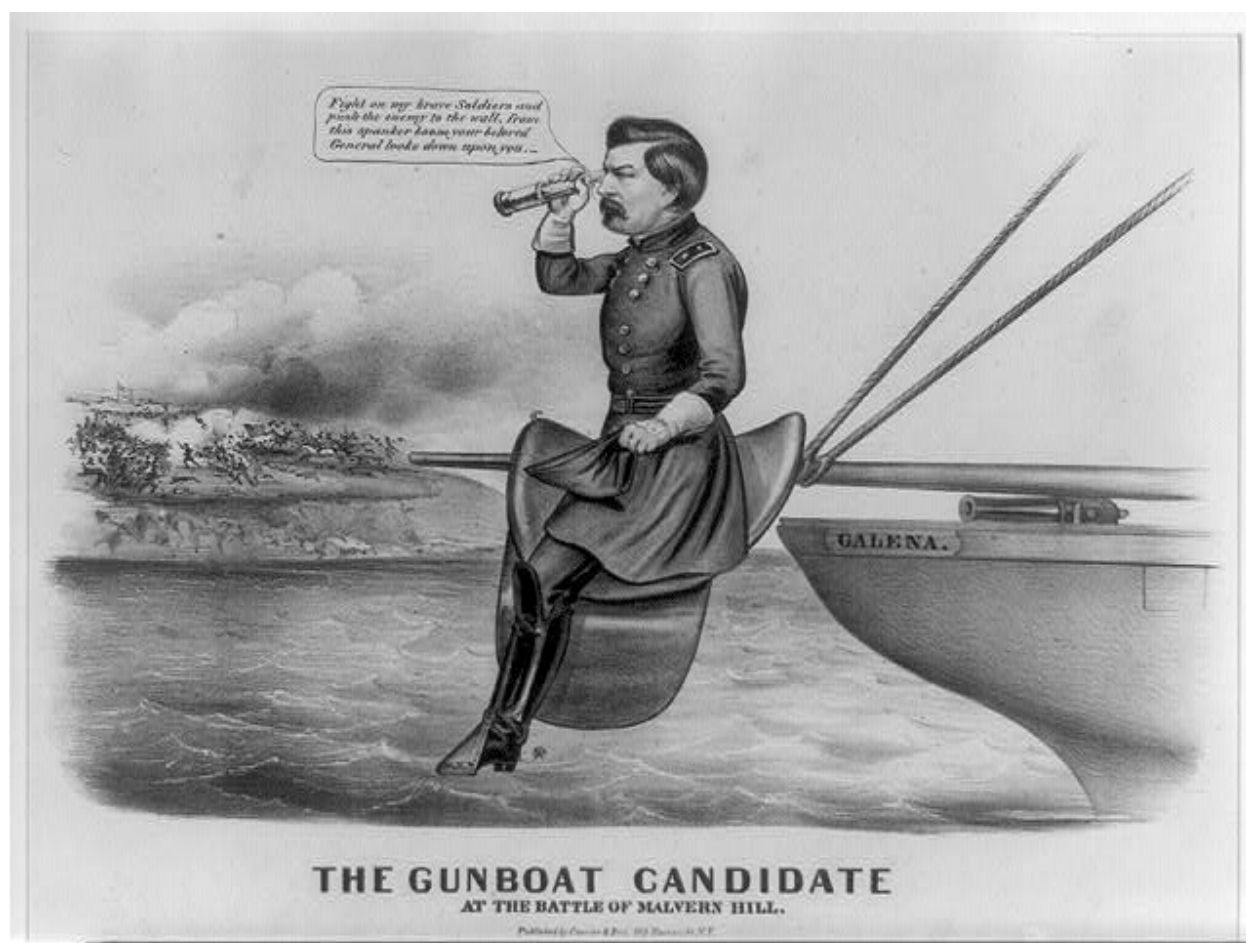
<sup>148</sup> *Journal of Commerce*, 22 September 1862.

<sup>149</sup> Sears, *Young Napoleon*, 230.

<sup>150</sup> Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln*, 138.

<sup>151</sup> *New York Herald*, 19 February 1864.

Some sketch artists, however, were not as kind to the general as the leading Democratic newspapers were. One political cartoon produced by Louis Maurer depicts McClellan watching the battle of Malvern Hill, the climax to the Seven Days Battle back in 1862, from the safety of a Union gunboat on the James River. Centered on the 1864 election, the illustration below portrays the unassertive leadership style of McClellan.<sup>152</sup> The sketch shows McClellan straddling the gun barrel and sitting atop a saddle—one he invented, although the general never served in the cavalry. Here, “The Gunboat Candidate” encourages his men to fight on even though he conveniently absent and safely positioned away from battle.



<sup>152</sup> Louis Maurer, *The Gunboat Candidate at Malvern Hill* (Boston: American Political Prints, 1766-1876), 145.

As the election neared, newspaper coverage became more critical of McClellan's political experience. For example, *The Herald* wrote, "Gen. McClellan excites all classes, but is wholly inexperienced in civil duties, his education and pursuits have been military—how can he contest Lincoln?"<sup>153</sup> Other journalists similarly questioned the political credentials of George McClellan. One new newspaper wrote, "the hero of Chickahominy is known to the country. In the military field, he never won a battle, but lost many. We have no idea he will prove more successful as a political leader."<sup>154</sup> Some political editorials regarding the election's most divisive issues prioritized Unionism for northern citizens instead of northern dictatorship over the South. For example, Henry Raymond, editor of the *New York Times*, wrote a piece titled "The Only Issue and the Only Solution." In his article, Raymond stated "the North fought not to kill slavery, destroy the doctrine of states rights, or subdue or degrade the Southern people."<sup>155</sup> Raymond's editorial targeted potential voters who supported the Union but were dispassionate toward ending slavery.

