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WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON AND THE ELECTION OF 1864

By

Paul H. Julian

The bitterness of the campaign for the Presidency can easily be seen in various press accounts. The election was so controversial that the editors of major newspapers throughout the country converted their journals into Lincoln, McClellan and Fremont organs. Editorials and articles during this period were tainted with political propaganda and personal abuse. William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist journal, The Liberator, was no exception. This anti-slavery journal reveals Garrison's thoughts on the necessity of Abraham Lincoln's re-election as President of the United States.

Garrison, perhaps the most notable abolitionist of his day, was a dedicated supporter of Lincoln's election in 1864. As early as January of that year, Garrison declared that "the re-election of Lincoln would be the wisest and safest course." Although Lincoln had his faults, Garrison asserted that "a thousand incidental errors and blunders" could be overlooked in the man who had freed the slaves. In addition, unity among loyal Northerners would prevent the possibility of a Democratic

victory.¹

Garrison's support of Lincoln was soon to become controversial when an open split with a fellow abolitionist, Wendell Phillips, began to develop. Many Republicans held a basic mistrust of Lincoln, and they were angered by his views on the power of the Presidency. On May 31, 1864, a group of anti-Lincoln men gathered in Cleveland, just eight days prior to the Republican Convention, and wrote a platform consisting of "the Constitutional prohibition of slavery, free speech and a free press, a one term Presidency, and reconstruction of the states to be left entirely to Congress." Then, they announced their support for General John C. Fremont for President.²

Garrison continued his support for the incumbent President. He recognized that a three party campaign could be fatal for the entire abolitionist cause. The Republican split would probably result in McClellan's election, and a possible Democratic move for peace and reconciliation with the South. The major fear of Garrison was that if the Union advocates remained divided, the

¹John L. Thomas, The Liberator: William Lloyd Garrison (Boston, 1963), p. 424.

²Carl Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln: The War Years (New York, 1936), p. 71.

inevitable Democratic victory would result in the continuance of slavery, and thus would effectuate a setback in the abolitionist movement.

The Liberator devoted itself to promoting Lincoln's anti-slavery image and consolidating the Union exponents for an endorsement of the President for a second term. On June 17, 1864, Garrison published an editorial which was an emotional appeal to Republicans throughout the country. The editorial insisted that Lincoln was acceptable to abolitionists, and that the Republican Party was the best hope for the eventual eradication of slavery. In a rather bold move, Garrison referred to the Republican convention as somewhat "radical in nature," conforming to the general principles of the Abolitionists in the United States.³ This editorial was political propaganda seeking to foster an image of Lincoln as somewhat of an abolitionist. Garrison had much more to explain, however, as in trying to convince his Negro and white readers that Lincoln was the best candidate he found his popularity waning.

A major issue in the campaign of 1864 centered on the powers exercised by the President during the war. The threat to civil liberty became a major issue which

³The Presidential Nominations," The Liberator, June 17, 1864, p. 98.

the anti-Lincoln Republicans used in promoting Fremont's candidacy. The suspension of Habeas Corpus by the President during the war was, according to the rebel Republicans, an example of Lincoln's abuse of power. Again, Garrison's pen went to work in order to defend the actions of the President in suspending that Constitutional right. He declared that "are not ordinary civil affairs accustomed to give place when war is in progress, and to yield to the necessity it imposes as a matter of course?" There was a "special need," Garrison stated, "that the routine of civil administration should be interfered with, because that routine protected and perpetuated slavery."⁴ Garrison explained that the actions of Lincoln were taken only as a matter of expediency in order to govern a nation involved in a great civil war. Rather significantly, Garrison related the President's actions with its effects on the slave question. The editorial declared that Lincoln was only trying to end slavery by using these excessive powers. In conclusion, the editorial claimed that Lincoln "has never used half enough power, and that "it is absurd to expect war to be carried on" other than by "violent and arbitrary rule." If Lincoln "will extirpate the cancer, we will stand the power of the knife."⁵ As the editorial

⁴"The Nation's Need," Ibid., June 10, 1864, p. 95.

⁵Ibid.

implies, "The Nation's Need" was for the incumbent President to suppress the rebellion with any coercive instrument necessary, and that would ultimately lead to the elimination of slavery.

