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The Founding Fathers and the Election of 1864

JEFFREY J. MALANSON

“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”1 While it might be somewhat trite to begin an article on the Civil War with a quote from one of its most enduring artifacts, the opening lines of Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address express in stirring fashion the fact that the founding fathers were a fundamentally important authority for Civil War–era Americans. The Gettysburg Address was Lincoln’s call to the American people to see the Civil War through to a successful end and, in the eyes of at least some observers, to see the abolition of slavery as an essential part of that ending. By alluding to the American Revolution and quoting the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln was invoking George Washington and Thomas Jefferson in support of the Union and emancipation. This was not the first time Lincoln cited the founders, nor was he the only politician to call on their authority. Indeed, throughout the Civil War, and especially during the presidential campaign of 1864, the founders were enlisted to legitimize a wide variety of perspectives on a multitude of issues.

The founders did not dominate political discourse in 1864, or at any other point in the nineteenth century, but they were an essential political and cultural touchstone, the significance of which has been

somewhat lost to Americans today. This is certainly not to suggest that twenty-first-century Americans do not recognize the founders as being historically important; rather, modern observers have lost sight of how relevant nineteenth-century Americans saw the founders' lives and legacies. Lincoln’s generation used the founders as a lens through which to view, understand, and interpret important issues, including the meaning of the Union itself. It is unsurprising that given the issues at stake in the Civil War, Thomas Jefferson and especially George Washington were a common focus of political rhetoric during the war and the campaign of 1864, as virtually all Americans, regardless of section or party, claimed both men.

In Jefferson’s case, people like Lincoln were drawn to his principles and spirit, the Declaration of Independence and the ideal that “all men are created equal.” Throughout Jefferson’s life, he had expressed the hope and expectation that the institution of slavery would one day die away. This did not stop white southerners from claiming Jefferson as their own. “All men are created equal” applied only to white men, they argued, an interpretation clearly supported by the simple fact that Jefferson owned six hundred slaves throughout his life and set almost none of them free. George Washington occupied a more complex place in the hearts and minds of Americans. Washington and his legacy spoke directly to the challenges of the times. He was the ultimate symbol of the Union—the father of his country—but he


was also a southerner, a native son of Virginia. Washington owned plantations and a large number of slaves, and he presided over the convention that produced a Constitution protecting slavery. At the same time, Washington freed his slaves upon his death. He was more than just a central part of the nation’s past, though. Despite having been dead for almost sixty-two years when the Civil War began, there remained a deep well of reverence for Washington, his sacrifices, and his example. His birthday (February 22) was a holiday annually celebrated in most cities and towns throughout the country, and while the Civil War gave new meaning to many of these celebrations, they revealed a people not rediscovering Washington but instead annually rededicating themselves to both him and his principles.

The presidential election of 1864 in the North is a particularly strong example of the rhetorical power of the founding fathers; candidates, critics, and the electorate at large utilized them to bolster their arguments and to make sense of the stakes. The efforts of both Republicans and Democrats to enlist George Washington and Thomas Jefferson in support of their candidates likely did not drive many voters toward one party or the other, but the fact that the campaigns tried, and that people reacted strongly in support of or in opposition to those efforts, speaks to how seriously the American people took the founders. While Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and Alexander Hamilton were all dead by 1804, other founders had remained active on the public stage well into the nineteenth century. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams famously died within hours of each other on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence; while John Jay lived until 1829 and James Madison survived to 1836. The Federalism of Adams, Hamilton, and Jay limited their long-term popular appeal (especially in the case of Hamilton, whom even the Whigs largely refused to talk about, despite their American System having been


almost entirely cribbed from his reports on public credit). Jefferson’s republican ideals were in many ways the most significant (if ambiguous) legacy of the founding fathers, with both the Whigs and the Democrats claiming to be the true defenders of Jefferson’s vision. It was Washington, though, who remained the most influential in the nineteenth century. He was the most famous and arguably the most important American, elevated above even the other founders. This status stemmed from a variety of factors, the most important of which were the annual celebrations of his birthday and the persuasiveness of his presidential Farewell Address as a foundational document for the nation. Washington’s relatively early 1799 death also accelerated the process of his apotheosis and the attainment of an almost mythic status. For a country lacking a lengthy national past, Washington became the only history that Americans needed.

In the decades before the Civil War, Congress debated exhuming Washington’s body from its grave at Mount Vernon and reburying it beneath the Capitol Building, as well as the propriety of using government funds to purchase the papers of founders such as Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, and Madison. In 1852 the American people weighed whether Washington’s Farewell Address should continue to guide U.S. foreign policy, ultimately determining that it should.

9. The first session of the 22nd Congress debated moving Washington’s body as part of their commemoration of the 1832 centennial anniversary of his birth. The Founders’ papers were purchased between 1834 and 1849, with most of the purchases authorized in the first and second sessions of the 30th Congress in 1848 and 1849 (which happened to be the one term Lincoln served in Congress). The debate over Washington’s Farewell Address took place during the 1851–52 U.S. tour of Hungarian revolutionary Louis Kossuth. In addition to the relevant Congressional debates, see Michael Kammen, *Digging Up the Dead: A History of Notable American Reburials* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 55–56; “Arrangement of the Papers of Madison, Jefferson, Hamilton, Monroe, and Franklin,” in *Bulletin of the Bureau of Rolls and Library of the Department of State*, no. 5 (Washington: Department of State, 1894), 5–16; Malanson, *Addressing America*, chap. 6.
Arguably the best and most relevant demonstration of the ongoing weight attached to the founders was the role they played in the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858. While Republican Abraham Lincoln and Democrat Stephen A. Douglas toured Illinois as part of their campaign for a seat in the U.S. Senate, both men frequently invoked the founders and the Declaration of Independence to sustain their view of the country’s origins and principles. In the opening debate at Ottawa on August 21, Douglas questioned the validity of Lincoln’s claim in his “House Divided” speech that the nation could not survive half slave and half free. “Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Madison, Hamilton, Jay, and the great men of that day, made this government divided into free states and slave states,” Douglas asserted, “and left each state perfectly free to do as it pleased on the subject of slavery.”

