His Loyal Opposition: 
Lincoln’s Border States’ Critics

WILLIAM C. HARRIS

On January 29, 1863, Senator Willard Saulsbury of Delaware rose in the United States Senate and launched a blistering attack on Lincoln and his Emancipation Proclamation. Although the proclamation did not free slaves in Delaware and the other border states, Saulsbury, as well as his colleague, James A. Bayard, claimed that its effect would be to flood his state with the freed slaves of rebels, creating racial conflict and serious social problems. He defiantly declared that, though opposed to secession, he would keep Delaware “a slaveholding State now and forever.” The senator, who had been drinking heavily, then leveled his rhetorical guns on Lincoln. Saulsbury characterized the president as a tyrant who had acted in perfect disregard of the Constitution and the rights of the people. He proclaimed Lincoln “a weak and imbecile man; the weakest man that I ever knew in a high place; for I have seen him and conversed with him, and I say here, in my place in the Senate of the United States, that I never did see or converse with so weak and imbecile a man as Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States.”

2. Ibid., 549–50, 552.

Although more personal in his criticism of Lincoln than most of his colleagues, Saulsbury was not the only member of Congress from the border states of Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri, and his own Delaware to attack the president on the floor of Congress. Usually the intensity of their opposition and criticism correlated with their political antecedents. Democrats like Saulsbury and Bayard, along with Senator Lazarus Powell of Kentucky, tended to the extreme in their denunciation of Lincoln and his policies. They repeatedly condemned his anti-

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slavery policies and his authorization of the arrests of war opponents as tyrannical and certain to reduce support for the Union cause in their states. These Democrats professed loyalty to the Union—a loyalty that Republicans questioned, with good reason in the cases of Senator and former Vice President John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky and two Missouri senators, as all three were expelled from the Senate after they joined the Confederacy. Union Democrats supported southern rights and claimed that Lincoln’s real purpose in the war was first to end slavery, then impose black equality upon the South.

After the war began, Lincoln turned to old-line Whigs—whether ex-Know Nothings or others (for example, the Constitutional Union party)—to keep the border states in the Union. These disciples of Henry Clay gloried in calling themselves conservatives—today’s moderates. Before the war, they had opposed sectionalism and rejected the fiery rhetoric of southern rights Democrats. That Lincoln had been a Whig and a native of Kentucky who understood the border states’ concerns made it easier for him to relate to the region’s conservative leadership. However, except for a few conservative Whigs (for example, Lincoln’s old friend Joshua Speed and his brother James of Kentucky), they did not pull their punches when publicly criticizing the president’s policies. Because the border states’ conservatives were proslavery, historians have labeled them Democrats, a political designation that they would have resented.

Unlike the staunch states’ rights Democrats, the overwhelming concern of the former Whigs in the border states was the preservation of the Union. At the same time, they insisted that the maintenance of the Union depended on the protection of slavery. Their position on slavery began to change after Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation. Except for Kentuckians, the old-line Whigs gradually and reluctantly fell in line behind emancipation in their states.

As the secession crisis unfolded in 1860–1861, conservative Whigs of the border states believed that the antislavery Republican Party, as much as that of the Fire-Eaters of the South, represented a grave threat to the Union of the founding fathers and to the Constitution. In the 1860 presidential campaign, border-state Whigs, led by Kentucky Senator John J. Crittenden, organized the Constitutional Union Party on a simple platform denouncing sectionalism and calling for an end of the agitation over slavery. Like the Democrats, who supported Stephen A. Douglas and John C. Breckinridge, these Whigs condemned Lincoln as hardly any different from radical antislavery men like Senator William H. Seward of New York and Salmon P. Chase of Ohio. Some conservatives acknowledged that Lincoln had been a
good Whig early in his career, but they repeatedly reminded voters of his House Divided Speech in which, they erroneously charged, he favored a war against the South to end slavery. George D. Prentice’s *Louisville Journal*, the newspaper that Lincoln often read as a youth, in 1860 expressed “a favorable opinion of the personal and even the political integrity of Abraham Lincoln . . . but is, as the whole nation knows, a sectional candidate and only a sectional candidate.” The *Journal* also misleadingly claimed that Lincoln supported the “irrepressible conflict” and “higher law” doctrine of Senator Seward.3

