Views of the Wigwam Convention:
Letters from the Son of Lincoln’s 1856 Candidate

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Abraham Lincoln was nominated as a candidate for president on May 18, 1860, at the Republican convention in the Chicago Wigwam. On each of the three days before the roll calls, Cincinnati lawyer Nathaniel C. McLean wrote letters from Chicago to his wife. He was neither a delegate nor a politician, but he was hoping for a deadlock that could result in nomination of his father, Associate Justice John McLean of the United States Supreme Court, to whom he referred affectionately as “the Judge.” He knew members of the Ohio delegation and gained inside knowledge of the deliberations of other state delegations. The candid observations he shared with his wife provide insights into the Wigwam convention from a newly available perspective.1

Justice McLean was a long-shot candidate from Ohio before whom Lincoln had practiced law in Illinois federal courtrooms.2 His long-standing presidential ambitions dated back to his service as postmaster general under Presidents Monroe and John Quincy Adams; he reluctantly accepted appointment to the Supreme Court by Andrew Jackson.3 When McLean sought the Whig presidential nomination

1. The letters were acquired recently by the Library of Congress where they were examined by the author. Letters from N. C. McLean to Mrs. N. C. McLean, May 15, 16, and 17, 1860, Nathaniel McLean Accession 23,652, Library of Congress.
2. “Of the many cases Lincoln handled in his twenty-four years at the bar, none was more important than Hurd v. The Rock Island Bridge Company, better known as the Effie Afton case, tried in September 1857 before the U. S. Circuit Court in Chicago, Justice John McLean presiding.” Michael Burlingame, Abraham Lincoln: A Life, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 1:337.
3. “The expansion of the national postal system occurred under the direction of one of America’s ablest administrators, John McLean of Ohio. McLean served as postmaster general from 1823 to 1829. . . . Like just about everybody in Monroe’s cabinet, he nursed political ambitions. . . . Since [under Jackson] Postmaster General John McLean remained committed to nonpartisanship and meritocracy. . . . Jackson elevated a reluctant McLean to the U.S. Supreme Court and turned the patronage-rich Post Office
in 1848, Congressman Lincoln was an observer at the Philadelphia convention and opposed McLean in favor of the eventual victor, General Zachary Taylor.\textsuperscript{4} In 1856, however, Lincoln backed the conservative antislavery Supreme Court justice as the candidate most likely to attract former Whigs to the new “anti-Nebraska” party.\textsuperscript{5} McLean was a serious contender and used his judicial position to win support. Shortly before the 1856 convention, he sent a letter on the pending Dred Scott case to a political ally, proclaiming his support for the power of Congress over slavery in the territories.\textsuperscript{6} A reporter from the \textit{New York Tribune} publicized Justice McLean’s position on the case before the convention; but McLean fell short of the nomination with a third of the votes in an unofficial poll.\textsuperscript{7}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{4} Lincoln advised an Illinois associate that he and another Whig “join cordially in the hope, that your hope of McLean’s nomination may be disappointed—not that we wish you disappointed in the abstract, nor that we have anything against Judge McLean; but because we are entirely sure he is not ‘a winning card.’” Abraham Lincoln to Silas Noble, May 25, 1848, Roy P. Basler et al., eds., \textit{The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln}, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953–1955), 1:474. Writing from Washington after the convention, Lincoln shared his enthusiasm for Taylor with his law partner. Abraham Lincoln to William H. Herndon, June 12, 1848, ibid., 1:476.
\item \textsuperscript{5} In a letter to Senator Lyman Trumbull shortly after the nomination of James Buchanan as the Democratic presidential candidate, Lincoln warned that “a good many whigs, of conservative feelings, and slight pro-slavery proclivities, withal, are inclined to go for him, and will do it, unless the Anti-Nebraska nomination shall be such as to divert them. The man to effect that object is Judge McLean, and his nomination would save every whig, except such as have already gone over hook and line. . . .” Abraham Lincoln to Lyman Trumbull, June 7, 1856, ibid., 2:342.
\item \textsuperscript{6} “In a long and thoroughly political letter—the letter of a candidate—written from Cincinnati eleven days before the Philadelphia Convention, June 17, 1856, McLean tells a political supporter that the \textit{Dred Scott} case has been continued until the December term; while he could not say anything about it, he was glad that his friend liked ‘my views already publicly avowed as to the constitutional power of the general government over the subject of slavery in the territories.’ McLean to Alexander C. M. Pennington, June 6, 1856. McLean MSS.” Albert J. Beveridge, \textit{Abraham Lincoln 1809–1858}, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1928), 2:461. A similar letter to the retired chief justice of New Jersey was printed in the \textit{New York Tribune}. Vincent C. Hopkins, S.J., \textit{Dred Scott’s Case} (New York: Athaneum, 1967), 43–44, citing \textit{New York Tribune}, June 16, 1856.
\item \textsuperscript{7} “More than any other reporter, Harvey [of the \textit{Tribune}] speculated in print about what the Court might decide, apparently mixing a good deal of gossip with some information obtained directly from McLean. . . . Harvey encouraged his readers to expect a rousing dissent from McLean, one that would make the Justice an antislavery hero on the eve of the Republican national convention. . . . McLean had strong support at
His eventual *Dred Scott* dissent in 1857 was less powerful as legal analysis than the dissent of his colleague, Justice Benjamin Curtis, but it played “to the antislavery gallery” and was read from at least one pulpit. At the 1856 convention the Illinois delegation supported McLean. After the victory of John C. Frémont, they proposed as vice presidential candidate another antislavery Whig, the absent Abraham Lincoln, who received 110 votes in defeat against New Jersey antislavery Whig and McLean supporter William L. Dayton.

