

Chapter Twenty-four

Sitzkrieg

The Phony War (August 1861-January 1862)

The ignominious defeat at Bull Run disheartened the North and undermined support for the Lincoln administration. Lyman Trumbull feared that “the men at the head of affairs do not realize our condition & are not equal to the occasion.” The cabinet, he thought, suffered from “a lack of affirmative, positive action & business talent.” Moreover, Trumbull told a fellow senator, the president, “though a most excellent & honest man, lacks these qualities.”¹ In a public letter, the abolitionist Gerrit Smith scolded Lincoln for not having ended the war in a matter of weeks; it was “owing to the errors of yourself and your advisers that it is not.”² More harshly, an upstate New York attorney called Cameron “a rascal,” Welles an “imbecile,” Seward a blunderer, and concluded that “Lincoln, it is a general impression with us, is a failure.”³ A former congressman from Pennsylvania urged that Scott replace Cameron and Edward Everett take over Seward’s duties.⁴

¹ Lyman Trumbull to James R. Doolittle, Lakeside, Connecticut, 31 August 1861, typescript, Doolittle Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

² Public letter, Peterboro, 31 August, in the National Antislavery Standard (New York), 14 September 1861.

³ E. Peshine Smith to Henry C. Carey, Rochester, 17 August 1860, Henry C. Carey Papers in the Edward Carey Gardiner Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁴ Joseph R. Ingersoll to Robert C. Winthrop, Philadelphia, 14 October 1861, Winthrop Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

Manton Marble, an editor of the New York World, doubted that the war could be waged successfully because of the “waning confidence of the people in the energy of Lincoln or the honesty of his cabinet or their ability to master the crisis & organize victory.” Marble decried “the lack of all that splendid boldness which [Andrew] Jackson would have shown.”⁵ Another influential journalist spoke for many when he confided to a colleague, “I am feeling bad – very bad. The Manassas disaster broke me down in a measure, but I could get over this – could understand it, and extract something good from it, were it not that I am wanting in Confidence in the Administration,” which “either does not comprehend the magnitude of this rebellion; or they don’t know, or don’t want to learn, how to put it down.” It could not “be suppressed by kindness; that’s clear – and yet Mr Lincoln seems to think it can.” The Republican party, he lamented, “has gone up – and I only hope that our country, through the imbecility or cowardice, or treachery of her rulers, may not follow. We want a firm and able Administration, with a great and determined National policy, vigorously executed.” He feared that another Bull Run “blunder and all would be lost. The people now more than half disgusted would then be wholly demoralized.”⁶

Lincoln shared that fear. In early December, Benjamin Brown French, the commissioner of public buildings, asked him why the army had made no serious advance since July. The president replied: “If I were sure of victory we would have one at once, but we cannot stand a defeat, & we must be certain of victory before we strike.”⁷ In

⁵ Manton Marble to Martin B. Anderson, New York, 1 August 1861, Martin B. Anderson Papers, University of Rochester.

⁶ Richard Smith to Joseph H. Barrett, Cincinnati, 7 August 1861, Lincoln Miscellaneous Collection, University of Chicago.

⁷ Benjamin Brown French to his son Frank, Washington, 8 December 1861, French Family Papers, Library of Congress.

September, when a Philadelphian expressed the hope that troops would soon march against Richmond and stated “that those who had subscribed money, &c., had a right to look for some such demonstration,” Lincoln quietly gazed at him and asked: “Will you tell us the route to take to Richmond? We tried it at Manassas, and found it like Jordan.”⁸

Lincoln derived some solace from the adjournment of Congress. John Russell Young, writing in the Philadelphia Press (widely regarded as an administration organ) may have expressed the president’s sentiments when he opined that Congress “adjourned just in time, for had it continued its sessions a week or two longer, we do not know in what embarrassing position it might have left the Administration and the country.”⁹

McCLELLAN TO THE RESCUE?

Equally convinced that no attack should be made until victory seemed certain was the commander Lincoln had placed in charge of the army, George B. McClellan. Known as the Young Napoleon, though he lacked his namesake’s aggressive boldness, he hesitated to commit his forces, which he had splendidly trained and equipped. For six months the Civil War resembled what World War II in Europe became during the fall and winter of 1939-1940: a sitzkrieg (sitting war) instead of a blitzkrieg (lightning war.) While the North grew exasperated with McClellan, the president bore with the general’s timidity month and month after month. Lincoln’s patience was legendary, but, as McClellan would eventually discover, finite.

From August 1861 to March 1862, the press regularly reported: “All quiet on the Potomac.” At first, it was a simple statement of fact; eventually it came to express derision for McClellan’s inactivity. In September, Lincoln asked the telegraph operator at

⁸ Washington correspondence by John W. Forney, 1 September, Philadelphia Press, 12 September 1861.

⁹ Washington correspondence by John Russell Young, 6 August, Philadelphia Press, 10 August 1861.

the war department, “what news?” When the reply came: “Good news, because none,” the president remarked: “Ah! my young friend, that rule don’t always hold good, for a fisherman don’t consider it good luck when he can’t get a bite.”¹⁰ McClellan was getting no bites.

The vain, arrogant, thirty-four-year-old McClellan shared the Northern public’s view that he was a savior.¹¹ Shortly after arriving in Washington, he told his wife: “I find myself in a new & strange position here – Presdt, Cabinet, Genl Scott & all deferring to me – by some strange operation of magic I seem to have become the power of the land. I almost think that were I to win some small success now I could become Dictator or anything else that might please me – but nothing of that kind would please me – therefore I won’t be Dictator. Admirable self denial!”¹² After visiting the Senate, where he felt “quite overwhelmed” with congratulations on every hand, he mused: “All tell me that I am held responsible for the fate of the Nation & that all its resources shall be placed at my disposal. It is an immense task that I have on my hands, but I believe I can accomplish it.” Boastfully he reported that in Richmond it was said “that there was only one man they feared & that was McClellan.”¹³ With unconscious irony he insisted that “I am not spoiled by my unexpected & new position – I feel sure that God will give me the

¹⁰ William B. Wilson, A Few Acts and Actors in the Tragedy of the Civil War in the United States (Philadelphia: self-published, 1892), 111.

¹¹ On McClellan historiography, see Stephen W. Sears, “Little Mac and the Historians” in Sears, Controversies and Commanders: Dispatches from the Army of the Potomac (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 1-26. For an overview of McClellan’s relations with Lincoln, see Joseph T. Glatthaar, Partners in Command: The Relationships Between Leaders in the Civil War (New York: Free Press, 1994), 51-93. The best biography of McClellan is Stephen W. Sears, George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1988).

¹² Stephen W. Sears, ed., The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan: Selected Correspondence, 1860-1865 (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1989), 70.

¹³ McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, Washington, 30 July 1861, Sears, ed., Papers of McClellan, 71.

strength & wisdom to preserve this great nation. . . I feel that God has placed a great work in my hands.”¹⁴

The general’s cockiness was understandable, for he had been a high-achieving wunderkind, finishing second in the class of 1846 at West Point, serving creditably in the Mexican War, leading a prestigious commission to observe the Crimean War, inventing a saddle that became standard cavalry issue, becoming the president of a railroad after quitting the service in 1857, receiving command of Ohio’s militia shortly after the fall of Sumter, attaining the rank of major general in the regular army (second only to Winfield Scott) in May 1861, and leading the only Union forces which won victories in the early months of the Civil War. Failure was unknown to the Young Napoleon, which was unfortunate, for he could have profited from that painful experience as Lincoln, U. S. Grant, and other successful leaders in the war had done; instead, his head swelled all too easily, creating a strange amalgam of timidity and over-confidence.¹⁵ His chest also tended to swell, especially when issuing proclamations to his troops like one dated May 25: “Soldiers! I have heard that there was danger here. I have come to place myself at your head and to share it with you.”¹⁶

While Lincoln and the North rejoiced at the triumph of Union arms in western Virginia, in fact McClellan had exhibited qualities during that campaign that boded ill. He ungenerously took credit due others, unfairly chastised subordinates, showed indecisiveness at key points, failed to follow up on his victories, made repeated promises that he did not honor, was tardy and irresolute on the battlefield, showed a lack of

¹⁴ McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, Washington, 9 August 1861, ibid., 82.

¹⁵ Allan Nevins, The War for the Union (4 vols.; New York, Scribner, 1959-71), 1:269-70.

¹⁶ Kenneth P. Williams, Lincoln Finds a General: A Military Study of the Civil War (5 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1949-59), 1:106.

initiative, and tended to whine unjustly about a lack of support. McClellan had devised an admirable plan but its success owed far more to his brigadier generals, most notably William S. Rosecrans, than to himself.¹⁷ These shortcomings were overlooked partly because his forces won and partly because he was a gifted self-promoter, writing vainglorious dispatches that exaggerated his accomplishments.

On August 2, McClellan complied with the president's request by submitting what he called "a carefully considered plan for conducting the war on a large scale" which would "crush the rebellion at one blow." With 273,000 troops in his own army and an unspecified number in others, he proposed to take Richmond (which had become the Confederate capital on May 21), New Orleans, Charleston, Savannah, Montgomery, Pensacola, and Mobile and thus "crush out this rebellion in its very heart."¹⁸ To his wife he predicted that he would "carry this thing on 'En grand' & crush the rebels in one campaign – I flatter myself that Beauregard has gained his last victory."¹⁹ In its impracticality, this scheme resembled the "Kanawha plan" that Little Mac had months earlier submitted to General Scott, who rightly dismissed it as unfeasible.²⁰ (That scheme envisioned 80,000 men marching from Ohio to Richmond, across two mountain ranges, with no rail or water lines to feed and supply such a force.)

¹⁷ Williams, Lincoln Finds a General, 1:105-12.

¹⁸ McClellan to Lincoln, Washington, 2 August 1861, Sears, ed., Papers of McClellan, 71-75.

¹⁹ McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, Washington, 2 August 1861, ibid., 75.

²⁰ Charles Winslow Elliott, Winfield Scott: The Soldier and the Man (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 721-22; Scott's comments, dated 2 May 1861 and addressed to Lincoln, on McClellan's letter to Scott, Columbus, Ohio, 27 April 1861, Chase Papers, Library of Congress; Ethan A. Rafuse, "Impractical? Unforgivable? Another Look at George B. McClellan's First Strategic Plan," Ohio History 110 (2001): 153-64.

If McClellan showed weakness as a strategist, he proved an exceptionally able organizer and administrator.²¹ In the late summer and throughout the fall he industriously drilled, trained, supervised, and inspired the troops under his command, replacing unfit officers, and thus creating a disciplined, well-equipped army.²² He renamed his force, which had been called the Division of the Potomac, the Army of the Potomac (which included not only the Division of the Potomac but also the troops in the District of Columbia and those which Patterson had commanded in the Shenandoah Valley). His soldiers loved him, for he seemed to care deeply about their well-being, even if he did not live among them in camp but rather in a comfortable house near the Executive Mansion. His martial bearing and air of self-possession inspired respect. Henry W. Bellows of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, which was dedicated to promoting the welfare of soldiers, said in September that there “is an indefinable air of success about him and something of the ‘man of destiny.’” One of his brigadiers in the western Virginia campaign wrote that McClellan was personally “very charming” and that “his manner of doing business impressed every one with the belief that he knew what he was about.”²³

McClellan enjoyed showing off his troops at reviews, which Lincoln gladly attended, even when the temperature in Washington reached 120°, causing many troops to fall out.²⁴ At one review, as the multi-national Thirty-ninth New York regiment, known as the “Garibaldi Guards,” passed by the platform on which the president and other dignitaries stood, each soldier removed from his hatband a small bouquet or a sprig

²¹ Sears, Controversies and Commanders, 14.

²² He inherited 51,000 troops from McDowell. By mid-September, he had 122,000. Sears, McClellan, 110.

²³ Ibid., 111, 70.

²⁴ Washington correspondence, 8 August, New York Times, 9 August 1861. For an account of a review witnessed by Lincoln, see Washington correspondence, 21 August, New York Times, 22 August 1861.

of evergreen which they tossed toward Lincoln, creating “a perfect shower of leaves and flowers.” Nicolay reported that this gesture “was unexpected and therefore strikingly novel and poetical.”²⁵ Another observer of this event, Samuel F. Du Pont, wrote his wife that his initial impression of the president was “that he was the ugliest man I had ever seen, for one looking so young. This wore off and he has a certain pose and air which are not unpleasant – if he had lived in the East, he might have been graceful.”²⁶ Some soldiers complained that Lincoln’s demeanor at reviews was too informal, that he talked with colleagues instead of paying full attention to the passing troops.²⁷

The president often visited army camps ringing the capital. (Sometimes the First Lady accompanied him. According to one report, she failed to receive the sort of attention “by the officers which courtesy should dictate toward the wife of the President.”)²⁸ On September 10, Lincoln and McClellan toured fortifications and reviewed George A. McCall’s division, whose ranks cheered the general heartily. “You have no idea how the men brighten up now, when I go among them,” McClellan told his wife. “I can see every eye glisten. Yesterday they nearly pulled me to pieces in one regt. You never heard such yelling. I did not think the Presdt liked it much.”²⁹ (Such enthusiasm was not always spontaneous; General William F. Smith ordered his men to hurrah whenever they saw the Young Napoleon.) On November 20, at what Nicolay

²⁵ Nicolay to Theresia Bates, Washington, 7 July 1861, in Michael Burlingame, ed., With Lincoln in the White House: Letters, Memoranda, and Other Writings of John G. Nicolay, 1860-1865 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 47; Washington correspondence, 5 July, New York Tribune, 6 July 1861.

²⁶ John D. Hayes, ed., Samuel Francis Du Pont: A Selection from His Civil War Letters (3 vols.; Ithaca: Published for the Eleutherian Mills Historical Library by the Cornell University Press, 1969), 1:94.

²⁷ Robert Colby to Lincoln, New York, 18 May 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁸ Washington correspondence by Vidette, 16 November, New York Commercial Advertiser, 29 November 1861.

²⁹ Sears, ed., Papers of McClellan, 98.

called “the largest and most magnificent military review ever held on this continent,” Lincoln and McClellan galloped for two hours inspecting 50,000 men, passing before and behind each regiment on the plain between Munson’s Hill and Bailey’s Cross Roads. Nicolay, who was among the entourage following the two leaders, reported that Lincoln “rode erect and firm in his saddle as a practical trooper – he is more graceful in his saddle than anywhere else I have seen him.”³⁰ A journalist concurred, noting that the “President looked well in the saddle – much better than he ever looked on any other public occasion. He is an excellent horseman, and grace, impossible as it may seem, becomes a Lincolnian attribute when the executive legs are spurred and stirrured.”³¹ One of McClellan’s staff officers was less complimentary, noting that as the president rode along holding his hat in one hand, he resembled a blind beggar. A corporal saw Lincoln with “one hand [a]hold of the bridle, the other convulsively clutched in the mane of his horse which never relaxed its hold except for a moment to crowd his hat further down over his eyes. His long legs were well clasped around the body of his horse, his hair & coat tails horizontal. He looked as though he was determined to go through it if it killed him but would be most almighty glad when it was over.”³²

A journalist who observed Lincoln shake hands with members of a New York regiment reported: “I have seen nearly all of our great men, from Jackson down, go through the ‘pump-handle movement,’ but there certainly never was a man who could do it with the celerity and abandon of President Lincoln. He goes it with both hands, and

³⁰ Nicolay, memorandum, 20 November 1861; Nicolay to Theresia Bates, Washington, 21 November 1861, in Burlingame, ed., With Lincoln in the White House, 61-63.

³¹ Washington correspondence, 21 November, New York World, 23 November 1861.

³² Stephen W. Sears, ed., For Country, Cause & Leader: The Civil War Journal of Charles B. Haydon (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1993), 130 (entry for 21 November 1861).

hand over hand, very much as a sailor would climb a rope. What is to the satisfaction of all is, that he gives a good honest, hearty shake, as if he meant it.”³³ In addition, Lincoln shook hands with troops in hospitals, where his “kind words and cordial manner cheered many a wounded and sick soldier.”³⁴

Rather than fighting the nearby Confederates, Little Mac defiantly campaigned against General Scott, whom he wished to supplant as general-in-chief of the army. This came as a shock to Old Fuss and Feathers, for McClellan had showered him with praise in July: “All that I know of war I have learned from you, and in all that I have done I have endeavored to conform to your manner of conducting a campaign, as I understand the history of your achievements. It is my ambition to merit your praise and never to merit your censure.”³⁵ (In fact, McClellan’s strategy and tactics in the Civil War resembled those he had observed Scott employ during the Mexican War.)³⁶ Three weeks later, McClellan wrote Scott a very different letter, haughtily expressing alarm that the 100,000 Confederate troops facing them (a gross overestimate) placed Washington in “imminent danger” and urging that his own command be enlarged.³⁷ After consulting

³³ Washington correspondence, 16 June, New York Times, 18 June 1861.

³⁴ Washington correspondence, 1 August, New York Times, 2 August 1861.

³⁵ McClellan to Scott, Washington, 18 July 1861, Sears, ed., Papers of McClellan, 60.

³⁶ Timothy D. Johnson, Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 229-37.

³⁷ McClellan to Scott, Washington, 8 August 1861, Sears, ed., Papers of McClellan, 79-80: “Information from various sources reaching me to day, through spies, letters and telegrams, confirm my impressions, derived from previous advices, that the enemy intend attacking our positions on the other side of the river as well as to cross the Potomac North of us. I have also to day received a telegram from a reliable agent just from Knoxville Tenn, that large reinforcements are still passing through there to Richmond. I am induced to believe that the enemy has at least one hundred thousand men in front of us; Were I in Beauregard’s place, with that force at my disposal, I would attack the positions on the other side of the Potomac, and at the same time cross the river above this city, in force. I feel confident that our present army in this vicinity is entirely insufficient for the emergency; and it is deficient in all the arms of service – Infantry – Artillery and cavalry. I therefore respectfully & most earnestly Urge that the Garrisons of all places in our rear be reduced at once to the minimum absolutely necessary to hold them, and that all the troops thus made available be forthwith forwarded to this City; that every company of regular artillery within reach be

with Seward that same day, McClellan wrote his wife: “How does he think that I can save this country when stopped by Genl Scott – I do not know whether Scott is a dotard or a traitor! I can’t tell which. He cannot or will not comprehend the condition in which we are placed & is entirely unequal to the emergency. If he cannot be taken out of my path I will not retain my position, but will resign & let the adm[instratio]n take care of itself.” Scott “understands nothing, appreciates nothing & is ever in my way.”³⁸ Ironically he complained that Scott was “inaction & the defensive.”³⁹

Scott, understandably offended at McClellan’s presumptuous tone, denied that the capital was in danger and, feeling infirm and undermined by Little Mac, asked to be retired. The president tried to smooth things over by persuading Little Mac to withdraw his letter and asking the General in Chief to retract his.⁴⁰ Scott, however, refused, explaining that “it would be against the dignity of my years, to be filing daily complaints against an ambitious junior” who ignored him, defied him, and dealt with cabinet members without consulting him.⁴¹ (By communicating directly with McClellan, Lincoln and Cameron had inadvertently helped undermine Scott’s authority. Cameron, under

immediately ordered here, to be mounted; that every possible means be used to expedite the forwarding of New regiments of volunteers to this capital without one hour’s delay. I Urge that nothing be left undone to bring up our force for the defence of this city to 100,000, men, before attending to any other point. I advise that at least 8 or 10 good Ohio & Indiana Regmts may be telegraphed for from Western Va.; their places to be filled at once by the New troops from the same states, who will be at least reliable to fight behind the intrenchments which have been constructed there. The vital importance of rendering Washington at once perfectly secure and its imminent danger impel me to Urge these requests with the utmost earnestness, and that not an hour be lost in carrying them into execution. A sense of duty which I can not resist, compels me to state that in my opinion military necessity demands that the Department of N. Eastern Va, Washington, the Shenandoah Pennsylvania including Baltimore & the one including Fort Monroe should be merged into one Department, under the immediate control of the Commander of the main army of operations, & which should be known & designated as such.”

³⁸ McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, Washington, 8 August 1861, Sears, ed., Papers of McClellan, 81.

³⁹ McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, Washington, 13 October 1861, ibid., 107.

⁴⁰ McClellan to Lincoln, Washington, 10 August 1861, ibid., 82-83.

⁴¹ Scott to Cameron, Washington, 12 August 1861, O.R., I, 11, 3:6.

heavy criticism for inefficiency and ineptitude, backed McClellan's attempt to oust Scott.)⁴² Scott did not, however, insist that his resignation be accepted.

Try as he may, Lincoln was unable to stop the feuding between the hypersensitive general-in-chief and his contemptuous subordinate; they continued to squabble for the next three months. Little Mac ignored Scott's requests for information about his command, bypassed him in communicating with the administration, and flouted his chief's orders. On September 27, an ugly flare-up occurred in Lincoln's presence. At Scott's office, the president, Welles, Cameron, Seward, and McClellan met to discuss the military situation. When no one else seemed to know how many Union troops were in and around the capital, Seward offered an exact count, much to the chagrin of Scott, who indignantly asked: "Am I, Mr. President, to apply to the Secretary of State of the necessary military information to discharge my duties?" As they left, the general-in-chief confronted the Young Napoleon, saying: "When I proposed that you should come here to aid, not supersede, me, you had my friendship and confidence. You still have my confidence."⁴³ Lincoln "kindly interposed & said he could not afford to permit them to disagree."⁴⁴ Little Mac boasted to his wife: "I kept cool, looked him [Scott] square in the face, & rather think I got the advantage of him. . . . I said nothing, merely looked at him, & bowed assent."⁴⁵ The president explained that in managing his generals, "he tried to

⁴² George Gibbs to John Austin Stevens, Washington, 21 September 1861, Stevens Papers, New-York Historical Society.

⁴³ Howard K. Beale and Alan W. Brownsword, eds., Diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy under Lincoln and Johnson (3 vols.; New York: W.W. Norton, 1960), 1:242 (entry for 25 February 1863).

⁴⁴ Gideon Welles, undated typed memo, Welles Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

⁴⁵ McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, Washington, 27 September 1861, Sears, ed., Papers of McClellan, 103-4.

cultivate ‘good temper’” and “not to let any of them get mad with him, nor gain much by getting mad with each other.”⁴⁶

Later that month, three Radical Republican senators – Benjamin F. Wade of Ohio, Zachariah Chandler of Michigan, and Lyman Trumbull of Illinois – impatient with the army’s failure to move, urged Little Mac to advance on the enemy. He replied that he could do nothing as long as Scott remained in power. Chandler was “greatly dissatisfied” with McClellan, who seemed “to be devoting himself to parades” rather than “cleaning the country of Rebels.”⁴⁷ The president warned McClellan that, ill-informed though they might be, those senators and their constituents could not be ignored. “I have a notion to go out with you and stand or fall with the battle,” Lincoln mused.⁴⁸

Those three senators (deemed “the Jacobin club” by John Hay) also implored Lincoln to remove Scott.⁴⁹ In fact, the president on October 18 had read to the cabinet the draft of a “delicate and handsomely written” letter accepting Scott’s resignation.⁵⁰ The aged general had become too ill and was too unfamiliar with the vast scope of such a war to be effective.⁵¹ As a lieutenant colonel put it, “Scott has no more idea of the command

⁴⁶ Edward Everett journal, entry for 25 September 1862, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁴⁷ Chandler to his wife, Washington, 27 October 1861, and St. Louis, 12 October 1861, Chandler Papers, Library of Congress.

⁴⁸ Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettliger, eds., Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 29 (entry for 26 October 1861).

⁴⁹ Hans L. Trefousse, The Radical Republicans: Lincoln's Vanguard for Racial Justice (New York: Knopf, 1969), 179-81; Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 28 (entry for 26 October 1861), 28.

⁵⁰ Howard K. Beale, ed., The Diary of Edward Bates, 1859-1866 (Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1930, vol. 4; Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1933), 196-97 (entry for 18 October 1861).

⁵¹ Russel H. Beatie, The Army of the Potomac (2 vols.; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2002), 2:239-40, 263-66.

of 300,000 men than I have. He has no experience to aid him in such a command, he is too old to learn.”⁵²

Two weeks later the general-in-chief once again asked that he be placed on the retired list. On November 1, Lincoln agreed and, along with the cabinet, paid a visit to Scott, who was too weak to sit up. As the general lay on his couch, the president read him a statement: “The American people will hear with sadness and deep emotion that General Scott has withdrawn from the active control of the army, while the President and a unanimous Cabinet express their own and the nation's sympathy in his personal affliction and their profound sense of the important public services rendered by him to his country during his long and brilliant career, among which will ever be gratefully distinguished his faithful devotion to the Constitution, the Union, and the Flag, when assailed by parricidal rebellion.” Lincoln assured the general that his staff would be well taken care of.⁵³ The aged hero of Lundy’s Lane wept as he listened to the president’s words, replied graciously “from the depths of his heart,” and shook hands with his visitors as he bade them a sad farewell.⁵⁴ Upon emerging from the room, Lincoln too had tears in his eyes.⁵⁵

That evening, the president called on McClellan, who rejoiced in his triumph over Scott. Old Fuss and Feathers had magnanimously recommended Little Mac as his successor.⁵⁶ (Among others, Lincoln passed over John E. Wool, second-ranking officer

⁵² William Dwight to his mother, 31 July 1861, Dwight Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, in Beatie, Army of the Potomac, 2:239.

⁵³ Order dated 1 November 1861, Roy P. Basler et al., eds., Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln (8 vols. plus index; New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953-55), 5:10-11.

⁵⁴ Washington correspondence, 1 November, New York Herald, 2 November 1861; Beale, ed., Bates Diary, 199 (entry for 1 November 1861).

⁵⁵ Washington correspondence, 1 November, New York Tribune, 2 November 1861.

⁵⁶ Lincoln told this to Edward Everett on 25 September 1862. Everett journal, Massachusetts Historical Society (entry for 25 September 1862).

behind Scott. When Wool threatened to resign, congressmen from his native New York dissuaded him.)⁵⁷ After hearing Little Mac read his order regarding Scott's retirement, the president said: "I should be perfectly satisfied if I thought that this vast increase of responsibility would not embarrass you."

"It is a great relief, sir. I feel as if several tons were taken from my shoulders today. I am now in contact with you, and the Secretary. I am not embarrassed by intervention."

"Draw on me for all the sense I have, and all the information. In addition to your present command, the supreme command of the army will entail a vast labor upon you."

"I can do it all," McClellan replied quietly.⁵⁸

Around that same time, Little Mac told the president: "I think we shall succeed entirely if our friends will be patient, and not hurry us."

"I promise you, you shall have your own way," Lincoln said.⁵⁹

With this change in high command, the impatient North expected action. Angry at the army's inertia, several senators, including Trumbull, Wade, and Chandler -- as well as other eminent men -- called on Lincoln and "kindled a brisk fire around his crazy and spavined old legs." They wanted to know who was responsible for the army's failure to move: "Who was to face the angry people and say 'I did it.'" The president "assured them that now and henceforth McClellan should be in full command [of] the Army of the

⁵⁷ Wool to his wife Sarah, Fort Monroe, 4 October 1861, Wool Papers, New York State Library; Harwood P. Hinton, "The Military Career of John Ellis Wool, 1812-1863" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1960), 396.

⁵⁸ Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 30 (entry for [November 1861]).

⁵⁹ Washington correspondence by John Hay, 26 October, Missouri Republican (St. Louis), 31 October 1861, in Michael Burlingame, ed., Lincoln's Journalist: John Hay's Anonymous Writings for the Press, 1860-1864 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), 126; Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 25 (entry for 10 October 1861).

Potomac [which] is to act under his orders, he [is] to be responsible for [an] advance, and to be actually unfettered.”⁶⁰ Trumbull warned the president “that if the federal army did not achieve a decided success before winter set in, it would be very difficult not only to raise a fresh loan in the money market, but to get Congress to authorize a new loan.”⁶¹ Wade expressed doubt that “the people of the northern states care to pay forty millions a month simply to retain Maryland in the Union, for that seems to be about all the government is doing, or attempting to do.” He cautioned “that Congress would not allow the Army of the Potomac to winter” in Washington and declared: “Something, Mr. President, must be done. War must be made on the secessionists, or we will make war on the Administration.”⁶²

Back in Illinois, William H. Herndon wondered what his law partner was doing. “Does he suppose he can crush – squelch out this huge rebellion by pop guns filled with rose water?” he asked Lyman Trumbull. “He ought to hang somebody and get up a name for will or decisiveness of character. Let him hang some child or woman, if he has not courage to hang a man.”⁶³ Equally bloody-minded was a Detroit resident who called for “war to the knife and the knife to the hilt” and expressed astonishment that “the Government has managed to be so far behind the people.”⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Henry M. Smith of the Chicago Tribune to “Bro. G.”, Washington, Friday [ca. 31 October 1861], Charles Henry Ray Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California. A brief, toned-down version of this report appeared in the Washington correspondence, 31 October, Chicago Tribune, 1 November 1861. Cf. Washington correspondence by Ben: Perley Poore, 31 October, Boston Evening Journal, 2 November 1861.

⁶¹ Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 5 November, Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 8 November 1861.

⁶² Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 31 October, Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 1 November 1861; Washington correspondence, 28 October, New York World, 29 October 1861; Washington correspondence by Ben: Perley Poore, 30 October, Boston Evening Journal, 1 November 1861.

⁶³ Herndon to Lyman Trumbull, Springfield, 20 November 1861, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

⁶⁴ John J. Bagby to Zachariah Chandler, Detroit, 6 December 1861, Chandler Papers, Library of Congress.

The quarrelsome Young Napoleon, who never could get along with superiors, implied that Scott alone had hindered him and now that he was out of the way, he could take the offensive. But in fact McClellan complained about the president as much as he ever did about Old Fuss and Feathers. To his wife, McClellan described Lincoln as “an idiot,” “the original gorilla,” a “baboon,” and “‘an old stick’ – & pretty poor timber at that.” He denounced “the cowardice of the Presdt” and declared that “I can never regard him with feeling other than those of thorough contempt – for his mind, heart & morality.”⁶⁵ (Other well-bred Philadelphians agreed with McClellan’s assessment. William M. Meredith, attorney general of Pennsylvania and former treasury secretary under President Taylor, complained after several interviews at the White House that Lincoln was “greatly wanting in dignity,” “familiar in his manners, eternally joking and jesting and fond of telling bawdy stories in gross language,” and “deficient in force, knowledge & ability.”)⁶⁶

McClellan manifested his contempt for Lincoln in deeds as well as words. Less than two weeks after his elevation to the supreme command, the Young Napoleon returned home from a wedding to discover the president, John Hay, and Seward waiting for him. According to Hay, the general “without paying any particular attention to the porter who told him the President was waiting to see him, went up stairs, passing the door of the room where the President and Secretary of State were seated. They waited about half-an-hour, and sent once more a servant to tell the General they were there, and the

⁶⁵ Michael Burlingame, The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 182; Sears, Controversies and Commanders, 13-14.

⁶⁶ Nicholas B. Wainwright, ed., A Philadelphia Perspective: The Diary of Sidney George Fisher Covering the Years, 1834-1871 (Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1967), 1:443 (entry for 9 December 1862).

answer came that the General had done to bed.” As they returned to the White House, Hay bemoaned “this unparalleled insolence of epaulettes,” but Lincoln “seemed not to have noticed it specially, saying it was better at this time not to be making points of etiquette & personal dignity.”⁶⁷

This snub was not unprecedented. A month earlier, the English journalist William Howard Russell noted in his diary: “Calling on the General [McClellan] the other night at his usual time of return, I was told by the orderly, who was closing the door, ‘The General’s gone to bed tired, and can see no one. He sent the same message to the President, who came inquiring after him ten minutes ago.’”⁶⁸ Around that same time, Lincoln called at the general’s headquarters, only to be told that “he’s lying down, very much fatigued.”⁶⁹ On another occasion, McClellan did not deign to interrupt his breakfast when the president called; Lincoln was kept waiting till the general finished eating, much to the surprise of an observer.⁷⁰ David D. Porter was astounded when a conversation he was having with Little Mac concerning the New Orleans campaign was interrupted by a servant announcing that the president wished to see the general.

“Let him wait,” said McClellan. “I am busy.”

“Oh,” remarked Porter, “don’t send such a message to the President, he is very much interested in this matter, and it is not respectful to keep him waiting. Remember that he is our Commander-in-chief.”

⁶⁷ Burlingame and Ettlinger, eds., Hay Diary, 32 (entry for 13 November 1861).

⁶⁸ William H. Russell, My Diary North and South (Boston: T. O. H. P. Burnham, 1863), 552 (entry for 9 October 1861).

⁶⁹ Comte de Paris diary, entry for 28 September 1861, in Beatie, Army of the Potomac, 1:488-89.

⁷⁰ John M. Wilson, then a lieutenant on McClellan’s staff, in the Brooklyn Eagle, 12 February 1913.

“Well,” said the Young Napoleon, “let the Commander-in-chief wait, he has no business to know what is going on.” Porter accurately concluded that McClellan’s days were numbered.⁷¹

In December 1861, Lincoln asked McClellan to see Colonel Rush Hawkins, but the general refused. When Hawkins complained to Secretary of the Interior Caleb B. Smith about Little Mac’s unwillingness to honor a presidential request, Smith assured him that such behavior was common.⁷²

Several months later, Lincoln once again found the Young Napoleon unwilling to get out of bed to meet with him. The president called at the general’s house one Sunday morning in September and asked to see him. A short while later, McClellan’s chief of staff, General Randolph Marcy, “came down and with flushed face and confused manner said he was very sorry but McClellan was not yet up. A strange expression came over Lincoln’s face, as he rose and said, ‘Of course he’s very busy now, and no doubt was laboring far into the night.’ He departed hastily.”⁷³ A similar act of rudeness occurred when McClellan failed to keep an appointment with the president, General Ormsby M. Mitchell, and Ohio Governor William Dennison. After a long wait, Lincoln said with customary magnanimity and forbearance: “Never mind; I will hold McClellan’s horse if he will only bring us success.”⁷⁴ William O. Stoddard recalled how mortified he was

⁷¹ David Dixon Porter, “Journal of Occurrences during the War of the Rebellion,” vol. 1, pp. 173-74, Porter Papers, Library of Congress.

⁷² Rush Hawkins’ reminiscences, Margaret B. Stillwell, ed., “Hawkins of the Hawkins Zouaves,” in Deoch Fulton, ed., Bookmen’s Holiday: Notes and Studies Written in Tribute to Harry Miller Lydenberg (New York: New York Public Library, 1943), 105.

⁷³ Memorandum by C. C. Buel, New York, 23 November 1885 (recalling the words uttered the previous evening by Horace Porter), Richard Watson Gilder Papers, New York Public Library.

⁷⁴ F. A. Mitchell to John Hay, East Orange, New Jersey, 3 January 1889, Nicolay-Hay Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

when he accompanied Lincoln to the home of McClellan, who kept the president waiting for an unconscionably long time.⁷⁵

In early 1862, McClellan stood up not only Lincoln but the entire cabinet. As the president told General Ambrose E. Burnside in February, Little Mac “is a good fellow and means well” but he “don’t know so much about etiquette as I do. I asked him to come and meet the Cabinet in Consultation the other day and he promised to do so. I called them together at 12 and all came, but no McClellan. At ½ past 12 Seward got impatient and went away, and at one all were gone. At half-past one McClellan came, and when I asked him why he was not here, he said he forgot it.”

This absent-mindedness reminded Lincoln of one of his legal cases. “When I was practicing law in Illinois a bad fellow in our town was charged with moral delinquency or in other words rape. He was accused of having committed two outrages on the woman – one in the afternoon and the other next day; everybody believed him guilty and when he applied to me to defend him, I refused; but he pled so hard and assured me so positively that the woman was a willing party that I consented to defend him and took up his cause. My friends remonstrated; but I was so convinced of the man’s innocence that I determined to go on. At the trial, the woman gave in [an?] excellent direct testimony. I saw its effect on the jury and that it must be overcome; & in the cross examination I led her off to other topics and then suddenly returned to the charge.

“‘Did you sleep with your husband after the first outrage?’

“She said ‘Yes.’

“‘Did you tell him about it?’

⁷⁵ William O. Stoddard, Inside the White House in War-Times: Memoirs and Reports of Lincoln's Secretary, ed. Michael Burlingame (1880; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 63.

