

ZACHARIAH CHANDLER'S PART IN THE REELECTION OF
ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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August, 1864 presented a unique political situation. Contrary to circumstances at this stage of the usual presidential campaign, a large degree of uncertainty persisted in regard to party alignments and candidates. The Republicans, with the coöperation of the most pronounced War Democrats, had met at Baltimore in June under the banner of the National Union Party, and, apparently with practical unanimity, had renominated President Lincoln upon a vigorous war and anti-slavery platform. This action had been dictated by the growing popularity of the Lincoln administration during the early months of the year, but it met at least the passive disapproval of many of the more radical Republican leaders, especially among the members of Congress. These Radicals had wanted a more aggressive and vigorous executive, a man with more determination to crush the rebellion by any and every means, an exponent of a more rigorous reconstruction program—in short a Radical. Many of these men had previously supported, either actively or passively, the candidacy of Secretary Salmon P. Chase, General Benjamin F. Butler or General John C. Fremont, but their opposition to Lincoln's renomination failed to gain sufficient unity or popular strength to promise success. The irreconcilables of this faction bolted the party and nominated General Fremont for the presidency on an independent ticket. But the majority of the Radicals, in Congress and out, were too practical to jeopardize their prospects of success by disrupting the party. They acquiesced, temporarily at least, in the President's renomination and consoled themselves with a virtual request in the platform for the dismissal of the more conservative members of the Cabinet, particularly the postmaster-general, Montgomery Blair, who had become extremely obnoxious to the Radicals.

By July, however, the Radicals had found further cause for exasperation with President Lincoln in his "pocket veto" of the Radical plan of reconstruction as embodied in a bill sponsored by Senator Benjamin F. Wade and Representative Henry Win-

ter Davis.¹ A month later these two Radicals replied with a public manifesto,² attacking Lincoln's entire reconstruction program with such bitterness that their opposition to his reelection was anticipated by many. In the meantime, Republican politicians were becoming alarmed over the widespread popular impatience and discontent with the apparently slow progress of the Union armies. They beheld a rising wave of pacifism throughout the war-tired North and noticed with increasing concern the success of the Democratic leaders in riding this wave.³ Suggestions were coming from various quarters that both Lincoln and Fremont should withdraw so that all the Union forces could be united behind a new candidate to be chosen at another convention. By mid-August some of the Republican managers were almost ready to admit defeat. Substantial military success would stem the Democratic tide, they reasoned; otherwise only a most energetic campaign by a united and harmonious party could prevent the defeat of Abraham Lincoln and his party — and perhaps his cause.

According to his official biography,⁴ Senator Zachariah Chandler of Michigan undertook to save the Republicans and their cause from impending defeat by reuniting the party. Chandler was one of the most pronounced Radicals in Congress, on intimate terms with Wade, and a close friend of both Davis and Fremont. With the other Radicals, he was decidedly opposed to Lincoln's moderate war and reconstruction policies and to his retention of such conservative advisers as Blair and Seward.⁵

¹ The Radicals had just been irritated on June 30 by what they considered the forced resignation of Chase, secretary of the treasury and the outstanding Radical in the Cabinet.

² This document, known as the Wade-Davis Manifesto, was first published in Greeley's *New York Tribune* on August 5 and was widely copied by other newspapers.

³ The Democrats had postponed their national convention from July 4 to August 29 in order to take advantage of any misfortunes that might befall the Lincoln Administration during the summer. This maneuver also handicapped the Republicans because they had no candidate or platform to attack and had to remain on the defensive.

⁴ The *Detroit Post and Tribune*, *Zachariah Chandler: An Outline Sketch of His Life and Public Services* (Detroit, 1880), 263-78.

⁵ Reliable evidence of Chandler's attitude towards Lincoln's renomination is scarce. Doubtless he preferred a more radical candidate, but when public opinion supported the President he summarized his position in his reply to a letter from Greeley (May 2, 1864), asking him to help prevent Lincoln's renomination: "As for

Unlike some of the Radicals, however, Chandler's personal relations with the President were reasonably pleasant, fostered doubtless by his control of a generous share of the federal patronage in his state. Moreover, he considered General George B. McClellan, the prospective Democratic nominee, both a weakling and a traitorous "Copperhead," and was too much of a politician to hesitate long in choosing the less objectionable of the two major presidential candidates.

