

The Military Provides Lincoln a Mandate

By Michael J. Forsyth

As the turmoil of the recent 2000 presidential election reached a crescendo, discussion among political pundits turned to absentee balloting and the military vote. Many commentators observed that for the first time votes from actively serving soldiers could have a significant impact on the outcome of the election, especially in Florida.¹ However, contrary to opinions in the press, the 2000 election was not the first instance in which soldier suffrage had an important impact on a presidential canvass. In 1864 soldiers and sailors throughout the Union armies and navies cast votes for President Abraham Lincoln, sealing the fate of the Confederacy. This election represented the first time in American history that active troops participated in a national election, but attaining that right for soldiers proved difficult.

As the year 1864 opened, prospects for Union victory appeared bright indeed. Federal armies in 1863 had scored a series of decisive victories in rapid succession. In July Federal forces defeated General Robert E. Lee at Gettysburg, captured Vicksburg, and reopened the Mississippi River; in November Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant drove the Confederates completely out of Tennessee in a smashing success at Chattanooga. The Confederacy found itself reeling on all fronts, and to the Northern public it appeared that 1864 would finally witness the end of this tragic war. Those hopes were soon dashed, however, when the offensives planned for the spring quickly bogged down in bloody stalemate.²

In March President Lincoln appointed Grant lieutenant general in the Regular Army, making him the General in Chief of all Union armies. Grant had been the most successful Union general, having strung together an impressive series of victories that included Fort Donelson, Shiloh, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga. Lincoln had long searched for the man who “understood the math” and would put the rebellion to rest. Grant appeared to be the right leader to finish it in 1864.³

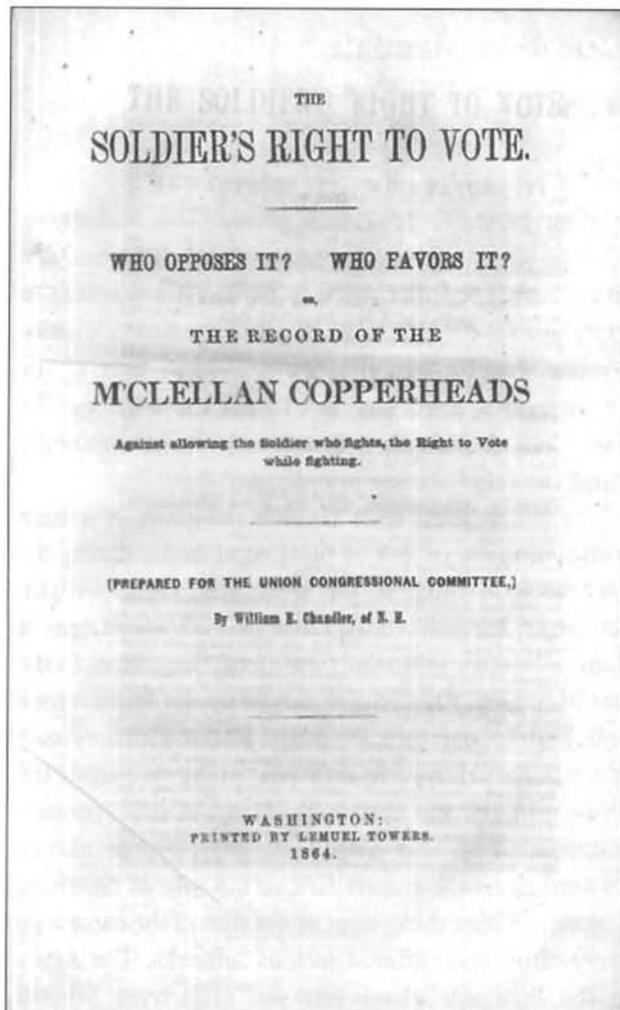
Grant arrived in Washington with a simple yet brilliant plan to crush the Confederacy. Grant believed that the South had survived militarily for three years because it could always use interior lines to move

reinforcements to threatened points. This had staved off disaster on various occasions throughout the war. Grant concluded that the way to win the war was to apply unrelenting pressure on all of the South’s major armies simultaneously. He reasoned that if the Confederates were unable to shift their forces, the sheer weight of Federal manpower would eventually cause the rebel armies to collapse.⁴

