

# Lincoln and Leadership

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## Seeing Lincoln's Blind Memorandum

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A few days after his reelection on Tuesday, November 8, 1864, President Abraham Lincoln made a startling revelation to his inner circle. According to the diary of aide John Hay, the president "took out a paper from his desk" at the Friday morning cabinet meeting, and said, "Gentlemen do you remember last summer I asked you all to sign your names to the back of a paper of which I did not show you the inside? This is it." Lincoln then directed Hay to open the mysterious note, which had been "pasted up in so singular a style that it required some cutting to get it open." The text of the document, dated from the Executive Mansion on Tuesday, August 23, 1864, read in its entirety: "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 co-operate 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 can not possibly save it afterwards." The sixty-word statement had been signed "A. Lincoln" and was endorsed on the reverse side by the seven cabinet officers at that time. Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, one of August signers, had since been fired. Lincoln now explained to the others that his original purpose had been to outline a "course of action," which he had "solemnly resolved on" during a period "when as yet we had no adversary, and seemed to have no friends." Lincoln described how he had been expecting the Democrats to nominate General George McClellan, and planned in the event of Little Mac's victory to confront his former subordinate "and talk matters over with him." Lincoln suggested that he had been prepared to concede that McClellan was "stronger" and had "more influence with the American people than I," but since he retained the "executive power of the Government" until March 4, the two men would need to work together "to try to save the country." Lincoln's proposal to McClellan would have been straightforward: "You raise as many troops as you possibly can for this final trial, and I will devote all of my energies to assisting and finishing the war."

Hay refrained from commenting on this unprecedented offer, but the twenty-seven-year-old made sure to include within his diary a withering response from

Secretary of State William Henry Seward, by far the most astute politician in the cabinet. "And the General would answer you 'Yes, Yes,'" replied Seward, "and the next day when you saw him again & pressed these views upon him he would say 'Yes—yes' & so on forever and would have done nothing at all." To this prediction, Lincoln merely observed, "At least I should have done my duty and have stood clear before my own conscience."

If anybody else spoke up, Hay did not record it. Nor did any of the other diarists present capture the episode for posterity. There also seems to have been no direct account from August when the president had first asked the seven men to endorse something they were not allowed to read, and no other type of contemporary testimony from November when Lincoln finally explained the document's purpose to the remaining six men. The adviser who finally broke the code of silence was the former secretary of the navy Gideon Welles in a reminiscence he contributed to the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1878. Welles labeled the document a "desponding note," and paraphrased it briefly to illustrate how badly things had looked by August 1864. "At no time had Mr. Lincoln been more depressed," he concluded.<sup>3</sup>

Welles's account irritated John Hay, who was then living in Cleveland and preparing to write an official biography of Lincoln with his former Executive Mansion colleague John G. Nicolay. Hay was jealously protective of the original document, which he still had in his possession. "Do you understand Mr. Welles' reference to a 'Memorandum,' written by Lincoln in 1864 in anticipation of defeat, in [the] Atlantic?," he complained to Nicolay. Hay reported that he had "the whole occurrence in my notebook" but regretted that he had once distributed copies of the August 23 note to a few of the cabinet officers. "I cursed silently," he recalled, when the outgoing attorney general Edward Bates and then Welles had requested keepsakes of the document following the November 11, 1864, meeting, implying that he had long suspected it would eventually make for wonderful post-war memoir material. "I have been dreading their reappearance," he added about the copies, with the tartness of an author in the process of being scooped.<sup>4</sup>

When Nicolay and Hay finally published their ten-volume masterpiece on Lincoln in 1890, they did succeed in turning the August 23 memo into one of their more dramatic set-pieces. Though agreeing with Welles that the period had been one where "the general gloom and depression enveloped the President himself," they did far more to flesh out the details of that political despair in late 1864—not only by publishing for the first time the text of the actual document, but also by providing excerpts from starkly pessimistic reports







ment also reveals a profoundly principled politician who refused to cancel or ignore an election whose outcome he feared might destroy the nation. The blind memorandum provides much more than a dramatic snapshot of a bad summer; it opens a unique and revealing window into the full panorama of Lincoln's political leadership.

Understanding Lincoln's achievement as a political leader begins with an acknowledgment that he was not only a self-made man, but also a self-made politician. "You must do like Seward does," he was once advised by "Long" John Wentworth, the legendary Chicago mayor and political boss. "Get a feller to run you."<sup>10</sup> But unlike his former rival William Henry Seward, Lincoln never had a Thurlow Weed. The truth is that he never needed one. From his first campaign at the age of twenty-three until his last race thirty-two years later, Lincoln won seven out of ten contests, mainly on his own initiative and guided by his own political instincts. And the two "defeats" he suffered in U.S. Senate contests (1854–55, 1858–59) were not really defeats at all, but rather party setbacks handed to the Republicans in an era when legislators selected senators almost always along strict partisan lines. That is how Lincoln was able to claim in his 1859 autobiographical sketch that his first electoral defeat in 1832, at the age of twenty-three, was "the only time I ever have been beaten by the people." Along the way, there were always some Lincoln political intimates—usually self-proclaimed—but none who seemed to stay with him from one stage of his career to the next. His law partner William H. Herndon was the classic example. Herndon was an original Lincoln man who worked side by side with the future president for seventeen years before the senior partner left for Washington and then hardly interacted with him again.<sup>11</sup>

The singular style of Lincoln's wire-pulling, coupled with his "shut-mouthed" nature, has complicated the process of writing his political narrative. Especially on questions as nuanced as those involving the blind memorandum, the Lincoln historian is often left with few reliable sources. The challenge is to reconstruct what the British historian Maurice Cowling has called the "sociology of power."<sup>12</sup> Historians must take into account the competing agendas of Lincoln's various cronies and offer reasonable speculation about the motivations of his actions. The basis for such analysis often comes as much from what is not written or done as it does from actual texts or actions.