Late in August, according to his biographer,⁶ Chandler set out to reunite the discordant elements of his party. As the initial step he visited Wade, who by this time had become convinced, through association with his constituents, that Lincoln was the only candidate who had a reasonable chance of defeating the dreadful "Copperheads." Consequently Wade was willing to take the stump for the Baltimore ticket but felt that the President should make a concession to the Radicals by dismissing Blair from his cabinet.⁷ Moving on to Washington, Chandler found the party managers there as anxious as he to present a united front. After considerable negotiation with these men and a trip to Philadelphia to consult other prominent politicians, including the chairman of the national executive committee,⁸ Chandler was able to secure a reluctant assurance from the President that Blair would be sacrificed to secure Fremont's withdrawal and the support of the sulking Radicals. On September 6 Chandler hurried to New York to interview Fremont and his political managers. He found the general reluctant to enter the bargain and also encountered an abortive conspiracy on the part of several prominent Radicals from New York and neighboring states to force the withdrawal of Lincoln and the substitution of a candidate considered more acceptable to the diverse elements of the party.⁹ After several days of conferences and another trip the Presidential question I fear it is beyond *our* control but God knows I do not." Chandler MSS. (in Library of Congress).

⁶ George W. Partridge, who was for some years a private secretary to Chandler, is regarded as the author of the chapters which deal with his political life.

⁷ Chase and his many political friends also were decidedly opposed to the retention of Blair in the cabinet. Cf. Gideon Welles, *Diary* (Boston, 1911), II, 158, n. 1; Donnal V. Smith, *Chase and Civil War Politics* (Columbus, 1931), 148-57.

⁸ Henry J. Raymond, the editor of the *New York Times*.

⁹ August 24, 1864, Henry Winter Davis, who was one of the leaders of this conspiracy, wrote Chandler strongly urging him to come to New York to aid the move-

to Washington for further consultation with campaign managers, Chandler secured Fremont's belated promise to retire.¹⁰ Fremont's letter of withdrawal was published on September 22, and the next day the President asked for Blair's resignation. By this time most of the Radicals had taken the stump for the Lincoln ticket and, thanks to timely military victories and to the anti-war platform of the Democratic Convention, were becoming confident of success.

Serious doubts have been cast upon the version of these negotiations presented by Chandler's biographer. Lincoln's private secretaries and official biographers appeared to know little or nothing about the definite nature of the political maneuver.¹¹ Professor Stephenson, who places great emphasis upon the struggle between Lincoln and the Radicals, alludes to the Chandler version as a "legend" and a "myth."¹² In his recent study of the Blair family, Professor William E. Smith designates the account "an interesting story," but apparently a story to be trusted.¹³ Miss Dilla accepts the version in question but is unable to understand the motive for Chandler's action.¹⁴ The following letters written by and to Chandler confirm the general nature of the account in his biography, but modify and supplement it in certain interesting details. They also disclose the personal attitude of such prominent Radicals as Chandler and Wade towards President Lincoln and his candidacy for reëlection.¹⁵

ment. Chandler MSS. Chandler, however, had probably left Detroit before the letter arrived.

¹⁰ Fremont afterwards denied that his withdrawal was purchased by Blair's removal or other promises of personal advantage and claimed that his "only consideration was the welfare of the Republican party." Allen Nevins, *Fremont* (New York, 1928), II, 665.

¹¹ John Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln, A History* (New York, 1890), IX, 337-42.

¹² Nathaniel W. Stephenson, *Lincoln* (Indianapolis, 1922), 391, 458, n. 5.

¹³ William E. Smith, *The Francis Preston Blair Family in Politics* (New York, 1933), II, 283-89.