George Prentice advanced another theme that appeared in the criticism of Lincoln by border-state conservatives. He wrote that, despite Lincoln’s political integrity, he was weak and as president would be controlled “by the wild and powerful and raging partisan influences” surrounding him.4 In a well-publicized speech at Louisville in August 1860, Senator Crittenden repeated the view that “Mr. Lincoln may be a very worthy, upright and honest man,” but if elected president, he will “govern by the political influence and voice of his party. Mr. Lincoln is at the head of a great anti-slavery party, a purely sectional party, which, according to all its antecedents, threatens the existence of slavery everywhere,” and thus the Union.5

As is well-known, after Lincoln’s election South Carolina and the lower South moved toward secession. In the border states, a coalition of conservative Whigs and Douglas Democrats urged a watch-and-wait policy while remaining in the Union. The *Baltimore American*, a Whig newspaper, reminded its readers that Lincoln, faced with an anti-Republican majority in Congress, would be powerless to subvert the Constitution and the rights of the people.6 The *American*’s Democratic rival, the *Baltimore Sun*, reached a similar conclusion when it announced: “Lincoln is elected, and it becomes us, as law-abiding citizens to submit quietly and await the result.” If Lincoln should “attempt to subvert our rights it will be ample time to speak of redress, and even then dissolution will be madness.”7

Anxious border-state spokesmen urged the president-elect to reassure Southerners of his good intentions. When he refused to make

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4. Ibid.
a public statement on the ground that it would be misinterpreted, Nathaniel P. Paschall, the conservative editor of the *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, castigated Lincoln for his indifference to the plight of the border states in the secession crisis. Paschall also wrote Lincoln that it would be impossible “to keep Missouri in her conservative stand” for the Union unless he did something to reduce “the excitement now pervading the South.”

Missouri’s Democratic governor, Claiborne Jackson, secured his legislature’s call for a convention to determine the state’s course in the crisis. Jackson clearly believed that Lincoln, after he became president, would violate his promise to protect the constitutional rights of Missourians; the state then should take preemptive action and leave the Union. A state convention met, but it was dominated by conservative Unionists, not staunch southern rights delegates.

Kentucky Governor Beriah Magoffin, also a Democrat but not a secessionist, failed in his effort to secure an election for delegates to a state convention to provide, as he said, for the protection of Kentucky’s rights in the Union. Governor Thomas H. Hicks of Maryland, a former Whig, refused to call the Democratic legislature into session, believing that if he did, it would authorize the election of a state convention that could take the state out of the Union. All of the border states’ legislatures and governors had been elected before Lincoln’s election and supported southern rights, though not necessarily secession. During the war these governments, except for the Delaware legislature, would give way to a conservative Unionist coalition led by former Whigs. The Delaware General Assembly and the state’s U. S. senators would remain Democratic and supportive of southern rights, including slavery.

Caught in the middle of the secession crisis, the border states’ Unionists placed their hopes on a compromise in Congress that would preserve the Union and at least calm political passions in their states. They favored Kentucky Senator Crittenden’s compromise proposals. However, Republicans, urged by President-elect Lincoln, rejected the provision in the compromise that would permit the expansion of slavery. The Crittenden Compromise, even if it had passed Congress, would not have brought the lower South back into the Union; nonetheless, it could have mitigated some of the opposition to the new president in the upper South.

The real issue by the time of Lincoln’s inauguration in March was the coercion of the seceded states. The question was, Would Lincoln intervene with troops to protect federal property and restore the wayward states to the Union? En route to Washington in mid-February, he suggested to an Indianapolis audience that it would not be coercion if the federal government “simply insists upon holding its own forts, or retaking those forts which belong to it.” Although he quickly said that he had decided nothing in the matter, the southern rights Louisville Courier pronounced his statement “a war proposition . . . without a declaration of war, waged under false pretenses, and justifiable only to that fanaticism of which Mr. Lincoln is at once the embodiment and representative.”

