

LINCOLN LORE

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THE SOLDIER VOTE IN 1864

The season just preliminary to a presidential election would seem to offer an appropriate time to consider what efforts were made in 1864 to give the soldiers an opportunity to vote. It is a well known fact that the political leaders who were supposed to be Lincoln's supporters and advocates became pessimistic about his chances for re-election. They turned their attention to what was called "the soldiers' vote" as a possible solution of their difficulties. Pressure was brought in the state legislatures to enact laws favorable to the soldiers voting in the field but a strong resistance was experienced from the opposition party.

There were three different reactions to the effort. The states of California, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, New Hampshire, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont and Wisconsin made it legal for men to vote in the field. Connecticut, Minnesota, New York and West Virginia soldiers were allowed to vote by proxy. Delaware, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Oregon did not permit any form of voting at the front.

By order No. 265 issued Oct. 1, 1864 the Secretary of War prescribed the following rules for voting in the field:

"First. One Agent for each Army Corps may be designated by the State Executive or by the State Committee of each political party, who, on presenting his credentials from the State Executive or from the chairman of said committee, shall receive from this Department a pass to the headquarters of the Corps for which he is designated, with tickets, (or proxies, when required by State laws,) which may be placed by him in the hands of such person or persons as he may select, for distribution among officers and soldiers.

"Second. Civilian inspectors of each political party, not to exceed one for every brigade, may in like manner be designated, who shall receive passes, on application to the Adjutant General, to be present on the day of election to see that the elections are fairly conducted.

"Third. No political speeches, harangues, or canvassing among the troops, will be permitted.

"Fourth. Commanding officers are enjoined to take such measures as may be essential to secure freedom and fairness in the elections, and that they be conducted with due regard to good order and military discipline.

"Fifth. Any officer or private who may wantonly destroy tickets, or prevent their proper distribution among legal voters, interfere with the freedom of election, or make any false or fraudulent return, will be deemed guilty of an offense against good order and military discipline, and be punished by summary dismissal or court martial."

The percentage of soldier votes favoring Lincoln in some of the states follow: California 92%, Iowa 90%, Kansas 85%, Michigan 78%, and Vermont 78%. Kentucky and Maryland soldiers gave McClellan a majority of their votes. The ballots used, of which the Foundation has an original, were marked "FIELD TICKET ONLY."

The Foundation is also fortunate in having one of the original envelopes with enclosure used for that group of soldiers who could vote by proxy. The large yellow envelope 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches bears this printed inscription

with the hand writing in the blank spaces placed in italics:

"The said absent elector shall make and subscribe the following affidavit:

"I, *Charles D. Merrell* do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I have been a citizen of the United States for ten days, am now of the age of twenty-one years, that I have been or shall have been an inhabitant of the State of New York for one year next preceding the election to be held on the 8th day of November 1864, for the last four months a resident of the county of *Rensselaer* for thirty days next preceding said election a resident of the town of *Lansingburgh* and that I am now, and until said election, intend to be a resident thereof; that I have not made any bet or wager, and am not directly or indirectly interested in any bet or wager depending upon the result of said election, and I do further swear, that I am in the actual military (or naval) service of the United States, that I am now a member of Company A of the 169th regiment of *New York Vols.* now at or near *Richmond* in the state of *Virginia.* *Charles D. Merrell.*

"Sworn to and subscribed this 17th day of October 1864, before me, *Alonzo Alden Colonel 169th N. Y. Vols.*"

Within this envelope is an enclosure entitled "Soldiers Power of Attorney" which is duly filled out and signed by Charles D. Merrell. He authorized John H. Campbell of Lansingburgh to cast his ballot.

The third group which had no opportunity of voting either in the field or by proxy were obliged to secure furloughs in order to go home and cast their ballots. *Lincoln Lore* No. 1136 gives information on how Indiana handled the situation. Mr. Lincoln advised General Sherman that those returning for the state election in October "need not remain for the presidential election, but may return to you at once."

Of course there was no opportunity to extend national voting privileges to the Union prisoners in the south. However, there was much curiosity shown by the wardens of the military prison camps as to how the captive men felt about the presidential candidates. Walter Gould Lincoln of Los Angeles has called our attention to reactions at both Andersonville and Camp Lawton. At the former prison black and white beans were provided for ballots, white representing McClellan and black, indicating preference for Lincoln. The thousands of men were ordered to "fall in" and they marched to the improved polling places where they deposited their ballots. Special care was taken to assure that no frauds were committed. The ratio is said to have been two and one-half for Lincoln and one for McClellan. At Camp Lawton in Georgia balloting was encouraged by the prison authorities and the total vote was Lincoln 3,014 and McClellan 1,050.

Thirty per cent of the soldiers in the field were too young to vote. While there were probably 1,000,000 men in the army and navy eligible to cast a ballot it is estimated that not over 25% of them took advantage of this privilege through the three different avenues prescribed. This fact indicates that they did not exert any perceptible influence in the final results although 75% of the votes cast were for Lincoln.