Four years later, during the weeks leading to the 1860 convention, McLean was once again in the race. Lincoln considered him stronger in Illinois than other leading candidates but too old to be a viable nominee. Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois advised Lincoln that the justice appeared to be a likely compromise alternative to the leading candidate, Senator William H. Seward of New York. Lincoln the Republican convention, receiving about 35 percent of the votes in a first informal ballot. Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 289, 291. See Hopkins, 41–42, citing *New York Tribune*, April 8, 10, 1856.

8. Ibid., 414, 442.


10. A Cincinnati Republican wrote Lincoln asking whether he would support McLean, Bates, or Seward and commenting, “Judge McLean’s age is a formidable obstacle tho’ I do not know that it would be insuperable. We must, if possible, win this time, for we cannot afford to be beat.” Richard M. Corwine to Abraham Lincoln, March 24, 1860, *Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress*, Transcribed and annotated by the Lincoln Studies Center, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois. Available at Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division (Washington, D.C.: American Memory Project [2000–01]), http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ahhtml/mahlome.html, accessed Feb. 8, 2010. On McLean Lincoln replied, “If Judge McLean were fifteen, or even ten years younger, I think he would be stronger than either, in our state, taken as a whole; but his great age, and the recollection of the deaths of Harrison and Taylor have, so far, prevented his being much spoken of here.” Lincoln to Corwine, April 6, 1860, *Collected Works*, 4:36.

11. “The next question is can his [Seward’s] nomination be prevented & how? It is perhaps doubtful, if it can be done at all, but if at all, it is thought here that it would be more likely to be accomplished by taking up Judge McLean than any one else. After Cameron he seems to be the choice of Pa. & I suppose Ohio would support him after Chase in preference to Seward. Would our State go for him in the Convention after you & if nominated, could he carry Ill. any better than Seward? There seems to be a good deal of feeling for Bates in the South half of our State, would the same men go for McLean, if nominated? Of course you know McLean’s age, infirmities & the objections which would be raised to him. . . . Of course McLean can only be taken up as a compromise candidate. He would have no votes to start with, & my reason for suggesting a rally upon him as against Seward is the belief, that it would be better to take him and probable victory than Seward and probable defeat. This McLean movement is daily gaining strength, & even now looks formidable; but I want to know your views.
replied to the ambitious Trumbull with a less positive assessment of McLean’s chances in Illinois due to his age. McLean was also in the calculations of Lincoln’s campaign manager, David Davis. The “most influential member” of the critical Indiana delegation, gubernatorial candidate Henry S. Lane, was reported as saying “that with Seward he and his party will inevitably be defeated; but with Bates, McLean, or Lincoln, and perhaps others, he can sweep the state.” Lincoln and Justice McLean both represented the mainstream anti-slavery nationalism that could unite Republican factions and appeal widely to the electorate in the North.