Other forms of pro- McClellan literature showed up on street corners and at townhall meetings, particularly in New York. The *Society for the Diffusion of Political Knowledge* sought to cast doubt on the President and his policies. These anti- Lincoln pamphlets served as effective propaganda geared toward fear mongering and race -baiting. Supportive groups of the general, commonly referred to as "McClellan Clubs," hosted by the wealthy inner- city elites, broadcasted the general's fervor on the commitment to the war, and his political discord with the President. At times, the *New York Tribune* seemed to echo the Democrat's notion of peace, and certainly the public's general frustration with the war effort heading into the election. Editor

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<sup>153</sup> *The New York Herald*, 22 October 1864.

<sup>154</sup> *The Pittsburg Daily Commercial*, 1 September 1864.

<sup>155</sup> *New York Times*, 1 December 1864. Henry Raymond was a respected political and pro- Lincoln voice who sought to influence his readership with Republican principles—most notably Unionism.



Greely famously wrote, “our bleeding, bankrupt and almost dying country... longs for peace—shudders at the prospect of fresh conscriptions, of other wholesale devastations, and new rivers of human blood.”<sup>156</sup> The contrast in favorable writing between the two candidates continued. As the politicians and newspapers spun their respective stances on the candidates, the northern citizenry and Union soldiers would form opinions of their own.

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<sup>156</sup> *New York Tribune*, 18 August 1864.

## Chapter Five: Northern Principles and Soldier Motivations

The Democrats emphasized civil liberty violations by the Lincoln administration throughout much of the campaign. One main talking point among Democrats and Republicans was the spirit of northern unity—especially economic vitality. Gallagher explained the concept and importance of *Unionism* around the time of the election by identifying several themes associated with the war effort. Democracy, Constitutional rule of law, and free economic enterprise were three principles that Lincoln believed were worth fighting for, and each theme fit together nicely in the President’s “maintenance of the Union” philosophy.<sup>157</sup> Additionally, many northern citizens felt that punishing the slaveholding aristocrats would damage the South’s economy. These ideals were presented to northern citizens in the form of a cleverly designed manifesto that emphasized consumerism, patriotism, and military service—all aimed at energizing the war effort and Union spirit. Whether Lincoln emphasized the importance of sustaining economic stability, the preservation of democracy, or moral responsibility, Unionism was one of the more aggressively pitched messages in the election.

Unionism was not singularly defined by any one motivation or factor. Gallagher contends that the “indispensable” component of northern unity and Unionism would be greatly threatened in the long term, even after the Civil War, should the economic climate presently defining the North and South not change. According to Gallagher, “a northern victory would validate one of two competing antebellum sectional visions—the one trumpeting free soil, free labor, and democratic rule by free citizens unencumbered by the narrow class interests of a slaveholding oligarchy.”<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Gallagher, *Union War*, 34.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

In his book, *Liberty, Virtue, and Progress*, historian Earl Hess contends that northerners believed preservation of the Union depended on liberty. The freedom to safeguard certain economic privileges motivated many northerners to stay committed to the war. The dichotomy of freedom and slavery, however, presented moral challenges for these northern civilians and the Lincoln administration long before the war ever began. Hess viewed emancipation as a tool toward economic preservation, not a morally founded principle. While northerners embodied the protection of white land ownership, they also viewed southern plantation owners as despots. Slavery was becoming a more polarizing issue by the day.

Hess then considers the question: could saving the Union be accomplished without destroying personal civil liberties? As the war progressed, some northerners supported some of the more radical measures Lincoln proposed, and ultimately instituted. According to Hess, “Federally sponsored emancipation, military conscription, confiscation of private property, and violations of civil rights were used by the government to meet the demands of the war.”<sup>159</sup> Other northerners simply wanted to preserve the Union without all the drama that came with wholesale change. One newspaper observed that the war was initially fought to reestablish the legitimate authority of the Federal government, not to “transform Southern society and eliminate slavery.”<sup>160</sup> Regardless, it seems northern interest over the course of the war did shift from initially recognizing that Federal authority must be re-legitimized after southern secession to de-legitimizing southern aristocracy (slavery) because it became evident that Lincoln’s war policies would be necessary to produce the desired outcome—Union preservation—even though the North was split on how to achieve that goal.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Hess, *Liberty, Virtue, and Progress*, 81.

<sup>160</sup> *New York Times*, 10 May 1861.

<sup>161</sup> Hess, *Liberty, Virtue, and Progress*, 81-2.

