

**AMERICAN CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE OF AUSTRALIA  
NEW SOUTH WALES CHAPTER**  
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**ABRAHAM LINCOLN  
THE CONSUMMATE POLITICIAN**



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### **COVER PHOTOGRAPH**

**This photograph was taken by Alexander Gardner and, for many years, was incorrectly said to be one of the last set of photographs taken of Lincoln prior to his assassination, purportedly on 10 April 1865. This information is incorrect. This Gardner photograph was actually taken on February 5, 1865 and this has been confirmed by a diary entry of Matthew Wilson, a portrait painter, who had accompanied Lincoln to Gardner's studio so Lincoln could provide a model for a portrait Wilson painted afterwards.**

This paper examines the political genius of Abraham Lincoln, America's 16<sup>th</sup> President and focuses initially on the events leading up to his presidential nomination in 1860, where he was successful against three more experienced and well-known candidates.

As the successful Republican candidate for the 1860 Presidential election, Lincoln then went about selecting his Cabinet, offering key positions to his rivals for the Republican nomination and incorporating into the Cabinet former Democrats. The Cabinet that emerged was certainly "top-heavy" with large egos to satisfy, but was able, under Lincoln's astute leadership, to steer the country through the "dark days" of the War to finally achieve victory.

During his first term, Lincoln defined the role of President as Commander-in-Chief in a way that had not been taken up by any of his predecessors. Neither the US Constitution nor existing legislation had specified how the President might declare war or dictate strategy for its conduct and by assuming the powers now associated with Commander-in-Chief, Lincoln certainly overstepped the narrow range of rights that had been granted to the President. Many would agree that this was a good thing since historians agree that it was Lincoln's strategic insight and his will to fight that changed the course of the War and saved the Union.

The manner in which Lincoln was able to become the undisputed leader of his Cabinet, to work with (and often against) his senior commanders and to mold fickle public opinion that enabled the Union to defeat the Confederacy is a tribute to his leadership and political genius.

In researching for tonight's presentation, I have leant heavily on the well-known comparative biographical work on Lincoln and his contemporaries by Doris Kearns Goodwin '*Team of Rivals – The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*'. I commend this book (and the abridged audio-book) to you as valuable reference providing insights into Lincoln's leadership that are not readily available in a single volume of the plethora of books written about Lincoln and the Civil War.

## John Cook



When Abraham Lincoln received his Party's nomination for the presidency in May 1860, each of his rivals for the nomination believed the wrong man had been chosen. Lincoln had appeared to come from nowhere to defeat three opponents who were better known, better educated and more experienced in public service than the prairie lawyer from Illinois whose national political experience involved a single undistinguished term in Congress and two failed bids for the US Senate.

Contemporaries and even some historians have attributed Lincoln's surprise nomination to chance - the fact that he came from the battleground state of Illinois and that none of his stated beliefs/policies were extreme. A closer analysis of the facts provides a quite different interpretation – when viewed from the wider perspective of his success *vis-à-vis* the failure of his three rivals, it is clear that Lincoln's win was because he was the shrewdest of them all. He took:

*“...the greatest control of the process leading up to the nomination, displaying a fierce ambition, an exceptional political acumen and a wide range of emotional skills ... that took his unsuspecting rivals by surprise”<sup>1</sup>*

The fact that when Lincoln was elected as President he then chose to incorporate his eminent rivals for the Republican nomination and former Democrats to form his Cabinet demonstrates clearly a profound self-confidence and the first indication of his true greatness as a political leader. New York's William H Seward was to become his Secretary of State; Salmon P Chase from Ohio became Secretary of the Treasury and Missouri's elder statesman, Edward Bates, Attorney General. To these former rivals for their Party's nomination, Lincoln added former Democrats to his Cabinet - Gideon Wells as Secretary of the Navy, Montgomery Blair as Postmaster General and eventually Edwin Stanton as Secretary for War.

The presence of such a distinguished group of experienced politicians in what has been described as *“...the most unusual Cabinet in history”* coupled with Lincoln's ability to marshal their various talents to the tasks of preserving the Union and winning the War, sets Lincoln apart as the “Man of the Century” and arguably America's greatest President.

Such a Cabinet might have been seen to have the potential to eclipse Lincoln, but it soon became evident that Lincoln was to be the undisputed “captain of the Cabinet ship”. Originally dismissed for his lack of political experience, naivety and ignorance, Lincoln soon established himself as being able to get the diverse group politicians that was to comprise his Cabinet to work together effectively for the common good of the country. Thus, as Goodwin points out in her book on Lincoln, his success in the dealings with his Cabinet clearly demonstrates:

*“... in the hands of a truly great politician those qualities we generally associate with decency and morality – kindness, compassion, honesty and empathy – can also be impressive political resources”<sup>2</sup>*

Seward was the first to see the futility of his plan to relegate the President to a figurehead role and he was to become Lincoln's closest friend and adviser within the Administration. Although Bates originally considered Lincoln to be well meaning but incompetent as an administrator, he eventually concluded that Lincoln was unmatched as a leader. Even Salmon Chase, whose consuming but frustrated ambition for the presidency was to cloud his judgment of Lincoln's leadership qualities, finally had to admit that Lincoln had out-manoeuvred him! Interestingly, Edwin Stanton, who had publically treated Lincoln with contempt at their initial contact, developed a great respect for his Commander-in-Chief and was unable to control his emotions for weeks after Lincoln's death. In Lincoln, America had found a man of sharp contrasts - plain and complex; tender but iron-willed; shrewd yet transparent. His political genius was grounded in an

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<sup>1</sup> Goodwin, Doris Kearns, *Team of Rivals – The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*: New York, Simon and Schuster, p.xvi

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p xvii

array of personal qualities that had been forged during this early life in such a way that it enabled him to:

- work with and form friendships with men who previously opposed him;
- repair injured feelings that, if left unaddressed, would most likely have resulted in permanent hostility;
- assume responsibility for subordinates' failures;
- share credit with ease; and
- learn from the mistakes he and others made.