For Douglas and the Democrats, this guarantee of states’ rights was in many ways the essential legacy of the founders and the American Revolution. Lincoln did not dispute that slavery was indeed a states’ rights issue, but he did object to Douglas’s portrayal of the founders’ intentions with regard to slavery. “Washington, and Jefferson, and Madison” had placed slavery on “the course of ultimate extinction,” Lincoln argued, and that was the course to which the country should return.

The debates also revealed dramatically different interpretations of the Declaration of Independence. For Lincoln, the concept of equality as derived from the statement “all men are created equal” could be very narrowly defined but had to be nearly universally applied. White men and black men were not and should not be equal in the enjoyment of civil and political rights, Lincoln argued, but there was “no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. . . . In the right to eat the bread, without leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man.”

At Galesburg in early October, Douglas described such claims as “a monstrous heresy. . . . The signers of the Declaration of Independence never dreamed of the negro when they were writing that document. They referred to white men, to men of European birth and European

12. Ibid., 117. Emphasis in original.
descent, when they declared the equality of all men.” As evidence, Douglas presented the plain fact that “when Thomas Jefferson wrote that document he was the owner, and so continued until his death, of a large number of slaves. Did he intend to say in that Declaration that his negro slaves, which he held and treated as property, were created his equals by Divine law, and that he was violating the law of God every day of his life by holding them as slaves?” Was “every man who signed the Declaration of Independence” and continued to hold slaves a “hypocrite” in the eyes of God? Modern Americans do see hypocrisy in Jefferson’s and the signers’ handling of slavery, but Douglas’s rebuttal of Lincoln was effective because their contemporaries generally did not want to find fault with the conduct of the founders. It can be easy to dismiss such discussions of the founders as mere rhetorical posturing, but it would be a mistake to do so; Lincoln and Douglas were expressing their earnestly held beliefs about the nature of the founding, the meaning of the Declaration of Independence, and the principles of their country.

Lincoln had a long-standing attachment to the founding fathers. He read Mason Locke Weems’s *The Life of Washington* as a child, he was a temporary devotee of Thomas Paine as a young man, and he upheld the Declaration of Independence and the preamble to the Constitution as the ultimate statements of American ideals throughout his political life. Starting in 1854, virtually every major speech Lincoln delivered was built on the foundation of the founders and their accomplishments, especially as it pertained to their viewpoints on slavery. Lincoln frequently cited the Declaration; the absence of the word *slavery* in the Constitution; the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which prohibited the expansion of slavery into the Northwest Territory (an idea, Lincoln pointed out, that originated with Thomas Jefferson); and a variety of other examples of the founders speaking out against or taking actions to limit the spread of slavery. Taken together, this evidence revealed, as he concluded in a speech protesting the Kansas-Nebraska Act, that “the unmistakable spirit of the [founders’] age, towards slavery, was hostility to the principle, and toleration, only by necessity.” Lincoln’s founding fathers viewed slavery as a necessary evil and had worked to contain its spread and place it on the path of eventual extinction.

This was the argument Lincoln brought to the American people in the 1850s and 1860s—that the founding fathers objected to slavery but understood its necessity, and that they took steps to limit its spread. The free soil policy of the Republican Party was borne out of the party’s interpretation of the founders’ principles. As Lincoln prepared to depart Springfield for Washington before his inauguration, he conceived of the project he was about to commence in historical terms. “I go to assume a task more difficult than that which devolved upon General Washington,” Lincoln declared. “Unless the great God who assisted him, shall be with and aid me, I must fail. But if the same omniscient mind, and Almighty arm that directed him and protected him, shall guide and support me, I shall not fail, I shall succeed.”

Despite being heavily criticized for comparing himself to Washington, Lincoln took the founders with him on his trip to Washington, invoking them to help explain his attitudes toward the Union and slavery, and the lessons that could be applied to the secession crisis. On the first approach of Washington’s birthday during the Civil War, Lincoln called for a national commemoration of the day, including readings of Washington’s Farewell Address throughout the country. And, of course, there was the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln’s masterful invocation of the American Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, and the founding fathers to bolster the Union and its cause. In all of these, as well as countless additional formal speeches, impromptu remarks, and private conversations, Lincoln made clear the influence the founders had on his thinking and his principles.

Of course, Lincoln was not the only American politician who laid claim to the founding fathers. One of the great advantages of the founders as a source of political rhetoric and authority was that their legacies and accomplishments were surprisingly malleable.

16. See, for example, Lincoln’s 1859 speech in Beloit, Wisconsin, in which he explicitly stated that “the Republicans hold to the same principles which Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Madison, and their compeers held.” “Speech at Beloit, Wisconsin,” October 1, 1859, ibid., 3:484.


