

The Blind Memorandum: Abraham Lincoln and Leadership

Short Lecture by Matthew Pinsker

(Videotaped August 2012; produced by Lance Warren; transcribed by Russ Allen)

There is a document in Lincoln's papers that I think is the most mysterious, but also the most revealing in the whole canon of his writing. It's called the Blind Memorandum. It was written on August 23rd 1864 and the language is so dramatic and striking. It's only 60 words long but I'm going to read this right now, and it's stunning to consider what this represents, just a few months before Abraham Lincoln faced his re-election in November of 1864.

He writes on August 23rd, "This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to so cooperate with the President elect, as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration; as he will have secured his election on such ground that he cannot possibly save it afterwards." Now what Lincoln did next is fascinating. He folded this document up, and you can see the fold lines in the original document which is held by the Library of Congress, and he asked his cabinet secretaries to sign it on the reverse, and date it without reading it. That's why we call it the Blind Memorandum. However, the questions are immediately confronting us: Why would he do this? Why would they sign it blind? And the answer is, Lincoln was asking them to date-stamp an offer that he was making to the next President elect.

His democratic opponent, yet to be named, but which he expected to be General George McClellan. And Lincoln knew that the democrats feared him as a dictator, a tyrant. This is a man who had suspended civil liberties in defiance of an order from the Chief Justice of the United States in 1861. They realized that he had thrown or authorized the imprisonment of over 14,000 people in jail without judicial hearing. They considered him to be someone who had usurped the Constitution, so that type of person might very well ignore election results that went against him, or cancel them, or postpone them. And what Lincoln was trying to do by date-stamping this offer from August is convince them that even if he lost, he had known for weeks that he was going to lose and he was prepared to do what he thought was best for the country if they would go along with him. In other words, the President and the President elect standing together, as Lincoln put it, to cooperate to help keep the army in the field, to make one last desperate attempt to capture the Confederate cities of Atlanta and Richmond, and perhaps end the war before the next President was inaugurated in March of 1865.

Now that's dramatic, it's unprecedented, it's outside of the Constitution, this sort of offer, but I think it's actually even more revealing than that. Because what you need to do with a document like this, a secret memo that Lincoln writes, is you have to ask yourself what else he might have done if he really believed these forces to be true, if he really thought there was a prospect of defeat in the offing for him and his administration. You reread that memo: "This morning, as for

some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected, then it will be my duty to..." and fill in the blank, because what you expect to come next is not an offer to cooperate with the next President. What you expect to come next after an opening like that, is perhaps something like this... "*That it will be my duty to step aside as the Union or Republican Party nominee to allow my country to focus on ending this war and to give my party a chance to put forward a candidate more likely to win.*" For example, that's what Lyndon Johnson said he was doing after the Tet Offensive in 1968. Step aside as the Union nominee however, is something Lincoln would never do because despite our sometimes mythical impression of his humility, this is a man who did not think there was anyone, anyone, better suited or more capable of leading the Union than himself.

But was else could he have done? "Then it will be my duty to..." "... *abandon the emancipation policy which has clearly ripped this country apart and threatened the chances of the Union's salvation.*" This is what he was under an awful lot of pressure to do in August of 1864. There were leading political advisors and figures in the Union who were urging President Lincoln to walk back the promise of emancipation. One of those advisors met with Lincoln in private on August 19th 1864, and another man present at that meeting recorded what Lincoln said in a diary account that's as vivid as any of the war. Lincoln said "I would be damned in time and in eternity if I return to slavery the black men who fought for this country." "I would be damned in time and in eternity." He wasn't going to waver on the question of emancipation.

Another policy though that he might change, and other advisers were urging him to change, was his hardline about negotiation with the Confederates. Some of his advisors urged him to just simply open up talks with the Confederacy in order to help quell some of the disappointment. He was receiving all kind of reports from the field. "The people are wild for peace" said one correspondent. "Your re-election is an impossibility" said another. And what they were urging him to do was create a sense of an end game. Give people hope that the war might end. And some of them were even cagey enough to tell him, you don't have to actually negotiate with the Confederates, just pretend to negotiate in order to give people a sense of hope in the fall elections.

But Lincoln stuck to his preconditions for talks. He said there were two essential preconditions for any negotiation with Jefferson Davis and the Confederates. Number one: they had to agree to the restoration of the Union. And number two: they had to agree to the abandonment of slavery. Now anybody who's watching this video knows full well, those were the reasons why they were at war in the first place. So what Lincoln was in a sense saying in the summer of 1864 was there was no chance for talks. So he wasn't backing down on talks, he wasn't flip-flopping on emancipation, he wasn't stepping aside as the Union nominee, and he wasn't willing to cancel the elections. He said after the fact, "We cannot have free government without elections." It's one of the wisest things he ever said, but it's the cardinal principle of Lincoln's view of the Constitution, which is that a constitution that begins "We the People," ultimately rests on the people's sovereignty. And therefore there is no principle greater, no bulwark stronger in the American Constitution than the elections that the people conduct to determine who represents them.

And so therefore, I consider this to be Lincoln's greatest moment. I know the Blind Memorandum is not so well known, but it should be better known. On August 23rd 1864, Abraham Lincoln showed us why he was a great president. His faith in the people, his belief in emancipation, his willingness to risk real political loss for that policy, his unwavering firmness in the face of a war that was frustrated and sometimes long-delayed, and too bloody, and of course his essential belief in himself and his long experience as a political leader. All of these factors come to play on Tuesday August 23rd 1864. When Lincoln finally read this memorandum to his cabinet after his re-election, they were stunned. None of them could really believe what Lincoln had done. And in the years since, people have, I think, been mystified by what this document represents, but I hope that people will begin to see it as the best introduction to the reason why we celebrate Abraham Lincoln as our greatest President.

(This lecture is available online at

<http://housedivided.dickinson.edu/sites/lincoln/2013/06/10/blind-memorandum-august-23-1864/>
or via Vimeo at <http://vimeo.com/47791432>)