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Win or go home?: Michigan soldiers view of the 1864 presidential election

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Win or go home?: Michigan soldiers view of the 1864 presidential election

Abstract

Abraham Lincoln is one of the most revered Presidents in the history of the United States. Lincoln is remembered for ending slavery, ending the Civil War, and reconstructing the country after the atrocities of the Civil War. Despite his accomplishments, Lincoln was not the heroic icon during the Civil War he is today. Coming into the 1864 Presidential election, Lincoln's reelection chances were dim due to the prolonged duration of the war and his views on emancipating the slaves. Further, public opinion in the Union was strictly divided into two views of the war: those who wanted peace and those who wanted to win the war and save the Union. However, in some circumstances the views of the public do not resonate with the views of soldiers. Did the soldiers want peace? Or did they want to bring victory to the Union? For the first time in Presidential politics, the soldiers had the opportunity to answer this question by casting ballots.¹ The soldier vote in the 1864 election was sure to affect the race, and answer the questions posed above. The aim of this thesis is to focus on Michigan soldiers' view of the 1864 Presidential election by looking at their views of Lincoln and his competitor, General George Britton McClellan, from New Jersey.

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MICHIGAN SOLDIERS VIEW OF THE 1864 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

By

Jonathan Tropf

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Contents

Introduction.....	3
Views of the President.....	7
Views of the General.....	14
The Soldiers' Choice.....	19
Conclusion.....	25
Bibliography.....	28

Introduction

Abraham Lincoln is one of the most revered Presidents in the history of the United States. Lincoln is remembered for ending slavery, ending the Civil War, and reconstructing the country after the atrocities of the Civil War. Despite his accomplishments, Lincoln was not the heroic icon during the Civil War he is today. Coming into the 1864 Presidential election, Lincoln's reelection chances were dim due to the prolonged duration of the war and his views on emancipating the slaves. Further, public opinion in the Union was strictly divided into two views of the war: those who wanted peace and those who wanted to win the war and save the Union. However, in some circumstances the views of the public do not resonate with the views of soldiers. Did the soldiers want peace? Or did they want to bring victory to the Union? For the first time in Presidential politics, the soldiers had the opportunity to answer this question by casting ballots.¹ The soldier vote in the 1864 election was sure to affect the race, and answer the questions posed above. The aim of this thesis is to focus on Michigan soldiers' view of the 1864 Presidential election by looking at their views of Lincoln and his competitor, General George Britton McClellan, from New Jersey.

As mentioned above, Lincoln's re-election was far from certain, and the President himself was quite skeptical of his re-election chances. In August, the President prepared a memorandum which stated, "It seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected."² There are two main reasons why Lincoln, and many others,

¹ John C. Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln: The Battle for the 1864 Presidency* (New York City: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1997), 339.

² Michael Vorenberg, *Final Freedom: The Civil War, the Abolition of Slavery, and the Thirteenth Amendment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 152.

thought re-election was unlikely. The first of these was the war was in its fourth year and most people did not see victory in the foreseeable future. Failures to capitalize at Bull Run and Antietam, coupled with disastrous defeats, like Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, were still fresh in the minds of citizens in the north. Further, even after successes in 1863 at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, the Confederacy regrouped under their commander Robert E. Lee.³ For all these reasons, some Northerners considered the war not worth fighting any longer, and viewed suing for peace a better option. Secondly, President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was controversial, not only among the pro-slavery Democrats, but also members of his own Republican party.⁴ The Emancipation Proclamation aimed to answer the slavery question, something most people did not want to answer, or did not like the way it was being answered.

Despite all the uncertainty in the Republican Party surrounding Lincoln, he decided to pursue re-election. However, Lincoln used a clever trick to attract voters from outside the Republican Party. Lincoln chose a pro-war Democratic Senator from Tennessee, Andrew Johnson, as his Vice President. While Lincoln still ran as a Republican at heart, by choosing Johnson as his running, Lincoln hoped to attract the pro-war Democratic bloc. But, Lincoln knew Democrats did not want to vote for a Republican, so instead campaigning as a member of the Republican Party, he ran as a member of the brand new National Union Party.⁵ In essence Lincoln created a psychological ploy to attract Democratic voters. Lincoln was a Republican, but by changing the title of his party, Democrats felt more comfortable supporting him. The

³ Waugh, 4.

⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁵ Ibid., 21.

National Union's party platform focused on achieving victory in the war, with the abolition of slavery a must.

Opposing Lincoln and the National Union party was George McClellan and the Democratic Party. Ironically, McClellan served Lincoln as the commander of Union forces during part of the 1861 and 1862 campaigns. After his failure to capitalize at Antietam, Lincoln replaced him. Lincoln told McClellan to return to Washington and await assignment; the assignment never came, and McClellan never saw action in the Civil war again. Despite his many failures on the battlefield, McClellan was enormously popular among the soldiers during his tenure as commander. McClellan brought stability, training, and discipline to an untrained citizen army, and morale reached new highs under him. According to Frank Williams, the stability brought about by McClellan, "was how he [McClellan] won the soldiers' confidence and became affectionately known as 'Little Mac.'"⁶ Democrats and McClellan figured the soldier vote would go their way, and possibly decide the election.