In accordance with Grant’s program, Northern armies took the offensive on several fronts during the first week of May. In the west Maj. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman with three armies advanced against General Joseph Johnston’s Army of Tennessee. In the east Maj. Gen. Franz Sigel moved up the Shenandoah Valley while Maj. Gen. Benjamin Butler with his Army of the James moved to outflank Richmond from the south. Finally, the hard-luck Army of the Potomac commanded by Maj. Gen. George G. Meade moved forward to attack Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia. Within thirty days of the start of the campaign every effort had suffered serious setbacks. The Army of the Potomac alone had suffered over 50,000 casualties and endured a series of tactical defeats in the Rapidan wilderness, at Spotsylvania, and at Cold Harbor.

News of the stalemate caused Northern optimism to plummet. With the armies stalled, it seemed to folks on the homefront that the South was as formidable a foe as ever. Further, peace-oriented Democrats began to use each reverse as evidence that Lincoln’s war policy had failed. If the Lincoln administration could not win the war by November, it would have to stand for reelection in the midst of a civil war, a politically unpalatable scenario. The Republicans and Democrats both understood that failure on the battlefield could translate into a loss for Lincoln at the polls in November.⁵

Lincoln’s Democratic opponent in the election was Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan, the popular former commander of the Army of the Potomac. Early in the war Lincoln and McClellan had locked horns on numerous occasions over how best to prosecute the war. Despite McClellan’s acknowledged abilities in



*Title Page of an Election Pamphlet
Denouncing Democratic Party Opposition
to Voting by Union Soldiers in the Field*

training an army, he demonstrated marked shortcomings in using troops in combat. McClellan's refusal to employ the army in accordance with Lincoln's wishes irritated the president deeply. The general's lack of aggressiveness following Antietam was the last straw for Lincoln. He relieved McClellan in November 1862, causing a near-mutiny in the army. McClellan's popularity and political alignment made him the darling of the Democratic Party. Democrats believed that he represented their best chance to wrest control of the White House from the Republicans. His charisma and his high stature with the American public made him a formidable opponent to his former commander in chief.⁶

Republican members of Congress began in the late spring of 1864 to express concern both about Lincoln's chances for reelection and about his steadfastness in

the pursuit of Northern war aims. Many party leaders searched for alternative candidates and some even called for dumping Lincoln at the top of the ticket were he unwilling to yield voluntarily. Lincoln had few strong admirers within the Republican Party. The Radicals, abolitionists whose numbers included Senator Ben Wade of Ohio and Congressman Henry Winter Davis of Maryland, believed Lincoln too conciliatory to the South on the issues of slavery and reconstruction. They began to maneuver for a nominee who was more amenable to their views and likely to be more aggressive in implementing them as policy. However, the move to find a new candidate collapsed because the Radicals underestimated Lincoln's ability as a politician and the grass roots support Lincoln maintained in state GOP organizations. Nevertheless the Radicals' dissatisfaction with Lincoln remained evident during the campaign.⁷

The Radical Republicans, moreover, stymied Lincoln's hopes to gain electoral votes from Union-occupied areas of the South. When the 38th Congress had convened in December 1863, the president had proposed to recognize loyal Southern state governments elected by citizens in each state who would take an oath swearing loyalty to the Union and avowing support for all wartime acts of Congress and presidential proclamations regarding the future of slavery. Under Lincoln's plan reconstructed state governments could be recognized once 10 percent of their states' 1860 electorates had taken the oath of allegiance and elected new state officials under a new state constitution. Lincoln seems to have hoped that Tennessee, Louisiana, and Arkansas, at least, could be recognized in time for their electoral votes to be cast and counted in the 1864 elections.⁸

