



"Make No Contracts"

by Michael Burlingame

<http://housedivided.dickinson.edu/sites/journal/2010/09/27/no-contracts/>

During the second night of the 1860 Republican convention, while the Sewardites consumed 300 bottles of champagne in anticipation of their imminent triumph, David Davis and his cohorts barely slept. Henry S. Lane was observed lobbying furiously for Lincoln, especially among the Vermont and Virginia delegations. Lane "asserted hundreds of times that the nomination of Seward would be death to him, and that he might in that case just as well give up the canvass. He did not feel like expending his time and money in carrying on a hopeless campaign, and would be disposed to abandon the contest." George W. Lawrence of Maine, who boarded at the hotel where the Pennsylvanians were staying, "was incessant in his effort to procure their votes" for Lincoln. Davis wanted to cut a deal with the Pennsylvanians, but the previous day Lincoln had sent a terse message via Edward L. Baker: "Make no contracts that will bind me."

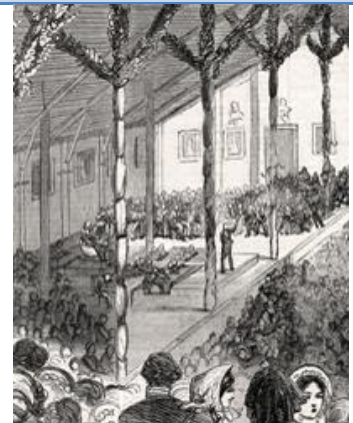


"Chief of the Wigwam"
Campaign Plain Dealer, 1860

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According to Henry C. Whitney, Baker "related that when he read the note to the delegates and workers gathered at the Lincoln headquarters he was greeted with a burst of laughter." Davis, who guffawed louder than anyone else, said: "Lincoln ain't here, and don't know what we have to meet, so we will go ahead, as if we hadn't heard from him, and he must ratify it." Davis and Swett negotiated with the leading Cameron operatives, John P. Sanderson and Joseph Casey, "in the wee small hours of Friday morning." Before the convention met, Sanderson had predicted that Lincoln, unlike other contenders, might be able to carry the Keystone State. Cameron was allegedly offered a cabinet post in return for the votes of the Pennsylvania delegates on the second ballot. The Cameron representatives, wary because their counterparts had no authorization from Lincoln to act, were reassured that the Rail-splitter would never repudiate a promise they made.



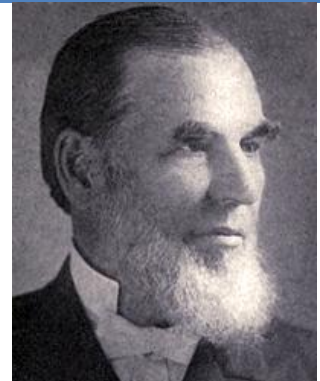
Detail - "The Wigwam"
Harper's Weekly, May 1860



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Whitney's account of the Cameron bargain has been challenged, but it seems plausible in light of abundant reminiscent testimony. Swett described to a convention delegate "his labors with Cameron," the "promises he made Pennsylvania on behalf of Mr. Lincoln," and "the subsequent difficulty he encountered in persuading Mr. Lincoln to carry out the contracts, or 'bargains,' as Mr. Lincoln called them." Swett acknowledged that he had promised to have Cameron appointed to the cabinet if Pennsylvania supported Lincoln on the second ballot. In 1875, Cameron confided to an interviewer: "Lincoln told me that he was more indebted to Judd than any other one man for his nomination, but I told him I thought Davis and Swett did more for him. They bought all my men – Casey and Sanderson and the rest of them. I was for Seward[.] I knew I couldn't be nominated but I wanted a complimentary vote from my own State. But Davis and the rest of them stole all my men. Seward accused me of having cheated him."

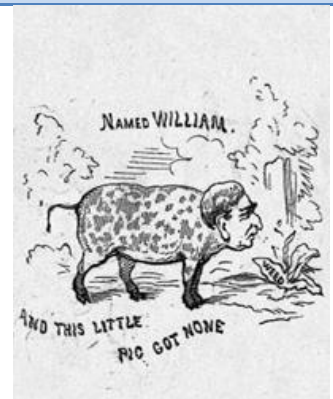


Leonard Swett

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Cameron's statement may have been disingenuous. To be sure, he had told Seward he would back him, but on May 10, Casey wrote the Chief from Chicago that if he could not be nominated, the Keystone State delegation would go for Seward "unless we are satisfied that we can do better for our State, by the arrangement we spoke of when I last saw you." The terms of that arrangement are unknown, but evidently Cameron was willing to abandon Seward if he could obtain a better deal for Pennsylvania and himself. Seward's confidential friends were, according to Casey, "overbearing and refused to talk of any thing but his unconditional nomination." If Weed had been more flexible, Seward may have won. Norman B. Judd's son remembered his father describing a deal that gave Cameron an unspecified cabinet post in exchange for Pennsylvania's votes.



"The Story of the Five Little Pigs"
Vanity Fair, June 1860



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Alexander K. McClure of Pennsylvania, chairman of the Republican State Committee, testified that "Two positions in the Cabinet, one for Pennsylvania and one for Indiana, were positively promised by David Davis at an early period of the contest." McClure added that the bargain with Pennsylvania was unnecessary, for Sanderson approached Swett and Davis with an offer to switch to Lincoln on the second ballot only after the delegation had made Lincoln their third choice, thus guaranteeing that the Illinoisan would receive their support once Cameron had been given a complimentary vote. The deal specified that Cameron would receive a cabinet post if a majority of the Pennsylvania congressional delegation would back him for it. McClure reported that Lincoln was unaware of the bargain until early 1861. Upon learning of it, the Rail-splitter reportedly declared: "They have gambled me all around, bought and sold me a hundred times. I cannot begin to fill all the pledges made in my name."