While the Democrats selected a candidate, they had to decide on a platform to counter the National Union Party's. There was considerable disunity among Democrats concerning what type of platform the party should adopt. While they all shared dislike for the Emancipation Proclamation, they disagreed on whether to continue the war or sue for peace. McClellan himself was pro-war, meaning he favored continuing the war to save the Union. However, he disagreed with the idea of fighting a war of abolition (a war fought solely on the purpose of freeing the slaves) as many Republicans wanted. Other Democrats, known as Copperheads, were anti-war, and favored ending the war immediately and suing for peace with the Confederacy. Ideally suing for peace meant

⁶ Frank J. Williams, "Voting for Uncle Abe." *Civil War Times* 45 (2006): 36.

allowing the Southern states to rejoin the Union, while letting them keep the institution of slavery.⁷ By selecting George H. Pendleton, a copperhead from Ohio, the Democrats made a strong statement of peace, and adopted a peace platform, despite reservations from McClellan. With their platform established, the Democrats needed to unite the party, and gather some soldier support in order to achieve victory.

With the candidates chosen and the platforms decided, the campaigning began. While the citizenry was certainly important, the other important factor was the soldiers in the field. With so many soldiers in the field, most states finally decided (for the first time ever) to allow them to vote away from home. By the time of the election, eighteen states allowed for absentee voting, five allowed for soldiers to return home districts and vote, and two states still refused for soldiers to vote. Unfortunately, one of the two states refusing the soldier vote was Michigan, but soldiers still found ways around this rule by taking legitimate or illegitimate furloughs to return home and vote.⁸ The soldier vote represented “the largest voting bloc in the canvass,” according to John C. Waugh in his work *Reelecting Lincoln: The Battle for the 1864 Presidency*.⁹ Certainly, both candidates needed to court the soldiers if they wanted to win the election.

⁷ Vorenberg, 154.

⁸ Waugh, 339-340

⁹ *Ibid.*, 339.

Views of the President

Abraham Lincoln knew the importance of having soldier support if he was to not only win re-election, but also, make the policy decisions necessary to win the war and free the slaves. Lincoln himself wrote in August 1864, "I would rather be defeated with the soldier vote behind me than to be elected without it."¹⁰ Statements like these really tell the story of how much Lincoln wanted the support of the soldiers. He did know, however, this was easier said than done, as some soldiers disagreed with Lincoln militarily, politically, or both.

As a commander-in-chief, there is nothing more important than success on the battlefield. Early in the war, things did not go as swimmingly as Lincoln wanted. Many historians argue the Confederacy won the first two years of the war, and thus, Lincoln's position as leader of the Union's military effort was scrutinized. Perhaps, the most famous of all Michigan soldiers to fight during the Civil War was Major General George Armstrong Custer. While Custer generally respected Lincoln, he thought the president trusted the wrong advisors early in the war when he needed to trust the plans of those in command. In his unfinished memoirs, Custer mentioned how Lincoln and his advisors "interfered" with the plans of General McClellan, and needed the blame for the early losses of 1861 and 1862.¹¹ This sentiment resided among other Michigan soldiers throughout the war. Private Edward Henry Courtney Taylor of Company A of the 4th Michigan Infantry is an example. In a letter to his family in August 1861, he calls the

¹⁰ Abraham Lincoln's own words found in the work by Ida M. Tarbell, *A Reporter for Lincoln: Story of Henry E. Wing, Soldier and Newspaperman*, 70-71, taken from Waugh, 343.

¹¹ George A. Custer, *Custer in the Civil War: His Unfinished Memoirs*, comp. and ed. by John M. Carroll (New York: Presidio Press, 1977), 120-121.

present administration “very weak” and wants “to tie up with red tape every movement of the Army.”¹² Further, as the war prolonged in duration, soldiers grew tired of army life, and lost faith in Lincoln’s ability to achieve victory. In a letter written to the editor of the *Detroit Free Press* on September 16, 1864, an unnamed soldier serving in Virginia states “there is no cheering, no torchlight processions” and no longer general enthusiasm in camp life. The soldier goes on to say “There was never a man so despised as Abraham Lincoln by the great mass of this army to day.”¹³ To be fair, President Lincoln’s task was no easy one, but failure on the battlefield took its toll on the president’s image for much of his tenure in office.

While performance on the battlefield took a toll on Lincoln, most of his criticism stemmed from political decisions made during his time in office. In September 1862, President Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation, which freed the slaves in rebel controlled territory. The bill went into effect in January 1863, and was controversial among citizens and soldiers. Despite the presence of abolitionists in Michigan, a vast number of soldiers disagreed with the president’s heroic bill. One of the soldiers’ concern with the bill was it made the Civil War a war against slavery, when in fact most soldiers felt they fought to preserve the Union, not free the slaves. Hiram F. Covey of the 13th Michigan Infantry said in August of 1862, “...the war was not got up to putt down slavery, but to preserve the Union...”¹⁴ Similarly, his cousin Israel P. Covey said, “We

¹² Edward Henry Courtney Taylor to Mother, Brothers and Sisters, August 2, 1861, Edward Henry Courtney Taylor correspondence, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

¹³ “A Voice From the Army: Enthusiasm in the Army for General McClellan,” *Detroit Free Press*, September, 1864, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed, September 30, 2011).