Furthermore, Lincoln possessed:

- an acute understanding of the sources of power inherent in the presidency;
- an unparalleled ability to keep his governing coalition intact;
- a tough-minded appreciation of the need to protect his presidential prerogatives; and
- a masterful sense of timing.

Throughout his two terms in office as President, Lincoln demonstrated time and time again with various political colleagues and army commanders the rare ability of not letting personal affronts, petty grievances or jealousies threatening to destroy his administration, interfere with his judgments of pursuing his political and war aims. Possibly the best example of this is seen in his dealings with General George McClellan, whose personal affronts to his Commander-in-Chief were borne by Lincoln without overt reaction until McClellan failed to meet Lincoln's required expectations for victory by the Army of the Potomac. At this time, McClellan was "sacked"!



Lincoln and McClellan at Antietam

As a young man, Lincoln had considered that the "field of glory" had been fully harvested by the founding fathers and only modest ambitions were left for his generation. The turbulent 1850s, involving the rising intensity of slavery issues and the threat of dissolution of the nation itself, provided the opportunity and challenge for Lincoln and his political contemporaries to save the fledgling democracy established some 80 years earlier by Washington, Jefferson, Adams *et al* and to provide what Lincoln himself described as:

*"... a new birth of freedom"*

Without these tumultuous events of the 1850s that led inevitably to secession and war, it is unlikely that Lincoln's greatness would have been publically recognised. It was history that gave him the opportunity that allowed him to demonstrate his greatness and to transform and shape the American nation for future generations.

In 1854, history changed America forever. It began when settlers in Kansas and Nebraska requested Congress to grant them territorial status, a request that raised the contentious issue of whether slavery should be extended to the territories. In his capacity as Chairman of the Committee on Territories, Illinois Senator, Stephen Douglas, introduced a bill that, at first glance, appeared to provide a ready solution to the problem by allowing the settlers themselves to decide if they wished to become “free” or “slave” states. Unfortunately, Douglas’s “popular sovereignty” solution proved anything but simple! Since both Kansas and Nebraska were north of the 36° 30’ latitude line that underpinned the 1820 Missouri Compromise the passing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act meant the provisions of both the Missouri Compromise and the later Compromise of 1850<sup>3</sup> were null and void, thus opening the very real possibility of slavery being introduced in lands that had been granted “free” status for over 30 years.

The debate of the Kansas–Nebraska Act elicited a significant increase in anti-slavery sentiment throughout the North, particularly when the fugitive slave provisions contained in the 1850 Compromise legislation were enforced with slaveholders trying to recapture former slaves who had settled in New York and Boston. The introduction of the Act provided then a rallying point for all anti-slavery supporters in the North, where previously there had not been one.

Somewhat ironically, passions were also aroused in the South, where the issue of Kansas and Nebraska were seen, not merely as one of slavery, but whether Southerners, who had helped create the nation and enlarge its borders, would be entitled to a share of these territories held in common by the whole nation. As one Southern governor put it:

*“The day may come when our Northern brethren will discover that the Southern States intend to be equals in the Union, or independent out of it”*

The leadership of the anti-slavery lobby was taken on by the Ohio Senator, Salmon Chase with Seward, somewhat surprisingly, taking a secondary role. Chase, along with Charles Sumner and Ohio Congressman, Joshua Giddings, conceived the idea of reaching beyond the Senate to the population at large with an open letter “Appeal of the Independent Democrats in Congress to the People of the United States”. Originally printed in the National Era, the abolitionist newspaper that first serialized Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the document has been deemed by historians as one of:

*“...the most effective pieces of political propaganda ever produced”*

It was reprinted in pamphlet form as the basis of the Northern opposition to the Act. Chase saw this as the greatest opportunity that had come to him to further his political ambitions. In the course of the heated Senate debate Chase and Douglas made accusations of each other – Chase claimed that Douglas sponsored the Bill to further his presidential ambitions whilst Douglas countered by accusing Chase of entering the Senate by “...a corrupt bargain”

As an aside, whilst Douglas was making his concluding speech to this debate, he was interrupted by Seward asking clarification of some point, Douglas responded by saying:

“You can’t crawl behind that free nigger dodge”

To which Seward replied with the “perfect squelch”:

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<sup>3</sup> Essentially the Compromise of 1850 dealt with the issue of slavery in the territories acquired from Mexico as a result of the Mexican War. It proposed that in California the issue of slavery be left to the State Legislature (a proposal favouring the North) whilst in the remaining territories Utah and New Mexico, a similar regional delegation of the decision to be “free” or “slave”, would favour the South. The passage of the Clay Compromise through the Senate was managed in a masterly fashion by Stephen Douglas and was not vetoed by the President, probably because President Taylor died unexpectedly and the conservative Vice-President, Millard Fillmore, who took office in his place, signed the Bill into law.

*“Douglas, no man will ever be President of the United States who spells the word ‘negro’ with two gs”*

On March 4, 1854, the Senate finally cast its votes in favour of the Bill. In the weeks that followed its passing, mass protest meetings spread throughout the North fuelled, at least in part, by the enormous reach and influence of the daily newspapers. The New York Tribune warned Southerners:

*“... You are sowing the wind and you will reap the whirlwind ...  
No man can stand in the North that plants himself on the  
ground of sustaining the repeal of the Missouri Compromise”*

Lincoln was on the court circuit in the backblocks of Illinois when news reached him of the successful passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. His initial reaction was to state “...this nation cannot exist half-slave and half-free”. Later, he was to affirm that the Bill’s successful passage had roused him like never before but it had taken him by surprise. He could no longer maintain that slavery was “on course” towards its natural extinction.

It was not until some months later that Lincoln spoke out publically against the Kansas-Nebraska Act. In the interim he spent many hours in the Illinois State Library researching congressional debates, past and present, with a view to developing a clear, reasoned and convincing argument based firmly on America’s political history.