Lincoln, a participant in presidential election campaigns throughout his political career, would have appreciated Nathaniel’s letters to his wife; they might have been what Lincoln himself would have told Mary if he were an interested observer in Chicago, as he had been at the Whig convention in Philadelphia twelve years earlier.

I have talked with my Republican colleagues & they all agree that we may ultimately have to take McLean & that it would be hazardous to take Seward.” Lyman Trumbull to Abraham Lincoln, April 24, 1860, Abraham Lincoln Papers.

12. “I think neither Seward nor Bates can carry Illinois if Douglas shall be on the track; and that either of them can, if he shall not be. I rather think McLean could carry it with D. on or off—in other words, I think McLean is stronger in Illinois, taking all sections of it, than either S. or B. . . . I hear no objection to McLean except his age; but that objection seems to occur to everyone; and it is possible it might leave him no stronger than the others.” Abraham Lincoln to Lyman Trumbull, April 29, 1860, Collected Works, 4:45–46. On Trumbull’s political ambitions as a basis for his promotion of the McLean candidacy and Lincoln’s adept persuasion of Trumbull to back away from McLean, see Mark M. Krug, Lyman Trumbull: Conservative Radical (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1965) 158–59.

13. “I am satisfied that the Tribune Office & Trumbull are evidently thinking that it is to be Judge McLean 6 or Mr Bates— They are not for Govr Seward—Clearly— Wentworth thinks running McLean at his age—is like running a dead man. . . .” David Davis to Abraham Lincoln, April 23, 1860, Abraham Lincoln Papers.


16. Mary and son Robert did not preserve Lincoln’s letters to her and other family members. David C. Mearns, The Lincoln Papers: The Story of the Collection with Selections to July 4, 1861 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1948), 129–30. According to the recollec-
Nathaniel McLean’s letter of Tuesday, May 15, reported that he arrived about ten o’clock in the morning and “have not yet been able to obtain a room to sleep.” He had “the promise of a sleeping place before bed time” and was “writing in a brother lawyer’s office upon whom I am sponging. He has invited me to stay with him, but I prefer to be at the hotel.” McLean described the situation on the day before the convention opened:

I have never seen such a crowd as this at the hotel. It is almost impossible to move about in the halls without tearing off the buttons from your coat. It is now four o’clock and I have been on my feet nearly all day and feel very tired, but I must keep going in order to learn all the news. There at present appear to be great division[s] among the delegates as to the nomination. The friends of Mr. Seward are moving heaven and earth for his nomination and it is said that much money is being expended for his interest. This may all be slander but I fear not. At all events his friends seem to be very determined, and this has created a very strong feeling against him among the friends of the other candidates. If Seward is not nominated in the beginning his chance say the wise ones is gone. I scarcely know what to say in regard to the Judge. He has many warm friends who are working for him very earnestly. It seems to be the policy not to

17. The letters do not indicate where McLean finally spent the nights.
18. Seward’s campaign manager, Thurlow Weed, spent lavishly on hotel accommodations, entertainment, and travel expenses for supporters. Did he cross the line to bribery? One account describes “an effort to buy off the Illinois delegation” and the worries of Lincoln supporters “that other states’ delegates—particularly those who had promised never to shift to Seward’s camp—would be blandished by Weed’s riches.”