¹⁴ Hiram F. Covey to Rosanah and all, August 1, 1862, Rosanah Covey Hulbert papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

come to fight for our country and to save the union.”¹⁵ By enacting legislation to free the slaves Lincoln made the idea of fighting to save the Union secondary, and freeing the slaves the top priority of the war.

As the war dragged on, Lincoln took a stronger and stronger position of winning the war and eliminating slavery by all means necessary. By the time 1864 came around, Lincoln’s initiatives were clear, and soldiers reacted to his plans. John Slover, a member of Company B in the 17th Michigan Infantry criticized the president for his policies. Writing to his cousin he says, “The soldiers are losing all confidence in the administration yes indeed there must be a change in the programs.” In the same letter he criticizes Lincoln for placing “the nigger on a level with the white man” and concludes with “I hope he [Lincoln] never will stay in the chair long enough to carry out his designs (I am for a change).”¹⁶ It’s important to note Slover say “soldiers” and not soldier, implying he was not alone in his feelings toward the President. Lincoln’s agenda for winning the war was too radical for some, including soldiers like Slover.

Lastly, some of Lincoln’s policies, such as forced conscription, violations of habeas corpus, and false imprisonments gave the president the title of tyrant or dictator.¹⁷ While not a direct voice from the army, the *Detroit Free Press* wrote an article in 1864 calling Lincoln’s presidency a “military despotism.” The article also refers to Lincoln and Vice-President Johnson “trampling” on the “liberties and rights” of individuals.¹⁸ It needs stating the *Detroit Free Press* at the time was a very Democratic leaning

¹⁵ Israel P. Covey to Rosanna, Rosanna Covey Hulbert papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

¹⁶ John Slover to Rosanna Covey Hulbert, August 17, 1864, Rosanna Covey Hulber Papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

¹⁷ Waugh, 13.

¹⁸ “Lincoln and Despotism-McClellan and Liberty,” *Detroit Free Press*, October 19, 1864, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed September 30, 2011).

newspaper, and was not favorable of the President. However, the sentiment shared in the article was felt in the field as well. Private Taylor, as early as 1861, stated he was “anything not Republican” because they were “the first cause of trouble.”¹⁹ This does not directly call Lincoln a tyrant but does show the contempt for the ideas Lincoln and Republicans passed around at the time. Most historians agree Lincoln redefined traditional Presidential power during wartime, but do not consider him a tyrant. Due to the extraneous stress of the war President Lincoln expanded his power in order to preserve the Union, not to trample on individuals’ rights. Many Presidents since Lincoln built on his leadership and expanded power during stressful warlike situations like the one Lincoln faced.

The reason in pointing out the negative views felt by the soldiers is to counter the popular held belief that Lincoln was a hero in the White House. Lincoln achieved this title well after his presidency, and many during his time, as seen above, were not fond of him. However, Lincoln did garner the titles honest, heroic for a reason. President Lincoln still had support going into the 1864 election, and plenty of soldiers were there to speak up for their commander in chief. In addition, he was the incumbent, and throughout American history, incumbents have a good record of being reelected.

Whether it was simply great respect, or full out love, many Michigan soldiers held very positive views of the President. General Custer, while criticizing Lincoln as commander-in-chief, still had an overall positive view of the President. If the letters between himself and his wife are any indication, Custer respected Lincoln during and after the war. Even as late as 1873- eight years after Lincoln’s death- he had nice things

¹⁹ Edward Henry Courtney Taylor to Lottie, January 10, 1861 Edward Henry Courtney correspondence, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

to say about the president. Writing to his wife Elizabeth from Ft. Abraham Lincoln in the Dakota Territory on September 28, 1873 Custer used a phrase uttered by President Lincoln, "With malice toward none; with charity toward all." Custer explained he hoped to live out this saying to its full potential.²⁰ Custer was not alone in his respect toward the President, as many are seen through the titles given Lincoln by Michigan soldiers. Some, including Private Spencer D. Lee of the 1st Michigan Cavalry, addressed their leader as "Father Abraham."²¹ Other soldiers like John Rising Morey of the 5th Michigan Cavalry addressed Lincoln as "Honest Abe" or "Old Abe."²² These examples show the respect and admiration Michigan soldiers had for Lincoln. However, Lincoln needed more than just respect in the coming election; he also needed the support of soldiers.

While respect is definitely important, Lincoln realized he needed the support of the soldiers to really win their hearts and their vote. Obviously, some soldiers supported Lincoln simply because he was a Republican, or because he wanted to free the slaves. But the average soldier was not this aware of the political landscape at the time. For these soldiers Lincoln had to display his charm and prove he genuinely cared about them. Despite the stresses of the war, Lincoln found ways to visit the soldiers at camp, to encourage and support them. Nathan Hulbert describes one of Lincolns' visits in July 1862. In the letter to his wife, Rosanna, he wrote, "President Lincoln was here to see us on the 9 there was great cannonadeing and cheering when he rode along the lines."²³

²⁰ George A. Custer and Elizabeth Custer, *The Custer Story: The Life and Intimate Letters of General George A. Custer and His Wife Elizabeth*, ed. Marguerite Merington (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1950), 267.