Confederate military successes and the opposition of both Democrats and Radical Republicans in Congress stood in the way of Lincoln's "10 percent plan." The Radicals feared that the members of Congress admitted from the restored states would join with Northern Democrats to form a new conservative majority on Capitol Hill. Democrats objected that those unwilling to give the president a blank check on determining the future of slavery would be disenfranchised. The two groups joined in objecting that the plan would create "rotten boroughs" under effective presidential control. In July 1864 Congress passed the Wade-Davis reconstruction bill requiring

loyalty oaths from 50 percent of citizens and congressional approval before states could be reintegrated. While Lincoln pocket vetoed the bill, he could hardly count on Congress in 1865 to count electoral votes from any states that had seceded, and in the event it did not.⁹

Many Republicans despaired of success as fall drew nearer. Lincoln himself believed there was little hope that he could win the election. His concern was so serious that he committed his thoughts to paper. On 23 August 1864 in the privacy of his office, Lincoln composed what is known as the “blind memorandum.” It read:

This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this administration will not be reelected. Then it will be my duty to so cooperate with the President-elect as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration; as he will have secured his election on such grounds that he cannot possibly save it afterward.¹⁰

Lincoln sealed this memorandum in an envelope and called a cabinet meeting for the next day. At that meeting he presented it to the assemblage and obtained a promise from them that they would not open it until after the election. Lincoln’s purpose, according to some historians, was to unify the cabinet behind redoubling the effort to win the war before the March 4 inauguration, should he lose the election. Lincoln believed this might be the only way to reunite the country successfully.¹¹

In spite of the gloom, there existed one Republican initiative that provided Lincoln a ray of light in the election. It lay with the soldiers themselves. This set of citizens held a sincere affection and attachment for the president. For some time Republicans in states across the North had pushed to provide soldiers in the field with the opportunity to vote. Previous to the Civil War there had never been a conflict where so many soldiers had been absent from home at the time of a national canvass. In peacetime too, citizens in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not as mobile as they are today, and they rarely spent extended periods away from home. Therefore, state laws and constitutions contained no provision for absentee balloting. During the Civil War, as over a million citizens were away from their home districts serving their

