"I say, Mr. Speaker, that it was that meeting of the factious governors at Altoona, and the pressure they then brought to bear, and had previously with others brought to bear, on the President of the United States . . . that caused him to abandon his original policy."

Thus Representative Robert Mallory of Kentucky on June 25, 1864, excoriated the Emancipation Proclamation and the Lincoln government's yielding to the demands of the radical abolitionist faction for a "cruel and bloody" proscription of the Southern people. Promptly the Republicans denounced Mallory's implications, and solemnly asserted that "Divine Providence" alone had inspired the Emancipation Proclamation. They importuned Lincoln and extracted from him a statement that, "I never thought of the meeting of the governors at all. When Lee came over the Potomac, I made a resolve that if McClellan drove him back I would send the Proclamation after him." Then Congressman James G. Blaine caught Mallory in error on the date of the Altoona Conference, and solemnly discredited the Kentuckian's charges.¹

As a result, the orthodox account of the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation became one in which Lincoln bargained with his Maker to exchange a victory at Antietam for freedom for the slaves. The coincidence of the defeat and the preliminary proclamation made the explanation credible, but a survey of the political situation among the Republicans from January to September, 1862, indicates that Representative Mallory’s intuition was better than his facts. The Altoona Conference was at least as important as Divine Providence in precipitating Lincoln’s act.

By the beginning of 1862 Abraham Lincoln and the abolitionists were at swords’ points. The Radicals among the Republicans had formulated a program which aimed at destroying slavery, ridding the nation of the dangers of Southern domination, and securing Southern wealth for Northern conquerors. First item on their agenda was the substitution of kindred spirits like John C. Fremont for “proslavery” generals like George B. McClellan. That accomplished, they hoped to force an emancipation proclamation with concomitant enlistment of Negro soldiers and a confiscation act of the type demanded by Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania. By early spring the Radicals saw signs for encouragement on each of their aims. The President had reduced McClellan’s command to the Army of the Potomac and had transferred some of his forces to Fremont’s newly created Mountain Department; congressional acceptance of a joint emancipation and confiscation measure was imminent.

Confident though some of the Radicals were of a successful outcome for Union arms, Abraham Lincoln constantly waged a desperate struggle to keep an army in the field. The source of his difficulties was a 1795 law which provided the President with only those forces


which the state governors might supply from their militias. An initial wave of patriotism swamped the War Department, and led the state executives to insist upon furnishing additional men. But after Bull Run, enlistments slumped alarmingly. Henceforth Lincoln, the Secretary of War, and the governors ceaselessly battled with recruitment issues. By early summer of 1862 the situation was critical. A mid-March War Department inquiry concerning numbers of men in preparation for dispatch to Washington had brought only the discouraging replies that regiments were forming slowly or that new recruits were going for replacements in old regiments. Two months later many governors were sending replies which varied from pleas for more time, to promises to “do all possible,” and even to blunt confessions that regular civilian pursuits claimed the time and interests of eligible men.4

It was a reply of Governor John Andrew of Massachusetts, however, which provided the high lights on Lincoln’s and the Radicals’ different conceptions of the war. His constituents, said Andrew, were cool to the idea of fighting rebels who still enjoyed the assistance of their slaves. The Negroes, thought Andrew, could serve a double purpose if the President would liberate them and enlist them in the army. Lincoln was later to recall bitterly the implication of this expression of “conditional patriotism.”5

By the middle of 1862 the issues of non-radical generals, emancipation, Negro soldiers and confiscation had become hopelessly involved. Moreover, the governors showed both reluctance and inability to answer all the government’s demands for troops. Late in June, Washington experienced another of its repeated panics, and the governors responded apathetically to the War Department’s frantic call for men. The experience convinced Lincoln that he must either yield to the abolitionists or find some means of coercing the governors into redoubling their efforts to supply man power to the armies.

As a politician, Lincoln understood the mentality of the political heads of the states. With the aid of Secretary Seward—as apt as he in adroit maneuver—the President planned to build a fire behind the

8 Ibid., Series 3, II, 45.
lagging governors. Mysteriously, the Secretary of State left Washington and appeared in New York where he closeted himself with the city's mayor. Rumor quickly had it that Seward had seen Philadelphia's mayor, and that he was enroute to Boston. The rumor came immediately—as Seward intended it should—to Pennsylvania's Governor Andrew G. Curtin, recuperating from an illness in a New York hotel. Curtin knocked at Seward's door, and entered to argue with the Secretary that the raising of troops was a gubernatorial and not a mayoral function. Seward agreed, and brought forth a letter which he and Lincoln had drafted. It was a letter to be signed by the governors, asking Lincoln to call for more troops. In addition, Seward showed Curtin the President's reply—both letter and reply being appropriately predated—and Curtin went away to the telegraph office. He wired the other governors asking them to join with him in signing the call. The governors had no alternative: they had glimpsed the power which might come to Lincoln if the President relied on mayors and citizens' committees for troops. They signed the call, and sat down to ponder the best way to exert the efforts they had promised.6