Thus, when on October 4, 1854, in Springfield, Lincoln delivered his first great anti-slavery speech before a large crowd at the annual Illinois State Fair, the impact was extremely positive. On the previous day, Lincoln had heard Stephen Douglas address the same crowd for over three hours where he presented his vigorous defence of the Bill. Douglas had been surprised at the hostility within Illinois towards his role in passing the controversial legislation and had chosen the State Fair as the forum for his defence of the Bill. At the end of Douglas’s presentation, Lincoln jumped up and announced that he would be delivering a rebuttal to Douglas’s case the following day.

Reports of Lincoln’s speech the next day noted the passion with which he argued his position and that while Douglas simply asserted his points were self evident, Lincoln embedded his argument in the history and experiences of the American people. Of Lincoln it was said:

*“For the first time in his public life, his remarkable array of gifts as historian, storyteller and teacher (were) combined with a lucid, relentless yet always accessible logic ... Lincoln used irony and humour, laced with workaday, homespun images to build an eloquent tower of logic ... The proslavery argument that a vote for the Wilmot Proviso ...threatened the stability of the entire Union was reduced to absurdity by analogy ... Such flashes of figurative language were always available to Lincoln to drive home a point, gracefully educating while entertaining – in a word, communicating an enormously complicated issue with wit, simplicity and a massive power of moral persuasion”<sup>4</sup>*

The debate with Douglas was repeated 12 nights later at the State Fair by torchlight with Lincoln matching Douglas’s considerable oratory skills with disarming logic. It was not the last time that Lincoln and Douglas would share the same forum and one might wonder if the “little giant” had any idea in 1854 of what the future held for them both!

A direct consequence of the turmoil created by the passing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act was the split over slavery within the Whig Party, causing the earlier dissension in the Party to “boil over” and ensure that Party itself would soon disappear from the American scene. In addition, the Democratic Party had become a Southern dominated party leaving a void for the various antislavery movements in the North. It was this void that was filled by Northern based anti-slavery

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<sup>4</sup> Goodwin, Doris Kearns, Team of Rivals – The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln: New York, Simon and Schuster, p 166.



groups that would soon be the Republican Party. In less than two years this newly formed Party had a State Governor appointed (Salmon Chase in Ohio in 1855) and in six years the country's President.

As with Seward, Lincoln did not immediately join the new Republican Party, probably in the hope that the Whig Party might rise again as a national political force to champion the anti-slavery cause. Salmon Chase had no such qualms of abandoning past loyalties, however, if he saw it was to his personal advantage. Beginning as a Whig he had then joined the Liberty Party later abandoning it and joining the Free-Soilers and then had gone to the Senate as a Free-Democrat. With little prospect of being re-nominated by the Democrats for a second term in the Senate, he was happy to "jump ship" again and come on-board with "new boy on the block" - the Republican Party.

Seward had some difficulty in breaking long-standing friendships with his fellow Whigs and it was not until 1855 when he finished his term in the Senate that he moved over to the Republican Party. Similarly, Lincoln still harboured a hope that the Whig Party would rise again and it was not until 1856 that he considered bringing Illinois under the Republican banner when he was to campaign on behalf of John Frémont, the new Republican Party's candidate for the 1856 presidential elections.

Lincoln's second attempt to be elected to the US Senate in 1858 provided the scene for a titanic struggle with his rival Stephen Douglas. The clash would propel Lincoln onto the national scene and ultimately the presidency while, at the same time, undermine Douglas's support in the South and further split the Democratic Party. During 1858, Lincoln and Douglas participated in seven face-to-face debates throughout Illinois. In these debates, Lincoln showed clearly he was more than a match for the experienced Douglas. Every word was taken down by stenographers and full transcripts circulated throughout the country. The highly partisan newspapers provided quite contradictory stories of the debates' outcome and the audience's reactions. Observing the same occasion the Republican Chicago Press and Tribune reported:

*"... when Mr Lincoln walked down from the platform, he was seized by the multitude and borne off on their shoulders, in the center of a crowd of 5,000 shouting Republicans, with a band of music in front"*

The Democratic Chicago Times claimed that when the debate was over Douglas's:

*"excoriation of Lincoln (had been so successful and)... so severe that the republicans hung their heads in shame"*

When the election was held in November 1858, neither Lincoln's nor Douglas's names were on the ballot papers, since it was the State Legislature that would choose the next Senator. The Republicans won the popular vote but the Democrats retained control of the legislature, thus ensuring Douglas would be elected.

Lincoln's reputation grew as a result of the reporting of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates and he received an increasing number of invitations to speak throughout the country – Ohio, Iowa, Indiana, Kentucky and then New York and the New England states. In February 1860 he spoke at Cooper Union, NY, to an enthusiastic audience of over 1500 people where he captivated his listeners with a clear statement of Republican principles and a convincing argument that slavery should be confined to the states/territories where it already was. The reaction to his Cooper's Union address brought demand for him to speak throughout New England with his conducting an exhausting tour of New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Connecticut where he repeated (and refined) the arguments of the Cooper's Union address. Now no longer just an obscure prairie lawyer, Lincoln's national profile was secure, making his candidacy for the presidency at least something that was being widely discussed. On May 10, 1860, the Illinois state Republicans accepted the resolution:

*“That Abraham Lincoln is the choice of the Republican party of Illinois for the Presidency and the delegates from this State are instructed to use all honorable means to secure his nomination at the Chicago Convention and to vote as a unit for him”*

Thus, when the Republican National Convention began in Chicago a week later, Lincoln was able to acknowledge that he had used his time well to increase the chances of his receiving the Republican nomination for president. He recognised, however, that he had only an outside chance of being nominated – Seward had a commanding lead and was followed, in turn, Chase and Bates. Each of his rivals had problems, however, in terms of political enemies working against them and the strategy Lincoln and his team devised was to give offence to no one and aim for his being the second choice to all delegations that had not made him their first choice. Thus, if the leading candidate could not “get over the line” the Convention might come to him as the alternative.