Conservative Whig Unionists held off on their criticism of his remarks at Indianapolis, determined to await Lincoln’s inauguration for his policy toward the seceded states. However, they excoriated Lincoln for his secret, middle-of-the-night trip through Baltimore, en route to Washington, in order to avoid an assassination plot. Their state pride aroused, Marylanders denied that any violence against him would have occurred in Baltimore. They unbraided the president-elect for his cowardly movement through the city. The Baltimore Sun, the leading Democratic newspaper in the state, declared: “Had we any respect for Mr. Lincoln . . . the final escapade by which he reached the capital would have utterly demolished [it], and overwhelmed us with mortification.” The people of the state, the Sun editor concluded, have “much cause to fear that such a man, and such advisers as he has, may prove capable of infinitely more mischief than folly when invested with power.” Governor Hicks criticized Lincoln for slipping through the city when, Hicks claimed, no plot existed against. The Maryland governor was wrong. The danger to Lincoln in Baltimore was real.

In his long-awaited inaugural address on March 4, 1861, Lincoln laid down a policy designed in part to allay concerns about him in the border

9. Louisville Daily Courier, February 13, 1861, as quoted in Dumond, Southern Editorials, 453. See also the St. Louis Daily Missouri Republican, February 15, 1861, as reported in ibid., 460.


11. The documents pertaining to the assassination plot, along with a fine introduction by the editor, can be found in Lincoln and the Baltimore Plot, 1861, From the Pinkerton Records and Related Papers, ed. Norma B. Cuthbert (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1949).
states and in the upper South. He announced that all rights would be protected in the southern states, including the right of slaveholders to own slaves. He also promised that the Fugitive Slave Law, an important concern for border-states Unionists as well as other Southerners, would be enforced. At the same time, Lincoln declared that he could not recognize secession, and that, furthermore, it was his constitutional duty to enforce the laws and protect government property in the southern states, including federal military installations. “But beyond what may be necessary for these objects, Lincoln promised, “there will be no invasion—no using of force against, or among the people anywhere.”

Conservative Whigs in the border states pronounced the inaugural address “conciliatory and firm—promising peace.” Prentice’s Louisville Journal insisted that Lincoln’s speech meant the president “will not undertake . . . any policy calculated to give to the country war.” It would be “an insane enterprise” to do otherwise, the newspaper said. The Baltimore American maintained that while Lincoln “announces his intention to collect the revenue and to possess and defend the forts, he distinctly declares that he will do these things in such a manner as to avoid the necessity for strife.” On the other hand, southern rights Democrats like John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky and Governors Jackson of Missouri and Magoffin of Kentucky saw the mailed fist in the inaugural address. The Baltimore Sun expressed this view when it characterized the speech as “sectional and mischievous,” and added, “if it means what it says, it is the knell and requiem of the Union, and the death of hope for peace.”

To the great dismay of Senator Crittenden and other conservative Whigs, Lincoln indeed intended to apply the mailed fist to the secessionists of the South. After the fighting at Fort Sumter, Lincoln, as is well-known, called for 75,000 troops to suppress the insurrection in the South. Governors Jackson and Magoffin sharply denounced the call. Magoffin telegraphed the War Department that it would get no troops, as he put it, “for the wicked purpose of subduing [Kentucky’s] sister Southern States.” Governor Jackson sent a similar message.

15. Beriah Magoffin to Simon Cameron, April 15, 1861; Claiborne Jackson to Simon Cameron, April 17, 1861, The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of
Governor Hicks of Maryland hurriedly met with the president to protest his action and warned him of his state’s strong opposition to the decision to use force against the seceded states. Hicks at this time refused to provide troops to the federal government, even for the defense of the besieged national capital as Lincoln wanted.\footnote{Radcliffe, Hicks, 52.}

Both conservative Unionists and Democrats in the border states denounced the president’s decision to coerce the seceded states. One St. Louis newspaper demanded Lincoln’s impeachment on the ground that he had violated the Constitution by calling for troops without congressional authorization. John Pendleton Kennedy, a Maryland man of letters who had served in Millard Fillmore’s cabinet, wrote: “We are driven into extremities by a series of the most extraordinary blunders at Washington, which I think must convince everybody that there is no ability in the Administration to meet the crisis.” The actions of Lincoln and his subordinates, Kennedy sadly predicted, would inevitably force “the Border States out of the Union, and [they] really seem to be utterly unconscious of the follies they have perpetrated.”\footnote{As quoted in Michael Burlingame, Abraham Lincoln: A Life, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 2:134.}