If Abraham Lincoln intended to join with citizens to build fires behind the governors, the Radicals could play the same game. They could line up significant support among Northern businessmen by painting visions of fabulous profits if the administration would only prosecute a truly abolitionist war. Expeditionary and colonization projects to Texas and other Southern regions would promptly materialize. Already the Radicals were pushing a Confiscation Act through Congress. The act, they hoped, would open the Southern states to colonization either by Negroes or by Northern soldiers.

The moment for enlisting the businessmen of the country in the radical cause was opportune. When Seward had gone to New York

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he had talked to the Union Defense Committee. This committee, which had rendered valiant service in the first months of the war, was ready to disband. The Secretary had persuaded a dozen members to reconsider, and, meeting with them at the Astor House, had convinced them that he and the President needed their support. In the long run, this move proved a boon to the Radicals rather than to the administration. The rejuvenated Committee passed without a struggle into radical hands, and comparable committees in other cities sprang into renewed life. Soon there was a wave of "war meetings" throughout the country. Each meeting adopted prearranged resolutions demanding an abolitionist war. By the beginning of August, James A. Hamilton, son of the first Secretary of the Treasury, was talking of schemes "in contemplation" to organize a Committee of One Hundred to call on the President and force both him and the cabinet to declare themselves on the radical program.7

On September 3, 1862, three members of the New York National War Committee met with five New England governors at Providence, Rhode Island, and in meetings which they tried to keep unpublicized agreed that "the unanimous choice of New England was for a change of the cabinet and a change in the generals." The governors sent the New York delegates to Washington to tell the President so. The committee, therefore, led by John E. Williams and James A. Hamilton, called first on Salmon P. Chase, who welcomed them warmly but advised them to approach Lincoln cautiously. But on September 10, when they interviewed President Lincoln, they lashed out furiously against Secretary Seward, and Williams blurted out a request for the removal of McClellan. Lincoln took advantage of their intemperance, accused them of being willing to do anything—even to ruining the country—to get rid of Seward, and dismissed them. On the next day in conference with James A. Hamilton, however, Lincoln was in a different mood. He listened patiently to the

7 Proceedings at the Mass Meeting of Loyal Citizens on Union Square, New York, 15th day of July 1862, Under the Auspices of the Chamber of Commerce of the State of New York, the Union Defence Committee of the Citizens of New York, the Common Council of the City of New York, and Other Committees of Loyal Citizens. Letters and Speeches (New York, 1862); George W. Smith, Generative Forces of Union Propaganda; A Study in Civil War Pressure Groups (unpublished doctoral dissertation in the library of the University of Wisconsin), 164-170; Chicago Tribune, July 21, 22, 23, 25, 29, 31, August 1, 1862; O. R., Series 3, II, 253.
New York Radical and asked him to submit to him a suitable plan for the emancipation of the Negro. The Providence meeting, coincident with Lee’s Antietam campaign, gave impetus to the proposal, current since the Radicals’ summer agitation, that the loyal governors should meet to discuss the whole problem of the conduct of the war. John Andrew confided to the radical Count Gurowski that he was trying to organize a movement to save the President from ruining the country. William Cullen Bryant backed the same movement, and William Gannaway “Parson” Brownlow added his voice to the appeal for a meeting. One of Governor Richard Yates’ constituents wrote that the governors would be wise to ask Lincoln to “drive his generals” or resign or face a gubernatorial threat to recall state troops. Zach Chandler wrote Senator Lyman Trumbull that he feared “nothing will save us but a demand of the loyal governors, backed by a threat—that a change of policy and men shall instantly be made. . . .”