The campaign of 1864 was an acrid contest which subjected the various candidates to a great deal of personal abuse. The usual mudslinging found in Presidential campaigns was intensified due to the bitterness of the civil war. Lincoln was a target of this attack. Garrison sought to ameliorate Lincoln's character in this abusive campaign with an editorial on July 15. Quoting the Negro abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, Garrison declared that the President was an honest man. When Douglass "told him that he had been somewhat slow in proclaiming equal protection to our colored troops and prisoners," the President responded that "he felt that the country was not ready for it." This, according to Garrison, attested to Lincoln's honesty; the editor proclaimed that Lincoln "will go down in posterity, if the country is saved, as Honest Abraham; and going down thus, his name may be written any where in this wide world of ours side by side with that of Washington, without disparaging the latter."⁶

⁶"Response to Professor Newman," Ibid., July 15, 1864, p. 114.

Interestingly, Garrison's crusade to re-elect Lincoln met with much opposition by his readers. In the July 29 issue of The Liberator, Garrison sadly reported that many people were cancelling their subscriptions in response to his endorsement of the President. Loss of subscriptions, however, did not deter the Boston abolitionist. His campaign for Lincoln continued.⁷

In August, Garrison was accused of quoting Wendell Phillips, the principal supporter of Fremont, out of context. Garrison responded with an editorial declaring that he could not be charged with "garbling" the speeches of Mr. Phillips, and he challenged anyone "to show wherein we had done injustice to Mr. Phillips."⁸ Then, although Garrison and Phillips differed, Garrison gave a great deal of coverage to his adversary, and he even published several of the anti-Lincoln speeches.⁹

Garrison's final attacks on the Fremont candidacy concentrated on the theory that the Confederacy would stand to benefit from a divided Republican party. On September 2, he included a letter on behalf of Fremont's candidacy, written by the poet John Greenleaf Whittier.¹⁰

⁷"Garrison's appeal," Ibid., July 29, 1864, p. 120.

⁸"Our Partisanship of Mr. Lincoln," Ibid., August 26, 1864, p. 138.

⁹See The Liberator, January 29, 1864.

¹⁰Ibid., September 2, 1864, p. 143.

Garrison replied to Whittier's letter in the next issue of The Liberator. The editor stated that "it is idle to dream of electing a third candidate, and to labor for any other man is to serve McClellan and make glad the South. Divide and conquer is the Democratic programme, and to this end the Democratic Journals have with adroitness and hypocrisy, fostered every symptom of a break among the Republicans. It is time to block that game. . . ."11

Garrison's fears of the possibility of a party split were soon proven false. Lincoln's popularity was growing, and apparently many Republicans had second thoughts about supporting Fremont, and in September Fremont dropped out of the race.¹² At that point, Garrison devoted the remaining issues of The Liberator before the election to a powerful defense of the candidates of the National Union Party, Lincoln and Andrew Johnson. The Republican Party, now united under the single banner of Union, could devote its full attention to the defeat of McClellan.

11"Under Which King?" Ibid., September 9, 1864, p. 146.

12Sandburg, The War Years, pp. 238-246.

When Lincoln was re-elected, Garrison seemed overjoyed and proud of his part in the campaign. "No Presidential election has ever occurred at all comparable in magnitude, solemnity and far reaching consequences," he said. "The hosts of freedom and the powers of despotism met in a death grapple, and the latter have been sent howling to the pit from which they emanated, while the former singing songs of praise and thanksgiving. The doom of the Rebellion and slavery is now irrevocably pronounced."¹³ Lincoln's re-election led Garrison to believe that the Civil War would soon be over, and slavery would finally be eliminated.

In evaluating the influence of Garrison on the election, one must recognize the work of an experienced political propagandist. Garrison was always ready and willing to seize upon the various issues in order to effectively serve Lincoln. He abandoned his idealism in favor of the more practical means of attaining his ends. As his biographer, John L. Thomas, reveals, "in rejecting Fremont, Garrison displayed the political acumen worthy of a ward boss." Garrison recognized that if a political campaign involved a moral issue, he should "speak in a very different manner. . . for the man who stands alone in a moral cause, though all

¹³"Re-election of Mr. Lincoln," The Liberator, November 11, 1864, p. 182.

the world be against him if God be for him, stands in a majority, and is a conqueror. But when you come to politics, that is another sphere. Then you must have votes, then you must have political influence and respectability."¹⁴ Garrison's major concern was to end slavery, and he saw Lincoln as providing the only realistic hope of success. Unlike Phillips, who felt that ideology should be supreme, Garrison was willing to sacrifice principles in order to attain a higher end, the abolition of slavery.

¹⁴ Thomas, The Liberator: William Lloyd Garrison, p. 425.