““No – I forgot.””⁷⁶

Even when Little Mac deigned to allow the president to consult with him, he would not say much. In mid-December, George Bancroft accompanied Lincoln to McClellan’s house. Bancroft described the Young Napoleon unflatteringly: “Of all the silent, uncommunicative, reserved men, whom I ever met, the general stands among the first.”⁷⁷

Little Mac’s contemptuous attitude toward the president was partially rooted in snobbery. The scion of a refined Philadelphia family, McClellan regarded many people as his social inferiors, among them Lincoln. Years after the war, he wrote that the sixteenth president “was not a man of very strong character, & as he was destitute of refinement – certainly in no sense a gentleman – he was easily wrought upon by coarse associates whose style of conversation agreed so well with his own.”⁷⁸

McClellan had contempt for other civilian leaders, including the cabinet, which he scorned as “a most despicable set of men.” Seward he called “a meddling, officious, incompetent little puppy.” Welles was “weaker than the most garrulous old woman you were ever annoyed by.” Bates was an “inoffensive old man.”⁷⁹ When he kept Edwin M. Stanton (Cameron’s replacement as secretary of war) cooling his heels, much as he did Lincoln, the infuriated secretary said: “That will be the last time General McClellan will

⁷⁶ In 1869, Burnside told this story at a dinner party in London. Manuscript diary of Benjamin Moran, Library of Congress (entry for 11 December 1869). A similar version can be found in Edward Dicey, Spectator of America, ed. Herbert Mitgang (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 95. In 1862, Dicey had reported this story to his readers in the London Spectator. Washington correspondence, n.d., London Spectator, n.d., quoted in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, 17 May 1862.

⁷⁷ Bancroft to his wife, Washington, 16 December 1861, Bancroft Papers, Cornell University.

⁷⁸ Sears, McClellan, 59.

⁷⁹ Sears, ed., Papers of McClellan, 106-7.

give either myself or the President the waiting snub.”⁸⁰ Chase told Little Mac that he was tired of calling on him and being told the general was too busy to be disturbed.⁸¹

The Young Napoleon also denounced Radicals in Congress for their ideology as well as their meddlesome ways. A partisan Democrat, he had little sympathy for the antislavery cause or for blacks. He confided that he had “a prejudice in favor of my own race” and that he could not “learn to like the odor of either Billy goats or niggers.” Radicals insisting on immediate emancipation, he thought, “had only the negro in view” and “cared not for the results” of the war, “knew little or nothing of the subject to be dealt with, & merely wished to accomplish a political move for party profit, or from sentimental motives.” He told his wife, “I will not fight for the abolitionists.” Tactlessly he made these views known to leading Radicals, including the influential Senator Charles Sumner, with whom he had an interview soon after arriving in Washington.⁸²

When Radicals clamored for action, McClellan appealed to a Democratic leader in New York: “Help me to dodge the nigger – we want nothing to do with him. I am fighting to preserve the integrity of the Union & the power of the Govt – on no other issue. . . . As far as you can, keep the papers & the politicians from running over me.”⁸³

ALL QUIET ON THE POTOMAC

The self-aggrandizing McClellan may have conquered Scott, but the Confederates in Virginia went virtually unmolested. At the end of September, when the enemy abandoned Munson’s Hill (within distant sight of the Capitol), Unionists were mortified

⁸⁰ A. E. H. Johnson “Reminiscences of Stanton,” Columbia Historical Society Records 13 (1910): 73.

⁸¹ Chase to McClellan, Washington, 11 December 1861, letterpress copy, Chase Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁸² Sears, McClellan, 116-17.

⁸³ Sears, ed., Papers of McClellan, 128.

to learn that the artillery posted there, which had intimidated McClellan, turned out to be “Quaker guns” – logs painted to resemble cannon.⁸⁴ Confederates laughed while Northerners fumed. Lamely McClellan consoled himself with the thought that the enemy “can no longer say that they are flaunting their dirty little flag in my face.”⁸⁵

This humiliating revelation did not deter McClellan from continuing to exaggerate Confederate strength, a mistake that affected all his decisions. A month later he submitted to Cameron a report (drafted by Edwin M. Stanton) stating that “all the information we have from spies, prisoners, &c., agrees in showing that the enemy have a force on the Potomac not less than 150,000 strong, well drilled and equipped, ably commanded, and strongly entrenched. It is plain, therefore, that to insure success, or to render it reasonably certain, the active army should not number less than 150,000 efficient troops, with 400 guns, unless some material change occurs in the force in front of us.” Since, by his own peculiar accounting methods, his force was far smaller, he could not launch an offensive without significant reinforcements. If they were provided, he would attack no later than November 25.⁸⁶ Privately, Little Mac admitted that the Army of the Potomac was probably “condemned to a winter of inactivity.”⁸⁷

In actual fact, McClellan had between 85,000 and 100,000 effectives, while Joseph E. Johnston at Centerville and Manassas had only 30,000 to 35,000.⁸⁸ The Young Napoleon could have assaulted Johnston, or Confederate positions on the south bank of the

⁸⁴ Washington correspondence, 29 September, New York Times, 1 October 1861.

⁸⁵ Sears, ed., Papers of McClellan, 104.

⁸⁶ O.R., I, 5, 1:9-11; Williams, Lincoln Finds a General, 1:127-30; Benjamin P. Thomas and Harold M. Hyman, Stanton: The Life and Times of Lincoln's Secretary of War (New York: Knopf, 1962), 130.

⁸⁷ Sears, McClellan, 123.

⁸⁸ Williams, Lincoln Finds a General, 1:130; Nevins, War for the Union, 1:300, 301.

Potomac, or Winchester, or Leesburg, or Norfolk, all of which were vulnerable to a force as large as the Army of the Potomac.⁸⁹ There was no excuse for the inactivity which demoralized the North and encouraged the Confederates, whose contemptuous leaders began to refer sarcastically to McClellan as “the redoubtable McC.”⁹⁰

McClellan’s overestimation of Confederate strength stemmed in part, but only in part, from faulty information supplied by Allan Pinkerton, the detective who had warned Lincoln about the Baltimore assassination plot in February.⁹¹ Little Mac hired him as his chief of intelligence well after he had grossly overestimated Confederate forces in August. McClellan’s central problem was not so much bad intelligence but a case of paranoia which not only led him to see enemies everywhere but also to quarrel with superiors, mistrust most people, indulge in extreme secrecy, judge others harshly, cling to preconceived notions in the face of overwhelming evidence discrediting them, and refusing to acknowledge his own faults. Compounding his paranoia was a streak of narcissism, predisposing him to envy, arrogance, grandiosity, vanity, and hypersensitivity to criticism.⁹²

BLUNDERS IN THE EAST

Public pressure for action led to a humiliating fiasco on October 21 at Ball’s Bluff, Virginia, forty miles from the capital, where Union forces under General Charles P. Stone, acting on vague orders from McClellan, crossed the Potomac and conducted a

⁸⁹ Nevins, War for the Union, 1:303; Sears, McClellan, 119-20.

⁹⁰ Williams, Lincoln Finds a General, 1:146.

⁹¹ Pinkerton overestimated Confederate strength, but McClellan ignored his reports and substantially inflated the numbers even more than Pinkerton had. See Edwin C. Fishel, “Pinkerton and McClellan: Who Deceived Whom?” Civil War History 34 (1988) 115-42. See also Edwin C. Fishel, The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War (Boston : Houghton Mifflin Co., 1996).

⁹² Glatthaar, Partners in Command, 52, 65, 237-42.

reconnaissance in force.⁹³ During the Union repulse, the president's close friend Colonel Edward D. Baker was killed, along with dozens of others. A few weeks earlier, when Baker "expressed a conviction that he would soon be shot in battle," the president "endeavored to dissuade him from entertaining such gloomy forebodings."⁹⁴ Awaiting reports from the front, Lincoln commented on the beauty of the afternoon and prophetically said of Baker, "I am afraid his impetuous daring will endanger his life."⁹⁵ When this fear proved justified, Lincoln was devastated; the news "smote upon him like a whirlwind from a desert."⁹⁶ An "expression of awe and grief solemnized" his "massive features."⁹⁷ Emerging from the telegraph office "with bowed head, and tears rolling down his furrowed cheeks, his face pale and wan, his heart heaving with emotion," he "almost fell as he stepped into the street. . . . With both hands pressed upon his heart he walked down the street, not returning the salute of the sentinel pacing his beat before the door."⁹⁸ That night, unable to sleep, he "paced the floor of his room . . . in the greatest grief."⁹⁹ He later deemed Baker's death the "keenest blow" he suffered in the entire war.¹⁰⁰ At the

⁹³ Sears, McClellan, 120-122.

⁹⁴ Philadelphia Press, 25 October 1861.

⁹⁵ Washington correspondence by John Hay, 22 October, Missouri Republican (St. Louis), 27 October 1861, in Burlingame, ed., Lincoln's Journalist, 122.

⁹⁶ Noah Brooks, "Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln," Michael Burlingame, ed., Lincoln Observed: Civil War Dispatches of Noah Brooks (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 215. A similar account can be found in Charles Carleton Coffin, The Boys of '61: or, Four Years of Fighting (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1881), 30.

⁹⁷ Washington correspondence by John Hay, 22 October, Missouri Republican (St. Louis), 27 October 1861, in Burlingame, ed., Lincoln's Journalist, 122.

⁹⁸ Charles Carlton Coffin in Allen Thorndike Rice, ed., Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time (New York: North American Review, 1888), 172-73.

⁹⁹ Washington correspondence, 22 October, New York Tribune, 23 October 1861; Stoddard, "White House Sketch No. 6," New York Citizen, 22 September 1866, in Stoddard, Inside the White House, ed. Burlingame, 167.

¹⁰⁰ Brooks, "Personal Recollections of Lincoln," in Burlingame, ed., Lincoln Observed, 215.

funeral, Lincoln “wept like a child.”¹⁰¹ A member of Baker’s regiment, who attended the funeral and described the battle to Lincoln, said that the “President thought as much of Baker as a Brother.”¹⁰² William O. Stoddard also noted that Lincoln “loved him like a brother, and mourned his untimely death bitterly.”¹⁰³ While listening to Colonel Charles Devens narrate the sad tale of Baker’s demise, Lincoln interrupted repeatedly to ask: “When will this terrible war be over? Is there no way of stopping this shedding of blood?”¹⁰⁴

Occurring three months to the day after Bull Run, the disaster at Ball’s Bluff demoralized the North badly. “The effect of the last Battle is more depressing than all other reverses,” Thurlow Weed observed. “I was beset by hundreds in N. Y. asking unanswerable questions.”¹⁰⁵ The commissary general of the Empire State declared the administration “an utter and palpable failure” and concluded that Lincoln “is not fitted for an emergency like this.”¹⁰⁶ To Edwin M. Stanton, the administration’s prospects “have never appeared more dark & gloomy than now.” In Washington, he wrote: “Murmurs of discontent are heard on all sides.”¹⁰⁷ According to George Gibbs, who reported that “[t]hings certainly look very blue” at the capital, Lincoln believed that Baker had been

¹⁰¹ J. Wainwright Ray to John G. Nicolay, Washington, 18 October 1886, Nicolay Papers, Library of Congress. Ray cited his wife as the authority for this description. See also Charles Carlton Coffin in Rice, ed., Reminiscences of Lincoln, 172, 174.

¹⁰² James Roman Ward to his father, Baltimore, 24 October 1861, photostatic copy, Civil War Papers, Maryland Historical Society.

¹⁰³ Stoddard, “White House Sketch No. 6,” New York Citizen, 22 September 1866, in Stoddard, Inside the White House, ed. Burlingame, 167.

¹⁰⁴ Stillwell, ed., “Hawkins of the Hawkins Zouaves,” 96.

¹⁰⁵ Weed to Seward, Albany, 27 October 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁰⁶ Benjamin Welch Jr. to George G. Fogg, New York, 22 October 1861, Fogg Papers, New Hampshire Historical Society.

¹⁰⁷ Stanton to John A. Dix, Washington, 26 October 1861, Dix Papers, Columbia University.

needlessly sacrificed and “made a fuss” about it until he was shown evidence that Baker had disobeyed orders to conduct only a reconnaissance in force.¹⁰⁸

FRÉMONT IN MISSOURI

October was an unusually bad month for Lincoln. In the East, Baker’s death, the ignominy of Ball’s Bluff, the unseemly intrigue of McClellan against Scott, and the failure of the Young Napoleon to do much with his large army all combined to depress the president’s spirits. Equally dispiriting were developments in the West. On the second day of the month, Nicolay wrote his fiancée that Lincoln was “a good deal oppressed with the quantity of bad and discouraging news which comes from the West. Pretty much everything appears to be going wrong there.”¹⁰⁹ Five days later, one of Nicolay’s assistants, William O. Stoddard, reported that for the past few weeks Lincoln “has been looking pale and careworn, as if the perpetual wear-and-tear of the load which presses upon him were becoming too much even for his iron frame and elastic mind.”¹¹⁰

That load was becoming oppressive indeed, especially since innumerable callers gave Lincoln little peace. He said “the importunities of the office seekers trouble him more than the rebellion of the secessionists.”¹¹¹ In mid-October Stoddard observed that “[n]ot a day passes, but appeals are made to the Executive for action, on his part, that would be all but impossible if he were an absolute monarch, and many honest people doubtless feel themselves aggrieved that the President does not exercise, in their behalf,

¹⁰⁸ George Gibbs to John Austin Stevens, Washington, 25 October 1861, Stevens Papers, New-York Historical Society.

¹⁰⁹ Nicolay to Therenia Bates, Washington, 2 October 1861, in Burlingame, ed., With Lincoln in the White House, 58.

¹¹⁰ Washington correspondence, 7 October, New York Examiner, 10 October 1861, in Michael Burlingame, ed., Dispatches from Lincoln's White House: The Anonymous Civil War Journalism of Presidential Secretary William O. Stoddard (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 32.

¹¹¹ Washington correspondence, 12 September, Chicago Evening Journal, 16 September 1861.

prerogatives which any crowned head of Europe would hesitate to assume.”¹¹² Others pestered him with advice so often that he let it be known “that those who have the responsibility of managing the war, know how to conduct it as well as outsiders, and that he prefers not to be troubled with their counsels.”¹¹³

Lincoln was especially upset by developments in the West, where he said everything “military & financial is in hopeless confusion.” Chase despaired because the government was within eleven days of exhausting the money raised by the most recent loan, its credit was gone at St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Springfield, and Congress had to audit immense claims. Events in Missouri were particularly distressing. The commanding general there, John Charles Frémont, was “ready to rebel,” the state was “virtually seized” by the Confederates, and “instead of having a force ready to descend the Mississippi” from Missouri, “the probability is that the army of the West will be compelled to defend St. Louis.”¹¹⁴ In September, Frémont had predicted that the Confederates “will hold St. Louis in less than six weeks.”¹¹⁵ According to Norman B. Judd, the Pathfinder had “concluded that the Union was definitely destroyed and that he should set up an independent Government as soon as he took Memphis and organized his army.”¹¹⁶ In August, one of his division commanders, John Pope, speculated that Lincoln “will do in a different manner what Jeff Davis is doing directly – I mean that by neglect,

¹¹² Washington correspondence by Stoddard, 14 October, New York Examiner, 17 October 1861, Burlingame, ed., Dispatches from Lincoln's White House, 36.

¹¹³ Washington correspondence, 3 November, Chicago Evening Journal, 6 November 1861.

¹¹⁴ Nicolay, memorandum, 2 October 1861, in Burlingame, ed., With Lincoln in the White House, 59.

¹¹⁵ Frémont to Montgomery Blair, [St. Louis], September 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹¹⁶ Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 123 (entry for [9 December 1863]).

corruption, & outrage, the States of the West will be driven to join together & act without reference to the authority of Gen[eral] Gov[ernmen]t.”¹¹⁷

In Missouri, Frémont’s impetuosity, tactlessness, poor judgment, egomania, ethical insensitivity, and administrative and military incompetence unfitted him for his heavy responsibilities. As one of his supporters ruefully noted, the “defect in Frémont was that he was a dreamer. Impractical, visionary things went a long way with him. He was a poor judge of men and formed strange associations. He surrounded himself with foreigners, especially Hungarians, most of whom were adventurers and some of whom were swindlers.”¹¹⁸ He would not have been appointed to such an important post if the Blair family, which had been friendly with him and his wife, had not lobbied vigorously on his behalf.¹¹⁹ As commander of the Department of the West (encompassing Illinois, Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Arkansas, western Kentucky, and the territories of Nebraska, Colorado, and Dakota), his most pressing task was to thwart Confederate attempts to conquer Missouri. He was then to raise an army and move on Memphis, thus helping to secure the Mississippi River, a goal that General Scott had originally proposed and which Lincoln endorsed heartily.

Shortly after his belated arrival at St. Louis on July 25, Frémont had to decide whether to reinforce the threatened Union position at Cairo, Illinois, or Nathaniel Lyon’s small army in southwest Missouri. When he sensibly chose the former course, the impulsive, willful Lyon recklessly flung his force against a much larger Confederate

¹¹⁷ Pope to Valentine B. Horton, St. Louis, 22 August 1861, Pope Papers, New-York Historical Society.

¹¹⁸ Reminiscences of Emil Preotorius, in Ida Tarbell, The Life of Abraham Lincoln (2 vols.; New York: McClure, Phillips, 1900), 2:61-62n. For a defense of Frémont, see Robert L. Turkoly-Jocizk, “Frémont and the Western Department,” Missouri Historical Review 82 (1988): 363-85.

¹¹⁹ Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 123 (entry for [9 December 1863]); Nevins, War for the Union, 1:308.

army at Wilson's Creek on August 10 and suffered a predictable defeat (in which he was killed). Coming a scant three weeks after Bull Run, this setback "made a very painful impression on the public mind."¹²⁰ A prominent journalist declared that "since the death of Lyon all confidence is gone."¹²¹ Making matters worse still, in September Confederates captured the 3500-man Union garrison at Lexington, Missouri. In his first two months at St. Louis, Frémont had lost almost half the state. Between those two defeats, he issued a proclamation emancipating the slaves of rebels and imposing martial law, which Lincoln ordered him to rescind. Through General Scott, Lincoln instructed the Pathfinder "to repair the disaster at Lexington without loss of time."¹²²

Frémont's political blundering upset Lincoln more than his military ineptitude. On August 30, the impulsive, flamboyant, grandiose Pathfinder of the West issued a proclamation establishing martial law throughout Missouri, condemning to death civilians caught with weapons behind Union lines, and freeing the slaves and seizing the property of rebels.¹²³ Before issuing this fateful decree, he had consulted his wife and a Quaker abolitionist but no one in the administration.¹²⁴

While the Northern press generally lauded the Pathfinder's emancipation edict, residents of the Bluegrass State indignantly denounced it as "an abominable, atrocious,

¹²⁰ Truman Smith to Gideon Welles, New York, 16 August 1861, Welles Papers, Library of Congress.

¹²¹ George Wilkes to the editor, Washington, 18 August, New York Times, 20 August 1861.

¹²² Scott to Frémont, Washington, 23 September 1861, O.R., I, 3:185.

¹²³ Vernon L. Volpe, "The Frémonts and Emancipation in Missouri," The Historian 56 (1994): 339-54; Allan Nevins, Frémont: Pathmarker of the West (rev. ed.; New York: Longmans, Green, 1955), 499-501.

¹²⁴ Tom Chaffin, Pathfinder: John Charles Frémont and the Course of American Empire (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 463-64.

and infamous usurpation.”¹²⁵ Joshua Speed, a devoted Unionist, told his old friend Lincoln that the proclamation “will hurt us in Ky– The war should be waged upon high points and no state law be interfered with– Our Constitution & laws both prohibit the emancipation of slaves among us – even in small numbers– If a military commander can turn them loose by the thousand by mere proclamation – It will be a most difficult matter to get our people to submit to it. All of us who live in slave states whether Union or loyal have great fear of insurrection– Will not such a proclamation read by the slaves incline them to assert their freedom? And the owner whether loyal or not & the whole community suffer? I think the proclamation directly against the spirit of the law.” So upset that he could neither eat nor sleep, Speed predicted that Frémont ’s decree “will crush out every vestage of a union party in the state–. . . Think of its practical workings– We have from 180 to 200000 slaves among us– A military commander issues an edict which declares 20.000 of them free men– I suppose that would be about the relative proportion which would be declared free They would not be slow to assert their claim– It would be a necessity with our entire people to resist – for the loyal slaveholder & the non slaveholder would all be alike interested in resistance. Cruelty & crime would run riot in the land & the poor negroes would be almost exterminated– So fixed is public sentiment in this state against freeing negroes & allowing negroes to be emancipated & remain among us – That you had as well attack the freedom of worship in the north or the right of a parent to teach his child to read – as to wage war in a slave state on such a principle.”¹²⁶ Any man who tried to buck the opposition to emancipation in Kentucky

¹²⁵ Louisville Courier, n.d., copied in the Cincinnati Commercial, 3 September 1861.

¹²⁶ Speed to Lincoln, Cincinnati, 1 September 1861, and Louisville, 3 September 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress. Cf. Green Adams and James Speed to Lincoln, Frankfort, 2 September 1861, ibid.

“had as well attempt to ascend the falls of Niagara in a canoe as to meet it, brave it, or change it.”¹²⁷

Robert Anderson, military commander in Kentucky, sent Lincoln a similar message: “I feel it my duty to say that Major General Fremont's Proclamation, followed as it has been by the act of a military commission, manumitting slaves, is producing most disastrous results in this State, and that it is the opinion of many of our wisest and soundest men that if this is not immediately disavowed, and annulled, Kentucky will be lost to the Union. I have already heard that on the reception of the news from Missouri, this morning, a company which was ready to be sworn into the service was disbanded. Kentucky feels a direct interest in this matter, as a portion of General Fremont's force is now upon her soil.”¹²⁸ Kentuckians seemed to agree with the English newspaper that termed Frémont 's proclamation a call for “negro insurrection, servile war, outrages and horrors without number and without name.”¹²⁹ Montgomery Blair skewered the Pathfinder, acidly remarking that “with Fremont's surroundings, the set of scoundrels who alone have control of him, this proclamation setting up the higher law was like a painted woman quoting Scripture.”¹³⁰

Even before he had heard from Speed and Anderson, Lincoln gently but firmly urged Frémont to rescind the emancipation order, which went beyond the Confiscation Act passed by Congress in early August, freeing only those slaves directly supporting

¹²⁷ Speed to Joseph Holt, Louisville, 7 September 1861, Holt Papers, Library of Congress.

¹²⁸ Robert Anderson to Abraham Lincoln, Louisville, 13 September 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹²⁹ London Economist, n.d., copied in The Liberator (Boston), 18 November 1861.

¹³⁰ Blair to Sumner, 16 October 1861, in James Ford Rhodes, History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850 (4 vols.; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893-1899), 3:478.

Confederate military efforts. The president advised Frémont that “the liberating slaves of traitorous owners, will alarm our Southern Union friends, and turn them against us – perhaps ruin our rather fair prospect for Kentucky.” Tactfully, “in a spirit of caution and not of censure,” Lincoln asked the general to modify his order to conform to the new law; he should do so as if it were his own idea, not as a grudging capitulation to a superior’s order. (Lincoln also instructed the Pathfinder to execute no one without presidential approval.)¹³¹

The quarrelsome Frémont, who was temperamentally reluctant to follow orders and predisposed to ignore others’ feelings, rashly declined to modify his decree without being instructed to do so.¹³² He argued that if “I were to retract of my own accord it would imply that I myself thought it wrong and that I had acted without the reflection which the gravity of the point demanded. But I did not do so. I acted with full deliberation and upon the certain conviction that it was a measure right and necessary, and I think so still.”¹³³ Defiantly, Frémont ordered thousands of copies of the original proclamation distributed after the president had demanded its modification.¹³⁴

Reluctantly, Lincoln complied with Frémont’s request for a direct order and thus ignited a firestorm of protest.¹³⁵ His mailbag overflowed with letters denouncing the

¹³¹ Lincoln to Frémont, Washington, 2 September 1861, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 4:506.

¹³² Andrew Rolle, John Charles Frémont: Character as Destiny (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 278-84.

¹³³ Frémont to Lincoln, [St. Louis], 8 September 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress; Nevins, Pathmarker, 505.

¹³⁴ “Fremont’s Insubordination,” Illinois State Register (Springfield), 24 October 1861.

¹³⁵ Lincoln to Fremont, Washington, 11 September 1861, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln 4:517-18; St. Louis correspondence 16 September New York Tribune, 19 September 1861; excerpts from several

revocation.¹³⁶ Pro-secession Missourians took heart. One observer reckoned that the president's action "gave more 'aid and comfort to the enemy' in that State than if he had made the rebel commander, Sterling Price, a present of fifty pieces of rifled cannon."¹³⁷ A New York friend of the Pathfinder, summoned to Washington by the president, told him that "if he did not sustain the proclamation, Hamlin would take his place and would sustain it."¹³⁸ A similar threat appeared in an Auburn, New York, newspaper: "If he [Lincoln] will not regard the rights and will of his constituents,. . . we shall not be long in availing ourselves of all constitutional means to put one in his place who will do it."¹³⁹ Frederick Douglass condemned the "weakness, imbecility and absurdity" of the administration's action. "Many blunders have been committed by the Government at Washington," Douglass thundered, "but this, we think, is the biggest of them all."¹⁴⁰ William Lloyd Garrison ridiculed Lincoln's "timid, depressing, suicidal" letter to Frémont.¹⁴¹ The National Anti-Slavery Standard called the president's action "one of those blunders which are worse than crimes."¹⁴² Asking a question that preyed on many people's minds, James Russell Lowell wanted to know: "How many times we are to save

newspapers, copied in the Missouri Democrat (St. Louis), 19 September 1861; Trefousse, Radical Republicans, 176-77; Baltimore Patriot, n.d., copied in The Liberator (Boston), 27 September 1861.

¹³⁶ Washington correspondence, 7 October, New York Times, 8 October 1861. Scores of letters protesting his action, along with a handful supporting it, can be found in the Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹³⁷ John Russell to Lyman Trumbull, Bluefield, Illinois, 17 December 1861, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

¹³⁸ Washington correspondence, 11 September, Chicago Tribune, 12 September 1861.

¹³⁹ Auburn Northern Independent, n.d., copied in the Illinois State Register (Springfield), 18 October 1861.

¹⁴⁰ Douglass's Monthly 4 (October 1861):531.

¹⁴¹ The Liberator (Boston), 20 September 1861.

¹⁴² National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 28 September 1861.

Kentucky and lose our self-respect?”¹⁴³ The poet thought “an ounce of Fremont is worth a pound of long Abraham. Mr. L. seems to have a theory of carrying on war without hurting the enemy. He is incapable, apparently, of understanding that they ought to be hurt.”¹⁴⁴ A Quaker abolitionist declared: “Better lose Kentucky, than keep her, at such a price. She will cheat us, in the end, unless we do with her, as with Missouri & Maryland – teach her submission, by the bayonet.”¹⁴⁵

Senators joined the chorus of criticism. William P. Fessenden called Lincoln’s letter “very foolish,” a “most weak and unjustifiable concession to the Union men of the border States,” and reported that people in Maine “are all for the proclamation, and the President has lost ground amazingly.”¹⁴⁶ Benjamin F. Wade scouted Lincoln’s action, sneering that the president’s attitude toward slavery “could only have come of one, born of ‘poor white trash’ and educated in a slave State.”¹⁴⁷ Similarly, Gerrit Smith declared that Lincoln was “sadly perverted by his pro-slavery training.”¹⁴⁸ Charles Sumner denounced the president as “a dictator, Emperor, -- which you will; but how vain to have the power of a God if not to use it God-like.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴³ Lowell to Jane Norton, Elmwood, 28 September 1861, Charles Eliot Norton, ed., Letters of James Russell Lowell (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1894), 1:314.

¹⁴⁴ Horace E. Scudder, James Russell Lowell: A Biography (2 vols.; Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1901), 2:29.

¹⁴⁵ B. Rush Plumly to Chase, St. Louis, 15 September 1861, Chase Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁴⁶ Fessenden to James W. Grimes, Portland, 26 September 1861, Fessenden Papers, Bowdoin College.

¹⁴⁷ Wade to Chandler, Jefferson, Ohio, 23 September 1861, Chandler Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁴⁸ Gerrit Smith’s speech at Peterboro, New Hampshire, 22 September 1861, New York Tribune, 28 September, copied in The Liberator (Boston), 11 October 1861.

¹⁴⁹ Sumner to Francis Lieber, Boston, 17 September 1861, Beverly Wilson Palmer, ed., The Selected Letters of Charles Sumner (2 vols.; Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 2:79.

Another Massachusetts anti-slavery champion, Lydia Maria Child, condemned the president for being “narrow-minded, short-sighted, and obstinate” and exclaimed: “O Lord! O Lord! How we do need a Cromwell!” She urged all opponents of slavery to sustain the Pathfinder: “We ought never to forget that he was the first man to utter the word, which millions long to hear.”¹⁵⁰ George Bancroft told his wife: “We suffer from want of an organizing mind at the head of the government. We have a president without brains.”¹⁵¹ From Chicago, Joseph Medill wrote that Lincoln’s “frightfully retrograde” order to Frémont “comes upon us like a killing June frost – which destroys the coming harvest” and “has cast a funeral gloom” not only over the Windy City but also over “the state and the intire west.” Nothing that Buchanan ever did “received so universal censure.” Alluding to the ninety-first Psalm, Medill lamented that the “loss of a battle can be repaired: but this letter acts as a pestilence that walketh at noon day.”¹⁵² Medill’s newspaper alleged that “[n]o Sunday in our recollection has been so broken by general indignation and rage.”¹⁵³ In Wisconsin people were so angry that one resident told his congressman that it “is utterly impossible for you to conceive what a whirlwind of grief & indignation” Lincoln’s letter “has aroused throughout the North West.” There the president “today could not carry the vote of [a] single town.” Not even Buchanan was so roundly execrated as Lincoln now was.¹⁵⁴ The Missouri Democrat and the New York

¹⁵⁰ Lydia Maria Child to John Greenleaf Whittier, Wayland, Massachusetts, 21 January 1862 and 22 September 1861, Child Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁵¹ Bancroft to his wife, September 1861, in M.A. De Wolfe Howe, The Life and Letters of George Bancroft (2 vols.; New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1908), 2:132.

¹⁵² Medill to Chase, Chicago, 15 September 1861, John Niven, ed., The Salmon P. Chase Papers (5 vols.; Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1993-1998), 3:97-98.

¹⁵³ Chicago Tribune, 16 September, copied in the Missouri Democrat (St. Louis), 17 September 1861.

¹⁵⁴ J. H. Cooper to John F. Potter, Burlington, Wisconsin, 17 September 1861, Potter Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

Tribune reacted similarly. In Minnesota, the feminist-abolitionist Jane Grey Swisshelm condemned the president's "imbecility, or treachery."¹⁵⁵

In Ohio, the president was accused of succumbing to pressure from "chicken-hearted politicians."¹⁵⁶ Some thought Lincoln resembled Mr. Feeble Mind and Mr. Ready-to-Halt in John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, while Fremont seemed like Great Heart. Cincinnati Republicans were "in a state of great consternation and wrath." A judge there reported that "no word describes popular sentiment but 'fury.' I have heard men of sense, such as are called conservative, advocate the wildest steps, such as the impeachment of Mr. Lincoln, the formation of a party to carry on the war irrespective of the President & under Fremont, etc., etc."¹⁵⁷ Jacob Brinkerhoff reported that Lincoln's action "falls like lead upon the hearts of the people of Ohio."¹⁵⁸ Other Buckeyes deplored "the timid policy which the modification of Gen Fremont's Proclamation evidently foreshadows."¹⁵⁹

Conservative papers like the New York Herald dismissed Lincoln's critics as "nigger-worshippers who have endeavored to make the struggle that has commenced a crusade against Southern institutions, in which oceans of blood should be shed to gratify the malice and folly of the school of which Garrison, Greeley, Gerrit Smith, Wendell Phillips and others are the prominent representatives." Lincoln had "in his mild rebuke of

¹⁵⁵ Saint Cloud (Minnesota) Democrat, 19 September 1861, in Sylvia D. Hoffert, Jane Grey Swisshelm: An Unconventional Life, 1815-1884 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 126.

¹⁵⁶ Ashtabula Sentinel, n.d. copied in The Liberator (Boston), 11 October 1861.

¹⁵⁷ George Hoadly to Chase, Cincinnati, 18, 19 September 1861, Chase Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁵⁸ Jacob Brinkerhoff to Chase, Warren, Ohio, 18 September 1861, Chase Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁵⁹ J. G. Doddridge and many others to Chase, Circleville, Ohio, 19 September 1861, Chase Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Fremont” dealt “very tenderly” with the general. Those who “continue to glorify the imprudent proclamation of Fremont are counseling insubordination in its most dangerous form.” The Buffalo Courier predicted that the president’s action “will gain ten supporters for every one he loses by showing his resolute determination to stand by the Constitution and the Laws to the greatest possible extent.”¹⁶⁰ Thomas Ewing expressed great relief, for he believed that if Lincoln had not swiftly forced a modification of the proclamation, “it would have lost us Kentucky and the war would be now raging on the banks of the Ohio.”¹⁶¹

In fact, to allow Fremont’s proclamation to stand would be to authorize every department commander to set policy without reference to the elected representatives of the people.¹⁶² Moreover, Lincoln was obliged by his oath of office to modify the Pathfinder’s edict.¹⁶³ The Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican sympathized with Frémont but found it “gratifying to know that we have a president who is as loyal to law – when that is made to meet an emergency – as he is ready to meet an emergency for which no law is provided. The president is right.”¹⁶⁴ Rather than attacking Lincoln, Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper criticized Congress for passing such a halfway-measure as

¹⁶⁰ New York Herald, n.d., and Buffalo Courier, n.d., both copied in The Liberator (Boston), 27 September, 4 October 1861.

¹⁶¹ Thomas Ewing to Hugh Ewing, Lancaster, Ohio, 2 November 1861, typescript, Ewing Family Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁶² Washington National Intelligencer quoted in Washington correspondence, 23 September, Philadelphia Press, 24 September 1861.

¹⁶³ Washington correspondence by John Russell Young, 19 September, Philadelphia Press, 21 September 1861.

¹⁶⁴ “The President and General Fremont,” Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 17 September 1861. The Chicago Journal and Post also endorsed the president’s action. Illinois State Journal (Springfield), 18 September 1861.

the Confiscation Act.¹⁶⁵ Other Republican journals, without taking sides, condemned the dissention within the party's ranks that Fremont had stirred up.¹⁶⁶ Democrats wryly observed that the “carping at the President for doing his simple duty” did not “come with a good grace from those who put him in his present situation, and who should bestow on him a generous confidence.”¹⁶⁷

On September 10, Frémont's headstrong wife, née Jessie Benton (daughter of the eminent Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton), called at the White House and administered a tongue-lashing to the president. An admirer likened her to a dangerous, mammoth ironclad warship, “a She-Merrimac, thoroughly sheathed, & carrying fire in the genuine Benton furnaces” and armed with “guns enough to be formidable to a whole Cabinet.”¹⁶⁸ Lincoln later remembered that “she taxed me so violently with many things that I had to exercise all the awkward tact I have to avoid quarrelling with her. . . . She more than once intimated that if Gen. Frémont should conclude to try conclusions with me he could set up for himself.”¹⁶⁹ To a congressman, Lincoln said that Mrs. Frémont, after “opening her case with mild expostulation,” departed “in anger flaunting her handkerchief before my face, and saying, ‘Sir, the general will try titles with you. He is a man and I am his wife.’”¹⁷⁰ Two years later she would refer to Lincoln's “sly slimy

¹⁶⁵ Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, 21 September 1861.

¹⁶⁶ “General Fremont,” New York World, 20 September 1861; Washington correspondence by Sigma, 22 September, Cincinnati Commercial, 26 September 1861.

¹⁶⁷ Cincinnati Enquirer, 28 September 1861.

¹⁶⁸ Thomas Starr King to Henry W. Bellows, San Francisco, 18 March 1862, Bellows Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹⁶⁹ Burlingame and Ettlinger, eds., Hay Diary, 123 (entry for 9 December 1863).

¹⁷⁰ Josiah B. Grinnell, Men and Events of Forty Years: Autobiographical Reminiscences of an Active Career from 1850 to 1890 (Boston: D. Lothrop, 1891), 174.

nature.”¹⁷¹ (Mary Lincoln reportedly took offense at “the want of attention from Mrs. Fremont.”)¹⁷²

When Elizabeth Blair Lee chided Jessie Frémont for acting like Catherine the Great, she shot back: “Not Catherine but Josephine.” Mrs. Lee replied, “You are too imperious for her.” Mrs. Frémont warned that her husband would challenge Frank Blair to a duel.¹⁷³ Frank’s father told her she was acting “in very bad taste” and urged her to return to her family in St. Louis. He loftily added that in Washington “we make men and unmake them.” She snapped: “I have seen some men of your making, and if that is the best you can do, I would advise you to quit the business.”¹⁷⁴

On September 12, the president wrote her insisting that he entertained no doubts about her husband’s “honor or integrity” and protesting “against being understood as acting in any hostility toward him.”¹⁷⁵ (Three decades thereafter Mrs. Frémont implausibly reported that Lincoln treated her rudely, failing to offer her a seat and accepting the letter she handed him “with an expression that was not agreeable.” After

¹⁷¹ Jessie B. Fremont to Thomas Starr King, Nahant, 16 October 1863, The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont, ed. Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 356.