19. Former Whig Ohio Governor Tom Corwin apparently supported McLean. Jesse Dubois, a member of Lincoln’s Chicago team, reported to Lincoln, “Eight of the Ohio men are urging you with great vigor Gov Corwin is for McLean, we hope to in the end get them all.” Jesse K. Dubois to Abraham Lincoln, Sunday, May 13, 1860, Abraham Lincoln Papers. Cincinnati journalist Murat Halstead reported that Henry S. Lane of Indiana supported Judge McLean as “the man of all the land to carry the State of Indiana.
push him forward in the beginning of the fight, but to hold him in reserve on a compromise when the other factions shall have found out that their favorite cannot be nominated.

It is impossible to tell the result, but I feel hopeful for the Judge, though I should not be astonished at the nomination of Seward on tomorrow. If this should be the result it will result like the last nomination of Fremont in 1856. Chase is out of the question, and has only influence enough left to do harm. He is opposed to the Judge. But enough of such summaries for they are nothing more. The result will soon come and I can only hope for the best. . . . As yet there is no predicting when the convention will terminate but I hope to start home sometime on Friday.

The letter of Wednesday, May 16, was written between the first and second sessions of the convention’s first day. McLean told his wife he had “succeeded . . . last night in getting a room with three other quiet gentlemen so that I had a comfortable sleep so far as the noise in the hotel would permit.” He described hotel tumult, the morning opening business, and the political environment before the evening session:

The last thing I remember was sundry yells given by some excited person in the hall below, but what about I cannot tell. Whiskey probably was the cause. Today all is confusion and no one can tell the result. The convention met this morning and organized by appointing a temporary Chairman and committee[s] for various purposes, and then adjourned until half past five this afternoon. The Ohio delegation I am sorry to say are playing the fool by splitting up and dividing their strength upon men who cannot possibly get the nomination. Chase and Wade of Ohio are the first choice of different factions, and neither Chase [n]or Wade

... But when he found that the contest was between Seward and Lincoln, he worked for the latter as if his life depended upon success.” William B. Hesseltine, ed., Three Against Lincoln: Murat Halstead Reports the Caucuses of 1860 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960) 166, cited in Good, Lincoln for President, 134.

20. Ohio Governor Salmon B. Chase was a major candidate with a first-ballot majority in the state’s delegation. He and Judge McLean shared similar antislavery views, but Chase had alienated McLean “as a consequence of his manipulations to gain his Senate seat. Chase, McLean remarked, ‘is selfish, beyond any other man. And I know from the bargain he has made in being elected to the senate, he is ready to make any bargain to promote his interest.’” Reinhard H. Luthin, The First Lincoln Campaign, 146, cited in Doris Kearns Goodwin, Team of Rivals : The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 243, 798.
could by any possibility get the nomination. At least so say the politicians and I believe the friends of those gentlemen admit the fact so to be. Yet knowing this they seem to be unwilling to throw their votes for the Judge although their doing so would it [is] believed nominate him beyond all question. It is hard to find ones own state acting thus through delegates who misrepresent the sentiment of the people of the state.

Seward has the majority, yet this afternoon Mr. Stevens of Pennsylvania who is a very strong and influential man says that it is not believed that he can be nominated. All however is doubt and confusion and a very little matter may change the whole phase of affairs. Wise counsel it is best hoped will prevail among the delegates, but for the present we can only hope for the best. The Judge will not show any strength on the first few ballots, but when all parties now run a tilt with their separate candidates and find that a choice cannot be made, then those who are his friends will turn for him in a body and may effect his nomination. The crowd

21. Nathaniel McLean’s impression of the support for dark horse antislavery Senator Benjamin Wade apparently preceded an Ohio caucus on the 15th where Wade’s candidacy “lost steam.” At the caucus “when the staunchest Chase men were threatened by defections from other Ohioans, the Chase supporters threatened to throw their support to Seward; thus ended the discussion. The caucus seemed to guarantee two important results: that Ohio would not switch from Chase to a more agreeable Buckeye [Wade or McLean], and the door was left open to transfer the Ohioans’ vote to an inoffensive middle-ground candidate outside of Chase’s home state (i.e., Lincoln).” Edward Chase to Salmon P. Chase, May 21, 1860, in John Niven, et al., *The Salmon P. Chase Papers* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1993), 3:29, cited in Ecelbarger, *The Great Comeback*, 207 and n. 33. Wade received no votes from Ohio, but two from Kentucky. Ecelbarger, 224.