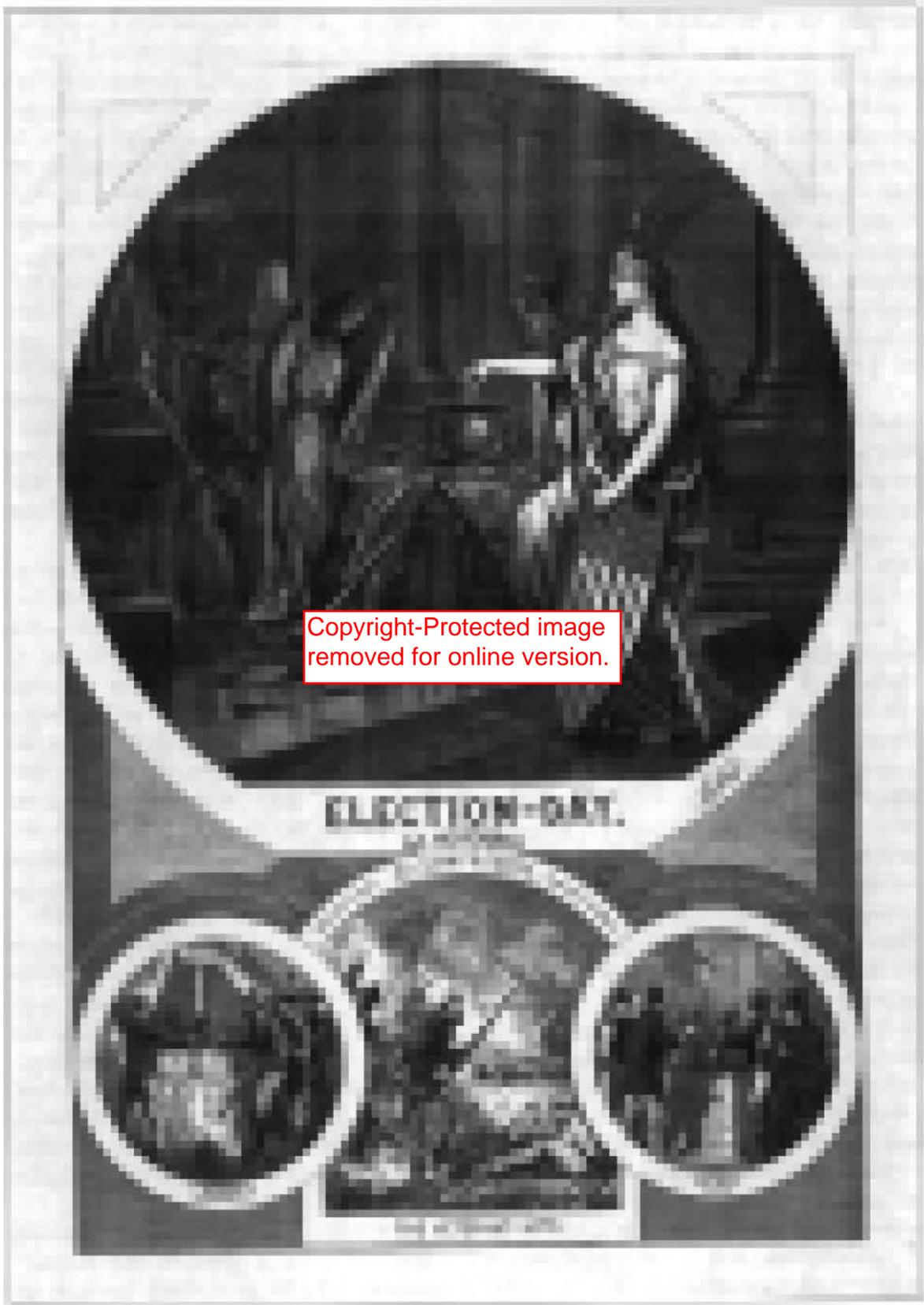
country at its time of crisis, politicians across the North sought to make provisions for soldier suffrage.¹²

Imbedded in United States military tradition is the notion that the Army is composed of citizen-soldiers. Republican politicians, who ardently supported the war effort, felt that these soldiers were carrying the fate of the nation on their bayonets and should have the right to raise their voices in the election.¹³ Republicans also sensed that a large percentage of soldiers would support Lincoln’s candidacy. The soldiers at the front frequently corresponded by mail with their families and kept diaries of their personal thoughts. Those letters and diaries demonstrated solid support for the administration, and state Republican organizations knew it. One Rhode Island soldier, who voted near Middletown, Virginia, observed: “Lincoln of course is the favorite with the soldiers,” a view that was frequently repeated in the writings of common soldiers.¹⁴

Republicans had reason to believe that soldier opinions would also influence loved ones back home. Amidst all the partisan rhetoric over the conduct of the war, only the soldiers stood above the fray. As one author explained, “the soldiers were the unstained heroes in the eyes of their families and neighbors back home. . . . To vote or act inconsistently with what the boys in the field called for was to undermine them and the war effort.” If the Republicans could tap into this source of votes they felt the administration would have a fighting chance to win. As a result, GOP organizations across the country rolled up their sleeves to provide soldiers the right to vote by absentee ballot.¹⁵

The effort to achieve soldier suffrage proved difficult. Since the state constitutions precluded voting outside one’s home district, they required amending through a lengthy legislative and electoral process. Many Democrats objected to changing their constitutions to allow soldier voting in the field. The Democrats were as aware of soldier sentiments as the Republicans. They knew that a new source of Lincoln votes could undermine their own efforts to install McClellan in the White House.

New Jersey proved particularly resistant to a soldier-vote initiative. The Democrats dominated the statehouse and legislature of New Jersey. In spite of legal briefs presented to the legislature stating that the New Jersey constitution did not disallow absentee balloting, it rejected a measure to allow it. Also, as



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This pro-Lincoln cartoon by Thomas Nast appeared in the 2 November 1864 issue of Harpers' Weekly.

