

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Abraham Lincoln's Cabinet

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Historians have frequently looked to Abraham Lincoln's cabinet as a touchstone for understanding wartime politics. Indeed, many of the most essential issues Lincoln's administration faced during the war can be best understood through his cabinet, from his relationship to the Republican Party, to his ideas and beliefs about slavery, emancipation, and race, as well as the broader popularity of the Union war effort.

At the same time, historians have also viewed Lincoln's cabinet as one of the more fraught aspects of his presidency, emphasizing the divisions and rivalries between individual cabinet members and even the President himself. Some scholars have argued that Lincoln's relationship with his cabinet was representative of the much larger fissures between Lincoln and the antislavery wing of the Republican Party, while others have claimed that the cabinet reflected the degree to which Lincoln and the party marched in lockstep on a range of policies during the war. Still others have pointed to Lincoln's management of the varied personalities within his cabinet as evidence of his political genius. This essay provides an overview of the relationship between Lincoln and his cabinet, highlighting several of the key episodes during the war, and offering reflections on what insights Lincoln's relationship with his cabinet can provide for his presidency.¹

Following Lincoln's election in 1860, there was widespread speculation and even some angst about the formation of his cabinet, and for good reason. With South Carolina's secession barely a month after the election, the incoming administration faced unprecedented circumstances, making the stakes surrounding Lincoln's cabinet picks extraordinarily high. There were widespread calls for Lincoln to balance his cabinet by including at least one Southern moderate in the hopes it might help stem the tide of secession. At the same time, the brand-new but fractious Republican Party was taking control of the executive branch for the first time, creating a need for Lincoln to help balance the different factions of the party with his choices for the cabinet.

¹ For representative examples, see T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and the Radicals* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1941); James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861–1865* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012); and Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

The number of executive departments that made up Lincoln's cabinet was much smaller than it is today, with just five departments—State, Treasury, War, Navy, and the Interior—in addition to the Postmaster and Attorney General. Traditionally, nineteenth-century presidents often reserved their choice for Secretary of State for one of (if not the) most prominent members of their party, and Lincoln was no exception. His selection for Secretary of State, William Henry Seward of New York, had been the runner up for the Republican nomination in 1860, and was widely considered to be one of the most prominent antislavery politicians in the Republican Party. Lincoln chose other prominent rivals for the 1860 Republican nomination for his cabinet as well, including Salmon Portland Chase of Ohio for Secretary of the Treasury and Simon Cameron from Pennsylvania for Secretary of War.

Yet Lincoln also aimed to balance his cabinet selections both politically and geographically, choosing men from across the political spectrum alongside prominent antislavery Republicans like Chase and Seward: former Democrats, conservative Whigs, and representatives from the border states. These included Edward Bates, a conservative Missouri Whig as Attorney General as well as Montgomery Blair, scion of one of the nation's most powerful political families, for Postmaster General. Rounding out the cabinet was Navy Secretary Gideon Welles, a longtime Connecticut Democrat and the only New Englander, and Caleb Blood Smith of Indiana as Secretary of the Interior.

Intentionally forming a cabinet that included such a wide range of political beliefs and geographical representation reflected some of Lincoln's larger aims for the future of his Republican Party. Lincoln understood he had won election in 1860 with no support in the Southern states that now made up the Confederacy. He also believed, perhaps naively, that the vast majority of white Southerners—and particularly those in the Border States—opposed secession and would eagerly flock to a political party built around preserving the Union. Finally, Lincoln was convinced that the war would eventually end, and when it did, the Republican Party would require a broader base of popular support to secure its political future. Thus, in many ways, Lincoln's vision for his cabinet reflected his vision for the Republican Party. To wit, Lincoln and other Republicans worked to rename their party the Union Party shortly after the war began, and Republicans ran as Union Party candidates throughout the war. Importantly, the Union Party represented an effort to create an entirely new organization, rather than simply a superficial name change.²

² On Lincoln's attempts to build a new Union Party during the war, see Michael F. Holt, "Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Union," in Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 323–53. On the Union Party and wartime politics see Adam I. P. Smith, *No Party Now: Politics in the Civil War North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Jack Furniss, *Between Extremes: Seeking the Political Center in the Civil War North* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2024).

Once in office, Lincoln's administration faced an immediate dilemma over control of federal forts, and his cabinet played a major role in managing the crisis at Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor in South Carolina. On March 5, the day after taking office, Lincoln received word from the commanding officer at Fort Sumter, Major Robert Anderson, that he had approximately six weeks of supplies on hand. Once those provisions ran out Anderson would be forced to abandon his position. Lincoln thus faced a crucial choice: resupply Fort Sumter, or abandon the fort entirely to the nascent Confederacy. At stake was Lincoln's pledge in his inaugural address to "hold, occupy, and possess the property and places belonging to the Government."³ The cabinet was split. Some, like Montgomery Blair and Salmon Chase, favored reinforcing Sumter and worried that abandoning it would make the federal government appear weak. Other cabinet members, led by Secretary of State Seward but also Simon Cameron and Gideon Welles, advised that an aggressive expedition to resupply the garrison would antagonize the newly formed Confederacy and lead directly to war.