However, some border-state voices, especially in the German American community in St. Louis, could be heard applauding Lincoln for his use of force against the secessionists. A Presbyterian minister in Wilmington, Delaware, came out boldly for coercion and proclaimed from the pulpit that the conflict should be fought as a holy war against the rebellion.\footnote{Harold Bell Hancock, Delaware During the Civil War (Wilmington: Historical Society of Delaware, 1961), 65.}

We know today that the border slave states remained in the Union. But this outcome was far from certain during the first months after Fort Sumter and Lincoln’s call for troops, and indeed much later in Kentucky. The first crisis occurred in Baltimore in April when rioters attacked Massachusetts troops en route to protect defenseless Washington, D.C. To prevent the passage of troops through Baltimore, Governor Hicks went along with the mayor’s decision to disable the railroad bridges leading into the city. Although the siege of Washington was soon lifted, Lincoln’s concern that Maryland supported secession caused him to suspend the writ of habeas corpus and authorize the military arrests of Maryland legislators suspected of treason, actions that brought down on the president’s head charges that he was a tyrant.
A Baltimore delegation that visited Lincoln in the spring of 1861 had the impertinence to demand that he recognize the Confederacy. Lincoln angrily replied that “you would have me break my oath and surrender the Government without a blow. There is no Washington in that—no Jackson in that—there is no manhood or honor in that.” Upset by Lincoln’s refusal to end military intervention in the state, Maryland’s General Assembly on May 10, 1861, pronounced the war “unconstitutional and repugnant to civilization, and will result in a bloody and shameful overthrow of our institutions.” In November, Maryland voters, however, placed the state squarely behind the Union when they elected former Whig Augustus W. Bradford as governor and also elected a Unionist legislature. Bradford warned in his inaugural address that Maryland’s unionism could be quickly reversed if Lincoln abandoned his “single purpose of preserving the nation” and interfered with slavery. This indeed was the sticking point for many conservative Unionists and Democrats, not only in Maryland but also in the other border states until much later in the war.

In early 1862, Lincoln tested the waters on emancipation when he proposed a plan of compensated emancipation for the border states designed, he insisted, to end the war soon. Although the border states would have to agree to it, the proposal immediately ran into opposition from their members in Congress. They concluded that it was a foot-in-the-door scheme to abolish slavery by federal decree. Like many Democrats, Senator Willard Saulsbury of Delaware went further; he characterized the proposal as a plot “to elevate the miserable Negro, not only to political rights, but to put him in [the] army,” an eventuality that frightened many whites even in his tiny slaveholding state.

On July 14, 1862, the majority of the border states’ members of Congress rejected a second appeal from Lincoln to accept his state-controlled compensation plan. They told him that his proposal would represent “a radical change of our social system [and] was hurried through both Houses with undue haste, without reasonable time for

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21. *Inaugural Address of Hon. Augustus W. Bradford, Governor of Maryland, Delivered in the Senate Chamber, Annapolis, January 8th, 1862* (Annapolis, Md.: Schley & Cole, 1862). This pamphlet is part of a collection of digital texts and images that have been created and curated by the Cornell University Library since 1992.
consideration and debate.” The congressmen maintained that the proposal interfered with a matter “which peculiarly and exclusively belonged to our respective States.” They particularly criticized his argument that the continuation of slavery in their states would keep the rebellion alive by encouraging rebels to assume that the border states eventually would join them. The rebellion, the border states’ congressmen contended, derived its strength not from the slave institution, as the president had concluded, but from the overwhelming belief by the rebels that their property and society were under assault by the federal government.23