New Jersey was McClellan's home state, the Democrats wanted to assure his victory there. Illinois and Indiana were also unable to enact soldier suffrage provisions, but most Northern states did pass acts or amendments allowing soldiers to vote in the field.¹⁶

As late summer 1864 turned into early fall, Lincoln's fortunes began to brighten. In early August Rear Adm. David Farragut and his fleet steamed into Mobile Bay, closing off an important trade artery to the South. Then in the first week of September General Sherman finally captured Atlanta after a two-month-long siege. In September and October Maj. Gen. Philip Sheridan won an impressive series of battles in the Shenandoah Valley culminating at Cedar Creek, effectively closing the Army of Northern Virginia's breadbasket forever. With each victory Lincoln's chances for reelection surged steadily upward. The soldiers' confidence in the administration soared, as did their belief in themselves and in ultimate victory.

This proved a key element in sealing Lincoln's reelection. Once the Confederacy appeared doomed, the soldiers were convinced that the only way to ensure complete destruction of the rebellion lay with the president. The troops, who had deeply admired McClellan as a commander, had second thoughts now about his fitness as a politician. They viewed him as the representative of a party whose peace platform would undercut all the hard work and sacrifice they and their fallen comrades had endured to date. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain spoke for many when he wrote after the war that the soldiers were "unwilling that their long fight be set down as a failure."¹⁷ This was unacceptable to the men in the field, and their opinions soon became known not only in their letters and diaries, but also at the polls.

Having granted soldiers the right to vote, the states had to set up a mechanism by which they could exercise their privilege. Many states sent election officials south to the armies in the field, setting up polling stations with their states' regiments. All qualified soldiers were then allowed to cast their votes. Gideon Welles, Lincoln's dependable secretary of the Navy, even directed all naval commanders to provide the use of naval vessels as polling places for sailors aboard ship.¹⁸

Other states, including New York, set up cumbersome systems of voting. Each Empire State soldier first had to execute a proxy authorizing an elector in his city or town to cast his ballot for him, and

he had to sign an affidavit attesting to his eligibility to vote. In the field, the soldier placed his ballot and proxy into a sealed envelope. Then he placed this envelope and his affidavit inside a second envelope stamped "Soldier's Vote" and sent the package home. On Election Day the designated proxy would deliver the sealed envelope to the polling station where election officials verified the validity of the affidavit. Upon finding the soldier's name on the list of registered voters or upon receiving a second affidavit from a "'householder of the district' that he knows the soldier to be a 'resident of the district,'" the election inspectors would place the ballot in the appropriate box.¹⁹

Unfortunately, this system became susceptible to accusations of fraud because the soldier's vote passed through another's hands. Accusations of serviceman vote fraud ran rampant in New York City, where Democratic operatives allegedly stuffed ballot boxes with fraudulent ballots.²⁰ Democrats leveled similar accusations against the administration for supposed strong-arm tactics at polling stations. In Baltimore and New York City, Union commanders deployed troops at voting places ostensibly to ensure order and prevent rioting by anti-administration elements. The election proved peaceful in both cities, but Democrats claimed that troop presence at the polls discouraged some potential voters while intimidating others. This fueled debate about the legitimacy of Lincoln's reelection similar to the discourse witnessed in the 2000 election.²¹

In the end, the troops played a significant role in reelecting Lincoln. Nationally, soldiers voted four to one in favor of Lincoln over McClellan, and in two states in particular the soldiers provided the majority. These were Connecticut and New York, pivotal states that Lincoln needed for a decisive victory. In Connecticut, the Lincoln majority proved razor-thin, with his tally totaling 44,693 votes to McClellan's 42,288. The soldiers cast some 2,898 votes for the president, providing the margin of victory and swinging the state's five electoral votes to him. Of greater importance, the men in uniform handed Lincoln a win in New York with its thirty-three electoral votes. Lincoln polled 368,726 votes to McClellan's 361,986 in the Empire State. With more than 70,000 votes cast by the soldiers at a likely four-to-one Lincoln margin, the men in the field easily made the difference for the president. The soldiers had spoken for the first time in a national

plebiscite and their message was loud and clear: stay the course and win the war. As one veteran eloquently stated, "that grand old army performed many heroic acts, but never in its history did it do a more devoted service than vote for Abraham Lincoln."²²