¹⁴ Henrietta M. Dilla, "The Politics of Michigan, 1865-1878," in *Columbia University Studies* (New York, 1892-), XLVII (1912), no. 1, p. 35.

¹⁵ The originals are in the Chandler MSS, recently deposited in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.

Confidential of course

Washington August 27th 64

My dear Wife

I arrived here late last night having failed to connect at Harrisburgh Spent the forenoon with Mr. Cameron¹⁶ & left after dinner I consider it on the whole rather providential that I was left as I am of the opinion that Cameron can & will aid me. The Pa State Central Committee meet at Philadelphia on Wednesday next & C[ameron] wants me to be there. If I dont succeed to my mission & think I can get aid there I shall go. In fact I am more & more of the opinion that the Election of Mr Lincoln & salvation of the country may depend upon my mission, whether anything will come of it or not. God knows, I do not. I shall leave no stone unturned to ensure success. Have not seen the President yet & shall not before Monday or Tuesday. Have an appointment tomorrow (Sunday) with his *particular* friends, those who drop in & chat with him of evenings & who have his confidence What the result may be I know not. You see my whole heart is set upon success & I *must* win or leave the country. If traitors rule this land it is no place for me, nor do I believe I *could* live here if I would. Excuse haste with much love affectionately your husband

Z Chandler

P. S. having told you secrets that must not be divulged I have written confidential upon the letter.

Washington Augt 27th [28] 64

My dear Wife

I have spent the day among the confidential friends of Mr Lincoln but am unable to say what was accomplished if anything. I fear he may prove stubborn & mulish & if so! but I will not prognosticate. I shall I think go to Philadelphia on Wednesday to meet influential men from N. Y. — Pa & Ohio & shall leave no stone unturned to accomplish my object & if I fail, it will be with the consciousness that I have done my whole duty. I do nothing night & day but attend to this one thing. No news Am well affectionately your husband

Z Chandler

Confidential

Washington Sept 2nd 64

My dear Wife

I have been to Philadelphia. Seen Raymond,¹⁷ Cameron & a host of

¹⁶ Simon Cameron, a prominent Pennsylvania Republican politician and Lincoln's original secretary of war.

¹⁷ Henry J. Raymond, the chairman of the Union National Executive Committee.

others. Went on night before last, returned last night *sitting up all night*. Pleasant you will say for a man of Family, with at least the *ordinary* comforts of home. I admit that I *may* have made a mistake when I entered the political arena, *but not now*. I am trying to do my duty & save the country. I *may* accomplish nothing, but I would certainly prefer the traitor Jef Davis, to the equal traitor McLelland for President. The one has brains, the other has none. The one has *will* the other none. both are d——d traitors but give me a smart villain before a fool one. I thought of starting for home last night from Pa in disgust but concluded to make one more effort and am glad I did. Have not yet talked with the President but shall see him with Harlan & Washburn¹⁸ tomorrow & then. Well, I shall know what to look for & that is more than I do now. He & his particular friends seem to be perfectly infatuated with Seward, Weed,¹⁹ Blair etc — My God! is the *Country* to be lost through this infatuation. I *cannot* believe it. I will not. I *do not*. I don't want to write a line or say a good natured word to any one. *it must not be*, & shall not. I dont know when I shall come home, but rest assured I shall not stay one *second* after I loose hope or succeed. I am disgusted beyond the power of language to express & yet here I am. . . I *wont* stay much longer *any how*. If it was only Abe Lincoln I would say, go to — in your own way, I will not stop a second to save you but it is this great nation with all its hopes for the present & future I cannot abandon the effort now. Affectionately your husband

Z Chandler

ASTOR HOUSE
NEW YORK

New York, Sept 6th 1864

My dear wife

I arrived here this morning to meet Mr. Wade upon a telegraph & the sumoning [?] to Mr. Wade to meet me here but he is not here. I think I shall be successful to the fullest extent but may still fail God knows I deserve success. Never did I undertake so thankless *or hopeless* an enterprise. If I succeed, *Glory enough*, the country is safe. If I fail, Well we will try still to save it but I shall feel discouraged. Sherman's victory has helped us amazingly & others may save us. Don't know when I shall be home, but at first possible moment in haste affectionately with much love, your husband

Z Chandler

¹⁸ Senator James Harlan of Iowa and Congressman Elihu B. Washburne of Illinois, members of the Union Congressional Committee.