¹⁷² Wendell Phillips told this to the journalist Samuel Wilkeson. Wilkeson to Sydney Howard Gay, [Washington], n.d., Gay Papers, Columbia University.

¹⁷³ Elizabeth Blair Lee to Phillip Lee, Washington, 17 September 1861, Wartime Washington: The Civil War Letters of Elizabeth Blair Lee, ed. Virginia Jeans Laas (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 78; Montgomery Blair to W. O. Bartlett, 26 September 1861, Blair-Lee Papers, Princeton.

¹⁷⁴ Cincinnati Press, n.d., copied in the New York Evening Express, 6 January 1862.

¹⁷⁵ Lincoln to Jessie Frémont, Washington, 12 September 1861, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 4:519.

she defended her husband, the president allegedly replied “in a sneering tone” that she was “quite a female politician.”¹⁷⁶

Of the many protests deluging Lincoln, one from his conservative friend Orville H. Browning surprised him most. (Uncharacteristically, Browning had in April urged the president “to march an army into the South, and proclaim freedom to the slaves.”)¹⁷⁷ Frémont’s “proclamation had the unqualified approval of every true friend of the Government within my knowledge,” said Browning, who had just been appointed senator from Illinois to complete the term of the recently-deceased Stephen A. Douglas. “I do not know of an exception. Rebels and traitors, and all who sympathize with rebellion and treason, and who wish to see the government overthrown, would, of course, denounce it. Its influence was most salutary, and it was accomplishing much good. Its revocation disheartens our friends, and represses their ardor.”¹⁷⁸

Frémont had acted unconstitutionally, in Lincoln’s view. Patiently he explained to Browning that the general’s “proclamation, as to confiscation of property, and the liberation of slaves, is purely political, and not within the range of military law, or necessity. If a commanding General finds a necessity to seize the farm of a private owner, for a pasture, an encampment, or a fortification, he has the right to do so, and to so hold it, as long as the necessity lasts; and this is within military law, because within military necessity. But to say the farm shall no longer belong to the owner, or his heirs forever;

¹⁷⁶ Excerpt from Jessie Benton Frémont’s “Great Events,” 1891, in Spence and Herr, eds., Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont, 266.

¹⁷⁷ Orville H. Browning to Lincoln, Quincy, 30 April 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁷⁸ Browning to Lincoln, Quincy, 17 September 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress; Browning to Lincoln, Quincy, 30 September 1861, Browning Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

and this as well when the farm is not needed for military purposes as when it is, is purely political, without the savor of military law about it. And the same is true of slaves. If the General needs them, he can seize them, and use them; but when the need is past, it is not for him to fix their permanent future condition. That must be settled according to laws made by law-makers, and not by military proclamations. The proclamation in the point in question, is simply ‘dictatorship.’ It assumes that the general may do anything he pleases – confiscate the lands and free the slaves of loyal people, as well as of disloyal ones. And going the whole figure I have no doubt would be more popular with some thoughtless people, than that which has been done! But I cannot assume this reckless position; nor allow others to assume it on my responsibility. You speak of it as being the only means of saving the government. On the contrary it is itself the surrender of the government. Can it be pretended that it is any longer the government of the U.S. – any government of Constitution and laws, – wherein a General, or a President, may make permanent rules of property by proclamation? I do not say Congress might not with propriety pass a law, on the point, just such as General Frémont proclaimed. I do not say I might not, as a member of Congress, vote for it. What I object to, is, that I as President, shall expressly or impliedly seize and exercise the permanent legislative functions of the government.”

Wrong in principle, Frémont’s proclamation was ruinous in practice. “No doubt the thing was popular in some quarters,” Lincoln told Browning, “and would have been more so if it had been a general declaration of emancipation. The Kentucky Legislature would not budge till that proclamation was modified; and Gen. Anderson telegraphed me that on the news of Gen. Frémont having actually issued deeds of manumission, a whole company of our Volunteers threw down their arms and disbanded. I was so assured, as to

think it probable, that the very arms we had furnished Kentucky would be turned against us.” The president hastened to add that Browning “must not understand I took my course on the proclamation because of Kentucky. I took the same ground in a private letter to General Frémont before I heard from Kentucky.”¹⁷⁹

To another defender of Frémont’s proclamation Lincoln replied, “We didn’t go into the war to put down Slavery, but to put the flag back; and to act differently at this moment, would, I have no doubt, not only weaken our cause but smack of bad faith; for I never should have had votes enough to send me here, if the people had supposed I should try to use my power to upset Slavery. Why, the first thing you’d see, would be a mutiny in the army. No! We must wait until every other means had been exhausted. This thunderbolt will keep.”¹⁸⁰

In fact, the public was not yet ready for emancipation. As George William Curtis put it, some antislavery sentiment was rooted in “abstract philanthropy,” some in “hatred of slaveholders,” some in “jealousy for white labor,” but “very little” in “a consciousness of wrong done and a wish to right it.”¹⁸¹

Lincoln’s calm handling of the controversy pleased Frank Blair’s sister Elizabeth. She hoped that the president’s “cool way of doing things will. . . teach the Blairs a lesson

¹⁷⁹ Lincoln to Browning, Washington, 22 September 1861, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 4:531-32.

¹⁸⁰ Lincoln said this to Charles Edwards Lester. Lester, Life and Public Services of Charles Sumner (New York: United States Publishing Company, 1874), 359-60.

¹⁸¹ George William Curtis to Charles Eliot Norton, n.p., [late August 1861], quoted in Norton to Henry W. Bellows, Newport, 25 August 1861, Bellows Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

not to rush on at things or people so violently.”¹⁸² But Lincoln was not always decorous in handling Fremont’s defenders. A Philadelphia abolitionist acting as a special treasury agent, Benjamin Rush Plumly, sent telegrams from St. Louis defending Frémont. When Plumly called at the White House, Lincoln told him bluntly that he had received complaints from "a set of speculators who would be disturbed if General Fremont was removed." Plumly responded, "I hope, sir, you do not include me in that category." "I do, sir," said Lincoln. "Mr. President, I am not one of them; I have no interest, remote or immediate, in contracts, and no other interest but to serve the government by sending the exact state of things; do you accept my statement, Mr. President?" "I think I cannot," Lincoln said. "Nobody has said anything to me against you, but my opinion was formed from your letters and dispatches.”¹⁸³ To a friend of the Pathfinder, Lincoln was even more abrupt: "Sir, I believe General Fremont to be a thoroughly honest man, but he has unfortunately surrounded himself with some of the greatest scoundrels on this continent; you are one of them and the worst of them.”¹⁸⁴

FIRING FRÉMONT

The president was dismayed to learn from Frank Blair that Frémont let out contracts carelessly, secluded himself in his expensive mansion-headquarters, busied himself with trivial matters, and refused to draw up action plans. Blair regretted his earlier support of Frémont and now urged his dismissal.¹⁸⁵ In early September, after

¹⁸² Laas, ed., Letters of Elizabeth Blair Lee, 84.

¹⁸³ Plumly to Chase, Washington, 19 October 1861, in Rhodes, History of the United States, 3:480-81.

¹⁸⁴ Thomas Wentworth Higginson to his mother, n.p., 1 November 1861, in Mary Thatcher Higginson, ed., Letters and Journals of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1846-1906 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921), 160.

¹⁸⁵ Frank Blair to Montgomery Blair, St. Louis, 29 August, 1 September 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress; Rolle, Frémont, 66.

receiving numerous similar complaints from leading Kentucky and Missouri Unionists, Lincoln dispatched Montgomery C. Meigs and his brother-in-law Montgomery Blair to St. Louis to investigate those charges.¹⁸⁶ On their way, they stopped in Chicago to hand David Hunter a letter from Lincoln, written at the suggestion of General Scott: “Gen. Frémont needs assistance which it is difficult to give him. He is losing the confidence of men near him, whose support any man in his position must have to be successful. His cardinal mistake is that he isolates himself, & allows nobody to see him; and by which he does not know what is going on in the very matter he is dealing with. He needs to have, by his side, a man of large experience. Will you not, for me, take that place? Your rank is one grade too high to be ordered to it; but will you not serve the country, and oblige me, by taking it voluntarily?”¹⁸⁷ Hunter proceeded to St. Louis with the quartermaster general and the postmaster general. (Though Hunter could have proved helpful, Frémont ignored him.)

After conferring with Frémont, Montgomery Blair recommended his removal, explaining to Lincoln that the Pathfinder seemed “Stupified & almost unconscious, & is doing absolutely nothing. I find but one opinion prevailing among the Union men of the State (many of whom are here) & among the officers, & that is that Fremont is unequal to

¹⁸⁶ Samuel T. Glover to Lincoln, St. Louis, 20, 21 September, 4 October 1861; W. M. Wyeth to Lincoln, St. Joseph, 25 September 1861; Charles Gibson to Lincoln, Washington, 27 September 1861; Joshua F. Speed to Lincoln, St. Louis, 1 and 3 September 1861; Greene Adams and James Speed to Lincoln, St. Louis, 2 September 1861; Francis Preston Blair to Montgomery Blair, St. Louis, 1 September 1861; Samuel T. Glover to Montgomery Blair, St. Louis, 2 September 1861; James O. Broadhead to Montgomery Blair, St. Louis, 3 September 1861; Montgomery Blair to Lincoln, September 3, September 4, 1861; John How to Montgomery Blair, St. Louis, 4 August, 3 October 1861; Giles F. Filley to Henry T. Blow, St. Louis, 7 October 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁸⁷ Lincoln to David Hunter, Washington, 9 September 1861, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 4:513. Scott told Lincoln: “If Major Genl (Major) Hunter could be brought in close relations with Major General Frémont some rash measures might be staved off & good ones accepted by insinuation; but H.'s rank is too high, by one degree to put him on duty as ‘the chief of the staff to act as Adjutant & Inspector General’ of Frémont’s army.” Scott to Lincoln, Washington, 5 September 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

the task of organizing the defences of the State.”¹⁸⁸ (Blair’s sister heard from a member of the Pathfinder’s staff that his “seclusion & torpor” resulted from “the fact of his being an opium eater.”)¹⁸⁹ Meigs discovered that Frémont was “living in state with body-guards sentinels” and “building fortifications about the City at extravagant cost. He has built more gun-boats than directed. He is buying tents of bad patterns. . . at prices fixed by himself – not by the purchasing officers. The impression among the regular officers is that he is incapable, and that he is looking not to the Country but to the Presidency; he is thought to be a man of no principle. The rebels are killing and ravaging the Union men throughout the state; great distress and alarm prevail; in St. Louis the leading people of the state complain that they cannot see him; he does not encourage them to form regiments of defence, but keeps his eye fixed upon Cairo and the expedition down the Mississippi, while he leaves the state unprotected. Some talk of his intending to set off – like Aaron Burr – for himself with an independent empire. He lives in great style in a fine house. . . . A general atmosphere of distrust and suspicion pervades the place; none of the regular officers seemed to think him honest.”¹⁹⁰

Even admirers of the Pathfinder were appalled at his conduct. One wrote from St. Louis “that he fears all is going wrong, that Fremont has surrounded himself with a set of corrupt broken-down speculators from California, and is playing the very devil with the

¹⁸⁸ Montgomery Blair to Lincoln, St. Louis, 14 September 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁸⁹ Elizabeth Blair Lee to Samuel Phillips Lee, Silver Spring, 22 October 1861, Laas, ed., Letters of Elizabeth Blair Lee, 90n2.

¹⁹⁰ Meigs diary, 18 September 1861, copy, Nicolay Papers, Library of Congress.

public money – that he is almost inaccessible to the best men. On one occasion Gov. Gamble could not get access to him for a week.”¹⁹¹

Egged on by his hyper-ambitious, headstrong wife, known as “General Jessie,” Frémont committed a major blunder by arresting Frank Blair immediately after his brother had departed St. Louis. Frank Blair had criticized the general’s failure to send reinforcements to Lexington.¹⁹² The Pathfinder, whose nature was “bitter & vindictive,” denounced Blair’s “insidious & dishonorable efforts to bring my authority into contempt with the Govt & to undermine my influence as an officer.”¹⁹³ This high-handed act created an uproar in the national press. When the St. Louis Evening News came to Blair’s defense, Frémont made matters worse by suppressing it and jailing the editor.¹⁹⁴

On September 17, Thomas S. Ewing, who had served in the senate with Frémont, wrote Lincoln that the Pathfinder was “a man of imperfect military education & no military experience & habitually jealous of those who possess these qualifications which he has not– Those who knew him in California represented him to me as having there assumed state & pomp & ceremony under circumstances and in a style calculated to provoke ridicule – and that he was withal arrogant & jealous of power, quite disposed to combine the Russian autocrat with the Turkish Sultan– The sooner you call him to

¹⁹¹ This is William P. Fessenden’s summary of a letter he received from a friend. Fessenden to James W. Grimes, Portland, 26 September 1861, Fessenden Papers, Bowdoin College.

¹⁹² On the complex origins of this quarrel, see Nevins, Pathmarker, 649-50.

¹⁹³ George Gibbs to John Austin Stevens, Washington, 15 May 1861, Stevens Papers, New-York Historical Society; Frémont to Edward D. Townsend, St. Louis, 16 September 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁹⁴ Nevins, Pathmarker, 525.

Washington for the purpose of consultation & dispose of him in a quiet way, the better.”¹⁹⁵ (Elsewhere, Ewing described Frémont as “a vain pompous blatherskite.”)¹⁹⁶

On September 19, Lincoln had General Scott draft an order instructing Frémont to turn over his command and report to Washington immediately. At Seward’s suggestion, however, the president did not send it.¹⁹⁷ It was feared that the Pathfinder’s “hold on the great masses of the West, the great popularity of his proclamation, and the difficulty of finding a successor” made his removal inadvisable at that time.¹⁹⁸

Lincoln ordered the release of Frank Blair, but when that choleric congressman threatened to bring charges against Frémont, the Pathfinder once again arrested him, only to have General Scott countermand his act.¹⁹⁹ The exasperated president was sorely tempted to dismiss Frémont, but he hesitated when Illinois Governor Richard Yates told the cabinet that “the army of the West would rebel.”²⁰⁰ He sent Cameron and Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas to Missouri with an order relieve the Pathfinder, but only if he were not about to fight a battle. Cameron later said that it “was necessary that somebody go out and attend to Fremont. Blair went first and equivocated. Then they all said I must go. I told Lincoln I understand this – Fremont has got to be turned out, and somebody

¹⁹⁵ Thomas Ewing to Lincoln, Lancaster, Ohio, 17 September 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁹⁶ Thomas Ewing to Hugh Ewing, Lancaster, Ohio, 2 November 1861, typescript, Ewing Family Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁹⁷ Scott to Frémont, Washington, 19 September 1861, draft, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress. Seward told Lincoln: “These notices (in the Star of this evening, complicate the question of disturbing Fremont just now. I will see you at 8 P. M. if you are at home then.” Seward to Lincoln, Washington, 19 September 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁹⁸ Washington correspondence, 22 September, Chicago Tribune, 23 September 1861.

¹⁹⁹ Frémont had Blair arrested on September 16; he was released eight days later. After Blair filed charges against Frémont, he was rearrested on September 28.

²⁰⁰ Yates to Gustave Koerner, Springfield, 25 October 1861, Thomas J. McCormick, ed., Memoirs of Gustave Koerner, 1809-1896 (2 vols.; Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Torch Press, 1909), 2:188.

will have to bear the odium of it.”²⁰¹ The meddlesome Chase, who informally assumed many of the war secretary’s responsibilities, urged Cameron to “bear in mind that we must have vigor, capacity and honesty. If F[remont] has these qualities sustain him. If not let nothing prevent you from taking the bull by the horns. We have had enough dilly dallying, temporizing and disgraces.”²⁰²

When Lincoln asked Samuel R. Curtis, commanding in St. Louis, his opinion of Frémont, he replied that the Pathfinder “lacks the intelligence, the experience & the sagacity necessary to his command.”²⁰³ (Curtis told Lorenzo Thomas that Frémont was not only “unequal to the task of commanding an army” but also “no more bound by law than by the winds.”)²⁰⁴ Lyman Trumbull visited St. Louis and reported to the White House that he had “found a most deplorable condition of things there.”²⁰⁵

Comment [C1]:

In October, Lincoln requested seventy-seven-year-old General John E. Wool, the second highest-ranking officer in the army, to aid Frémont. When, however, Wool demanded complete control of the Pathfinder’s department, the president withdrew his request. Wool sourly remarked that the country did not have “a man at the helm of state capable of directing affairs of state at this important crisis.” While he believed that

²⁰¹ Cameron, interview with Nicolay, n.p., 20 February 1875, in Michael Burlingame, ed., An Oral History of Abraham Lincoln: John G. Nicolay’s Interviews and Essays (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 43.

²⁰² John Niven, Salmon P. Chase: A Biography (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 281.

²⁰³ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 4:549; Samuel R. Curtis to Lincoln, Benton Barracks (near St. Louis), 12 October 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁰⁴ Curtis paraphrased in Lorenzo Thomas to Cameron, Washington, 21 October 1861, O.R., I, 3:541.

²⁰⁵ Trumbull to Lincoln, Alton, 1 October 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

Lincoln was honest and well-intentioned, his “limited knowledge necessarily subjects him to be the instrument of others.”²⁰⁶

Finally, Cameron presented a dismissal order to the Pathfinder, prompting that general to beg for a chance to prove himself in battle, for he had belatedly started to move against Confederate forces in western Missouri.²⁰⁷ Cameron agreed to withhold the order on the understanding that Frémont would attack the rebels soon. General Thomas, after conferring with David Hunter and others, submitted a blistering report urging Frémont’s removal from command.²⁰⁸ The president received similar comments from Elihu B. Washburne, David Hunter, Charles G. Halpine, Ward Hill Lamon, John A. Gurley, Charles Gibson, John G. Nicolay, Thurlow Weed, and Josiah M. Lucas.

On October 22, Lincoln told the cabinet that “it was now clear that Fremont was not fit for the command” and that “Hunter was better.” Seward dissented, arguing that the Pathfinder was too popular with the army to dismiss. Chase and Cameron concurred, to the disgust of Bates, who urged Lincoln “to avoid the timorous and vacillating course that could but degrade the Adm[inistratio]n and make it weak and helpless – to assume the powers of his place and speak in the language of command.” To leave Frémont in place

²⁰⁶ Wool to Sarah Wool, Fort Monroe, 7, 9, 10, 21 October 1861, Wool Papers, New York State Library, Albany.

²⁰⁷ “He was very much mortified, pained, and, I thought humiliated He made an earnest appeal to me, saying that he had come to Missouri, at the request of the Government, to assume a very responsible command, and that when he reached this state he found himself without troops and without any preparation for an army; that he had exerted himself, as he believed, with great energy, and had now around him a fine army, with every thing to make success certain; that he was now in pursuit of the enemy, whom he believed were now within his reach, and that to recall him at this moment would not only destroy him, but render his whole expenditure useless. In reply to this appeal, I told him that I would withhold the order until my return to Washington, giving him the interim to prove the reality of his hopes as to reaching and capturing the enemy, giving him to understand that should he fail, he must give place to some other officer. He assured me that, should he fail, he would resign at once.” Simon Cameron to Lincoln, St. Louis, 14 October 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁰⁸ Thomas to Cameron, Washington, 21 October 1861, O.R., I, 3:540-41.

after Cameron had countermanded his orders, repudiated his contracts, denounced his contractors, suspended his officers, and halted construction of fortifications at St. Louis would convince the public that the administration feared him.²⁰⁹ Heatedly the attorney general protested against having his home state “sacrificed on such motives.” Despite this passionate appeal, Lincoln agreed to postpone action. Bates said the president hung “in painful and mortifying doubt” and that his suffering was “evidently great.”²¹⁰ (Bates conceded that he had “demanded the recall of Genl. Fremont, possibly with too much emphasis & too often repeated.”)²¹¹

Helping to stay Lincoln’s hand was pressure from Radical senators and congressmen, who warned him that if he removed Frémont, “you displease millions of western men, but if you feel it to be your duty to do it, go ahead, but remember one thing – the western people will insist that the same rule be as rigidly applied to incompetent generals in this vicinity. It will never do to remove Fremont for incompetency and retain generals here whose names we can mention if they are also open to the same charge!”²¹² Other Radicals, notably the editors of the Chicago Tribune, had grown disenchanted with the Pathfinder and said so publicly.²¹³

On October 24, Lincoln finally issued an order dismissing Frémont, with the proviso that it was not to be delivered if he was on the verge of a battle, or in the midst of

²⁰⁹ Washington correspondence, 14 October, New York Tribune, 15 October 1861.

²¹⁰ Seward to Lincoln, Washington, 19 September 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress; Beale, ed., Bates Diary, 198 (entry for 3 October 1861).

²¹¹ William E. Parish, Turbulent Partnership: Missouri and the Union, 1861-1865 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1963), 73.

²¹² Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 29 October, Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 1 November 1861.

²¹³ Chicago Tribune, n.d., copied in the New York World, 11 November 1861.

one, or had won one.²¹⁴ Since none of those conditions obtained, even though the army had belatedly begun to drive the Confederates from Missouri, on November 2 the order was handed to Frémont, who reluctantly turned over his command to Hunter.²¹⁵ Lincoln suggested to the new commander of the Department of the West that he abandon the pursuit of Price, pull back to Rolla and Sedalia, regroup his forces, guard the railroads, suppress local uprisings, and drive off invaders. Hopefully he predicted that before spring arrived, “the people of Missouri will be in no favorable mood to renew, for next year, the troubles which have so much afflicted, and impoverished them during this.”²¹⁶

The editor of the Cincinnati Gazette, Richard Smith, warned Chase that “the West is threatened with a revolution” because the “public consider that Fremont has been made a martyr.” Even “sober citizens” were so enraged that they burned the president in effigy and yanked his portrait from their walls and trampled it underfoot. Rhetorically he asked: “Is it not time for the President to stop and consider, whether, as this is a government of the people, it is not unsafe to disregard and override public sentiment, as has been done in the case of Gen’l Fremont?” The Pathfinder, Smith explained, “is to the West what Napoleon was to France” while Lincoln “has lost the confidence of the people.”²¹⁷

Henry Winter Davis, who eventually became a leading Radical critic of the administration, applauded Frémont’s dismissal and condemned “the abolition onslaught in Congress – which assails the Prest. for leniency in the war – & looks to a subjugation

²¹⁴ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 4:562.

²¹⁵ The extraordinary difficulty involved in getting the order to the inaccessible general is described by the courier, T. I. McKenny, in Tarbell, Lincoln, 2:66-69, and in the St. Louis correspondence, 12 November, Cincinnati Enquirer, n.d., copied in the Missouri Democrat (St. Louis), 16 November 1861.

²¹⁶ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:1-2.

²¹⁷ Richard Smith to Chase, Cincinnati, 7 November 1861, Chase Papers, Library of Congress.

of the rebellious states – a freeing of all the negroes – & holding the country merely by military power governed by the U.S. under Territorial forms!!”²¹⁸ Even some who condemned Fremont’s dismissal as a blunder admitted that his appointment in the first place was a blunder.²¹⁹

In response to the public uproar, cabinet members who had recommended Frémont’s ouster expressed second thoughts. Mildly irritated, Lincoln complained that those men “now wished to escape the responsibility of it.”²²⁰ In 1863, he offered post-mortems on Frémont’s hundred-day career in Missouri. He told John Hay, “I had thought well of Frémont. Even now I think well of his impulses. I only think he is the prey of wicked and designing men and I think he has absolutely no military capacity.”²²¹ To a group of abolitionists, he said: “I have great respect for General Fremont and his abilities, but the fact is that the pioneer in any movement is not generally the best man to carry that movement to a successful issue.” A case in point was Moses, who “began the emancipation of the Jews, but didn’t take Israel to the Promised Land after all. He had to make way for Joshua to complete the work. It looks as if the first reformer of a thing has to meet such a hard opposition and gets so battered and bespattered, that afterwards, when people find them have to accept his reform, they will accept it more easily from another man.”²²²

²¹⁸ Henry Winter Davis to Samuel Francis Du Pont, [Baltimore], 18 December 1861, transcript, S. F. Du Pont Papers, Hagley Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.

²¹⁹ Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, 23 November 1861.

²²⁰ Washington correspondence, 27 November, Philadelphia Inquirer, 28 November 1861.

²²¹ Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 123 (entry for 28 November 1863).

²²² Moncure Conway, Autobiography, Memories and Experiences of Moncure Daniel Conway (2 vols.; London: Cassell, 1904), 1:380.

Nicolay was less charitable in his assessment of the Pathfinder, judging that the “d—d fool has completely frittered away the fairest opportunity a man of small experience ever had to make his name immortal.”²²³ Edward Bates was equally emphatic: Frémont in his view “has done more damage to our cause than half a dozen of the ablest generals of the enemy can do.”²²⁴

ALL QUIET IN THE WESTS

One of Frémont’s more judicious acts while in charge of the Western Department was to appoint U. S. Grant to command a district with headquarters at Cairo. From there, on November 7 he moved nine miles south to attack Confederate forces at Belmont, Missouri, where he demolished a camp, captured half a dozen guns, and inflicted 642 casualties while sustaining comparable losses before being repulsed.

John A. McClelland, a brigade commander under Grant and Lincoln’s former political opponent and congressman, expressed dissatisfaction with the administration’s inadequate support for the Illinois units he headed. The president thanked and congratulated him and his men for all “you have done honor to yourselves and the flag and service to the country.” As for the shortages and other problems the Illinoisans faced, Lincoln explained that in “my present position, I must care for the whole nation; but I hope it will be no injustice to any other state, for me to indulge a little home pride, that Illinois does not disappoint us. . . . Be assured, we do not forget or neglect you. Much, very much, goes undone: but it is because we have not the power to do it faster than we

²²³ Nicolay to John Hay, Springfield, 21 October 1861, in Burlingame, ed., With Lincoln in the White House, 61.

²²⁴ Bates to Chase, St. Louis, 11 September 1861, Chase Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

do. Some of your forces are without arms, but the same is true here, and at every other place where we have considerable bodies of troops. The plain matter-of-fact is, our good people have rushed to the rescue of the Government, faster than the government can find arms to put into their hands. It would be agreeable to each division of the army to know its own precise destination: but the Government cannot immediately, nor inflexibly at any time, determine as to all; nor if determined, can it tell its friends without at the same time telling its enemies. We know you do all as wisely and well as you can; and you will not be deceived if you conclude the same is true of us.”²²⁵

On another occasion, when officers complained about a lack of equipment, Lincoln told an anecdote from his days on the circuit in Illinois. Late one night a thirsty traveler banged on the door of a tavern in Postville and demanded a drink of whisky. When the host and guests explained that they had none, the desperate fellow exclaimed, “Great heavens, give me an ear of corn and a nutmeg grater and I’ll make some!”²²⁶

On November 9, Lincoln broke up the gigantic Western Department, placing Henry W. Halleck, a pedantic, goggle-eyed, indecisive West Point graduate in command of the new Department of Missouri (which also encompassed Arkansas and western Kentucky). Halleck had earned the sobriquet “Old Brains” for writing several books, most notably Elements of Military Art and Science, which made him the premier military theorist in the country.²²⁷ Hunter was assigned to the Department of Kansas, and Don

²²⁵ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:20.

²²⁶ Lawrence Beaumont Stringer, “From the Sangamon to the Potomac: More Light on Abraham Lincoln,” typescript of an unpublished manuscript, p. 94, Edgar Dewitt Jones Papers, Detroit Public Library.

²²⁷ John F. Marszalek, Commander of All Lincoln's Armies: A Life of General Henry W. Halleck (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 108-10.

Carlos Buell was to head the Department of the Ohio, with responsibility for eastern Kentucky. Buell and Halleck were supposed to coordinate their efforts; the former was to move south along the Mississippi toward Memphis while the latter was to slice the critically important rail line connecting Virginia with the Confederate West and to liberate eastern Tennessee, where Unionists were suffering persecution.²²⁸ In the West, Lincoln emphasized seizing territory, in the East, destruction of the enemy's army.²²⁹

A stern martinet who suffered from indecisiveness, Buell understandably thought Lincoln's plan infeasible, for his army faced daunting logistical problems in marching across four mountain chains in winter, then occupying eastern Tennessee, with no rail line to supply it. McClellan, however, counted on Buell to cut the railroad from Virginia to Chattanooga, isolating the Confederate forces he planned to attack in the Old Dominion; Little Mac said he would be unable to advance until Buell accomplished his mission. Buell, however, favored moving against Nashville in central Tennessee, following the line of the Cumberland River, as a more practicable alternative to Lincoln's strategy. Impertinently, he told the president that he moved to implement this plan reluctantly: "I have been bound to it more by, say sympathy for the people of Eastern Tennessee, and the anxiety with which yourself and the General in Chief have desired it, than by my opinion of its wisdom."²³⁰

Meanwhile in Missouri, Halleck reported that "everything here is in complete chaos. The most astonishing orders and contracts for supplies of all kinds have been

²²⁸ Lincoln had spelled out this strategy in a "plan for campaign" written probably in late September or early October 1861. Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 4:544-45.

²²⁹ Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, "Lincoln as a Military Strategist," Civil War History 26 (1980): 293-303.

²³⁰ Buell to Lincoln, Louisville, 5 January 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

made and large amounts purport to have been received but there is nothing to show that they have ever been properly issued, and they cannot now be found.”²³¹ Swiftly he cancelled fraudulent contracts, suppressed guerillas, brought order out of the administrative rat’s-nest left behind by Frémont, fired do-nothing staffers, suspended the construction of needless fortifications around St. Louis, and restored order to the state, all the while complaining about a shortage of troops and weapons.²³²

From Kansas, Hunter protested bitterly that his new post command was too small for a man of his rank. Gently Lincoln chided him and offered sound paternal advice: “I am constrained to say it is difficult to answer so ugly a letter in good temper. I am, as you intimate, losing much of the great confidence I placed in you, not from any act or omission of yours touching the public service, up to the time you were sent to Leavenworth, but from the flood of grumbling despatches and letters I have seen from you since. I knew you were being ordered to Leavenworth at the time it was done; and I aver that with as tender a regard for your honor and your sensibilities as I had for my own, it never occurred to me that you were being ‘humiliated, insulted and disgraced’; nor have I, up to this day, heard an intimation that you have been wronged, coming from any one but yourself. No one has blamed you for the retrograde movement from Springfield, nor for the information you gave Gen. Cameron; and this you could readily understand, if it were not for your unwarranted assumption that the ordering you to Leavenworth must necessarily have been done as a punishment for some fault. I thought then, and think yet, the position assigned to you is as respo[n]sible, and as honorable, as that assigned to Buell. I know that Gen. McClellan expected more important results from

²³¹ O.R., I, 8:389-90.

²³² Marszalek, Halleck, 110-14.

it. My impression is that at the time you were assigned to the new Western Department, it had not been determined to re-place Gen. Sherman in Kentucky; but of this I am not certain, because the idea that a command in Kentucky was very desirable, and one in the farther West, very undesirable, had never occurred to me. You constantly speak of being placed in command of only 3000. Now tell me, is not this mere impatience? Have you not known all the while that you are to command four or five times that many? I have been, and am sincerely your friend; and if, as such, I dare to make a suggestion, I would say you are adopting the best possible way to ruin yourself.” Quoting one of his favorite poets, Alexander Pope, Lincoln counseled: “‘Act well your part, there all the honor lies.’ He who does something at the head of one Regiment, will eclipse him who does nothing at the head of a hundred.”²³³

NAVAL SUCCESS

Amid the gloomy aftermath of Bull Run, the navy provided the only bright spots. In August, with the help of troops under Ben Butler, it seized control of Hatteras Inlet on North Carolina’s Outer Banks. The small-scale operation, which deprived the Confederates of a privateer haven, required only seven ships. But minor though it was, this victory just after the ignominious defeat of McDowell cheered up Lincoln, his constituents, and the army.²³⁴ Butler, smarting from the loss at Big Bethel in June, rushed to the White House with the good news.²³⁵ (His haste to brag about his accomplishment

²³³ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:84-85.

²³⁴ E. B. Washburne to his wife, Washington, 1 September 1861, Washburn Family Papers, Washburn Memorial Library, Norlands, Maine; Fessenden to J. S. Pike, Portland, 8 September 1861, Pike Papers, Library of Congress.

²³⁵ Washington correspondence, 1 September, Chicago Evening Journal, 3 September 1861.

made him appear “schoolboyish” to some.)²³⁶ When the general arrived late at night to submit his report, Gustavus Fox, who had helped plan the operation, suggested that he immediately tell the president what had happened.

"We ought not to do that," said Butler, "and get him up at this time of night. Let him sleep."

"He will sleep enough better for it," replied Fox.

At the White House, Lincoln was so exhilarated at the glad tidings that he hugged the diminutive Fox and together “they flew around the room once or twice.” The president’s night shirt “was considerably agitated,” much to the amusement of Butler.²³⁷

In November, seventy naval vessels and 12,000 troops captured Port Royal, South Carolina, which became a vital link in the blockade. While helping to plan that operation, carried out jointly by Flag Officer Samuel Francis Du Pont and General Thomas W. Sherman, Lincoln grew frustrated by delays. Time and again the launch date was postponed until finally, on September 18, Lincoln told Welles that the “joint expedition of the Army and Navy, agreed upon some time since, . . . is in no wise to be abandoned, but must be ready to move by the 1st of or very early in October. Let all preparations go forward accordingly.”²³⁸ Du Pont feared that such a deadline “would involve imperfect preparation.”²³⁹ On October 1, the expedition was still not ready to depart. That day the president got “his dander up a little” when, during a council of war, mention was made of a scheme that General Ambrose E. Burnside was concocting for a campaign to secure the

²³⁶ George Gibbs to John Austin Stevens, Washington, 3 September 1861, Stevens Papers, New-York Historical Society.

²³⁷ Benjamin Butler, Autobiography and Personal Reminiscences of Major-General Benj. F. Butler: Butler’s Book (Boston: A. M. Thayer, 1892), 287-88.

²³⁸ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 4:528.

²³⁹ Du Pont to his wife, Washington, 17 September 1861, Hayes, ed., Du Pont Letters, 1:149.

Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac River. Lincoln, “with some warmth,” denied “all knowledge of it” and asked that the matter “be sifted instanter.” An official from the war department soon arrived with a paper from McClellan’s headquarters describing an “expedition of 8,000 men, General McClellan to name the Commanding General and names Burnside.” No one in the war council had seen this paper, including Lincoln, who said he had never been asked “or told a word on the subject” and talked “of going back to Illinois if his memory has become as treacherous as that.”²⁴⁰

Around that time, Lincoln remarked ironically to Ohio Governor William Dennison, who thought that the various government departments were “little islands unto themselves,” that if Jefferson Davis “was to get me and I told him all I know, I couldn’t give him much information that would be useful to him.”²⁴¹

In mid-October, when Sherman asked for a regiment from McClellan’s army, the president became irritated, as did the Young Napoleon, who objected to any diminution of his army. On October 17, Lincoln told Seward: “I think I will telegraph to Sherman that I will not break up McClellan[’]s command and that I haven[’]t much hope of his expedition anyway.” The secretary of state replied, “No you won[’]t say discouraging things to a man going off with his life in his hand. Send him some hopeful and cheering dispatch.” Lincoln took only part of this advice, telling Sherman: “I will not break up McC’s army without his consent. I do not think I will come to Annapolis.” John Hay thought Lincoln’s “petulance very unaccountable.”²⁴² A telegraph operator who often saw the president testified that he “was sometimes critical and even sarcastic when

²⁴⁰ Samuel F. Du Pont to Henry Winter Davis, New York, 8 October 1861, ibid., 1:162-63.

²⁴¹ Diary of William T. Coggeshall, 25 November 1861, in Freda Postle Koch, Colonel Coggeshall: The Man Who Saved Lincoln (Columbus, Ohio: Poko Press, 1985), 61.

²⁴² Burlingame and Ettlinger, eds., Hay Diary, 27 (entry for 17 October 1861).