Political scientist Joseph Allan Frank complements the positions of both Gallagher and Hess by asserting how regular and civilian soldier alike desired total defeat of the South through a civic minded patriotic duty. In his book *With Ballot and Bayonet*, Frank examines what motivated the northern and southern soldier to enlist and fight. Frank argues that politics was a central theme. According to Frank, military organization, officers, family and personal relationships, morality, morale, loyalty, and cohesion between the soldier and his environment were all shaped by politics.<sup>162</sup> Frank observes that soldiers were politically astute and could see the differences between Democrats and Republicans. One Union officer wrote that “back home treason walked unblushingly, the Copperheads dominated the political arena, while honest men were in fear.”<sup>163</sup> Soldiers were looking for good leadership from its politicians. Partisan politics (especially local squabbles) sickened many soldiers. The idea of self-serving politicians defeated the Union spirit of nationalism and was unpatriotic to all enlisted men. After all, what was the typical soldier fighting for? Additionally, soldiers judged the commanders in the field by corresponding with loved ones on the progress or result of battle. The key to victory was in many ways a numbers game. Both sides advocated the draft because they felt it impossible to win otherwise. Frank points out, however, that volunteers resented the conscripts because they were perceived as dangerous and unpredictable. Likewise, arming blacks was feared among many northern infantrymen despite the clear numbering advantage of having more troops in the field.

Economics also played an important role in soldier motivation. Career soldiers wanted incentives; whereas, citizen soldiers mainly fought out of patriotism. The Union flag and the

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<sup>162</sup> Joseph Allen Frank, *With Ballot and Bayonet: The Political Socialization of American Civil War Soldiers* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press), 1998.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

Constitution were symbols of northern freedom. As the war dragged on, abolishing slavery became perhaps more important to many northern citizens than flag or law. The socio-economic divide in the South between the rich planter class and the poor fighting soldier was mirrored in the North by the economic inequalities back home. Conscription was one thing, but confiscation of private property, or mislaid taxes was another matter entirely. Frank suggests that the northern soldier became particularly disgruntled in the economics of the war when the “steady decline in buying power at home and the supply shortages at the front” manifested.<sup>164</sup> Civilians were also concerned about the enormous cost of the war. The national debt was sky rocketing. Waugh notes, “The war was costing \$2 million a day with little to show for it.”<sup>165</sup> Ultimately, however, McClellan and Democrats’ peace faction made the candidate decision easier for both groups of voters to discern. Frank stresses that while McClellan did not declare the war a failure, his party did; and so many soldiers believed that a vote for McClellan would only prolong the war. They saw the war issue levied by the Democrats as a negotiated peace or unconditional surrender. Conversely, Lincoln extended a resolute offering—total defeat of the Confederacy. When election day arrived, the soldiers eagerly went to the polls.

The 1864 Presidential election set a precedent for soldier voting. Soldier suffrage had been a political topic for some time, and President Lincoln was aware of the potential impact of thousands of soldier votes. During the Civil War, the issue was confined to the states. In most states, a domiciliary requirement had to be satisfied before any service man could vote. In other words, a soldier could only vote in his home state. In legal terms, a person’s domicile is where a person resides, with the intent to remain permanently. Soldiers called away to the front did not forfeit their Constitutionally protected privilege to vote, but they had to physically be in their

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>165</sup> Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln*, 203.

home district to exercise that privilege. As historian Oscar Winther explains, State courts generally agreed that in order for men to vote, they would have to “cast their ballots in a district where they resided at the time of entering the armed forces.”<sup>166</sup> The obvious problem was that the men were away from their home state fighting the war. In 1862, Wisconsin and Minnesota were the first two states that passed laws aimed at addressing absentee voting. In Wisconsin, for example, a soldier cast his vote in camp, the officer would then forward it to the Governor of his home state, and the Secretary of State of that state would tabulate the vote. Minnesota’s procedure was slightly different: the vote was folded in an envelope and mailed to a soldier’s home district under seal, then sent to the judge in the respective county seat.<sup>167</sup> By 1864, thirteen Union states allowed soldiers to vote in the field.<sup>168</sup>

Democrats also recognized the importance of the soldier vote. Governor Seymour of New York suggested an amendment in the state legislature to allow soldiers called away to service to vote by proxy (by authorized agent). In Ohio and Pennsylvania, two states crucial to both candidates, President Lincoln furloughed enlisted soldiers to return to their home state to vote in the mid-term and general elections. Prisoners, including deserters, were even granted leniency by the War Department to physically arrive at the polls. Lincoln and his Administration would leave nothing to chance.

Historian William C. Davis highlights the vital relationship between the candidates and the soldiers. While it is true that Lincoln feared impatience from a war-weary citizenry, the President was equally concerned about how soldier morale might affect the election. Lincoln

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<sup>166</sup> Oscar Winther, “The Soldier Vote in the Election of 1864,” *New York History*, 25 (1944): 440.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.* States either not permitting soldiers to vote in the field absentee or precluded from voting in the 1864 Presidential election due to timely legislation included Illinois, Delaware, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Indiana, Nevada, and Oregon.

needed military support but knew that many servicemen admired McClellan. ‘Little Mac’ still possessed the allegiance of countless soldiers. Davis, however, cites potential problem areas for McClellan that the soldiers would be considering going into the election: the earlier demotion of McClellan as general-in-chief, the Emancipation Proclamation, conscription, and his failures on the battlefield.<sup>169</sup> To counteract whatever support McClellan still enjoyed, Lincoln relied on his speaking skills to encourage the troops in the field. In contrast, Waugh observes that McClellan was less visible than Lincoln on the campaign trail. McClellan preferred to stay out of the fray, leaving the political fanfare to his subordinates.<sup>170</sup> The President made “frequent appearances” at events where soldiers and volunteers were known to be present. At these gatherings, the President emphasized his sincere gratitude and appreciation for their “sufferings.”<sup>171</sup> The soldiers appreciated Lincoln’s support.