²¹ Spencer D. Lee to Father, Sept. 2, 1863, Rowe Family papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

²² John Rising Morey to Cousin Willie, Sept. 12, 1864, John Rising Morey papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

²³ Nathan Hulbert to Rosanna Covey Hulbert, July 11, 1862, Rosanna Covey Hulbert papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

This is a great example showing the positive impact a visit from “Old Abe” was, even when the war was not going well. Further, these visits helped Lincoln show he did actually care about the soldiers’ well-being. Frank Williams notes this as a common thought throughout the entire army, even if the President made mistakes in appointing generals.²⁴ By taking time to visit soldiers on the battlefield, Lincoln earned the adoration of many, and figured to be crucial come election time in November.

As noted earlier, there were some in the ranks who disapproved of the way Lincoln handled the war but still others actually approved of Lincoln in this manner, and wanted to achieve victory. As mentioned earlier, Lincoln was not up for peace talks, it was win or lose. Despite some criticism Lincoln remained strong in convictions, and made this a core part of his campaign. This was a bold move by the President because as the death toll rose, soldiers faced the question of whether the war worth fighting anymore. John Rising Morey is one of the soldiers who answered this question. In September of 1864, he wrote how he hoped Lincoln continued running the country, “as he has for the last four years.”²⁵ This statement shows Morey believed Lincoln was right for his view on the war and slavery. George Blashfield, of the 6th Michigan Infantry, gives more evidence of soldiers supporting Lincoln’s war, by stating the war, and Lincoln’s handling of it was not “a failure.”²⁶ The words of Private Morey and Sergeant Blashfield show how some Michigan soldiers supported Lincoln’s bold initiative in the war, and this was good news for the President.

²⁴ Williams, 36.

²⁵ John Rising Morey to Cousin Willie, Sept. 12, 1864, John Rising Morey papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

²⁶ George Blashfield to Henry M. Enos, Nov. 26, 1864, Henry M. Enos papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Like most presidents throughout history President Lincoln saw his fair share of criticism and praise. Interestingly, most history books leave out the serious problems Lincoln faced on his way to reelection. Many of the problems funneled all the way down to the lowest ranks of the army. The overall poor performance of commanders led to losses on the battlefield, and thus, cost Lincoln serious credibility as commander-in-chief. Further, Lincoln's political decisions proved, at least, controversial and perhaps even damaging. He also faced criticism from soldiers because of his policies, particularly those which exceeded the traditional power of the President. All this being said Lincoln did have great support among the men fighting for the Union's cause. Many simply respected him because he was a great man. Others viewed his visits to the battlefield as an example of a genuine man, and thus, loved him. Finally, some simply thought winning the war was essential, and knew Lincoln was the man to get this accomplished.

Views of the General

George Brinton McClellan is one of the most criticized figures who served in the Civil War. Notoriously remembered for his battlefield failures, McClellan was given the name “Virginia Creeper,” poking fun at his deliberately slow movements with his troops. Time and time again, McClellan trapped the Confederate Army in vulnerable positions, and every time he failed to deliver a decisive victory for the Union. McClellan blamed his battlefield failures on Lincoln, because he thought the President did not give him enough troops to deliver a knockout blow to the Confederacy. Lincoln did not agree, and neither did his advisors, and ultimately decided to relinquish command from McClellan after the Battle of Antietam, in November 1862. Despite these failures, McClellan did have some positive moments as a commander. His highest praises come from his organizational skills and restoring morale in the army. McClellan brought order and stability to an unorganized and motley army.²⁷ Due to his ability to restore morale in the army, McClellan was popular among the enlisted men in the army. As mentioned earlier, Frank Williams links McClellan’s popularity with his ability to improve morale in the army, and it’s for these reasons the soldiers called him “Little Mac.”²⁸ McClellan hoped the soldiers remembered this during election time in November, as he figured winning the soldier vote meant winning the election.

McClellan’s support came from soldiers who served for him during the years 1861 and 1862. The research suggests most Michigan soldiers adored their commander, and had the upmost faith in victory with him in command. Waugh calls him, “one of the

²⁷ Waugh, 24.

²⁸ Williams, 36.

most popular generals with the soldiers who had ever put on a uniform.”²⁹ Private Taylor wrote home in August 1861 expressing his feelings toward the General. He wrote, “McClellan can and will do much,” and, “I think McClellan will be the salvation of the nation in this crisis.” In the same letter, Taylor praised McClellan’s attributes and wrote he was “young and brave.”³⁰ In a different letter, Taylor spoke for his entire unit (Company A, 4th Michigan Infantry) stating, “We are confident of success with McClellan at our head.” Additionally, Taylor repeatedly blamed McClellan’s failures on abolitionists and President Lincoln.³¹ Taylor is a great representation of how many soldiers, and the general public, felt about McClellan as a commander. He was a hero to many in the North, and most Michigan soldiers agreed.

