

**History 211 History of US Elections
Discussion Transcript for September 24, 2020
Election of 1864**

Main Readings: Gienapp, chapters 6-8, Blind Memorandum, Harvey website

I never asked students for an overall critique of Gienapp's biography of Lincoln, but some respondents offered their reactions anyway (one example pasted below). Readers seem to respond to Gienapp's approach. I offered it to students as a model for how to convey great depth of information with a decent amount of creative storytelling while still being limited to a compact framework. It's amazing how much Gienapp was able to convey in a short book. All of the students in this class will be compelled to learn how to write in the Gienapp style since they will be facing even stricter limitations on their word counts.

Here is a selection of student comments on a variety of topics related to the Election of 1864:

LINCOLN AND THE POLITICS OF UNION COMMAND

STUDENT COMMENT: One of the most prominent themes in Gienapp's writing and Lincoln's presidency as a whole is the cumulative struggles he faced commanding the Union army during the Civil War along with the barriers he faced with the Democratic party in terms of his ability to command and delegate. When Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which allowed black men to be enlisted into the army and navy, this policy undercut Democratic support for the war and furthermore, strengthened the peace elements within the opposition's ranks. Lincoln's fear of the peace Democrats grew larger than that of the fighting in the war. After peace Democrat Clement Vallandigham was arrested for delivering a campaign speech that condemned emancipation, Lincoln was privately disturbed by the resulting consequences, but felt that after his several mistakes commanding his generals, he could not second guess their choices any longer. However, it should be noted that after a very rocky start where Joseph Hooker, one of Lincoln's generals, suffered a brutal defeat at the hands of General Lee due to a lack of recognition of Northern society as a separate front for the war, Lincoln's ability to command and lead took a turn for the better. Being ahead of public opinion on most controversial domestic issues of the war, Lincoln wrote a scathing letter to Erastus Corning defending his record on civil liberties following a meeting of Albany Democrats that condemned Vallandigham's arrest. This letter lit a flame under Lincoln, but the Union still lacked a functioning military structure. It was not until the battle at Gettysburg where Union troops finally earned a decisive victory, mowing down Lee's troops with artillery and rifle fire. Lincoln realized how important this victory was for the Union."

STUDENT COMMENT: "Lincoln's personal approach towards the election of 1864 reveals much about his love of country and his personal code of ethics. The war was slowly turning in the Union's favor in spite of the military leadership, yet the high number of casualties and small gains caused anti-war sentiment to grow. On the other hand, radicals within the republican party also viewed his actions as too moderate and weak.

However, Lincoln persevered, choosing his own path and never bowing to public pressure. He had realized that the country could not reunite through peace talks or compromise, because the South would never give up slavery. Lincoln was also unwilling to see his nation remain divided, so the only feasible option was to see the war to its conclusion, with only an absolute victory being acceptable.”

LINCOLN AND THE REPUBLICAN PARTY

STUDENT COMMENT: “Even in the midst of a bloody civil war, Abraham Lincoln managed to maintain a shaky coalition and achieve victory in the election of 1864. His role in the creation of the Republican Party and his emergence as the preeminent party leader in Illinois helped develop the “skill with which he ran the party machinery” and helped lead him to victory in 1864 (Gienapp, 123). Maintaining his coalition became particularly challenging given that Lincoln was often under attack by radical Republicans for not being more forceful on the issue of abolitionism and reconstruction policy, Democrats for being too aggressive against slavery, and by both for the length of the war (130). In 1864, Lincoln had opposition from all sides, as three prominent candidates emerged: Salmon P. Chase, John Fremont, and George McClellan. Chase served in Lincoln’s cabinet, Fremont was a former Republican nominee for President and Union general in Missouri, and McClellan was General-in-Chief of the Union Army (Harvey). Lincoln was closely associated with all three and had come into conflict with them during his first term. Though Chase was favored by many Republican leaders, Lincoln’s party patronage was so strong that enough delegates “were beholden to the president” to ensure the Republican nomination (Gienapp, 123). Fremont, the nominee of the Radical Democracy Party, was another pro-abolition radical who was critical of Lincoln, but lacked the party infrastructure to succeed and withdrew from the race “to do [his] part toward preventing the election of the Democratic candidate”(Harvey). The Democratic Party platform in 1864 called the war a failure and advocated an armistice, but it’s nominee George McClellan couldn’t even agree with the platform on these major questions. Lincoln, on the other hand, had the party influence and loyalty to shape the Republican platform, which endorsed a Constitutional amendment abolishing slavery and called for unconditional surrender.”

BLIND MEMORANDUM

STUDENT COMMENT: “Regardless of the specifics of this election it was always destined to be a significant one, as it was held in the midst of a war threatening to destroy the Union. Lincoln was obviously anxious to win his reelection, and his writings made it clear that he believed he was the only one who could properly lead the country to win the war. This was more than clear during the lowest point of his administration in his "Blind Memo", where had his cabinet members blindly sign a promise to "co-operate with the President elect, as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration." in the event that Lincoln did not win reelection (which seemed quite likely at that moment). The sense of urgency Lincoln demonstrated in this memo made it quite apparent that he did not anticipate the Democratic candidate to be able to resist party pressure calling for an armistice, which he thought would be a fatal blow to the Union. Lincoln was so assured of how necessary he was to the postwar effort as well, that he provided a lot of friction in Congress's efforts to pass laws regarding emancipation,

quoted saying "that is the point on which I doubt the authority of Congress to act". These two examples show how integral Lincoln saw himself as the only one who could bring the nation to the other side of the war, even seeing the need to take control in times when his administration could've been on the way out."

STUDENT COMMENT: "What made this such a notable moment in Lincoln's presidency was not only the context in which Lincoln wrote the memorandum, but also what Pinsker identifies as Lincoln's "essential belief in himself as a political leader." In a time where "the People [were] wild for Peace," Lincoln remained unwilling to negotiate with the Confederates and held steadfastly to his justifications for having drawn out the war. In the face of the increasingly popular pro-slavery opinions of Copperhead (or Peace) Democrats, Lincoln refused to alter his opinions of emancipation. In addition to holding true to his stances on the war and within politics, Lincoln would demonstrate a sense of humility. This would be evidenced by his refusal to step down as the nominee for his party as well as his reluctance to abandon the election all together. Pinsker points out that the latter of the two serves as an incredible representation of Lincoln's belief in core republican values. By consciously holding the election, even when it appeared as though he would not emerge as the next president, Lincoln demonstrated his commitment to the people and "the elections [they] conduct to determine who represents them" (Pinsker). Against opposition and uncertainty, Lincoln would emerge as the strong, calculated, and resolute leader that historians recognize him as today."

ON GIENAPP'S BIOGRAPHY

STUDENT COMMENT: "I found this book extremely informative while feeling extremely engaged due to its creative format and exciting story telling. I was fortunately able to learn in depth about Lincoln's life from beginning to end, his struggles, successes and also who he was as a person."