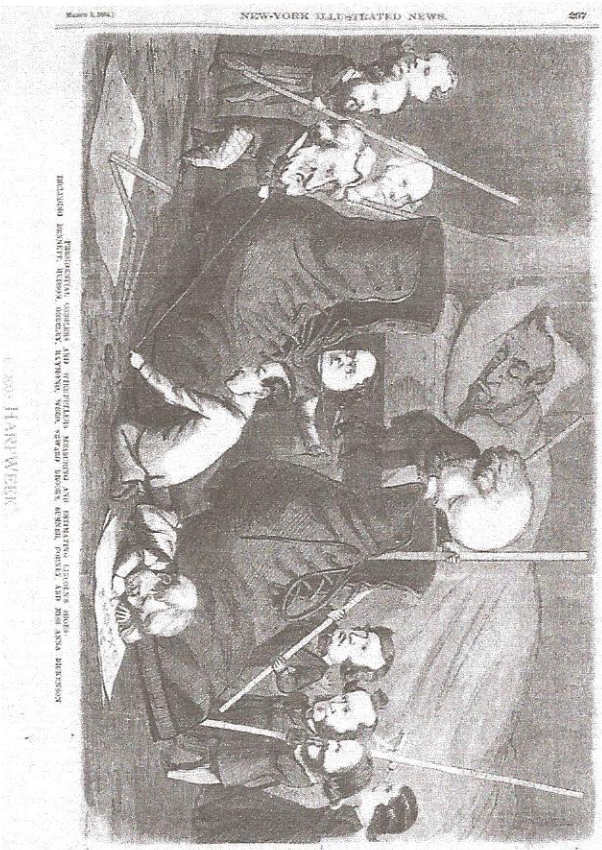
Consider the "blind" August 23, 1864, endorsement by the cabinet officers. What might have motivated such powerful men to sign a document "sight unseen"? Perhaps Lincoln had really succeeded in forging a "team of rivals," to

use the phrase popularized by Doris Kearns Goodwin. Or perhaps the peculiar nature of the endorsement—a kind of nineteenth-century date stamp—made knowledge of its contents seem irrelevant to the signers. But a different explanation might highlight the disjointed and disgruntled nature of that cabinet. Salmon P. Chase, the longtime secretary of the treasury, had not been one of the "blind" signers, because Lincoln had fired him earlier that summer once the president had secured his renomination. Maybe that decisive action had opened a few eyes. Lincoln's hard edge was certainly apparent in the firing of Montgomery Blair, who did sign the August document but who was let go just a month later, presumably as part of an implicit bargain to remove the third-party candidate John C. Fremont from the presidential race. Nothing better demonstrates the awkward chemistry of this cabinet group than the realization—almost never expressed in the scholarship—that regardless of their motivations for signing, Lincoln must have demanded "blind" endorsements from his cabinet because he did not trust his closest subordinates to keep such an explosive statement secret. This significant distrust would also help explain their bewildered reaction to the president's dramatic revelation about the memorandum's contents in November 1864.

Analyzing the power relationships within the administration and the Union coalition is especially challenging during the 1864 campaign. There were a bewildering variety of party organizations supporting the president, from the regular state and national Republican committees to a veritable maze of ad hoc Union Leagues.<sup>13</sup> Elected officials, cabinet members, newspaper editors, independent operators, army officials, and government agents all claimed roles in the campaign and were prone to bitter divisions over everything from ideology to patronage to regionalism to Jacksonian-era party affiliations—even to family feuds. Lincoln gave hardly any public speeches or published interviews during the contest, but met almost daily with friends and rivals to discuss political questions. Meanwhile, the campaigns that truly mattered were still being fought on the battlefields—often with frustrating results for a weary northern public. Thus Lincoln's victory over George McClellan inspired more relief than celebration. The president himself soberly concluded that the election had been a "necessity," and that he was gratified by the "right conclusion" to an otherwise divisive contest.<sup>14</sup>

Over the years, there have been several hotly disputed points of interpretation regarding the campaign. The sudden collapse of the presidential boom for Treasury Secretary Chase generated much attention at the turn of the twentieth





"Presidential Cobblers and Wire-Pullers Measuring and Estimating Lincoln's Shoes." *New York Illustrated News*, March 5, 1864. This oft-referenced cartoon casts Lincoln's rivals and critics as hiliptians looking for a replacement nominee for the presidency. Eight of the persons depicted were newspaper publishers. The Radical Republican and popular antislavery orator Charles Sumner is also in the band. Surprisingly, the cartoon also includes William Henry Seward, who was a strong Lincoln supporter by 1864, which fact contributed to the Radicals' disgust with Lincoln and Salmon P. Chase's ambition to unseat him. (Library Company of Philadelphia)

century. In the 1890s, the Pennsylvania journalist Alexander McClure and the former presidential aide Nicolay launched a debate that continued for decades over whether Lincoln engineered the replacement of his vice president, Hannibal Hamlin, with the Tennessee War Democrat Andrew Johnson. Historians in the twentieth century also investigated the deal that allegedly got Fremont out of the race in exchange for the removal of Postmaster Blair from the cabinet.