A wave of border-state protest and criticism of Lincoln greeted his issuance of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862, despite the fact that it would not apply to the Union states. Nowhere was the outrage greater than in Kentucky. Even Robert J. Breckinridge—a leading Presbyterian divine and Lincoln supporter—and Lincoln’s old friend Joshua Speed pronounced the proclamation unwise and certain to undermine loyal sentiment in the Bluegrass State. A large protest rally in Frankfort angrily denounced the proclamation as wrong-headed and also certain to gain support for the rebels. Prentice’s *Louisville Journal* announced: “There is not a paper or prominent politician in Kentucky that does not deeply regret and deprecate the President’s proclamation, though all may believe that it will be wholly inoperative so far as its objects are concerned.” Prentice assumed that “abolitionist fanatics” had driven Lincoln to issue the proclamation, an assumption also made by the *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, a conservative newspaper.24 Still, Prentice wanted to stay on good terms with the president; he admitted that Lincoln was “an honest and good man” who realized that he must be supported by Kentuckians in order to “crown himself with success and glory” in the war to save the Union.25 Even in Delaware, with only eighteen hundred slaves, the Democratic legislature assailed Lincoln’s antislavery policy and his suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, characterizing it “as a flagrant attempt to exercise absolute power under the plea of military necessity [and] an artful device by persons in authority for the subversion of our form of Government, and the establishment of another in its stead.”26

23. Border State Congressmen to Abraham Lincoln, July 14, 1861, Lincoln Papers.
When Congress met in December 1862, one month before Lincoln had promised to issue the final Emancipation Proclamation, border states’ members caucused to develop a response to it. They selected a committee, led by John W. Crisfield of Maryland, to meet with the president and inform him of the “public mischief” that emancipation would create in their states. No record of the meeting with Lincoln has been found, except that it occurred on December 18. But the committee clearly did not receive the response from the president that it wanted. One day later, Crisfield, a brilliant orator, took to the floor of the House of Representatives and delivered a harsh attack on the president and the Republicans. He assailed Lincoln’s antislavery policy as unconstitutional and condemned the Republican spirit of intolerance, comparing it to suppression in the rebel states. Crisfield did not charge Lincoln with intolerance of dissent; however, he insisted that, if sustained, the president’s position that emancipation was necessary to put down the rebellion would lead to despotism. “Once admitted as a power belonging to this Government, [necessity] swallows up all other powers, and resolves everything into the mere discretion of the individual who may happen to wield its mighty energies. This is the definition of despotism,” Crisfield exclaimed.

The Emancipation Proclamation did not prove to be the revolutionary decree that border-states conservatives feared, nor did Lincoln’s justification of necessity in issuing it open the door to dictatorial powers. Many in the border states, however, remained defiant. Alexander M. Woolfolk of Missouri issued a lengthy pamphlet in 1863 denouncing the president’s justification of the Emancipation Proclamation as a war measure based on military necessity. Why, then, Woolfolk asked, cannot he “suspend the Constitution at will, and by his own proclamation, free the slaves of loyal” men in the border states? “Why may he not on the same plea of necessity,” Woolfolk argued, even “set aside the Constitutional provisions for an election of President in 1864, and declare himself President until 1868, or Dictator for life.” The Missouri Unionist, who served as a colonel in his state’s military forces, predicted that Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation would drive the South to a guerrilla warfare that would last for a half-century after the rebel armies had been defeated.

Kentucky Unionists proved the most resistant to Lincoln’s antislavery policy and the most critical of his leadership. In early 1863, a friend wrote fellow Kentuckian and Judge Advocate General Joseph

Holt that “the order of the day now in Ky is to denounce the measures of the administration. Lincoln is regarded as false to his pledges, his position and his country.” Any faction standing too close to him, this Kentucky Unionist reported, “was bound to be unpopular.”