[military] events moved slowly.”²⁴³ The president was further annoyed by delays in launching the operation, which departed in January.²⁴⁴

The Port Royal armada, whose mission has been planned by Fox, finally sailed on October 29, complete with the regiment that Sherman had requested. The country anxiously awaited word of this force, whose destination was a closely-guarded secret. When a White House caller implored him to reveal it, Lincoln teasingly asked if he could keep the information to himself. “Oh, yes, upon my honor,” came the answer. “Well,” said Lincoln, “I will tell you.” Pulling his curious visitor near him, the president told him in a whisper loud enough to be heard by everyone in the room, “Well, the expedition has gone to . . . SEA!”²⁴⁵ Nine days after departing, the combined army and navy forces scored a brilliant success.²⁴⁶ Northerners rejoiced at what they called a “glorious achievement” and “our first great victory.”²⁴⁷ At Lincoln’s suggestion, Congress expressed its thanks to Du Pont “for the decisive and splendid victory achieved at Port Royal.”²⁴⁸

At the same time, Lincoln derived satisfaction from the victory of the Republican mayoral candidate in New York, George Opdyke, who defeated the incumbent, Fernando

²⁴³ David Homer Bates, Lincoln Stories: Told by Him in the Military Office in the War Department During the Civil War (New York: William Edwin Rudge, 1926), 24.

²⁴⁴ Washington correspondence by R. M. H., 15 January, Indianapolis Journal, 21 January 1862.

²⁴⁵ New York Evening Post, 1 November 1864.

²⁴⁶ Virgil Carrington Jones, The Civil War at Sea (3 vols.; New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1960-62), 1:253-84.

²⁴⁷ Mark Howard to Gideon Welles, Hartford, 14 November 1861; Fanny Eames to Welles, New York, 14 November 1861, Welles Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁴⁸ O.R.N., 12:291.

Wood, a bitter critic of the administration. William Cullen Bryant reported this good news “fills Washington with rejoicing.”²⁴⁹

Lincoln had little time to relish those triumphs, for Frémont’s dismissal touched off an explosion of anger. Missouri Germans complained vehemently, as did militant opponents of slavery throughout the North.²⁵⁰ Protest meetings were held in New York, Cincinnati, and other cities.²⁵¹ German troops in the Pathfinder’s army practically mutinied, swearing “that they had enlisted only under the expectation of being led by Fremont.”²⁵² At Washington, opinion was reported to be “very much against the removal of Frémont just as he was about to give battle to the enemy. Much sympathy is expressed for the removed general, and indignation at the vacillation of President Lincoln. The simple truth is, Mr. Lincoln has been wavering about Fremont for six weeks, and had not the courage to remove him at the proper time, before he left St. Louis. He finally got his courage to the sticking point just as he was ready to fight, and had driven the rebels out of Missouri. Yet General Stone, after the Leesburg [Ball’s Bluff] blunder, is untouched.”²⁵³

Acknowledging that the Pathfinder “may have wanted system in his financial

arrangements, and may have trusted too much to selfish men, in making contracts,” Lydia

²⁴⁹ Ron Soodalter, Hanging Captain Gordon: The Life and Trial of an American Slave Trader (New York: Atria Books, 2006) 153.

²⁵⁰ Germans for a Free Missouri: Translations from the St. Louis Radical Press, 1857-1862, selected and translated by Steven Rowan (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983), 284-90; Nevins, Pathmarker, 542-48.

²⁵¹ Carl Wittke, Refugees of Revolution: The German Forty-Eighters in America (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1952), 233.

²⁵² Koerner, Memoirs, 2:189.

²⁵³ Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 5 November, Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 8 November 1861. Not every journalist agreed. One reported that most observers in Washington were amazed that Lincoln “so long delayed the act of removal after his judgment was fully convinced, and that he allows Fremont’s newspaper organs in the West to insult the Government by the incendiary and mutinous language.” Washington correspondence, 5 November, New York Times, 7 November 1861.

Maria Child deplored “the manner in which the whole affair has been conducted.”²⁵⁴ A Republican paper in Ohio patronizingly declared that Lincoln’s “best friends and most intimate associates will hardly claim for him praise for any higher attribute than the absence of bad intentions.”²⁵⁵ The Radicals interpreted the dismissal as yet another sign that the administration was soft on slavery. “Where are you, that you let the hounds run down your friend Fremont ?” Thaddeus Stevens asked Simon Stevens.²⁵⁶ Publicly, William Lloyd Garrison speculated that Lincoln’s action would harm “the cause of the government, by depressing the moral sentiment and popular enthusiasm inspired by General Frémont’s proclamation.”²⁵⁷ Privately, Garrison wrote that though the president was six feet, four inches tall, “he is only a dwarf in mind.”²⁵⁸ Parker Pillsbury was so disgusted with Lincoln’s administration, which he deemed “the wickedest we have ever had,” that he rejoiced “in defeat and disaster rather than in victory, because I do not believe the North is in any condition to improve any great success which may attend its arms.”²⁵⁹ Lydia Maria Child said that although she “would be gratified by having a bomb-shell burst in the White House,” she refrained from criticizing the administration openly, for “the country is in such a precarious situation, that every patriotic heart is bound to be . . . forbearing.” Privately, she mocked Lincoln, exclaiming: “Look at his

²⁵⁴ Lydia Maria Child to Sarah Blake Sturgis Shaw, Wayland, Massachusetts, 24 November 1861, Child Correspondence, microfiche edition, ed. Milton Meltzer and Patricia G. Holland.

²⁵⁵ Cincinnati Press, n.d, copied in the Illinois State Register (Springfield), 13 November 1861.

²⁵⁶ Thaddeus Stevens to Simon Stevens, Washington, 5 November 1861, Stevens Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁵⁷ The Liberator (Boston), 20 September 1861.

²⁵⁸ Garrison to Oliver Johnson, Boston, 7 October 1861, Walter M. Merrill, ed., The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison (6 vols.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971-81), 5:37.

²⁵⁹ Speech at Albany, 7 February 1862, National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 22 February 1862.

long, lanky neck! How weak it looks! how infirm of purpose! What a poor old dried leaf he is, to be whirled aloft by a tempest!”²⁶⁰

When Congressman George W. Julian insisted that Frémont be given another command, Lincoln replied that he could not do so without removing some other general. Julian’s request reminded the president of a young man whose father urged him to take a wife. “Whose wife shall I take?” queried the young man.²⁶¹ Lincoln told a St. Louis businessman that he did not “feel unkindly towards Fremont, but will never give him an independent command.” The president would have appointed the Pathfinder minister to Russia “if he had treated him even civilly.”²⁶² When the abolitionist Moncure D. Conway called at the White House to protest, Lincoln explained that “Fremont is in a hurry. Slavery is going down hill. We may be better able to do something towards emancipation by and by than now.” Conway responded: “our fathers compromised with slavery because they said it was going down hill; hence, war today. Slavery is the commissary of the southern army.”²⁶³

The following month, Lincoln once again had to deal with an inflammatory proclamation issued by an abolitionist general. On December 4, General John W. Phelps, a Vermont abolitionist commanding federal troops at Ship Island, Mississippi, announced to the “loyal people of the Southwest” that Slave States were “under the highest obligations of honor and morality to abolish Slavery.” As soon as slavery was abolished,

²⁶⁰ Lydia Maria Child to Sarah Blake Sturgis Shaw, Wayland, Massachusetts, 24 November 1861, Child Correspondence, microfiche edition, ed. Milton Meltzer and Patricia G. Holland.

²⁶¹ Julian in Rice, ed., Reminiscences of Lincoln, 55.

²⁶² Henry D. Bacon to S. L. M. Barlow, n.p., 20 January 1862, Barlow Ppaers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California, copy in the Allan Nevins Papers, Columbia University.

²⁶³ W. A. Croffut, memoirs, typescript, p. 86, Croffut Papers, Library of Congress.

"our Southern brethren . . . would begin to emerge from a hateful delirium" and "their days [would] become happy and their nights peaceable and free from alarm."²⁶⁴ This document's "revolutionary and fanatical spirit, and total lack disregard of the policy of the Administration," aroused both "the amazement and indignation of the President."²⁶⁵ Rather than firing the general, Lincoln ignored his proclamation.²⁶⁶ Phelps' unit was soon folded into Benjamin F. Butler's command, leaving the Vermont firebrand without the authority to issue similar documents. When Phelps resigned to protest Butler's foot-dragging on the recruitment of black troops, Lincoln did not intervene.

McCLELLAN AND THE ADMINISTRATION UNDER ATTACK

At the time Frémont was removed, he was pursuing the enemy; meanwhile in the East, the conservative Democrat McClellan presided over the disaster at Ball's Bluff and then refused to undertake even a modest offensive. When Congress reassembled in early December, the Radicals demanded an investigation of the army and established a body to carry it out, the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, authorized to examine all aspects of the conflict. It vindicated Frémont, whom the Radicals regarded as "emancipation's martyr."²⁶⁷ The naiveté of the committee members, mostly Radical Republicans, led them to urge the appointment of men like Frémont whose antislavery ardor was matched only by their military incompetence. While the committee was critical of the president, it provided him with a tool to help spur his generals to fight, for Lincoln

²⁶⁴ Ira Berlin, ed., The Destruction of Slavery (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 199-201.

²⁶⁵ Washington correspondence, 18 December, New York Times, 19 December 1861.

²⁶⁶ Berlin, ed., Destruction of Slavery, 202n.

²⁶⁷ Bruce Tap, Over Lincoln's Shoulder: The Committee on the Conduct of the War (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 23-24, 32, 81-100.

was just as eager as the Radicals to conduct the war vigorously.²⁶⁸ He wanted aggressive, effective commanders.

McClellan did not fit that description. The Radicals, along with the rest of the North, grew increasingly impatient with the Young Napoleon as winter approached. Ideal fighting weather persisted into December, but the Army of the Potomac failed to take advantage of it. Instead, it concentrated on ringing Washington with dozens of forts, mounting hundreds of guns. (After inspecting those works and hearing Little Mac explain that every contingency should be planned for, the president remarked: “The precaution is doubtless a wise one, and I’m glad to get so clear an explanation, for it reminds me of an interesting question once discussed for several weeks in our lyceum or moot court in Springfield, Illinois, soon after I began reading law. The question was, ‘Why does man have breasts?’ After many evenings’ debate, the question was submitted to the presiding judge, who wisely decided ‘that if under any circumstances, however fortuitous, or by any chance or freak, no matter of what nature or by what cause, a man should have a baby, there would be the breasts to nurse it.’”)²⁶⁹

“There is a growing dissatisfaction with McClellan’s inaction here which finds universal utterance,” Congressman Henry L. Dawes reported from Washington.²⁷⁰ Adam Gurowski spoke for many when he expressed the hope that “the committee will quickly find out what a terrible mistake this McClellan is, and warn the nation of him.”²⁷¹ In fact, the committee chairman, Ohio Senator Benjamin F. Wade, deplored McClellan’s

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 1-9 and passim; Trefousse, Radical Republicans, 182-86.

²⁶⁹ John G. Barnard, remarks made at a dinner in 1871, as recalled by “S.S.,” New York Tribune, 21 October 1885.

²⁷⁰ Dawes to his wife, Washington, 11 December 1861, Dawes Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁷¹ Tap, Over Lincoln’s Shoulder, 35.

timidity. Soon after being named general-in-chief, Little Mac promised to launch an offensive within weeks, but he did not. In early December, Lincoln formally asked him about the feasibility of attacking the Confederates' supply lines to Manassas. If the Union army managed to cut their rail link, Johnston would be forced out of his entrenched position.²⁷² It was a sensible plan, but predictably Little Mac asserted that since the enemy forces were nearly as large as his own, no such advance should be risked. Yet, he said, he had a plan "that I do not think at all anticipated by the enemy nor by any of our own people." He did not deign to spell out that plan.²⁷³ On December 20, McClellan came down with typhoid fever and was indisposed for three weeks.²⁷⁴

Despair overspread the North as the army entered winter quarters; some feared that its inaction would lead European nations to recognize the Confederacy.²⁷⁵ In early January, Congressman Henry L. Dawes told his wife that the "times are exceedingly dark and gloomy – I have never seen a time when they were so much so. Confidence in everybody is shaken to the very foundation – The credit of the Country is ruined – its arms impotent, its Cabinet incompetent, its servants rotten, its ruin inevitable The Govt. can't survive sixty days of such a life as it is now living. Oh that such a Cause should be crucified to an unholy alliance between trifling indifference, utter incompetence and reeking corruption."²⁷⁶

²⁷² Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:34.

²⁷³ McClellan to Lincoln, 10 December 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁷⁴ Ethan S. Rafuse, "Typhoid and Tumult: Lincoln's Response to General McClellan's Bout with Typhoid Fever during the Winter of 1861-62," Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association 18 (1997):1-16.

²⁷⁵ Hiram Barney to Chase, New York, 2 November 1861, Chase Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

²⁷⁶ Dawes to his wife, Washington, 6 January 1862, Dawes Papers, Library of Congress.

Criticism of the administration grew ever more strident. Most congressional Republicans, following “a course of complaint and cavil,” disagreed with Ohio Representative John A. Bingham’s contention that “Congress ought to act & not find fault with the President.”²⁷⁷ Zachariah Chandler grouched that Lincoln was “timid vacillating & inefficient.”²⁷⁸ A Kentucky Republican acknowledged that Lincoln was “worthy & eminently honest” but feared that those qualities were not enough: “We need a man with an iron will & inflexible purpose.” After spending several weeks in New York and Washington, this native of the Blue Grass State concluded that there “is a painful state of feeling pervading all classes.” The administration’s delay in attacking the Confederates “has become intolerable. Something must be done or every thing will be lost & that speedily. If the Govt is not in earnest let us know it & quit. If it is then let it go to work. . . . If there is a single person that has not lost all confidence in the powers that be I have yet to find him.”²⁷⁹ Lincoln’s former ally in the antislavery Whig ranks, Truman Smith, admired his “unspotted rectitude & great goodness of heart” but insisted that “in such a crisis rectitude & goodness are poor substitutes for that spirit & determination which Genl. Jackson was accustomed to manifest.”²⁸⁰ Less charitable was a constituent of George W. Julian, who complained that Lincoln “has no positive qualities, however trivial. He is the mere puppet in the hands of others,” most notably

²⁷⁷ Washington correspondence by John W. Forney, 9 January, Philadelphia Press, 10 January 1862; John A. Bingham to Joshua Giddings, Washington, 19 December 1861, Giddings Papers, Ohio Historical Society.

²⁷⁸ Chandler to his wife, Washington, 27 October 1861, Chandler Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁷⁹ Charles F. Mitchell to John Sherman, Flemingsburg, Kentucky, 21 December 1861, 1 February 1862, Sherman Papers, Library of Congress. A Quaker, Mitchell was one of the few Republicans in his part of Kentucky.

²⁸⁰ Smith to Henry Shelton Sanford, 3 October 1861, in John Y. Simon, “Truman Smith and Lincoln,” Lincoln Herald 67 (1965):127.

Seward. David Hunter would have taken Memphis long since, but “General McClellan and Col. Seward and Capt. Lincoln did not want it so.”²⁸¹ Henry Winter Davis hyperbolically declared that “no administration has been so incompetent and so corrupt – not even Buchanan[’]s.”²⁸² More extreme still, Congressman Martin F. Conway called Lincoln and Seward “undoubtedly pro-slavery.” The president, said Conway, “is an old Kentucky Whig” seeking to revive the “Silver Grey” faction of that party.²⁸³ Charles Eliot Norton condemned the “incapacity,” “cowardice,” “wretched feebleness & inefficiency,” and “mean personal ambitions of the men who are in power.”²⁸⁴

Illinoisans were especially critical of the administration. “The people are heartily sick of reviews at an expense of one and a quarter millions a day,” noted Lincoln’s friend Pascal P. Enos of Springfield. The public felt that if the North could whip the Confederates, “let it be done at once,” but, said Enos, “if we cannot we want to know it now and save ourselves from bankruptcy.”²⁸⁵ Gustave Koerner reported that “our people, and our army out West are getting very much demoralised by this inaction.” The rate of desertion from the army was soaring, and the “enthusiasm of the People is pretty nearly all gone. Recruiting at the West has come to a dead standstill.”²⁸⁶ “Public sentiment here is becoming sadly debauched,” a resident of Freeport informed Congressman Elihu B.

²⁸¹ [F. M. Finch?] to Julian, Franklin, 26 January 1862, Giddings-Julian Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁸² Henry Winter Davis to Sophie Du Pont, [n.p.], 4 December 1861, transcript, S. F. Du Pont Papers, Hagley Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.

²⁸³ Conway to George Luther Stearns, 1 November 1861, in Frank Preston Stearns, The Life and Public Services of George Luther Stearns (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1907), 257; Conway to James Freeman Clarke, Washington, 27 January 1862, Clarke Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

²⁸⁴ Charles Eliot Norton to George Perkins Marsh, Cambridge, 9 November 1861, Marsh Papers, University of Vermont; George Gibbs to John Austin Stevens, Washington, 12 September 1861, Stevens Papers, New-York Historical Society.

²⁸⁵ P. P. Enos to Lyman Trumbull, Springfield, 7 January 1862, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁸⁶ Gustave Koerner to Lyman Trumbull, Belleville, 26 and 2 January 1862, Lyman Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

Washburne: “You at Washington must make a stand somewhere, and soon – else all – all is lost. . . . O! for an hour of an Executive of Jackson nerve and ability to stand forth and save this nation!!”²⁸⁷ Another Freeporter warned that “unless the War Policy at Washington is soon changed the People will break down every man that endorses it. The rumbling thunder is beginning to be heard and the People are getting aroused and I say to you the watchword must be forward at Every Point.”²⁸⁸ Others observed that “nearly a Majority of the Men who voted for Uncle Abe are beginning to come out against him. . . . They curse Lincoln & call him a Damned old traitor.” Thousands “among his most devoted friends, who have persistently stood by him through evil as well as good report,” were now “denouncing him most bitterly. They declare that he has done for the Republican Party what John Tyler did for the Whig Party.”²⁸⁹ Wait Talcott feared “that Kentucky had conquered the Administration, & that the President had forgotten that there was a North pouring out its best blood & treasure free as water to sustain the government.”²⁹⁰

Discontent reigned in Ohio. Rhetorically a Cincinnati physician asked: “How is it with our President? Our Republican President! Is he not given over, sold out, or pledged, bound hand and foot, soul and body, to the ‘Conservative,’ ‘Union men’ of the ‘Border

²⁸⁷ J. F. Amkeny to Washburne, Freeport, 23 December 1861, Washburne Papers, Library of Congress. See also John Montealein to Washburne, Freeport, 28 December 1861; Grant Goodrich to Washburne, Chicago, 4 January 1862; Wait Talcott to Washburne, Rockford, 18 January 1862; Robert J. Cross to Washburne, Roscoe, Illinois, 27 January 1862, ibid.

²⁸⁸ J. W. Schaeffer to Washburne, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 24 December 1861, Washburne Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁸⁹ W. C. Dunning to Washburne, Byron, Illinois, 10 January 1862; A. J. Betts to Washburne, Durand, Illinois, 29 January 1862, Washburne Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁹⁰ Wait Talcott to Lyman Trumbull, Rockford, 18 January 1862, Lyman Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

States.’ – to Kentucky ‘Union men?’ I fear so!”²⁹¹ A former congressman from the Queen City groused that the “inaction of the army is bad enough, but when it seems that the cause is to prolong the robbery of the public funds, the people feel indignant.”²⁹² Senator Benjamin Wade denounced the “blundering, cowardly, and inefficient” administration and sneered that one “could not inspire Old Abe, Seward, Chase, or Bates, with courage, decision and enterprise, with a galvanic battery.”²⁹³

Lincoln would have appreciated the understanding expressed by a Chicagoan: “I have no doubt, the Prest. would gladly exchange his tribulations for those of St. Paul, and be comparatively happy,” said E. B. Talcott. “It is no holiday Sport to run the Govt Machine at this time.”²⁹⁴

Lincoln grew as frustrated and discouraged as the committee on the conduct of the war. On January 2, he spoke to John A. Dahlgren “of the bare possibility of our being two nations.” (This was the first time the commander of the Navy Yard could recall the president suggesting such an outcome of the war.)²⁹⁵ When Benjamin Wade’s committee visited him at the White House on December 31, the Ohio senator said bluntly: “Mr. President, you are murdering your country by inches in consequence of the inactivity of the military and the want of a distinct policy in regard to slavery.”²⁹⁶ Lincoln offered no reply but he did write McClellan about it the next day: “I hear that the doings of an

²⁹¹ J. H. Jordan to John Sherman, Cincinnati, 22 December 1861, John Sherman Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁹² Timothy C. Day to John Sherman, Cincinnati, 18 January 1862, John Sherman Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁹³ Wade to Zachariah Chandler, Jefferson, Ohio, 8 October 1861, Chandler Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁹⁴ E. B. Talcott to Elihu B. Washburne, Chicago, 28 December 1861, Washburne Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁹⁵ John A. Dahlgren, diary, copy, Nicolay Papers, Library of Congress (2 January 1862).

²⁹⁶ Trefousse, Radical Republicans, 184.

Investigating Committee, give you some uneasiness. You may be entirely relieved on this point. The gentlemen of the Committee were with me an hour and a half last night; and I found them in a perfectly good mood. As their investigation brings them acquainted with facts, they are rapidly coming to think of the whole case as all sensible men would.”²⁹⁷

Thus Lincoln hinted that the Army of the Potomac must attack. He also tried to convey that message through a friend of the general, to whom he said: “McClellan’s tardiness reminds me of a man whose attorney was not sufficiently aggressive. The client knew a few law phrases, and finally, after waiting until his patience was exhausted by the non-action of his counsel, he sprang to his feet and exclaimed: ‘Why don’t you go at him with a Fi fa demurrer, a capias, a surrebutter, or a ne exeat, or something, and not stand there like a nudum pactum, or a non est?’”²⁹⁸

On January 6, Wade’s committee met with Lincoln and the cabinet. The lawmakers, Chase recorded, “were very earnest in urging the vigorous prosecution of the War, and in recommending the appointment of Genl. McDowell as Major-General, to command the Army of the Potomac.”²⁹⁹ According to one committee member, “neither the President nor his advisers seemed to have any definite information respecting the management of the war, or the failure of our forces to make any forward movement. Not a man of them pretended to know anything of General McClellan’s plans.” The committee was “greatly surprised to learn that Mr. Lincoln himself did not think he had any right to know, but that, as he was not a military man, it was his duty to defer to General McClellan.” To the committee “it seemed like a betrayal of the country” to let

²⁹⁷ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:88.

²⁹⁸ Isaac N. Arnold in Tarbell, Lincoln, 2:83.

²⁹⁹ John Niven, ed., The Salmon P. Chase Papers (5 vols.; Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1993-1998), 1:322 (diary entry for 6 January 1862).

McClellan “hold our grand armies for weeks and months in unexplained idleness, on the naked assumption of his superior wisdom.” Chairman Wade echoed his colleagues’ opinions “in a remarkably bold and vigorous speech, in which he gave a summary of the principal facts which had come to the knowledge of the committee, arraigned General McClellan for the unaccountable tardiness of his movements, and urged upon the Administration, in the most undiplomatic plainness of speech, an immediate and radical change in the policy of the war. But the President and his advisers could not yet be disenchanted, and the conference ended without results.”³⁰⁰

On another occasion, Lincoln told a committee protesting against McClellan’s inertness: “Well, gentlemen, for the organization of an army – to prepare it for the field – and for some other things, I will back General McClellan against any general of modern times – I don’t know but of ancient times either – but I begin to believe that he will never get ready to fight.”³⁰¹

Other congressional Republicans in addition to the committee on the conduct of the war were growing impatient with the administration. “We are in a world of trouble here,” Senator William Pitt Fessenden of Maine told his family. “Everybody is grumbling because nothing is done, and there are no symptoms that anything will be done. The truth is that no man can be found who is equal to this crisis in any branch of the government. If the President had his wife’s will and would use it rightly, our affairs would look much

³⁰⁰ George W. Julian, Political Recollections, 1840 to 1872 (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg, 1884), 201-3.

³⁰¹ William O. Stoddard, “White House Sketch No. 6,” New York Citizen, 22 September 1866, in Stoddard, Inside the White House, ed. Burlingame, 167.

better.”³⁰² A Democratic congressman from Indiana called the president “a feeble & vascillating man” who “lacks the energy, earnestness, comprehensive views & experience necessary for the crisis.”³⁰³

In February, Thurlow Weed groused that “most of the men trusted with the great responsibilities of the Government, either lack ability or fail to comprehend the magnitude of their trust. I am sure that [if] this war [had been] wisely entered upon and energetically carried on, would have been virtually concluded now.”³⁰⁴ A Cincinnati reported that Lincoln “is universally an admitted failure, has no will, no courage, no executive capacity . . . and his spirit necessarily infuses itself downwards through all departments.”³⁰⁵

Meanwhile, Union commanders in the West seemed as inert as Little Mac. Halleck and Buell each offered abundant excuses to delay attacking the enemy. When Buell opposed forwarding arms to East Tennessee, the president wrote on January 6: “Your despatch of yesterday has been received, and it disappoints and distresses me. . . . I am not competent to criticise your views; and therefore what I offer is merely in justification of myself.” Rather than attack Nashville, which Buell preferred to do, Lincoln repeated his earlier advice to move on East Tennessee, where Unionists were pleading for assistance. He told Buell: “my distress is that our friends in East Tennessee

³⁰² Fessenden to his family, Washington, 14 January 1862, in Francis Fessenden, Life and Public Services of William Pitt Fessenden (2 vols.; Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1907), 1:259-60.

³⁰³ William S. Holman to Allen Hamilton, Washington, 17 January 1862, Richard W. Thompson Papers, Lincoln Museum, Fort Wayne.

³⁰⁴ Weed to William M. Evarts, 20 February 1862, Brainerd Dyer, The Public Career of William M. Evarts (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1933), 52.

³⁰⁵ W. M. Dickson to Friedrich Hassaurek, Cincinnati, 27 September 1861, Hassaurek Papers, Ohio Historical Society.

are being hanged and driven to despair, and even now I fear, are thinking of taking rebel arms for the sake of personal protection. In this we lose the most valuable stake we have in the South. My despatch, to which yours is an answer, was sent with the knowledge of Senator [Andrew] Johnson and Representative [Horace] Maynard of East Tennessee, and they will be upon me to know the answer, which I cannot safely show them. They would despair – possibly resign to go and save their families somehow, or die with them. I do not intend this to be an order in any sense, but merely, as intimated before, to show you the grounds of my anxiety.”³⁰⁶ He urged Buell to name a date when he could begin an offensive. “Delay is ruining us; and it is indispensable for me to have something definite.”³⁰⁷ The president sent a similar request to Halleck, who was unwilling to commit troops to Kentucky while he was preparing for an advance in southwest Missouri.³⁰⁸

For Lincoln, January 10 was one of the worst days in the war. He dejectedly wrote to Cameron apropos of the negative responses from Halleck and Buell: “It is exceedingly discouraging. As everywhere else, nothing can be done.”³⁰⁹ In despair, he

³⁰⁶ Buell to Lincoln, Louisville, 5 January 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress; Lincoln to Buell, Washington, 6 January 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:90. See William B. Carter to Lincoln, Washington, 1 August 1861, and Andrew Johnson and William B. Carter to Lincoln, Washington, 6 August 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

³⁰⁷ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:91-92.

³⁰⁸ Halleck to Lincoln, St. Louis, 6 January 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress; Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:87; O.R., I, 7:526-33; Marszalek, Halleck, 115.

³⁰⁹ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:95. On January 1, Lincoln said “with much feeling” to John A. Dahlgren, commander of the Washington Navy Yard: “No one seemed ready.” John A. Dahlgren, diary, copy, Nicolay Papers, Library of Congress (entry for 2 January 1862).

turned to Montgomery Meigs, whose counsel he valued. (The president said Meigs “never comes [to the White House] without he has something to say worth hearing.”)³¹⁰

“General,” Lincoln asked, “what shall I do? The people are impatient; Chase has no money, and he tells me he can raise no more; the general of the army has typhoid fever. The bottom is out of the tub. What shall I do?”³¹¹

When Meigs suggested consulting with Little Mac’s division commanders, Lincoln called a meeting for January 10 with Generals Irvin McDowell and William B. Franklin, along with Seward and Assistant Secretary of War Thomas A. Scott.³¹² Cameron was conspicuously absent. According to McDowell, the “greatly disturbed” president told them that he “was in great distress, and, as he had been to General McClellan’s house, and the General did not ask to see him, and as he must talk to somebody, he had sent for General Franklin and myself, to obtain our opinion as to the possibility of soon commencing active operations with the Army of the Potomac.” He added that “if something was not done soon, the bottom would be out of the whole affair; and if General McClellan did not want to use the army, he would like to ‘borrow it.’” When Lincoln asked for recommendations, McDowell suggested an attack on the Confederates’ supply line to Manassas, a plan which the president had been urging on

³¹⁰ Meigs to his father, Washington, 2 March 1862, Meigs Papers, Library of Congress.

³¹¹ M. C. Meigs, “The Relations of President Lincoln and Secretary Stanton to the Military Commanders in the Civil War,” an article written in 1888, American Historical Review 26 (1921): 292.

³¹² Beatie, Army of the Potomac, 2:438-39.

McClellan. Franklin proposed a campaign against Richmond via the York River. Lincoln asked that they reflect on the matter and convene again the next day, which they did.³¹³

Word that two of his division commanders had met with the president acted as a tonic restoring McClellan's health. On Sunday morning, January 12, he unexpectedly called at the White House and sketched out a plan to attack Richmond by sailing his army down Chesapeake Bay to Urbanna on the Rappahannock River, forty miles east of the Confederate capital.

Early that afternoon president met with Chase, Seward, Montgomery Blair, McDowell, Franklin, and Meigs. After Meigs endorsed McDowell's proposal to attack the Confederate supply lines to Manassas, Lincoln suggested that since McClellan had recovered his health, they meet with him the next afternoon.³¹⁴

On January 13 at 3 p.m., they did so. After explaining why he had convened this council of war, Lincoln asked McDowell and Franklin to go over their proposals for an advance. When McDowell restated his plan to attack Confederate supply lines, the sullen general-in-chief "coldly, if not curtly" exclaimed: "You are entitled to have any opinion you please!" As the discussion continued, McClellan ominously said nothing further.³¹⁵ Into Little Mac's ear, Meigs whispered that Lincoln expected him to participate in the deliberations. The general-in-chief replied that the Confederates had at least 175,000 men at Manassas (a gross exaggeration), too many for the Army of the Potomac to confront. Moreover, he sneered: "If I tell him my plans they will be in the New York Herald

³¹³ McDowell memorandum, 10 and 11 January 1862, in Henry J. Raymond, The Life and Public Services of Abraham Lincoln (New York: Derby and Miller, 1865), 773-76.

³¹⁴ Chase to his daughter Kate, Washington, 12 January 1862, Chase Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

³¹⁵ McDowell memorandum, 13 January 1862, in Raymond, Lincoln, 776-77.

tomorrow morning. He can't keep a secret, he will tell them to Tadd." Meigs responded: "That is a pity, but he is the President, – the Commander-in-Chief; he has a right to know; it is not respectful to sit mute when he so clearly requires you to speak." (Meigs thought McClellan's conduct a "spectacle to make gods and men ashamed!")³¹⁶ Chase told Franklin: "If that is Mac's decision, he is a ruined man."³¹⁷ Responding to pressure from the treasury secretary, McClellan deigned to say that he would prod Buell to launch an offensive in Kentucky but that he was reluctant to discuss his plans further. Lincoln asked the commanding general "if he had counted upon any particular time" for that movement to begin, without specifying it. When Little Mac replied affirmatively, Lincoln said: "Well, on this assurance of the General that he will press the advance in Kentucky, I will be satisfied, and will adjourn this Council."³¹⁸

Incredibly, McClellan the next day spelled out to a New York Herald reporter the plan he had refused to describe to Lincoln because he did not want it revealed to that very newspaper! Little Mac began a three-hour conversation with correspondent Malcolm Ives by saying: "What I declined communicating to them [Lincoln and the others] I am now going to convey through you to Mr. [James Gordon] Bennett . . . all the knowledge I

³¹⁶ Meigs, "Relations of Lincoln and Stanton to the Military Commanders," 292-93.

³¹⁷ William B. Franklin, "The First Great Crime of the War," in Alexander K. McClure, ed., The Annals of the War Written by Leading Participants North and South (Philadelphia: Times Publishing Company, 1879), 78-79.

³¹⁸ McDowell memorandum, 13 January 1862, in Raymond, Lincoln, 777; Meigs, "Relations of President Lincoln and Secretary Stanton to the Military Commanders," 293, 295.

possess myself, with no reserve.”³¹⁹ Also incredible was McClellan’s decision to reveal his plan to Chase and to N. P. Banks (but not Lincoln) well before January 13.³²⁰

McClellan’s stubborn unwillingness to confide in Lincoln would prove a grave mistake and lead to his undoing. The president’s tendency to defer to Little Mac was also mistaken; if he had been more assertive, the general may have been more compliant.³²¹ Bates realized this. At a cabinet meeting on January 10, he emphatically urged the president to “take and act the power of his place, to command the commanders,” and if they balked, to fire them.³²²

TRENT AFFAIR

Also frustrating was a diplomatic crisis that nearly led to war with Great Britain. That autumn, the Confederate government decided to replace their three roving commissioners to Europe with two ministers plenipotentiary, former senators James M. Mason of Virginia (to England) and John Slidell of Louisiana (to France). In mid-October, those two men boarded a blockade runner that whisked them to Havana, where they transferred to the British mail packet Trent, bound for St. Thomas in the Danish Virgin Islands. There they intended to book passage for Europe. On November 8, Union Captain Charles Wilkes, commanding the San Jacinto, rashly stopped the Trent in the Bahama Channel, boarded her, and seized Mason and Slidell as contraband, maintaining

³¹⁹ Malcolm Ives to James G. Bennett, Washington, 15 January 1862 [misdated 1861], Bennett Papers, Library of Congress.

³²⁰ In November or December, McClellan showed Banks how he intended to attack Richmond from the east. “Notes at Washington” by S[amuel] B[owles], Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 27 March 1862. In November, at Lincoln’s urging, McClellan told Chase about the plan in detail. Memo by Chase “Notes on the Union of the Armies of the Potomac and the Army of Virginia,” [early September 1862], in J. W. Schuckers, The Life and Public Services of Salmon Portland Chase (New York: D. Appleton, 1874), 445.

³²¹ A. K. McClure to Ellen McClellan, Philadelphia, 13 January 1892, McClellan Papers, Library of Congress; Beatie, Army of the Potomac, 2:342, 378.

³²² Beale, ed., Bates Diary, 223-26 (entry for 10 January 1862).

that they were in effect animate dispatches. The Trent he allowed to proceed on its way while he shipped the two would-be diplomats off to Fort Warren in Boston harbor.³²³ (Seward had been warned about the impetuous Wilkes. “He will give us trouble,” prophesied George Harrington. “He has a superabundance of self-esteem and a deficiency of judgment. When he commanded his great exploring expedition [to Antarctica] he court-martialed nearly all his officers; he alone was right, everybody else was wrong.”)³²⁴

The North rejoiced, for Mason and Slidell were particularly hated as fire-eaters of the most extreme variety. Mason was the principal author of the widely execrated Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, and Slidell had been a leading spokesman for slavery and disunion. Good news for a change! Temporarily the defeats at Bull Run, Wilson’s Creek, Lexington, and Ball’s Bluff were forgotten.³²⁵ “We do not believe the American heart ever thrilled with more genuine delight,” declared the New York Times.³²⁶ Congress voted a resolution of thanks to Wilkes “for his brave, adroit, and patriotic conduct,” Secretary of the Navy Welles congratulated him officially, the city fathers of Boston gave him a banquet, and editorialists showered him with praise.³²⁷ Leading jurists like Edward Everett, Edwin M. Stanton, and Reverdy Johnson declared that Wilkes had acted

³²³ Gordon H. Warren, Fountain of Discontent: The Trent Affair and Freedom of the Seas (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1981), *passim*; D. P. Crook, The North, the South, and the Powers, 1861-1865 (New York: Wiley, 1974), 99-170; Welles, “The Capture and Release of Mason and Slidell,” in Albert Mordell, compiler, Civil War and Reconstruction: Selected Essays by Gideon Welles (New York: Twayne, 1959), 256-79; Norman B. Ferris, The Trent Affair: A Diplomatic Crisis (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977), *passim*; Lynn M. Case and Warren F. Spencer, The United States and France: Civil War Diplomacy (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), 190-249.

³²⁴ Harrington memo, Harrington Papers, in Nevins, War for the Union, 1:388.

³²⁵ Warren, Fountain of Discontent, 38-43, 45.

³²⁶ New York Times, 17 November 1861.

