Under Pressure: Lincoln’s Struggles for Reelection  
by China Harvey

While Americans today consistently rank Abraham Lincoln as the greatest President of the United States, Americans in 1864 were not so sure. During the election campaign of that year, his Democratic opponent, George B. McClellan, was willing to give up the cause of emancipation for a quicker victory, appealing to many voters who were tired of years of war. Republicans were divided as to whether the current president was doing enough to abolish slavery and ensure that the Confederacy would be fairly punished. To address these concerns and attract new voters, Lincoln made the gamble of replacing Hannibal Hamlin with Andrew Johnson, a War Democrat from Tennessee, as his running mate. He ultimately received the nomination by coalescing several factions into what would briefly be known as the National Union Party.[[1]](#footnote-1) On June 9th, 1864, following two days of the new party’s nominating convention, Lincoln officially accepted his party’s nomination.[[2]](#footnote-2) Upon acceptance, Lincoln said to the National Union League, “I can only say, in response to the kind words of your chairman…that I am very grateful for the renewed confidence which has been accorded to me…by the National League.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Lincoln goes on to say that he may not be the best man for the job, acknowledging the opposition that he faced within his own party and that he will continue to face against the Democratic nominee. Lincoln had a history of belittling his own worth, but in the election of 1864, he had good reason to be nervous about his success for reelection.

With his usual modesty, Lincoln replied to the National Union League upon his nomination saying, “I have not permitted myself, gentlemen, to conclude that I am the best man in the country.” This was not the first time Lincoln publicly expressed humility in the face of a campaign. In 1832, when running for a seat in the Illinois House of Representatives, Lincoln wrote in his campaign speech, “My case is thrown exclusively upon the independent voters of this county…if the good people in their wisdom shall see fit to keep me in the background, I have been too familiar with disappointments to be very much chagrined.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Granted, this was the very beginning of Lincoln’s political career, giving him good reason to anticipate a loss. Yet in 1859, after nearly three decades of relative political success, Lincoln wrote to newspaper editor, Jesse W. Fell, in an autobiographical profile, “There is not much of it, for the reason, I suppose, that there is not much of me”—a striking comment from the man who would soon become the 16th President of the United States.[[5]](#footnote-5) So when examining his 1864 reply to the nominating convention, it does not come as a surprise when he questioned whether he was the best man in the country for the position. Whether Lincoln was actually as modest as he appeared is unclear, but the political climate of 1864 did, however, give him real reason to doubt his success in the upcoming election.

As the nominating convention neared, his own Republican party was splintering. Radicals in the party questioned his commitment to political equality for the newly freed slaves. In addition, they thought his “10% plan” was far too lenient on the Confederacy, countering his plan with a bill that would require 50% of southern voters to swear loyalty to the Union.[[6]](#footnote-6) His own Treasury Secretary, Salmon P. Chase, had short-lived plans to run against him, and one of his former generals, John C. Fremont, also made a bid to oppose the incumbent president.[[7]](#footnote-7) Ultimately, Lincoln was granted the nomination by the National Union League, the new Republican Party that encompassed the various Republican and Democratic factions emerging in the Union. So when Lincoln said to the National Union League upon his nomination, “I am very grateful for the renewed confidence which has been accorded to me, both by the convention and by the National League,” there is no doubt that he meant it.[[8]](#footnote-8) He knew the opposition he was up against and that there was a very real possibility that he would not be chosen. His use of the phrase, “renewed confidence,” is telling. In this phrase, Lincoln acknowledged the hesitation his own party had in selecting him as their nominee. He continued to reassure them of their decision by reminding them “it [is] not best to swap horses when crossing streams.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Solidifying the support of his own party was not Lincoln’s only obstacle during the election. He faced growing discontent from both Peace and War Democrats who believed Lincoln abandoned his original purpose in the war, saving the Union, to a crusade against slavery. In August 1864, the Democrats selected former Union general, George B. McClellan, as their nominee. Going against his party’s platform of ending the war immediately and negotiating a settlement, McClellan promised to continue fighting and preserve the Union at all costs.[[10]](#footnote-10) Preserving the Union, for McClellan, meant giving up the cause of emancipation, which would bring a quicker end to the war. Historian John Waugh argues that even when McClellan was general-in-chief of the Union army, his political views were more in line with the Democrats.[[11]](#footnote-11) In an 1862 letter to Lincoln, McClellan argued “Neither confiscation of property, political executions of persons, territorial organization of states or forcible abolition of slavery should be contemplated for a moment.”[[12]](#footnote-12) McClellan’s popularity grew as many Unionists agreed with the former general that Lincoln had gone too far in abolishing slavery. Many of these Unionists abandoned Lincoln as McClellan became an alternative who promised to end the war with the Union intact, adding to the uncertainty that Lincoln was destined for a second term.