On May 16, 1860, the doors of the newly built convention hall –the Wigwam – (so-called because the Republican chiefs were to meet there) – opened its doors and thousands of ticket-holders streamed in to fill the centre seats or the more exclusive side galleries where men were allowed if accompanied by a lady. At noon, New York’s governor, Edwin Morgan, Chairman of the Republican National Committee commenced proceedings. The first two days of the Convention involved the resolution of credential battles and the adoption of an inclusive Party platform keyed to Northern interests. Whilst opposition to slavery continued to remain central to the Party’s platform, as it had been in 1856, the 1860 platform also called for a broader range of provisions designed to attract a larger population base, particularly in the fast-growing West. These included:

- A Homestead Act;
- A protective tariff;
- A railroad to the Pacific;
- Protection for naturalized citizens; and
- Government support for harbour and river improvements.

After considerable debate, the delegates rejected a motion requiring a two-thirds majority to secure the nomination and opted for a simple majority. This was seen to favour Seward, who already had nearly a majority of pledges coming into the convention. As business came to a close on the second day of the Convention, a move was made to proceed immediately to the presidential ballot, but when the convention secretary advised that the papers for tallying the votes were not yet prepared, the meeting was adjourned until 10am the next day. Many believe that if the votes had been cast that day, Seward would have won the nomination.

There were some in the Party that believed that even if Seward won the nomination he would have difficulty winning the election as he was regarded as too radical on slavery and too liberal on immigration to win the battleground states – Indiana, Illinois, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The question to be addressed was, therefore, could the opposition to Seward be unified under one man? Representatives of these states formed a committee of twelve to ascertain if a consensus could be reached on this question. By 10pm, 12 hours before the vote was to be taken, the Committee could not reach agreement and Seward’s nomination looked a certainty.

Thurlow Weed, Seward’s campaign manager, must have been aware of the growing opposition to Seward amongst the delegates from the conservative battleground states but did not change his strategy – before each delegation he simply asserted that Seward was the best man for the job. As Weed left each delegation, the journalist Horace Greeley<sup>5</sup> came in to tell the delegates that even if Seward were nominated, he would not win the election because as a sectional party, an election win would require carrying all of the Northern states but he could not win New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Indiana or Iowa. To confirm his assertion Greeley introduced key personnel from these states each of whom backed him up. Greeley had a long held but private grievance against

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<sup>5</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, Greeley had gained entrance to the Convention by representing Oregon as a proxy

Seward and it was here that he was to get his revenge. Greeley's claims were made more credible since most people believed that Seward and Greeley were friends. Delegates accepted Greeley's assertions as those of a friend who simply feared that Seward would not bring the Party the presidency. Interestingly, no one challenged Seward's ability or his credentials as a statesman within the Party. He was opposed simply on the grounds that he would damage the prospects of the Republican Party and hurt their candidates in local elections!

Seward was not the only one targeted at the late-night gatherings of delegates. Gustav Koerner, a leading German-American, had never forgiven Bates for supporting Fillmore's No-Nothing Party in 1856 and advised delegates that, if nominated, the German vote would not be for him.

Chase was having problems also, as Ohio was not united behind him since the many enemies he had made and failed to conciliate with over the years, would come back to haunt him at this critical time.

These were the situations for which Lincoln had long prepared. To achieve the goal of being everyone's second choice, Lincoln was careful not to criticize the other candidates – they didn't need to since Greeley et al had done the job very effectively for them! Each of Lincoln's team was given specific state delegations to win over and to quote Leonard Swett:

*"It all worked like a charm"*

Indiana was the first state to offer its pledges to Lincoln, gaining a decided advantage for Lincoln in the Committee of Twelve as he now had the pledges for two of the four battleground states. In the early hours of May 18, someone proposed that a straw vote be taken to ascertain which opposition candidate had the most strength. Since Lincoln already had the support of Indiana and Illinois, he emerged as this candidate. As the Committee of Twelve deliberated, it was then proposed that for the good of the Party after the first ballot, both Pennsylvania and New Jersey give up their "favourite sons" and transfer their votes to Lincoln. By adding the votes of Indiana, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, three of the critical battleground states to those of Illinois, the Lincoln team had achieved what many considered impossible – it had made possible the nomination of Abraham Lincoln!

Nevertheless, as the day of the ballot began, the Seward supporters were confident of victory – maybe a little too confident! In a celebratory march to the Convention Hall, led by a large band, they prolonged their march a little too long. On arriving at the Wigwam, they found that some of their number could not get in – Lincoln's followers had manufactured duplicate tickets and had entered the hall as soon as the doors opened. What had happened was that Lincoln's managers had recognised that part of the Seward plan was to carry the Convention by having the largest number of supporters present and had mustered friends and supporters to counter this, something that they did very effectively!

The nomination of each of the candidates was met with deafening applause from the respective camps, with Seward's and Lincoln's men leading this charge. The balloting began with a candidate needing 233 votes for victory. The New England states, which had been considered solidly for Seward, opted to give a number of their votes for Lincoln and, also, a few to Chase. As expected, New York gave all its 70 votes for Seward allowing him to jump to an early lead but, Virginia, considered safe for Seward, split its 22 votes between Seward and Lincoln. Chase had considered that his home state of Ohio would give him all their 46 votes. Instead, they gave him 34 votes with the remaining 12 votes going to Lincoln. The greatest surprise occurred with Indiana, however, which Bates considered was "his" territory; instead Lincoln gathered all their 26 votes and at the end of the first ballot the tally was:

Seward ...	173½
Lincoln ...	102
Chase ...	49
Bates ...	48

The Bates camp were disappointed to note that none of the pivotal states had supported Bates and the sought-after votes of Iowa, Kentucky, Minnesota and Ohio delegations had not been delivered. Also, the Chase team was acutely aware that the split within the Ohio delegation's votes was probably fatal. Lincoln had emerged as the clear-cut alternative candidate to Seward! Taken aback by the unexpected defections, nevertheless, Thurlow Weed still held out for a win for Seward on the second ballot. The second ballot revealed a further shift in favour of Lincoln where in the New England states he picked up 17 additional votes, while Delaware switched its 6 votes from Bates to Lincoln. The big surprise then came when Pennsylvania announced 44 votes for Lincoln bringing his total to 181, only 3½ behind Seward's new total of 184½. Both Bates and Chase lost ground on this second ballot, essentially removing them from contention. It was now between Seward and Lincoln!