³²⁷ Welles to Wilkes, 30 November 1861, O.R., II, 2:1109; Frank Moore, ed., The Rebellion Record: A Diary of American Events (5 vols.; New York: Putnam, 1862-1863), 3:473.

legally.³²⁸ Many other prominent observers, however, like Charles Sumner, chairman of the senate foreign relations committee, did not celebrate; they thought Wilkes had violated international law by seizing men from a neutral ship in transit between two neutral ports.³²⁹ They were right; the envoys should have been released as soon as the administration ascertained the facts.³³⁰

It is not clear just how Lincoln reacted to the news. The New York Herald reported that he felt “quite elated” and “declared emphatically” that the Confederate emissaries “should not be surrendered by this government, even if their detention should cause a war with Great Britain.”³³¹ Many years later, James Mitchell recalled him exclaiming: “I care not for Mason and Slidell! We have the precedents on England; she has done the same thing in the case of other nations.”³³² Wilkes alleged that Lincoln told him in late November or early December that he would stand by him and that he rejoiced at his bold action.³³³

But the New York Commercial Advertiser asserted in December that “We know that within a few hours of the fact of the arrest of Mason and Slidell being made known to the President, he entertained and expressed the opinion that the prisoners must be

³²⁸ Washington correspondence, 19 November, New York Tribune, 20 November 1861.

³²⁹ David Donald, Charles Sumner and the Rights of Man (New York: Knopf, 1970), 32-32; Bancroft, Seward, 2:229-31; George Sumner to S. P. Chase, Boston, 16 November 1861, Chase Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. See also Victor H. Cohen, “Charles Sumner and the Trent Affair,” Journal of Southern History 22 (1956): 205-19; Thomas Ewing to Lincoln, Lancaster, Ohio, 18 November and 28 December 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress; John Hooker to Gideon Welles, Hartford, 25 November 1861, Welles Papers, Library of Congress.

³³⁰ Warren, Fountain of Discontent, 184-85.

³³¹ Washington correspondence, 16 November, New York Herald, 17 and 18 November 1861.

³³² Reminiscences of Mitchell, Atlanta, Georgia, correspondence, 22 August, St. Louis Globe-Democrat, 26 August 1894.

³³³ William James Morgan et al., eds., Autobiography of Rear Admiral Charles Wilkes, U.S. Navy, 1798-1877 (Washington: Navy Department, 1978), 776.

given up.”³³⁴ Benson J. Lossing testified that on November 16, the president told him: “I fear the traitors will prove to be white elephants.”³³⁵ Three days thereafter, D. W. Bartlett wrote that the president was “somewhat fearful of the result” because “some men in whom he has confidence” informed him “that England will try to get up a war with the United States over the affair.”³³⁶ To Gideon Welles, Lincoln expressed “anxiety . . . as to the disposition of the prisoners.” The public’s “indignation was so overwhelming against the chief conspirators, that he feared it would be difficult to prevent severe and exemplary punishment, which he always deprecated.”³³⁷ The president told Edward Bates: “I am not getting much sleep out of that exploit of Wilkes’, and I suppose we must look up the law of the case. I am not much of a prize lawyer, but it seems to me pretty clear that if Wilkes saw fit to make that capture on the high seas he had no right to turn his quarter-deck into a prize court.”³³⁸

Initially the cabinet did not share that view. Edouard de Stoeckl, Russian chargé d’affaires in Washington, informed his government that upon hearing of Wilkes’s actions, “the President was disposed to disavow Captain Wilkes’ act, restore the prisoners, and apologize to England. But he ran into strong opposition from his Cabinet and from the demagogues among his advisors who believed . . . they [Union forces] were

³³⁴ Copied in the Boston Evening Journal, 24 December 1861.

³³⁵ Benson J. Lossing, Pictorial History of the Civil War in the United States of America (2 vols.; Hartford: Belknap, 1868), 2:156-57. Lossing claims that Lincoln said this to him and to Elisha Whittlesy on November 16. Cf. Welles, “Capture and Release of Mason and Slidell,” 270, 278.

³³⁶ Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 19 November, Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 23 November 1861.

³³⁷ Welles, “Capture and Release of Mason and Slidell,” 270.

³³⁸ Titian J. Coffee in Rice, ed., Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln, 245.

stronger than ever and could defy England.”³³⁹ At a cabinet meeting early in the crisis, Lincoln, according to a press account, “expressed himself in favor of restoring them [Mason and Slidell] to the protection of the British flag, if it should be demanded. He said it was doubtful if the course of Captain Wilkes could be justified by international law, and that, at all events, he could not afford to have two wars upon his hands at the same time.” (More succinctly, he cautioned: “one war at a time.”) Only Montgomery Blair sided with Lincoln. Chase “argued forcibly and with warmth that the course recommended by the President would be dishonorable.” Bates believed that “it was lawful to seize the men.”³⁴⁰ Gideon Welles recalled that initially Seward was “jubilant” and “elated” and “for a time made no attempt to conceal his gratification and approval of the act of Wilkes.” He “discredited every suggestion that Great Britain would avail herself of any technical error of the officer [Wilkes], and take serious exception to the proceeding. It was, he claimed, in conformity with British ruling and British practice; and if the commander of the San Jacinto has erred in permitting the Trent to proceed, it was not for that government to take advantage of his mistake generosity by which they had been benefited.” But at the cabinet meeting Seward did not commit himself.³⁴¹

When the British first learned of Wilkes’s act more than two weeks afterwards, their indignation knew no bounds. The union jack had been insulted! The outraged prime minister, Lord Palmerston, allegedly exclaimed to his cabinet: “I don’t know whether you

³³⁹ Stoeckl to Alexander Gortchakoff, n.d., in Albert A. Woldman, Lincoln and the Russians (Cleveland: World, 1952), 92. It is not clear whether Stoeckl’s informant was Lord Lyons or someone else.

³⁴⁰ Washington correspondence by Sigma, 31 December 1861, Cincinnati Commercial, 3 January 1862; “Suppressed dispatch,” Washington correspondence, 29 December, New York Tribune, 31 December 1861; William H. Russell’s dispatch, 19 November, London Times, 3 December 1861.

³⁴¹ Gideon Welles, Lincoln and Seward (New York: Sheldon, 1874), 185-187; Welles, “Capture and Release of Mason and Slidell,” 276; Beale, ed., Bates Diary, 202 (entry for 16 November 1861); “Suppressed dispatch,” Washington correspondence, 29 December, New York Tribune, 31 December 1861.

are going to stand for this, but I'll be damned if I do!" The British minister to the U.S., Lord Lyons, "considered the action of Captain Wilkes as the gravest insult ever perpetrated against the British flag."³⁴² Her Majesty's government was predisposed to react angrily in part because Seward was regarded as "a Giant Blunderbore, thirsting day and night for the blood of Englishmen."³⁴³ Weed reported from London that a "spirit, almost infernal, has been roused here against Gov. Seward, who is regarded as the incarnation of hostility to England." Such a view was not unjustified. While visiting England in 1859, Seward had offended people with tactless remarks about the unreasonably high cost of English books and the gullibility of nobles who paid too much for paintings.³⁴⁴ In July, the impulsive secretary of state had told William Howard Russell of the London Times that a "contest between Great Britain and the United States would wrap the world in fire, and at the end it would not be the United States which would have to lament the results of the conflict."³⁴⁵ According to the Duke of Newcastle, Seward had said to him the previous year that "he was likely to occupy a high office; that when he did so it would become his duty to insult England, and he should insult her accordingly."³⁴⁶

Palmerston had his foreign minister, Lord John Russell, compose a belligerent, curt message which Queen Victoria and her mortally-ill husband, Prince Albert, toned down. British authorities, the revised document stated, would accept an American

³⁴² Lyons paraphrased in Stoeckl's dispatch in Woldman, Lincoln and the Russians, 92.

³⁴³ Crook, North, the South, and the Powers, 120-21. Writing from London, Weed told Seward on December 4: "neither this Government or People are our Friends. The Morrill Tariff and the belief that you are unfriendly to England prepared the Country to go first, for Secession, and next for War." Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress. Cf. Case and Spencer, United States and France, 198.

³⁴⁴ Weed to Archbishop John J. Hughes, London, 7, 22 December 1861, photostatic copies, Weed Papers, University of Rochester.

³⁴⁵ Russell, Diary, 381 (entry for 4 July 1861).

³⁴⁶ Lossing, Pictorial History of the Civil War, 2:162. Seward denied having said this. Seward to Thurlow Weed, Washington, 27, 30 December 1861, 7 March 1862, Weed Papers, University of Rochester.

explanation that Wilkes had acted without instructions; but the U.S. must within seven days agree to offer an apology, pay indemnities, and forthwith release Mason and Slidell. If the Lincoln administration balked, Lord Lyons must pack his bags and return home. Lyons was to give Seward informal notice of this message in order to allow the administration sufficient time to consider its response.³⁴⁷ Ominously, 11,000 British troops set sail for Canada; Great Britain refused to sell the U.S. any more saltpeter (then the principal ingredient of gunpowder, imported from India); and several warships were ordered to the North American Station.³⁴⁸ As hostilities between the U.S. and Great Britain loomed, Wall Street panicked.³⁴⁹ “It looks like war,” observed Foreign Minister Russell.³⁵⁰ One of the most dangerous moments of Lincoln’s presidency had arrived.³⁵¹

Russell’s dispatch did not reach Washington until December 19. Meanwhile, Lincoln took comfort from reports (which later proved incorrect) that British legal authorities had declared Wilkes’s action justified. On December 10, the president told his old friend Orville H. Browning “that there would probably be no trouble about it.”³⁵² Three days later he was jolted out of his complacency when English newspapers arrived with blaring headlines about the indignation sweeping the British Isles. Two days thereafter informal word came that Her Majesty’s government would demand the release

³⁴⁷ John Russell to Richard B. Pemell, Lord Lyons, London, 30 November 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

³⁴⁸ Kenneth Bourne, “British Preparations for War with the North, 1861-1862,” English Historical Review 76 (1961): 600-32; Harold B. Hancock and Norman B. Wilkinson, ““The Devil to Pay!”: Saltpeter and the Trent Affair,” Civil War History 10 (1964): 20-32.

³⁴⁹ Warren, Fountain of Discontent, 173-74.

³⁵⁰ Donald, Sumner and the Rights of Man, 35.

³⁵¹ Nevins, War for the Union, 1:394; James A. Rawley, Turning Points of the Civil War (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 71-95.

³⁵² Theodore Calvin Pease and James G. Randall, eds., The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning (2 vols.; Springfield: Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield., 1925-33), 1:513-14 (entry for 10 December 1861).

of the Confederate emissaries and an apology. The president was “much moved and astonished by the English intelligence.”³⁵³ Browning, who was at the White House when this news reached Lincoln, told the president that he did not “believe England would do such a foolish thing,” but “if she is determined to force a war upon us why so be it. We will fight her to the death.”³⁵⁴ Lincoln evidently felt the same way, for he allegedly told a treasury department official around this time: “I would sooner die than give them [Mason and Slidell] up.”³⁵⁵ Many of his fellow countrymen agreed, among them Anson S. Miller of Illinois. The “National Govt and Washington must not be bullied by England,” wrote Miller. “Even war with England . . . is far preferable to humiliation.”³⁵⁶ A Cincinnati attorney howled that England “has humbled us,” “emasculated our pride, and thus invited any other insolent nation to spit upon us.”³⁵⁷

On December 16, Seward exclaimed to a British journalist and some diplomats: “We will wrap the whole world in flames! No power so remote that she will not feel the fire of our battle and be burned by our conflagration.”³⁵⁸ That day he and his fellow cabinet members decided to keep Mason and Slidell because it was believed that Her Majesty’s government would not go to war over their capture; instead it would probably demand that they be released and “a lengthy correspondence would settle the matter.”³⁵⁹

³⁵³ Sumner to Bright, Washington, 23 December 1861, Edward L. Pierce, Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner (4 vols.; Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1877-1893), 4:457.

³⁵⁴ Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 1:515 (entry for 15 December 1861).

³⁵⁵ Russell, Diary, 217 (entry for 28 December 1861). Lincoln allegedly said this a few days earlier.

³⁵⁶ Anson S. Miller to E. B. Washburne, Rockford, 25 December 1861, Washburne Papers, Library of Congress.

³⁵⁷ Richard J. Corwine to John Sherman, Cincinnati, 29 December 1862, John Sherman Papers, Library of Congress.

³⁵⁸ Russell, Diary, 217 (entry for 16 December 1861).

³⁵⁹ Washington correspondence, 17 December, Chicago Tribune, 18 December 1861; Washington correspondence, 16 December, New York Herald, 17 December 1861.

Sensitive to public opinion, Lincoln hesitated to back down, especially since he considered the possibility of war with Britain remote. On December 17, John Hay – perhaps reflecting the president’s view – wrote from the White House that the British should fear that any conflict with the U.S. would have deleterious consequences: Northern grain exports would be cut off, leaving the poor in Great Britain to starve; British shipping on the high seas would be devastated by American privateers; Canada might be attacked and annexed; as a preeminent foe of slavery, Britain would be embarrassed in supporting the slave-holding South; and if Her Majesty’s government were preoccupied with a war against the U.S., the French might feel free to carry out various schemes harmful to British interests. Hay declared that the Lincoln administration would not “yield one jot of what are our just rights in the matter. While all negotiations arising out of the complication will be conducted with the most entire candor and careful courtesy, there will be seen no unmanly subserviency, no cringing and not insolence. There is nothing to dread. We shall not lose honor.”³⁶⁰

On December 16, Hay’s coadjutor, John G. Nicolay, reported from the Executive Mansion that he saw no “sufficient cause for alarm. England has, throughout our whole trouble acted in a contemptibly mean and selfish spirit, and we need therefore not wonder in the least if we hear her bluster over even a suppositious error on our part.” But there was no error, he maintained: “This is purely a question of international law, to be settled by diplomacy, and I think when they come to hear our argument they will begin to draw

³⁶⁰ Washington correspondence, 17 December, Missouri Republican (St. Louis), 21 December 1861, in Burlingame, ed., Lincoln’s Journalist, 172-74.

less hasty conclusion than now. A pretty full examination, establishes the clear legality of the act of Commodore Wilkes.”³⁶¹

If Lincoln shared his personal secretaries’ optimism, events soon disabused him. A prolonged negotiation no longer seemed possible after December 19, when Lord Lyons informally showed Seward the dispatch from Lord Russell insisting on the release of Mason and Slidell and demanding a response within one week. Four days later, the British envoy officially submitted Russell’s document, giving the administration until December 30 to reply.

On December 18, Seward and Lincoln visited the Navy Yard to see Commander John A. Dahlgren, whom the president regarded highly and in whom he confided. (Lincoln told a friend, “I like to see Dahlgren. The drive to the Navy Yard is one of my greatest pleasures. I learn something of the preparation for defence, and I get from him consolation and courage.”)³⁶² Dahlgren noted in his diary that “I never saw the President or Mr. Seward more quiet or grave. The British affair seems to weigh on them.”³⁶³

That same day, at Lincoln’s urging, John W. Forney, editor of the Philadelphia Press, published a dispatch arguing that war with the British would be catastrophic and that therefore “the Administration may be compelled to concede the demands of England, and, perhaps, release Messrs. Mason and Slidell. God forbid! – but in a crisis like this we must adapt ourselves to stern circumstances, and yield every feeling of pride to maintain

³⁶¹ Nicolay to Theresia Bates, Washington, 16 December 1862, in Burlingame, ed., With Lincoln in the White House, 63.

³⁶² Charles Cowley, Leaves from a Lawyer's Life, Afloat and Ashore (Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1879), 192. On the friendship between Dahlgren and Lincoln, see Robert J. Schneller, Jr., A Quest for Glory: A Biography of Rear Admiral John A. Dahlgren (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 183-89.

³⁶³ John A. Dahlgren, diary, copy, Nicolay Papers, Library of Congress (18 December 1861).

our existence.”³⁶⁴ The president had told Forney: “I want you to sit down and write one of your most careful articles, preparing the American people for the release of Mason and Slidell. I know this is much to ask of you, but it shows my confidence in you, my friend, when I tell you that this course is forced upon us by our peculiar position; and that the good Queen of England is moderating her own angry people, who are as bitter against us as our people are against them. I need say no more.”³⁶⁵

Two days later, the president and Seward conferred about the crisis. No record of their meeting remains, though it seems likely that Seward explained the British position.

The following day, Lincoln confessed that he “feared trouble.”³⁶⁶ He now confronted a dilemma: if the Confederate envoys were released, it would outrage public opinion in the North; if he did not, Britain might declare war and break the blockade.

Arbitration seemed a possible middle way. A champion of that solution, Charles Sumner, called at the White House regularly during the critical week of December 19-25 to share correspondence from his well-placed English friends warning of the dangers of war and urging the surrender of Mason and Slidell. One such letter from John Bright recommended mediation.³⁶⁷ Sumner suggested that Prussia “or better still, three learned publicists of the Continent” serve that function.³⁶⁸ Thurlow Weed, who had been sent abroad as a propagandist for the Union cause, offered similar counsel from London.

³⁶⁴ Washington correspondence, by “Occasional,” 18 December, Philadelphia Press, 19 December 1861. Forney made similar arguments in later dispatches dated 29 and 30 December. Ibid., 30 and 31 December 1861.

³⁶⁵ Forney’s Progress, 4 September 1884, typed copy, David Rankin Barbee Papers, Georgetown University.

³⁶⁶ Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 516 (entry for 21 December 1861).

³⁶⁷ Bright to Sumner, 5 December 1861, Massachusetts Historical Society, Proceedings 45 (1911-12):150-52; Donald, Sumner and the Rights of Man, 36; Sumner to Lieber, Washington, 24 December 1861, Palmer, Sumner Letters, 2:88-89.

³⁶⁸ Sumner to Bright, Washington, 30 December 1861, Pierce, Sumner, 4:59.

France was rumored to be willing to act as an umpire, and American diplomats like Norman B. Judd, Henry S. Sanford, and George G. Fogg were suggesting that Louis Napoleon's government should play that role. James R. Doolittle, Sumner's colleague on the senate foreign relations committee, urged Lincoln to "refer the matter to the Emperors of France, & Russia to determine the question whether upon the law of nations we were not as belligerents justified in making that arrest."³⁶⁹

On December 20 and 21, Lincoln acted on such advice, drafting a dispatch for Seward's signature. He tactfully wrote: "this government has intended no affront to the British flag, or to the British nation; nor has it intended to force into discussion, an embarrassing question, all which is evident by the fact, hereby asserted, that the act complained of was done by the officer, without orders from, or expectation of, the government. But being done, it was no longer left to us to consider whether we might not, to avoid a controversy, waive an unimportant, though a strict right; because we too, as well as Great Britain, have a people justly jealous of their rights, and in whose presence our government could undo the act complained of, only upon a fair showing that it was wrong, or, at least, very questionable— The United States government and people, are still willing to make reparation upon such showing."³⁷⁰ On December 21, he read this document to Browning, who agreed that "the question was easily susceptible of a peaceful solution if England was at all disposed to act justly."³⁷¹ (Similarly, the president informed Sumner that there "will be no war unless England is bent upon having one." To help defuse tension, Lincoln proposed to circumvent normal diplomatic channels in order

³⁶⁹ James R. Doolittle to Lincoln, Washington, 19 December 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

³⁷⁰ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:63. It is not clear when Lincoln wrote this. Nicolay and Hay date it December 10. Ferris thinks it was probably December 20. Ferris, Trent Affair, 242-43.

³⁷¹ Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 516 (entry for 21 December 1861).

to deal directly with the British minister to the U.S. “If I could see Lord Lyons I could show him in five minutes that I am heartily for peace,” he told Sumner. When the senator counseled against such an irregular procedure, Lincoln abandoned that idea.)³⁷²

Seward meanwhile drafted his own response to the British government, which Lincoln promised to examine “word for word in order that no expression should remain which could create bad blood anew, because the strong language which Mr. Seward had used in some of his former dispatches seems to have irritated and insulted England.”³⁷³ The secretary endorsed the release of Mason and Slidell, even though he maintained that they were in fact contraband of war. Wilkes had acted without instructions, Seward explained, and though justified in seizing the Confederate emissaries, the captain should have taken the Trent to a prize court for adjudication. Such a step would have been in keeping with the traditional American view of the rights of neutrals, a view which the British had earlier rejected, leading to the War of 1812. But because he voluntarily let the Trent sail away, he vitiated America’s case for holding Mason and Slidell. Gratuitously Seward added that if the survival of the Union had hung in the balance, the prisoners would not have been yielded, and that the British were finally agreeing with the U.S. position on impressment.³⁷⁴

On December 25 and 26, the cabinet discussed Seward’s draft. Edward Bates recorded that everyone understood “the magnitude of the subject, and believed that upon

³⁷² Edward Waldo Emerson, ed., Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1856-1863 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 380 (entry for 31 January 1862).

³⁷³ Rudolph Schlieden, paraphrasing the remarks of an unidentified informant (doubtless Sumner), in Schlieden to the senate of Bremen, Washington, 23 December 1861, Ephraim Douglass Adams, Great Britain and the American Civil War (2 vols.; New York: Longmans, Green, 1925), 1:220n.

³⁷⁴ Seward to Lyons, Washington, 26 December 1861, O.R.N., 1:177-87.

our decision depended the dearest interest, probably the existence, of the nation.” The attorney general, waiving the question of legal right, “urged the necessity of the case; that to go to war with England now is to abandon all hope of suppressing the rebellion, as we have not the possession of the land, nor any support of the people of the South. The maritime superiority of Britain would sweep us from all the Southern waters. Our trade would be utterly ruined, and our treasury bankrupt.” There was, Bates noted, “great reluctance on the part of some of the members of the Cabinet – and even the President himself – to acknowledge these obvious truths.”³⁷⁵ (Evidently Cameron, Welles, and Smith balked.)³⁷⁶ Opponents of surrendering the prisoners feared “the displeasure of our own people – lest they should accuse us of timidly truckling to the power of England.”³⁷⁷ Chase said: “It is gall and wormwood to me. Rather than consent to the liberation of these men, I would sacrifice everything I possess.” But even the treasury secretary agreed to their release, explaining that as long as “the matter hangs in uncertainty, the public mind will remain disquieted, our commerce will suffer serious harm, our action against the rebels must be greatly hindered, and the restoration of our prosperity . . . must be delayed.”³⁷⁸

Charles Sumner attended the Christmas meeting and read letters from John Bright and Richard Cobden, eminent members of Parliament and fast friends of the Union, urging conciliation.³⁷⁹ (Lincoln so admired Bright that he hung a photograph of the Liberal leader in his office.) Most importantly, a freshly-arrived dispatch from the French

³⁷⁵ Beale, ed., Bates Diary, 216 (entry for 25 December 1861).

³⁷⁶ Case and Spencer, France and the United States, 222.

³⁷⁷ Beale, ed., Bates Diary, 216 (entry for 25 December 1861).

³⁷⁸ Niven, ed., Chase Papers, 1:319-20 (diary entry for 25 December 1861).

³⁷⁹ Cobden to Henry Catt, Midhurst, 16 December 1861, New York Times, 4 January 1862.

foreign minister, Edouard Thouvenel, was read; in moderate tones, it denied the legitimacy of Wilkes's action and supported the British position.³⁸⁰ Along with it came a message from William Dayton, U.S. minister to France, reporting that no European power accepted America's argument.³⁸¹ These documents reportedly "convinced the opponents of surrender that the public opinion of Europe would sustain England, and were used to secure unanimity" in agreeing to turn over Mason and Slidell.³⁸² Thus arbitration seemed unfeasible. Toward the end of the four-hour session, one cabinet member observed that "we need not decide at once. Let us settle it that we won't surrender them today. We can meet again, and consider it tomorrow."*SOURCE?

After the session adjourned, Lincoln said: "Governor Seward, you will go on, of course, preparing your answer, which, as I understand, will state the reasons why they ought to be given up. Now I have a mind to try my hand at stating the reasons why they ought not to be given up. We will compare the points on each side." The next day, after making several changes, the cabinet endorsed Seward's dispatch, though some members expressed regret at the release of Mason and Slidell. The document was submitted to Lord Lyons on December 27.³⁸³ It was a clever, face-saving argument, designed to

³⁸⁰ The text of that document is in Case and Spencer, France and the United States, 202-4.

³⁸¹ Case and Spencer, France and the United States, 227.

³⁸² "Suppressed dispatch," Washington correspondence, 29 December, New York Tribune, 31 December 1861.

³⁸³ "Suppressed dispatch," Washington correspondence, 29 December, New York Tribune, 31 December 1861; Frederick W. Seward, Reminiscences of a War-Time Statesman and Diplomat, 1830-1915 (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1916), 189; Seward, Seward in Washington, 2:25; Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 1:518-19 (entry for 25 December 1861). Seward told Weed apropos of the revisions to his dispatch: "in a council like ours there are some strong wills to be reconciled." 22 January 1861, Thurlow Weed Barnes, ed., Life of Thurlow Weed including his autobiography and a memoir (2 vols.; Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1884), 2:409; Thouvenel to Mercier, Paris, 3 December 1861, in John Bigelow, Retrospections of an Active Life (5 vols.; New York: Baker & Taylor, 1909-13), 1:390-91.

mollify the British government without offending the American public. Seward read it to several members of Congress, who agreed that Mason and Slidell must be released.

When the secretary of state asked Lincoln why he had not submitted a paper justifying retention of the Confederate diplomats, he replied: “I found I could not make an argument that would satisfy my own mind, and that proved to me your ground was the right one.”³⁸⁴ (In fact, Seward’s dispatch contained serious logical and legal weaknesses.)³⁸⁵ Lincoln may have also feared both a gunpowder shortage if Britain maintained its embargo of saltpeter and a bombardment of American ports by ironclads invulnerable to America’s antiquated shore batteries.³⁸⁶

The Palmerston government waived the demand for reparations and an apology, viewing the release of Mason and Slidell as a gesture sufficiently conciliatory to end the crisis. Lincoln called that surrender “a pretty bitter pill to swallow” but told Horace Porter: “I contented myself with believing the England’s triumph in the matter would be short-lived, and that after ending our war successfully, we would be so powerful that we could call her to account for all the embarrassments she had inflicted upon us.” The surrender made Lincoln feel “a great deal like the sick man in Illinois who was told he probably hadn’t many days longer to live, and that he ought to make peace with any enemies he might have. He said the man he hated worst of all was a fellow named Brown

³⁸⁴ Seward, Reminiscences, 190. A different version of this story was given by Seward’s friend Richard M. Blatchford, who alleged that Lincoln told the secretary of state that he would never give up the prisoners. Seward then said the president should compose the response to the British government. Both men wrote letters. When Seward read his, Lincoln acknowledged it was superior to his and acquiesced in the surrender of Mason and Slidell. Bigelow, Retrospections, 1:439-40. Charles Francis Adams Jr. doubted that Lincoln said this. Adams, The Trent Affair: An Historical Retrospect (Boston: [s.n.], 1912).

Daniel Butterfield told a variation of this story. Julia Lorrillard Butterfield, ed., A Biographical Memorial of General Daniel Butterfield (New York: Grafton Press, 1904), 151-5.

³⁸⁵ Bancroft, Seward, 2:246-52; Warren, Fountain of Discontent, 184.

³⁸⁶ Warren, Fountain of Discontent, 171-72.

in the next village and he guessed he had better begin on him. So Brown was sent for, and when he came the sick man began to say, in a voice ‘as meek as Moses,’ that he wanted to die at peace with all his fellow creatures, and he hoped he and Brown could now shake hands and bury all their enmity. The scene was becoming altogether too pathetic for Brown, who had to get out his handkerchief and wipe the gathering tears from his eyes. It wasn’t long before he melted and gave his hand to his neighbor, and they had a regular love-feast. After a parting that would have softened the heart of a grindstone, Brown had about reached the room door, when the sick man rose up on his elbow and said, ‘But, see here, Brown, if I should happen to get well, mind that old grudge stands.’³⁸⁷ (Similarly, when Anglo-American relations once again grew tense in the spring of 1863, Lincoln remarked to hotheads who wanted to confront the British: “we must have no war with England now; we can’t afford it. We’ll have to bear and bear and bear; she may even kick us, if she wants to, and we won’t resent it, till we get rid of the job we already have on hand. Then it will be our turn to see about the kicking!”)³⁸⁸ But at a dinner party shortly after the crisis ended, Lincoln indicated that (in Sumner’s paraphrase) he “covets kindly relations with all the world, especially England.”³⁸⁹ Early in the crisis, he had assured a member of Canada’s cabinet, Alexander T. Galt, that the U.S. had no intention of attacking her. On December 5, the president said he “had implicit faith in the steady conduct of the American people even under the trying circumstances of the war, and though the existence of large armies had in other countries placed successful generals in positions of arbitrary power, he did not fear this result, but believed the people would

³⁸⁷ Horace Porter, Campaigning with Grant (New York: Century, 1897), 407-8.

³⁸⁸ Washington correspondence by Agate [Whitelaw Reid], 19 April 1863, Cincinnati Gazette, n.d., clipping in scrapbook, Reid Family Papers, Library of Congress.

³⁸⁹ Sumner to Cobden, Washington, 31 December 1861, in Pierce, Sumner, 4:60.

quietly resume their peaceful avocations and submit to the rule of the government.”

Lincoln went on to pledge “himself as a man of honor that neither he nor his cabinet entertained the slightest aggressive designs upon Canada, nor had any desire to disturb the rights of Great Britain on this continent.”³⁹⁰

Most Americans and Britons felt relief that war was averted, at least for the time being.³⁹¹ To Bostonians, the surrender of Mason and Slidell “was taken a good deal as a man swallows an emetic – not because he loves it, but because it is the best way of ridding himself of an unpleasant matter.”³⁹² Not everyone was so stoic. Like Lincoln, many of his constituents harbored “a desperate grudge, a cherished animosity, a lurking revenge,” and looked forward to “an opportune day of retribution.”³⁹³ Lincoln’s good friend, Joseph Gillespie, took it badly; writing from Illinois, he noted that the “[p]eople are almost frantic with rage[.] We feel disgraced dishonored & outraged. . . . This blunder as I regard it of succumbing to England has ruined the Administration beyond redemption and if the war is not pushed on with becoming energy the cause of the Country and the Union is likewise gone.”³⁹⁴ “We have eaten our peck of dirt – and all at once!” exclaimed Henry Winter Davis in disgust.³⁹⁵ In a similar vein, Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper remarked: “If we are compelled to eat dirt, let us improve the disgusting process to our

³⁹⁰ Alexander T. Galt, memorandum, 5 December 1861, in Oscar Douglas Skelton, The Life and Times of Sir Alexander Tilloch Galt (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1920), 315.

³⁹¹ New York World, 30 December 1861.

³⁹² Boston correspondence, 30 December 1861, New York Herald, 1 January 1862

³⁹³ Philadelphia Inquirer, 30 December 1861.

³⁹⁴ Joseph Gillespie to William Kellogg, Edwardsville, Illinois, 28 December 1861, Gillespie Papers, Chicago History Museum.

³⁹⁵ Henry Winter Davis to Samuel Francis Du Pont, [Baltimore], [late December 1861], transcript, S. F. Du Pont Papers, Hagley Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.

profit.”³⁹⁶ An Illinois congressman reported from Washington that things “look very blue here. The humiliation of this country by the conduct of the Cabinet in giving up Slidell & Mason is almost too much to bear.”³⁹⁷

But Lincoln did not seem blue. On New Year’s Day, as he presided over a White House reception, he was reportedly “in his happiest mood.”³⁹⁸ As he shook innumerable hands, he “exhibited no sign of fatigue, but rather appeared to enjoy it.”³⁹⁹ One observer, however, thought “the weight of the nation’s cares makes him a sadder, silenter looking man” than he was back in Illinois.⁴⁰⁰ Others noted that he looked “perceptibly older than he did less than a year ago.”⁴⁰¹

The outcome of the Trent affair bitterly disappointed the Confederates. The French consul in Richmond reported that the “release of Messrs. Slidell and Mason has greatly upset the South. The government of the Confederate States was hoping for a war between England and the United States, and as a consequence, the raising of the blockade.” Slidell later told Louis Napoleon he regretted his release “because if we had not been given up, it would have caused a war with England, which would have been of short duration, and whatever might have happened to myself, the result must have been advantageous to our cause.” There is reason to think that the seizure of Mason and Slidell

³⁹⁶ Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, 11 January 1862.

³⁹⁷ John A. Logan to his wife, Washington, 27 December 1861, John A. Logan Papers, Library of Congress.

³⁹⁸ Washington correspondence, 1 January, Philadelphia Press, 2 January 1862.

³⁹⁹ Washington correspondence by John Russell Young, 1 January, Philadelphia Press, 2 January 1862.

⁴⁰⁰ Washington correspondence, 3 January, Indianapolis Journal, 11 January 1862.

⁴⁰¹ Washington correspondence, 23 December, Chicago Evening Journal, 27 December 1861.

was a set-up by the Confederates designed to precipitate hostilities between the North and Great Britain.⁴⁰²

Many months later, Lincoln told a visitor “how he had pushed the prompt surrender of Mason and Slidell as an act of justice to England, realizing that in light of international law the Trent affair might justly have given ground for reprisal. Seward would have temporized, and so risked a most unwelcome complication with England.”⁴⁰³ As he had done in the spring, Lincoln cooled off the fiery Seward and helped keep relations with Great Britain relatively cordial. Sumner, who told Gideon Welles “that Seward was ignorant of international law and lacked common sense,” also helped counteract the secretary of state’s impulsiveness and contributed significantly to defusing the crisis.⁴⁰⁴

TENTATIVELY ADDRESSING SLAVERY

At the conclusion of the Trent affair, Sumner twitted Lincoln about his reluctance to liberate the slaves. If he had publicly announced an emancipation plan, the U.S. would have enjoyed far more support in Europe, the senator claimed, and the Trent crisis “would have come and gone and would have given you no anxiety.”⁴⁰⁵ A knowledgeable journalist reported that “Mr. Lincoln assures his friends without reserve in conversation that he is in favor of measures which shall enable us to deprive every rebel from Virginia

⁴⁰² Case and Spencer, France and the United States, 190-94. For a different view, see Crook, North, the South, and the Powers, 106n14.

⁴⁰³ John Eaton, Grant, Lincoln and the Freedmen: Reminiscences of the Civil War (New York: Longmans, Green, 1907), 178.

⁴⁰⁴ Welles to an unidentified correspondent, Hartford, 19 March 1874, Lincoln Cabinet Collection, Lincoln Museum, Fort Wayne.

⁴⁰⁵ This conversation took place on December 26 or 27. Sumner, conversation with Edward Everett Hale, Washington, 26 April 1862, Hale, Memories of One Hundred Years (2 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1902), 2:192, 191. Earlier in December, Sumner wrote that Lincoln told him “that the question between him & me is only of 4 weeks or at most 6 weeks, when we shall all be together.” Sumner to Richard Henry Dana, Washington, 14 December 1861, Dana Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

to Texas of his slaves and every other species of property, and that the only disagreement which can rise between himself and Congress will relate to the details of the bill which may be adopted.”⁴⁰⁶

In fact, the president had been working on a scheme to free slaves in Delaware, which would, he hoped, serve as a model for other Border States.⁴⁰⁷ In December he indicated to George Bancroft that he thought “slavery has received a mortal wound, that the harpoon has struck the whale to the heart.”⁴⁰⁸ With a mere 1798 bondsmen (8% of the total 1860 population), Delaware would undergo less economic and social upheaval than any other Slave State. (In 1847, the Whig-dominated legislature had come within a single vote of abolishing slavery gradually.) On November 4, Lincoln consulted with Congressman George P. Fisher, a member of the so-called People’s Party, the main opposition to the Democrats in the First State. Fisher agreed to draft, in cooperation with Nathaniel B. Smithers of the Delaware legislature, an emancipation bill which would be submitted after Lincoln had revised it. When the president suggested that for each slave, owners would receive \$300, Fisher held out for \$500; Lincoln agreed. The president also met with Fisher’s party colleague, Benjamin Burton, the largest slaveholder in Delaware. Lincoln asked Burton if the legislature, then in session, could be induced to free the slaves in case Congress provided compensation, to be determined by local appraisers. “I am satisfied that this is the cheapest and most humane way of ending the war,” the

⁴⁰⁶ Washington correspondence 16 December, Chicago Tribune, 19 December 1861.

⁴⁰⁷ See William H. Williams, Slavery and Freedom in Delaware, 1639-1865 (Wilmington: SR Books, 1996); Patience Essah, A House Divided: Slavery and Emancipation in Delaware, 1638-1865 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996); H. Clay Reed, “Lincoln’s Compensated Emancipation Plan and its Relations to Delaware,” Delaware Notes 7 (1931): 27-78; Harold Bell Hancock, Delaware during the Civil War: A Political History (Wilmington: Historical Society of Delaware, 1961), 106-10.

