

## Document 7: Lincoln and the Blind Memorandum

By the late summer of 1864, the outcome of the Civil War was very uncertain. The grand campaigns initiated by Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman were sputtering in the face of heavy Confederate resistance. Abraham Lincoln was up for presidential re-election in November, and he thought he would lose to a candidate that would seek a negotiated peace with the Confederacy.

“You think I don’t know I am going to be beaten, but I do, and unless some great change takes place, beaten badly,” he told a fellow Republican. The people of the Union were “wild for peace,” declared Thurlow Weed, a prominent Republican who informed Secretary of State William Seward that Lincoln’s re-election was “an impossibility.”



The Democratic candidate was popular former Gen. George B. McClellan, who had risen to the command of all the Union armies only to be fired by Lincoln after he repeatedly hesitated to attack the Rebels. The peace platform adopted by the Democrats called for “a cessation of hostilities”, and while calling for “peace may be restored on the basis of the Federal Union of the States,” also seemed to make clear that they would embrace peace with or without Union.

“It is remarkable that there was even an election held,” says historian Joan Waugh of the University of California at Los Angeles. No nation had ever held an election in the midst of Civil War. At stake was not merely Lincoln’s continued occupation of the White House but the fate of millions of African Americans still held in Southern bondage and perhaps the existence of the Union itself, perhaps the most consequential presidential election in American history to this day.

On August 23, Lincoln wrote the memo below. He folded the memo into an envelope and told his cabinet members to sign the envelope without reading it. One interpretation is that he wanted a potential President-Elect McClellan after the election to have known his thoughts before it but didn’t want word to get out that he was already making plans for his defeat.

Having won, Lincoln finally read the memo of August 23 to his Cabinet. We cannot know what Lincoln actually would have done had he lost, but he seemed to indicate he would respect the results of the election, whatever the results, and try to save the Union in the precious few months he had left.

*Executive Mansion*

*Washington, August 23, 1864.*

*This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to so co-operate with the President-elect as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration; as he will have secured his election on such ground that he can not possibly save it afterwards. - LINCOLN*

Adapted From:

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/the-election-of-1864-and-the-last-temptation-of-abraham-lincoln/2014/09/11/e33f99aa-345b-11e4-9e92-0899b306bbea\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/the-election-of-1864-and-the-last-temptation-of-abraham-lincoln/2014/09/11/e33f99aa-345b-11e4-9e92-0899b306bbea_story.html) Image Credit: “[Abraham Lincoln, three-quarter length portrait, seated and holding his spectacles and a pencil] digital file from original neg.” from the Library of Congress is under the Public Domain