Tension mounted as the third round of balloting began. Lincoln gained an additional 4 votes from Massachusetts, 4 from Pennsylvania and 15 votes from Ohio, with his total reaching 231½ only 1½ votes short of victory. Then a member of the Ohio delegation rose and announced a switch of 4 votes from Chase to Lincoln. A brief stillness came over those in the Wigwam –

### **Lincoln had won!**

The news of Lincoln's nomination was a shock to most of the country and, in particular, to the Eastern Republican establishment. The decision met with derision in the Democratic press in both the North and the South. The New York Herald ridiculed Lincoln's background saying:

*"The conduct of the republican party in this nomination is a remarkable indication of a small intellect growing smaller ... they take up a fourth rate lecturer, who cannot speak good grammar (sic) and whose speeches are illiterate compositions ... interlarded with coarse and clumsy jokes"*<sup>6</sup>

Not content to restrict their comment to Lincoln's intellect, some newspapers focused on his appearance:

*"Lincoln is the leanest, lankest, most ungainly mass of legs, arms and hatchet face ever strung on a single frame. He has most unwarrantably abused the privilege all politicians have of being ugly"*<sup>7</sup>

More violent attacks of a personal nature appeared in the Charlestown Mercury who asked:

*"After him, what decent white man would want to be President? ... Lincoln was the "beau ideal" of a relentless, dogged, free-soil border ruffian ..."*<sup>8</sup>

The influential Richmond Enquirer claimed that Lincoln was:

*"... an illiterate partizan (sic) ... possessed with only his inveterate hatred of slavery and his openly avowed predilections for negro equality"*<sup>9</sup>

The venom of these attacks reflected a growing disquiet and apprehension in the South and amongst Southern Democrats in particular.

As Lincoln began preparing for his election campaign his prospects had been considerably enhanced by a major split in the Democratic Party. Meeting in Charleston S.C., prior to the Republican Convention in Chicago, the Democratic Party, which by this time was the only political

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<sup>6</sup> Goodwin, Doris Kearns, Team of Rivals – The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln: New York, Simon and Schuster, p 257.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p 258

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p 258

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p 258

party with supporters in both the North and South, ended its national convention in chaos. A majority of delegates, those associated with Stephen Douglas, had presented a platform designed to “paper over” the issues of slavery. Unfortunately for these “moderate” Democrats, the time for compromise on slavery had passed and the moderate positions that had been accepted previously were rejected out-of-hand by the hardline Southern Democrat politicians. These radical politicians condemned all compromise and demanded:

*“... complete freedom to bring slaves into all territories and explicit congressional protection for those slaves”*

Furthermore, they dismissed the once widely accepted doctrine of popular sovereignty as “... an abandonment of Southern principle”. When the Convention approved the moderate platform proposed by Stephen Douglas, the representatives from Alabama walked out followed by the Mississippi delegation and then all of the other Southern state delegations. The remaining delegates were unable to secure the required two-thirds vote for any nominee forcing the deadlocked Charleston Convention to re-convene in Baltimore after the Republican Convention. Here, Douglas was to receive the Democratic presidential nomination that he had long sought, but it was too late to rebuild the shattered pieces of the last national party. Simply put, the positions of the Northern and Southern Democrats were irreconcilable, crushed by the same slavery issues that years earlier had destroyed the Whigs and Know-Nothings.

The Southern Democrats then re-convened and nominated John Breckenridge of Kentucky as their presidential candidate. Breckenridge held the firm view that constitutionally, slavery could not be excluded from any of the territories. To complicate matters further a so-called Constitutional Union Party entered the 1860 presidential race. Comprising old-line Whigs and remnant Know Nothings, they nominated John Bell of Tennessee and Edward Everett of Massachusetts on a platform that the Union could be held together if the slavery issues were ignored. A forlorn hope!

Lincoln was to bring the old powerbroker, Thurlow Weed, (Seward’s campaign manager) into his election campaign planning. It soon became obvious to these men that there was to be, in fact, two elections: the first in which Lincoln was pitted against Douglas and the other in the South where Breckenridge competed against Bell. A Lincoln victory required at least 152 Electoral College votes.<sup>10</sup> To achieve this majority Lincoln would need virtually all of the North, including those states that voted for the Democrat Buchanan in 1856.

In three of these “must win” states, Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania that bordered slave states, Douglas had strong support, particularly in their southern counties that were populated largely with settlers from the South. In these states, slavery issues were not their primary concern. In Pennsylvania, tariff protection was the dominant issue while in both Indiana and Ohio (as well as elsewhere in the north-west) free or cheap land was their primary concern. Certainly, the antislavery vote would go to the Republicans but it alone could not build a majority amongst these diverse constituencies.

Lincoln’s initial task in his election campaign was to conciliate and secure the active support of Chase, Seward and Bates thus ensuring a firm hold on the Republican Party. Chase was the first approached to speak on behalf of Lincoln initially in the form of “... a mere printed circular”. Although reluctant to cooperate, Lincoln sent him a personal note cleverly soothing his wounded ego and in the following weeks spoke at numerous Republican meetings in Ohio, Indiana and Michigan.

With the formation of the Constitutional Union Party it was vital that Lincoln had Bates’s support since the Party had many of Bates’s old Whig supporters and Know Nothings. Lincoln sent a

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<sup>10</sup> Anything less than this 152 Electoral College votes majority would throw the election of the President to the Congress and the Vice-President to the Southern dominated Senate. It was considered that the turbulent chamber of representatives might well prove unable to choose a candidate and in such circumstances, the Vice President (probably Breckenridge’s running mate, Joseph Lane) would then occupy the vacant presidential chair.

friend, Orville Browning, to visit Bates and Bates promised to write a public letter supporting Lincoln. True to his word, Bates provided a letter heaping lavish praise on Lincoln:

*"... I consider Lincoln a sound, safe, national man...(Lincoln had)...earned a high reputation for truth, courage, candor (sic) and ability so that, as a man, he is most trustworthy...he is more entitled to our esteem (than) some other men, his equals, who had far better opportunities and aids in early life"*