20. Tracing the founders’ influence on Lincoln’s thought and action is the main focus of Brookhiser in Founders’ Son.
the contested natures of Washington and Jefferson, the American Revolution and the Constitution could also be marshaled in support of very different causes. For white southerners, the Revolution had fundamentally been about the establishment of states’ rights and self-government. When South Carolina seceded from the Union in December 1860, it justified the act by pointing to the meaning of the Revolution, to the original intent of the founders’ Constitution with regard to slavery, and to the violations of that Constitution by the northern states in their refusal to uphold and defend southerners’ rights.21 Presenting themselves as the true heirs of the Revolution’s legacies, Confederates celebrated the Fourth of July in 1861 with as much vitality as northerners.22 The Confederate States of America named Jefferson Davis acting president in February 1861 but waited until February 22, 1862—Washington’s birthday, a conscious selection of date—to formally inaugurate him under a statue of the father of his country.23 The Confederates also put Washington and Jefferson (as well as Davis) on their postage.24 While these were mostly relatively minor symbolic acts, it was symbolism intended to bestow legitimacy on the Confederacy by claiming the American founding as their precedent. Some southerners became so confident in the rightness of their cause that rather than trying to explain away Jefferson’s declaration that “all men are created equal,” they simply dismissed the sentiment as being “fundamentally wrong,” as Alexander Stephens did in March 1861.25

For many northerners, the Revolution and the Constitution represented tremendous acts of sacrifice and compromise for the establishment of a perpetual Union and the formation of a new nation. While many discussions of the sectional conflict of the 1850s focus on slavery, for many northerners their primary concern remained the preservation of that nation. Beginning in 1853, a fund-raising campaign was

21. [Charles Memminger], Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union; and the Ordinance of Secession (Charleston, S.C.: Evans and Cogswell, 1860).
22. Subsequent Independence Days were not observed in a similar manner. Goodheart, 1861, 351–52.
24. Brookhiser, Founders’ Son, 233. Davis was placed on the 5-cent stamp, Jefferson on the 10-cent, and Washington on the 20-cent.
inaugurated to see Mount Vernon purchased from George Washington’s heirs and preserved as an ultimate symbol of the Union. In 1856 the Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union was incorporated, and for several years former politician and diplomat Edward Everett toured the country delivering the speech “The Character of Washington” to raise money for the cause. By 1858 they had raised the $200,000 necessary to buy Mount Vernon. Everett’s speech and the larger fund-raising campaign it was a part of were successful because they played on both northerners’ Unionist sympathies and their love of Washington.26 Washington was the most persuasive symbol and defender of the Union. As an 1860 San Francisco newspaper editorial asserted, “The story of Washington, told about the fireside to the wondering little ones—the narrative of his honesty, his firmness amidst sharp trials, his self-sacrifice, will be better in its effects than a score of Union saving meetings, planting, as it will, in among the affections of the generation that must rule a few years hence, the love of our undivided country, to grow with the child’s growth and strengthen the strongest of the passions, with the man’s strength.”27 The editorial writer underestimated the rapidity with which the Union would falter, but the sentiment revealed the confidence northerners placed in Washington’s influence.

As the Lincoln-Douglas debate illustrated, northerners saw the founding fathers as being much more than just representatives of the Union. Republicans and Democrats both strongly contended that they were the true defenders of the founders’ vision for the country, with Republicans emphasizing a Union with limited slavery and Democrats pointing to a country built on states’ rights. Jefferson became an important wedge for Republicans in this vein. While Democrats


portrayed themselves as Jefferson’s rightful heirs, Republicans made good use of his many statements opposed to slavery and its expansion, going so far in one 1861 Milwaukee editorial to state, “Were Jefferson now living he would . . . be judged as an abolitionist and a coercionist.” Democrats had their own set of Jefferson quotes to defend their stance on slavery and used Washington’s Farewell Address and its call to avoid sectionalism against Republicans and their highly sectional antislavery rhetoric. Some saw the very existence of the northern-based party as an affront to Washington.

Even as they were used to highlight lines of division between North and South, Republicans and Democrats, the founders were still held up as the symbols of the nation. On the day after Washington’s birthday in 1863, New York Herald editor James Gordon Bennett asked,

Is it not a suggestive fact, that the rebels at Richmond and throughout the confederacy were celebrating Washington’s birthday yesterday with the same vim, vigor and splendor as the people of New York and the North? Does not this show that—all local prejudices aside—the people of the North and South still have the same patriotism and the same heart? Should not this teach us that if the leading extremists of both sections—the leading rebels at the South and the abolitionists at the North—were put down the passes of both divisions of our common country would soon reunite fraternally and eternally? Neither section will give up Washington, the father of the nation; and if both would but follow his advice, and “make those mutual concessions which are requisite to the general prosperity,” we should have no more civil wars.

29. Lincoln rejected the criticism that Republican principles violated Washington’s Farewell Address. See “Address at Cooper Institute, New York City,” February 27, 1860, Basler, Collected Works, 3:536–37.
30. “Washington’s Birthday North and South,” New York Herald, February 24, 1863. A writer in San Francisco offered a similar sentiment: “No person can read Washington’s ‘Farewell Address’ at this time, without coming to the conclusion that the Government of the country will not be destroyed; that the dependence of the North and South upon the other is so very great, that a dissolution cannot possibly take place. The struggle may continue for some time to come, but the disadvantages are so apparent—indeed, overwhelming—that the more information the people possess, the less likely will they be to sustain rulers who do not make the unity of the States an ultimatum.” George Washington—The Lesson He Taught of Union, San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin, February 23, 1863. Also see “Washington’s Birthday,” New York Times, February 22, 1864.
More than just symbols of the Union, and despite the bitterness of the previous dozen years, Washington and the founders represented a shared national past and, hopefully, a shared national future.