There was an alternative however: Lincoln and his cabinet discussed the possibility of reinforcing the smaller Fort Pickens at Pensacola, Florida, instead. This would allow the administration to make a public display of Union strength at Fort Pickens, which Northerners would cheer, while quietly abandoning Fort Sumter. Logistically, reinforcing Fort Pickens was also a much easier task: Fort Sumter presented a much greater tactical challenge situated as it was in the middle of Charleston harbor, surrounded by other Confederate batteries and forts. Lincoln's cabinet unanimously approved the Fort Pickens plan, and Lincoln issued orders to Lieutenant General Winfield Scott on March 11, 1861. The mission to reinforce Pickens would take approximately three weeks to arrive, so time was of the essence in order for the expedition to arrive with enough time to make a public show of force at Pickens before Robert Anderson ran out of supplies at Sumter. Unfortunately, a series of bureaucratic mishaps and confusions combined with political rivalries between cabinet members prevented prompt execution of Lincoln's orders, and the Pickens expedition failed to reach Pensacola in time. Instead, Lincoln was forced to resupply Sumter. In response, Confederates immediately bombarded the Fort, and the war was underway. The entire episode revealed the divisions within Lincoln's cabinet and his relative administrative inexperience during the early months of his presidency.⁴

As Lincoln continued to find his footing during his first year in office, several of his appointments also created significant problems for his administration. In particular, Simon Cameron, Lincoln's first Secretary of War and one of the most prominent Republicans from Pennsylvania, proved to be a disastrous selection. Though Cameron was well known nationally,

³ Abraham Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address," in James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, 11 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1897), 6:8

⁴ On Lincoln's cabinet and the dilemma over reinforcing Fort Sumter vs. Fort Pickens see William W. Freehling, *Becoming Lincoln* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018), 286–307.

he also had a reputation for political corruption, and in the first year of the war there was little doubt the War Department had been badly managed. By the summer of 1862 a congressional committee began investigating allegations of fraud and the mismanagement of government contracts that had led to the manufacturing of shoddy goods and supplies for Union soldiers. Lincoln quickly maneuvered to secure Cameron's resignation by appointing him as the Russian ambassador. Cameron's replacement was another Pennsylvanian and prominent Democrat, Edwin McMasters Stanton.⁵

In the fall of 1862, continued setbacks on the battlefield combined with sweeping Democratic victories in the midterm congressional elections created more political headaches for Lincoln, producing a full-blown cabinet crisis. Following the Union Army's disastrous defeat at Fredericksburg in December, flagging confidence in Lincoln's administration reached a head. Public criticism centered on Lincoln's advisors, particularly Secretary of State William H. Seward and Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase. Chase, who was associated with the antislavery wing of the Republican Party, had also been working behind the scenes to foment dissent, offering a long list of complaints to his Republican friends in the Senate about Lincoln's failure to consult with the cabinet in decision making. From the perspective of congressional Republicans, the struggles of Lincoln's administration—including failing to act decisively on military matters or aggressively enough towards the destruction of slavery—stemmed from his divided cabinet, and especially Seward's perceived influence over the president.

In December, a caucus of Republican Senators met behind closed doors and passed a resolution calling for the reorganization of Lincoln's cabinet and appointed a committee to meet with Lincoln. Seward understood he was the focus of dissatisfaction and offered his resignation to Lincoln, which Lincoln declined. Instead, Lincoln agreed to meet with the Senate committee, but also requested the presence of his entire cabinet. This master stroke placed Salmon Chase in an awkward position, forcing Chase to either confirm the private complaints he had made to his friends in the Senate in front of Lincoln, or openly support the administration. Chase chose the latter, confessing when prompted by Lincoln that there was no "want of unity" in the cabinet, taking the air out of the Senators' criticisms.⁶ The next day, Chase offered his resignation as well, which Lincoln also declined. The cabinet remained intact, and Lincoln's handling of the crisis demonstrated his exceptional political skills.

Part of the tensions that had produced the cabinet crisis stemmed from Lincoln's administrative style. As Lincoln biographer David Herbert Donald has observed, cabinet members did not get along with each other, and nearly every cabinet member complained about Lincoln's

⁵ David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 325–6.

