

# LINCOLN LORE

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## SELECTING VICE-PRESIDENTS

The procedure in the selection of the candidate for the vice-presidential nomination at both the Republican and Democratic conventions recently held in Chicago raises again one of the most controversial questions in the political history of Abraham Lincoln. What influence, if any, did the presidential nominee in 1864 exert over the Union Convention at Baltimore in choosing the Vice-Presidential candidate? As organized groups are always more or less interested in precedents when established by a favored exponent of their cause Lincoln's reaction in 1864 becomes an interesting study in the light of recent political procedure.

A bitter name calling argument printed in the *New York Times* in July 1891 between John G. Nicolay, Lincoln's private secretary and Col. A. K. McClure, editor of the *Philadelphia Times* divided students into two schools of thought regarding the interest which Lincoln took with respect to the choice of his second term running mate. More conclusive and certainly more objective than testimonials made pro and con on the subject in 1891, twenty-seven years after failing memory had dulled the vivid happenings of the day, are Lincoln's own words with respect to the incident. These are supplemented by his usual reaction to such parallel political situations where the President was invited to use the influence of his office.

Lincoln by nature was no dictator and displayed no evidence of vaunted ambition, egotism, jealousy, vengeance, self-aggrandizement or other such dictatorial characteristics. In his first message to Congress on December 3, 1861 he stated: "I have been unwilling to go beyond the pressure of necessity in the unusual exercise of power."

In his annual message on December 1, 1862 he stated with relation to foreign states, "We have attempted no propagandism, and acknowledged no revolution. But we have left to every nation the exclusive conduct and management of its own affairs." Lincoln refused to meddle with questions outside his jurisdiction.

In August 1864 after he had already received the presidential nomination he replied to a discouraged follower, "Well, I cannot run the political machine. I have enough on my hands without that. It is the people's business—the election is in their hands."

As late as November 1863 Lincoln replied in a letter to some New York politicians who were seeking Lincoln's endorsement of their candidate: "It is beyond my province to interfere with New York City politics."

The 1864 Union convention composed of a fusion of former Republicans and former Democrats met at Baltimore on June 7. It might be anticipated that with the head of the ticket a former Republican, a former Democrat would make a judicious selection for the Vice-Presidency. Lincoln was pressed for an endorsement of a candidate and on the back of a letter written to him from the convention by John G. Nicolay, Lincoln in his own hand on the day before the convention assembled, wrote these words: "Wish not to interfere about Vice-President, Cannot interfere about platform. Convention must judge for itself."

On June 20 just two weeks after Lincoln had advised by the endorsement that he did not wish to interfere in the nomination of the Vice-President he received a complaint from Philadelphia that the postmaster there was using his "official power" to defeat for renomination the incumbent member of Congress. This remonstrance caused the President to write to the postmaster as follows:

"The correct principle, I think is that all our friends should have absolute freedom of choice among our friends. My wish, therefore, is that you will do just as you think fit with your own suffrage in the case, and not constrain any of your subordinates to do other than he thinks fit with his. This is precisely the rule I inculcated and adhered to on my part when a certain other nomination now recently made was being canvassed for."

While Lincoln does not state specifically that "the other nomination now recently made" was that of the Vice-Presidential office for 1864, students of Lincoln have associated the episode as the one to which he referred in the above letter.

If Lincoln had given any advice whatever to the many men who claimed the President confided in them and gave each one, as they have implied different choices for the Vice-Presidency we could classify him as a double dealer. He was more apt to respond as he did, in commenting once on which one of two men was best to fill an office: "Let them be placed in the scales solely on what they have done, giving evidence of capacity for civil administration: and let him kick the beam who is found the lightest."

Apparently the Vice-Presidency has always been made a sort of allurements to catch votes or bolster a presidential candidate's strength where fraternally or geographically he is weakest. There can be no question but what Andrew Johnson was selected by the convention as Vice-President to run with Abraham Lincoln because he represented the Democratic element in the Union party and was also from a southern state.

New hazards confront the President of the nation today through all types of rapid transportation which he is almost forced to use and modern explosives which will soon be in the hands of the fanatic and assassin. These impending threats throw a somewhat different aspect on the selection of a Vice-President than it did in the days of horse drawn vehicles when crazed agitators were not lurking at every corner. Yet the selection of a Vice-President, who automatically becomes the head of the nation if disaster visits the White House, is usually made in a hurried session of a few political leaders or even by one man who may assume the dictatorial affront to select for the people their potential leader.

It is hoped that some day the Americans will wake up to the injurious practice of allowing one politician of high rank to select for them the man who may be their next President. The very spirit of Abraham Lincoln cries out against such undemocratic procedure.