The northern electorate in 1864 was not much concerned with the idea of a shared past and future. If anything, that year’s presidential contest demonstrated just how fractured the North truly was. On the surface the election pitted two political parties and two presidential candidates against each other, but a closer look revealed a myriad of factions within both parties competing to see their particular vision for the future enacted. Democrats generally fell into three camps: those who favored an immediate, negotiated peace with slavery left intact (Peace Democrats, or Copperheads); those who wanted to see the war prosecuted to a victorious conclusion and the restoration of the Union, but with emancipation dropped as a war aim (War Democrats); and those who chose to support the Lincoln administration in its conduct of the war, emancipation and all (they, at least temporarily, became members of the Republicans’ coalition National Union Party). The Republicans had always been something of an amalgamation party, with disparate groups coming together in the 1850s over a shared concern about slavery, but not otherwise enjoying ideological consistency. By early 1864, evidence suggested that Lincoln was generally popular among Republican voters but was generally opposed by Republican politicians. Some of Lincoln’s intraparty opponents objected to his handling of the war, others favored a one-term principle, and some just did not think that he could win reelection in the fall. The most significant opposition came from the radical, or unconditional, wing of the party, which believed that Lincoln was not doing enough to bring about the abolition of slavery and that his proposal for postwar reconstruction, which he revealed in December 1863, was too lenient on the South.31

In this environment the founding fathers remained a valuable source of guiding wisdom but also became a political tool that could be

utilized to bring divergent factions together and to clarify differences. Recognizing the divisions within the Republican Party, Lincoln’s supporters attempted to generate a groundswell of popular support for the president’s reelection early in the year by lining up newspaper and state party endorsements, which would culminate in popular demonstrations on Washington’s birthday. At the end of January the Union Lincoln Association of New York “proposed that on the 22d of February, 1864, all citizens of the United States, without regard to party, who are in favor of the re-election of Abraham Lincoln, shall meet at appropriate places within their towns, counties or States, for the purpose of giving public expression of their sentiments upon this most important question.” By organizing a national demonstration in support of Lincoln on Washington’s birthday, the Union Lincoln Association attempted to link support of Lincoln with support of Washington, and to capitalize on the already-gathering crowds around the country. Many observers, including Bennett’s New York Herald, criticized the Union Lincoln Association for attempting to “supersede” the party convention that would traditionally be responsible for nominating a presidential candidate. The Herald speculated that the president’s supporters were fearful that if his renomination was left up to a convention, he would be replaced on the ticket.  

Horace Greeley, the Republican editor of the New York Tribune, also condemned the Union Lincoln Association, arguing that more effort should be put toward ensuring that the Union army was at full strength rather than worrying about the presidential election so early in the year. In one speech Greeley “respectfully suggest[ed] that all existing or embryo political clubs, of whatever name or nature, devote their best energies for the ensuing month to the recruiting of the Union armies, and that we all take a fair and equal start in a public canvass for the Presidency so soon as we shall have been officially advised that the ranks of our armies are full, and that our Generals are moving forward, strong-handed and confident, to the certain and final triumph of the National cause.” In the fourth year of the war, this was a near-impossible hurdle to cross. Greeley’s disapproval of the Union Lincoln Association had less to do with the army than with his desire to see Lincoln removed from the Republican ticket. When the supporters of Greeley’s favored candidate, treasury secretary Salmon P. Chase, organized themselves to challenge Lincoln in

early February, Greeley readily appeared before them to argue that the Union could not agree to peace without abolition. Chase’s supporters also inadvertently used Washington’s birthday to publicize their candidate. After circulating some anti-Lincoln literature early in February, a second document was prepared as a response to the Union Lincoln Association’s call for pro-Lincoln demonstrations on Washington’s birthday. This Pomeroy Circular, so-called because it was signed by Kansas senator Samuel C. Pomeroy, attacked Lincoln and advocated the nomination of Chase in his place. The document was still being privately circulated when the Washington Constitutional Union published it on February 20. The Associated Press transmitted the document nationwide two days later.

Another challenge to Lincoln came from the Republican Party’s first presidential candidate, John C. Frémont, whose supporters had a particularly skewed view of their candidate’s chances in early 1864. They predicted that Frémont would “succeed Lincoln by the largest majority ever given to a president.” One set of pro-Frémont pamphlets described the president as being “not the emancipator, as the people ignorantly suppose; on the contrary he is the Pharaoh of the nation, who will not let God’s people go.” They dismissed the “cant about Lincoln’s honesty” as being “always ridiculous,” and asserted that the “country wants something more than a ‘smutty joker’ for president.” Frémont’s supporters in Kentucky intended to call a convention on Washington’s birthday to nominate Frémont as an independent candidate to challenge both Lincoln and the Democrats. Frémont was more formally nominated as the candidate of the “Radical Democracy” by a convention in Cleveland, Ohio, at the end of May.

Neutral observers thought not that Chase and Frémont, on their own, posed much threat to Lincoln, but that these kinds of challenges from within his own party portended danger. As one editorial framed the situation, “it is clear that if we are to have a dirty scrimmage of this sort within the republican party, the democrats have only to keep

36. Zornow, Lincoln and the Party Divided, 72–86. Zornow noted that Frémont had no expectation of actually winning the election and that his main goal was to see Lincoln defeated. When he finally withdrew in September, he did so to prevent the election of a Democrat and not to help Lincoln. Ibid., 144–47.
cool and decent and take the government for the next four years.” 37

In the New York Herald, Bennett noted the “remarkable coincidence” of Republican infighting taking place on Washington’s birthday but dismissed the efforts of Lincoln’s, Chase’s, and Frémont’s supporters, instead throwing his support behind General Ulysses S. Grant as “the only compromise candidate upon whom the Union men of all parties can be combined.” Without compromise, Bennett predicted, “the Presidential campaign will involve the country in a most fearful, demoralizing and dangerous squabble of the miserable factions of the day.” 38 Three such factions within the Republican Party had settled on Washington’s birthday as the fitting occasion to inaugurate their campaigns. Each hoped that it could take advantage of greater public awareness and national thinking, but the people did not ultimately use the day to rise up in support of Lincoln, and all of the Republican challenges to the president ultimately fizzled. Grant had no interest in running for president with the war unfinished; Chase offered his resignation from the cabinet and dropped out of the race after the publication of the Pomeroy Circular; and Frémont had no real organization supporting him, although he did remain in the race until September. 39

