
Winter 2010

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Recommended Citation

Ayers, Edward L. "The Tide is Setting Strongly Against Us." *American Heritage*, 59:4 (2010): 58-59.

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“THE TIDE IS SETTING STRONGLY AGAINST US”

Lincoln's bid for reelection in 1864 faced serious challenges from a popular opponent and a nation weary of war

By Edward L. Ayers

FOR A GOOD PART OF 1864—the year he faced reelection—Abraham Lincoln had little faith that he would win or even be renominated. Despite the decisive Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg the year before, the Confederacy had sustained recent victories outside Richmond at the Crater and Cold Harbor. Three long and bloody years of war, with still no end in sight, had rallied significant political support for peace. The Democratic challenger, his former general, the popular George B. McClellan, bowed to his party's convention vote for peace, even though he personally believed in continuing the war.

Powerful politicians such as Salmon Chase, Benjamin Wade, and Horace

Greeley opposed Lincoln because they believed he could not win.

The presidential contest of 1864 would determine whether the United States would compromise its fundamental purposes. The war, triggered by an election, would see another election stand as the pivotal point of the entire conflict.

The Democrats

relentlessly attacked Lincoln's policies of conscription, taxes, and spending. They criticized every aspect of Lincoln's handling of the war, accusing him of squandering lives and wasting opportunities. In the summer of 1864, only six months before

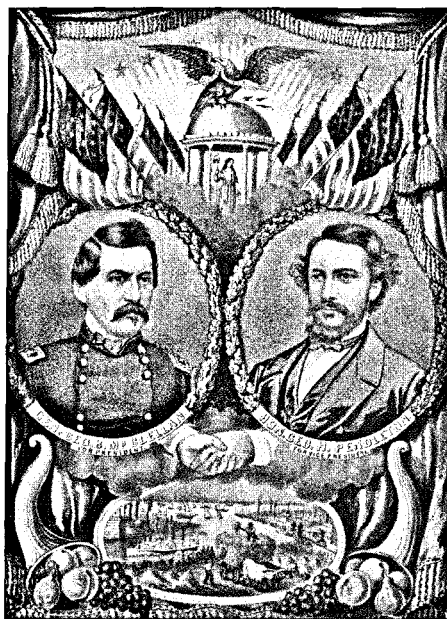
the looming election, Robert E. Lee and his troops remained formidable opponents in Virginia, and the Confederacy still held vast parts of the Deep South and the Shenandoah Valley. In newspaper column after column, in speech after speech, the Democrats attacked emancipation as a perversion of the war's original aims, as a usurpation of power by a greedy executive as well as a dangerous inversion of the social order. The resentment, fear, and disillusionment of a people exhausted by war were growing.

The election loomed as an unavoid-

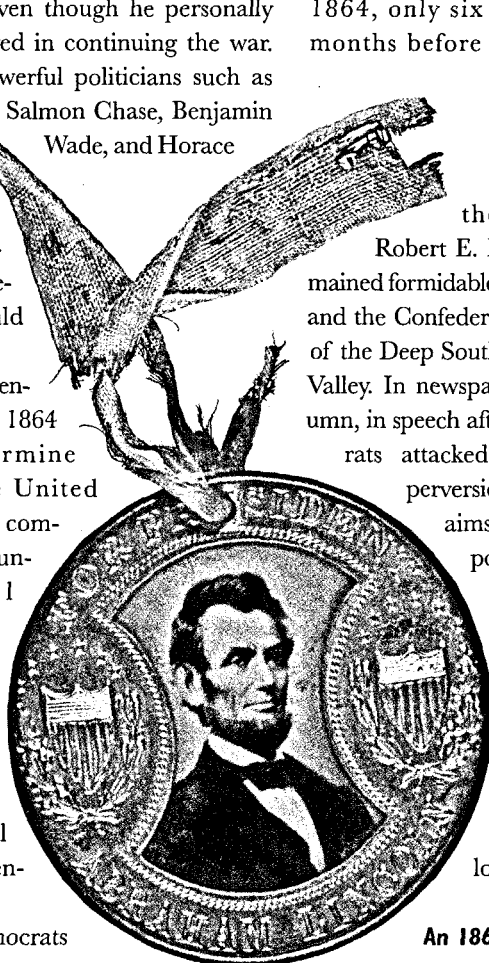
dence with your staunchest friends in every state and from them all I hear but one report," gave it to him straight: "The Tide is setting strongly against us." Lincoln would lose Illinois, Pennsylvania, and New York, party leaders there warned. Only by abandoning emancipation, warned the men with their ears to the ground, could he even hope to win.

Success on the battlefield, perfectly timed, saved Lincoln, his party, and his cause. Military victories in Atlanta and in Virginia in the early fall brought just the news he needed; Sherman's and Sheridan's triumphs finally gave the Republican war leadership a quality of competency and determination. Perhaps the war would not drag on indefinitely after all. Perhaps emancipation and victory went hand in hand. In the