22. Pennsylvania Congressman Thaddeus Stevens was “a leading Pennsylvania Radical who championed the candidacy of John McLean” from a nativist perspective. Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln*, 1:604. His position was reported to Lincoln by a supporter: “Stevens of Pennsylvania Says with Mr Seward Pennsylvania is lost with Mr Lincoln or Mr McLane they Can Carry it by 20 000 Stevens is instructed for Camron but frankly Says it will not do I must Stop evrything all is Confusion & noise.” William Butler to Abraham Lincoln, May 16, 1860, *Abraham Lincoln Papers*. One account says the Pennsylvania delegation “had agreed on McLean as its second choice and Lincoln as its third.” Ida Tarbell, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 2 vols. (New York: McClure, 1900), 1:352; see also Benjamin P. Thomas, *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 211. Pennsylvania resistance to the Seward campaign was a key ingredient in the convention mix. If Thurlow Weed had worked more effectively to bring Pennsylvania boss Senator Simon Cameron on board, the Seward momentum might have been inexorable. Lincoln’s campaign manager, Judge David Davis, proved more effective than Weed by stressing the prospect of a cabinet position for Pennsylvania both to negate Weed and to gain Pennsylvania second ballot votes for Lincoln rather than McLean. See Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, 216–21, 246.
here is enormous. Every hotel seems to be filled almost to suffoca-
tion, and it is very difficult to walk through the halls. Tonight I
intend to try and get a seat at the Wigwam when the convention
meets, but I do not know that I can succeed as only delegates are
admitted on the first floor, and gentlemen with ladies in the gallery.
As I have no lady to go with me I must try to get a ticket from a
delegate and go in as if I had a right to a seat.23

The letter of Thursday, May 17, the second day of the convention,
was written in the morning before adoption of the platform and in
anticipation of a possible first roll-call vote. The eventual nominee
was now in sight:

Since my arrival I have been constantly on the move so that the
only really quiet time I have is when writing in my friend[s] office
and in bed. I do not go to my room until near twelve o’clock and
get up at seven, and have that time until bed time again. I am in
the midst of a throng of politicians. You can have no idea of all
that is going on here. Buying and selling is I have no doubt a large
business, and particularly with the New York politicians.24

I am afraid that the chances are against us, but no one can
tell which way the tide may turn. The other candidates are bitter
against each other and we hope that rather than see others nomi-
nated they will finally cast their votes for the judge. Seward has
more votes than any other candidate, but not a majority over all
others which is necessary to a nomination. At least so say those
who profess to know. His (Seward’s) friends declare that they will
never permit what they call a representation man to be nominated
over him, and that they will defeat all such candidates if they

23. Controlling admission to the Wigwam was vital to the strategies of the Seward
and Lincoln camps. Seward’s backers outnumbered Lincoln’s on the first and second
days, but by the third day Lincoln’s men found ways to “render the crowd influence
moot” that may seem inconsistent with the image of “honest Abe.” Ecelbarger, 219.
Who packed the gallery for Lincoln? Michael Burlingame summarizes the evidence in
a footnote to his online text posted on the website of the Lincoln Studies Center at Knox
College. Michael Burlingame, Abraham Lincoln: A Life—Unedited Manuscript by Chapters,
Lincoln-Studies-Center/Burlingame-Abraham-Lincoln-A-Life.html, accessed Feb. 8,
2010.