While Republicans were attempting to latch themselves onto the popularity of Washington’s birthday, Democrats tried to use the day to undermine their opponents. An editorial in Washington’s Constitutional Union cited Henry Lee’s eulogy of Washington, proclaiming him to be “first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen,” and complained that “the last clause of the eulogy no longer retains its pristine verity. . . . The memory of the hero who achieved our independence, and the sage who presided over the convention, that bequeathed us our Constitution, seems to have vanished from the minds and been crushed out of the hearts of the people by the agency of the dominant party.” This was a pointed attack against the Republicans, who were, according to the writer, “unwilling that [Washington] should be held up as father or example . . . because he was guilty of slaveholding.” The writer still had hope, though, “that a lucid period will return, and that the people—the people—will shake off the shackles, forged in the workshops of abolitionism, and fastened on their limbs by their party leaders.” To demonstrate the “resolve

to return to the good old days of Washington and the other fathers, we should solemnize the coming anniversary [of Washington’s birthday] with the zealous earnestness, which was exhibited by the early inheritors of the boons, which we have forfeited for the promotion of negro prosperity.” The Democratic editors of the Constitutional Union were attempting to array their party and George Washington against Lincoln, the Republicans, and abolition.40

Washington’s birthday was an obvious moment on the calendar to pause and reconsider the ongoing relevance of Washington and the founding fathers for the United States, but the founders helped shape political rhetoric and messaging throughout the 1864 campaign. Lincoln was unanimously nominated as the candidate of the National Union Party (the coalition of Republicans and pro-war Democrats) at their convention in Baltimore on June 7–8. The Democratic convention had originally been scheduled to convene in Chicago on July 4, but the party postponed until August 29, hoping that the war would go poorly during the summer campaigns and that they could capitalize on declining public support for the president. For much of the summer, that seemed like a prescient decision, as the Union armies failed to make any popularly discernible progress toward winning the war.41 By August, Lincoln and his party were convinced that there was no hope for reelection. For months the Democrats, who had yet to nominate a candidate of their own and thus provide a definite target for Republican vitriol, had been coming after Lincoln and making effective use of the founders in their attacks. Most political pieces in 1864 that did more than simply report on campaign events took the form of either glowing tributes to a candidate’s accomplishments and abilities or attacks on those same accomplishments and abilities. For these purposes the founders and their legacies were extraordinarily useful. They represented a point of common reference that virtually every American knew something about, thus allowing for ready comparisons between past and present.

Democrats frequently accused Lincoln of abusing federal authority and trampling on the rights of the states. They easily pointed back to the American Revolution, which was fought in defense of rights and the independence of the states, to argue that Lincoln was not


41. Johnson, Decided on the Battlefield.
upholding the legacies of the founders and that he was rendering their accomplishments meaningless. A January 1864 editorial in the *Philadelphia Daily Age* made a simple historical observation: “In the days of the American Revolution, a large party existed in America, who were jealous of the extension of [the] power of the people; its adherents were opposed to the revolution, were favorable to unconditional submission to the tyranny of King George and to unconditional support of his government; thus they were the enemies of George Washington, and they were called Tories.” The supporters of Abraham Lincoln were the new “unconditional supporters of the government” and were also Tories. By the transitive property, Lincoln was thus a direct opponent of George Washington and the American Revolution, and it was up to the Democrats to restore the rightful order. Later in the year, another writer found irony in northern celebrations of Independence Day given that the Lincoln administration had repeatedly trampled on so many of the same rights that the British had violated before the Revolution.

While the Revolution was a compelling example, partisans in 1864 were also interested in judging Lincoln by the standard of Washington’s presidency. Multiple writers and orators pointed to Washington’s decision to treat with the Whiskey rebels in 1794 and judged Lincoln a failure because he refused to treat with the Confederacy. A Massachusetts Democrat developed an entire speech around a comparison between the administrations of Washington and Lincoln, “which told fearfully against the latter.” Emma Webb, an actress who occasionally lectured in favor of slavery and sectional compromise, took issue with Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. She specifically found fault in Lincoln’s conclusion that even though the nation had been founded on the principle of freedom, there was still a need to call for a new birth of it. This call, in Webb’s assessment, was an “insult [to] the memory of George Washington.” Copperhead newspaper editor Samuel Medary addressed an editorial to Lincoln directly, asserting, “Were Washington alive to-day he would wish to die. When Fanatics compare you

42. “Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land!,” *Philadelphia Daily Age*, January 5, 1864.
to Washington his bones rattle in their tomb at Mount Vernon.” After ordering Lincoln to “Read [Washington’s] Farewell Address,” Medary offered a closing plea to “Let us follow the counsels of the Fathers. The South, history will assert, has been fighting for our liberties as well as their own.” Very few of Lincoln’s northern opponents went so far as to defend the South.

Medary referenced that some of Lincoln’s supporters had taken to comparing the president to Washington in an effort to historically contextualize the magnitude of what Lincoln and the country faced. One speaker in June compared the accomplishments of Washington and Lincoln, noting that “Abraham Lincoln was as much raised up by a special Providence to carry this Nation through this War as George Washington was to carry it through the War of the Revolution.”