⁴⁰⁸ Bancroft to his wife, [Washington], 16 December 1861, Bancroft Papers, Cornell University.

president said. “Delaware is the smallest and has the fewest slaves of any State in the Union. If I can get this plan started in Delaware I have no fear but that all the other border states will accept it.”⁴⁰⁹ Burton thought his fellow slave owners would go along with such a scheme. Working with Fisher and Smithers, the president drafted two bills, each providing for total abolition in the First State by 1893. Slave children born following the passage of one of the proposed laws, along with all slaves more than thirty-five years of age, would be immediately emancipated. Others would gain their freedom upon their thirty-fifth birthday. To compensate slave owners, the federal government would provide the state with \$719,200 in bonds which could be paid out in small increments until 1893 or in larger sums until 1872.

To Orville H. Browning, Lincoln “said it would require only about one third of what was necessary to support the war for one year.” The president was, Browning noted, “very hopeful of success.”⁴¹⁰ He predicted to David Davis “that if Congress will pass a law authorizing the issuance of bonds for the payment of the emancipated Negroes in the border states, Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri will all accept the terms.”⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁹ This is based on Fisher’s unpublished essay, “The Trial of John H. Surratt for the Murder of President Lincoln,” typescript, pp. 3-3½, George P. Fisher Papers, Library of Congress; J. Thomas Scharf, History of Delaware, 1609-1888 (Philadelphia: L. J. Richards, 1888), 1:345n-46n, which indicates no source; on the reminiscences of Burrton’s son, in Reed, “Lincoln’s Compensated Emancipation Plan and its Relations to Delaware,” 38. In his essay on the Surratt trial, Fisher wrote that: “An extra session of the legislature of Delaware had been called by the governor of that state for the first Tuesday in November of that year. On the day before that session was to begin I received a telegram from Hon. Montgomery Blair, then Post Master General, stating that the President wished to see me immediately upon very important business. I went to Washington the next day and had a long interview with Mr. Lincoln on the subject of the war, and more particularly in relation to the matter of compensated emancipation for the border states. . . . In this interview he confided to me with great sincerity his views in regard to the institution of slavery, in all of which I fully concurred. Our meeting closed with the understanding the Hon. N. B. Smithers, of Dover, Delaware, and myself were at once to prepare a bill to be presented to the legislature of our state, after it had been revised by him, which was done.”

⁴¹⁰ Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 1:512 (1 December 1861).

⁴¹¹ David Davis to Leonard Swett, *place 26 November 1862, David Davis Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

In order to carry out the scheme, Congress had to appropriate the required money and the Delaware legislature had to agree to accept the offer.

On December 3, Lincoln submitted to the newly-reconvened Congress his annual message, which did not mention the Delaware plan directly, but it did address the matter of compensated emancipation in a roundabout way.⁴¹² Noting that under the provisions of the Confiscation Act, some slaves had become semi-free, he said they must now be cared for. (Less than a month earlier, many slaves had been liberated when a Union joint army-navy expedition captured Port Royal, South Carolina, and a number of nearby coastal islands. When the local whites fled, 10,000 bondsmen suddenly found themselves without masters.) Conceivably other slaves might also be freed by state legislatures. Such states, he recommended, should be compensated with tax breaks or by some other means. (Here was a veiled hint at the Delaware plan, but so heavily veiled that some criticized its obscurity. Others understood that it was designed “to encourage the Legislatures of Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri to adopt the policy of emancipating the slaves of disloyal citizens.”)⁴¹³ As it was, slaves whose labor had been taken from their Confederate owners by virtue of the Confiscation Act existed in a legal limbo as virtual wards of the government; Lincoln recommended that such people “be at once deemed free.” Then they, and any bondsmen who might in the future be liberated by state action, should be voluntarily colonized “at some place, or places, in a climate congenial to them.” Free blacks would be encouraged to follow suit. Implementing that plan might require the purchase of territory “and also the appropriation of money beyond that to be

⁴¹² Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:35-53.

⁴¹³ “The Message,” Missouri Democrat (St. Louis), 5 December 1861; Washington correspondence, 5 December, Chicago Tribune, 9 December 1861.

expended in the territorial acquisition.” In a nod toward the prevalent white racial prejudice, he argued that if “it be said that the only legitimate object of acquiring territory is to furnish homes for white men, this measure effects that object; for the emigration of colored men leaves additional room for white men remaining or coming here.” (This sentence created a sensation among the congressmen when it was read to them.)⁴¹⁴ Some kind of emancipation was “an absolute necessity . . . without which the government itself cannot be perpetuated.”

Lest his modest remarks be construed as rank abolitionism, Lincoln stressed that he would treat the slavery issue cautiously: “In considering the policy to be adopted for suppressing the insurrection, I have been anxious and careful that the inevitable conflict for this purpose shall not degenerate into a violent and remorseless revolutionary struggle.” This was probably an allusion to slave insurrections, which some Northerners thought should be encouraged by the administration. (In December, Lincoln told George Bancroft that he was “turning in his thoughts the question of his duty in the event of a slave insurrection.”⁴¹⁵ In 1863, when some Union commanders expressed a willingness to aid slave uprisings, Lincoln reportedly “refused on the ground that a servile insurrection would give a pretext for foreign intervention.”)⁴¹⁶ “I have, therefore, in every case, thought it proper to keep the integrity of the Union prominent as the primary object of the

⁴¹⁴ Washington correspondence, 3 December, New York Tribune, 4 December 1861.

⁴¹⁵ Bancroft to his wife, [Washington], 16 December 1861, Bancroft Papers, Cornell University.

⁴¹⁶ George W. Smalley told this to George Luther Stearns. Stearns to his wife, Washington, 25 January 1864, Stearns, Life and Public Services of Stearns, 327. Stearns reported that Smalley “told us that through Edmund Kirke [James Gilmore] the negroes had communicated last August, a plan for a general insurrection to be aided by our armies, and five of our commanders had promised to aid it.” Gilmore reported that he had spoken with General William S. Rosecrans about an insurrection planned for August 1, 1863, but he and his chief of staff, James A. Garfield, opposed it. Acting as a messenger, Gilmore reported this to Lincoln. James R. Gilmore, Personel recollections of Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War (London: J. Macqueen, 1898), 142-53.

contest on our part, leaving all questions which are not of vital military importance to the more deliberate action of the legislature.” But, he hinted, emancipation may be necessary in time, for the “Union must be preserved, and hence, all indispensable means must be employed.” To soften this sentence of iron, he immediately added: “We should not be in haste to determine that radical and extreme measures, which may reach the loyal as well as the disloyal, are indispensable.”⁴¹⁷

Lincoln may also have been warning against proposals to implement what later generations would call “ethnic cleansing.” In late June, he told Worthington G. Snethen, a Baltimore abolitionist who urged him to emancipate the slaves: “I should like to put down the rebellion, without disturbing any of the institutions, laws or customs of the States.” Snethen maintained that Southern resistance would never cease so long as slavery existed: “You must drive slavery and slaveholders into the Gulf, and people the waste with a new people.” When Seward, who was present, laughingly remarked that Snethen had the better argument, Lincoln remarked: “Well, if it must come to that, it will come to that.” In January 1862, a Democratic congressman who spoke with the president at length reported that Lincoln “will stand up and not succumb to the abolitionists in their mad causes – he says he will stand firm.”⁴¹⁸

The president’s suggested tax incentives to promote emancipation drew fire from some Radicals. Grant Goodrich of Chicago called it “the most unjust, & humiliating

⁴¹⁷ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:48-49.

⁴¹⁸ Snethen to Wendell Phillips, Baltimore, 25 August 1864, Phillips Papers, Harvard University; John A. Logan to his wife, Washington, 12 January 1862, Logan Papers, Library of Congress.

proposition that could be conceived.” To him it seemed that Lincoln was suggesting that Border States “should pay their taxes in the blood & sinews of their fellow beings.”⁴¹⁹

In early 1862, Lincoln’s Delaware plan fizzled when the legislature, which was evenly divided between Democrats and representatives of the People’s Party, refused by a one-vote margin to endorse the plan.⁴²⁰ In addition, it passed a resolution asserting that when “the people of Delaware desire to abolish slavery within her borders, they will do so in their own way, having due regard to strict equity” and “that any interference from without, and all suggestions of saving expense to the people, or others of like character, are improper to be made to an honorable people such as we represent, and are hereby repelled.”⁴²¹ Behind the state’s action lay what its Democratic Senator James A. Bayard called “the antagonism of race.” It was, said Bayard, “the principle of equality which the white man rejects where the negro exists in large numbers.”⁴²² The state’s other senator, Willard Saulsbury, a bad-tempered sympathizer with secession, echoed that sentiment, arguing that the country “shall be the white man’s home; and not only the white man’s home, but the white man shall govern, and the nigger never shall be his equal.”⁴²³ Other opponents of emancipation warned that Lincoln’s plan was but “the first step; if it shall

⁴¹⁹ Grant Goodrich to Lyman Trumbull, Chicago, 5 December 1861, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

⁴²⁰ Reed, “Lincoln’s Compensated Emancipation Plan and its Relations to Delaware,” 42-43; Harold Bell Hancock, Delaware During the Civil War: A Political History (Wilmington: Historical Society of Delaware, 1961), 107-8. Fisher recalled that “our bill failed of passing the Delaware legislature, but it was by reason of the obstinacy of the only member of that body who had voted for Mr. Lincoln for the presidency. Finding him persistent in his opposition to it, we concluded to withhold its presentation to the legislature and await the course of events.” Fisher, “Trial of Surratt,” p. 3½.

⁴²¹ House Journal, 1862, quoted in Hancock, Delaware during the Civil War, 110. The vote was 12-9 in favor of this resolution. See also Essah, House Divided, 162-74; Williams, Slavery and Freedom in Delaware, 174-76. The Democrats outnumbered the People’s Party representatives five to four in the senate; the People’s Party outnumbered the Democrats eleven to ten in the House.

⁴²² Congressional Globe, 3 April 1862.*

⁴²³ Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett] 25, March, Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 28 March 1862; Congressional Globe, 37th Congress, 2nd session, 2:1923-24 (6 May 1862).

succeed, others will follow tending to elevate the negro to an equality with the white man or rather to degrade the white man by obliterating the distinction between races.” If the remaining slaves of Delaware were to join the large ranks of free blacks in the state, soon the blacks “might equal the white population and cause a massacre.”⁴²⁴ (In 1860, there were 21,627 blacks and 90,589 whites in the state.) Even Republican Congressman Fisher appealed to racial prejudice while championing Lincoln’s plan: “the Almighty intended this Union as the home of the white race, created for them, not for the negro.” All patriots should consider “how the separation of the two distinct races, which can never, and ought never, to dwell together upon terms of political and social equality, can be effected with the least jarring to the harmony and happiness of our country.”⁴²⁵

Lincoln’s annual message dealt with a series of other problems in a rather perfunctory fashion, making it one of the president’s less memorable state papers.⁴²⁶ Before its publication, a justice of the New York state supreme court, fearing that it would be undignified and marred by “low commonplaces,” suggested that Seward should help write it.⁴²⁷ In fact, a portion of the message was evidently composed by Seward and inserted at the last moment.⁴²⁸ Because it was “peculiarly a business document,” it was, according to Senator William P. Fessenden, “considered here a dry and tame affair.” He

⁴²⁴ Dover Delawarean, n.d., quoted in Williams, Slavery and Freedom in Delaware, 175.

⁴²⁵ Congressional Globe, 11 March 1862.*

⁴²⁶ One journalist accurately predicted that the message would be “a comparatively plain, businesslike statement of the situation.” Washington correspondence, 27 November, Cincinnati Gazette, 28 November 1861.

⁴²⁷ E. Darwin Smith to Thurlow Weed, Rochester, 13 November 1861, Weed Papers, University of Rochester.

⁴²⁸ Washington correspondence, 4 December 1861, Philadelphia Inquirer, 5 December 1861.

thought it was marred by “several ridiculous things,” but condescendingly remarked, “we must make the best of our bargain.”⁴²⁹

Its most noteworthy rhetoric appeared in a disquisition on free labor, a seeming non sequitur.⁴³⁰ Lincoln deplored “the effort to place capital on an equal footing with, if not above labor, in the structure of government. It is assumed that labor is available only in connexion with capital; that nobody labors unless somebody else, owning capital, somehow by the use of it, induces him to labor. This assumed, it is next considered whether it is best that capital shall hire laborers, and thus induce them to work by their own consent, or buy them, and drive them to it without their consent. Having proceeded so far, it is naturally concluded that all laborers are either hired laborers, or what we call slaves. And further it is assumed that whoever is once a hired laborer, is fixed in that condition for life. Now, there is no such relation between capital and labor as assumed; nor is there any such thing as a free man being fixed for life in the condition of a hired laborer. Both these assumptions are false, and all inferences from them are groundless.

“Labor is prior to, and independent of, capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration. Capital has its rights, which are as worthy of protection as any other rights. Nor is it denied that there is, and probably always will be, a relation between labor and capital, producing mutual benefits. The error is in assuming that the whole labor of community exists within that relation. A few men own capital, and that few avoid labor themselves, and, with their capital, hire or buy another few to

⁴²⁹ Boston Evening Journal, 4 December 1861; William P. Fessenden to his son Frank, Washington, 6 December 1861, Fessenden Papers, Bowdoin College.

⁴³⁰ Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 4 December 1861; Cincinnati Enquirer, n.d., copied in the Missouri Democrat (St. Louis), 6 December 1861.

labor for them. A large majority belong to neither class—neither work for others, nor have others working for them. In most of the southern States, a majority of the whole people of all colors are neither slaves nor masters; while in the northern a large majority are neither hirers nor hired. Men with their families—wives, sons, and daughters—work for themselves, on their farms, in their houses, and in their shops, taking the whole product to themselves, and asking no favors of capital on the one hand, nor of hired laborers or slaves on the other. It is not forgotten that a considerable number of persons mingle their own labor with capital—that is, they labor with their own hands, and also buy or hire others to labor for them; but this is only a mixed, and not a distinct class. No principle stated is disturbed by the existence of this mixed class.

“Again: as has already been said, there is not, of necessity, any such thing as the free hired laborer being fixed to that condition for life. Many independent men everywhere in these States, a few years back in their lives, were hired laborers. The prudent, penniless beginner in the world, labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land for himself; then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him. This is the just, and generous, and prosperous system, which opens the way to all—gives hope to all, and consequent energy, and progress, and improvement of condition to all. No men living are more worthy to be trusted than those who toil up from poverty—none less inclined to take, or touch, aught which they have not honestly earned. Let them beware of surrendering a political power which they already possess, and which, if surrendered, will surely be used to close the door of advancement against such as they, and to fix new disabilities and burdens upon them, till all of liberty shall be lost.”

In closing, Lincoln stressed the larger significance of the war, giving a foretaste of the address he would deliver at Gettysburg in 1863: “The struggle of today, is not altogether for today – it is for a vast future also. With a reliance on Providence, all the more firm and earnest, let us proceed in the great task which events have devolved upon us.”

While moderate Republicans hailed the message’s substance as “wise, patriotic, and conservative,” and its style as “plain, concise and straightforward,” others complained about its brevity and its failure to mention the Trent crisis or to deal more fully with the slavery issue, both of which loomed large in the public mind.⁴³¹ Kansas Congressman Martin F. Conway noted with disappointment that the president “in his recent message to Congress, refers only incidentally to the subject [of slavery], and indicates no policy whatever for dealing with the momentous question.”⁴³² A Democratic journalist said that the “whole country awaited his message with breathless suspense. But the whole country turns away from it, sick with disappointment. It is silent on the very topic of all others that the nation is most anxious to have settled.”⁴³³ The Cincinnati Commercial also regretted that the president “evaded the rugged issue, and leaves the everlasting slavery question still adrift.”⁴³⁴ With justice, the New York Evening Post remarked that the message contained nothing which “speaks to the popular heart; nothing in it seems up to the spirit of the times; no sententious utterances of great truths are there

⁴³¹ New York World, Philadelphia Inquirer, 4 December 1861; “The Message,” Missouri Democrat (St. Louis) 5 December 1861.

⁴³² Congressional Globe, 37th Congress, 1st session, *12 December 1861.

⁴³³ Washington correspondence 11 December, Chicago Times, n.d., copied in the Illinois State Register (Springfield), 16 December 1861.

⁴³⁴ Cincinnati Commercial, 4 December 1861. See also Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 4 December 1861.

to stir the public mind in the midst of trial and calamities.”⁴³⁵ The Post’s editor, William Cullen Bryant, wrote that Lincoln’s “evident eagerness to dispose of the slavery question without provoking any violent conclusion is honorable to his feelings of humanity,” but “it will be felt universally that he does not meet either the necessities or the difficulties of the case with sufficient determination.”⁴³⁶ Charles Eliot Norton, a Massachusetts litterateur, complained that the message was “very poor in style, manner and thought, – very wanting in pith, and exhibiting a mournful deficiency of strong feeling and of wise forecast in the President. This ‘no policy’ system in regard to the conduct of the war and the treatment of the slavery question is extremely dangerous.”⁴³⁷ Less harsh criticism of Lincoln’s prose came from Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, which found the message “a great advance on the colloquial affair” he submitted to Congress in July.⁴³⁸

Lincoln’s failure to mention the Trent affair was interpreted as a sign of moderation in some circles, but English commentators regarded it as warlike.⁴³⁹ “If he means to give up the persons illegally seized,” said the London Times, “one would have thought it no unwise precaution to prepare the public mind for such a decision.”⁴⁴⁰

Just before the message was submitted to Congress, Lincoln told his cabinet why he was soft-pedaling the slavery issue: “Gentlemen, you are not a unit on this question, and as it is a very important one, in fact the most important which has come before us since the war commenced, I will float on with the tide till you are more nearly united than

⁴³⁵ New York Evening Post, 4 December, copied in the New York World, 5 December 1861.

⁴³⁶ Charles H. Brown, William Cullen Bryant (New York: Scribner, 1971), 435.

⁴³⁷ Norton to George William Curtis, Shady Hill, Massachusetts, 5 December 1861, Sara Norton and M. A. De Wolfe Howe, eds., Letters of Charles Eliot Norton (2 vols.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 1:246.

⁴³⁸ Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, 21 December 1861.

⁴³⁹ London Morning Post copied in the New York Times, 1 January 1862.

⁴⁴⁰ London Times, 17 December 1861.*CHECK

at present. Perhaps we shall yet drift into the right position.”⁴⁴¹ Just after Fremont’s dismissal, when a western congressman asked if the administration would not be forced to issue an emancipation proclamation, Lincoln replied: “We are drifting in that direction.”⁴⁴² According to an abolitionist, Lincoln admitted that he had “no policy” but rather “allowed matters to drift along pretty much as they pleased.”⁴⁴³ To the Prince de Joinville’s query about his over-all policy, he said: “I have none. I pass my life in preventing the storm from blowing down the tent, and I drive in the pegs as fast as they are pulled up.”⁴⁴⁴ In January 1862, Democratic editor James Brooks of New York said the president “seems right, all right, and acts right, but he is not now a positive man. He drifts, and loves to drift.”⁴⁴⁵

Radicals deplored Lincoln’s policy of drift. “The utterances of the White House are not statesmanlike in tone any more than elegant in expression,” sneered the National Anti-Slavery Standard. It dismissed the message as “the development of a hand-to-mouth policy” by a president who “drifts about with every day’s breeze, but ever with the traditionary instinct of all politicians, that slavery is still the guiding star of the ship of state.”⁴⁴⁶ “I really blushed for my country when I read that message,” Elizabeth Cady

⁴⁴¹ Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 27 November, Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 29 November 1861.

⁴⁴² Washington correspondence, 4 November, National Antislavery Standard (New York), 9 November 1861.

⁴⁴³ Mr. Stebbins of Rochester said a friend of his had a conversation with Lincoln in which the president made this statement. Stebbins’ speech at the 29th annual meeting of the Massachusetts Antislavery Society, New York Evening Express, 27 January 1862.

⁴⁴⁴ Don E. Fehrenbacher and Virginia Fehrenbacher, eds., Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996), 269.

⁴⁴⁵ Washington correspondence by James Brooks, 31 January, New York Evening Express, 1 February 1862.

⁴⁴⁶ National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 14 December 1861.

Stanton remarked. She added that “all his messages have been of the most namby-pamby order.”⁴⁴⁷

The message, coming after the president’s modification of Cameron’s annual report, led a prominent attorney in Milwaukee to declare that “people, in this section, have scarcely a remaining hope, that this Administration will ever awake [from] its deep lethargy to a vigorous prosecution of the war. The demon slavery, seems to have struck it with blindness.” Another Wisconsin Republican predicted that Lincoln would not win 500 votes in Rock County, which he had carried by 3,000 in 1860.⁴⁴⁸ Lucretia Mott called the message “rather tame” and denounced Lincoln’s “proslavery conservatism.”⁴⁴⁹ Contemptuously Lydia Maria Child asked: “What else could we expect from King Log?” She deplored the president’s “stagnant soul” and “wooden skull” as well as his “vacillating and imbecile policy” regarding slavery. But her friend Francis G. Shaw shrewdly observed that “Lincoln is Providential; for if we had a more energetic man at the helm he would rouse all the pro-slavery in the country to violent activity, whereas now they are lulled by his slow and timid course, and will not fairly wake up till the current of events has carried them too far out to sea to steer for the port they intended to make, and supposed they were making.” This analysis provided Child “a crumb of comfort.”⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁷ Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Gerrit Smith, Seneca Falls, New York, 16 December 1861, in Ann D. Gordon, ed., The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton (4 vols.; New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997-2006), 1:476.

⁴⁴⁸ James H. Paige to John F. Potter, Milwaukee, 1 January 1862, Potter Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

⁴⁴⁹ Mott to Martha Coffin Wright, Philadelphia, 5 December 1861, in Beverly Wilson Palmer, ed., Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 317-18.

⁴⁵⁰ Child to Mary Stearns, Wayland, Massachusetts, 15 December 1861, 30 January 1862, Lydia Maria Child: Selected Letters, 1817-1880, ed. Milton Meltzer and Patricia G. Holland (Amherst: University of

In fact, Lincoln evidently believed that the best way to boil a frog was to place it in a pot of water on a stove then gradually heat it up. If the water temperature rose precipitously, the frog would leap out, but if it increased little by little, the frog would not notice the difference and would eventually be cooked. Employing a different image, abolitionist Owen Lovejoy sensibly observed in November that “President Lincoln is advancing step by step just as the cautious swimmer wades into the stream before making a dive. President Lincoln will make a dive before long.”⁴⁵¹

Lincoln had been urged to ignore the vexed question of slavery by the venerable John J. Crittenden, author of the July resolution stating that the war fought to preserve the Union and not to abolish slavery.⁴⁵² When the president received contrary advice from George Bancroft, he told that prominent historian that emancipation was a subject “which does not escape my attention, and with which I must deal in all due caution, and with the best judgment I can bring to it.”⁴⁵³

Comment [C2]:

Some Southerners objected to the rather oblique references to emancipation and suggested that McClellan and his generals “surrender their swords rather than link them with the infamy of such measures.”⁴⁵⁴ They also took issue with Lincoln’s proposal to extend diplomatic recognition to Haiti and Liberia.

Comment [C3]:

Massachusetts Press, 1982), 399-400, 405; Child to Sarah Blake Sturgis Shaw, Wayland, Massachusetts, 24 November 1861, Child correspondence, microfiche edition, ed. Milton Meltzer and Patricia G. Holland.

⁴⁵¹ Owen Lovejoy, His Brother’s Blood: Speeches and Writings, 1838-64, ed. William F. Moore and Jane Ann Moore (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 277.

⁴⁵² John J. Crittenden to Lincoln, Frankfort, 26 November 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

⁴⁵³ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:26.

⁴⁵⁴ Louisville Journal, n.d., copied in the Cincinnati Commercial, 6 December 1861. George D. Prentiss, editor of the Journal, apologized to Lincoln for the harshness of this editorial, written by another journalist when he was out of town. George D. Prentice to Lincoln, 19 December 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

At the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, disappointment reigned. Several Republican members of Congress were prepared to censure the administration.⁴⁵⁵ “The President has lost all hold upon Congress, though no one doubts his personal integrity,” reported William P. Fessenden, who thought Lincoln meant well but was “sadly deficient in some qualities essential for a ruler in times like these.”⁴⁵⁶ According to a Washington correspondent, the message “falls like a wet blanket upon the hopes of the ardent anti-slavery party, and is all but denounced by many Republicans as utterly below the occasion.”⁴⁵⁷ Henry L. Dawes of Massachusetts found the document “very weak and in some parts . . . exceedingly flat.” He wished “that some Webster could put on record for immortality a true statement of the real character of this infamous rebellion, of the events transpiring here beneath the gaze of the world.”⁴⁵⁸ Dawes’s wife agreed, observing that the message was “without force” and complaining that “it is a great mortification to any one possessing any national pride, that we should have a ‘clever’ President at this crisis in our history.”⁴⁵⁹ (Dawes discovered more to admire in the president than cleverness, no matter how disappointing his rhetoric might be. After visiting the White House on December 4, he wrote his spouse: “Everybody likes Lincoln when they call on him. There is the simplicity of a child, the earnestness and sincerity which command the love of all who get near him.”)⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁵ Washington correspondence, 8 December, New York Times, 9 December 1861.

⁴⁵⁶ Fessenden to his son William, Washington, 15 December 1861; Fessenden to Elizabeth Warriner, Washington, 4, 19 January 1862, Fessenden Papers, Bowdoin College.

⁴⁵⁷ Washington correspondence by Sigma, 3 December, Cincinnati Commercial, 9 December 1861.

⁴⁵⁸ Henry L. Dawes to his wife Electa, Washington, 4 December 1861, Dawes Papers, Library of Congress.

⁴⁵⁹ Electa Dawes to Henry L. Dawes, North Adams, Massachusetts, 8 December 1861, Dawes Papers, Library of Congress.

⁴⁶⁰ Henry L. Dawes to his wife Electa, Washington, 5 December 1861, Dawes Papers, Library of Congress.

Lincoln's message disheartened many Illinoisans, including his good friend James C. Conkling. "I was highly disappointed and so was the country generally," wrote Conkling, "upon the complete non-committal policy of the President as indicated in his Message," which lacked "that high toned sentiment which ought to have pervaded a Message at such a critical period as this. Instead of ignoring the subject [of slavery] and falling far below public opinion and expectation, it should have recommended a bold and decisive policy and should have elevated public sentiment and aroused the national enthusiasm."⁴⁶¹ A resident of eastern Illinois complained to Lyman Trumbull that he and his neighbors "were all on tiptoe in expectation of the President's Message, but imagine our disappointment and mortification when it came. Such a Message! Not one single manly, bold, dignified position taken in it from beginning to end. No response to the popular feeling. No battle cry to the 500,000 gallant soldiers now in the field, but a tame, timid, time-serving, commonplace sort of an abortion of a Message, cold enough with one breath to freeze h-ll over."⁴⁶² On December 10, a physician who identified himself as "no Abolitionist" reported that many voters in Aurora, Illinois, were "surprised and disappointed at the President's course," for "the meekness of his Message disgusts the whole of us. The first man I met after leaving my house this morning, in a rage declared that if a speedy change in views and acts did not soon occur, he hoped some Brutus would arise and love his country more than he did the President."⁴⁶³ If Lincoln continued for three more months his moderate policy regarding slavery, predicted a resident of Greene County, he would "become the most unpopular man in the nation." No Illinois

⁴⁶¹ Conkling to Lyman Trumbull, Springfield, 16 December 1861, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

⁴⁶² Shubal York to Trumbull, Paris, Illinois, 5 December 1861, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

⁴⁶³ Dr. P. A. Allaire to Lyman Trumbull, Aurora, Illinois, 10 December 1861, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

Republican, said he, “doubts the honesty and patriotism of Abe Lincoln, yet his persevering opposition to striking rebellion where a blow is most effectual, has utterly destroyed all confidence in his statesmanship.”⁴⁶⁴ A disappointed Chicagoan expressed the hope that “Mr. Lincoln will show back bone” so that after his term expired he “can leave Washington without making Buchanan[’]s administration [seem] respectable.” Like others, this gentleman thought Lincoln’s downplaying of the slavery issue contrasted sharply with his 1858 House Divided speech.⁴⁶⁵ The president’s friend Ebenezer Peck similarly wished that the president “could be recast with more iron in his composition.”⁴⁶⁶

The proposal to colonize freedmen outraged many opponents of slavery, who protested that the message “is thoroughly tinged with that colorphobia which has so long prevailed in Illinois” and condemned Lincoln for “so laboring under colorphobia, as to make emancipation dependent on colonization.”⁴⁶⁷ The country’s leading opponent of colonization, William Lloyd Garrison, called the president “a man of very small caliber” who would do better “at his old business of splitting rails than at the head of a government like ours, especially in such a crisis.” He characterized the message as “wishy-washy,” “very feeble and rambling, and ridiculous as a State paper,” “weak and commonplace to a pitiable degree,” and scorned Lincoln’s “stupidity” and “imbecility.” The colonization proposal, he said, was “absurd and preposterous” and suggested that “Lincoln may colonize himself if he choose, but it is an impertinent act, on his part, to

⁴⁶⁴ John Russell to Lyman Trumbull, Bluffdale, Illinois, 17 December 1861, 4 February 1862, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

⁴⁶⁵ W. A. Baldwin to Lyman Trumbull, Chicago, 4 January 1862, 16 December 1861; Jason Marsh to Trumbull, Rockford, 10 February 1862, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

⁴⁶⁶ Ebenezer Peck to Lyman Trumbull, Chicago, 15 February 1862, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

⁴⁶⁷ New York Independent, n.d., copied in New York World, 7 December 1861; Worthington G. Snethen to Lyman Trumbull, Baltimore, 8 December 1861, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress; Worthington G. Snethen to George W. Julian, Baltimore, 20 January 1862, Giddings-Julian Papers, Library of Congress.

propose the getting rid of those who are as good as himself.”⁴⁶⁸ In New York, the Tribune spoke dismissively of the president’s “crazy scheme.”⁴⁶⁹ Even the conservative Herald declared that there “is no necessity for it.” The editor of that paper voiced a widely-shared practical objection: “the labor of the negroes is needed in the cotton and sugar States. The labor of the white man cannot supply it; and it would be extreme folly to deprive the country of such an immense laboring population.”⁴⁷⁰

Many blacks indignantly protested against colonization. The editor of the New York Anglo-African declared that Lincoln’s message “does not contain one word of generous trust, generous cheer or cordially sympathy with the ‘great uprising’ of the nation” and recommended ironically that “any surplus change Congress may have can be appropriated ‘with our consent’ to expatriate and settle elsewhere the surviving slaveholders.”⁴⁷¹ (The New York Tribune endorsed that suggestion.)⁴⁷²

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⁴⁶⁸ Garrison to Oliver Johnson, Boston, 6 December 1861, Merrill, ed., Letters of Garrison, 5:47; Garrison to Sumner, Boston, 20 December 1861, ibid., 5:53; The Liberator (Boston), 6 December 1861.

⁴⁶⁹ New York Tribune, 27 May 1862.

⁴⁷⁰ New York Herald, 17 April 1862. See also issue of 9 March 1862; Washington correspondence by Sigma, 8 December, Cincinnati Commercial, 12 December 1862; New York Times, 7 December 1861; speech by Senator John P. Hale, 10 April 1862, Congressional Globe, 37th Congress, 2nd session, 1605*CHECK.

⁴⁷¹ Weekly-Anglo African (New York), 7 December 1861.

⁴⁷² New York Tribune, 24 February 1862.

slaveholders.”⁴⁷³ In Boston, prominent blacks insisted that “when we wish to leave the United States we can find and pay for that territory which shall suit us best,” that “when we are ready to leave, we shall be able to pay our own expenses of travel,” that we don't want to go now,” and that “if anybody else wants us to go, they must compel us.”⁴⁷⁴ Frederick Douglass, who was “bewildered by the spectacle of moral blindness, infatuation and helpless imbecility which the Government of Lincoln presents,” denounced colonization and bitterly remarked that the president “shows himself to be about as destitute of any anti-slavery principle or feeling as did James Buchanan.”⁴⁷⁵

Yet a few months earlier Douglass had urged his fellow blacks to emigrate to Hayti, “this modern land of Canaan” where “our oppressors do not want us to go, and where our influence and example can still be of service to those whose tears will find their way to us by the waters of the Gulf washing all our shores. Let us be there to help beat back the filibustering invaders from the cotton States, who only await an opportunity to extinguish that island asylum of the deeply-wronged colored race.” In an 1853 speech, he had spoken favorably of Caribbean islands and British Guiana as suitable locations for American blacks to resettle.⁴⁷⁶

Other blacks supported colonization, including some newly freed slaves in Washington who memorialized Congress to provide for their settlement in Central

⁴⁷³ Weekly-Anglo African (New York), 7 December 1861.

⁴⁷⁴ James M. McPherson, “Abolitionist and Negro Opposition to Colonization,” Phylon 26 (1965): 393.

⁴⁷⁵ Douglass to Gerrit Smith, Rochester, 22 December 1861, Smith Papers, Syracuse University; Douglass's Monthly, January 1862, p. 577.

⁴⁷⁶ “Emigration to Hayti,” Douglass's Monthly, January and May 1861, 386, 450; John W. Blassingame et al., eds., The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series 1: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews (5 vols.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979-91), 4:437-38 (speech of 11 May 1853). Cf. Douglass's Monthly, March 1861, p. 420.

America.⁴⁷⁷ Earlier they had resisted colonization because it “was managed by a company, and was too often prostituted to selfish or speculative purposes.” But they trusted the government to administer the program in their best interest.⁴⁷⁸

Dissenting more temperately than some of his fellow abolitionists, Gerrit Smith acknowledged that Lincoln “is more intellectual than nine-tenths of the politicians, and more honest than ninety-nine hundreds of them. I admit too, that he would have made a good President had he not been trained to worship the Constitution,” a “comparatively petty thing.” Still, Smith deemed the message “twattle and trash” and urged that there be no more talk “of expelling our friends from the country.”⁴⁷⁹

The Radical editors of the Chicago Tribune, however, remarked that the “cautious language which Mr. Lincoln employs, does not hide from us, who know the deep moral convictions of the man, the purpose that he has in view.”⁴⁸⁰ A Radical senator emphatically defended the message, arguing that “nothing should be attempted that could not be maintained.”⁴⁸¹ Both the New York Times and Tribune detected in the message full acceptance of the Confiscation Act, which the president had so reluctantly signed a few months earlier.⁴⁸²

In fact, Lincoln’s long-standing support of colonization was not rooted in “colorphobia” but in hard political realities. Southern states simply would not voluntarily

⁴⁷⁷ Washington correspondence, 20 April, New York Times and New York Herald, 21 April 1862; New York Tribune, 22 April 1862; undated letter by “an American Negro,” Washington Star, 30 April 1862.

⁴⁷⁸ Washington correspondence, 7 May, Philadelphia Press, 8 May 1862.

⁴⁷⁹ The Liberator (Boston), 20 December 1861; Gerrit Smith to Thaddeus Stevens, 6 December 1861 (published letter, Peterboro, 1861).

⁴⁸⁰ Chicago Tribune, n.d., copied in the Missouri Democrat (St. Louis), 6 December 1861.

⁴⁸¹ Washington correspondence, 4 December, Boston Journal, 6 December 1861.

⁴⁸² New York Times, New York Tribune, 4 December 1861.

emancipate slaves unless the freedmen were colonized.⁴⁸³ A case in point was Kentucky. Senator Garrett Davis of that state assured the president that loyal men there “would not resist his gradual emancipation scheme if he would only conjoin with it his colonization plan.” (Lincoln cited this statement when explaining his support for colonization.)⁴⁸⁴ Wisconsin Senator James R. Doolittle similarly remarked that “every man, woman, and child who comes from these [Slave] States, tells me that it is utterly impossible for them to talk of emancipation within any slave State without connecting it with the idea of colonization.”⁴⁸⁵ In June 1862, Democratic Congressman Charles John Biddle of Pennsylvania told his colleagues in the House that alarm about emancipation “would spread to every man of my constituents who loves his country and his race if the public mind was not lulled and put to sleep with the word ‘colonization.’ I say the word, not the thing; for no practicable and adequate scheme for it has ever been presented or devised. The word is sung to us as a sort of ‘lullaby.’”⁴⁸⁶ Lincoln was singing that necessary tune. Another Representative from the Keystone State received a similar message from a Democratic constituent: “If you can only send the whole race out of the country, I think all loyal democrats would be willing to see slavery abolished at once, regardless of any other consideration. . . . If the black race is once removed, we will have repose – not sooner.”⁴⁸⁷ In New York, Democrats at a Tammany meeting declared that they were

⁴⁸³ Robert H. Zoellner, “Negro Colonization: The Climate of Opinion Surrounding Lincoln, 1860-65,” Mid-America 42 (1960): 131-50; “Emancipation and Colonization,” New York World, 29 March 1862.

⁴⁸⁴ Lincoln quoted Senator Davis’s remark to Kansas Senator Samuel C. Pomeroy. Adams S. Hill to Sydney Howard Gay, Washington, 25 August 1862, Gay Papers, Columbia University.