But interpreting the blind memorandum has not proved nearly as controversial as these well-known debates. According to nearly all the standard accounts,

the president's darkest moment came in late August when stalemate on the battlefield had spooked many northern Republicans into contemplating the possibility of dumping him from the Union ticket. The failure of Grant's armies to capture Richmond during the summer, growing discontent on Capitol Hill over Reconstruction policies, and the recent announcement of another half-million-man call-up seemed to have deflated almost everyone. Even Lincoln himself, according to the usual plotline, feared the worst and was preparing for the likelihood of his own defeat until General William T. Sherman's capture of Atlanta in early September transformed public opinion and saved his reelection.<sup>15</sup> Yet under closer scrutiny, it appears that while many around the president were clearly alarmed over his prospects, he remained confident, or at least unshaken. All of his previous political experience had taught him that despite the sound and fury of his increasingly forlorn campaign team, his position as the regular party nominee was practically unassailable. For Lincoln, the only serious question concerned whether he could win at the polls without his generals gaining any more victories in the field. Despite expectations to the contrary, it was a question the president seemed prepared to answer with a tactic that showed his more anxious contemporaries a glimpse of the worst. In other words, Lincoln spent most of August attempting to scare his more lukewarm allies straight. The blind memorandum was in effect a culmination of this strategy.

One of the best illustrations of this tactic in action occurred on Friday, August 19, 1864. It was a typically full day for the president, with an agenda that included a perfunctory cabinet meeting as well as discussions with the abolitionist Frederick Douglass and the former Wisconsin governor Alexander Randall. The meetings with Douglass and Randall were anything but perfunctory, however, since the topic of discussion in both cases was a politically charged letter that Lincoln had drafted regarding peace negotiations with the Confederacy. The question had become more and more pressing during the period of military stalemate, and Lincoln had reluctantly authorized a series of secret, back-channel missions to sound out Jefferson Davis. In public, however, Lincoln remained resolute about negotiations. In a general statement issued on July 18, 1864, Lincoln had announced that "any proposition" which included the "integrity of the whole Union" and the "abandonment of slavery" would be considered by his administration. Naturally, such a hard line seemed to foreclose the possibility of talks. It also suggested to some northern critics that emancipation had been transformed from a temporary and somewhat limited policy of military necessity into a sweeping national political objective. In his August 19 meetings, the



president openly discussed a letter he was drafting in response to the particular concerns of Charles T. Robinson, a newspaper editor and leading pro-war Democrat from Wisconsin, who had challenged Lincoln to explain how he was supposed to convince his skeptical readers that saving the Union and "freeing the slaves" were now inseparable goals.<sup>16</sup>

Randall had delivered the confidential note from Robinson earlier in the week, and he and some associates planned to visit with Lincoln at the president's summer cottage at the Soldiers' Home on Friday evening to hear his draft response.<sup>17</sup> "To me it seems plain," Lincoln began, "that saying re-union and abandonment of slavery would be considered if offered is not saying that nothing else would be considered, if offered." But if Lincoln's opening gambit was designed to appeal to conservative sensibilities, the rest of the response was a passionate, often indignant, defense of his emancipation policy. "I am sure you would not desire me to say, or to leave an inference," Lincoln wrote in the original draft, "that I am ready, whenever convenient, to join in re-enslaving those who shall have served us in consideration of our promise." Lincoln might have hoped that such a balancing act would satisfy both conservatives and radicals, but he more likely had another plan in mind. He read the draft first to Douglass, and then to Randall's party, revised it at least once, but never sent it.<sup>18</sup>

Other scholars have commented on Lincoln's habit of drafting but not sending materials, usually in the context of angry outbursts aimed at wayward generals, but in this case the strategy seemed to have had a more calculated effect.<sup>19</sup> Lincoln wanted to bring his political allies around by showing them the war from his perspective and by offering a sign of how bad things would become if he went down in defeat. Nothing suggests this scheme more clearly than the meeting with Frederick Douglass at the White House on Friday morning. The orator had opposed efforts to renominate Lincoln and was actively considering supporting John Fremont. "When there was any shadow of a hope that a man of a more decided anti-slavery conviction and policy could be elected," Douglass wrote, "I was not for Mr. Lincoln."<sup>20</sup> By this point, Douglass was far from alone in his discontent. The day before, on August 18, a group of leading Radical Republicans had met in New York City at the home of former mayor George Opdyke to organize a movement that might be able to recruit a substitute for Lincoln as the Union candidate. "Mr. Lincoln is already beaten," Horace Greeley argued. "He cannot be elected. And we must have another ticket to save us from utter overthrow."<sup>21</sup> Aware for some time that such movements had been afoot, Lincoln had asked Colonel John Eaton, who supervised the escaped slaves of

"contrabands" living behind Union lines in the Mississippi Valley, to arrange the meeting with Douglass.<sup>22</sup>