Moreover, the Republican’s forceful platform met with the soldier’s approval. In the second and third resolutions of their platform, the Republican’s included a commitment to “a constitutional amendment ending slavery everywhere, and a determination to prosecute the war to total victory with no room for compromise.”<sup>172</sup> The strong language was evidence that Lincoln had their back. To Lincoln, total victory was the goal. In contrast, the mixed message of war and peace coming from the Democrat camp offered little conviction. Many soldiers began to perceive what Smith had called McClellan’s “half-one way and half-the-other-way Generalship” as too noncommittal.<sup>173</sup> The soldier vote for Lincoln “ensured that the war would be prosecuted vigorously until the Rebels capitulated and the Union prevailed.”<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> William C. Davis, *Lincoln’s Men*, (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 193-94.

<sup>170</sup> Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln*, 327.

<sup>171</sup> Davis, *Lincoln’s Men*, 194.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>173</sup> Smith, *McClellan’s Nomination and Acceptance*, 8.

<sup>174</sup> Gallagher, *The Union War*, 106.

Soldiers interpreted the Democratic platform as promulgating a wasted effort by the Union Army. Davis maintains that the Democratic platform sought to reinstate slavery where it existed, proclaim the entire war a failure, and immediately end the war. This defeatist mentality expressed by the Democrats was a sentiment that most soldiers could not stomach. Davis claims “that single issue of stopping the war short of victory immediately started to erode Little Mac’s support, and bolster Lincoln’s.”<sup>175</sup>

The number of letters sent to loved ones increased. These “campfire opinions,” as Davis terms them, shed light on the level of discontent many soldiers harbored. One Union colonel in the Army of the Potomac wrote, “Why, we don’t touch the Chicago platform! The former friends of George B. McClellan have abandoned him because he has got in *such bad company*.”<sup>176</sup>

According to James McPherson, it was the Democratic platform that counted the most. While many soldiers—especially veterans from the Army of the Potomac—still admired McClellan, they were confused why he consorted with men of peace. One veteran wrote, “I cannot vote for one thing and fight for another.”<sup>177</sup> A New York lieutenant remarked, “I do not see how any soldier can vote for such a man, nominated on a platform which acknowledges that we are whipped.”<sup>178</sup> Frank supports many of these views by stating, “The men in the ranks believed McClellan was a hypocrite, a liar and a traitor for running on a Democratic peace platform.”<sup>179</sup>

Despite the seemingly prominent level of soldier resentment toward McClellan, many officers appeared to stay loyal to their friend and former colleague. Just one month prior to the election, *The Daily Ohio Statesman* reported that “Gen. [Ulysses S.] Grant has expressed no opinion as

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<sup>175</sup> Davis, *Lincoln’s Men*, 202.

<sup>176</sup> Robert McAllister to wife, 8 October 1864 in Sears, *George B. McClellan*, 379. See also *The Civil War Letters of Robert McAllister*, ed. James Robinson, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), 1965.

<sup>177</sup> James McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought In The Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 177. Letter from Henry Kauffman to Katherine Kreitzer, 15 October 1864.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 177. Letter from Henry Crydenwise to his parents, 25 October 1864.

<sup>179</sup> Frank, *With Ballot and Bayonet*, 88.



the Presidency, but is known to be the friend of McClellan, and Gen. [Philip Henry] Sheridan, Gen. [George] Meade, Gen. [William] Rosecrans, Gen. [Lewis] Cass, and Gen. [John E.] Wool, are all for McClellan.”<sup>180</sup> It is unclear whether this purported support among the top generals for McClellan was factual.

Party distrust led to instances of fraud in key battleground states. In some cases, politicians were less concerned with remedying soldier disenfranchisement and more concerned with gaining an advantage over their opponent. Winther observes, “Blatant irregularities were exposed in connection with the New York and Pennsylvania sponsored field elections, and there is reason to believe that soldier voting within Indiana had its odious aspect.”<sup>181</sup> In New York, Governor Seymour allegedly instructed elections commissioners to instruct agents to forward New York ballots from the Army of the Potomac to more favorable districts. The conspirators were indicted on fraud and forgery charges. Obvious discrepancies appeared in one poll, which favored McClellan over Lincoln 400 to 11. One suspect confessed that “the names ballots of New York officers and men (dead or alive) had been forged.”<sup>182</sup> What made many of the voting scandals particularly appalling was that the conspiracies defrauded many sick and wounded service men. The blame fell on Gov. Seymour, and newspapers picked up on the coverage. After the election, *The New York Tribune* claimed that “the Union party had been cheated of not less than 30,000 votes.”<sup>183</sup> Accusations of malfeasance, such as ballot- box stuffing and voting multiple times was not limited to the Democrat Party and occurred in other states as well. Apart from the Presidential election, the soldier ballots had the potential to decide pivotal state elections in places like Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana. The Governor’s race in Indiana, for

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<sup>180</sup> *The Daily Ohio Statesman*, 7 October 1864.

<sup>181</sup> Winther, “The Soldier Vote in the Election of 1864,” 449.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 450.