¹⁹ Thurlow Weed, a prominent conservative Republican politician of Albany, New York.

New York Sept 8th 64

My dear wife

Wade has disappointed me unaccountably I have been waiting here since Tuesday morning & last night was informed by Telegraph that Wade could not come. If he were here I could accomplish all I started to do but without him I fear I shall fail. The President was most reluctant to come to terms *but came* & now to be euchered is hard. I saw Fremont yesterday & shall see him again today when the matter will be decided one way or another. I may go to Washington again & I may not. If I do you will see me on Tuesday morning next if not I shall get home 12 hours ahead of this letter. You will not hear from me again until you see me, as I either start for home or Washington tonight. I am real mad at Old Wade, as but for him I should never have started & now upon the eve of eminent success to have the whole dish kicked over is too bad. Jerome²⁰ [?] is here & wants me to go back to Washington for a day or two Shall know soon I was never so homesick in my life nor did I ever attempt so hopeless or thankless a task as this in my life. Nothing but my intense desire to save the country by defeating that Traitorous cuss McLelland could have induced me to undertake this mission. however it may turn out I shall feel that I tried to do my whole duty. There has been the most extraordinary change in publick opinion here that ever was known within a week. Even Bob Dun²¹ says he will not vote for McLelland on the platform, in fact McLs[McClellan's] nomination has fallen flat

Affectionately your husband with much love

Z Chandler

Washington, Sept 18th 64

My dear wife

I arrived here this Sunday morning, having failed to meet Genl Fremont or to accomplish my object. I am now to meet him on Wednesday unless I am compelled to return here to finish with the President. This Senator Harlan Judge Edmonds²² & Washburn advise & I see now no way to avoid it, & if so I shall wait untill *all* is accomplished & may not be home untill the first of next week They all seem to rely wholly upon me in this matter & say no one else can do it. perhaps this may be so or it may not. At any rate Harlan told me this morning that if I succeeded I should accomplish more to save the campaign & the country, than any ten men could do upon the stump or in any other way. It seems to me to be all important & therefore I pursue it, stand by it & will not give

²⁰ Probably David H. Jerome of Saginaw.

²¹ Robert G. Dun, the head of "The Mercantile Agency" of New York City.

²² James M. Edmunds, commissioner of the United States Land Office.

way to doubt or despair. You will see but little of me until after the Election in Nov as I have already agreed to go to Indiana next week & to spend two weeks in New York. While in Michigan I shall be happy to have your company whenever I may go on the line of Rail Roads *but not on wagon routes* as you would break down & I fail to meet my appointments. I must spend two or three weeks in Michigan to meet the Expectations of my Friends. They are now *urging* me to speak in the academy of Musick Brooklyn N. Y. on Thursday of this week & *to stay in N. Y.* but I cannot do anything until my present mission is accomplished & then I am at the disposal of the country or of the managers of the campaign. I shall not stand in the way of the candidates for Senator in Michigan *often*. Of that they may be assured & I regret that I was compelled to offend one of them at Ypsilanti but no matter. With much love & great impatience to get home I am affectionately your husband

Z Chandler

Washington Sept 24th 64

My dear wife

I have succeeded in all that I have undertaken & should have started for home last night had not Mr. Sheldon ²³ Telegraphed me that Mr Baldwin ²⁴ was on his way here & to wait for him Today I have accepted an invitation to to speak in Patterson New Jersey on Monday next So I shall not reach home until Wednesday While they all admit that I have done my full share of work in this campaign and & more than any ten men *can* accomplish during it, still they will not grant me a days rest. Harlan and I are going immediately to Indiana So you see there is no rest. I have been running a nightly express between here & New York the past week but have now closed that business. H. Winter Davis has just left my room. He is delighted with my success & cant see how it was done. Well! I may as well call it impudence [?] as anything else. It was persuasion [?] under difficulties that accomplished the work. I can assure you that I am receiving a perfect ovation for what I have done. Stanton told me day before yesterday that I should fail ²⁵

affectionately your husband

Z Chandler

²³ Allan Shelden, one of Chandler's business partners.