Once he heard the draft of Lincoln's answer to the conservative critics, Douglass's reaction was thoroughly predictable. The black abolitionist argued strenuously against Lincoln's proposed reply to Robinson. "It would be taken as a complete surrender of your anti-slavery policy," Douglass said, "and do you serious damage."<sup>23</sup> Lincoln listened but then wondered aloud if it was still possible to encourage more southern slaves to escape, since the war might end without the complete abolition of slavery. Douglass understood this to be a veiled threat.<sup>24</sup> The abolitionist returned home and reluctantly drafted a plan for a new "Underground Railroad," but the aspiring politician combined his reply with a request for a personal favor. He asked the president to discharge his son Charles from the army because of illness. Lincoln immediately ordered the discharge.<sup>25</sup> The president was not as imposing in his conversation that evening with Randall and the others, but he did become passionate at one point, denying that he could abandon emancipation even if he should do so for political reasons. "I should be damned in time & in eternity for so doing," he claimed adamantly.<sup>26</sup>

In retrospect, Lincoln's objective on August 19, 1864, seems clear. He was buying time, hoping that either better news from the front or sheer desperation would eventually restore a unity of purpose to his shaky political coalition. This latter, worst-case scenario often gets lost in the interpretive shuffle, drowned out by the agonized rhetoric of Lincoln's political lieutenants. As word of the Opdyke meeting leaked out, for example, Republican politicians like Henry Raymond, the *New York Times* editor and general campaign chairman, and even political war horses like Thurlow Weed, began sounding despondent tones in letters that have been widely quoted since the publication of Nicolay and Hay's official biography and their subsequent inclusion in the annotations for the *Collected Works*. Weed wrote Seward on August 22, 1864, reminding him that for days he had been calling Lincoln's election "an impossibility" because the "people are wild for peace." On the same day, Raymond sent the president a long, depressing note outlining the party's poor prospects in various states and warning that the "tide is setting strongly against us."<sup>27</sup>

But was Lincoln equally disturbed and unsettled? He certainly appeared in full command of his moods on August 19, 1864. Scholars occasionally cite a thirdhand account passed along to General Benjamin Butler, a man who aspired to become the new Union candidate, which suggested that the president might have been persuaded to step aside. "You think I don't know I am going



to be beaten, *but I do* and unless some great change takes place *badly* beaten," Lincoln reportedly told one visitor. Yet if true, that statement was made much earlier in the month.<sup>28</sup> There are more signs that by mid-August the frustrations of the summer were serving mainly to increase Lincoln's determination. Illinois Lieutenant Governor William Bross visited the White House during this period on his way to recover the body of his brother who had been killed at Petersburg. He tried to offer the president some political advice, but was cut short. "I will tell you what the people want," said Lincoln sharply. "They want and must have, *success*. But whether that come or not, I shall stay *right here*, and do my duty."<sup>29</sup> To another old Illinois friend, Lincoln appeared at times almost indifferent to the political crisis around him. Leonard Swett, an instrumental Lincoln organizer during the realignment of the 1850s, recalled that he "poured [himself] out" to the president about the forlorn campaign, only to watch in disbelief as Lincoln gazed absentmindedly out of a window, imitating a nearby bird: "Tweet, tweet, tweet; isn't he singing sweetly?" Swett reported that he felt "as if my legs had been cut from under me," and rose angrily to leave until Lincoln called him back, saying by way of apology, "It is impossible for a man in my position not to have thought of all those things."<sup>30</sup>

Lincoln's candor with his old Illinois friends hints at a likely truth. Always a meticulous political manager, he was now verging on obsession in his attention to the details of his final campaign—and with no sign of surrender. Nothing better demonstrates the level of Lincoln's preoccupation and determination than the blind memorandum, which involved an elaborate example of worst-case planning. By noting that it seemed "exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected," Lincoln offered an opening line that sounded the alarm in much the same way as all the other reports from that week. But if Lincoln was truly shaken, as his correspondents appeared to be, then the next line should have read, "Therefore I have decided for the sake of my party and country to step aside as the Union nominee." Instead, Lincoln announced that it would be his "duty to so co-operate with the President elect as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration." To fully appreciate the surprising nature of that statement, one must acknowledge that the pressure on Lincoln *at that moment* was to resign or step aside as his party's choice for president. By refusing to do so, as he signaled in this document, Lincoln was defying many powerful political forces within his own party.

In crafting the memorandum, Lincoln was also defying some of his closest allies, the ones who did not want him to step aside but who did press him to



*Platforms Illustrated* (Philadelphia, [1864]), lithograph attributed to Prang and Company. Republicans cast themselves as the true American party, and contrasted their steadfast commitment to defeat secession while disparaging the Democrats as a party in trouble because of its supposed dominance by Copperheads and party bosses, a reluctant candidate in George B. McClellan, and a reliance on the immigrant vote. This lithograph shows Liberty crowning Lincoln, who is held aloft by the pillars of Union strength. (Library of Congress)