For a time in 1863, military authorities and self-proclaimed “Unconditional Unionists” claimed that the Bluegrass State was on the verge of rebellion. On May 1, 1863, the conservative *Frankfort Commonwealth* reported that “in every possible form, in every kind of assembly, in the recent mammoth Union convention, in one hundred country meetings, through the press—in every possible form of expression”—Kentuckians “have condemned the administration of Abraham Lincoln, and the insane war policy in the shape of freedom proclamations, compensated emancipation, and the use of negro soldiers.” The Kentucky General Assembly, upon Governor James F. Robinson’s recommendation, passed a series of resolutions setting forth the state’s grievances against the federal government. Although the Emancipation Proclamation did not apply to Kentucky, the legislature pronounced it “unwise, unconstitutional, and void.” It stopped short of threatening armed resistance or secession if Lincoln persisted in his antislavery policy. The General Assembly announced that it “recognizes a manifest difference between the administration of the government and the government itself—the one is transitory, limited in duration only to that period of time for which the officers [were] elected by the people; . . . the other is permanent, intended by its founders to endure forever.” The Kentucky legislators meant that they would support the government in its prosecution of the war for the Union, but they hoped that Lincoln and the Republicans would soon be defeated at the polls and their antislavery policies reversed.

In 1863 border-state Unionist leaders, except for those in Kentucky and Delaware, generally ceased their denunciation of the Emancipation Proclamation and moved toward ending slavery in their states, as Lincoln desired. However, complications arose when Lincoln and Congress insisted on the recruitment of blacks in the military. The main opposition, as expected, came from Kentucky, although conservative Unionists in Maryland, Missouri, and Delaware also expressed their outrage with the policy of placing arms in the hands of blacks; they es-

30. Quoted in ibid., 175.
especially denounced the forced and unlawful recruitment of the slaves of loyal owners. Governor Augustus W. Bradford of Maryland wrote Lincoln on September 28, 1863, that “no policy adopted by the Government since the commencement of the Rebellion has ever awakened such unequivocal opposition” in his state as the seizure of the slaves of Unionists for military and other purposes. Bradford admitted that “if an imminent public necessity exists, which cannot be otherwise met, property of any description,” including slaves, “may be seized to provide for it,” but a proper procedure must be established that would include compensation for loyal owners.\textsuperscript{32}

The Maryland governor’s letter alarmed Lincoln. Faced with a legislative election that, he hoped, would begin the process of emancipation in Maryland, Lincoln had the War Department issue specific rules for the recruitment of both free blacks and slaves in the border states and also for the compensation of consenting loyal owners.\textsuperscript{33} Lincoln’s action, at least partly, placated Bradford and conservative Unionists regarding black recruitment, and it largely removed the issue from the Maryland campaign. The campaign proved successful for the emancipationists, and Maryland in October 1864 became the first border state to abolish slavery; Missouri would follow in January 1865. Kentucky, however, would not be so easily satisfied.

Indeed, Kentucky’s new governor, Thomas E. Bramlette, in early 1864 threatened armed resistance to prevent the enlistment of blacks in his state. On March 8, Bramlette hotly wrote Lincoln: “Kentuckians will obey willingly any law requiring their services in defence of their Government . . . but they will not obey a [policy] that violates their Constitutional rights as Citizens [and] dishonors them by preferring the slave to the loyal Kentuckian.” The governor warned Lincoln: “Do not sow to the winds—least you reap the whirlwind” by the recruitment of black troops.\textsuperscript{34}

Cooler heads, however, prevailed in Kentucky, and Bramlette was persuaded to go to Washington and lay the state’s case before Lincoln. He took two conservative Unionists with him—one of whom was Albert Hodges, editor of the \textit{Frankfort Commonwealth}. They met with the president on March 26, 1864. This was the famous meeting in which Lincoln made his “little speech,” as he called it, revealing his

\textsuperscript{32} Augustus W. Bradford to Abraham Lincoln, September 28, 1863, Lincoln Papers.


\textsuperscript{34} Thomas E. Bramlette to Abraham Lincoln, March 8, 1864, Lincoln Papers.
long-held opposition to slavery and his frustrating efforts to jump-start emancipation during the war. He later repeated these sentiments in a letter to Hodges, known in history as the Hodges letter.\(^{35}\) The president pronounced the governor’s opposition to unrestricted black recruitment as “reasonable” and directed Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton to accommodate the governor “as far as practical.” On his part, Bramlette approved the arrangement whereby the enlistment of African Americans would continue under strict rules in each county and only after the county had failed to meet its conscription quota with white troops.\(^{36}\) In the hands of General Stephen Burbridge, however, violations of the agreement soon occurred, undermining the good will that Lincoln had created in his meeting with the governor.