²⁴ Henry P. Baldwin, a prominent business man and Republican of Detroit.

²⁵ September 24 Adam Gurowski, in his *Diary: 1863-'64-'65* (Washington 1866), 359, explained Blair's removal thus: "The victory was exclusively won by Senator Chandler." September 26 J. K. Herbert wrote from Washington to General Butler: "Chandler had a 'celebration' over his success, for it is really his own triumph that Blair is removed *at this time*." Benjamin F. Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence* (Norwood, Massachusetts, 1917), V, 168.

Jefferson [Ohio] Oct 2^d 1864

Brother Chandler,

At ten o'clock last evening I received your letter of the 29th ult. and lest you should continue to curse me, I hasten to reply to it. I had noticed before that letter reached me, that you had accomplished what you undertook so far as the removal of Blair was concerned. When I saw it announced in the papers that he was to leave, I knew it was brought about by your labor. I also noticed in my last Tribune that you had done what would entitle you to the gratitude of the nation. I don't see how you effected it, except it was by working on Old Abe's fears, for I know him well enough to know that he would not have done it because all his political friends desired it, he was governed by a fear that Blair's continuing might affect his re-election. My wife is exceedingly anxious to know what you said to produce this effect. We both think that the withdrawal of Fremont was coupled with the resignation of Blair. But he has gone and I thank God for it, I only wish Seward was with him. It is a great victory and you may well be proud of it, it is all the greater because you achieved it alone. Now for your curses of me because I did not respond as you wished. In the first place I did not understand that in your opinion it was essential that Fremont should withdraw from the canvass. I mentioned that thing to you while here and that I ought to have some influence with Fremont and thought I could persuade him to withdraw, but concluded from your manner that you attached but little importance to the idea and as my mind was made up after visiting Lincoln as one of the Senatorial Committee in the Seward matter,²⁶ that I would never apply to him again for anything, I could not well see of what use I could be in the matter. But aside from this, your dispatch reached me on Monday evening and you wished me to meet you on Tuesday morning at the Astor House, when your next came I was on a journey to Lexington Ky. Your communication from Detroit requesting me to come there, I replied to at once, I do not know that you received the letter, but stumping engagements at that time, even had I received your letter in season would have prevented my accepting the invitation. To the request made in your last, I regret to say, I am compelled to make the same answer. My time up to the 18th, inclusive, is engaged in this State and Pennsylvania. Now I believe I have made a thorough defence against your charges and that you will have to take them all back. As for the election of Lincoln, I never had a doubt of our ability to elect him by an over whelming majority. I only wish we could do as well for

²⁶ Wade was a member of the committee of Republican Senators who made a determined effort in December, 1862, to force the resignation of Seward but who were checked by Lincoln's refusal to accept the resignation.

a better man. But to save the nation I am doing all for *him* that I possibly could do for a better man, were it not for the country there would be a poetical justice in his being beaten by that stupid ass McClellan, who, he persisted in keeping in the service against all that you and I, and Andy Johnson could do, to have him removed and a live man in his place.²⁷ That stupid wilfulness cost this nation more than a hundred thousand men, as you well know and when I think of those things, I can but wish the d——l had Old Abe But the issue is now made up and we have either got to take him, or Jeff Davis, for McClellan and all who will support him, are meaner traitors than are to be found in the Confederacy Shall we ever proceed to take the testimony we are ordered by Congress to take, if so, when shall it be?

Tomorrow morning I start for the stump in Pennsylvania.

As ever, very truly your friend

B. F. Wade

²⁷ As the senatorial members of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, Wade, Chandler, and Andrew Johnson during 1862 repeatedly urged Lincoln to remove McClellan from command of the Army of the Potomac.