As critical as the presidential election was, the congressional contests were arguably more important still. Even if the Republicans could retain the executive branch, they had to have control of the legislature to ensure that Congress would enact laws promoting Union war aims. The fighting men did not let Lincoln down on this account. In the Ohio House races the Republicans captured an astonishing total of twelve previously Democratic seats. The Republicans also picked up six House seats each in Illinois and New York and four each in Indiana and Pennsylvania. Overall the Grand Old Party emerged with more than two-thirds of the seats in both the House and the Senate.²³ In several congressional districts, particularly in Ohio, the soldiers cast the decisive votes. After Lincoln's assassination, the Republicans in Congress took the lead in guaranteeing civil rights to the newly freed slaves and in preventing a quick return to power by Confederate leaders in the southern states.

The 1864 election contest proved a landmark event in world history as a democratic nation for the first time carried out a presidential election in the midst of a civil war. Even more remarkable was the fact that soldiers in the field exercised their right to participate in the process by casting votes. These men helped determine the future direction of the country by voting overwhelmingly for Lincoln. These Union soldiers paved the way for succeeding generations of soldiers to exercise their privilege in free and fair elections. All troops serving the nation today owe a debt of gratitude to these men who cast the first absentee soldier ballots in the history of our country.

Maj. Michael J. Forsyth is a field artillery officer attending the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He has served as an artillery platoon leader in Operation DESERT STORM, a battalion fire support officer in the 2^d Infantry Division in Korea, a battery commander in the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), and an observer controller at the Joint Readiness Training Center. He holds a master's degree in military history from Louisiana State

University. His first book, The Red River Campaign of 1864, is due for release from McFarland & Company before the end of 2001.

NOTES

1. See for example Vince Crawley, "Turning the Tide: Absentee Voters from Military May Decide Presidency," *Army Times*, 20 Nov 2000, pp. 22–24.
2. David E. Long, *The Jewel of Liberty: Abraham Lincoln's Re-Election and the End of Slavery* (Mechanicsburg, Pa., 1994), p. 91.
3. Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative*, 3 vols. (New York, 1958–74), 3: 4–6; Bruce Catton, *A Stillness at Appomattox* (Garden City, N.Y., 1953), pp. 41–43.
4. Catton, *Stillness at Appomattox*, pp. 66–67; Foote, *The Civil War*, 3: 13–17.
5. Long, *Jewel of Liberty*, pp. 179–94.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 51.
7. John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, 10 vols. (New York, 1890), 9: 29–51; T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and the Radicals* (Madison, Wisc., 1941), pp. 306–31.
8. William B. Hesseltine, *Lincoln's Plan of Reconstruction* (reprint ed., Gloucester, Mass., 1963), pp. 94–108; Nicolay and Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, 8: 106–09, 418; Foote, *The Civil War*, 3: 27; Long, *Jewel of Liberty*, p. 31–32.
9. Hesseltine, *Lincoln's Plan of Reconstruction*, pp. 98–119, 126–35.
10. John G. Nicolay and John Hay, eds. *Abraham Lincoln: Complete Works, Comprising His Speeches, Letters, State Papers, and Miscellaneous Writings*, 2 vols. (New York, 1894), 2: 568.
11. Long, *Jewel of Liberty*, p. 189.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 217.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 215–16.
14. Robert H. Rhodes, ed., *All for the Union: A History of the 2nd Rhode Island Volunteer Infantry in the War of the Great Rebellion as Told by the Diary and Letters of Elisha Hunt Rhodes, Who Enlisted as a Private in '61 and Rose to the Command of His Regiment* (Lincoln, R.I., 1985), p. 196. For a wide-ranging study of Civil War soldiers' political attitudes, see Joseph Allan Frank, *With Ballot and Bayonet: The Political Socialization of American Civil War Soldiers* (Athens, Ga., 1998).
15. Long, *Jewel of Liberty*, p. 216; William F. Zornow,