The publication of the Hodges letter sent the *Louisville Journal* into a rant against Lincoln. The president’s argument in the letter that “measures, otherwise unconstitutional, might become lawful, by becoming indispensable to the preservation of the constitution [was] simple absolutism,” the *Journal* contended. It was “the most unworthy declaration that ever emanated from the chief magistrate of a free country. If it does not awaken the people to a due sense of the peril which the government must encounter from the re-election of Mr. Lincoln” in the fall, “words cannot awaken them.” The Lincoln doctrine, if not successfully challenged, the *Journal* predicted, will result in “the destruction of the republic.”\(^{37}\)

In the 1864 presidential campaign, Prentice, Bramlette, and other former Whigs in the border states sought to fuse with their old enemies, the national Democrats, in an effort to defeat Lincoln. They gained the backing of some prominent conservative Whigs in the northern states, including John Todd Stuart, Lincoln’s old political mentor and law partner. But when the Democrats met in Chicago in late August, the northern Copperheads, or peace wing of the Democratic Party, seized control of the convention and proceeded to adopt a war failure platform. This was too much for many border-state Unionists who supported the war, particularly those in Maryland and Missouri. Governor Bradford and Maryland conservatives immediately called for the re-election of Lincoln. A notable exception in Maryland was the venerable Senator Reverdy Johnson, who campaigned against Lincoln. Johnson

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ignored the Democrats’ peace platform and emphasized Lincoln’s alleged failures as a war president. In Kentucky, Bramlette, Prentice, and many conservative Unionists also ignored the Copperhead platform and supported General George B. McClellan, who favored the war. In addition, Peace Democrats backed McClellan. The two anti-Lincoln factions fused their electoral votes, and the general easily won the Bluegrass State.38

Lincoln also faced a growing political opposition from the Unionist left in the border states. A radical faction of Republicans had emerged in these states by late 1863, mainly in Missouri where they had considerable support among St. Louis’s German Americans. Calling themselves “Unconditional Unionists,” the radicals opposed the conservatives’ plan for gradual, compensated emancipation and urged the immediate ending of slavery. They also objected to Lincoln’s lenient reconstruction policy, and they bitterly resented Lincoln’s backing of Governor Hamilton Gamble and General John M. Schofield, who refused to seek retribution against rebel guerrillas. Gamble, as chair of the state convention, and Schofield also opposed immediate emancipation.

Charles D. Drake, the fierce leader of the Missouri radicals, in a speech in August 1863, denounced Lincoln as a “Tyrant and a Dictator” for his support of Gamble and Schofield.39 In a testy meeting with a delegation of Missouri radicals led by Drake, the president refused to bow to their demands. Having beforehand received a copy of their complaints, Lincoln was ready for the “little army,” as he styled the delegation of about seventy men, who were joined by some rough-looking Kansas Jayhawkers. Lincoln’s secretary John Hay recorded the exchange between the president and the westerners. Lincoln announced that he would carefully consider the delegation’s complaints, but “there are some matters,” he said, that he had already decided.40

Specifically, Lincoln rejected their demand for General Schofield’s removal. He chastised the Missouri radicals for their “vague denunciations” of the general, which, he said, “are so easy to make and yet so unsatisfactory.” He also refused to bend in his support of Governor Gamble. Regarding the claim that Schofield had muzzled the radical press (this occurred in one case), Lincoln informed the Missourians

38. For the border states’ conservative movement to fuse with the northern Democrats, see William C. Harris, “Conservative Unionists and the Presidential Election of 1864,” Civil War History 38 (1992): 298–318.
that “when an officer in any department finds that a newspaper is pursuing a course calculated to embarrass his operations and stir up sedition and tumult, he has the right to lay hands upon it and suppress it, but in no other case.” A member of the delegation shouted out: but “we thought” that the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus and the suppression of the press were “to be used against the other side.” “Certainly you did,” Lincoln sharply replied. “Your ideas of justice seem to depend upon the application of it.”