24. Based on his review of extensive correspondence from the convention, Michael
Burlingame has concluded that the Seward camp’s “tactics backfired,” reinforcing
an impression that the corruption in New York government under Weed’s powerful
influence would extend to Washington if Seward were elected. Burlingame, Abraham
Lincoln, 1: 605–06.
cannot elect him. They do not consider the Judge a representation man\textsuperscript{25} and therefore are willing when Seward is out of the question to go for him. They say however that they have no doubt of the nomination of Seward. Other persons however say that Seward cannot possibly be nominated but indicate this, that and the other candidate as the man. Now in fact all this is mere speculation and no man can tell the result until the votes are counted. Lincoln of Illinois seems to be very prominent just now, and although an honest man with talent enough for many places, yet totally unfit in administration capacity for President. So we go however fitness and capacity is no longer looked to. Lincoln is I believe entirely honest and a very clever fellow, but we want something in addition to this in a President.\textsuperscript{26} This convention in the opinion of many will do one good thing and, that is, kill Chase forever as a candidate for the Presidency. This will be a gratifying result to me even if the Judge should be defeated.\textsuperscript{27} Yesterday the convention made Mr. George Ashman of Mass. Chairman, and this morning a platform will probably be adopted. Whether any balloting will be done today is uncertain, but if not tomorrow will probably decide the fate of the aspirants. If this should be so I will return by the night train and be in Cinnti. the next morning. You must not be disappointed however if I do not come, as the convention

\textsuperscript{25}I have not found the term \textit{representation man} in other sources on the convention (italics in the original). However, “representative man” appears in a letter sent to Lincoln on the convention’s second day by his political associate Mark W. Delahay, who used the term to describe someone assigned “to meet the N York men upon their system of tactics.” Delahay complained that Lincoln’s men were “too honest” and should instead offer that “a representative man from each of [four key] states may dispense what ever Patronage they respectively are or would be entitled to from the administration.” Delahay to Lincoln, May 17, 1860, Abraham Lincoln Papers, accessed April 6, 2010. Seward’s friends may have been telling Nathaniel McLean that they would never allow a “representation man” to win the nomination by using such patronage promises.

\textsuperscript{26}Lincoln had become especially well known in Ohio as a result of speeches he and Stephen A. Douglas gave during the 1859 off-year election campaign for state offices won by Republicans. Lincoln’s skillfully calculated anti-Douglas speech in Cincinnati has been described as “one of the most important addresses of his pre-presidential career.” Gary Ecelbarger, “Before Cooper Union: Abraham Lincoln’s 1859 Cincinnati Speech and Its Impact on His Nomination,” Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association 30 (Winter, 2009): 1, par. 46 http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jala/30.1/ecelbarger.html , accessed Feb. 8, 2010. See also Ecelbarger, \textit{The Great Comeback}, 54–76.

\textsuperscript{27}Chase received 49 votes on the first ballot, but dropped to 42 1/2 on the second ballot. Burlingame, 1:622. “The Lincoln team was confident that their friends in Ohio would fulfill the agreement to switch from Chase to the Rail candidate. Ohio did not disappoint, awarding Lincoln fifteen additional delegates, the most by any single state on the third ballot.” Ecelbarger, \textit{The Great Comeback}, 228.
may not act so promptly as we anticipate. Success would be a
great benefit to all of us, as well to the country, but I am prepared
for defeat.

The balloting did not begin that night. On the first ballot the next
day McLean received twelve votes, but Lincoln matched his strength
in the Ohio delegation. His total fell to eight on the second ballot.28
Lincoln’s Ohio votes increased by six on the second ballot and by
another fifteen on the third ballot, before the final switch of four more
Ohio votes from Chase put him over the top. A reasonable estimate is
that some of McLean’s delegates switched to Lincoln as “the man.”
Like the supporters of the Judge, Lincoln’s team had not been “bit-
ter against” the other candidates, but had treated their opponents
with respect and had sought delegates who would be “willing when
[their candidate] is out of the question to go for him.” Unlike Judge
McLean, Lincoln was not a long-shot by the time balloting began but
had become the leading alternative to Seward. Lincoln’s victory had
depended upon preventing a deadlock and winning with second-
choice votes as soon as the prospects of other major candidates Chase
and Bates and Cameron had dimmed.