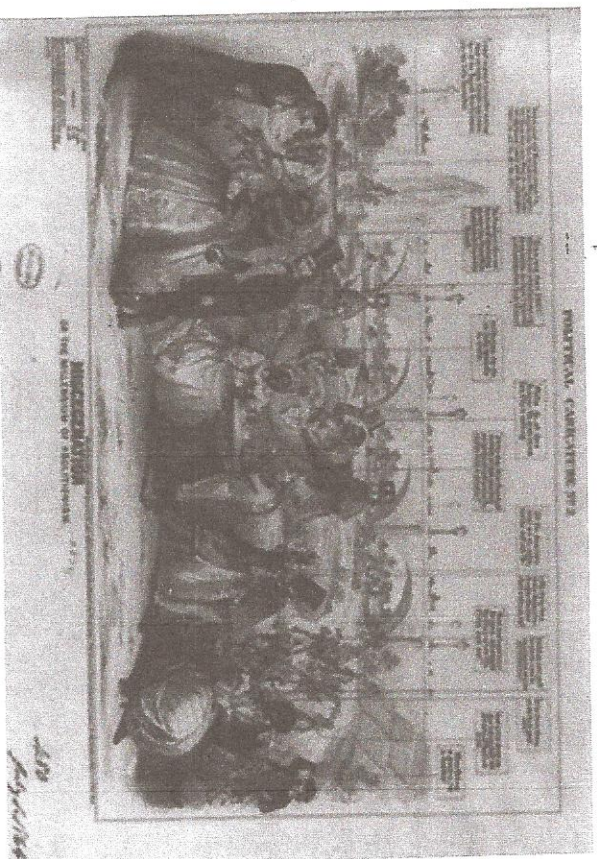
change his policies. Lincoln avoided the alternative policy options recommended by his advisers. Some pushed him to abandon emancipation. Others urged him to open negotiations with Richmond. Lincoln appeared to consider these ideas, but ultimately embraced none of them. During the same week that he revised the Robinson letter and prepared the blind memorandum, Lincoln was also pulling together a document authorizing Raymond to open talks with Jefferson Davis. Yet none of these materials saw the light of day in 1864. Lincoln might have been nervous in contemplating these alternatives, but more likely he was engaging in a



political Kabuki dance to help others see their futility. The blind memorandum offers especially powerful evidence that Lincoln had become almost disdainful of compromise and flip-flops by this point in the war. Consider how he was offering in the memorandum to "co-operate" with the Democratic president-elect, but could not resist adding in this otherwise magnanimous note that his opponent would "have secured his election on such ground that he can not possibly save it afterwards." In his 1979 essay, Mark Neely suggested that this bitter edge marked "the real operative content of the memo"—namely, that Lincoln was "a loyal Republican and shared his party's fears of a disloyal opposition."<sup>31</sup> From this perspective, Lincoln certainly appears far more radical than pragmatic—a revealing insight for a man and a leader often celebrated for his conciliatory nature.

Thus, when the ever-pragmatic Henry Raymond and other leading members of the Union executive committee finally arrived at the Executive Mansion on August 25 to confront the president about his resistance to a peace mission and secure final authorization for a new mission to Richmond, he dismissed them rather easily. Along with what John Nicolay labeled the "stronger half of the Cabinet," which included, in the aides' view, Seward, Edwin Stanton, and the new treasury secretary, William Pitt Fessenden, the president provided a "respectful answer" to the committee's various political concerns but essentially killed plans for negotiations, somehow leaving them both "encouraged and cheered." Writing to Hay, who was back home in Illinois during this period, Nicolay observed, "If the President can infect R. and his committee with some of his own patience and pluck, we are saved."<sup>32</sup>

They were soon saved, and Lincoln's "patience and pluck" was a critical element of their salvation. The Opdyke movement began collapsing even before the news of Sherman's victory reached the North. Governor John Andrew of Massachusetts pulled out of the cabal in late August. Even if Lincoln would have stepped aside, which he almost certainly would not have, then who could have united the disparate factions? Chase and Fremont certainly could not. Generals like Grant or Butler might have in theory, but Lincoln kept careful tabs on both. Grant repeatedly made clear that he would not serve as a candidate. Besides, why nominate generals whose troops were mired in stalemate? After all, that was the problem presumably eroding most of Lincoln's popularity in the first place. Nor is it conceivable that the coalition's members would have splintered or simply accepted defeat. There was just too much at stake. Weed's explanation for why he refused to join the movement exposes the fatal flaw in the plans to dump Lincoln. "Knowing that I was not satisfied with the President, they came to me



*Miscegenation, or, The Millennium of Abolitionism* (New York, 1864), lithograph by Bromley and Co. One of four political caricatures issued by the Bromley firm for the Democratic Party, this lithograph repeated the Democratic charge that emancipation meant racial mixing and a social order turned upside down. Democrats used racial stereotypes as regular campaign fare, especially after emancipation became Republican policy, to paint Lincoln and the Republicans as dreamers and fanatics. The frustrations with military reverses and the cost of the war, worries about violations of civil liberties, and racial fears proved a potent combination, leading to Democratic successes in local, state, and congressional elections in 1862 and 1863, which worried Republicans that they might lose the White House and more in 1864. (Library of Congress)

for cooperation," he wrote to Seward on September 20, 1864. "But my objection to Mr. Lincoln is that he has done too much for those who now seek to drive him out of the field."<sup>33</sup> James Gordon Bennett, the astute editor of the *New York Herald*, had outlined the outcome on the very day Lincoln was penning the blind memorandum. The various Republican factions would be "skedaddling for the Lincoln train and selling out at the best terms they can," the paper predicted, "be-



cause the president has the whiphand of them." Bennett concluded, "The spectacle will be ridiculous; but it is inevitable."<sup>34</sup>

Inevitability is an argument easy to make afterward. But if historians focus on the sociology of power rather than the mood swings of the chattering classes, it does appear easier to see what Lincoln saw. He was going to remain the Union nominee with or without victories in Atlanta or Richmond. If there was any political turning point, it was the Republican decision, orchestrated by Lincoln supporters, to hold an early convention in June and the subsequent Democratic move to delay their gathering from mid-July to late August. Imagine if the meetings had been reversed. A Democratic convention held during the initial enthusiasm surrounding Grant's Wilderness Campaign might have resulted in diminished influence for the Peace Democrats and a more acceptable general election platform. A Republican or Union convention at the end of August would have provided Lincoln's critics with a rallying point and real opportunity.

