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## “Altoona was his, and fairly won”: President Lincoln and the Altoona Governors’ Conference, September 1862

### **Abstract**

This article explores the long-forgotten Altoona Conference of 1862, when nearly a dozen Union governors met at the Civil War's darkest hour to discuss war strategy and, ultimately, reaffirm their support for the Union cause. This article examines and questions the conventional view of the conference as a challenge to President Lincoln's efficacy as the nation's leader. Rather, the article suggests that Lincoln may have actually welcomed the conference and had his own designs for how it might bolster his political objectives.

### **Keywords**

altoona, altoona conference, 1862, civil war, abraham lincoln, war governors' conference, governors

## **“ALTOONA WAS HIS, AND FAIRLY WON”: PRESIDENT LINCOLN AND THE ALTOONA GOVERNORS’ CONFERENCE, SEPTEMBER 1862**

Kees Thompson

When the first shells blasted into the walls of Fort Sumter in April 1861, the doors of the starting gate flew open, and the dogs of war finally sprung free as the American Civil War commenced. Immediately, the Commander-in-Chief went to work. While coordinating with U.S. Secretary of War Simon Cameron to reinforce the southern border, he called upon his citizens to take up arms and enlist. He ordered the presidents of the local railroads to halt all shipments of “contraband” heading south, and he instructed telegraph lines to cease all communication that included troop movements. To lead the troops, he tapped Captain George B. McClellan, known as a wunderkind in military circles. To solidify strategy, the chief called on all of the western governors for a conference in Cleveland to discuss war strategy and an invasion of the South. Furthermore, he aggressively supported the separatist movement in western Virginia, stationing an army at the border under McClellan, who later invaded, routed the lingering Confederate forces, and secured the government of what would become the new state of West Virginia.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William B. Hesseltine, *Lincoln and the War Governors* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 158-59, 162-63; *The War of the Rebellion: A*

Much has been written and debated about the “war powers” of President Abraham Lincoln, especially in the first months of his presidency before Congress convened. But the aforementioned actions were not justified by the President’s war powers, as they were not taken by President Lincoln at all; rather, the leader described above is actually William Dennison Jr., Governor and “Commander-in-Chief” of the state of Ohio at the outset of the Civil War. Even as one of the more ineffective governors, especially in managing finances and organizing the state militia, Governor Dennison still clearly wielded an enormous amount of power, not only in his own state but nationally. Indeed, at the start of the war, the Union was truly that: a union of (the remaining) states who at times acted independently yet whose power was always compounded when they acted in concert. The culmination of this united power and influence was supposed to manifest itself at the Loyal War Governors’ Conference of September 1862.

Also called the “Altoona Conference” for its location at the central Pennsylvania railroad junction, the gathering has mostly been relegated to the footnotes of history, largely forgotten in the grand narratives of the Civil War and the Lincoln administration. Indeed, events immediately preceding the gathering—most notably the

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*Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Cornell University Library, 1880-1901), series 3, I, 101-04; Whitelaw Reid, *Ohio in the War: Her Statesmen, Her Generals, and Soldiers* (New York: Moore, Wiltach, and Baldwin, 1868), 1: 41-42; Richard H. Abbott, *Ohio’s War Governors* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1962), 18-19.

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“victory” at the Battle of Antietam and the subsequent announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation—seemingly rendered the conference moot. When it is mentioned, the Altoona Conference is characterized as another one of the war’s “close calls” in which President Lincoln escaped an organized revolt of his governors by the favorable preceding events. Lincoln did surely respect the prestige and power, both military and political, of the governors. Nevertheless, this paper suggests that, far from a surprise obstacle, the Altoona Conference was partly the contrivance of Lincoln himself, who intended for it to be linked to the Emancipation Proclamation and have it serve as a political buttress for his most controversial presidential order.<sup>2</sup>

In order to properly assess the motivation for, and significance of, the conference, it is important to first examine the context of the conference and Lincoln’s relationship with the governors. At the outset of the war, most Northern states and their governors were extremely enthusiastic about the war, with their constituents enlisting in droves. In fact, the state of Ohio raised men so quickly that there was no way to house or feed them all, and they sat idly in the state capital, awaiting orders. The War Department under Simon Cameron scrambled to gather supplies and organize the mass of militia units scattered across the cities of the North, yet it suffered from a fatal lack of efficiency, especially in the face of complaints from

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<sup>2</sup> Tarring S. Davis and Lucile Shenk, eds. *A History of Blair County Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg: National Historical Association, 1931), 1: 90.

leaders in every state, each with his own opinion on the correct course of action for both his army and the effort as a whole. Each governor acted like a distinct “war minister” with duties stretching from raising war funds to retrieving the bodies of dead constituents to commissioning officers in the regiments from his state. This last duty triggered much friction with the War Department, as patronage became a political battleground as the war progressed and the armies of the nation became increasingly nationalized.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, all of the enthusiasm that burst forth after Fort Sumter dwindled as the months dragged on, and it was all but trampled after the First Battle of Bull Run, when it became clear that the war would not simply be a glorious march straight into Richmond. By the early months of 1862, the governors and Lincoln Administration were at a near stalemate over recruiting. The Radical Republican governors, especially those in New England led by the fiery John Andrew of Massachusetts, blamed Lincoln’s policies for slow recruiting numbers as well as the overall lack of progress in the war. The Radicals argued that the dearth of enthusiasm stemmed from an uninspiring foundation for the war itself; a public commitment that the war was one definitively fought to erase the evil of slavery

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<sup>3</sup> Hesselstine, *Lincoln and the War Governors*, 148-154; Reid, *Ohio in the War: Her Statesmen, Her Generals, and Soldiers*, 1: 28; William B. Weeden, *War Government, Federal and State, in Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania and Indiana, 1861-1865* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), xi-xii; Stephen Engle, *All the President’s Statesmen: Northern Governors and the American Civil War*, ed. A. Kristen Foster, Frank L. Klement Lectures 15 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2006), 11.