The pressure was growing stronger, and a conference of the governors, under radical auspices, was in the air. Even Pennsylvania’s Curtin felt it, and consulted Lincoln about a countermove. With the President’s consent, he inquired of John Andrew whether it would not be well for the loyal governors to meet to “take measures for the more active support of the government?” When Andrew agreed, Curtin added the support of Governors David Tod and Francis Pierpont to an official invitation to a meeting. Hence the call of the governors went out under the auspices of moderates whom Lincoln could control. The place was set for Altoona, Pennsylvania, and the

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9 Andrew to Gurowski, September 6, 1862, Andrew Mss. Letterbooks, Massachusetts Historical Society; A. B. Schaeffer to Yates, September 8, 1862, Yates Mss., Illinois Historical Library, Springfield; Chandler to Trumbull, September 10, 1862, Trumbull Mss., Library of Congress; Parke Godwin, A Biography of William Cullen Bryant with Extracts from His Private Correspondence (2 vols., New York, 1883), II, 179; New York World, September 9, 1862.
date for September 24. During the next ten days all the sharpest shafts of radicalism converged upon the administration. A Massachusetts and an Illinois Republican convention declared in favor of abolitionist principles; the New York National War Committee threatened to go into action because of the Pennsylvania invasion; the Tribune shouted for emancipation; Thurlow Weed and others were in Washington announcing their conversion to emancipation as an appeal for popular support for the war. Abraham Lincoln, realizing that the winds of radicalism were blowing stronger, moved to steal the Radicals’ thunder.

Two days before the Altoona Conference, the President asked his cabinet for advice on the wording of an emancipation proclamation which he had decided to issue. He wished that the country were in a better position, and admitted that the action of the army against the rebels had not been quite what he would have liked. But, he said, he had promised his Maker that, if the army should be driven from Maryland, he would issue the proclamation.

The preliminary Emancipation Proclamation appeared in the papers the following day. John A. Andrew read it on the train which was carrying him to Altoona. Had the Massachusetts Radical possessed more sense of humor, he would have realized how clever Lincoln was. For the proclamation did not free any slaves and it did not furnish black soldiers to take the place of white men on the battlefields. Instead, the President declared that the war would

10 Yates to Tod, August 11, 1862, in Yates Letterbook dated February 14, 1862, to April 24, 1863, 486; John Gridley to Yates, September, 1862, Yates Mss.; Salomon to Yates, September 11, 1862, Yates Mss.; Yates to Salomon, September 12, 15, 16, Wisconsin Mss. (Telegrams, 1862–1865), Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison; Francis A. Hoffman to Salomon, September 16, in Wisconsin Governors’ Papers (Relations with the United States and with Other States, 1862), Wisconsin Historical Society; O. K., Series 3, II, 543; Warden, Chase, 469; New York Tribune, September 23, 25; Baltimore Sun, September 15; Philadelphia Press, September 2; Philadelphia Daily Evening Bulletin, September 13, 17; Chicago Tribune, September 17, 1862.


12 Nicolay and Hay, Lincoln, VI, 158–160.
continue to be prosecuted for the purpose of restoring the union; he reiterated his intention of recommending compensated emancipation; he offered to entertain plans for colonization of Negroes. There was scarcely a hint of radicalism in the whole document.

Hence the governors assembled in Altoona with the Emancipation Proclamation hanging over them. The astute Lincoln had cut the ground from under the Radicals, and, politicians as they all were, they knew it. Governor Curtin, with an unconcealed twinkle in his eye, met his colleagues at the town's only hotel. When they gathered in the Logan House parlor there were, in addition to Tod, Curtin, and Pierpont, a New England delegation of Andrew, Maine's Israel Washburne, Rhode Island's William Sprague, and New Hampshire's Nathaniel Berry, a Midwestern group consisting of Illinois's Yates, Wisconsin's Edward Salomon, and Iowa's Samuel Kirkwood, while Maryland's Augustus Bradford and New Jersey's Charles Olden represented eastern moderates. Indiana's Oliver P. Morton had sent one D. J. Rose as his personal representative. New York's Edwin D. Morgan, no longer the leader of his state's Republicans, had refused to attend. Connecticut's William Buckingham was still enroute, and Michigan's Austin Blair was attending the state Republican Convention in Detroit, and too busy securing his own renomination to journey to Altoona.

Preorganization conversation among the gathering governors foretold a coming conflict. Moderate and Border State men had come to talk of ways to force the national government to make better use of state-supplied men and materials; they had no quarrel with the general policy of the conduct of the war. The Radicals came to effect a complete change of war policies; they were prepared to press the standard radical demands on proslavery generals, on emancipation and Negro enlistments, and on confiscation. The moderates won a first point when they made Bradford chairman of the meeting, and Curtin announced that the meeting would immediately formulate an address to direct the President toward a more vigorous prosecution of the war.