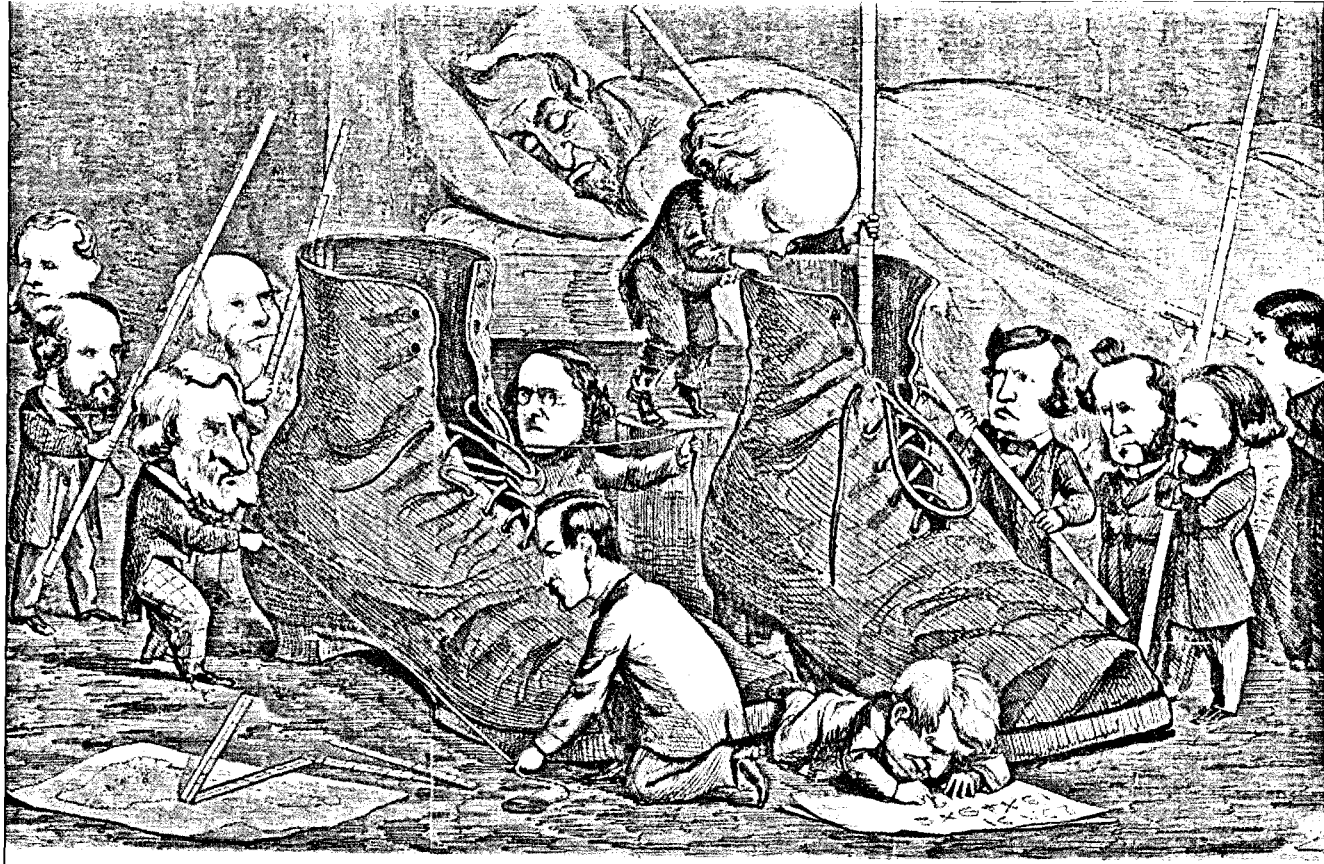
able obstacle, and Lincoln's supporters understood the risks. "If we come triumphantly out of this war, with a presidential election in the midst of it," wrote one ally to Charles Sumner in late August, "I shall call it the greatest miracle in all the historic course of events." Lincoln's campaign manager, who was "in active correspon-



Lincoln's opposition in 1864: Democrat George B. McClellan, the popular former commander of the Army of the Potomac, and George Pendleton, above, in an election poster.



An 1864 Republican campaign button, left.



PRESIDENTIAL COBBLERS AND WIRE-PULLERS MEASURING AND ESTIMATING LINCOLN'S SHOES: INCLUDING BENNETT, HUDSON, GREELEY, RAYMOND, WEED, SEWARD BROOKS, SUMNER, FURNEY, AND MISS ANNA DICKENSON

meantime, Lincoln's adroit use of political patronage kept party members in line, and the innovation of absentee voting gave nearly a million soldiers in the field a chance to cast their ballots for the commander in chief they supported. Lincoln

His advisors warned Lincoln that he could only hope to win by abandoning emancipation

won, and the election signaled that the North under his leadership would fight until Confederate surrender. Civil victory at the ballot box did more than any military Union triumph in the field to undermine Southern resolve.

Lincoln's share of the vote—55 percent—barely changed from 1860. Lincoln won, in part, because fixed election

cycles prevented his opponents from seizing moments of despair and crisis to challenge him and because the Electoral College created a convincing mandate out of a narrow popular difference. Lincoln freely admitted that he had been re-elected "by the blunders

of the Democrats. If, instead of resolving that the war was a failure, they had resolved that I was a failure, and denounced me for not prosecuting it more vigorously, I would not have been re-elected."

Winning 55 percent of the vote is called a "landslide" in American politics, but even such lopsided victories leave

jagged outcroppings. Lincoln understood all too clearly that almost half of all voters in the loyal states had refused to support the incumbent president even in the desperation of wartime, even with news of key victories ringing in the air. The election signaled that the white North was profoundly divided even after—or even by—the Emancipation Proclamation, after the victories at Gettysburg, Vicksburg, Atlanta, and the Shenandoah Valley, and after the Gettysburg Address.

The history of the United States during Reconstruction, and for generations afterward, only makes sense if it's considered within the context that nearly half of white Northerners rejected Abraham Lincoln and what he embodied, even at the height of his glory.



Edward L. Ayers, author of *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (Oxford USA 2007), is president of the University of Richmond and serves on the National Council on the Humanities.

A dozen politicians and journalists assess what it would take to fill Lincoln's "shoes" before the 1864 election, above, in a *New-York Illustrated News* cartoon.

NEW-YORK ILLUSTRATED NEWS