Nonetheless, just because Lincoln was likely to remain the nominee even without battlefield victories does not mean that he would have won in November. That is the final reason why the blind memorandum appears so remarkable. Lincoln wrote the document as a last-ditch attempt to secure a policy victory even if he endured a personal defeat. After a month spent opening the eyes of friends, he was now planning for the prospect of scaring his political enemies straight, too. Few interpretations of the blind memorandum bother to dissect Lincoln's extraordinary and extra-constitutional offer for a coalition government during the period of lame-duck transition, but he clearly believed the proposal would have had an impact on McClellan and Democratic Party leaders. Recall Lincoln's imagined conversation with President-Elect McClellan as recounted in Hay's extraordinary diary entry: "Now let us together, you with your influence and I with all the executive power of the Government, try to save the country. You raise as many troops as you possibly can for this final trial, and I will devote all my energies to assisting and finishing the war."<sup>35</sup> In the event of his possible electoral defeat, what Lincoln wanted was a statement from McClellan urging regular troops to stay in the field and encouraging northern civilians to respond positively to the latest call up of more men. What Lincoln feared most was that absent such a public endorsement, the Union Army would collapse from the weight of postelection desertions and increasing unrest on the home front. This explains the earnest and careful nature of the August 23 document, most especially those mysterious blind endorsements. Lincoln understood full well that McClellan and his advisers would be inherently skeptical of his motives. From



*Grand National Union Banner for 1864: Liberty, Union, Victory (New York, 1864), lithograph with watercolor by Currier and Ives. Running under the National Union Party label, the Lincoln-Johnson ticket played up themes of military might, harvest, commerce, and progress rather than remarking on emancipation or responding to Democrats' politics of race. The message was that the reelection of Lincoln would restore the Union and ensure its future happiness, as related in this banner with its farmer plowing a field and cornucopia spilling abundance. (Library of Congress)*



their perspective, President Lincoln—who had suspended habeas corpus in defiance of the Chief Justice, and imprisoned thousands of citizens without judicial process, and who had, as they saw it, emancipated slaves by military decree in the unconstitutional fashion of John Brown—was utterly capable of ignoring election results and holding power indefinitely. Thus, the blind memorandum, with its impromptu “date stamp” secured by the unknowing cabinet officers, revealed that Lincoln had been reconciled to a possible electoral defeat for months while simultaneously offering an ominous reminder to the incoming team that unless they found some way to cooperate with him, chaos awaited them in March 1865.

Following his reelection, President Lincoln quietly informed a serenade of supporters outside the Executive Mansion, “We can not have free government without elections.”<sup>36</sup> This was not mere rhetoric. By deciding to forge ahead with his campaign during the panicky days of late August, Lincoln demonstrated that a long and successful career in politics had girded him to resist self-doubt and ignore public criticism. He did not step aside under pressure as the Union nominee. Nor did he flip-flop on key policies. Most important, he did not cancel the election. Any of those choices might have fatally undermined his legacy. Instead, the evidence suggests that Lincoln only pretended to consider depressing alternatives in order to draw allies—and sometimes enemies—back into his fold. Yet none of this speculation about tactics or analysis regarding the “sociology of power” should obscure the fact that Lincoln’s decision to commit himself wholly to the verdict of the people at the moment when his own prospects seemed dimmest marks one of the most inspiring examples of popular sovereignty in American history. That is surely how Lincoln saw the blind memorandum—and how he hoped history would view it. “At least,” he had confided to his stunned cabinet officers after the election, “I should have done my duty and have stood clear before my own conscience.” The self-conscious pride of that statement has long merited more careful examination. There should no longer be much doubt that August 23, 1864, was a decisive day in Lincoln’s presidency, full of insight about both his unparalleled partisan skills and unyielding faith in the people.



“Jeff Davis’s November Nightmare,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, December 3, 1864. This cartoon spoke a great truth, for the Confederacy had counted on Lincoln and the Republicans’ defeat in the 1864 elections as the best chance for a negotiated peace and the prospect of realizing southern independence. Lincoln ran hard on the need to win the war at all costs and never to concede any legitimacy to secession. Strengthened by electoral victory in 1864, thanks in part to the soldiers’ vote, Lincoln determined to finish what in the Gettysburg Address he had called “the great task remaining before us.” (Library of Congress)



in John Cimprich, *Fort Pillow, a Civil War Massacre, and Public Memory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); Richard L. Fuchs, *An Unerring Fire: The Massacre at Fort Pillow* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994); Gregory J. Malacuso, *The Fort Pillow Massacre: The Reason Why* (New York: Vantage, 1989); John Gauss, *Black Flag! Black Flag! The Battle of Fort Pillow* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003); Andrew Ward, *River Run Red: The Fort Pillow Massacre in the American Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2005); Brian Steel Wills, *A Battle from the Start: The Life of Nathan Bedford Forrest* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Richard Slotkin, *No Quarter: The Battle of the Crater, 1864* (New York: Random House, 2009); Michael A. Cavanaugh and William Marvel, *The Petersburg Campaign: The Battle of the Crater, "The Horrid Pit," June 25–August 6, 1864* (Lynchburg, VA: H. E. Howard, 1989); and Earl J. Hess, *Into the Crater: The Mine Attack at Petersburg* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010).

