

When Lincoln Had a Coalition Cabinet

Discussion About Such a Body Today Recalls How His Great Tact and Firmness Enabled Him to Allay Discord Among His Advisers

THESE is so much talk nowadays of the practicability of a "Coalition Cabinet" in time of war that one frequently hears about this country's great historical example of such a Cabinet, particularly as the anniversary of Lincoln's birthday approaches.

Abraham Lincoln took office as President with the hope that war might still be averted, and with the determination to have, as far as possible, the whole country represented in his Cabinet. Of the seven men whom he chose to be his Ministers, not one disagreed with him on the fundamental questions of slavery and secession, but only three were "Whig Republicans." The other four were "Democratic Republicans"—that is, they had been Democrats, but had split with their party on the issues of the impending war. Lincoln faced much opposition and ignored much criticism and gloomy forecast in his appointment of these men, but, on the whole, they worked well together. When one of them proved not quite the man for the place, the President replaced him with a Democrat who had been the harshest of personal opponents, who had met Lincoln only to insult him, and who, save in his loyalty to the cause of the Union, represented the features of Democratic policy most antagonistic to Lincoln's own political belief. This was Edwin M. Stanton, who succeeded Simon Cameron as Secretary of War, and who, sacrificing personal feeling to enter Lincoln's Cabinet, accepted the President's authority, and really served him with devotion, as well as with vigor and efficiency.

Lincoln did not, naturally, have an easy time with his Coalition Cabinet. Many changes took place in the years of his Administration. But for the most part the group submitted effectively to his authority—one may well say to his domination—and the quarrels between them were as often personal as partisan. The original Cabinet was as follows:

Secretary of State—William H. Seward of New York, Whig Republican.

Secretary of the Treasury—Salmon P. Chase of Ohio, Democratic Republican.

Secretary of War—Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania, Whig Republican.

Secretary of the Navy—Gideon Welles of Connecticut, Democratic Republican.

Secretary of the Interior—Caleb B. Smith of Indiana, Whig Republican.

Attorney General—Edward Bates of Missouri, Democratic Republican.

Postmaster General—Montgomery Blair of Maryland, Democratic Republican.

Most of these appointments were decided upon by the President-elect on the night of his election. He had gone to the telegraph office in Springfield to get the returns, and the figures that made plain his victory soon shared the wires with messages of congratulation.

Naturally, however, some of the selections had been really made at a much earlier date, and on the whole Cabinet

matter, the authors continue, after the election he "took unusual care to receive patiently and consider seriously all the advice, recommendations, and objections which his friends from different States had to offer." He had gone over in his mind the question of choosing his actual opponents in politics or a Southern representation, and had decided that "the selection of enemies" was "out of the question, so he chose his ablest friends." The conclusion which he reached on the matter of the South in the Cabinet was made clear in a question which, though unsigned, was evidently his own: that if a Southerner of character and influence be induced to accept such an appointment, which is most unlikely, "on what terms does he surrender to Mr. Lincoln, or Mr. Lincoln to him, on the political differences between them, or do they enter upon the Administration in open opposition to each other?" But he clung

rival factions. Carrying out his motto of 'Justice to all,' he determined to appoint Mr. Blair. When reminded that by such selection he placed four Democrats and only three Whigs in his Cabinet, he promptly replied that 'he was himself an old-line Whig, and he should be there to make the parties even,' a declaration which he repeated, sometimes jocularly, sometimes earnestly, often afterward."

Seward, however, persuaded that the ascendancy of Chase and his faction was real and ominous, withdrew his acceptance of the office of Secretary of State, but Lincoln persuaded him to rescind his withdrawal. The President-elect, meanwhile, had been through troublesome complications in the case of Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania, the only selection, says James T. Morse, Jr., another biographer of Lincoln, in which his hand was forced. Cameron was finally appointed

because of his ungainly personal appearance, and had been, to quote Ida M. Tarbell, "his most scornful, even vituperative, critic since his election." But Nicolay and Hay thus describe him and his relations with the President:

He watched the beginning of the new Administration with an eye of unsparring faultfinding. It is clear that he had no high opinion of Mr. Lincoln, and no hope in the Republican Party; worse than all, his faith in the ability of the Government to defend and maintain itself seems to have been seriously shaken, if not utterly gone. His comments on public events are couched in a tone of partisan bitterness. * * * He repeated baseless street rumors of the "trepidation of Lincoln" and the "panic" of the Administration, complained of party action, "venality and corruption" of power, and "distrust in every department of the Government." As events culminated, his language grew stronger; he spoke of the "painful imbecility of Lincoln" with all the gibbousness of a country editor, and after the Bull Run defeat he thought a better state of things impossible "until Jeff Davis turns out the whole concern." It would be uncharitable to insist on a literal criticism of these phrases. They must be judged in the light of Stanton's excited patriotism and impulsive vehemence of thought.

