

History 319

Re: Lincoln and His Party

Lincoln's Reconstruction Plan:

One of the enduring, among the many myths of Reconstruction, is that assertion that Lincoln had a plan of Reconstruction. The truth seems to be that Lincoln had plan(s) for reconstruction.

In short, that Lincoln, the complete and total politician, had several plans for reconstruction. . . And while they were all characterized by a strain of charity toward the defeated enemy, they nevertheless demonstrated his flexibility in this matter. Another characteristic was that all his approaches were POLITICAL in their design

Politics and "politicians" generally are regarded as terms of opprobrium in the national experience. Perhaps this is why Lincoln is not regarded as a political animal.

His political finesse best illustrated in Lincoln's Border State-policy during the war:

Lincoln's need to keep the slave-holding Border states in the war. To accomplish this he used the patronage "honey" to build up Union supporters in these states. He appealed to the former Whig politicians and tried to cultivate ~~the~~ Union sentiments. He was scrupulous not to antagonize the border state leaders by recruiting them for his Cabinet.

He was not averse to using coercive measures. When the city of Baltimore in 1861 threatened to lead Maryland into secession . . . Baltimore was the hotbed of Maryland secessionist sentiments. Lincoln simply stepped in and had these men arrested and suspended habeas corpus . . . to headoff secessionist movement by locking up the leaders.

During the war Lincoln acceded to Kentucky's wishes to remain neutral. While acquiescence was Lincoln's official policy toward the state's leaders, he used all his resources to quietly build up Union support and a "party" for the Union cause.

Lincoln's First Efforts:

This was the use of military governors (like Andrew Johnson in Tennessee, etc) to build up a loyal party machine as the hard core nucleus around which a Union party could be developed.

The case of Louisiana.

Lincoln's use of the political general Ben Butler from Massachusetts.

Butler was brought in to use his political talents to fashion a political basis for Unionism in the state of Louisiana. The only center for Union support in the State after it was occupied by the Union, was the merchant-shipper classes of Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

But Butler was a radical. . . His political talents were in the area of demagoguery and class-oriented politics. He brought this political orientation into Louisiana and made an appeal for the workers and the unemployed in the state. He initiated public works projects to employ the jobless lower classes. These projects were financed by a wealth tax act; taking it out of the hide of the wealthy and propertied. In this he lost the support of the merchant-shipper classes. His regime was attacked by the wealthy and the majority of the anti-Unionists in the State for corruption. . . Some of these charges had apparent justification. Although there is no evidence that Butler personally benefitted from any kick-backs and graft.

Some of Butler's other antics. . . antagonized the whole of the upper elites of the Louisiana society.

Lincoln removed Butler and replaced with another political general, General Nathaniel P. Banks.

This policy of political intergration into the Union under military governors was not a successful approach to the complex problems of Reconstruction. By 1864 Lincoln had reached for another plan.

This was the 10 Per Cent Plan:

Consisted of an oath to the Constitution and a general amnesty to all those who would take an oath of allegiance to the Constitution. As soon as 10% of the electorate that voted in the last national election (1860) had taken the oath the state was allowed to draft a new constitution and reenter the Union. . .

Those not qualified. . . .But a special Presidential pardon could restore them to political rights. . . .Lincoln gave every intention of using this pardoning power very liberally, at least at the start, . . .Or while the war was on . . .

Of course what Lincoln was interested in was finding a wartime reconstruction program that would get those former Confederate states back into the Union as soon as possible. . . .To get them reintegrated and politically restored in preparation for the 1864 election.

Reaction to the Ten Per Cent Plan:

The Democratic party accused Lincoln of playing politics. Looking ahead to the 1864 election. With only 10% of the 1860 electorate needed to control these states (Louisiana, Florida, Arkansas, etc) it would require only a minimum of votes to control these states and get them to return for the Union or the Lincoln Party in 1864.

Furthermore, if only 10% of the electorate was needed, the Democrats argued, then military rule would never end in the South. For this thin margin of 10% would guarantee these states to the Republicans there would be no reason to expand the electoral base of the state. . . . These 10% governments came to be called "Lincoln's Rotten Boroughs"

The point about the 10% plan was that it could not work when the war was over. There was no way that 10% support could hold a state after the war was over and the veterans returned home. . . . It was an emergency measure Lincoln was experimenting with largely, it appears, to assure his re-election in 1864

In any case Lincoln's 10% plan did not work.

The Congress refused to seat the Representatives from Arkansas. Largely because of Congressional resistance to the program because that body was not called in by Lincoln for advice and consent.

The 10% plan failed in Florida because Lincoln could not even get 10% to take the oath.

In Louisiana, Lincoln got the 10% with the help of Banks. . . . But once again Congress refused to seat the representatives from this state.

Louisiana was an interesting test case for the Ten Per Cent Plan for another reason. General Banks was able to mobilize the voters and turned out over 110,000, this was well over the 10% heeded. But the election revealed that the Conservative Unionists in the state were very strong. This Conservative Unionist bloc was a very weak reed as far as Union sympathies were concerned. It promised that Banks' faction in the state would control only temporarily and could easily be swept aside by the inevitable growth of conservative strength when the Rebel veterans returned from the war.

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Banks and his choice for Governor, Hahn, decided to make an appeal to the strong Conservative forces, ~~hoping~~ hoping to win them into the ranks of the Union party by making concessions. This was illustrated in the new state Constitution that was drafted after the election. The Constitution took a strong stand on the Negro. A stand that all but nullified the emancipation proclamation and its impenation in changing racial policy in Louisiana. This was the price that the Banks-Hahn bloc was willing to pay to attract the state's conservatives. . .

The Constitution opposed suffrage extension to any freedmen. It even opposed funds for educating black children, etc. . .

The Louisiana situation precipitated the Congress in bringing forward the Wade-Davis Bill in July 1864 . . .

From the defeat of the Lousisian Plan to his death in April Lincoln was working on another Reconstruction program. (See his April 11, 1865 speech). . . He told the nation to expect a statement about Reconstruction at any time.

Had Lincoln Lived?

We can only speculate on how Lincoln would have fared in dealing with the knotty problem of Reconstruction. But the best informed guesses would be that he would have avoided the problems with Congress that Andrew Johnson experienced.

Must remember that Lincoln was a supreme politico in the best tradition of the term politics--the accomplishment of the possible. The he was a totally loyal party man. After all where would he have been without the Republican party. He was a political "insider." He was determined to remain in control of the party when the war was over. And he was enough of a political realist to know that this might ~~mean~~ mean compromising. . . He had demonstrated that he was flexible. . . .

He had also demonstrated throughout the war that he could work with the Radicals in his party.

He had their support in the enunciation of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Radicals supported Lincoln in the recognition of West Virginia.

Lincoln went ultimately with the Radicals' suggestion that the EM be incorporated into the Constitution permanently by the amendment process.

Lincoln boosted a Radical, Salmon Chase, to fill the vacancy on the S. Court after the death of Taney. . . .

When the matter of party unity was on the line Lincoln had time and again demonstrated that he was with the party. He used the patronage to support party Radicals to get them re-elected in 1864. . . .

It is not hard to believe that Lincoln would have gone along with the party after the war in extending civil liberties and civil rights to blacks in the South.

He might even have gone as far as supporting some form of extension of the suffrage to some blacks.