45. Anonymous to "Dear Sallie," April 20, 1864, Spence Family Collection, Old State House Museum, Little Rock; William Blain to "Dear Wife," May 17, 1864, in Dolly Botters comp., *Rouse Stevens Ancestry & Allied Families* (Cathage, MO: privately printed, 1970), 108B; Glatthar, *Forged in Battle*, 157–58; Urwin, "Poison Spring and Jenkins Ferry," 128–33.

46. William E. Gienapp, *Abraham Lincoln and Civil War America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 52, 64–65, 111–12, 129; Burkhardt, *Confederate Rage*, *Yankee Wrath*, 2–3, 77–79, 91–92, 243–44; Richard J. Carwardine, *Lincoln* (Harlow, Essex: Pearson/Longman, 2003), 22–23, 75–76, 211; Derek W. Frisby, "Remember Fort Pillow? Politics, Propaganda, and the Evolution of Hard War," in Urwin, ed., *Black Flag over Dixie*, 121. Daniel E. Sutherland reveals the willingness of many Confederates to greet Union armies with merciless and unrelenting guerrilla warfare from the war's opening guns in *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). See also Clay Mountcastle, *Punitive War: Confederate Guerrillas and Union Reprisals* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

47. The most comprehensive history of Civil War POW policy, which is equally condemnatory in its treatment of both sides, is Charles W. Sanders Jr., *While in the Hands of the Enemy: Military Prisons of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

48. An anthology devoted to the same theme as this chapter is Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *Lincoln, the War President: The Gettysburg Lectures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). The latest word on the subject is James M. McPherson, *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

49. Walt Whitman, "Specimen Days (1882–83)," in Louis P. Mauser, ed., "... *The Real War Will Never Get into the Books*": *Selections from Writers during the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 281.

### 3. Seeing Lincoln's Blind Memorandum / Matthew Pinsky

1. "Memorandum Concerning His Probable Failure of Re-election," August 23, 1864, in Roy P. Basler et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick:

Rutgers University Press, 1953): 7:514 (hereafter *Collected Works*); Hay diary entry, November 11, 1864, in Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ertlinger, eds., *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 247–48.

2. Hay diary entry, November 11, 1864, in Burlingame and Ertlinger, eds., *Inside Lincoln's White House*, 247–48.

3. Gideon Welles, "The Opposition to Lincoln in 1864," *Atlantic Monthly* 41 (March 1878): 367.

4. John Hay to John G. Nicolay, February 27, 1878, in William Roscoe Thayer, *John Hay: American Statesman*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Bros., 1915), 2:21–22.

5. John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, 10 vols. (New York: Century, 1890), 9:249–51.

6. "Memorandum Concerning His Probable Failure of Re-election," in *Collected Works*, 7:514–15n.

7. James G. Randall and Richard N. Current, *Lincoln the President: Last Full Measure* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1955), 215–16.

8. Mark E. Neely Jr., "The Lincoln Theme since Randall's Call: The Promises and Perils of Professionalism," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 1 (1979): 18–19. Neely further popularized the use of the term "blind memorandum" when he incorporated the label as an entry for his important reference work *The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982).

9. James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 771. Although McPherson used quotation marks for "blind memorandum," he did not cite Neely and yet none of the sources in his relevant footnote employed this phrase—further evidence for how quickly the term had achieved popularity.

10. October 17, 1861, in Burlingame and Ertlinger, eds., *Inside Lincoln's White House*, 26.

11. David Donald, *Lincoln's Herndon* (1948; New York: Da Capo, 1989), 153.

12. Maurice Cowling, 1867: *Disraeli, Gladstone, and Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 3. During the 1970s, Cowling led what has been called the "high politics" school in mid-Victorian history, a movement that emphasized ambition and power as leading factors in political decision making, and thick narrative as the most suitable forum for comprehending political action. Typical of the high political approach were monographs such as Andrew Jones, *The Politics of Reform, 1884* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); and A. B. Cooke and John Vincent, *The Governing Passion: Cabinet Government and Party Politics in Britain, 1885–86* (Brighton, Eng.: Harvester, 1974). For a spirited defense of the approach, see Andrew Jones, "Where 'Governing' Is the Use of Words," *Historical Journal* 19 (1976): 251–56. For much more skeptical critiques, see Lawrence Goldman, "The Social Science Association, 1857–1886: A Context for Mid-Victorian Liberalism," *English Historical Review* 101 (January 1986): 95–134; and Richard Brent, "Butterfield's Tories: 'High Politics' and the Writing of Modern British Political History," *Historical Journal* 30 (December 1987): 943–54.

13. David E. Long, *The Jewel of Liberty: Abraham Lincoln's Re-election and the End of Slavery* (1994; New York: Da Capo, 1997), 252. For a provocative analysis of Union politi-



cal movements, see Michael Holt, "Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Union," in John L. Thomas, ed., *Abraham Lincoln and the American Political Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986). See also Mark E. Neely Jr.'s *The Last Best Hope of Earth: Abraham Lincoln and the Promise of America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 159-82; and *The Union Divided: Political Conflict in the Civil War North* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

14. "Response to a Serenade," November 10, 1864, in *Collected Works*, 8:101.