The first Altoona session, in which the governors discussed the Emancipation Proclamation, gave false promises of harmony. When they took their first recess at three o'clock, Curtin was positive that they could finish their consultation and have an address ready for transmission by the dinner hour. But Curtin had not conjured with the ire of the Radicals.
When the meeting reconvened at four o'clock, the Radicals had their guns loaded. No sooner had the gavel fallen than Andrew jumped to his feet with a blistering attack upon McClellan. That "traitor" must go. Who, asked the moderates, would take his place? "Fremont," answered Andrew; and his colleagues of the Providence meeting nodded agreement. Even Antietam, explained Andrew, was a rebel victory, their retreat a strategic one. But, declared Curtin, McClellan had saved Pennsylvania; and, said Tod, Ohio would stand by McClellan to the last. Until eight o'clock Andrew, Yates, and Sprague fought it out with Curtin, Tod, and Bradford. A second intermission gave each faction opportunity to prepare a draft for the address to President Lincoln.

At nine o'clock the governors assembled once more and Andrew presented a preamble and resolutions which approved the Emancipation Proclamation, reaffirmed radical principles, and demanded drastic changes in army personnel. Tempers flared again, but the moderates had the situation in hand. Both Tod and Salomon offered more temperate statements. But the Radicals were out to do or die. With Kirkwood supplementing their strength, they fought through the address point by point.

In the end, the moderates won and Andrew sat down to revise his document to conform with the compromises effected. The governors had agreed only on thanking Lincoln for the Proclamation and on urging him to organize 100,000 reserves for emergencies. There was much confusion and little meaning to their approval of the restoration of the Union, their "recognition" of the President's prerogatives, to their expression of loyalty to him, and to their tribute to the brave soldiers. There was no "conditional patriotism" in the "Address," no querulous mention of McClellan, no hint of rallying around Fremont's standard. Abraham Lincoln could afford to answer Andrew's early-morning wire with an invitation for the governors to conclude their conference with a visit to Washington—a circumstance which gave the Radicals one more hope that they might yet intrude their favorite issues.13

But the President was on his guard. During the long interview, which he granted upon their arrival on September 26, he listened patiently—sometimes they thought enraptured—to suggestions for improvement on details of recruiting, organizing, equipping and transporting troops, and then requested written recommendations on each problem.

The Radicals took heart and worked around to discussing methods of exchanging prisoners, granting furloughs, removing sick and wounded to home states, and, finally, to the effects of emancipation. Provokingly close to the subject of proslavery generals, the Radicals squirmed and tried to encourage each other to speak up. Finally, Iowa’s Kirkwood, hunched forward in his ill-fitting suit, abruptly announced that McClellan wasn’t very popular out his way. Would the President express himself on that general’s fitness for the position he held?

But Abraham Lincoln was too clever to answer a question which, if done negatively, would leave him no reason for retaining his general; if positively, would give him a share of radical opposition to McClellan. He therefore turned the responsibility for an answer squarely upon the inquisitor. Looking Kirkwood in the eye, he solemnly and deliberately enumerated McClellan’s accomplishments. He paused and sat forward. Could any patriot, he asked, doubt the loyalty, sincerity, and the ability of such a man?

No one broke the uneasy silence. The President indicated that this closed both the matter of General McClellan and the day’s discussion, and the governors took their leave as gracefully as they could.14

The “Address” which Andrew had formally presented at the beginning of the conference was a valuable document for Lincoln, and he used it to force the hands of the state executives. Andrew, in an uncomfortable position as its sponsor, solicited the signatures of the governors who had not come to Altoona. He got those of Vermont’s Holbrook, Minnesota’s Ramsey, Kansas’ Robinson, Oregon’s Gibbs, and California’s Stanford. But Robinson of Kentucky, Gamble of Missouri, Burton of Delaware, Olden of New Jersey and Morgan of

New York joined Maryland’s Bradford in rejecting the document.¹⁵

The failure of Border State and moderate governors to support the Emancipation Proclamation encouraged the Democrats. Their papers reiterated the charge that the Altoona conference was a plot to replace Lincoln with Fremont—“A Second Hartford Convention”—and they declared that conspiring governors had forced Lincoln to issue the Proclamation. They denounced the “Disloyal Governors of the Loyal States.” Although Governor Washburne thought the governors should deny the allegations, they did not do so. Republican papers merely said that the “Address” proved that the Democrats were “wretched calumniators” stirring up “counterrevolution and anarchy.” The “malevolence” of the “soul and infamous aspersions of the Vallandigham press” deserved only contempt. After Lincoln, political wizard that he was, denied that the conference had anything to do with the issuance of the proclamation, his story became the orthodox version. Thirty years later three surviving governors remembered only that they had assembled to strengthen the hand of their wartime leader.¹⁶

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¹⁵ Copies of telegrams, dated October 2–30, 1862, in Austin Blair Mss., Detroit Public Library.