English abolitionist George Thompson, while on a speaking tour of the United States in early 1864, equated “George Washington as the founder of American Independence” and “Abraham Lincoln, by his proclamation for the extermination of slavery, as the founder of American liberty.” In another version of the speech, Thompson expressed the belief that “future generations would remember with equal gratitude George Washington, the founder of American independence, and Abraham Lincoln, the liberator of the slave.” Two months later, Thompson observed, “George Washington . . . gave the American nation the boon of independence. In one day Abraham Lincoln has conferred a more estimable blessing, by proclaiming the Federal nation the home of impartial and universal freedom.” These were bold statements about Lincoln’s historical significance, especially coming from a foreigner.

As Lincoln had discovered when he compared himself to Washington on his departure from Springfield in February 1861, such comparisons were not always well received, especially by Democrats. An editorial in the Democratic Republican Farmer of Bridgeport, Connecticut, took serious issue with Thompson’s remarks. Touching on many of the Democrats’ most common critiques of Lincoln, the editorial complained, “George Washington, the founder of American liberty, must, according to this authority, take a lower place in the estimation

47. “Another ‘Voice from the Pit,’” Columbus (Ohio) Crisis, September 7, 1864. Also see “Democratic Principles,” Logansport (Ind.) Democratic Pharos, June 15, 1864.
49. “Welcome to America!” Liberator, February 12, 1864.
51. “George Thompson,” Republican Farmer, April 15, 1864.
of his countrymen, when the claims of Abraham Lincoln are considered. Washington, by sacrifices, hardships, self-denial, years of patient endurance, was the chief instrument in the hands of an overruling Providence for the establishment of a free government for white men.”

The writer continued, describing it as “almost blasphemous to mention the name of Abraham Lincoln in the same paragraph with that of Washington. The one the ‘Father of his country’ — the other the destroyer of a great people’s liberties, the foe of constitutional government, and the enemy of civil liberty.”

It is unsurprising that not everyone agreed with the suggestion that Lincoln was greater than Washington. With the Civil War, and thus the project of emancipation that Thompson found so praiseworthy, still incomplete, it was egregiously presumptuous to really compare, let alone equate, Washington and Lincoln. Nonetheless, it was interesting that the response to Thompson’s presumption was a brutal attack on Lincoln himself, as if to erase any doubt that the comparison to Washington was not valid.

Republicans were just as willing to condemn the opposition for making comparisons to the founders. On Washington’s birthday, Greeley’s *New York Tribune* observed, “When a Copperhead is at his wits end for something to say, he can always, and especially when the 22d of February is approximating, emit ‘glittering generalities’ about George Washington, and declare that if he were now living he would be a Copperhead chieftain. As these babblers profess to hold the memory of Washington in the highest respect, and to regard him as a model patriot and an immaculate statesman, we hope to be pardoned for suggesting to them that a slight study of the life and character of their idol might add novelty and possibly biographical accuracy to their lucubrations.”

Given that both parties were guilty of committing the crime of biographical inaccuracy, this was a disingenuous critique. Greeley continued to push the issue, though, projecting that “If the Father of his Country had been two hundred years in his tomb, something might be gained to a desperate cause by ascribing to him opinions which he never held, and sentiments which his letter[s] show that he abhorred. . . . We do consider it to be dreadfully disgraceful that one whose good name and fame should be so affectionately and reverently cherished should be dragged from his grave to be used as the mere tool of prejudice, cruelty, error, and tyranny.”

This editorial represented the proverbial double whammy. It was an attack

52. Ibid.
against the Copperheads for maligning and misusing the memory of Washington while also being an attack against the Copperheads for not living up to the memory of Washington. And again, as one side connected itself to the founders, the other used extreme language to negate the connection.

One of the more common tactics used by both Republicans and Democrats was to depict their candidates’ poor treatment at the hands of the opposition as a feather in their cap due to the similar abuse that Washington had been subjected to during his public career. After the Democratic convention nominated General George B. McClellan for president, a Lincoln supporter writing in the *Providence Evening Press* asked, “Is there a man who, preferring the principles represented by Abraham Lincoln to those represented by George B. McClellan, yet hesitates to vote for the former because his enemies call him ignorant and incapable?” Anyone facing this dilemma should have trusted their instincts rather than submitting to public pressures, because under similar pressures, they “would have been deterred from voting for the re-election of George Washington and Andrew Jackson for identically the same style of abuse. . . . And yet, upon the roll of the Presidents, the two names which shine with the purest historical lustre, and which are kept dearest in the popular affections, are those of George Washington and Andrew Jackson. Posterity, whatever injustice his cotemporaries may do him, will add to these the name of Abraham Lincoln.”

While the purity of Jackson’s “historical lustre” has justifiably come into question in the century and a half since this statement was made, the writer’s assessment of Lincoln’s eventual place in the annals of history proved correct, even if this was not the most persuasive reason to vote for his reelection in 1864.

Not to be outdone in protesting unfair abuse, Democrats were just as quick to marshal Washington’s poor treatment as a historical precedent in support of McClellan, even before his nomination. One article remarked, “Those of his friends who have concluded that this young General is the best-abused man this country has ever known, are greatly mistaken. If they will turn to the files of a paper called the *Aurora*, published in Philadelphia during the last century, they will find that George Washington was denounced, day after day and month after month as a liar, a scoundrel, a cheat, a thief, and as a man almost unfit to live. The good and great Washington withstood all those infernal epithets, and his detractors are only remembered to be

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despised. May not a similar fate be the inheritance of the demagogue enemies of McClellan?" 55 Another newspaper remarked on the similarity of “the efforts to defame and injure McClellan” in 1864 and “the intrigues against Washington in 1777.” 56 Reading these comparisons today, the association of Washington and Lincoln seems reasonable while that of Washington and McClellan seems a bit silly, but this style of rhetoric was a remarkably convenient way for writers to tie their candidate to a heroic past and to dismiss the legitimacy of the criticisms offered against him without actually refuting any of those criticisms.