15. There are now three solid monographs available on the campaign. William Frank Zornow, *Lincoln and the Party Divided* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), remains the most complete political narrative, despite some outdated interpretations of the Radical Republicans, whom the author labels the "Unconditionals" and whom he generally treats with disdain (p. 3). David Long, *Jewel of Liberty*, sometimes strains to argue that the election was "the most important one in history" (p. 265), but this account nevertheless presents the most sophisticated analysis of the campaign's issues. John C. Waugh, in *Reelecting Lincoln: The Battle for the 1864 Presidency* (New York: Crown, 1997), describes himself as a "historical reporter" (p. x) rather than a historian, and not coincidentally offers the most engaging, but not always the most nuanced, narrative. Despite the various merits of these monographs, the most reliable treatment of the contest comes from David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995); see especially chaps. 18-19.

16. Robinson had written that the president's refusal to negotiate "without the abandonment of slavery . . . puts the whole war question on a new basis, and takes us War Democrats clear off our feet, leaving us no ground to stand upon." Quoted in *Collected Works*, 7:500n. Earl Schenck Miers, ed., *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 1809-1865* (Dayton, OH: Morningside, 1991), 279. Out of three principal monographs on the 1864 contest, none takes note of the juxtaposition of the Randall and Douglass meetings; see Long, *Jewel of Liberty*, 189-90; and Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln*, 267. William Zornow does not even cover the episode in *Lincoln and the Party Divided*. David Donald, however, does include at least some material from both meetings; see *Lincoln*, 526-27. For the documents in question, see "To Whom It May Concern," July 18, 1864, in *Collected Works*, 7:451; and Abraham Lincoln to Charles D. Robinson, August 17, 1864, in *Collected Works*, 7:499-502.

17. Joseph T. Mills, a federal judge from Wisconsin, joined Randall. William P. Dole, an Indian Affairs commissioner, was also present after the meeting began. Mills took notes, which were later published in various newspapers and magazines, including *Harper's Weekly*. Much of the text from his account has been included in *Collected Works*, 7:506-8. For a more complete background on the meeting, see Matthew Pinsker, *Lincoln's Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldiers' Home* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 157-62.

18. There are two versions of Lincoln's draft reply to Robinson in his papers. See Abraham Lincoln to Charles D. Robinson, August 17, 1864 [pencil draft], and Abraham Lincoln to Charles D. Robinson, [August 1864], in Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress, Washington.

19. On the subject of Lincoln's habit of holding back angry letters, see Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 536.

20. Frederick Douglass to Theodore Tilton, October 15, 1864, in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, 5 vols. (New York: International, 1975): 3:423-24.

21. Quoted in Robert S. Harper, *Lincoln and the Press* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951), 309.

22. Christopher N. Breiseth, "Lincoln and Frederick Douglass: Another Debate," *Journal of the Illinois Historical Society* 68 (February 1975): 19.

23. Frederick Douglass to Theodore Tilton, October 15, 1864, in Foner, ed., *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, 3:423.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Frederick Douglass to Abraham Lincoln August 29, 1864, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress, Washington. See also Breiseth, "Lincoln and Frederick Douglass," 20; and William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: Norton, 1991), 230.

26. Abraham Lincoln to Charles T. Robinson, August 17, 1864, in *Collected Works*, 7:499-502; interview with Alexander W. Randall and Joseph T. Mills, August 19, 1864, in *Collected Works*, 7:507.

27. Thurlow Weed to William Henry Seward, August 22, 1864, quoted in Nicolay and Hay, *Abraham Lincoln*, 9:250. Henry M. Raymond to Abraham Lincoln, August 22, 1864, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress, Washington.

28. From J. K. Herbert to Benjamin Butler, August 6, 1864, and August 11, 1864, and N. G. Upham to Benjamin Butler, August 12, 1864, quoted in Jesse A. Marshall, ed., *Private and Official Correspondence of General Benjamin F. Butler during the Period of the Civil War*, 5 vols. (Norwood, MA: Plimpton, 1917), 5:35-37. See also Donald, *Lincoln*, 529.

29. Quoted in Francis F. Browne, ed., *The Every-Day Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: N. D. Thompson, 1886), 663. Miers, ed., *Lincoln Day by Day*, does not confirm this meeting. But Bross, a former editor of the *Chicago Press and Tribune*, had known Lincoln well in Illinois and did have a brother who was killed leading the 29th U.S. Colored Troops, a black regiment from Illinois, at the Battle of the Crater (July 30, 1864) outside Petersburg.

30. Quoted in Browne, ed., *Every-Day Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 667.

31. Neely, "Lincoln Theme since Randall's Call," 18-19. David Donald reaches exactly the opposite conclusion in his well-regarded biography of Lincoln. Donald reads the blind memorandum as a way to demonstrate that Lincoln "did not think the Democrats were disloyal." See Donald, *Lincoln*, 529.

32. Nicolay and Hay, *Abraham Lincoln*, 9:221; Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln*, 269.

33. Thurlow Weed to William Henry Seward, September 20, 1864, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress, Washington.

34. *New York Herald*, August 23, 1864.

35. Burlingame and Ettinger, eds., *Inside Lincoln's White House*, 248.

36. "Reply to a Serenade," November 10, 1864, in *Collected Works*, 8:100-101.