

DID ABRAHAM LINCOLN DESERVE A SECOND TERM?

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Well, did he? Many men thought not. (Women had no say.)

Republican Abraham Lincoln carried 22 of the 25 states loyal to the Union, crushing Democrat George B. McClellan in the electoral count, but the popular vote wasn't so lopsided: 55% to 45%.

Former Union Gen. McClellan and his Democrats wanted peace. By 1864's election, the dead -- North and South -- numbered over half a million (a number that Americans today would not tolerate). No one can be blamed for believing that half a million dead is too much. If stopping the carnage meant recognizing the Confederacy as a nation and letting Southerners keep their slaves, 45% of Union voters thought this a good bargain.

By Election Day -- November 8, 1864 -- Union Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman had leveled Atlanta, the supply hub of the South, and his army was marching through Georgia, cutting the rebellious states in half. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant was outside the rebel capital of Richmond. The Union would win the war, and everybody knew it, but when? After another hundred thousand dead? Two hundred thousand?

The Union's "soldier vote," as historians call it, put Lincoln over. After three years of horrific combat, Union soldiers did not want a tie. They wanted to lick the rebels.

But "Did Abraham Lincoln deserve a second term?" is a personal question, and must be, as any vote is personal.

Put yourself in those times. Maybe you have a son of draft age and you don't want him exposed to this mayhem of carnage. Maybe, like a majority of Northerners, you don't give a damn about "Negro" slaves. Or maybe you do care, a lot, but not enough to see your son or your grandson or you, yourself, drafted into a war where so many are sacrificed.

The 13th Amendment that would abolish slavery has already been put before Congress the previous April and defeated. No one imagines that in two months Lincoln will again put forth the amendment and win (as related in Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*). All anyone knows for sure is that the killing goes on and on. As a voter, maybe you've had enough or you believe the country has had enough. Or your family and friends have died in the war and you can't bear more loss.

It's not a simple choice. It is not enough, in our time, to blithely assume you'd vote for Lincoln. That is why I wonder how would I cast my vote in 1864. Lincoln, and continue the war? Or McClellan, and end it?

It's an interesting exercise in history, self-honesty, and self-image.

Who would I have been in 1864? "Some the same 'n' some different," as Lincoln might say.

I worked as a typesetter in my 20s, and in these columns I'm something of a pamphleteer, so I imagine that Sicilian Mike, born in Palermo, Sicily, in 1798, is a typesetter and printer by trade and a pamphleteer by temperament. Like my parents, Sicilian Mike's are educated and political, dedicated to -- and suffering for -- the causes of working people.

Sicilian Mike's mother, like my mother, reads English, French, Italian, and German, follows European events closely, and speaks her beliefs to her children. (Her husband is under her thumb, as is not uncommon in Sicilian families.) She's keenly aware that France abolishes slavery in 1794 and Britain abolishes its slave trade in 1807. In 1815, when Sicilian Mike is 17, a journeyman printer, he sets type to announce "The Declaration of the Powers [of Europe] on the Abolition of the Slave Trade." Hatred of slavery and devotion to liberty has become the family tradition.

Sicilian to the bone, Sicilian Mike is suspicious of altruism and contemptuous of idealism. His feelings toward slavery are practical. He'd write: "A nation that makes one man a slave may make another man a slave, and that man may be you. Liberty and slavery cannot coexist."

By Sicilian Mike's young manhood, Europe has realized this, so his attitude toward slavery is mainstream. Only in the United States would an antislavery stance label him as a "radical abolitionist."

In 1840, Sicilian Mike is 42. A French typesetter, printer and pamphleteer named Pierre-Joseph Proudhon publishes *What Is Property? An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government*. For Proudhon, "property is theft." Proudhon believes society should be organized through workers' associations and cooperatives; he is against private ownership and centralized control. Proudhon is the first to call himself an "anarchist." Sicilian Mike follows suit as quickly as he can set type.

But Sicilian Mike is troubled by Proudhon's belief that social revolution may be achieved through peaceful means. Sicilians make lousy pacifists. Can that really happen, a peaceful revolution? He's hopeful but doubtful.

In 1848, against all expectations, workers' revolts spring up all over Europe. As in 2010 when Tunisia ignited the Arab Spring, so the revolutions of 1848 begin with Sicily's Palermo uprising. Sicilian Mike, age 50, is right in the middle of it. To his enduring grief, he experiences fully the how and why of the uprising's ultimate failure.

He's finished with Sicily. Italy is no better. There, Giuseppe Garibaldi is a flashy leader, but he has no ideas. Sicilian Mike believes that only through new ideas, like Proudhon's, can a just future be realized.

Why he ends up in the United States is unclear. He hates its toleration of slavery. Maybe, disgusted at his homeland's failures, he just takes the first boat out. Maybe he chooses the U.S. instead of, say, Brazil, because his mother taught him English, not Portuguese.

In 1864, age 66, he's a naturalized citizen in New York, a printer in English and Italian, but he writes only in Italian because he can't see how anyone may think clearly in a language as disorderly as English. His small readership consists of immigrant Italian and Sicilian intellectuals.

So, it's 1864: Lincoln or McClellan? It can't be McClellan. Peace with slavery is not peace and a people that tolerates slavery is not civilized.

But Lincoln? And all this killing? So many men who will not have the years that he, Sicilian Mike, has had? Has he the right to send them to fight for his cause? No. Of that, he is certain. He has not the right, but he may send them to war anyway, with his vote. Can he bring himself to do that?

During that autumn of 1864, Sicilian Mike is not grateful for democracy. He wasn't yet a citizen in 1860; this is his first vote and he does not welcome the choice.

From his mother, he learned that he must read everything, a lifelong and impossible assignment. He reads the U.S. Constitution. Many complain that Lincoln has violated the writ of *habeas corpus*, but Article I, Section 9, states: “The Privilege of the Writ of Habeas Corpus shall not be suspended, unless when in Cases of Rebellion or Invasion the public Safety may require it.” Lincoln is within his constitutional power in that instance, but what of his other authoritarian excesses?

The Gettysburg Address is very pretty, but, to Sicilian Mike, words have little meaning until they are fulfilled. He is painfully aware that he does not understand America, the airy philosophy of its Transcendentalists, the exploitation of its workers, and the corruption that is Manhattan. He is a stranger in a strange land, to which he often wishes he had not come, for this vote is an awful choice.

He decides for Lincoln the commander in chief who fights slavery, but it’s not a happy decision. The blood yet to be spilled will now be on his own hands. The future is most terribly uncertain. Sicilian Mike wonders if anybody understands or will ever understand America. Remembering his mother, he votes for an unknown and bloody future that frees all slaves.

More than ever, he wishes he could believe in a just God.

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