While most of the enlisted men in Michigan thought very highly of McClellan, it was the officers who really adorned “Little Mac.” Williams notes the higher up in rank, the more support there was for McClellan, and the more criticism there was for Lincoln. There is not a better example to look at than Michigan’s own, George Armstrong Custer. It is an understatement to say Custer loved McClellan; he absolutely adored the man. As a Captain in 1862 he wrote to his parents:

I have more confidence in General McClellan than any other living man. I would forsake everything and follow him to the ends of the earth. I would lay down my life for him. He is here now. Every officer and private worships him. I would fight anyone who would say a word against him.³²

²⁹ Waugh, 340.

³⁰ Edward Henry Courtney Taylor to Mother, Brothers and Sisters, August 2, 1861, Edward Henry Courtney Taylor correspondence, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

³¹ Edward Henry Courtney Taylor to Family, May 28, 1862, Edward Henry Courtney Taylor correspondence, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

³² George A. Custer and Elizabeth Custer, 27-28.

Custer's words describe the feelings of many who served under McClellan, and how much faith they had in him. In another letter written to his sister, Custer stated, "General McClellan is here to lead us, so we are certain of victory."³³ Also, Custer did not give up on McClellan even after McClellan was relieved of command. In May of 1863 Custer wrote to a friend, "I am gratified you are still in favor of our beloved General McClellan who, when all other tried, will be found our only hope."³⁴ Custer makes known he, and many other men, trusted McClellan over other commanders, even though McClellan had not led the army in over six months. Custer's opinions agree with the assertion Williams makes about officers adorning McClellan. It is hard to deny McClellan was popular as the commanding officer in the Union and needed this popularity to translate into votes come November 1864.

After McClellan's removal as commander of the Army of the Potomac, he stayed out of the public eye for most of 1863. However, he did leave his home in Trenton, New Jersey, and moved to New York City. This move gave McClellan a better insight into the world of politics, and many in the Democratic Party considered him a viable candidate to challenge Lincoln in the upcoming election.³⁵ Many within the Democratic Party considered him such a solid candidate because he favored the Union military crushing the rebellion, but did not favor the infringement on personal property (particularly slaves). Further, by choosing Copperhead George Pendleton as his running mate, prominent Democrats figured they had a ticket which fit the views of all Democrats, and even some Republicans.³⁶ Now that all things were put in place George McClellan was a political

³³ Ibid., 27.

³⁴ Ibid., 52.

³⁵ Waugh, 25

³⁶ Waugh, 291-292.

man, and no longer the beloved soldier he was previously. Soldiers loved McClellan as their commander, but now they had to decide if they wanted him as commander-in-chief.

Research suggests Michigan soldiers at first had mixed feelings about McClellan as a President, but by the time of the election, most soldiers thought of McClellan more as a traitor than a hero. This example of mixed feelings is clearly seen in a letter written by Elizabeth Custer, the loyal wife of George Custer. In September of 1864, she wrote, "There is great excitement over the political campaign," and, "The soldiers make demonstrations as they pass, some cheering for McClellan... and the reverse."³⁷ Also, in September of 1864, two soldiers gave account to their feelings about McClellan; the views are intensely different. The *Detroit Free Press* included a letter from a soldier discussing his and other soldiers' support for McClellan. He wrote, "There was never a name, the mention of which caused such a feeling of enthusiasm in the heart of any man as does that of Geo. B. McClellan when uttered to the grand loyal army of the Potomac."³⁸ Able to counter this view was the one of Israel Covey (Covey served in the 44th Illinois Infantry, but lived most of his life in Michigan) when he wrote soldiers "dont think he [McClellan] is enny better than a Rebel in arms."³⁹ These two disparaging views of McClellan are indicative of the opinions of many Michigan soldiers in September and October of 1864. However, Covey's remarks are more accurate to the opinions of soldiers during election time in November. Private Lee stated on November 14, 1864, those who vote for McClellan are "traitors." This is a perfect illustration to the shifting views of Michigan soldiers toward McClellan. As a soldier he was loved, as a politician

³⁷ George A. Custer and Elizabeth Custer, 118.

³⁸ "A Voice From the Army: Enthusiasm in the Army for General McClellan," *Detroit Free Press*, September, 1864, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed, September 30, 2011).

³⁹ Israel P. Covey to Rosanna Covey, September 23, 1864, Rosanna Covey Hulbert papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

he was not. McClellan could not afford negative views from soldiers heading into the election; not winning the soldier vote meant not winning the general election.

George McClellan's popularity as a general dissipated after he decided to run for President. John C. Waugh points out McClellan "expected to win the soldier vote," with prominent Democrats projecting two-thirds of soldiers voting for "Little Mac."⁴⁰ This perhaps was an accurate assumption early in McClellan's candidacy, but as shown above, McClellan's popularity decreased drastically in the final months before the election. The obvious question remains: why did soldiers' views change so drastically in just a short span? There are a number of possible answers to this question, but no single definitive answer. It's apparent the soldiers gradually began thinking McClellan was a traitor. Perhaps this was due to the fact McClellan had a Copperhead as his Vice-President, or he was running as a "peace" candidate. At first, McClellan rejected the peace platform pushed upon him by many prominent Democrats, but ultimately, for the sake of the party, he adopted the peace platform. Soldiers who did not want peace were not happy with the General's decision. Another possible answer is the well documented visits made to camp by President Lincoln which contrasted to very few documented visits by McClellan. Frank Williams notes McClellan only made two public appearances in the entire campaign, and mentions nothing of visiting the soldiers in the field.⁴¹ Finally, another possible answer is the simple notion McClellan ran against his former commander in chief, leaving a bad impression on the soldier's minds.