Also it must be remembered that they were written for confidential, not public, inspection. And, more than all, that he wrote them without the full and accurate knowledge which was requisite to a proper judgment. * * * Stanton's nature was largely materialistic; his eye saw things in a simple, practical light; his mind dealt with them by rules of arithmetic. * * * Above everything else he was a man of action. * * * He had the qualities which made him a worker of workers.

If the Democrat Stanton was "hard to get along with," so also was the conservative Republican, Seward. When the Cabinet appointments were made it was prophesied that the new President would be merely the tool of Seward or Chase, whichever of these two strong men proved himself the stronger. Gideon Welles shows plainly, in his diary, his personal opinion that the Secretary of State did influence Lincoln unduly. But many events make it clear that the master of the Cabinet was not Seward, or Chase, or Stanton, or Bates, but Abraham Lincoln. At one time, when the resignation of Montgomery Blair was talked of by men whom he had offended, in terms that amounted almost to a demand, Lincoln stated flatly:

"I propose continuing to be myself the judge as to when a member of the Cabinet shall be dismissed."

And he made a short speech to his Ministers in which, in the most dignified and peremptory fashion imaginable, he repeated this, and requested them not to discuss the subject further.

The brief story of the Cabinet's first hearing of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation is told by James T. Morse, Jr.:

Schuyler Colfax well said that Mr. Lincoln's judgment, when settled, "was almost as immovable as the eternal hills." A good illustration of this was given upon a day about the end of July or beginning of August, 1862, when Mr. Lincoln called a Cabinet meeting. To his assembled Secretaries he then said, with his usual simple brevity, that he was going to communicate



LINCOLN READING EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION TO HIS CABINET, SEPT. 20, 1862.

(From F. B. Carpenter's Painting in the National Capitol.)

Left to Right: Stanton, Chase, President Lincoln, Welles, Smith, Seward, (Seated,) Blair, and Bates.

to the hope of persuading a Southern Unionist to enter his Cabinet, and, after several had refused, succeeded in appointing Montgomery Blair, a Democratic Republican, and a member of a prominent Maryland family, as Postmaster General. Blair had, however, a Maryland rival in Henry Winter Davis, a Whig. This was the last of his Cabinet appointments. The party division was even. And on the fight for the minor office of Postmaster General the party struggle over the Cabinet focused vehemently.

"It was supposed to be the casting vote of the new Cabinet, which should decide the dominancy of the Whig Republicans or Democratic Republicans in Lincoln's Administration," Nicolay and Hay record. "In the momentary heat and excitement, this phase of the matter expanded beyond any original design, until Mr. Lincoln realized that it was no longer merely a local strife between Blair and Davis in Maryland, but the closing trial of strength and supremacy between Whigs and Democrats of the new party throughout the Union, headed, respectively, though perhaps unconsciously, by Seward and Chase. This contingency, too, had been foreseen by the President-elect, and he had long ago determined not to allow himself to be made the football between

Secretary of War. In his new office he did not last out the year.

After nine months of service as Secretary of War, Simon Cameron was offered the post of Minister to Russia, and Edwin M. Stanton was put in charge of the War Department.

As Attorney General in Buchanan's Cabinet, Stanton's reputation had been that of "a stubborn and prejudiced Buchanan Democrat." He was, however, a strong anti-secessionist, and was a zealous patriot when war broke out. Of his character, estimates differ. Gideon Welles disliked him intensely. James T. Morse, Jr., in his biography of Lincoln, says that Lincoln was undoubtedly "the only ruler known to history who could have co-operated for years with such a Minister," and adds that Stanton, "however brow-beating he was to others, recognized a master in the President, and, though often grumbling and insolent, always submitted if a crisis came." But Nicolay and Hay aver that the reports of discord between the President and the Secretary of War have been exaggerated, as have also the reports of ungraciousness on Stanton's part after he entered Lincoln's Cabinet. Stanton certainly had been discourteous in his personal attitude toward Lincoln, had slighted him

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to them something about which he did not desire them to offer any advice, since his determination was taken; they might make suggestions as to details, but nothing more. After this imperious statement he read the preliminary Proclamation of Emancipation. The Ministers listened in silence; not one of them had been consulted; not one of them, until this moment, knew the President's purpose; not even now did he think it worth while to go through any idle form of asking the opinion of any one of them. He alone had settled the matter, and simply notified them that he was about to do the most momentous thing that had ever been done upon this continent since thirteen British Colonies had become a nation. Such a presentation of "one-man power" certainly stood out in startling relief upon the background of popular government and the great free republican system of the world.

