

# LINCOLN LORE

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## RADICAL DEMOCRACY CONVENTION, CLEVELAND

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Groups opposed to the reelection of Abraham Lincoln in 1864, already rebuffed in two organized efforts to sidetrack his nomination, planned a third and more potent effort to prevent his selection as a presidential candidate. They called a conclave to proceed by one week the regular political convocation of the party set for June 7th. Completely failing in their effort to start a Chase for President boom by the use of the Pomeroy circular and also repudiated in their attempt to postpone the Baltimore convention, they sent out a call for a political conclave to be held at Cleveland on May 31.

The call was addressed to "The Radical Men of the Nation" and signed by R. Gratz Brown, Lucius Robinson, John Cochran, Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, George B. Cleaver, James Redpath, Wendell Phillips and Emil Pretorius. An observer classified those interested in this project in three groups: 1. Extreme Abolitionists, 2. Administration Foes, 3. Rebel Sympathizers. The party name chosen was "Radical Democracy."

The editor of *Harper's Weekly* drew this conclusion about the call for the political conclave: "Its ostensible motive was dissatisfaction with the administration but its chief inspiration was the desire for personal revenge. It was the work partly of angry and intriguing, partly of impractical men. . . . The Cleveland Convention was called by men who despaired of controlling the Union Convention at Baltimore."

The time element was an important factor in the setting up of this meeting. Its sponsors felt that with a candidate already in the field, by placing the meeting a week earlier than the Baltimore gathering, they would make the latter assembly appear as a divisive movement.

The person around which this effort began to evolve was General John C. Fremont. He was the Republicans unsuccessful candidate for the presidency in 1856. Yet the fact that he was the first nominee of the Republican party for the presidency gave him some strength among the founders. It is a strange coincidence that Abraham Lincoln in the 1856 convention was seriously considered for the Vice-Presidency as a running mate for Fremont. With a little more effort on the part of Lincoln's friends the first Republican ticket might have read "Fremont and Lincoln." Although Lincoln with 110 votes ran second to Dayton in the contest, the latter secured the nomination.

Two other factors contributed to Fremont's support. The rabid abolitionists were back of him for his proclamation liberating slaves. Lincoln considered this a political thrust rather than "within the range of military necessity." This proclamation Lincoln rescinded and drew upon himself the life long enmity of Fremont. The other factor was Fremont's attack on the Blairs which encouraged the anti-Blair factions to support Fremont.

As early as March 1864 Fremont had signified his intentions of soliciting the presidential nomination. It was anticipated, however, by his early supporters that he would seek the nomination through the usual channels of the National Union Convention, but when it became evident that Lincoln would likely be renominated, his more ardent supporters looked for other means for his advancement.

One editor reacted to the Fremont candidacy as follows: "With what profound sorrow those who have known the name of Fremont only as the watchword of Liberty and Union now hear him repeating the cry of Vallandigham and the Copperheads, adopting their extreme position as his own. . . . Was it worth-while to cease to be the Fremont of June 1856 to be the Fremont of June 1864?"

One of the earliest telegrams to come out of the Cleveland Convention on May 31 was sent to Secretary Blair by E. Cowles, postmaster of Cleveland, who stated: "Convention tremendous fizzle less than two hundred from abroad consisting of disappointed contractors, sore-head governors and copperheads." A ludicrous incident occurred in the convention when the same postmaster Cowles went to the platform to interview a person seated there and was called "vociferously for a speech" although a loyal Lincoln man.

Lincoln received a report of the convention in its early stages from S. Newton Pettis who wrote:

"I left the *monster* convention a few minutes since and in all sincerity I must say that up to the present time it is the most perfect failure, the most magnificent fizzle I ever looked in upon claiming to be a convention. It has neither members nor talent to commend it to confidence and is destitute of all enthusiasm. Take from the body assembled Gen. John Cochran of New York and ex Gov. Johnson of Pennsylvania and in my opinion a motion to go into mourning would be perfectly in order upon any member of the convention. . . . Fremont men seem determined to control and run the convention, with him all the time in command."

General Fremont's acceptance of the Cleveland nomination was also timed so as to prevent if possible the selection of Mr. Lincoln at Baltimore. On the very eve of the convention Fremont's political letter was published. He took occasion to reveal that the ground on which he stood is "implacable hostility to the continuance of the administration in power." The editor of the *New York Herald* sums up Fremont's purpose in these words which might be called Fremont's message to the Baltimore Convention:

"Drop Abraham Lincoln and nominate a new man, and I am with you, but if you put up Mr. Lincoln for a second term I will do my best as an independent candidate to defeat his election."

The main objective of the Cleveland convention and the subsequent acceptance letter of its candidate both failed to disturb as anticipated, the procedure of the Baltimore convention. Joseph Gillespie wrote to Lincoln on June 10, 1864 his reaction to the Cleveland proceedings in these words:

"There is an evident giving way of the friends of Fremont. I think his nomination and his acceptance was intended to frighten your friends into the nomination of some one other than yourself. But since that could not be done they will now place themselves in cooperation with the copperheads, for my opinion is that there will not be a corporal's guard left with Fremont by the election day who were of the Union Party."

The friends of Fremont did not entirely give up until after the Democratic Convention at Chicago, hoping he might be recognized there. He was never much stronger than he was in March when he was first set forth as a candidate.