⁴⁰ Waugh, 340.

⁴¹ Williams, 37.

The Soldiers' Choice

In the final months building up to the November election, no one knew which candidate soldiers would choose as their next President. However, almost everyone, including the soldiers, knew the agendas of each candidate. A biased article in the *Detroit Free Press* titled, *Lincoln and Despotism- McClellan and Liberty* outlined the “agendas” of both Presidents. The article claimed the Lincoln/Johnson ticket offered “war, bankruptcy, and despotism,” while the McClellan/Pendleton ticket would “secure us peace, Union, and prosperity.”⁴² While this is not an objective article, the *Detroit Free Press* does capture the difference of the two campaigns; Lincoln and Johnson ran a pro-war, anti-slavery campaign, while McClellan and Pendleton ran a campaign focused on a peaceful reunion and no emancipation of the slaves.⁴³ Michigan soldier Spencer Lee predicted a similar situation in September 1863, before McClellan even accepted the Democratic nomination. In a letter to his father, Private Lee wrote, “under the present Administration they will not have peace.” Lee went on to say only “if ‘Old Abe’ was dead” or, if he lost the next Presidential election, was peace possible.⁴⁴ Private Lee was a Lincoln supporter, but understood many soldiers and citizens of the north simply wanted peace. Fellow comrade John Morey was also attuned to the political situation, calling McClellan and the Democrats “the peace party.”⁴⁵ Soldiers knew the coming election was about continuing the war or suing for peace.

⁴² “Lincoln and Despotism-McClellan and Liberty,” *Detroit Free Press*, October 19, 1864, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed September 30, 2011).

⁴³ Vorenberg, 174.

⁴⁴ Spencer D. Lee to Father, Sept. 2, 1863, Rowe Family papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁴⁵ John Rising Morey to Cousin Willie, Sept. 12, 1864, John Rising Morey papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Interestingly, President Lincoln expected himself to win the state of Michigan in the upcoming election.⁴⁶ According to a *Detroit Free Press* article, there were 226 electoral votes available in the election; meaning the majority needed to win was 114 (various other sources list 233 total electoral votes, with 117 needed to win). The article also showed Michigan having 8 electoral votes, up two from the 1860 Presidential Election.⁴⁷ With so few electoral votes in existence, the eight of Michigan were important to win. Further, newspapers, political leaders, and top advisors to both Lincoln and McClellan started casting projections of the election, and almost all agreed in a tight race. One Lincoln advisor projected a Lincoln reelection by a mere six electoral votes. Others in both camps saw a tight race with just a few electoral votes deciding the outcome.⁴⁸ The *Detroit Free Press* seemed to suggest a McClellan victory, and even boldly stated enthusiasm in Michigan grew as the election neared.⁴⁹ A close election seemed almost imminent. If projections were any indication, one state determined the outcome of the election. The soldier vote also seemed destined to impact the race. On November 8, 1864, soldiers and citizens casted their votes; many expected a tight race. As voters went to the polls, one question likely went through their mind, "Is this war worth winning, or is it better to go home and restore peace?" Those choosing victory likely voted Lincoln, those wanting peace likely voted McClellan.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to know exactly how Michigan soldiers voted in the election. Michigan was one of just two states which had no law permitting soldiers to

⁴⁶ Waugh, 339.

⁴⁷ "The Approaching General Election," *Detroit Free Press*, October 6, 1864, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed, September 30, 2011).

⁴⁸ Waugh, 339.

⁴⁹ "The Approaching General Election," *Detroit Free Press*, October 6, 1864, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed, September 30, 2011).

vote, and thus, their only way to cast a ballot was to return home.⁵⁰ However, based on original correspondence, it is reasonable to conclude Michigan soldiers overwhelmingly voted for Lincoln. Certainly the words of John Morey show this when he wrote, "About every soldier I have had anything to do with say 'Abraham' gets their vote and it is a general feeling among the soldiers." Morey himself hoped "Honest Abe" won reelection, although it is impossible to know whether he actually casted a vote.⁵¹ John Bromley, who served in Company D of the 1st Michigan Cavalry, like Morey, said he hoped Lincoln won reelection, and men in the camp felt the same way.⁵² Perhaps the most interesting pieces of correspondence come from Spencer Lee. On October 18, 1864, he wrote to his sister, "We will elect our President without any trouble," and even notes the men are allowed to return home and vote.⁵³ However, on November 14, 1864, (almost a week after the election), he wrote home telling how the soldiers had an election by themselves in Alexandria, Virginia. The returns showed Lincoln won, but not as overwhelmingly as he thought. He noted how surprised he was by the support of "Little Mac," and called those who voted for him "traitors."⁵⁴ It appears from Lee's account the men did not return home, after thinking they would. Perhaps travel was the issue, or maybe field duty came about. Regardless, Lee's account is the most detailed about Michigan soldiers, and who they voted for as President.