Later in the campaign, Bates was to write:

*"His character is marked by a happy mixture of amiability and courage; and while I expect him to be as mild as Fillmore, I equally expect him to be as firm as Jackson"*

Lincoln recognised the active support of Seward would be pivotal to the success of his campaign. Indeed, the 35 electoral votes from Seward's state of New York might well be the key to victory. Lincoln considered that it was not a good sign that when Seward had returned to New York after the Republican Convention to find his supporters "... disillusioned and dispirited by the prospect of any other candidate". Extremely disappointed at his defeat at the Chicago Convention, Seward initially contemplated immediate retirement from public life, but on reflection, considered that such a move would be seen as petulant and at the end of May returned to Washington to complete his term in the Senate. He received literally hundreds of requests to speak and, finally committed himself to an electioneering tour of nine states in late August/early September. It was noted that with Seward:

*"... about to take the platform and open the campaign for Lincoln ... was our first gleam of sunshine out of the depths of discouragement"*

While Seward made the grand tour, Lincoln remained in Springfield where he made no public speaking engagements. This strategy was consistent with established practice and, importantly, his judgment that any public statement would only damage his electoral prospects. He was working extremely hard behind the scenes, however, maintaining the unity of the coalition comprising the Republican Party whilst disrupting attempts of his opponents to unite on fusion tickets. He sent emissaries to his supporters to solve campaign problems and address disputes between individuals. In an indirect way he sought to clarify his position on important issues while still maintaining his strategic silence. His approach to this presidential campaign demonstrated clearly an outstanding political acumen!

In contrast to Lincoln's silence, Seward was the "public face" of the Party starting his tour in Michigan from where he went west to Wisconsin and Minnesota, south to Iowa and Kansas and east to Illinois and Ohio. En route to his meeting in Chicago, Seward's train stopped at Springfield where he met briefly with Lincoln. Both men appeared constrained possibly recognising that the result of the presidential nomination contest might be considered to be as much a matter of Seward's defeat rather than Lincoln's victory.

It was during this meeting that Lincoln demonstrated his political acumen when, in an attempt to reassure the Northern conservatives rather than conciliate with the South, he asked Seward at their brief meeting to include in his speech at Chicago, mention the problematic matter of the Republican Party's position regarding slavery, viz., abolishing slavery in the territories did not mean that they would interfere with slavery in the states where it already existed. Seward agreed. Although misunderstood at the time by Southerners and abolitionists alike and, to this day, by neo-Confederates, Lincoln not only consistently supported the abolition of slavery but developed a clear vision of how it might be achieved but in a more evolutionary, staged manner than radicals might have wanted.

In contrast to Lincoln, immediately after gaining the Democratic Party nomination, Stephen Douglas began barnstorming the country, defying custom to conduct what was to be America's first presidential candidate making a nation-wide electioneering tour. He was in Iowa in October

when he received the news of the results of the Republican wins in the state elections in Indiana and Pennsylvania, victories that went a long way to destroying his chances of winning the presidency. In what has been described as "... his finest hour", he is reputed to have said,

*"Mr Lincoln is the next President... We must try to save the Union. I will go South".*

During Douglas's non-stop weeks of campaigning throughout the Deep South, he faced hostile audiences at every meeting. No longer hoping to gain support for his candidacy, Douglas campaigned courageously for the survival of the Union, truly "his finest hour".

Although the victories in the October state elections had given momentum to the Republican Party's presidential campaign, it was not a "done deal". Because there were four candidates to split the vote, Lincoln would have to win New York to ensure their 35 Electoral College votes were secured. In this regard, however, New York posed a number of problems for the Republican Party:

- It was the home of large numbers of traditionally Democratic Irish immigrants who were unfriendly to the anti-slavery cause; and
- New York City contained an influential class of merchants and manufacturers who viewed Republicanism as a threat to their commercial relations with the South.

Lincoln left the organisation of New York in the capable hands of Thurlow Weed, essentially to prevent these groups of citizens joining with any disaffected Seward supporters to provide Douglas with a win in the state. In the end, the Democratic vote in New York City was not enough to counter the Republican vote throughout the rest of the state and Lincoln would gain their pivotal 35 College votes in the November 6 election. By midnight on Election Day, November 6, 1860, it was clear that Lincoln had won and would be the 16th President of the United States. The very next day, Wednesday, November 7, Lincoln began the task of assembling the Cabinet that would support his Administration. From the outset, he determined that the Cabinet would comprise the strongest men from all factions of the new Republican Party.



At the centre of his selections were his three rivals for the Republican nomination – William H Seward, Salmon P Chase and Edward Bates. Also, part of the team would be the former Democrats, Gideon Wells, Montgomery Blair and Norman Judd as well as William Drayton, a

former Whig. Despite considerable pressure, particularly from Seward and Weed, to be part of the selection process, Lincoln was determined to make the decisions of who was to comprise the Cabinet, himself. He was certainly willing to discuss options for appointments with key people, but the final decision was to be his alone.

Using his considerable powers of persuasion Lincoln was able to bring to the Cabinet a most impressive group of politicians. Not all his selections were good ones – Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania, who was to be Secretary for War in the early days of the War, turned out to be a “dud” and needed to be given the sinecure of Ambassador to Russia to enable the gruff but very able Edwin Stanton to fulfil the War Department duties throughout most of the War.

The second part of this paper seeks to examine Lincoln’s defining role of the President as Commander-in-Chief, which during his first term of office he defined in a way that had not been taken by any of his predecessors. Neither the Constitution nor established legislation at the time had defined the **powers** of the President as Commander-in-Chief. Alexander Hamilton, one of America’s “founding fathers” and the first US Secretary of the Treasury, (1789 – 1795) sought to clarify the situation to those who opposed the Constitution by stating that the Commander-in-Chief:

*“... would amount to nothing more than supreme command and direction of the military forces, as first General and Admiral”*

It should be noted that Hamilton’s phrase “...supreme command and direction”, whilst seemingly quite forceful, lacked specificity. Furthermore, the precedents created by Presidents James Madison in the War of 1812 and by James Polk in the Mexican War provided little guidance to Lincoln in the much greater conflict he faced with the combination of the most dangerous aspects of an internal war and war against another nation. Following the Mexican War, the US Supreme Court had ruled that the President as Commander-in-Chief was authorised to employ the country’s army and navy:

*“... in a manner that he may deem most effectual to harass and conquer and subdue the enemy”*

In this ruling, however, the Court did not define “most effectual” and appeared to limit the president’s powers by specifying that they must be confined to “purely military matters”.