Was Nathaniel totally mistaken when he told his wife that, if the
Ohio delegates had been willing “to throw their votes for the Judge,”
it would have “nominate[d] him beyond all question”? With poten-
tial second-ballot strength in Pennsylvania and support in Rhode
Island, Indiana, and even Illinois, McLean could have stayed in the
race against a weaker Lincoln campaign. Nathaniel’s sources led
him to believe his father could emerge as the compromise choice
with Seward’s support if the New York senator’s candidacy faded.
In that event all would have recognized the need for a capable vice
presidential nominee to play the back-up role of a Tyler or Fillmore
under an elderly president. Would Seward have accepted second
place? Or would the party have sought a former antislavery Demo-
crat with current national political experience to balance the ticket?
This profile helps explain Illinois Senator Lyman Trumbull’s interest
in the McLean candidacy. Chicago editor Joseph Medill had specu-
lated to Trumbull about a possible McLean-Trumbull ticket.29

28. Ecelbarger, 224, 228. McLean’s votes included delegates from Ohio, Rhode Island,
29. See footnotes 11 and 12. Medill had suggested that if a deadlock led to McLean’s
nomination, “a young, fresh, reliable” vice presidential candidate such as Trumbull could
be selected and become president if the old judge did not “live thro’a term.” Ecelbarger
169–170, citing Medill to Trumbull, April 18, 1860, McLean Papers, Library of Congress.
As it happened the greatest impact of the votes for Justice Mclean was, as his son acknowledged, to undermine the candidacy of Governor Chase by dividing his home-state delegation. Nathaniel’s emphasis on Lincoln as “an honest man” also anticipated the possibility that the successful candidate’s integrity would be as important in the election as his stand on the issues. The younger McLean accurately recognized that the party was less interested in “fitness and capacity” to administer the presidency than in avoiding a “result like the last nomination of Fremont in 1856” that would take the party down the road to defeat again.

Nathaniel McLean went on to become a general in the Union army. Justice McLean died in Cincinnati a month after Lincoln’s inauguration, giving the new president his first opportunity to appoint a Supreme Court Justice. Justice McLean did not live to see the abolition of the oppressive slave regime he had fought against for years as one of the most politically ambitious justices ever to serve on the United States Supreme Court.

Trumbull had then written to Judge McLean that he was “the only person who can be nominated in Chicago in opposition to Governor Seward” because he had the unique ability to unite supporters from Ohio and Pennsylvania and “we could also give you Illinois” if Lincoln faltered. Ecelbarger 174, citing Trumbull to McLean, April 21, 1860, McLean Papers.

30. “After winning the presidency, Lincoln told a visitor, ‘[a]ll through the campaign my friends have been calling me “honest Old Abe,” and I have been elected mainly on that cry.’ His reputation as an honest man was as important as his reputation as a foe of slavery.” J. K. Moorhead, interview with John G. Nicolay, Washington, May 12 and 13, 1880, cited in Burlingame, Abraham Lincoln, 1:628.

31. At the 1952 Republican convention Senator Everett Dirksen challenged Governor Thomas E. Dewey of New York, who had lost the 1944 and 1948 elections and now supported General Eisenhower, “[W]e followed you before and you took us down the path of defeat.” Edward L. Schapsmeier and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, Dirksen of Illinois: Senatorial Statesman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 79. Both 1952 conventions and the 1960 Democratic convention were the last where a presidential nomination was seriously contested at the convention itself.

32. He nominated Ohio attorney Noah Haynes Swayne who had “enthusiastically supported Lincoln’s presidential candidacy in 1860” and “was said to be the choice of the man he replaced, Justice John McLean, the most outspoken anti-slavery justice to serve on the Taney Court.” James F. Simon, Lincoln and Chief Justice Taney: Slavery, Secession, and the President’s War Powers (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 223.