⁵⁰ Waugh 340.

⁵¹ John Rising Morey to Cousin Willie, September 25, 1864, John Rising Morey papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁵² John Bromley to John Harvey Faxon, October 19, 1864, John Harvey Faxon papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁵³ Spencer D. Lee to Sister Sarah, October 18, 1864, Rowe Family papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁵⁴ Spencer D. Lee to Sister Sarah, November 14, 1864, Rowe Family papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

While many Michigan soldiers seemed eager or willing to vote, others, most notably George Custer, took a different approach to the election. By the time of the voting, Custer was a Major General for the Union Army. If the correspondence between he and his wife are any indication, Custer refused to vote in the 1864 Presidential election. However, Elizabeth favored a candidate; Abraham Lincoln. In a letter to George in the fall of 1864 she wrote, "I am for Abraham," but also stated she did not know her husband's opinion. In George's response to his wife he wrote how he wanted to see unity, "But my doctrine has ever been that a soldier should not meddle in politics."⁵⁵ Why is this response so interesting? First, Custer gives an excuse why he will not vote in the election. He was torn between his love for McClellan and his respect for his commander-in-chief. The best way to solve this problem is to not vote, and Custer did not. Second, Custer's response lets in a little of his disappointment with General McClellan. The last thing Custer wanted to see was his former General try to defeat his commander-in-chief. Obviously, General Custer served no impact on the election, but he does give insight into why some soldiers did not vote. The man they formerly "worshipped" was now opposing their great leader, thus, abstaining seemed the best option.

If the research is any indication, the majority of Michigan soldiers voted, or wanted to vote for Abraham Lincoln, which aligned with the views of soldiers in the entire Union Army. Again, there is no way to know the exact numbers of soldier voting, as only 13 of 25 eligible states counted the soldier vote separately. The numbers available, however, are staggering. The soldier vote Union wide overwhelmingly

⁵⁵ George A. Custer and Elizabeth Custer, 118-119.

supported Lincoln, as he received 121,152 votes to McClellan's 34,922.⁵⁶ These figures show Lincoln won almost 78 percent of the soldier vote, an almost unbelievable figure, considering the divergent viewpoints of soldiers in September and October. These numbers also indicate how soldiers felt about the war; they wanted to win, and they trusted 'Old Abe' as their leader. For McClellan, these numbers reflect either how poorly he ran his campaign, or how disappointed soldiers were at his decision to run as a peace candidate against his former boss. McClellan blamed Lincoln for his failures on the battlefield, but this failure was squarely on him.

Prior to the election, many thought the soldier vote was crucial to winning the general election. Although in reality, the soldier vote only served a minor impact in the general election due to Lincoln's lopsided victory. Lincoln and the National Union Party won 55 percent of the popular vote, but what is more astounding is Lincoln won the electoral vote in all but three states. In all, Lincoln won 212 electoral votes, while McClellan won only 21.⁵⁷ A *Detroit Free Press* article brought about an interesting statistic; Lincoln received one electoral vote for every 9,134 votes, while McClellan received one electoral vote for every 80,950 votes; almost a 10:1 ratio in favor of the incumbent.⁵⁸ McClellan failed to win many of the states which typically voted Democratic or any swing states, and in the end left with only three insignificant victories in New Jersey (his home state), Delaware, and Kentucky. The results devastated McClellan and the Democrats as they lost 91 percent of the electoral vote, and 78 percent of the soldier vote. However, John Waugh notes had a mere 80,000 votes changed sides

⁵⁶ Williams, 38.

⁵⁷ Vorenberg, 174.

⁵⁸ "The Popular Vote of the Recent Election Compared with Previous Elections," *Detroit Free Press*, December 1, 1864, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed September 30, 2011).

in crucial areas, a much closer election might have resulted.⁵⁹ New York, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut went Lincoln's way, but only by a small margin. Still, even if McClellan won these three states, his electoral counts boosts to only 86, while Lincoln's drops to 147; ultimately leading to no change in the final result.

In the end, Lincoln was right about his assumption of Michigan; he carried the state with a 55 percent majority. McClellan fared well with the voters of Detroit, but by and large, Lincoln had nothing to worry about in the state's outcome.⁶⁰ The news comforted soldiers and civilians throughout the state. Sergeant Blashfield wrote on November 26, "It seems to be the voice of the people that the present head of affairs Father Abraham shall hold his seat for four years longer, and I think they could not have made a better choice." Further, Blashfield said in electing Lincoln the country spared itself "disgrace" in electing a "miserable" president from the Chicago Platform.⁶¹ From a civilian standpoint, runaway slave Sojourner Truth of Battle Creek Michigan called Lincoln, "the best President who has ever taken the seat," and prayed for a Lincoln reelection.⁶² Sojourner got her wish, and undoubtedly the wish of many others in the great state of Michigan. People in Michigan and throughout the Union welcomed the news of Lincoln's reelection. With the lopsided victory, Lincoln assured himself the people staunchly supported his view of winning the war and ending slavery. With the election behind, it no longer served as a distraction to Lincoln or the soldiers. It was now time to focus on victory, and in less than six months, victory was achieved.