When the Democrats finally did convene on August 29, the plan for delay seemed to have worked perfectly, with many observers from both parties predicting defeat for the president. 57 While events beyond the Democrats’ control would ultimately seal their electoral fate, they did themselves no favors with the decisions they made at the convention. Most notorious was the “war failure” plank of their party platform, which declared “that after four years of failure to restore the Union by the experiment of war, during which . . . the Constitution itself has been disregarded in every part, and public liberty and private right alike trodden down, . . . justice, humanity, liberty, and the public welfare demand that immediate efforts be made for a cessation of hostilities, with a view of an ultimate convention of the States, or other peaceable means, to the end that, at the earliest practicable moment, peace may be restored on the basis of the Federal Union of the States.” 58 Epitomizing the concept of mixed messages, the Democrats paired this peace platform with the pro-war McClellan as their presidential nominee. For vice president they nominated the adamantly pro-peace George Pendleton. It took McClellan more than a week to accept the nomination, and when he did, he explicitly rejected the party’s pro-peace platform. 59

55. “Washington and McClellan,” Wisconsin Daily Patriot, April 12, 1864. The exception to the claim that Washington’s detractors were “only remembered to be despised” was Jefferson, who condemned Washington and whose supporters were the ones publishing the most significant attacks against the president.
57. In August, there was even a movement by some radical Republicans to call a new convention in Cincinnati to replace Lincoln and Frémont with a better Republican candidate. Waugh, Reelecting Lincoln, 270–72.
The “war failure” plank of the Chicago platform worked against the Democrats in four tangible ways. First, on September 2 (two days after the convention adjourned), General William Tecumseh Sherman’s army occupied Atlanta, proving somewhat definitively that the Civil War had not been a failure. Second, one of the dominant themes of the Republican campaign against the Democrats became a grand accusation of treason. To a significant degree the charge represented rhetorical hyperbole, but between the “war failure” plank and the actual treasonous activities of secret societies such as the Sons of Liberty (another Revolutionary callback) in states like Indiana, it was hyperbole that carried weight. Third, opposition to the Democrats and their platform led the radical Republicans who had spent the year searching for alternatives to Lincoln to line back up in support of the president. Finally, one of McClellan’s great strengths as a candidate was his immense popularity with the soldiers. The Civil War was the first election in which soldiers were allowed to vote in the field (or were furloughed home to those states that did not make such allowances), and the Democrats expected these votes to tilt heavily in their favor. Instead, Lincoln received a large majority of the soldier votes. A variety of factors contributed to this result, but soldier resentment of the “war failure” plank was chief among them. Given these factors and the Democratic Party’s internal divisions, the founding fathers became both a patriotic and a unifying focus of their campaign. The founders were implicit in the party’s campaign slogan, “The Union as it was, and the Constitution as it is.” While the slogan, which was originally adopted in 1862, was as much about expressing opposition to emancipation as it was about the election of McClellan, it conveyed the idea that a vote for the Democrats was a vote to preserve the country as established by Washington, Jefferson, and Madison.

Democrats saw their party as the defenders of the founders’ ideals, and they saw their candidate as the founders’ true heir. At one pro-McClellan meeting in Massachusetts, former Salem mayor Joseph S.


61. For a recent treatment of the soldier vote in 1864, see Jonathan W. White, Emancipation, the Union Army, and the Reelection of Abraham Lincoln (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014).

62. For a counterpoint arguing that this slogan should really have belonged to the Republicans, see “The Union as It Was, and the Constitution as It Is,” New York Times, October 18, 1864.
Cabot expressed his belief that McClellan was “honest, capable and faithful so the Constitution.” By electing him as president, the American people would “restore the Government to its purity as it was formed and organized by Washington and Jefferson, and administered by Jackson.” At the same event, another Salem politician, William D. Northend, accused the Republicans of fearing “that the Union as George Washington made it, will be the Union under which our children will live.” Northend predicted that “history will record not one but two saviours of their country, and that upon the same illuminated page will be recorded the names of George Washington and George B. McClellan.”63 Standing at a distance of 150 years, it is difficult to determine how earnestly McClellan’s supporters believed these grand historical comparisons or if they simply represented easy points of reference in the midst of a hotly contested election. What can be said with greater certainty is that the people making these comparisons did not understand their nation’s history given how fundamentally different Washington, Jefferson, and Jackson were in their principles and administrations.

An extraordinarily more superficial way that Democrats attempted to link Washington with McClellan in the minds of the voters was by highlighting that the first president and both of the party’s nominees were named George. A speaker at a Democratic campaign event in Washington pointed to a portrait of George Washington and “called the attention of the Association to the fact that one George had made the country, and the second George would preserve it. George Washington, George McClellan—George Pendleton—he proposed three cheers for the three Georges, which were given with uproarious might.”64 References to the Georges became commonplace in the ensuing weeks, leading the Ohio Statesman to publish a sarcastic rejoinder: “The people want another George, to save the country, as much as they wanted the first George, to beget it; and they believe that God has provided for their want now as He did then. They believe, that, as Washington was the father of his country, McClellan will be the savior of his country. This is the sublime and touching faith of the people! What sober-minded patriot, what thoughtful man, shall scoff it?”65 While there was a dismissive tone to the piece, subtly calling into question the actual relevance of the name George, the idea of the

65. Editorial, Ohio Statesman (Columbus, Ohio), September 12, 1864.
Georges had gained enough public traction that someone felt the need to respond.