A direct consequence of the vagueness of these definitions and precedents was Lincoln having to establish most of the role and powers of Commander-in-Chief for himself and, in so doing, he proved to be a more “hands-on” Commander-in-Chief than any of his predecessors.

Lincoln was on a steep “learning curve” being particularly conscious of the gap in military experience between himself and the Confederate President, Jefferson Davis. Lincoln’s experience was limited to that of a Militia Captain in the Blackhawk War of 1832, which, in his own words, he described later in a speech in his single term in Congress of how he:

*“...fought, bled and came away... (after)... charges among wild onions... and a good many struggles with the musketoes (sic)”.*

Davis, on the other hand, was a graduate of West Point, had fought with a Mississippi Regiment during the Mexican War and was U.S. Secretary for War from 1853 to 1857.<sup>11</sup> To redress this imbalance, Lincoln was known to have applied himself to a rigorous program to master the intricacies of military strategy in the same way he taught himself Euclidian geometry and later the practice of law. His Private Secretary, John Hay, was to write:

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<sup>11</sup> As an aside, it would have been much better for the Confederacy if Davis had concentrated getting the fledgling Confederate Government up and running rather than interfering with its military operations and seeking to be its general-in-chief rather than commander-in-chief.



“He read a large number of strategic works. He pored over the reports from various departments and districts of the field of war. He held long conferences with eminent generals and admirals and astonished them by the extent of his special knowledge and the keen intelligence of his questions.”

Some of the generals found themselves in the embarrassing situation of being “trumped” by this “self-taught amateur” who was their Commander-in-Chief. One can only speculate that the sound knowledge base of military strategy that Lincoln had developed was one reason why George McClellan refused to meet with his President when Lincoln called on him at his home one evening in 1862. Surely, Lincoln’s understanding of military strategy must have really upset the supreme egotist McClellan with his exhortations for action on McClellan’s part. Lincoln’s grasp of military strategy led one historian to declare, albeit incorrectly, that Lincoln was:

*“... a natural strategist, a better one than any of his generals”*

The fact remains, however, that Lincoln was not a “natural strategist”. He had to work hard to master the subject of military strategy, in the same way he had earlier worked hard to become a lawyer and his achievements as Commander-in-Chief were part of his on-the-job-training. Certainly, he made mistakes but he learnt from these and was able to achieve ultimate victory for the Union. In his wartime capacity as Commander-in-Chief, Lincoln may be considered to have performed or provided oversight to five functions, in diminishing order of personal involvement:

1. National Policy
2. National Strategy
3. Military Strategy
4. Operations, and
5. Tactics

Some of Lincoln’s senior officers did think the war was “something autonomous”, decrying the political intrusion into military matters. Henry Halleck, on his appointment as general-in-chief in August 1862, complained, albeit privately, about the political “string pulling” in military appointments, suggesting that if the “incompetent and corrupt politicians” were to:

*“... follow the example of their ancestors, enter a herd of swine, run down some steep bank and drown themselves in the sea, there would be some hope of saving the country”*

Lincoln, however, never ignored the political context in which the War was being fought and on which military strategy was built. His view was probably similar to that of the French politician of a later era who said:

***“The War was too important to be left to the generals.”***

Lincoln recognised that in a highly politicised and democratic society where the mobilization of the volunteer army was implemented through state governments, political considerations would inevitably affect the scope and timing of military strategy and even operations. As leader of the party that controlled Congress and most state governments, Lincoln, in his capacity of Commander-in-Chief, needed to continually juggle the complex interaction between policy, national strategy and military strategy. In this regard, the issue of slavery offers an excellent example of such interplay. In early 1861, the goal of preserving the Union united the population in the North, whereas the issue of slavery and emancipation divided them. In order to maximise support for the war effort, Lincoln, therefore, initially proclaimed that the War was being fought solely for the preservation of the Union with the national strategy and military strategy supporting this policy requiring the issue of slavery to be “left alone”. The slaves refused, however, to cooperate with this policy. The administration was confronted with the problem of what to do with the thousands of “contrabands”, slaves that came within Union lines. Furthermore, it became increasingly clear that slave labour sustained the Confederate economy and, importantly, their armies’ logistical support. Northern opinion moved or, more accurately, was moved to making the

War a war against slavery and, by 1862, national and military strategies emerged that targeted Confederate resources, including slavery, as part of the Union's arsenal. This culminated with the issue of the Emancipation Proclamation and the commitment of the Republican Party to abolish slavery. At this time, the policy of the War being for Union and freedom came into harmony with the national and military strategies of striking against the vital Confederate resource of slave labour. As McPherson in his recent book *"Tried by War – Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief"* notes:

*"Lincoln's skillful management of this contentious process was a crucial part of his war leadership"*

In both military strategy and operations, Lincoln initially deferred to the aging Winfield Scott, who had fought with distinction in both the War of 1812 and the Mexican War. With Winfield Scott's poor health and lack of energy, it was soon obvious that he could not run the war now facing the Union. The situation was confounded by the fact that Lincoln had some doubt that Winfield Scott, as a native Virginian, would be able to make some of the "hard" decisions or provide "fearless" advice required of the general-in-chief during the anticipated conflict with the Confederacy. Winfield Scott's loyalty was not in question, but rather his Virginian heritage was considered to have a potential for colouring his thinking on how the War might be fought in his native state of Virginia. Winfield Scott's immediate successor, George McClellan was even a greater disappointment and the succession of generals including Halleck, Buell, Pope, Burnside, Hooker and Rosecrans all failed to live up to their early expectations. Their shortcomings led Lincoln to become, in effect, general-in-Chief as well as commander-in-chief. He became involved, on occasion, in the operational planning, where he would offer astute suggestions to which, in hindsight, his generals should have paid more attention. He did not become directly involved in the tactics aspects of the War, although he was solely tempted to do so when Meade did not follow up the victory at Gettysburg by failing to immediately pursue Lee and attack his Army of Northern Virginia trapped with its back to the flooded Potomac River. Even when Grant was appointed as general-in-chief in March 1864, Lincoln continued to exercise a significant degree of oversight of military strategy, particularly in relation to the conflict in the Shenandoah Valley in the late summer of 1864.