<sup>183</sup> *The New York Tribune*, 17 November 1864.

example, focused on the vulnerability of Republican Congressional seats. U.S. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton was suspected of orchestrating negative campaign tactics such as illegal surveillance, planting rumors, and conspiratorial misconduct. Sears notes that certain regiments stationed in Indiana participated in fraudulent conduct as they were marched to the polls and voted some twenty-five times each for Republicans in the mid-term election of 1864.<sup>184</sup>

A little over 154,000 soldiers voted in the 1864 Presidential election, but Lincoln would have easily won electorally without the soldier's support. The President overwhelmingly won the soldier vote: 119,754 to McClellan's 34,291. The vote represented only four percent of the total votes cast out of approximately four million. Although voting preferences were more visible in certain areas of the country, there is no clear delineation of a voting demographic. In fact, the results of several states—especially the western territories—are incomplete altogether. However, where data is available, the soldier vote from the Army of the Potomac (the Army McClellan was previously in command) shows that no state gave the general a majority. Furthermore, Winther illustrates that “The Third Maryland Veteran Volunteers gave McClellan thirty-three votes as against twenty-five for Lincoln and as such was the only unit to give the Democratic standard bearer a majority.”<sup>185</sup> As significant as the soldier vote was (from a historical and precedential absentee voting perspective) these numbers are overshadowed in raw political terms. So, where did the bulk of the popular vote lie? And what can be learned by analyzing the election results?

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<sup>184</sup> Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon*, 383.

<sup>185</sup> Winther, “The Soldier Vote in the Election of 1864,” 455.

## Chapter Six: Election Analysis

In 1864, Republicans and Democrats had one thing in common: both were divided into two camps—radicals and conservatives. Whether a Republican radical was labeled as an abolitionist, or a Democrat a peace man, the fact that each party had a significant bloc of differing voting ideologies was clear. The winner would be the candidate that could pull the polarizing conservatives onto their side. Lincoln’s policies—especially that of emancipation—caused alarm for some conservative Congressmen. Former campaign manager Stephen Douglas and House Democratic Representative William Richardson of Illinois (a November state) claimed that Lincoln had altered the purpose of the war. In a speech before members of the 37<sup>th</sup> Congress, Richard echoed many Democrat’s concerns by saying Lincoln was unconcerned with the white man, civilians were tax-burdened, the suspension of habeas corpus left glaring constitutional questions, and the war had become too expensive. Richardson exclaimed that “The Army is being used for the benefit of the Negro... and that President Lincoln was running... every department of the government for his benefit.”<sup>186</sup> Indeed, going into the Presidential election of 1864, concerns grew over what Dell called the perceived “radical drift of Lincoln.” But as Dell points out, it was not the radicals Lincoln had to worry about, it was the “defection of the conservatives.”<sup>187</sup> This bloc of voters, should they go for McClellan, could swing the election. Abraham Lincoln needed 118 out of 233 electoral votes to win, which he did easily. With the President carrying all but three states, Lincoln won decisively over McClellan electorally—212 to 21.

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<sup>186</sup> Dell, *Lincoln and the War Democrats*, 195-6.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

How Democratic legislators voted between 1861 and 1865 in the 37<sup>th</sup> and 38<sup>th</sup> Congress were not always easy to discern. Not all pro- slavery votes were anti- war votes. Similarly, not all Lincoln administration war measures were aimed at slavery.<sup>188</sup> But anti- slavery votes seem to coincide with pro- war votes. Although many Democrats were philosophically opposed to Lincoln, the following bills and legislative considerations represent just a few of the key political issues that Democrats sought compromise with Republicans over during the course of the war: “to coerce seceded states into paying federal revenue,” “to table [suspend] a proposal for a peace conference with Confederate officials,” “to enact a conspiracy bill,” “to table a motion overruling the presidential suspension of habeas corpus in wartime,” “to enact the Conscription Bill (1863),” “to pass a resolution calling for the crushing of the rebellion (1864),” “to table a motion denouncing as unconstitutional the arrest and banishment of Clement Vallandigham (1864),” and the approval and enactment of several Army appropriation bills.<sup>189</sup> Thus, it is apparent that War Democrats (conservative Democrats) were committed to reunion, and not interested in giving an inch to the Confederacy as it related to favorable conciliatory legislation.

The numbers of votes in states critical to McClellan’s success offer some interesting election analysis. Although there is no clear delineation of specific voting demographics, some of the more populous states carrying high numbers of electoral votes may give a researcher an idea of how to gauge candidate support. New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio offered a candidate a combined eighty (80) coveted electoral votes. In each of these states, the vote count was close because the electorate was sharply divided on the issues. For example, Lincoln’s draft was unpopular among New York voters. As a result, McClellan received a popular vote in New York of 49.4%, losing by less than one percent, though it still cost him the state’s thirty- three electoral

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 365.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 365-8.

votes. In the general's birth state of Pennsylvania, McClellan received 48.2% of the popular vote. The twenty- six electoral votes in Pennsylvania were predicted by many Democratic leaders to fall to McClellan, primarily due to the large peace contingent. Local and congressional elections in October before the general election showed promising Democratic gains in Pennsylvania from previous years. Likewise, Vallandigham's home state of Ohio presumed to have enough peace votes—despite the state's large moderates contingent—to make the difference. However, McClellan only received 44 % of the popular vote— 205, 568 out of the 470, 722 cast. The strong business ties (engineering and railroad) the Young Napoleon held in Ohio failed to make the difference at the polls, as McClellan lost its twenty- one electoral votes.

The results were similarly close in other states. The general received a total of 45.6 % in Illinois, and 46.4% in Indiana. Despite these tight races, McClellan lost all twenty- nine electoral votes in Indiana and Illinois states to Lincoln, thirteen and sixteen respectively. According to one newspaper, these 80 votes could have made the election very interesting had McClellan been able to carry a majority.<sup>190</sup> On election day, *The Evening Star* reported the fluid situation on the latest returns. Although the turnout was low, McClellan carried Kentucky by a majority of 25,000 to 50,000 votes. Strength at the polls reflected loyalty for President Lincoln. At the same time, the President's majority dispelled any possibility of future Confederate influence over Copperhead- led legislatures in the North.