Attaching significance to shared first names cut both ways. Republicans took to attacking McClellan for also sharing a first name with King George III, Britain’s king at the time of the American Revolution. Democrats fought back, though, not just by reiterating that George was the first name of the nation’s “first, most venerated, and most illustrious ruler” but by pointing out that Abraham happened to be “a favorite appellation” of the despotic rulers of Turkey, and Andrew (the first name of Lincoln’s running mate) had been the name of three different kings of Hungary. Taking the episode to its logical conclusion, the Democrats surmised that “the cause of the Republican hostility to the Christian name of Washington is apparent. To his great influence it was mainly due that the Constitution was adopted by the Convention and ratified by the respective States.—That instrument it is which secures the liberties of the people and restricts the authority of the rulers. And this is sufficient to account for the hatred which the Republicans entertain against the names of Washington and McClellan.”66 From this perspective, Republicans linked George McClellan to George III rather than to George Washington because they resented the Constitution and its limits on government power. The reasoning here was a little strained, but it was consistent with the larger trend in the Democrats’ usage of Washington and the founders to attack Lincoln: they saw the founders as favoring limited government and states’ rights and they saw Lincoln as rejecting those limitations.

After a hard-fought campaign, in which the Republicans and Democrats presented the voters with two visions of the country’s past and future, Lincoln was reelected by significant margins, winning 212 electoral votes (to only 21 for McClellan) and 55 percent of the popular vote. It is impossible to know what impact the founding fathers had on the northern electorate in 1864, to know how much they contributed to Lincoln’s reelection or McClellan’s defeat. The reality is that Sherman’s victory in Atlanta and the divisiveness of the Democrats’ platform likely had a far more significant impact on the outcome than did rhetoric about Washington or Jefferson. The point of this article has not been to suggest that Lincoln won or that McClellan lost as a result of this kind of rhetoric. Instead, the goal has been to uncover the extent to which the American people tried to understand the election of 1864 through the lens of their nation’s founders. Some partisans

certainly took a mercenary approach to the founders, invoking them purely for political gain rather than out of honestly held beliefs. But it is important to recognize that they did so because they believed that this approach would yield positive results for their candidates. Also important is that for many Americans the attachment to the founders, and especially to Washington, was genuine. By the 1860s relatively few Americans had been alive in the 1790s, let alone politically active, but the veneration of Washington was as much about honoring history as it was the celebration of family, community, and national traditions.67 The American people still revered their nation’s founding fathers, so much so that both campaigns attempted to frame the decision in 1864 as one to uphold the work of Washington and Jefferson or to break with the past and their wisdom.

* * *

After the election, Abram Wakeman, a former Whig congressman from New York, delivered a speech in which he revived the Washington-Lincoln comparison. “‘It is not yet time to predict with certainty the position that Abraham Lincoln will hold in history,’” Wakeman declared. “The life of no man can be called fortunate till it is closed. But of the results of his administration two already distinctly appear—a restored and firm nationality, and the final and complete abolition of slavery. The labors of other statesmen and reformers sink into insignificance when we contemplate the results of these two achievements. In view of these results only, it requires no sanguine prophet to see that the future millions of American freemen will cherish in their hearts two names as their greatest men and benefactors—George Washington, the father of their country, and Abraham Lincoln, its preserver.”68 Little did Wakeman or his audience know that in less than five months Lincoln’s life would be “closed.”

After Lincoln’s assassination, as writers and orators tried to make sense of a national (or at least northern) tragedy, many turned back to the founders and started seating Lincoln next to Washington. Paintings and poems, speeches and editorials made the connection in a variety

67. While there were not many, there were a few Americans who voted in the election of 1864 and gained brief notoriety for also having voted for George Washington. See, for example, “A Man Who Voted for Washington Votes for Lincoln,” Albany (N.Y.) Journal, November 18, 1864; “Miscellaneous. Washington and Lincoln,” Sandusky (Ohio) Daily Commercial Register, November 19, 1864. Also see Abraham Lincoln to John Phillips, November 21, 1864, Basler, Collected Works, 8:118.

68. “Mr. Wakeman at the Banquet of the Campaign Club,” New York Evening Post, November 26, 1864.
of logical and illogical, factual and emotional ways. Emblematic of these efforts was the eulogy offered by Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner on June 1, 1865. While much of the eulogy was devoted to a lengthy rehearsal of the events of Lincoln’s life, Sumner began with a discussion of the circumstances that linked Lincoln and Washington. Sumner believed that the “association” of the two was natural “because the part which Lincoln was called to perform resembled in character the part which was performed by Washington. The work left undone by Washington was continued by Lincoln.” Central to Sumner’s portrayal of Washington and Lincoln, the American Revolution and the Civil War, was the Declaration of Independence. “Since enmity to the Union proceeded entirely from enmity to the great ideas of the Declaration,” Sumner declared, “history must record that the question of the Union itself was absorbed in the grander conflict to uphold those primal truths which our fathers had solemnly proclaimed.” Before the war Lincoln had seen the conflict between himself and Stephen A. Douglas, Republicans and Democrats, North and South, freedom and slavery, as a contest over these “primal truths.” In Lincoln’s view and in Sumner’s, the Civil War had confirmed the founders’ vision for the nation. “The cornerstone of National Independence is already in its place,” Sumner concluded, “and on it is inscribed the name of George Washington. There is another stone which must have its place at the corner also. This is the great Declaration itself, once a promise only, at last a reality. On this adamantine stone we will gratefully inscribe the name of Abraham Lincoln.”

69. For a more thorough discussion of the Washington-Lincoln comparisons in the period after Lincoln’s assassination, see Merrill D. Peterson, Lincoln in American Memory (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 24–29, esp. 27.

70. Charles Sumner, The Promises of the Declaration of Independence. Eulogy on Abraham Lincoln, Delivered before the Municipal Authorities of the City of Boston. June 1, 1865 (Boston: J. E. Farwell, 1865), 6, 8–9, 66–67.