The final part of this paper provides a "snapshot" of Lincoln's actions in the early days of the War that illustrate the contribution he made to the war effort as Commander-in-Chief.

From the time of his election as President in November 1860 Lincoln confronted issues of policy and strategy. The South Carolina legislature immediately called a convention to take the state out of the Union and within six weeks, six more state legislatures had voted to do the same thing. With each of these secessions, the state militias seized federal forts, arsenals and other federal property within their state and in February 1861 these seven states met in Montgomery, Alabama, to form a new nation – the Confederate States of America. Lame-duck President James Buchanan stated that secession was unconstitutional but did nothing about the situation. The eight upper-South and border slave states threatened also to secede if the Federal Government tried to "coerce" the seceded states.

Although he had no power before he took office in March 1861, Lincoln set about exploring his options for when he legally became Commander-in-Chief on March 4, 1861. Lincoln insisted that:

*"... the right of a State is not an open or debatable question ... it is the duty of the President to execute the laws and maintain the existing Government ... He cannot entertain any proposition for dissolution or dismemberment"*

Lincoln never changed his position from these principles although the more difficult issue was how they might be put into practice. In December 1860, Lincoln sent word indirectly to Winfield Scott to be prepared to re-take the forts and other installations seized by the State militias. There emerged a stalemate on whether to withdraw from Southern installations still held by government forces or try to re-take those forts already seized by the militias. On taking office, Lincoln's Cabinet led by Seward was in favour of the withdrawal option for Fort Sumter with only the Postmaster, Montgomery Blair, opposing an evacuation. The evacuation option was particularly

distasteful to Lincoln but he was concerned that any action to reinforce Fort Sumter would drive Upper South and the Border States out of the Union to join the Confederate banner. He was said to have explored an option of a significant quid pro quo where a withdrawal from Sumter would be approved if the Virginian convention that was meeting in Richmond, were to dissolve without seceding. If there were such a proposal, the delegates who met with Lincoln did not have the authority to agree to it and the deal fell through.

Lincoln pursued, also, a plan to re-provision Fort Sumter, which went astray when the most powerful warship (USS Powhatan) intended to support the re-provisioning was tasked to reinforce Fort Pickens. Lincoln had signed off on the orders to this effect without reading them carefully, (he was distracted with being preoccupied with patronage appointments as well as the Sumter problem), and by the time the mistake was discovered. it was too late to recall the Powhatan. This error was part of Lincoln's steep path to become an effective Commander-in-Chief and one from which he learned well.

On the same day as the Powhatan muddle occurred, (April 1) Lincoln asserted his authority as Commander-in-Chief over Winfield Scott by bringing him "into the loop" for the re-provisioning of Pickens and Sumter. The plan to implement the relief of these forts had changed significantly since its original conception by Gustavus Fox (Montgomery Blair's brother-in-law). The original plan was for there to be a full-scale attempt to reinforce the Forts, backed by warships that would shoot their way into Charleston Bay. Lincoln reasoned that this would make out the North as the aggressor, drive the uncommitted States into the Confederacy with Lincoln seen to have started the war. He then conceived a plan to split the issue of reinforcement with that of re-provision and showed his hand by advising the South Carolina governor of his intentions (on April 6) so that if the Confederates were to open fire on the unarmed tugs carrying the provisions, they would be seen to have started the war. Alternatively, if the Confederates allowed the boats to land with the provisions, the uneasy status quo that had existed for the previous two months would be allowed to continue.

### **Who said Lincoln was not cunning – the consummate politician!**

It was to become a stand-off situation with whoever blinked first being the loser! On April 8, the Confederate Secretary of War advised General Beauregard, the commander of Confederate forces in Charleston, that:

*"... under no circumstances are you to allow provisions to be sent to Fort Sumter"*

This was followed up by a telegram two days later saying:

*"You will at once demand its evacuation and if this is refused proceed ... to reduce it"*

After a further two days, Confederate guns opened fire on Fort Sumter and this shot was heard around the world. Lincoln could now claim with some justification that the onus for starting the War lay with the Confederates and while this did not immediately force the uncommitted Border States into the Confederacy, Lincoln's call for 75,000 men<sup>12</sup> from State militias into federal service for 90 days<sup>13</sup> certainly did! Meeting with three representatives of the Virginia convention that had previously rejected secession, but remained in session "awaiting events", Lincoln spoke to them coldly:

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<sup>12</sup> This proclamation which had been drafted by Lincoln was approved by the Cabinet in an emergency Sunday meeting on April 14, 1861

<sup>13</sup> The 90 days for militia to be brought into federal service was the maximum that was allowed under the 1795 Militia Act, which was still operative at that time.

*“... now that actual war against the government” ... had commenced, he intended not only to ... “possess, occupy and hold ...” national property in the Confederate states, but also “... if I can, the places which have been seized before the Government was devolved upon me”*

As McPherson notes:

*“Here was the beginning of a military strategy consistent with Lincoln’s policy of rejecting the legitimacy of secession and continuing to regard the Confederate states as part of the United States”*

Lincoln’s effort in placing the onus on the South for starting the war had certainly paid off with the attack on Fort Sumter uniting the previously divided Northern peoples more than ever they would be again.

Throughout the War Lincoln, the politician was able to manage his Cabinet and, as Commander-in-Chief, monitor the progress of the War and the performance of his generals to finally achieve victory. What a pity it was that he was not able to enjoy the fruits of his labours!

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