"Alarming Appearance of the Winnebago Chief Cameron at Springfield"
Vanity Fair, 1860



Further Reading

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Document 1– Recollection by Henry C. Whitney, Republican National Convention, May 16-18, 1860

<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/34098>

Source Citation –

Henry C. Whitney, Lincoln the Citizen, vol. 1 of *Life of Lincoln*, eds. Marion Mills Miller (New York: Baker & Taylor Co., 1908), 288-289,

<http://www.archive.org/details/lifeoflincoln01whit>.

Transcribed Text –

Nearly the entire delegation from Indiana came there with the specific design of securing control of the fat Interior Department in case of Republican success. They had agreed on a secretary of that department – Caleb B. Smith ; a Commissioner of Indian Affairs, William P. Dole, formerly of Indiana ; and on candidates for some of the minor offices. They then opened their political huckster shop and spread out their votes for inspection. As there was close intercommunication between Illinois and Indiana, and Lincoln had served in Congress with Smith, it was quite natural that they should give Illinois their support. The bargain was very soon made. Caleb B. Smith was to be Secretary of the Interior, Dole Commissioner of Indian Affairs ; and the vote of Indiana was to be solid for Lincoln. He, therefore, started in with the votes of Indiana and Illinois.

The next block of votes that was lying around loose was the Cameron strength in Pennsylvania. This was more difficult to manage. Not having yet been made acquainted with Lincoln's ethical tendencies, Davis got Dubois to telegraph to Lincoln that they could secure the Cameron delegates from Pennsylvania if they might promise Cameron the Treasury. Lincoln replied : "I authorize no bargains and will be bound by none." Just ten words - the normal length of a telegraphic message! Not satisfied with this, however, he sent a copy of the *Missouri Democrat* to Herndon with three extracts from Seward's speeches marked ; and on the margin of which he had written : "I agree with Seward's 'irrepressible conflict,' but do not agree with his 'higher law' doctrine." And he added, "*Make no contracts that will bind me.*"

Everybody was mad, of course. Here were men working night and day to place him on the highest mountain peak of fame, and he pulling back all he knew how. What was to be done? The bluff Dubois said : "Damn Lincoln !" The polished Swett said, in mellifluous accents : "I am very sure if Lincoln was aware of the necessities -----" The critical Logan expectorated viciously, and said : "The main difficulty with Lincoln is -----" Herndon ventured : "Now, friend, I'll answer that." But Davis cut the Gordian knot by brushing all aside with : "Lincoln ain't here, and don't know what we have to meet, so we will go ahead, as if we hadn't heard from him, and he must ratify it. The Cameron contingent was secured for Lincoln on the second vote.



Document 2– Abraham Lincoln's Endorsement on the Margin of the Missouri Democrat, May 17, 1860

<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/34095>

Source Citation –

Endorsement on the Margin of the Missouri Democrat, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (8 vols., New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 4: 50, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/>.

Transcribed Text –

I agree with Seward in his "Irrepressible Conflict," but I do not endorse his "Higher Law" doctrine. *Make no contracts that will bind me.*



Document 3 – Chicago (IL) Press and Tribune, “Mr. Lincoln's Committals,”
May 28, 1860

<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/34084>

Source Citation –

“Mr. Lincoln's Committals,” Chicago (IL) *Press and Tribune*, May 28, 1860, p. 2: 1.

Transcribed Text –

MR. LINCOLN'S COMMITTALS.

To represent that Mr. Lincoln is covered up with pledges to men, factions, cliques, &c., within the Republican party, and that his election will be the triumph of Weed, of Greeley, or of some squad of insiders or outsiders, to the exclusion of all the rest of mankind, will be one of the tricks of the Democracy during the campaign. We have a story to tell on that point:

On Monday preceding the nomination, one of Mr. Lincoln's trusted friends addressed him a note, telling him that his prospects were improving; but that, at the last moment, it might be necessary to say a word here and a word there for securing the support of certain interests; and the writer of the note asked that he with two friends whom he named might be empowered to “negotiate,” if negotiations should become necessary. We saw Mr. Lincoln's reply. It was worthy of Washington. He said, “No, gentlemen; I have not asked the nomination, and I will not now buy it with pledges. If I am nominated and elected, I shall not go into the Presidency as the tool of this man or that, or as the property of any faction of clique!” We quote from memory, but his language was substantially as we give it; and nothing but an injunction of secrecy prevents us from printing the name of the gentleman to whom the letter was addressed.

It is quite immaterial what Mr. Lincoln's pro-slavery opponents may say; but it is proper that our Republican friends East and West, should understand that he has not made and will not make any pledges of any kind by which his action in the distribution of public patronage, will be clogged or embarrassed, if he is elected. We mean that he has made no promises of any sort for any purpose whatever; and if we know the man, he will go through the canvass as he has begun it – free. We make this statement for the benefit of the wise [illegible] who have already organized his Cabinet, appointed his Foreign Ministers and generally distributed the patronage which will fall into his hands; and for the benefit, further, of the patriotic gentleman who will be impelled to make a journey to Springfield for the purpose of magnifying their services, past and prospective, and securing at the same time, a promise of reward for what they have done or expect to do. Mr. Lincoln's nomination was a generous and touching tribute to his honesty as well as his ability. We are sure that he will not sacrifice the one and be false to the other by cheating half the friends from whom he expects support, before the canvass has fairly begun!