⁴⁸⁵ Congressional Globe, 37th Congress, 2nd session, 1633 (11 April 1862). *CHECK

⁴⁸⁶ Congressional Globe, 37th Congress, 2nd session, 2504-05 (2 June 1862)*CHECK

⁴⁸⁷ Charles N. Schaeffer to Edward McPherson, Gettysburg, 16 December 1861, McPherson Papers, Library of Congress.

“opposed to emancipating negro slaves, unless on some plan of colonization.”⁴⁸⁸ A former resident of the South assured Senator John Sherman that it was essential “that colonization should be held out in order to win the nonslaveholding and especially the poor whites of the South, and these are the men who must uphold the United States rule in the slave states.” Ninety percent of them “when they once understand it will hail manumission and colonization as a God’s blessing. The slaveholders rule them by creating a horror of what the Negroes would do if freed among them, but with all this there is a strong though secret hatred of slavery.”⁴⁸⁹ Appalled by the discrimination that blacks faced in the Free States, a treasury official in St. Louis exclaimed that if emancipation were not accompanied by colonization, “God pity the poor Negro!” for many Northern states would outlaw black settlement within their borders.⁴⁹⁰

Thousands of slaves in Virginia, South Carolina, and elsewhere were in the custody of the Union army, which did not wish to continue feeding and housing them. (Ben Butler, who ingeniously declared them “contraband of war,” called the flood of blacks streaming into Fort Monroe a “Disaster.”)⁴⁹¹ Neither the North nor the Border States wanted them; the public disapproved of allowing them serve in the army; so colonization seemed the only viable option, especially since practical steps had already been taken to find sites abroad where freedmen might resettle.

⁴⁸⁸ James M. McPherson, ed., The Negro’s Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted during the War for the Union (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965), 77.

⁴⁸⁹ Eli Nichols to John Sherman, New Castle, Ohio, 20 January 1862, John Sherman Papers, Library of Congress.

⁴⁹⁰ William Davis Gallagher to Chase, St. Louis, 12 February 1862, Chase Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁴⁹¹ West, Butler,* 83-85.

Before 1861, colonization had been supported by Radicals like Salmon P. Chase and many others. During the war some Radicals promoted it, including James Redpath, whom Frederick Douglass described as “a sincere friend of the colored race.”⁴⁹² The ultra Radical Moncure D. Conway, who became a bitter critic of Lincoln, published an influential book in 1862, The Rejected Stone, which contained a letter to the president urging him to colonize Haiti as part of a general plan of emancipation. “If,” he wrote, “under the formidable circumstances which now surround our nation, we should fear the expense, or the labors attending such a step [as emancipation], mark how Haiti stands ready to bear a hand to the holy work. The Queen of the Antilles sits there with her ungathered wealth about her, her spices and fruits gilding every wave around her shores, awaiting the ten millions of gatherers to whom she can yet give a hospitable home. One word from you, sir, and she is a recognized sister Republic. Another word, and, whilst African troops march on to see that your decree is executed, the aged, the women and children, which we can scarcely sustain, are borne away to the happy clime where no fevers nor lashes await them.”⁴⁹³

It is not entirely clear that Lincoln really thought colonization feasible or desirable. Harriet Martineau speculated that he was insincere. His “absurd” and “impracticable” plan, she wrote, “is so wrong and foolish that we might safely assume that Mr. Lincoln proposed something that would not do, in order to throw upon others the

⁴⁹² Douglass's Monthly, March 1861, p. 420; Willis D. Boyd, "James Redpath and American Negro Colonization in Haiti, 1860-1862," The Americas 12 (1955): 169-82; John R. McKivigan, "James Redpath and Black Reaction to the Haitian Emigration Bureau," Mid-America 69 (1987): 139-53; Christopher Dixon, "Nineteenth Century African American Emigrationism: The Failure of the Haitian Alternative," Western Journal of Black Studies 18 (1994): 77-88.

⁴⁹³ Conway rejected stone 101.*

responsibility of whatever will have to be done.”⁴⁹⁴ Indeed, he was covering his flank against attacks which would inevitably attend emancipation and trying to sugar-coat it to make it a less bitter pill for conservatives to swallow. But he may also have harbored an unrealistic belief that colonization just might work. At least he wanted to be able to say that he had tried to implement it.

Radicals were upset not only at Lincoln’s message but also at the conduct of Ward Hill Lamon and generals Halleck and McClellan, all of whom appeared soft on slavery. On November 20, Halleck, a conservative Democrat, had issued an order forbidding runaway slaves from entering Union lines in the Department of the West.⁴⁹⁵ Months earlier, McClellan had announced to white Virginians: “Notwithstanding all that has been said by the traitors to induce you to believe that our advent among you will be signalized by interference with your slaves, understand one thing clearly – not only will we abstain from all such interference but we will on the contrary with an iron hand, crush any attempt at insurrection on their part.”⁴⁹⁶ Other army officers, including Charles P. Stone, were returning fugitive slaves to their owners, and Lamon was holding some runaways in the District jail.

Infuriated Radicals in Congress denounced these actions and began formulating new confiscation measures.⁴⁹⁷ A Republican caucus endorsed the unconditional

⁴⁹⁴ National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 15 February 1862, and Once a Week: An Illustrated Miscellany of Art, Science, and Popular Information, 1 February 1862, in Harriet Martineau, Writings on Slavery and the American Civil War, ed. Deborah Anna Logan (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002), 161, 183-84.

⁴⁹⁵ Marszalek, Halleck, 111.

⁴⁹⁶ Sears, McClellan, 79.

⁴⁹⁷ Washington correspondence, 9 December, New York Times, 10 December 1861.

emancipation of slaves owned by disloyal masters.⁴⁹⁸ On December 7, Lincoln reportedly took umbrage, saying: “Emancipation would be equivalent to a John Brown raid, on a gigantic scale. Our position is surrounded with a sufficient number of dangers already. Abolition would throw against us, irrevocably, the four States of Missouri, Kentucky, Virginia and Maryland, which it is costing the nation such efforts to regain. We have our hands full as it is, and if there is to be any such suicidal legislation, we might as well cut loose at once, and begin taking up the arteries to prevent our bleeding to death.”⁴⁹⁹ Congress backed down for the time being and refused to pass a resolution urging the president to countermand Halleck’s order.⁵⁰⁰

On the other hand, Lincoln pleased the Radicals by ordering that slaves escaping to Washington not be jailed or returned to bondage.⁵⁰¹ He also approved the execution Nathaniel Gordon, the only American ever hanged for slave trading.⁵⁰² When the prosecutor in the case, E. Delafield Smith, visited Washington to urge the president to uphold the death sentence, Lincoln said: “You do not know how hard it is to have a human being die when you know that a stroke of your pen may save him.”⁵⁰³ (Similarly, he told the governor of Missouri that he “could not bear to have the power to save a

⁴⁹⁸ Washington correspondence 12 December, New York Times, 13 December 1861.

⁴⁹⁹ Lincoln reportedly said this on December 7. Washington correspondence, 9 December, New York Herald, 10 December 1861. The journalist reporting this stated that “My informant has given me these words that fell from the President’s lips, as nearly as he could remember them, and thinks they are exactly what he said.”

⁵⁰⁰ Washington correspondence, 11 December, New York Times, 12 December 1861.

⁵⁰¹ Seward to McClellan, Washington, 4 December 1861, Seward at Washington, 1:617-18.

⁵⁰² For an overview of this story, see Ron Soodalter, Hanging Captain Gordon: The Life and Trial of an American Slave Trader (New York: Atria Books, 2006). See also Robert Murray, “The Slaver Erie, or the Career of Gordon, the Slaver Captain,” typescript of an unpublished 1866 manuscript, in the possession of Ron Soodalter. I am grateful to Mr. Soodalter for generously providing me with a copy of this valuable document.

⁵⁰³ Ethan Allen, “Lincoln and the Slave Trader Gordon,” in William Ward Hayes, ed., Abraham Lincoln: Tributes of His Associates (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1895) 168.

man's life and not do it.")⁵⁰⁴ Yet he refused to commute Gordon's sentence, explaining to the prisoner's intercessors that the "slave-trade will never be put down till our laws are executed, and the penalty of death has once been enforced upon the offenders." The statute had been thought unenforceable.⁵⁰⁵ To his Illinois friend Congressman Henry P. H. Bromwell, Lincoln explained that the case of Gordon was one "where there must be an example, and you don't know how they followed and pressed to get him pardoned, or his sentence commuted; but there was no use of talking. It had to be done."⁵⁰⁶ The pressure had been intense.⁵⁰⁷ Thousands of New Yorkers had signed petitions appealing for commutation of the sentence.⁵⁰⁸ The New York World reported that every "possible social, professional and other interested influence has been brought to bear upon Mr. Lincoln, and it is stated that never before has a President been so thoroughly and persistently approached for official interference as in this case. Every possible argument which the ingenuity of counsel, the regard of relatives, or the fear of mercantile accomplices could suggest, has been used."⁵⁰⁹ On behalf of Gordon, funds were poured out, a rally took place on Wall Street, and congressmen and senators were pressured to lobby the president.⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰⁴ Hamilton R. Gamble to Lincoln, St. Louis, 2 May 1863, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

⁵⁰⁵ New York Tribune, 6 February 1862; New York World, 29 January 1862.

⁵⁰⁶ Denver Tribune, 18 May 1879.

⁵⁰⁷ See petitions from citizens of Portland, Maine, to Lincoln, and Edward P. Curtis to Lincoln, New York, 27 January 1862, Record Group 48, General Records of the Department of the Interior, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

⁵⁰⁸ Washington correspondence 14 February, New York Times, 15 February 1862. The Times said 5,000 and the New York Herald said 30,000 signed such a petition. New York Herald, 20 February 1862.

⁵⁰⁹ New York World, 6 February 1862.

⁵¹⁰ New York Evening Express, 21 February 1862.

Lincoln's resolve may have been stiffened by Charles Sumner, who told him that Gordon must be executed in order to "deter slave traders, to "give notice to the world of a change of policy," and to demonstrate "that the Govt. can hang a man."⁵¹¹ The New York World agreed: "A more deliberate, cold-blooded, nefarious, accursed, infernal crime it is not possible for a human being to commit. If we are to cheat the gallows of such guilt, we may as well at once abolish the gallows altogether."⁵¹² A Massachusetts antislavery militant, John Murray Forbes, asked: "Is he, like the rattlesnake in camp. . . to be released? The great want of the hour is to see one spy . . . hanged But if this one wish of the nation can not be gratified, can we not at least hand one of the pirate who have sacrificed such hecatombs of Africans?"⁵¹³

Fearing that the president might commute the death sentence, U.S. Marshal Robert Murray hastened from New York to Washington, where he explained to the president "that mercy would be misapplied in this instance, and if extended, that it would only embolden the slave traders and give the government a character for timidity and incompetency." Lincoln assured him "that no change in the sentence would be extended by him." Gordon's beautiful young wife also traveled to the capital, where she won the sympathy of Mary Lincoln. But it did her no good, for Lincoln "would not allow his wife to broach the subject."⁵¹⁴

When Gordon's lawyer sent Lincoln a last-minute appeal for mercy, the president forwarded the it and accompanying documents to Edward Bates, who advised that the

⁵¹¹ Emerson's journals, 15:187*

⁵¹² New York World, 29 January 1862.

⁵¹³ Forbes in a letter to n yep*GET quoted in lutz Lincoln le him hang 37

⁵¹⁴ Murray, "Career of Gordon," 43, 46.

chief executive “has no right to stop the course of law, except on grounds of excuse or mitigation found in the case itself – and not to arrest the execution of the statute merely because he thinks the law wrong or too severe.”⁵¹⁵ Lincoln did allow a brief postponement of Gordon’s execution, but nothing more. He counseled the prisoner to relinquish “all expectation of pardon by Human Authority” and “refer himself alone to the mercy of the common God and Father of all men.”⁵¹⁶

In New York, George Templeton Strong wrote of Gordon’s fate: “Served him right, and our unprecedented execution of justice on a criminal of this particular class and at this particular time will do us good abroad, perhaps with the pharisaical shop-keepers and bagmen of England itself.” He hoped that the courts, acting on this precedent, would “promptly exterminate every man who imports niggers into this continent.” Strong admired the backbone Lincoln displayed in resisting appeals for clemency. “Immense efforts were made to get the man pardoned or his punishment commuted. Lincoln told me of them. . . . He deserves credit for his firmness. The Executive has no harder duty, ordinarily, than the denial of mercy and grace asked by wives and friends and philanthropes.”⁵¹⁷ Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper insisted that Gordon’s execution was necessary “to show to the friends of Freedom throughout the world that we are really entitled to their sympathies and support.”⁵¹⁸

A Massachusetts citizen who applauded the execution of “the wretched pirate” viewed it as part of the administration’s general campaign against slave trading. “Mr

⁵¹⁵ Beale, ed., Bates Diary, 233 (entry for 18 February 1862).

⁵¹⁶ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:128-29.

⁵¹⁷ Nevins and Halsey, eds., Diary of Strong, 3:209 (entry for 22 February 1862).

⁵¹⁸ Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, 15 March 1862.

Lincoln, in selecting his district attorneys and marshals, had an eye to their capacities for arresting the foreign slave trade. Under the energetic and sagacious action of his officers slave ships which, under former administrations, boldly entered our northern ports to fit out for their atrocious and inhuman voyages, are now suppressed. . . . He has made with England a most stringent treaty, to insure the suppression of the slave trade. . . . Without the professions of a philanthropist, Mr L. has evinced a noble and generous nature, and should rank with the honored names of Clarkson and Wilberforce.”⁵¹⁹ A similar view was taken by the London Daily News, which speculated that “Gordon would have had a better chance had his life depended on the decision of some impulsive negro-phile, instead of being at the disposal of the severe, deliberative, but inflexible tenant of the White House, a man who, amidst the severest trials has never swerved a hair’s breadth from the policy which he professed when he was a candidate for office. Those who knew President Lincoln well said that he would not lose the precious opportunity to strike a blow at a system which costs hundreds of lives yearly and dooms the brave men of the two African squadrons to ruin their health on a pestilential coast.” The president’s refusal to alter the death sentence “is an index of the quality of Mr. Lincoln’s government, of its strength of principle, and the consistency of its policy, and it marks the end of a system.”⁵²⁰

Many abolitionists applauded the president, though a protégé of Thaddeus Stevens expressed wonder that Lincoln would hang Gordon and yet allow men like John C. Breckinridge and Beriah Magoffin to go unmolested.⁵²¹ Similarly, the president’s old

⁵¹⁹ Undated letter by “Pynchon,” a resident of Hampden County, Massachusetts, to the editor, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 8 July 1862.

⁵²⁰ London Daily News, 8 March 1862, in Soodalter, Hanging Captain Gordon, 226-27.

⁵²¹ Alexander H. Hood to Thaddeus Stevens, Lancaster, 14 April 1862, Stevens Papers, Library of Congress.

friend Erastus Wright asked: “If Lincoln directed Gordon hung Why should he treat with complacency those who are in fellowship and complicity, who are equally guilty?”⁵²² In fact, Lincoln did pardon some slave traders. When, however, Massachusetts Congressman John B. Alley appealed to him on behalf of one who had served his prison sentence but had been unable to pay his fine, the president replied sternly: “I believe I am kindly enough in nature and can be moved to pity and to pardon the perpetrator of almost the worst crime that the mind of man can conceive or the arm of man can execute; but any man, who, for paltry gain and stimulated only by avarice, can rob Africa of her children to sell into interminable bondage, I will never pardon, and he may stay and rot in jail before he will ever get relief from me.”⁵²³

Lincoln also fiercely criticized domestic slave traders. In 1864, upon hearing that Confederate cavalry raider John Hunt Morgan had been killed, he told an army chaplain: “Well, I wouldn’t crow over anybody’s death, but I assure you that I take this as resignedly as I could take any dispensation of Providence. This Morgan was a nigger-driver. You Northern men don’t know anything about such low, mean, cowardly creatures.” He added that “Southern slaveholders despise them. But such a wretch has been used to carry on their rebellion.”⁵²⁴

In 1863, Lincoln was similarly deluged with appeals to pardon a Virginia physician, David M. Wright, who had shot a Union army officer commanding some black troops. Incensed by the very idea of former slaves in uniform marching down the

⁵²² Erastus Wright to E. B. Washburne, Springfield, 11 April 1864, Washburne Papers, Library of Congress.

⁵²³ Rice, ed., Reminiscences of Lincoln, 582-83. Lincoln pardoned four of the seven slave traders who appealed to him for clemency. Dorris, “President Lincoln’s Clemency” * 547-68*CHECK

⁵²⁴ J. P. Thompson, “A Talk with President Lincoln,” The Congregationalist and Boston Recorder, 30 March 1866, p. 50. Thompson based his recollection on memoranda he wrote in September 1864.

sidewalks of Norfolk, the doctor whipped out a pistol and murdered Lieutenant Anson L. Sanborn. When a military commission condemned Wright to death, Lincoln carefully reviewed the trial record, spoke with the defendant's attorney, read the numerous petitions testifying to the doctor's respectability, ordered a special examination be made of the condemned man's sanity (he had pleaded temporary insanity), and then, after satisfying himself that the accused had received a fair trial and was never insane, approved the death sentence. Like Captain Gordon, Dr. Wright was hanged.⁵²⁵

CABINET SHAKE-UP

Lincoln may well have been tempted to dismiss his contemptuous general-in-chief, but instead he sacked Cameron. In October, the president had voiced dissatisfaction not only with conditions in the West but also with the secretary of war, who was, he said, "utterly ignorant and regardless of the course of things, and the probable result," "[s]elfish and openly discourteous to the President," "[o]bnoxious to the country," and "[i]ncapable of organizing details or conceiving and advising general plans."⁵²⁶ Five months earlier, a friend reported that there was "evidently much feeling between Lincoln & Cameron – judging from the conversation of each of them." The president said "he had been complained to about some Pennsylvania contracts" and "that he hoped the contracts were fair, but that he intended to have the matter examined."⁵²⁷ An example of Cameron's rudeness occurred in the late fall when a young man presented him a letter of recommendation from McClellan with a strong endorsement from Lincoln. McClellan wanted the bearer to have an important position in the commissary department. The war

⁵²⁵ Cite Lincoln herald article about this case* and bill miller's new book

⁵²⁶ Nicolay memorandum, 2 October 1861, in Burlingame, ed., With Lincoln in the White House, 59.

⁵²⁷ W. W. Orme to Leonard Swett, Washington, 14 May [1861], David Davis Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

secretary read the document impassively, tossed it aside, and said Lincoln's "recommendation has not the slightest weight with me."⁵²⁸

Chase and others shared the president's concern about the administration of the war department. The treasury secretary chastised Cameron for tardiness and sloppiness in submitting budget estimates.⁵²⁹ In August, Cameron's private secretary and Assistant Secretary of War Alexander Cummings were reportedly "very much dissatisfied" with the Chief, who they believed had been a failure. The department, in their view, was in a "most serious disorganization which it will take years to right."⁵³⁰ In May, an up-and-coming political leader from Maine, James G. Blaine, reported from Washington that he was having trouble getting the war department to accept troops from the Pine Tree State because "Cameron is too busy awarding contracts to Pennsylvanians and in giving the new lieutenancies in such a manner that S. Cameron shall not lose the convention in 1864. Besides it is said that his capacity is for intrigue and not for business."⁵³¹ Alluding to Napoleon's fabled war minister, Iowa Senator James W. Grimes fumed that "[i]nstead of having a man in these times at the head of the War Dept. who Carnot like, can sit down and organize victory for us we have a man there whose highest capabilities would be reached as pavement broker of third class notes in Wall Street or as the speculator of

⁵²⁸ Reminiscences of Edward Jay Allen in E. J. Edwards, "New Chronicles," Pittsburgh Gazette-Times, [6 November?] 1913, clipping, C. L. Goodwin Papers, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis.

⁵²⁹ Chase to Cameron, Washington, 19 June 1861, National Archives, Record Group 107; Chase to Cameron, Washington, 28 June 1861, National Archives, Record Group 56; Chase to Cameron, Washington, 21 November 1861, Niven, ed., Chase Papers, 3:110-11. See also Chase to Cameron, Washington, 18 January 1862, Cameron Papers, Library of Congress.

⁵³⁰ Manton Marble to Martin B. Anderson, New York, 1 August 1861, Martin B. Anderson Papers, University of Rochester.

⁵³¹ [James G. Blaine] to Gen. John L. Hodsdon, Washington, 13 May 1861, Records of the Adjutant General, Congressional Delegation Correspondence, Maine State Archives, Augusta.

corner lot in some of our western paper towns.”⁵³² Similarly, Henry Winter Davis asked: “Why will not the President find a Carnot to end the rebellion with?”⁵³³

In June, Lincoln seemed “agitated” and “in a temper” when asking T. J. Barnett, a lawyer-journalist and Republican activist who held a post in the interior department, about war department contracts.⁵³⁴ Soon thereafter, when Ebenezer Peck urged him to replace the secretary of war, the president was impressed with his arguments about the Chief’s incompetence but feared that Cameron’s hostility would have a deleterious effect on the Keystone State.⁵³⁵ Even though the public was rapidly losing confidence in the war secretary that summer, Lincoln hesitated to replace him, saying: “It is no time to swap horses when we are crossing a torrent” and “I know everything that Mr. Cameron has done since he came into office, and I tell you that he is as honest as I am.”⁵³⁶

⁵³² Grimes to William P. Fessenden, Washington, 13 November 1861, copy, Fessenden Papers, Bowdoin College.

⁵³³ Henry Winter Davis to Samuel Francis Du Pont, [Baltimore], 18 December 1861, transcript, S. F. Du Pont Papers, Hagley Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.

⁵³⁴ He queried Barnett on June 13 about any rumors he may have heard in New York concerning “responsible parties [who] were dissatisfied with the contracts of the War Dept.” Barnett to S. L. M. Barlow, Washington, 14 June 1861, Barlow Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California. In late 1864 or early 1865, six New York Republican congressmen petitioned the president on Barnett’s behalf: “We earnestly recommend the appointment of T. J. Barnett Esq. formerly of New York, and now resident in Washington to some place in the District of Columbia, such as Register of Wills or District Attorney. We regard Mr. Barnett as among our best popular speakers, and as one of the most experienced and effective political writers in the country. It is well known to many of the undersigned that Mr. Barnett rendered such distinguished services to the ticket of Lincoln & Johnson in New York and Indiana as entitle him to a much higher position than the one which he seeks, and which he deserves quite as much for political as for personal reasons. Mr. B is a lawyer, well known in his profession especially in Indiana, and his acquaintance is general with the politicians of the country.” Roscoe Conkling, Henry J. Raymond, John Henry, Daniel Morris, Robert S. Hale, Burt Van Horn to “the President,” n.d., Lincoln Papers, Western Reserve Historical Society. Barnett frequently wrote to the highly influential Democratic leader of New York, S. L. M. Barlow. He also wrote Washington dispatches for a New York newspaper.

⁵³⁵ Ebenezer Peck to Lyman Trumbull, Chicago, 15 July 1862, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

⁵³⁶ “Cabinet Matters,” New York Times, 28 August 1861; Simeon Nash to S. P. Chase, Gallipolis, Ohio, 27 August 1861, Chase Papers, Library of Congress; John B. Alley to Henry L. Dawes, Lynn, Massachusetts, 19 August 1861, Dawes Papers, ibid.; Washington correspondence by “Rhode Island,” 12 September, Providence Journal, 16 September 1861.

But Lincoln soon changed his tune. In early September 1861, he told Hiram Barney that he wished to remove Cameron because the Chief “was unequal to the duties of the place” and “his public affiliation with army contractors was a scandal.” Moreover, when away from Washington, Cameron often gave “telegraphic orders for the removal of troops and munitions, of which no record was made in the Department,” thus causing “serious disorder and difficulty.” The president also “named other instances to the same end.”⁵³⁷ The New York Times complained about Cameron’s refusal to accept regiments or to encourage the enlistment of cavalry, his reluctance to enroll a regiment of marksmen until Lincoln practically forced him to do so, his awarding of contracts for cannon to one Pennsylvania manufacturer instead of several different firms who collectively could have filled the order more quickly, and to his wasting time by “quarrelling over the appointment of sutlers and messengers, and arranging minor matters of the least possible consequence to the public.”⁵³⁸ The Boston Transcript denounced Cameron’s favoritism in making army appointments and his “sheer want of executive capacity.”⁵³⁹

The rapacity of unscrupulous contractors was legendary. Régis de Trobriand likened them to “a cloud of locusts alighting down upon the capital to devour the substance of the country. They were everywhere: in the streets, in the hotels, in the offices, at the Capitol, and in the White House. They continually besieged the bureaus of

⁵³⁷ On 13 January 1872, Barney told this to Jacob W. Schuckers. Schuckers to Whitelaw Reid, Philadelphia, 3 October 1872, Reid Family Papers, Library of Congress. Cf. Barney to Schuckers, New York, 11 May 1885, Schuckers Papers, Library of Congress, and an unidentified statement (probably by Barney) made to Maunsell B. Field, in field, of men 270*.

⁵³⁸ New York Times, 25 July 1861.

⁵³⁹ Boston Transcript, 19 August, copied in the Cincinnati Commercial, 24 August 1861.

administration, the doors of the Senate and House of Representatives, wherever there was a chance to gain something.”⁵⁴⁰

Cameron tried to block the appointment of capable men, like Ethan Allen Hitchcock and Montgomery C. Meigs. Lincoln did manage to get Meigs named quartermaster general but had less luck with Hitchcock. Once the war broke out, General Scott asked Cameron’s permission to have Hitchcock, who had retired from the army in 1855 after thirty-eight years of service, recalled to duty and assigned to Washington. The secretary of war, whose corruption in dealing with the Winnebago Indians in 1838 had been denounced at the time by Hitchcock, refused.⁵⁴¹ When Scott appealed to Lincoln, the president replied “that he must let the Head of the War Dept. have his voice.” (After Cameron’s forced resignation in 1862, Lincoln sought to do Hitchcock justice, but by then the general felt it would be inappropriate for him to assume command over brigadiers who had labored hard to recruit and train troops and were just then beginning to win victories. Eventually Hitchcock was made supervisor of prisoner exchanges.)⁵⁴²

The secretary of war alienated Lincoln not only with his incompetence as an administrator, his tendency to ignore the president’s wishes regarding promotions, and his ethical obtuseness, but also with his indiscreet statements regarding slavery. Under the influence of Chase, Cameron grew more radical as time passed. When slaves ran to Union army lines and General Benjamin F. Butler refused to return them to their owners

⁵⁴⁰ Régis de Trobriand, Four Years with the Army of the Potomac (Boston: Ticknor, 1889), 135*CHECK in risch 345.

⁵⁴¹ Washington correspondence, 1 March, New York Herald, 2 March 1862; Verplanck Van Antwerp to Lyman Trumbull, Leavenworth, Kansas, 21 March 1862, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

⁵⁴² Hitchcock to Mary Mann, St. Louis, 22 February 1862, Hitchcock Papers, Library of Congress.

but instead kept them as “contraband of war,” Cameron approved his action.⁵⁴³ In August, Cameron impulsively congratulated Frémont on his emancipation proclamation.⁵⁴⁴ Two months later he wrote orders for General Thomas W. Sherman, who was to help lead an expedition against Port Royal, South Carolina, authorizing him to liberate and arm slaves who came under his control. When he read those orders to Lincoln, the president struck the clause emancipating slaves and stipulated that “This, however, [is] not to mean a general arming of them for military service.”⁵⁴⁵ (Soon thereafter, Cameron said that he would send extra arms on any future expedition to the South “to enable those who desired to fight to take the field in aid of the Union cause.”)⁵⁴⁶ According to Cameron’s interpretation of the president’s revision, slaves could be armed “in cases of great emergency.”⁵⁴⁷ On November 13, after Colonel John Cochrane told his regiment that he endorsed the emancipation and arming of slaves as a military measure, Cameron said to those troops: “I heartily approve every sentiment uttered by your commander. The doctrines which he has laid down I approve as if they were my own words. They are my sentiments – sentiments which will not only lead you to victory, but which in the end reconstruct this our glorious Federal Constitution. . . . Every means which God has placed in our hands it is our duty to use for the purpose of

⁵⁴³ Cameron to Butler, 30 May, New York Tribune 31 May 1862.

⁵⁴⁴ Bradley, Cameron, 191, 193-94.*

⁵⁴⁵ Cameron, interview with Nicolay, 20 February 1875, in Burlingame, ed. Oral History of Lincoln, 43-44; John G. Nicolay and John Hay, Abraham Lincoln: A History (10 vols.; New York: Century, 1890), 123-24; *Kamm, Thomas A. Scott, 54-55; *Arnold, Lincoln and Slavery, 236*GET;

⁵⁴⁶ Cameron told this to some residents of Springfield, Massachusetts. Washington correspondence, 14 November, New York Tribune, 15 November 1861.

⁵⁴⁷ O.R., III, 1:626.

protecting ourselves.”⁵⁴⁸ Two days later at a cabinet meeting Cameron “came out openly . . . in favor of arming and organizing negro soldiers in the south.”⁵⁴⁹ Soon thereafter, at a dinner party given by John W. Forney, the war secretary embarrassed his host by reiterating “his opinion that, as a last resort, we ought to arm every man who desires to strike for human liberty.” Caleb B. Smith demurred, protesting “with some warmth” that “the Administration contemplated no such policy. Slaves escaping from rebels might be received as they had been hitherto – within the lines of the army; but it was not intended to arm them. If twenty million of freemen could not, single handed, subdue this rebellion, it would be a disgrace to them, and they ought to give up the contest.”⁵⁵⁰ (Weeks earlier, Smith had urged a Massachusetts friend to persuade “your New England politicians to resist the efforts now being made to convert his war into a crusade against slavery.”)⁵⁵¹ The controversy grew so heated that the music stopped and the guests became alarmed.⁵⁵² This intra-cabinet public contretemps delighted Democratic leaders like S. L. M. Barlow, who urged Edwin M. Stanton to foment even greater dissension within the Republican ranks: “Such quarrels should be fostered in every proper way.”⁵⁵³ Stanton was in a good position to do so, for he had become close to Cameron. The Chief recalled years later that shortly after Stanton took over the war department, he called on his predecessor and “was

⁵⁴⁸ Washington correspondence, 14 November, New York Tribune, 15 November 1861. Cameron later said that Lincoln “was along and laughed with me over it on the way home.” Cameron, interview with Nicolay, 20 February 1875, in Burlingame, ed. Oral History of Lincoln, 43. Nothing in surviving newspapers or manuscripts indicates that Lincoln attended that event in Bladensburg.

⁵⁴⁹ Beale, ed., Bates Diary, 203 (entry for 20 November 1861).

⁵⁵⁰ Smith to S. L. M. Barlow, 22 November 1861, Barlow Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California; Washington correspondence, 20 November, Cincinnati Gazette, 21 November 1861.

⁵⁵¹ Smith to William Schouler, Washington, 6 October 1861, Schouler Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁵⁵² Forney, Anecdotes of Public Men, 1:76.*

⁵⁵³ Barlow to Stanton, 21 November 1861, Barlow Papers, in Thomas and Hyman, Stanton, 133.

cordial and effusive, and fervidly eloquent on the subject of depriving the Confederacy of its slave property and putting it to the use of the Union. Thenceforward . . . Stanton was his confidant and adviser.”⁵⁵⁴

Acting on Barlow’s advice, Stanton recommended to Cameron that he incorporate into the war department’s annual report his views on emancipating and arming slaves. According to Cameron, Stanton “read the report carefully, and after suggesting a few alterations, calculated to make it stronger, he gave it his unequivocal and hearty support.”⁵⁵⁵ One exceptionally important addition proposed by Stanton was the following passage: "Those who make war against the Government justly forfeit all rights of property, privilege, and security derived from the Constitution and laws against which they are in armed rebellion; and as the labor and service of their slaves constitute the chief property of the rebels, such property should share the common fate of war, to which they have devoted the property of loyal citizens. It is as clearly the right of the Government to arm slaves, when it may become necessary, as it is to use gunpowder taken from the enemy. Whether it is expedient to do so is purely a military question. . . . What to do with that species of property is a question that time and circumstance will solve, and need not be anticipated further than to repeat that they cannot be held by the Government as slaves. It would be useless to keep them as prisoners of war; and self-preservation, the highest duty of a government, or of individuals, demands that they should be disposed of or employed in the most effective manner that will tend most speedily to suppress the insurrection and restore the authority of the Government. If it

⁵⁵⁴ Cameron paraphrased by Charles F. Benjamin, a clerk in the war department at that time, in Benjamin to Horace White, Washington, 1 June 1914, White Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

⁵⁵⁵ *SOURCE?

shall be found that the men who have been held by the rebels as slaves are capable of bearing arms and performing efficient military service, it is the right, and may become the duty, of the Government to arm and equip them, and employ their services against the rebels, under proper military regulation, discipline, and command.”⁵⁵⁶

Without bothering to consult Lincoln, Cameron took Stanton’s suggestion and included this paragraph in his report. Why Stanton behaved as he did is not clear. He may have been trying to carry out Barlow’s scheme to stir up dissension within the cabinet, or he may have been paving the way for Cameron’s dismissal and thus creating an opportunity for himself to become secretary of war, or he may have sincerely favored the policy recommended in the controversial paragraphs.⁵⁵⁷ In fact, the policy Cameron recommended was logical and would soon be adopted by the administration.

Although newspapers had accurately predicted what Cameron would say, Lincoln felt blindsided by the report, copies of which had been mailed to the press.⁵⁵⁸ On December 1, immediately after reading it, he exclaimed: “This will never do! General Cameron must take no such responsibility. This is a question that belongs exclusively to me!”⁵⁵⁹ He told a supporter of the secretary’s policy: “Arm the slaves, and we shall have more of them than white men in our army.”⁵⁶⁰ Indeed, a Kentuckian said the effect of Cameron’s proposal “is worse than pouring fifty thousand more Secession voters in among us. . . . Proclaim the general emancipation of all slaves of rebels, and as sure as

⁵⁵⁶ Nicolay and Hay, Lincoln, 5:125-26.

⁵⁵⁷ Thomas and Hyman, Stanton, 131.

⁵⁵⁸ Washington correspondence, 24 November, New York Tribune, 25 November 1861.

⁵⁵⁹ Carpenter, Six Months at the White House, 136.

⁵⁶⁰ Washington Sunday Chronicle, 29 December 1861.

*CECK DEFREES TO HOLLAND IN ALA JNL

there is a heaven, you annihilate the Union sentiment in every Southern state, destroy every hope of a Union party anywhere with which to begin a reconstruction, and unite the whole South as one man in a struggle of desperation.”⁵⁶¹

Lincoln summoned the Chief, told him his recommendation would hurt the Union cause in Kentucky, and demanded that he delete the controversial paragraphs, whose true authorship (by Stanton) was unknown to him. The president was working on a proposal dealing with slavery in Delaware and did not want his war secretary to rile up the public on that sensitive subject. The impertinent Cameron “promptly and resolutely refused to suppress a word of it.” At a cabinet meeting the next day, Welles and Chase backed the war secretary, but Bates, Blair, Seward, and Smith did not. The secretary of state was especially alarmed. According the Philadelphia Inquirer, Lincoln “finally settled it by going to General Cameron and insisting upon his confining his report to a statement of the past, and not dictate to Congress what they should do! Cameron insisted that his policy was correct, and must be carried out at once. The President assured him that it did not follow, if he changed his report or left out any of it, that he must necessarily change his policy, but that he could carry it out; only let Congress take hold of the matter first.” The secretary of war then reluctantly agreed to comply with the presidential directive.⁵⁶²

The offending paragraphs were replaced with a less controversial statement, which Lincoln may have written: “It is already a grave question what shall be done with

⁵⁶¹ James Smart* agate dispatches 1 83-84 dispatch from Frankfort ky 17 dec

⁵⁶² Washington correspondence, 2 December, New York Tribune, 4 December 1861; Cameron interviewed Nicolay, 20 February 1875, in Burlingame, ed. Oral History of Lincoln, 43; Washington correspondence, 4 December, Philadelphia Inquirer, 5 December 1861; Washington correspondence by Perley, 5 December, Boston Journal, 7 December 1861.

those slaves who were abandoned by their owners on the advance of our troops into southern territory, as at Beaufort district, in South Carolina. The number left within our control at that point is very considerable, and similar cases will probably occur. What shall be done with them? Can we afford to send them forward to their masters, to be by them armed against us, or used in producing supplies to sustain the rebellion? Their labor may be useful to us; withheld from the enemy it lessens his military resources, and withholding them has no tendency to induce the horrors of insurrection, even in the rebel communities. They constitute a military resource, and, being such, that they should not be turned over to the enemy is too plain to discuss. Why deprive him of supplies by a blockade, and voluntarily give him men to produce them? The disposition to be made of the slaves of rebels, after the close of the war, can be safely left to the wisdom and patriotism of Congress. The Representatives of the people will unquestionably secure to the loyal slaveholders every right to which they are entitled under the Constitution of the country.”⁵⁶³

But, as Cameron remarked, “the copies I have sent out will stand.”⁵⁶⁴ Angrily, Lincoln ordered Blair to telegraph postmasters instructing them to stop delivering copies of the report until the revised version arrived. Some newspapers ran both versions of the document, causing Radical Republicans to cheer Cameron and denounce the president. “What a fiasco!” exclaimed Charles Henry Ray of the Chicago Tribune. “Old Abe is now unmasked, and we are sold out. We want to keep the peace as long as there is hope of unity, but . . . we are ready to quarrel with Lincoln, the Cabinet, McClellan, and anybody

⁵⁶³ Washington correspondence, 4 December, Philadelphia Inquirer, 5 December 1861; O.R., III, 1:708.

