On the third Monday in February, the U.S. celebrates Presidents Day, a somewhat vague holiday placed in 1968 near the date of George Washington’s birthday on February 22, 1732, but also traditionally including Abraham Lincoln, who was born on February 12, 1809. This year, that holiday falls on February 19.

That the American people in the twenty-first century celebrate Abraham Lincoln as a great president would likely have surprised Lincoln in summer 1864, when every sign suggested he would not be reelected and would go down in history as the man who had permitted a rebellion to dismember the United States.

The news from the battlefields in 1864 was grim. In May, General U. S. Grant had taken control of the Army of the Potomac and had launched a war of attrition to destroy the Confederacy. In May and June, more than 17,500 Union soldiers were killed or wounded at the Battle of the Wilderness, 18,000 at Spotsylvania, and another 12,500 at Cold Harbor. As the casualties mounted, so did criticism of Lincoln.

Those Republican leaders who thought Lincoln was far too conservative both in his prosecution of the war and in his moves toward abolishing enslavement had plotted with the humorless Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase, who perennially hankered to run the country, to replace Lincoln with Chase on the 1864 ticket.

In February they went so far as to circulate a document signed by Senator Samuel Pomeroy of Kansas, a key party leader, saying that “even were the re-election of Lincoln desirable, it is practically impossible against the union of influences which will oppose him.” Even if he could manage to pull off a reelection, the Pomeroy circular said, he was unfit for office: “his manifest tendency towards compromises and temporary expedients of policy” would make the “dignity and honor of the nation…suffer.”

This was no small challenge: Chase had been in charge of remaking the finances of the United States, and he had both connections and Treasury employees all over the country who owed their jobs to him. In an era in which political patronage meant political victories, he had a formidable machine.

Lincoln managed to quell the rebellion from the radicals. In June 1864, soon after the party—temporarily renamed the National Union Party to make it easier for former Democrats to feel comfortable voting for Republicans—met to choose a presidential candidate, Chase threatened to resign from the Cabinet, as he had done repeatedly. In the past, Lincoln had appeased him. This time, Lincoln accepted his resignation.

But conservatives, too, were in revolt against Lincoln.

Crucially, Thurlow Weed, New York’s kingmaker, thought Lincoln was far too radical. Weed cared deeply about putting his own people into the well-paying customs positions available in New York City, and he was frequently angry that Lincoln appointed nominees favored by the more radical faction.

That frustration went hand in hand with anger about policy. Weed was upset that the Republicans were remaking the government for ordinary Americans. The 1862 Homestead Act, which provided western land for a nominal fee to any American willing to settle it, was a thorn in his side. Until Congress passed that law, such land, taken from Indigenous tribes, would be sold to speculators for cash that went directly to the Treasury. Republicans believed that putting farmers on the land would enable them to pay the new national taxes Congress imposed, thus bringing in far more money to the Treasury for far longer than would selling to speculators, but Weed foresaw national bankruptcy.

Even more than financial policy, though, Weed was unhappy with Lincoln’s 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, which moved toward an end of human enslavement far too quickly for Weed.

On August 22, Weed wrote to his protégé Secretary of State William Henry Seward that he had recently “told Mr. Lincoln that his re-election was an impossibility…. [N]obody here doubts it; nor do I see anybody from other states who authorizes the slightest hope of success.”

“The People are wild for Peace,” he wrote, and suggested they were unhappy that “the President will only listen to terms of Peace on condition Slavery be ‘abandoned.’” Weed wrote that Henry Raymond, another protégé who both chaired the Republican National Committee and edited the New York Times, “thinks Commissioners should be immediately sent to Richmond, offering to treat for Peace on the basis of Union.”

On August 23, 1864, Lincoln asked the members of his Cabinet to sign a memorandum that was pasted closed so they could not read it. Inside were the words:

“This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to so co-operate with the President elect, as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration as he will have secured his election on such ground that he can not possibly save it afterwards.  — A. Lincoln”

But then his fortunes turned.

Just a week after Weed foretold his electoral doom, the Democrats chose as a presidential candidate General George McClellan, formerly commander of the Army of the Potomac, in a transparent attempt to appeal to soldiers. But to appease the anti-war wing of the party, they also called for an immediate end to the war. They also rejected the new, popular measures the national government had undertaken since 1861—the establishment of state colleges, the transcontinental railroad, the new national money, and the Homestead Act—insisting on “State rights.”

Americans who had poured their lives and fortunes into the war and liked the new government were not willing to abandon both to return to the conditions of three years before.

Then news spread that Rear Admiral David Farragut had taken control of Mobile Bay, the last port the Confederates held in the Gulf of Mexico east of the Mississippi River. On September 2, General William T. Sherman took Atlanta, a city of symbolic as well as real value to the Confederacy, and set off on his March to the Sea, smashing his way through the countryside and carving the eastern half of Confederacy in half again.

Reelecting Lincoln meant committing to fight on until victory, and voters threw in their lot. In November’s election, Lincoln won about 55% of the popular vote compared to McClellan’s 45%, and 212 electoral votes to McClellan’s 12. Lincoln won 78 percent of the soldiers’ vote.

After his reelection, Lincoln explained to a crowd come to serenade him why it had been important to hold an election, even though he had expected to lose it:

“We can not have free government without elections; and if the rebellion could force us to forego or postpone a national election it might fairly claim to have already conquered and ruined us.”

Happy Presidents Day.

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**Notes**:

[https://archive.org/details/letterinopposit00pome](https://substack.com/redirect/0d2b6336-33d7-42b6-a85b-5a70eebc604f?j=eyJ1IjoiOGZ5encifQ.8Us9CrcMvH0t_UJeNAzVZmBf60hWkMNz0w4YThlwZUI)

Thurlow Weed to William H. Seward, August 22, 1864, at [https://www.loc.gov/resource/mal.3549000/?sp=1&st=image](https://substack.com/redirect/bea5045d-8f95-4424-9647-e74c8d7549ae?j=eyJ1IjoiOGZ5encifQ.8Us9CrcMvH0t_UJeNAzVZmBf60hWkMNz0w4YThlwZUI)

[https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2014/08/abraham-lincolns-blind-memorandum/](https://substack.com/redirect/743d1a51-29a2-4d23-bbb7-3d9d17e94b8b?j=eyJ1IjoiOGZ5encifQ.8Us9CrcMvH0t_UJeNAzVZmBf60hWkMNz0w4YThlwZUI)

[https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/lincoln/healing-the-nations-wounds.html#obj1?loclr=blogloc](https://substack.com/redirect/f06dcdad-7308-4dfa-b2db-51ed41592589?j=eyJ1IjoiOGZ5encifQ.8Us9CrcMvH0t_UJeNAzVZmBf60hWkMNz0w4YThlwZUI)

[https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/1864-democratic-party-platform](https://substack.com/redirect/2288e36c-e184-44a5-aa97-379a1ce3b799?j=eyJ1IjoiOGZ5encifQ.8Us9CrcMvH0t_UJeNAzVZmBf60hWkMNz0w4YThlwZUI)

[https://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/1864election.htm](https://substack.com/redirect/4080a196-ba7f-44e0-93c4-e7371154ec62?j=eyJ1IjoiOGZ5encifQ.8Us9CrcMvH0t_UJeNAzVZmBf60hWkMNz0w4YThlwZUI)