The President won by approximately 403,000 votes over McClellan, or 55% to 45%. For Lincoln, the 1864 election was not unlike the Presidential Vote of 1860. Delaware, Kentucky, and New Jersey again went against Lincoln. Silbey observes that the number of close calls in

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<sup>190</sup> *The Evening Star* (Washington, District of Columbia), 10 November 1864.

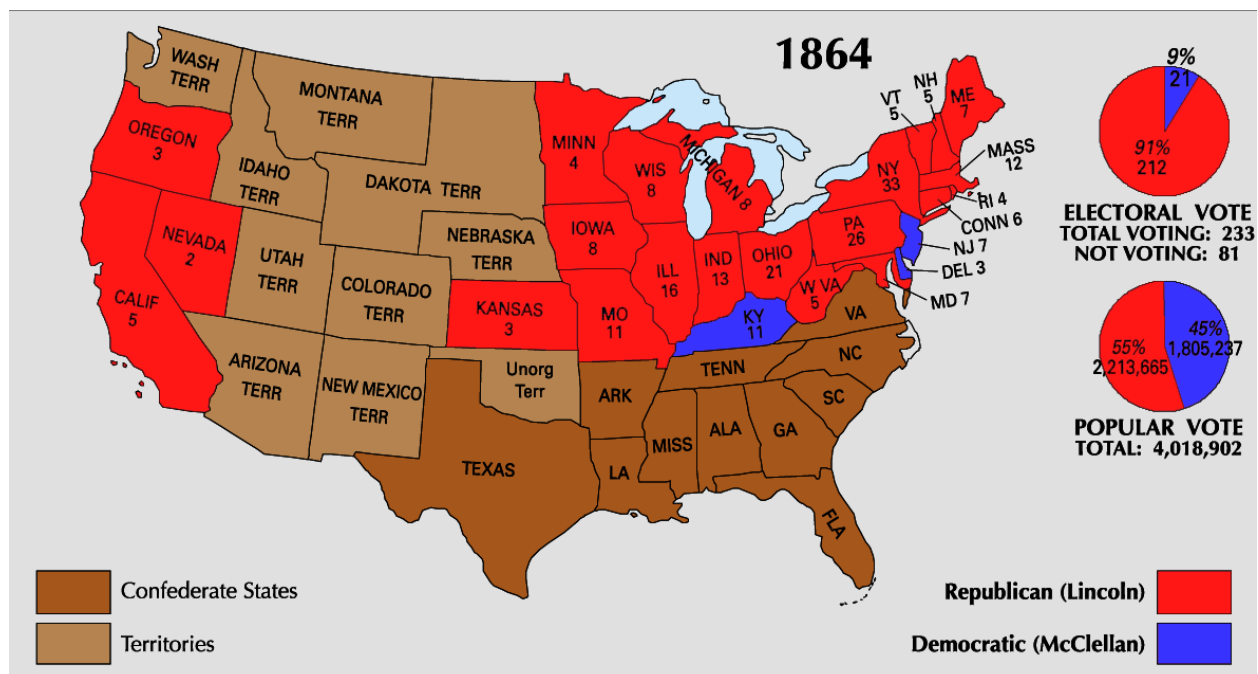
states with substantial electoral numbers gave McClellan a shot to win.<sup>191</sup> Other states with less electoral votes, but nonetheless close calls, indicate that the general did not get dominated in the race. New Hampshire fetched 47.4 % for McClellan, Connecticut 48.6%, Oregon 46.1 %, Michigan 44.1 %, and Wisconsin 44.1 % which was surprisingly close for Republicans. In fact, the Maryland civilian vote was close for McClellan as the general received almost 33,000 votes out of 72, 892 cast. These numbers represent both a moderately competitive and intensely competitive outcome in many traditionally Republican strongholds. Yet, while the numbers are interesting, they are not statistically close. McClellan would have been required to win all the states above, except for New Hampshire and Connecticut, and could not have won without New York. None of those developments happened.

Not canvassed because the election results arrived too late for tabulation were Vermont, Minnesota, and Kansas. Consistent with the above analysis, these three states were inconsequential to McClellan anyway as they cumulatively only netted twelve electoral votes. The two border States (Delaware and Kentucky) and McClellan's home state of New Jersey only totaled twenty-one—hardly enough for the general to win. Interestingly, McClellan won both the civilian and soldier vote in pro- slavery border state of Kentucky—the only state he won with a combined majority. The map below illustrates how many votes each participating state could certify in the 1864 electoral college.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Silbey, *A Respectable Minority*, 151-2.

<sup>192</sup> [http://www.commonswikimedia.org/wiki/File:1864\\_Electoral\\_Map.png](http://www.commonswikimedia.org/wiki/File:1864_Electoral_Map.png)



So, what value does the election results provide a researcher? In comparing the civilian and soldier vote, one may analyze the different stakes involved. Gallagher records that the “soldiers cast a far higher percentage of their votes for Lincoln than did the general electorate.”<sup>193</sup> It seems clear that civilian population responded to issues of Unionism, economy, and slavery; whereas, the soldiers overwhelmingly voted Republican due to their personal investment in the war. Dissimilar motivations arrive at the same result: a majority for Lincoln.