⁵⁶⁴ Flower*, Stanton, 116.

else.” Ray urged that Congress force Lincoln “to accede to the popular demand to make this a war in earnest.”⁵⁶⁵ An Illinois abolitionist lamented that “the modification of Cameron’s report has absolutely broken down all enthusiasm in his [Lincoln’s] favor among the people. No man . . . ever threw away so completely, an opportunity, such as occurs to no individual, more than once in an age, to make himself revered, and loved by millions, and secure to himself a place and a name in history, more enviable than often falls to the lot of man. The modification reveals to the eyes of the people the real position and sentiments of the president, in a way that destroys in a great measure all confidence in his ability to bring the war to a successful issue.”⁵⁶⁶ Wendell Phillips sneered: “If we had a man for President, or an American instead of a Kentuckian, we should have had the satisfaction of attempting to save the Union instead of Kentucky.”⁵⁶⁷ He conceded that Lincoln was honest, but added: “as a pint pot may be full, and yet not be so full as a quart, so there is a vast difference between the honesty of a small man and the honesty of a statesman.”⁵⁶⁸

After alerting the postmasters, Blair told Lincoln that “he ought to get rid of C[ameron] at once, that he was not fit to remain in the Cabinet, and was incompetent to manage the War Department.”⁵⁶⁹ For some time the president had been planning to do so. In September, he allegedly hinted to Edwin M. Stanton that soon he would probably be

⁵⁶⁵ C. H. Ray to Elihu B. Washburne, Chicago, 5 December 1861, Elihu B. Washburne Papers, Library of Congress; C. H. Ray to Lyman Trumbull, Chicago, 6 December 1861, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

⁵⁶⁶ John H. Bryant to Lyman Trumbull, Princeton, Illinois, 8 December 1861, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

⁵⁶⁷ Speech of Phillips in Boston, 7 January 1862, Boston Post, n.d., copied in the New York Evening Express, 9 January 1862.

⁵⁶⁸ Speech at the Massachusetts Antislavery Society in Boston in the New York Evening Express, 27 January 1862.

⁵⁶⁹ Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 1:127*

named to an important position. (Stanton, who had been contemplating moving from Washington to New York, postponed those plans. After months of waiting, Stanton grew impatient and harshly criticized Lincoln.)⁵⁷⁰ In October, he let his war secretary know he would be dismissed sooner or later.⁵⁷¹ But what to do with him? Because he remained a powerful a force in Pennsylvania, the Chief had to be given a consolation prize, like a diplomatic post. As it developed, Cassius M. Clay wished to return home from Russia, where he had been serving as U.S. minister, and take an army command. From Thurlow Weed, the president learned that Cameron would be willing to take Clay's place.⁵⁷² (When informed of this move, Thaddeus Stevens quipped: "Send word to the Czar to bring in his things of nights.")⁵⁷³

According to Henry Winter Davis, Cameron's "removal was after the fashion of the deposition of an eastern Vizier. No consultation of the Cabinet – not one of them knew it was contemplated except Mr. Seward."⁵⁷⁴

So on January 11, Lincoln sent the secretary of war an uncharacteristically curt note: "As you have, more than once, expressed a desire for a change of position, I can

⁵⁷⁰ An unidentified statement, probably written by Hiram Barney, in manunsell field, of men, 270*

⁵⁷¹ "I knew I was doomed when I consented to go to St. Louis," Cameron wrote in February 1862, "and was not altogether clear of suspicion that it was intended I should be by one of my associates [Seward], but having determined to shrink from no duty I went cheerfully, only taking care to let the President know my belief, and to get his promise that I should be allowed to go abroad when I left the Department." Cameron to Francis P. Blair, 8 February 1862, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Princeton University.

⁵⁷² Weed, "Reply to Ex-Senator Cameron," New York Tribune, 5 July 1878. According to a friend of Leonard Swett, Weed helped persuade Cameron to give up the war department portfolio in order to protect his health and his reputation. Weed, in turn, had been prompted by Swett, who in turn had been prompted by Lincoln. Washington correspondence by Frank G. Carpenter, 22 January, Cleveland Leader, 23 January 1885.

⁵⁷³ Brodie, Stevens, 149.*

⁵⁷⁴ Henry Winter Davis to Samuel Francis Du Pont, [Baltimore], 8 February 1862, transcript, S. F. Du Pont Papers, Hagley Museum, Wilmington, Delaware. Davis alleged that Delaware Congressman George P. Fisher "was in the Prest. room when Seward walked in & the Prest. took him aside & in a stage whisper – for you know Seward [Lincoln?] cant whisper – he was heard to say 'recall Clay & send him to Russia.'" That was done the next day.

now gratify you, consistently with my view of the public interest. I therefore propose nominating you to the Senate, next monday, as minister to Russia.”⁵⁷⁵ It contained no expression of regret or gratitude. Deeply wounded and offended, Cameron complained to Seward and Chase that the president’s note was “discourteous.”⁵⁷⁶ To Alexander K. McClure and Thomas A. Scott, the Chief predicted tearfully that it “meant personal as well as political destruction.” The three men concluded to ask Lincoln to replace that note with a more generous and complimentary one.⁵⁷⁷ The president obliged, sending Cameron another missive, backdated to January 11, paying tribute to his services: “Though I have said nothing hitherto in response to your wish, expressed long since, to resign your seat in the cabinet, I have not been unmindful of it. I have been only unwilling to consent to a change at a time, and under circumstances which might give occasion to misconstruction, and unable, till now to see how such misconstruction could be avoided. But the desire of Mr. Clay to return home and to offer his services to his country in the field enables me now to gratify your wish, and at the same time evince my personal regard for you, and my confidence in your ability, patriotism, and fidelity to public trust. I therefore tender to your acceptance, if you still desire to resign your present position, the post of Minister to Russia. Should you accept it, you will bear with you the assurance of my undiminished confidence, of my affectionate esteem, and of my sure expectation that, near the great sovereign whose personal and hereditary friendship for

⁵⁷⁵ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:96.

⁵⁷⁶ Niven, ed., Chase Papers, 1:325 (diary entry for ?).*

⁵⁷⁷ McClure, Lincoln and Men of War Times, 164-65.*

the United States, so much endears him to Americans, you will be able to render services to your country, not less important than those you could render at home.”⁵⁷⁸

Cameron later maintained that he was fired because of his antislavery principles, but that seems unlikely, though many at the time believed that was the case.⁵⁷⁹ William P. Fessenden accurately observed that “Cameron did not leave the department on account of his Slavery views,” which “were the same as those of Mr Chase and others, who remain.” (A case in point was Welles, whose annual report describing his policy of sheltering fugitive slaves and hiring them for the navy was more radical than Cameron’s, yet the navy secretary was not reprimanded; he stayed in the cabinet throughout Lincoln’s administration.)⁵⁸⁰ As Fessenden put it, Cameron simply “could not manage so large a concern,” for he “had neither the capacity nor strength of will.” As a result, “there was great mismanagement. He did his best, but his best was not enough.”⁵⁸¹ Welles concurred, noting that Cameron lacked “the grasp, power, energy, comprehension, and important qualities essential to the administration of the War Department.”⁵⁸² Among Cameron’s most widely criticized shortcomings were his “worse than equivocal antecedents; his swarms of corrupt hangers-on and contract-hunting friends; his repeated and persistent attempts to enrich his Pennsylvania favorites at the expense of the people,” and his lack of “a single military instinct” or a “comprehensive and organizing executive

⁵⁷⁸ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:96-7.

⁵⁷⁹ Washington correspondence, 13 January, New York Tribune, 14 January 1862.

⁵⁸⁰ Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 1:58n*; “The Cabinet on Contrabands,” New York Tribune, 5 December 1861; Steven J. Ramold, Slaves, Sailors, Citizens: African Americans in the Union Navy (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002), 40-42.

⁵⁸¹ Fessenden to his father, Washington, 20 January 1862, Fessenden Papers, Bowdoin College.

⁵⁸² Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 1:57.*

faculty.”⁵⁸³ Horace White argued plausibly that Cameron’s explanation of his dismissal was “all bosh. If crowded out of the Cabinet for that reason, why was he not set adrift when he and the President quarreled about his report six weeks ago, and when he got the latter into such a scrape by the publication of the wrong copy? Undignified as was that fiasco, nobody can believe that the feud has been allowed to moulder forty days, until the people had well nigh forgotten it, to break out anew, and result in the removal of the Secretary, at the very juncture when his principles have received an endorsement in the fitting out of Jim Lane’s expedition.”⁵⁸⁴ (Kansas Senator James H. Lane, a militant abolitionist, had received presidential authorization to lead an expedition against Texas. According to one report, Lane’s instructions were, in effect, “To let slavery be disposed of by military necessities and the course of events. If slaves come within our lines from the plantations beyond the federal lines, use them. If they can work on fortifications use their services, clothe, feed and pay them. If absolutely necessary, arm them. If [they are] slaves of rebels, free them.” Lane’s “Southern Expedition” was eventually scrubbed when he and David Hunter quarreled about who should command it.⁵⁸⁵ When word of Lane’s instructions leaked out, an incredulous Democrat asked: “Can it be possible that a chief magistrate of a great nation has no settled policy? Can it be possible that he lets out

⁵⁸³ Washington correspondence by Sigma, 19 January, Cincinnati Commercial, 23 January 1862; Boston Advertiser, 10 February, copied in the Cincinnati Commercial, 14 February 1862. Cf. John Allison to Lyman Trumbull, New Brighton, Pennsylvania, 4 June 1861, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

⁵⁸⁴ Washington correspondence by Horace White, 15 January, Chicago Tribune, 20 January 1862.

⁵⁸⁵ Washington correspondence, 28 January, New York World, 29 January 1862; Washington correspondence, 6 February, Philadelphia Inquirer, 7 February 1862; Miller, Lincoln’s Abolitionist General, 76-87.* According to one journalist, Lane’s plan was to “employ contrabands to lighten the labors and perform the rougher duties of a soldier without arming them to fight. He will employ them to gather forage, build fortifications and attend to transportation.” Washington correspondence, 19 January, Philadelphia Inquirer, 20 January 1862.

his administration by contract to politicians who are to take turns in the management of it?")⁵⁸⁶

Cameron's dismissal electrified both the public and Congress.⁵⁸⁷ "Washington has not been in such a ferment since the day after Bull Run," reported one journalist. "The crowds who are here for good or evil still stand agape at the great change which has darted across the political firmament like a meteor."⁵⁸⁸

The president's bold act prompted calls for further changes in the cabinet. While rejoicing at the appointment of Stanton, a Maine resident insisted that there "should be more changes immediately," for "[w]e have so signally failed in our Cabinet."⁵⁸⁹ Criticism of the navy and interior departments was especially harsh. "Everybody knows that the heads of those Departments are not the men for these times," remarked a *Washingtonian*.⁵⁹⁰ Welles was denounced for lacking "energy, decisiveness, system, organization, [and] prescience."⁵⁹¹ But when urged to dump the navy secretary, Lincoln replied that "when I was a young man I used to know very well one Joe Wilson, who built himself a log-cabin not far from where I lived. Joe was very fond of eggs and chickens, and he took a great deal of pains in fitting up a poultry shed." Late one night, hearing loud squawks and fluttering of wings, Wilson arose to see what caused the fuss.

⁵⁸⁶ Robert Harryman to S. S. Cox, Newark, Ohio, 26 January 1862, Cox Papers, Brown University.

⁵⁸⁷ Washington correspondence, 13 January, New York *World*, 14 January 1862; Washington correspondence by Ben: Perley Poore, 13 January, Boston *Journal*, 15 January 1862; Washington correspondence, 13 January, Philadelphia *Press*, 14 January 1862; Washington correspondence by John W. Forney, 14 January, Philadelphia *Press*, 15 January 1862.

⁵⁸⁸ Washington correspondence, 14 January, Philadelphia *Inquirer*, 15 January 1862.

⁵⁸⁹ Israel D. Andrews to David Davis, Washington, 28 January [1862], David Davis Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

⁵⁹⁰ Washington correspondence by "Observer," 31 January, *Iowa State Register* (Des Moines), 5 February 1862.

⁵⁹¹ Boston *Transcript*, 19 August, copied in the Cincinnati *Commercial*, 24 August 1861.

He observed half a dozen skunks circling the shed. Angrily he reached for his musket and banged away at the pests, managing to kill only one. When he told this story to his neighbors, Wilson held his nose at this point. They asked why he didn't shoot the other skunks. "Blast it," he rejoined, "why it was eleven weeks before I got over killin' one. If you want any more skirmishing in that line you can just do it yourselves!"⁵⁹²

In the spring of 1862, when the House of Representatives censured Cameron, Lincoln defended him, much to the surprise of Congress.⁵⁹³ With characteristic magnanimity, he assumed much of the blame for mistakes made at the beginning of the war, when contracts were let without the usual precautions. By swift action, he said, "the Government was saved from overthrow" and no money "was either lost or wasted."⁵⁹⁴ Lincoln's defense of Cameron antagonized many Republicans, including several senators who manifested their dissatisfaction by voting against the Chief's confirmation as minister to Russia.⁵⁹⁵ Samuel Galloway "was shocked at the assumption of the responsibility of Cameron's odious acts by Lincoln." Incredulous, Galloway asked: "Does he suppose that any sane man is so stupid as to suppose that the President anticipated that any government officer would employ scoundrels to execute its wishes and orders." The president "must have been persuaded by Chase to throw his mantle over

⁵⁹² Carpenter, Six Months at the White House,* 38-39; Henry Winter Davis to Samuel Francis Du Pont, [Baltimore], [10 or 11 March] 1862, transcript, S. F. Du Pont Papers, Hagley Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.

⁵⁹³ Washington correspondence, 27 May, New York Times, 28 May 1862.

⁵⁹⁴ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:240-43. Cameron had complained to Lincoln about the criticism leveled at him. Cameron to Lincoln, Lochiel, 5 May 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

⁵⁹⁵ David D. Field to Lincoln, New York, 8 November 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress; Washington correspondence, 17 January, Philadelphia Inquirer, 18 January 1862.

Simon's 'multitude of sins.'"⁵⁹⁶ Some wondered why Lincoln waited till Cameron had left for Europe to defend the Chief.⁵⁹⁷ Others praised his forbearance and pointed out that the president assumed responsibility only for the emergency expenditure of \$2,000,000 by Cummings et al., and not for Cameron's other peccadilloes.⁵⁹⁸ The president's gesture won him Cameron's unflinching gratitude, which would prove vital in later elections.

To replace the Chief, Lincoln desired to name Joseph Holt, who had served with distinction as war secretary in the latter days of the Buchanan administration.⁵⁹⁹ Lincoln so trusted Holt that he told a Kentucky Republican seeking a favor that he should call on Holt. "If he says you ought to be attended to I will do it."⁶⁰⁰ But Holt was too conservative for the Radicals, whose support Lincoln regarded as vital.⁶⁰¹ When the president asked Cameron's opinion about his successor, the Chief mentioned Edwin M. Stanton, a celebrated lawyer who as attorney general had, like Holt, helped stiffen Buchanan's backbone during the secession crisis.⁶⁰²

Chase, regarding himself as the ablest man in the cabinet, took a hand in the selection of a new war secretary, maneuvering to have Stanton named.⁶⁰³ Chase had

⁵⁹⁶ Samuel Galloway to Henry L. Dawes, Columbus, 9 June 1862, Henry L. Dawes Papers, Library of Congress.

⁵⁹⁷ John Barr to John Sherman, Cleveland, 2 June 1862, John Sherman Papers, Library of Congress.

⁵⁹⁸ Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 31 May 1862.

⁵⁹⁹ R. W. Bush to Joseph Holt, Louisville, 13 November 1861; Joshua Speed to Holt, Washington, 8 December 1861, Holt Papers, Library of Congress.

⁶⁰⁰ Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 1 October, Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 5 October 1861.

⁶⁰¹ Washington correspondence, 21 October, National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 26 October 1861.

⁶⁰² Cameron interviewed by Nicolay, 20 February 1875, in Burlingame, ed. Oral History of Lincoln, 44. See also Nevins, War for the Union, 1:408-9.

⁶⁰³ Chase told Bates he had worked for two months to have Stanton replace Cameron but had done it so subtly that "his hand was hardly seen in it." Beale, ed., Bates Diary, 240 (entry for 14 March 1862).

known Stanton when they were both young attorneys and political activists; he may have thought the gruff, irascible Pennsylvanian would be an ideological ally, for Stanton had opposed slavery and his father had been an abolitionist. Evidently Chase was unaware that in 1860 Stanton supported Breckinridge for president. Calling on Seward, the treasury secretary speculated that Holt or Stanton would be chosen. Holt, he feared, could embarrass the administration on the slavery issue “and might not prove quite equal to the emergency.” Stanton he lauded as “a good lawyer and full of energy.” Seward also regarded Stanton highly, calling him a man “of great force – full of expedients, and thoroughly loyal.”⁶⁰⁴ He may have believed that as a War Democrat, Stanton might well side with him and the other moderates in the cabinet. Seward lobbied actively on behalf of Stanton, with whom he had worked in secret during the winter of 1860-61.⁶⁰⁵ At that time Stanton had leaked inside information to the New York senator.⁶⁰⁶ Thus Chase and Seward, who opposed one another on virtually every question, helped engineer Stanton’s appointment. Lincoln probably rejoiced to observe these antagonists cooperate for a change.

Stanton was politically attractive, for, like Cameron, he lived in Pennsylvania and had been a Democrat. In addition, his service in Buchanan’s cabinet had made him famous as a staunch Unionist. Lincoln decided to pass over other candidates for the war department portfolio, including Holt, Montgomery Blair, John A. Dix, and Benjamin F. Wade, and name the lawyer who had humiliated him at the McCormick reaper trial in 1855. Among other men, Lincoln consulted with George Harding, a Philadelphia patent

⁶⁰⁴ Niven, ed., Chase Papers, 1:325 (entry for *)

⁶⁰⁵ maunsell field* of men 266-67.

⁶⁰⁶ Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 1:58-59.*

attorney he had gotten to know during that trial. When asked his opinion about a successor to Cameron, Harding replied: “I have in mind only one man, but I know you could not and would not appoint him after the outrageous way he has insulted you and behaved towards you in the Reaper case.”

“Oh,” replied Lincoln, “you mean Stanton. Now, Mr. Harding, this is not a personal matter. I simply desire to do what will be the best thing for the country.”⁶⁰⁷

Stanton’s appointment was one of the most magnanimous acts of a remarkably magnanimous president.

When informed that he would be offered the war department portfolio, Stanton said: “Tell the President I will accept if no other pledge than to throttle treason shall be exacted.”⁶⁰⁸

At Lincoln’s invitation, Stanton visited the White House with Harding, who recalled that the president and his secretary-of-war-designate greeted each other with little embarrassment. “The meeting was brief but friendly and Lincoln and Stanton shook hands cordially at parting, both thanking him [Harding] for the trouble he had taken in bringing them together.”⁶⁰⁹

Before announcing Stanton’s appointment, Lincoln asked Congressman Henry L. Dawes, who served on a committee investigating government transactions during the secession crisis, “whether any thing appeared in that investigation reflecting on the integrity” of Stanton. The president explained that he did not doubt Stanton’s integrity,

⁶⁰⁷ Harding told this to his law partner William B. H. Dowse. Dowse to Albert J. Beveridge, Boston, 10 October 1925, Albert J. Beveridge Papers, Library of Congress.

⁶⁰⁸ E. D. Townsend in Flower, Stanton, 117*GET EDT’s book

⁶⁰⁹ Thomas and Hyman, Stanton, 136; Harding told this to Charles F. Benjamin, who in turn described it to Horace White. Benjamin to White, 1 June 1914, White Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield. Benjamin had been a clerk in the war department during the Civil War.

but “it is necessary that the public as well as I should have confidence in the man I appoint to office, whatever may be my own opinion.” Later, when Dawes congratulated Lincoln on his choice, he replied “that it was an experiment which he had made up his mind to try, and that whenever a Union man was willing to break away from party affiliations, and stand by the government in this great struggle, he was resolved to give him an opportunity and welcome him to the service.” He added “that he had been warned against this appointment, and had been told that it never would do; that ‘Stanton would run away with the whole concern, and that he would find he could do nothing with such a man unless he let him have his own way.’” Lincoln “then told a story of a minister out in Illinois who was in the habit of going off on such high flights at camp meetings that they had to put bricks in his pockets to keep him down. ‘I may have to do that with Stanton; but if I do, bricks in his pocket will be better than bricks in his hat. I guess I’ll let him jump a while.’”⁶¹⁰ To a delegation from Boston and Philadelphia, the president said that he knew Stanton “to be a true and loyal man, and that he possessed the greatest energy of character and systematic method in the discharge of public business.”⁶¹¹

Although he consulted with many men before selecting Stanton, Lincoln had not spoken with McClellan. On the day after the appointment, he told the general-in-chief that he knew Stanton was a friend of McClellan’s whom he would probably be happy to have in the war department, and that he was afraid if he had informed Little Mac ahead of time, “some of those fellows” (i.e., Radical Republicans) would allege that the general

⁶¹⁰ Dawes, “Recollections of Stanton under Lincoln,” Atlantic Monthly, April 1894, 163; Dawes, “Some Sayings of Mr. Lincoln,” undated typescript, Dawes Papers, Library of Congress.

⁶¹¹ Washington correspondence, n.d., Philadelphia Inquirer, n.d., copied in the Boston Journal, 22 January 1862.

had inveigled him into making that choice.⁶¹² In early January, Stanton said “he regarded McClellan as the greatest military genius upon the continent.”⁶¹³ That opinion would soon change.

News of Stanton’s appointment “fell like a bombshell into political circles,” producing “tremendous commotion among the Republicans,” including Senator William P. Fessenden, who reported that it “astounded every body.”⁶¹⁴ When some protested against the selection of a prominent Democrat as secretary of war, Lincoln replied: “If I could find four more democrats just like Stanton, I would appoint them.”⁶¹⁵ He said “he knew him to be a true and loyal man, and that he possessed the greatest energy of character and systematic method in the discharge of public business.”⁶¹⁶

Democrats, like New York editor James Brooks, were gratified. In choosing Stanton, Lincoln “shows that he means to administer the Government, not alone upon a narrow Chicago Platform, but upon the Constitutional National Platform,” Brooks declared.⁶¹⁷ August Belmont, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, thought Stanton’s appointment indicated that Lincoln understood the necessity of adding conservative Democrats to his administration.⁶¹⁸ The Democratic former mayor of New York praised Lincoln extravagantly: “Your highly patriotic, and conservative course

⁶¹² *McClellan, My Own Story, 161.

⁶¹³ Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 15 January, Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 18 January 1862.

⁶¹⁴ Washington correspondence by R. M. H., 15 January, Indianapolis Journal, 21 January 1862; Fessenden to Elizabeth Warriner, Washington, 19 January 1862, Fessenden Papers, Bowdoin College.

⁶¹⁵ Portland Oregonian, 20 May 1862.

⁶¹⁶ Washington correspondence, 19 January, Philadelphia Inquirer, 20 January 1862.

⁶¹⁷ Washington correspondence by James Brooks, 16 January, New York Evening Express, 17 January 1862.

⁶¹⁸ Belmont to Barlow, 10 February 1862, Barlow Papers in Katz, Belmont, 112n.*

meets with the hearty concurrence of the Democratic masses in this state– We will sustain you fully, and you may rely upon my best exertions in behalf of the administration of which you are the noble head– The late change in the cabinet was opportune– It has given the best proof of your own ability to govern, and also of your executive power and will.”⁶¹⁹

Westerners were also pleased. “The West will look to Mr. Stanton . . . as her guardian and representative in the voyage of the Cabinet in these perilous times,” the Cincinnati Enquirer predicted. “He is identified with us by birth, feelings and interests, and by all his aspirations.”⁶²⁰

Physically, the new secretary cut an unimpressive figure. General John Pope thought Stanton “was in no sense an imposing person, either in looks or manner.” Relatively short, “stout and clumsy,” with “a broad, rather red face, well covered with a heavy black beard, which descended on his breast and was scarcely sprinkled with gray,” he “had a mass of long hair, pushed off toward the back of his head from a broad, massive brow and large, dark eyes, which looked even larger behind a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles, seemingly of unusual size.” With a “rather squat figure, surmounted by the Iconine bust an head above it,” he seemed “shaggy” and “belligerent.”⁶²¹

Former California Senator William M. Gwin, who had known Stanton years before, predicted that the new war secretary “will tomahawk them all.”⁶²² But most observers approved of the choice, among them George Templeton Strong of the United

⁶¹⁹ Fernando Wood to Lincoln, New York, 15 January 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

⁶²⁰ Cincinnati Enquirer, 16 January 1862.

⁶²¹ The Military Memoirs of General John Pope, ed. Peter Cozzens and Robert I. Girardi (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 115.

⁶²² Van Deusen, Seward, p?*

States Sanitary Commission, who said Stanton was worth "a wagon load of Camerons." Though Strong did not admire Stanton's "rather pigfaced," "Luther-oid" appearance, the new war secretary was, in Strong's view, "[i]ntelligent, prompt, clear-headed, fluent without wordiness, and above all, earnest, warm-hearted, and large-hearted," and thus represented "the reverse in all things of his cunning, cold-blooded, selfish old predecessor."⁶²³ D. W. Bartlett called Stanton "a very able man, a pushing, all-alive man."⁶²⁴ The conservative New York Herald predicted that "what Carnot was to the first French republic, as Minister of War, Stanton will be to 'Honest Abe Lincoln,'" and "that he will be the man to bring order out of confusion, efficiency out of inaction, and an invincible army out of raw recruits, dispirited by frequent disasters, delays and disappointments."⁶²⁵ Senator Fessenden hoped that Stanton would "be of great benefit in stiffening the Cabinet – a thing which it much needs."⁶²⁶ Some senators, however, were reluctant to confirm Stanton unless the president assured them that the war would be prosecuted vigorously.⁶²⁷

Lincoln's preferred candidate for the war portfolio, Joseph Holt, thanked the president for choosing Stanton: "In him you will find a friend true as steel, & a support, which no pressure from within or from without, will ever shake. It was my fortune to know him during the darkest days of the late administration & I think I know him well. With his great talents, he is the soul of honor, of courage, & of loyalty. In the progress of

⁶²³ Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey, eds., The Diary of George Templeton Strong (4 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1952), 2:203 (entry for 29 January 1862).

⁶²⁴ Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 15 January, Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 18 January 1862.

⁶²⁵ New York Herald, 15 January 1862.

⁶²⁶ Fessenden to Elizabeth Warriner, Washington, 19 January 1862, Fessenden Papers, Bowdoin College.

⁶²⁷ Charles Sumner told this to Richard Henry Dana. Dana diary, 14 January 1862, Dana Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

the terrible events inseparable from the struggle for the life of our country, in which you are heroically engaged, you can assign to Edwin M. Stanton no duty however stern, or solemn or self-sacrificing, which he will not nobly & efficiently perform.”⁶²⁸ Edwards Pierrepont described to Lincoln “the reviving confidence which your appointment of Mr Stanton had given us. The whole nation thanks God, that you had the wisdom and the courage to make the change.”⁶²⁹

In the New York Tribune, Charles A. Dana lauded his good friend of Stanton as a man who cared deeply about the preservation of the Union: "If slavery or anti-slavery shall at any time be found obstructing or impeding the nation in its efforts to crush out this monstrous rebellion, he will walk straight on the path of duty, though that path should lead him over or through the impediment, and insure its annihilation." The energetic Stanton would infuse energy into the war department, Dana predicted, and would be a "zealous cooperator" rather than "a lordly superior" in dealing with McClellan.⁶³⁰

In thanking Dana, Stanton expressed the hope that all Unionists would support him. "Bad passions, and little passions, and mean passions gather around and hem in the great movements that should deliver this nation," he said. But he sensed a new determination in his department. "We have no jokes or trivialities," he assured Dana, "but all with whom I act show that they are now in dead earnest. . . . As soon as I can get the machinery of the office working, the rats cleaned out, & the ratholes stopped, we shall move."⁶³¹

⁶²⁸ Holt to Lincoln, St. Louis, 15 January 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

⁶²⁹ Edwards Pierrepont to Lincoln, New York, 19 January 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

⁶³⁰ *source?

⁶³¹ Stanton to Dana, Washington, 24 January 1862, Dana Papers, Library of Congress.

Joseph Medill of the Chicago Tribune spoke for many Northerners when he told Stanton that the “country looks to you to infuse vigor, system, honesty, and fight into the services. The army has lost more men in the past four months from inaction and ennui than it would have done from ten bloody battles.”⁶³² John Hay described Stanton as “an energetic and efficient worker, a man of initiative and decision, an organizer, a man of administrative scope and executive tact” who “is personally friendly” with all the members of the cabinet.⁶³³

Hay reckoned without Montgomery Blair, who had earlier expressed doubt about Stanton’s integrity and opposed his appointment to the cabinet.⁶³⁴ Bates also distrusted Stanton, and Gideon Welles complained that Stanton’s “remarks on the personal appearance of the President were coarse, and his freely expressed judgment on public measures unjust.” The navy secretary believed Stanton “was engaged with discontented and mischievous person in petty intrigues to impair confidence in the Administration.”⁶³⁵ (Indeed, Stanton had criticized Lincoln severely in private, and the Washington rumor mill spread his caustic comments far and wide. McClellan recalled the “extreme virulence with which he abused the President, the Administration, and the Republican party. He carried this to such an extent that I was often shocked by it. He never spoke of the President in any other way than as the ‘original gorilla.’”)⁶³⁶ Welles also objected to

⁶³² Bernard A. Weissberger, Reporters for the Union 222-23*GET

⁶³³ Washington correspondence by John Hay, 15 January, Missouri Republican (St. Louis), 19 January 1862, in Burlingame, ed., Lincoln’s Journalist, 196-97.

⁶³⁴ Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 56, 59; Blair to Welles, Washington, 24 November 1870, Welles Papers, Connecticut State Historical Society, Hartford.

⁶³⁵ *Cain, Bates, 172; Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 1:57.

⁶³⁶ McClellan’s own story* get

the way Stanton curried McClellan's favor.⁶³⁷ Later, the navy secretary wrote that Stanton "took pleasure in being ungracious and rough towards those who were under his control, and when he thought his bearish manner would terrify or humiliate those who were subject to him. To his superiors or those who were his equals in position, and who neither needed nor cared for his violence, he was complacent, sometimes obsequious."⁶³⁸

Despite those unfortunate qualities, Stanton proved to be a remarkably capable war secretary who worked well with the president. Whereas the selection of his first secretary of war was one of Lincoln's greatest mistakes, the choice of a successor turned out to be one of his most inspired appointments.

Shortly after Stanton assumed control of the war department, Joshua Speed praised the way he transformed it: "Instead of that loose shackeling way of doing business in the war office, with which I have been so much disgusted & which I have had so good an opportunity of seeing – there is now order regularity and precision. . . . I shall be much mistaken if he does not infuse into the whole army an energy & activity which we have not seen heretofore."⁶³⁹

Unlike the president, Stanton had little trouble saying "no." Early in his tenure at the war department, the new secretary was approached by a man who wanted an army appointment and said he had received Lincoln's endorsement. "The President, sir, is a very excellent man and would be glad if he had an appointment for every man who applied, which, unfortunately for his good nature, is not the case," Stanton explained.⁶⁴⁰

⁶³⁷ *Niven, Welles, 397; Thomas and Hyman, Stanton, 128-30.

⁶³⁸ *source?

⁶³⁹ Joshua F. Speed to Joseph Holt, Washington, 4 February 1862, Holt Papers, Library of Congress.

⁶⁴⁰ Washington correspondence, 27 January, Philadelphia Inquirer, 28 January 1862.

Later, when Judge Joseph G. Baldwin of California asked for a pass to visit his brother in Virginia, Lincoln suggested he see Stanton. The judge replied that he had done so and was refused. With a smile Lincoln observed, “I can do nothing; for you must know that I have very little influence with this administration.”⁶⁴¹ Stanton thus helped the president seem accommodating by assuming the unpleasant but necessary duty of denying requests. His gruffness was useful, for, as General Pope observed, no one “can compute what was the value to the government, of this terse, not to say abrupt treatment of men and business by the Secretary of War in the times when Mr. Stanton held that office. No politician nor suave man of any description could have disposed of such a mass of business and such a crowd of people as pressed on the Secretary of War from morning until night and until far into the early hours of the next day, for months together.”⁶⁴²

With Stanton’s assistance, Lincoln now began to assert himself more forcefully in dealings with his generals and to take charge of the war effort more decisively. The new war secretary’s first directive to McClellan was signed by order of “the President, Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy,” a not-so-subtle message to the Young Napoleon.⁶⁴³ He had been studying strategy and tactics whenever he could find the time. Among the books he read was Henry W. Halleck’s Elements of Military Art and Science. William Howard Russell of the London Times observed him scuttling from the White House to the War Department and to the homes of his generals. “This poor President!” Russell exclaimed. “He is to be pitied; . . . trying with all his might to understand strategy, naval warfare, big guns, the movements of troops, military maps,

⁶⁴¹ Chicago Tribune, 26 March 1864.

⁶⁴² Memoirs of Pope, ed. Cozzens and Girardi, 115.

⁶⁴³ Washington correspondence, 30 January, New York Tribune, 31 January 1862.

reconnaissances, occupations, interior and exterior lines, and all the technical details of the art of slaying. He runs from one house to another, armed with plans, maps, reports, recommendations, sometimes good humored, never angry, occasionally dejected, and always a little fussy.”⁶⁴⁴

In time, Lincoln acquired a better understanding of strategy than most of his generals, as is made clear in a letter he wrote to General Buell on that memorable January 13: “I state my general idea of this war to be that we have the greater numbers, and the enemy has the greater facility of concentrating forces upon points of collision; that we must fail, unless we can find some way of making our advantage an over-match for his; and that this can only be done by menacing him with superior forces at different points, at the same time; so that we can safely attack, one, or both, if he makes no change; and if he weakens one to strengthen the other, forbear to attack the strengthened one, but seize, and hold the weakened one, gaining so much. . . . Applying the principle to your case, my idea is that Halleck shall menace Columbus, and ‘down river’ generally; while you menace Bowling-Green, and East Tennessee. If the enemy shall concentrate at Bowling-Green, do not retire from his front; yet do not fight him there, either, but seize Columbus and East Tennessee, one or both, left exposed by the concentration at Bowling Green.”⁶⁴⁵

Lincoln was right: the North’s advantages in manpower and economic strength would bring about victory only if its military forces applied pressure on all fronts simultaneously. Alas, Buell, Halleck, McClellan, and numerous other generals failed to grasp this elementary point and act on it. In 1864, when U. S. Grant began to implement such a strategy, Lincoln was, as John Hay noted in his diary, “powerfully reminded” of

⁶⁴⁴ *William Howard Russell diary 9 October 1861*

⁶⁴⁵ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:98-99.

his “old suggestion so constantly made and as constantly neglected, to Buell & Halleck et al to move at once upon the enemy’s whole line so as to bring into action to our advantage our great superiority in numbers. Otherwise by interior lines & control of the interior railroad system the enemy can shift their men rapidly from one point to another as they may be required. In this concerted movement, however, great superiority of numbers must tell: As the enemy however successful where he concentrates must necessarily weaken other portions of his line and lose important position. This idea of his own, the Prest. recognized with especial pleasure when Grant said it was his intention to make all the line useful – those not fighting could help the fighting.” Lincoln pithily summarized the point with a rustic analogy: “Those not skinning can hold a leg.”⁶⁴⁶

But in the winter of 1861-1862, McClellan, Halleck, and Buell seemed unwilling either to skin or hold a leg, to the president’s infinite frustration.

⁶⁴⁶ Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 193-94 (entry for 30 April 1864).