Seward was not always easy to work with, for Lincoln or any one else. At the end of 1862 the resentment against him crystalized in an almost unanimous vote in the Republican caucus that the President should be asked to remove him. Gideon Welles pictures this crisis vividly in his diary, and Miss Tarbell, in the new edition of her life of Lincoln, sums up a part of his record:

When Seward's friends informed him he was overwhelmed with surprise. With the fatuity of the overambitious man he had not suspected how obvious his manoeuvres were, both to his colleagues in the Administration and to Washington in general. A goodly body of members of Congress had come to the point where they felt that it was their duty to protest against what they believed was his too great influence over the President. This, says Welles, "was the point and pith of their complaint." Surprised, chagrined, but quite big enough to understand that it was a matter for the President, he sent in his resignation. Mr. Lincoln was perplexed. * * * He talked with all concerned; he soon discovered that there had been considerable influence exerted against Seward by members of his own Cabinet. Somebody there had complained of Seward's practice of discouraging regular Cabinet meetings and of holding back information from the members when it did meet, his pose of settling things independently of the President and his associates. Lincoln, in the general airing of things which he conducted, came to see that certainly Mr. Chase and possibly Mr. Stanton had had something to do with stirring up the trouble.

In the excitement some one suggested that the whole Cabinet should resign. Welles refused. This was no time, in his judgment, to make things worse by such an exodus, but it was entirely in keeping that Stanton and Chase should bring their resignations. Welles pictures in his diary the extraordinary moment when Lincoln saw with lightning rapidity his way out. Chase had informed the President that he had prepared his resignation.

Welles, in his diary, continues:

"Where is it?" said the President quickly, his eye lighting up in a moment. "I brought it with me," said Chase, taking the paper from his pocket. "I wrote it this morning." "Let me have it," said the President, reaching his long arm and fingers toward Chase, who held on, seemingly reluctant to part with the letter, which was sealed, and which he apparently hesitated to surrender. Something further he wished to say, but the President was eager and did not perceive it, but took and hastily opened the letter.

"This," said he, looking toward me with a triumphal laugh, "cuts the Gordian knot." An air of satisfaction spread over his countenance such as I had not seen for some time. "I can dispose of this subject now without difficulty," he added, as he turned on his chair. "I see my way clear."

Chase sat by Stanton, fronting the fire; the President beside the fire, his face toward them, Stanton nearest him. I was on the sofa near the east window. While the President was reading the note, which was brief, Chase turned around and looked toward me, a little perplexed. * * * The

President was so delighted that he saw not how others were affected.

"Mr. President," said Stanton with solemnity, "I informed you day before yesterday that I was ready to tender my resignation. I wish you, Sir, to consider my resignation at this time in your possession."

"You may go to your department," said the President. "I don't want yours. This," holding Chase's letter, "is all I want. This relieves me. My way is clear. I will detain neither of you longer."

Wondering what the President was going to do, the members of the Cabinet left the room. Chase obviously supposed that he and Seward were both to be dismissed, but just what was going to happen no one could surmise.

What happened was exactly nothing. The President did nothing whatever. Two days later it was quietly announced to the public that both Secretaries had tendered their resignations and that neither had been accepted! The "way out" which Lincoln had seen when he got Chase's resignation was simply to balance the chiefs of the rival factions against each other by getting both resignations in his hand—and taking no action at all. Every one was surprised. As Morse says, "the two sections had encountered each other and neither had won control of the Government. The President had restrained discussion within safe limits and had saved himself from the real or apparent domination of a faction."

When it was all over he remarked, cheerfully: "Now I can ride; I have got a pumpkin in each end of my bag."

Miss Tarbell points out the significance of the whole affair as an example of Lincoln's management of intrigue:

He lived in a world of intrigue. That a man who himself was so incapable of intrigue should have been so able to sense what the men whom he gathered into his Cabinet, and before whom he was really humble, were about is an unending marvel. But he did understand them, and the legitimate cunning with which he could handle a serious intrigue when it came to the last phase is a pure, intellectual joy. * * *

It was this quality of diving the elements of an intrigue and of almost instantaneously putting his finger on the spring which would loosen it that is most astonishing in a man of Lincoln's temperament and training.

As for Seward, he knew that Lincoln was his master, says Miss Tarbell, but he took good care that only Lincoln should know that he knew it!