Lincoln was well aware of the political obstacles he faced in the election. In expressing his gratitude to the National League delegation, he said, “I am not insensible at all to the personal compliment there is in this; yet I do not allow myself to believe that any but a small portion of it is appropriated as a personal compliment.”[[13]](#footnote-13) While Lincoln’s modesty is once again evident, he doubted that he alone could win the election. It was in this atmosphere of political rivalries and self-doubt that Lincoln chose Andrew Johnson, War Democrat from Tennessee, as his running mate. New York Republican, Chauncey M. Depew, recalled “that the situation demanded the nomination for vice-president of a representative from the border States, whose loyalty had been demonstrated during the war…[Lincoln] favors Mr. Johnson.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Lincoln recognized his vulnerability in the race and saw Johnson as an opportunity to gain support from the opposite side of the political aisle. The mere fact that the Republican Party became the National Union Party shows the party’s efforts at broadening its constituent base. Lincoln’s choice of Johnson went far beyond presidential candidates choosing a running mate with a different political and regional background to appeal to a broader constituency. While Johnson was a Unionist like Lincoln, he was also a Democrat, was from a secessionist state, and had been a slaveholder himself. Replacing his current vice-president Hannibal Hamlin, who opposed slavery and encouraged Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, shows that Lincoln was very concerned he could lose the election over the slavery issue.[[15]](#footnote-15) This was not the first time Lincoln made an ill-fated political decision in an attempt to garner support from opposing factions. Historian Brooks D. Simpson chastises Lincoln for choosing “political generals” during the war, “professional politicians before the war [who] possessed little if any military training or experience.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Simpson accuses Lincoln of “retaining incompetent generals in order to appease political constituencies,” an accusation that could easily be applied to his choice of Johnson as running mate.[[17]](#footnote-17) In both cases, Lincoln sacrificed party loyalty in an attempt to attract voters, revealing the self-doubt he expressed in his reply to the National Union delegation that he alone could win the election.

Lincoln’s response to his nomination by the National Union Party reveals the obstacles he faced in his reelection campaign and his concern that he would be reelected. His Republican Party was fractured and he faced severe opposition from the Democrats, creating a need for a more inclusive National Union Party. Still he was worried he would not be elected on his own; he knew he needed broader support, prompting the decision to appoint Johnson as his running mate. After all the worry and political maneuvering, however, Lincoln won in a landslide victory, earning 212 electoral votes to McClellan’s 21.[[18]](#footnote-18) Would he have won without Johnson on the ticket? Were the Democrats mounting enough opposition to defeat an incumbent president in the middle of a war? It’s impossible to say. But in July 1864, Lincoln did not take victory for granted.

1. “1864: Lincoln v. McClellan,” *Harp Week*, accessed July 21, 2016, http://elections.harpweek.com/1864/Events-1864.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “1864: Presidential Campaigns and Elections,” *Presidential Campaigns and Elections: An American History Reference Source*, accessed July 21, 2016, https://presidentialcampaignselectionsreference.wordpress.com/overviews/19th-century/1864-overview/. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Abraham Lincoln, Reply to Delegation from the National Union League, June 9, 1864, in Roy P. Basler, ed., The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln (8 vols., New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 7: 383-384, accessed July 18, 2016, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. "Communication to the People of Sangamo County," in Roy P. Basler, ed., The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln (8 vols., New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 1: 5-10, accessed July 20, 2016, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Abraham Lincoln to Jesse W. Fell, December 20, 1859, Springfield, IL, Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, accessed July 20, 2016, http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/alhtml/malhome.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, “Abraham Lincoln: Campaigns and Elections,” accessed July 20, 2016, http://millercenter.org­/president/biography/lincoln-campaigns-and-elections. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Richard Striner, *Father Abraham: Lincoln’s Relentless Struggle to End Slavery*, (Oxford University Press: 2006), from Google Books, accessed July 21, 2016, https://books.google.com/books?id=dtbDeeRHjloC&pg=PT212&dq=salmon+chase+election+of+1864&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjMvN-G-oTOAhVT42MKHUvUCxY4ChDoAQgaMAA#v=onepage&q=salmon%20chase%20election%20of%201864&f=false; Miller Center. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Abraham Lincoln, Reply to Delegation. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Miller Center. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln: The Battle for the 1864 Presidency*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2001), 27, from Google Books, accessed July 31, 2016, https://books.google.com/books?id=NDzSypIhISUC&printsec=frontcover&dq=reelecting+lincoln&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi8uqnmlJ7OAhUO-2MKHageAD0Q6AEIHTAA#v=onepage&q=reelecting%20lincoln%20mcclellan%20emancipation&f=false. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. George B. McClellan, “Letter to Lincoln, 1862,” quoted in John Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln: The Battle for the 1864 Presidency*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2001), 28, from Google Books, accessed July 31, 2016, https://books.google.com/books?id=NDzSypIhISUC&printsec=frontcover&dq=reelecting+lincoln&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi8uqnmlJ7OAhUO-2MKHageAD0Q6AEIHTAA#v=onepage&q=reelecting%20lincoln%20mcclellan%20emancipation&f=false. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Abraham Lincoln, Reply to Delegation. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Chauncey M. Depew, published in *Scribner’s Magazine*, Vol. LXX, July-December, 529, from Google Books, accessed July 21, 2016, https://books.google.com/books?id=bJE6AQAAMAAJ&pg=PA529&dq=chauncey+depew+scribners+johnson+vice+president&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwie68i7t4XOAhVS9GMKHQiZCUEQ6AEIHTAA#v=onepage&q=chauncey%20depew%20scribners%20johnson%20vice%20president&f=false. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia. “Hannibal Hamlin (1861–1865).” Accessed July 31, 2016. http://millercenter.org­/president/essays/hamlin-1861-vicepresident. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Brooks D. Simpson, “Lincoln and His Political Generals,” (Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association: Vol. 21, Issue 1, Winter 2000), accessed July 12, 2016, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jala/2629860.0021.105?view=text;rgn=main. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. “Presidential Election of 1864: A Resource Guide,” Library of Congress, accessed July 21, 2016, https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/elections/election1864.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)