⁵⁹ Waugh, 354.

⁶⁰ Waugh, 353.

⁶¹ George Blashfield to Henry M. Enos, Nov. 26, 1864, Henry M. Enos papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁶² Sojourner Truth's own account found in the work by Francis A. Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House*, 201-203, taken from Waugh, 345.

Conclusion

After the election of 1864, things on the battlefield finally started turning the Union's way. In the Western Theater, General William Tecumseh Sherman began his "March to Sea" shortly after the conclusion of the election. Sherman led his men on a 90 mile wide path of destruction, destroying Confederate supplies but, more importantly, the Confederate will to fight. By late December, 1864, Sherman's March concluded, and all but ended the war in the West. Further, in the Eastern Theater, the besiegement of Petersburg finally started taking its toll on the Confederacy. Union General Ulysses S. Grant forced Confederate General Robert E. Lee to make the difficult decision of abandoning Petersburg, the Confederacy's last major industrial port. This virtually ended the War in the East. Lee did attempt one last effort to rejoin with the Western part of the Confederate army, but failed, and Lee surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse on April 9, 1865; the Civil War was essentially over.

This change of course in the military events of the war was directly affected by the reelection of Abraham Lincoln. A McClellan victory meant a completely different agenda. The most likely scenario was a peace treaty with the South, allowing the Southern states to keep slavery if they promised to rejoin the Union.⁶³ Essentially, this was the pre-war situation of the United States, and meant all the battles and bloodshed resulted in a huge waste of time. Fortunately, Lincoln won reelection and ended all the speculation of peace talks and keeping slavery. Lincoln's victory brought about increased confidence in the Union Armies, and shattered the hope of the South. The South knew a McClellan victory was their best opportunity at peace, and a Lincoln

⁶³ Vorenberg, 154.

victory meant more war. When the election was decided and the Southern soldiers knew the results, they realized all hope at peace was lost.

To say the election of 1864 was important for the Civil War is an understatement; it was the defining moment of the war, as well as a defining moment in United States History. This election posed a very serious question to soldiers and voters; did they want to keep fighting and win the war, or did they want to go home and sue for peace? In the study of Michigan soldiers, one gets a good look into the entire nation's response to this question. In the early stages of 1864, it seemed the answer to this question was, "go home." Lincoln was not popular for various political reasons, and the mounting casualties on the battlefield had many wondering if the war was worth fighting. Democrats knew Lincoln's vulnerabilities and thus, wanted to exploit them using a popular man among the soldiers; George McClellan. Had McClellan translated his battlefield popularity into political popularity, victory was certain. However, not all soldiers trusted McClellan's motives due to his ties with the Copperheads. Further, things on the battlefield looked a little brighter, and some started questioning why McClellan ran against his former boss. By mid to late October, the dynamic of the election shifted. In August and September, McClellan was the favorite, but by October the race was dead even. Again in November, the race shifted; this time in Lincoln's favor. Lincoln succeeded in changing the public perception about him, and McClellan failed to utilize his popularity. The result ended in a changed perception of the war in general. The answer to the question was no longer, "go home," but rather, "win!" This change in tone gave enormous confidence to Lincoln, his commanders, and the men on

the field. The soldiers believed in Lincoln, in the war, and in themselves, and ultimately brought home victory.

While it is impossible to know exactly how Michigan soldiers voted in the 1864 Presidential election, it is not impossible to see how they viewed each candidate, and who they wanted to win. The soldiers thought of McClellan as a hero. General Custer even claimed men “worshipped” him.⁶⁴ Concerning Lincoln, the soldiers generally respected him, but had differing opinions on him as President. Some considered him a tyrant, while others considered him “Father” or the “Great Emancipator.” Soldiers like John Slover said they were “for a change.”⁶⁵ While others like John Morey hope Lincoln ran the country like “as he has for the last four years.”⁶⁶ Ultimately, soldiers decided Lincoln was best suited to run the country when they casted ballots in November. As mentioned earlier, 78 percent of the soldier vote went Lincoln’s way, and from the letters of soldiers in Michigan, it was likely similar there. It was the first election soldiers voted, and it came just in time for one of the most crucial elections in American History. Moving forward, the soldier vote proved crucial to any wartime president, as it did to Lincoln. As Lincoln himself said, “I would rather be defeated with the soldier vote behind me than to be elected without it.”⁶⁷ Fortunately, Lincoln won both the soldier vote and the popular vote in convincing fashion.

⁶⁴ George A. Custer and Elizabeth Custer, 27-28.

⁶⁵ John Slover to Rosanna Covey Hulbert, August 17, 1864, Rosanna Covey Hulber Papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁶⁶ John Rising Morey to Cousin Willie, Sept. 12, 1864, John Rising Morey papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁶⁷ Abraham Lincoln’s own words found in the work by Ida M. Tarbell, *A Reporter for Lincoln: Story of Henry E. Wing, Soldier and Newspaperman*, 70-71, taken from Waugh, 343.

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