Lincoln and the Party Divided (Norman, Okla., 1954), pp. 200–201.
 16. *Ibid.*, pp. 217–19; Frank, *With Ballot and Bayonet*, p. 95.
 17. Joshua L. Chamberlain, *The Passing of the Armies: An Account of the Final Campaign of the Army of the Potomac, Based upon Personal Reminiscences of the Fifth Army Corps* (reprint ed., Gettysburg, 1994), p. 12.
 18. Long, *Jewel of Liberty*, p. 219; Gideon Welles, *The Diary of Gideon Welles: Secretary of the Navy under Lincoln and Johnson*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1911), 2: 175.

19. *Appleton's Annual Cyclopaedia and Register of Important Events*, 4 (1864): 581–82; Long, *Jewel of Liberty*, pp. 219–20.
 20. Long, *Jewel of Liberty*, p. 219.
 21. Zornow, *Lincoln and the Party Divided*, pp. 202–04; Hesseltine, *Lincoln's Plan of Reconstruction*, pp. 130–32.
 22. Zornow, *Lincoln and the Party Divided*, pp. 201–02; Long, *Jewel of Liberty*, pp. 257, 285; and Ken Burns, *The Civil War*, videotape, Vol. 7.
 23. Kenneth C. Martis, *The Historical Atlas of Political Parties in the United States Congress, 1789–1989* (New York, 1989), pp. 116–19.

Letter to the Editor

To the Editor:

We have received the Winter 2001 edition of *Army History* [No. 51].

I found the article “The Pentomic Puzzle” very interesting but would offer one minor correction. Lt. Col. [Kalev] Sepp is correct in saying that the “U.S. Army was alone among the great armies of the world to configure itself in this . . . fashion,” but when he continues to say that “no other nation . . . chose to emulate” he is incorrect.

The Australian Army followed the U.S. example with a formation tailored (it was claimed) for jungle warfare and called “Pentropic.” It didn’t work for us either and is usually referred to as a disaster. (It was not fully implemented as the battalion sent to Malaya as part of the British Commonwealth Strategic Reserve remained on the old, essentially British, establishment.) As you can imagine, doing this on a two-year rotation in an army that then had only three regular infantry battalions gave a new dimension to the word disruptive.

The real embarrassment was that, due to the usual

lag time to staff and implement an idea, we went Pentomic just as the U.S. Army gave up and went ROAD. The organisation we abandoned was almost identical to ROAD. The pressures of *Konfrontasi* [the confrontation with Indonesia over Malaysia in 1964–65] and the looming commitment to Vietnam forced a return to more traditional organisations. The Tropical Warfare (TW) division was almost identical to the old pre-pentropic organisation except that (probably as a face-saving measure) the brigades were redesignated task forces. This organisation remained almost unchanged during our Vietnam commitment, so it obviously worked.

The Australian pentropic experience is recorded in J. C. Blaxland, *Organising an Army: The Australian Experience, 1957–1965*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 50 (Canberra, 1989).

Bill Houston
 Army History Unit
 Australian Defence Forces

Call for Papers: 2002 Conference of the Council on America's Military Past

The Council on America's Military Past (CAMP) will hold its 36th annual military history conference on 10–14 July 2002 at the Wyndham Old San Juan Hotel in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The conference will emphasize United States military activities in the Caribbean region and will include visits to historic military sites in Puerto Rico. Paper proposals should be sent to CAMP '02 Conference Papers, P.O. Box 1151, Fort Myer, Virginia 22211-1151. Further information is available from retired Col. Herbert M. Hart, who may be reached by phone at 703-912-6124 or by email at camphart1@aol.com.