⁶ Francis Fessenden, *Life and Public Services of William Pitt Fessenden*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1907), 1: 243–4.

system for consulting his advisors (or lack thereof). Meetings were irregular and not all cabinet members attended, particularly Secretary of State Seward. Following the cabinet crisis of 1862, Lincoln was careful to involve the cabinet more regularly in his decisions, including requesting input on the final draft of the Emancipation Proclamation. This marked a substantive departure from Lincoln's first discussion of the proclamation in the summer of 1862, when he declared he was not seeking the cabinet's advice, but was simply informing them of his decision. In the final proclamation, Lincoln incorporated several stylistic suggestions and added a concluding paragraph inspired by a suggestion from Chase via antislavery Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts.⁷

Tensions within Lincoln's cabinet certainly did not end with the 1862 cabinet crisis. Salmon Chase, in particular, continued to resent Lincoln's relationship with Seward and disapproved of Lincoln's administrative style of leaving each department head to run his own division without interference or input from other cabinet members. As part of the Republican Party's antislavery faction, Chase also disagreed with Lincoln's reluctance to extend his emancipation proclamation to areas of the South already under Union control.

As the election of 1864 approached, Chase's Republican allies undertook a campaign to build support for a Chase candidacy, circulating pamphlets and public letters undermining Lincoln and supporting Chase. Whether or not Chase was directly involved in these efforts (he was certainly aware of them), they backfired as numerous Republicans found the criticisms of Lincoln and efforts to subvert his renomination distasteful. Chase was forced to disavow any involvement in the circulation of pamphlets on his behalf, withdraw his candidacy, and offered his resignation once more, which Lincoln again declined. After Lincoln's official renomination in the summer of 1864, however, their relationship soured further and a misunderstanding over a patronage appointment prompted Chase to offer his resignation as Treasury secretary a third and final time. This time Lincoln accepted, and following the death of Chief Justice Roger Brooke Taney, Lincoln nominated Chase to the Supreme Court at the end of the year.⁸

Even after Lincoln's successful renomination by the Republicans in 1864 (renamed the National Union Party during the war), there was still doubt within the party about whether he could be reelected. As late as September there were continued murmurs about replacing Lincoln on the ticket, with some still advocating for Chase to take his place. In fact, Lincoln was so concerned that he might lose his reelection campaign, in August he drafted a memorandum pledging support for the next administration should he be defeated. At the next cabinet meeting, he asked his advisers to sign the back of the document without knowledge of its contents—a document that became known famously as the "Blind Memorandum".⁹

⁷ Donald, *Lincoln*, 399–406.

⁸ Walter Stahr, *Salmon P. Chase: Lincoln's Vital Rival* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 471–92.

⁹ Donald, *Lincoln*, 529–30.

Despite his doubts during the campaign, Lincoln won reelection in November handily. As his second term approached, there was some expected cabinet reorganization to replace four resignations, including Salmon Chase, but also Montgomery Blair as Postmaster General, Attorney General Edward Bates, and Secretary of the Interior John Palmer Usher. For Treasury Lincoln chose William Pitt Fessenden of Maine and then Hugh McCulloch of Indiana, Kentuckian James Speed for Attorney General, James Harlan of Iowa for Secretary of the Interior, and Ohioan William Dennison, Jr. as Postmaster General. All of these selections marked a stark contrast from Lincoln's original cabinet appointments, reflecting Lincoln's growing confidence in his ability to manage his administration. Rather than turning to established party leaders and presidential aspirants who frequently clashed with him politically and even occasionally undermined him, the cabinet Lincoln put in place for his second term was far more loyal to him personally.¹⁰

Lincoln of course would not see that second term. Just a month after his second inauguration and with the war rapidly coming to a close, Lincoln was assassinated at Ford's Theater in Washington on April 14, dying the next day. Yet, though Lincoln would not survive to see his second administration, his cabinet appointments continued to have import for the course of Reconstruction years after his death. Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, retained his entire cabinet until at least 1866, with several key appointments remaining through the end of Johnson's presidency in 1869. Most notably, William H. Seward remained as Secretary of State, negotiating the purchase of Alaska in 1867, and Edwin Stanton continued as Secretary of War.

Stanton's tenure as Secretary of War was particularly contentious as he became the focus of the bitter standoff between Johnson and Republicans in Congress over Reconstruction policy. In an effort to rein in Johnson's actions, Congress passed the Tenure of Office Act in 1867, requiring the president to seek Senate approval before removing any officials who had required Senate confirmation for appointment. Johnson intentionally violated the law by removing Stanton from office while Congress was out of session, eventually leading to Johnson's impeachment in 1868.

In sum, the relationship between Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet reveals Lincoln's evolution as president and his mastery of the nineteenth-century political world. Though some scholars have argued that Lincoln's initial cabinet selections reflected his lack of confidence, Lincoln's ability to navigate numerous political crises throughout the war while simultaneously using his cabinet as a proxy to manage the larger divisions and factions within the Republican Party illustrate just how skilled Lincoln was as a politician. Ultimately, that political skill aided Lincoln in his management of the war effort, eventually producing a Union victory.

¹⁰ Donald, *Lincoln*, 550–2.