The method of econometrics (quantitative analysis based on inferences) can be useful in determining how voters behave. Causal inferences, or independent and dependent variables that can predict the outcome of an election, offer explanations on why certain outcomes occur. In a post-election commentary, certain variables can summarize the opposing views of Lincoln and McClellan. Campaigns can play a big role and represent one such predictor that can affect the outcome of an election, but only in a limited way. In his book *Do Campaigns Matter?* political

<sup>193</sup> Gallagher, *The Union War*, 78.

analyst Thomas Holbrook studies how campaigns are multi-faceted in predicting success or failure in an election. Specific campaign events, campaign strategies, newspaper coverage, public relations, and conventions can serve as independent variables in election analyses.

Campaign events or campaign strategies have less of an effect than most researchers may think. In the election of 1864, for example, there were no public debates on record between Lincoln and McClellan. What is impressionable, from a campaign strategy standpoint, is the writing of the Democratic platform and the emphasis McClellan and the Democrats placed on its overall significance going forward. The platform was the party's identity—and that identity was neither marketed nor explained to a reasonable satisfaction for most voters. The daily tone of newspaper coverage can influence affect the outcome of a race, but again, only in a limited way. According to Holbrook, “journalistic analyses of campaigns provide support for the importance of campaigns and, sometimes, single campaign events.”<sup>194</sup> Other specific events such as political stunts, advertising, and speeches can positively or negatively affect the outcome of an election.

Regardless of President Lincoln's decline in popularity over the course of the Civil War, other factors superseded any total abandonment by the voters. For example, the progress of the war took an upswing after the fall of Atlanta, Georgia. So critical was the Confederate infrastructure in this region that editor Henry Raymond wrote that a Union victory in Atlanta “will tell the story.”<sup>195</sup> John Waugh agrees with Raymond's forecast by citing the importance of Atlanta as a major “military and political target.”<sup>196</sup> Jefferson Davis went on the stump after Atlanta fell encouraging perseverance, and imploring its citizens to flush out any deserters who

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<sup>194</sup> Thomas Holbrook, *Do Campaigns Matter?* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 3, 86.

<sup>195</sup> *New York Times*, 13 July 1864.

<sup>196</sup> Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln*, 296.



abandoned the Confederate cause.<sup>197</sup> The Union victory in Georgia certainly crippled the Confederate army and the South's resolve, but Sherman's siege of Atlanta was perhaps a bigger blow to McClellan's chances of becoming President. Waugh writes, "It made a stunning political statement, the strongest possible rebuttal of the war- failure plank in the just- adopted Democratic platform."<sup>198</sup> The Union victory in Atlanta vastly improved Lincoln's chances of reelection. At the same time, Sherman's success in the fall of 1864 so close to the election immediately presented negative ramifications for the Democrats and their platform.

Another independent variable that has an impact on campaigns are conventions. Political campaigns are sometimes affected by conventions and are responsible for changes in public opinion that occur over the course of the campaign. According to Holbrook, "Conventions provide the parties with a stage from which they can dominate not only news about the campaign but news in general for a period of several days."<sup>199</sup> A party can present its candidate and image to the public at conventions. Conventions can also produce significant changes in candidate support during a campaign. Lincoln's policies and the rhetoric spelled out in the Republican resolutions at their convention provided more momentum than did the Democrats. And the national conditions of a positive war effort can, again, bolster the convention's purpose. As we have seen from several articles reporting on the election, opinion editorials can paint a party or candidate in good or bad light. Aside from voters being influenced by public opinion, however, conventions are generally "less noticeable and presumably less consequential than campaign events."<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Nelson, *Bullets, Ballots, and Rhetoric*, 130.

<sup>198</sup> Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln*, 297.

<sup>199</sup> Holbrook, *Do Campaigns Matter?*, 70.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

Dependent variables can also have a substantial impact on an election. Under the Candidate Evaluation Model, Holbrook analyzes leadership, party identification, ideology, and a candidate's understanding of problems facing a nation as decision factors in voters choosing a candidate.<sup>201</sup> Lincoln exhibited unwavering leadership during the war, despite so many political and military setbacks. Substantively, the Republicans had a much clearer message than the Democrats, as evidenced by the Conventions. Equally crippling for McClellan was how the Democrats lacked any true party identity. The conservative and purist ideology the Democratic party had traditionally espoused was not the problem. Rather the peace faction of the party, and the resulting language presented in its platform, confused the voters and unbalanced the ticket. To my knowledge, there does not exist any data on how to measure a county or region in evaluating whether a voter was for war or peace, or for that matter, a radical Republican or non-abolitionist. In other words, how many votes were calculated in a state assigned by Copperhead, or Unionist, or non-abolitionists is not made available. What variables are more recognizable to examine was what was the profile of each of these groups that voted.