In regard to the radicals’ insistence “upon adherence to . . . the Emancipation [Proclamation] as a test” of political friendship, the president reminded the delegation that Missouri was excluded from its application. “The Proclamation can therefore have no direct bearing upon your state politics,” he declared. “Yet you seem to insist that is shall be made as vital a question as it if had. You seem to be determined to have it executed there.” A delegate interjected that “we think it a national question” and should be implemented in the border states as well as in the rebel states. Lincoln responded: “You are then determined to make an issue with men who may not agree with you upon the abstract question of the propriety of that act of mine. Now let me say that I, who issued that proclamation after more thought on the subject than probably any one of you have been able to give it, believe it to be right and expedient.”

Lincoln told the Missouri delegation that “many good men, some earnest Republicans, and some from very far north, were opposed to the issuing of the Proclamation holding it unwise and of doubtful legality. Now when you see a man loyally in favor of the Union—willing to vote men and money . . . and throwing his influence into the recruitment of our armies—I think it ungenerous, unjust and impolitic to make his views on the abstract political questions a test of his loyalty. I will not be a party to this application of a pocket Inquisition.”

The president expressed his disappointment with “the immediate emancipation movement’s” resistance to gradual emancipation, as the Gamble faction had supported. “It endangers the success of the whole advance towards freedom,” he contended. Still, Lincoln reaffirmed that “the mode of emancipation in Missouri is not my business.” He admonished the radicals to go home and work with other antislavery men to make “emancipation a final fact forever.”

Finally, Lincoln took exception to Drake and other critics who had

41. Ibid., 58–59.
42. Ibid., 60.
43. Ibid., 63–64.
charged him “with ‘tyranny’ and willfulness, with a disposition to make my own personal will supreme. I do not intend to be a tyrant,” he said. “I shall take care that in my own eyes I do not become one. [Also] I have no right to act the tyrant to mere political opponents.” Yet, he announced, “I must make a dividing line, some where, between those who are the opponents of the Government and those who only oppose peculiar features of my administration while they sustain the Government. . . . In cases where political opponents do not in any way interfere with, or hinder military operations, I have judged it best to let them alone.”

The Missouri radicals, joined by radicals in the free states and Congressman Henry Winter Davis in Maryland, sought to replace Lincoln as the Republican candidate in 1864. But after the Democrats adopted the defeatist peace platform at Chicago, the radicals reluctantly fell in line behind Lincoln. When Lincoln won the election, Henry Winter Davis sniffed: “The people now know Lincoln and voted for him to keep out worse people—keeping their hands on the pit of the stomach the while! No act of wise self-control—no such subordination of disgust to the necessities of a crisis and the dictates of cool judgment has ever before been exhibited by any people in history.” Lincoln overwhelmingly won Missouri and fairly easily carried Maryland where, in both states, a stringent loyalty oath for voting existed and soldiers cast ballots in the field. He lost Kentucky by a large margin and Delaware by six hundred votes.

After the election, Lincoln’s border-state detractors tempered their criticism of him. Prentice’s Louisville Journal “exhorted Constitutional Unionists everywhere to be of good cheer.” The Journal, which had once referred to Lincoln as a tyrant, admitted that in the past the president had faced “exigencies we may not have understood, requiring measures which, though doubtful now, shall be approved by future events.” The bitter “partisan crimination” against him “may have been natural, but we are now convinced that it was always extravagant and brought no good to the country.”

Lincoln’s assassination caused his border-state critics not only to mourn his death but also to acknowledge his importance in history. Governor Bramlette of Kentucky, who had vehemently criticized Lincoln during the war, issued a proclamation calling on Kentuckians to observe a day of bereavement for the fallen president. At a mass

44. Ibid., 63.
meeting in Louisville on April 18, which was preceded by a three-mile-long procession of mourners, Bramlette apologized for his and other Kentuckians’ repeated attacks on Lincoln during the war. “He was right and we were wrong,” the governor frankly admitted. “The name and cause of Mr. Lincoln,” he told the crowd, “will go down to future ages as part of the record of our country” during this tragic period. Few who lived in the border states in the aftermath of the assassination would challenge the sentiment in that statement.