Court cases can also potentially affect voter outcomes. The Democrats in 1864 should have exploited Lincoln's record on civil liberties more effectively. Controversial Fifth Amendment and due process issues arose during the campaign. For instance, *Ex parte Milligan* 71 U.S. 2, 1866 reflects the questionable lengths to which the Lincoln Administration went to discriminate against Union dissenters during the war. In that case, Harrison Dodd, a leading Indiana Democrat and prominent Copperhead was tried for treason in what was known as the "treason trials of 1864." Investigations by the office of the Judge Advocate General in Kentucky and Indiana resulted in the arrest of several Democratic leaders "accused of belonging to a

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 122.

subversive organization and planning to disorganize and frustrate the Union cause.”<sup>202</sup> The October 1864 investigation by federal officials revealed the confidential activities of various Democratic groups, evidence of Northern insurrection, and the purchase of thousands of rifles. A Union military raid resulted in the seizure of thousands of guns and rounds of ammunition whereupon Dodd and other co- conspirators were tried and convicted of treason. After the war, the U. S. Supreme Court ruled that the actions of the Federal government were illegal, and that the Army had no jurisdiction over civilians in matters of this kind. Furthermore, the application of military tribunals to citizens where civilian courts are still operating was held unconstitutional.<sup>203</sup>

Voting shares in the twenty-five Union participating states can measure support or opposition for a candidate. For example, Kentucky, Delaware, and New Jersey (the three states McClellan won electorally) might suggest majority support for McClellan based on unpopular Republican laws or policies. Border states such as Kentucky and Delaware, not surprisingly, went Democrat because of Lincoln’s emancipation proposals. In analyzing McClellan’s victory in his home state of New Jersey, it is plausible to conclude that business interests (railroad and raw materials) contributed to the favorable outcome. For example, some factories in New Jersey manufactured clothing for slaves. Additionally, the abolitionist movement was not as strong in New Jersey as it was in other northeastern states, such as Massachusetts. Assigning probability, or calculating chance versus pattern, in political elections can be predictable. The problem with statistical methodology, however, is that little data is available on the 1864 election, other than the raw numbers. If we were to run the 1864 election over, we might see a different result if the Democrats had not chosen to incorporate the peace plank into their platform. The counterfactual

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<sup>202</sup> Dell, *Lincoln and the War Democrats*, 301.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 313.

argument exists only to analyze different election results, not to suppose a vastly different historical outcome.

The 1864 Presidential election provides a few final political reflections. Dell observes that “McClellan’s nomination was expected to weaken the nonpartisan Union coalitions in the several states.”<sup>204</sup> However, there exists no evidence of this as it appears from the numbers that the War Democrats mostly aligned with the Union Party, with its Republican Party base. Additionally, the Republicans nominated scores of War Democrats to the highest state executive positions during the first Lincoln Administration. This remarkable display of non-partisanship would be unheard of today. The Democrats did not come close to party unity. In comparison, over the course of the campaign, Dell confirms, “it would appear that the Union Party was all it claimed to be; and much of the credit belongs to Abraham Lincoln, whose gentle hammering proved devastating to the Conservative principles of the Democratic party.”<sup>205</sup>

Though McClellan lost the election, his political career was not over. In September 1877, at fifty years of age, McClellan became the Governor of New Jersey. As Governor, McClellan successfully reduced spending, encouraged education, and promoted industry. Sears admits that the public praised McClellan for his “conservative executive management and minimal political rancor.”<sup>206</sup> Some of McClellan’s achievements as Governor include reconstructing the New Jersey State militia, founding industrial schools, and organizing a special tax commission.<sup>207</sup> Perhaps history would have been more kind to McClellan had he chosen to pursue his political ambitions exclusively on the state level, or his civilian skills as an engineer.

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 309.

<sup>206</sup> Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 345.

<sup>207</sup> John Raimo and Robert Sobel, *Biographical Directory of the Governor’s of the United States, 1789- 1978*, (Westport: Meckler Books, 1978).

### Conclusion

To substantiate the argument that the Democratic platform is responsible for the eventual outcome of the 1864 Presidential election, an examination of many external facets provides a researcher with a plausible understanding of why McClellan lost should be considered. Even though fundamental, political, or even philosophical and ideological differences existed between Lincoln and McClellan, other factors such as Unionism, slavery, citizen and soldier motivations, editorial opinion, and last-minute heroics by the Union Army contributed, collectively, to the election result. Lincoln's reelection would be a turning point for the country. Had McClellan won, would the Confederacy have survived? While these considerations certainly influenced the northern voting electorate, the Democratic platform (specifically the peace overtures) singularly disadvantaged McClellan more than any variable.

Assuredly, President Lincoln had his own problems convincing, persuading, and unifying a vastly growing national divide. In the press, Lincoln certainly had doubters. For much of the election, McClellan seemed a very strong candidate. Even Republican party leader and Pennsylvania editor Alexander McClure believed McClellan was a worthy adversary, and reflected years after the election that between January and September 1864, at no time during this time could McClellan not have defeated Lincoln.<sup>208</sup> Abolitionists saw Lincoln as a coward in that he wanted slavery to continue where it already existed—as the President indeed did for much of his tenure. But Unionists saw the bigger picture. Unionism and liberty, not radicalism,

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<sup>208</sup> Sears, *Young Napoleon*, 384.

was as good a reason to reelect Lincoln as anything McClellan was offering. And soldiers naturally gravitated toward Lincoln out of loyalty, and his commitment to victory. Ultimately, peace on the Democrat's terms simply could not be seriously considered as a viable alternative.

Initially, a negotiated peace seemed like a very attractive idea to many northerners. McClellan, the once brilliant organizer of the Army of the Potomac lost the respect of the men in the field as the general became attached to a peace platform. McClellan, the former darling of the Democratic party, was discredited in the newspapers for his politics and criticized for his military command record. McClellan, the once self-proclaimed "Savior" of the Union, was repudiated by the northern voters in favor of Lincoln because conditional Unionism was too great a risk. War or Peace? This conflicting message of the Democrats, pitched as the best direction for the Union, coupled with their inability to reconcile party infightings along the way, damaged McClellan's chances of winning the Presidency, really before the election ever got underway.

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