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would demoralize the South and rally the North in spirit and manpower, leading to victory. Moreover, they desired a purge of the army, replacing moderate or Democratic generals such as McClellan with those such as John C. Fremont, who was the darling of the Radicals for his attempts to implement emancipation in Missouri against the will of Lincoln. McClellan was detested by the Radicals, who saw him as wholly incompetent and who were outraged by his public stance against the emancipation of slaves.<sup>4</sup>

Lincoln had to resist the Radicals, although he shared in some of their sentiments. Lincoln was by no means ambivalent towards slavery, yet he was wary of sudden, widespread emancipation across the nation. More importantly, Lincoln was held in check by perpetual fear of the reactions of the border states; in many ways, the war, and even the fate of the capital, rested on their placation. But the Radicals, who controlled Congress, were constantly attempting to ram through legislation to remold the war effort into more of an abolitionist crusade. Lincoln, ever the compromiser in a manner that would make his idol Henry Clay proud, attempted to combat the wave of abolitionist fervor with a moderate plan for compensated emancipation. Although compensated emancipation was approved for

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<sup>4</sup> Hesseltine, *Lincoln and the War Governors*, 242; William B. Hesseltine and Hazel C. Wolf, “The Altoona Conference and the Emancipation Proclamation,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 71, no. 3 (July 1947): 196; Alexander K. McClure, *Abraham Lincoln and Men of War-Times: Some Personal Recollections of War and Politics during the Lincoln Administration* (Philadelphia: Times Publishing, 1892), 91.

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Washington D.C., Lincoln's plan was met with disdain from both sides of the issue, especially in in the Border States.<sup>5</sup>

By the summer of 1862, tensions between Lincoln and the Radicals were rising with each passing day. After McClellan's Peninsula Campaign ended in utter failure, additional troops were needed more than ever, yet the governors seemed indifferent to this new call for troops, which simply joined the continual stream of calls sent throughout the year. Even when Washington itself was supposedly threatened by General Stonewall Jackson, response from the governors was sluggish. Thus, Lincoln knew he must incite the governors politically. Secretary of State Seward, acting in concert with Lincoln, left Washington in late June of 1862 to personally call on the mayors of Philadelphia, New York, and Boston in an apparent attempt to bypass the governors and enlist the help of the mayors.<sup>6</sup>

The governors were greatly alarmed by this development, fearing the power that would shift to Lincoln if he were able to recruit without his "war ministers." Andrew Curtin, the pro-Lincoln governor of Pennsylvania, intervened on behalf of his fellow leaders and met with Seward while the Secretary was in New York. In a meeting

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<sup>5</sup> Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings: 1859-1865*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1989), 585-6; McClure, *Abraham Lincoln and Men of War-Times*, 92; Hesseltine, *Lincoln and the War Governors*, 242-244; John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History* (New York: Century, 1890), 109-11.

<sup>6</sup> Nicolay and Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, 113, 117-19.



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on June 30, 1862, at the Astor House, Governor Curtin, Seward, and Governor Morgan of New York agreed that the raising of troops was a gubernatorial prerogative, and the governors agreed to affix their signatures to a public letter, pre-written for them by Seward and Lincoln, stating a belief that “the decisive moment [of the war] is near at hand” and explicitly asking President Lincoln to call for more reinforcements. This letter was then sent out to the other governors, eighteen of whom signed the letterS some even delivered the letters personally to the thankful President.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, Andrew Curtin was not just another one of the many governors with whom Lincoln and his Cabinet had to deal in order to conduct the war effort. Rather, Curtin and Lincoln were political allies, and the President counted this particular governor as somewhat of a confidant. Indeed, Curtin biographer Alexander McClure, himself an influential Republican politician and patronage-wielder in Pennsylvania, wrote:

Many circumstances combined to bring Lincoln and Curtin into the closest official and personal relations from Lincoln’s [presidential] nomination until his death...the nomination of Lincoln was made possible by two men – Henry S. Lane of Indiana and Curtin of Pennsylvania...The

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<sup>7</sup> Hesseltine and Wolf, “The Altoona Conference and the Emancipation Proclamation,” 197-99; *Official Records*, series 3, I, 181-82.

appointment of [Curtin's in-state rival] Cameron to the Lincoln Cabinet was regarded by Curtin as unfortunate, and would have made very strained relations between [them] had not both been singularly generous in all their impulses and actions...there was never a shadow upon the relations of these two men. Curtin was profoundly loyal and an enthusiast in everything pertaining to the war.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, when Seward met with Curtin in New York, the governor was naturally a willing participant in the ploy to aid his Commander-in-Chief. The success of the governors' call for more troops—eventually allowing Lincoln to settle on asking for an astounding 300,000 more troops—was not likely lost on either man, especially looking toward the future, with Lincoln's relationship with the other governors unlikely to ameliorate because of the lingering dissension over war strategy.<sup>9</sup>

With the failure of Lincoln's attempts at seeking a compromise regarding emancipation and increased pressure from Radicals in Congress, the President began to chart a new course. In late June of 1862, Lincoln undertook the drafting of his Emancipation Proclamation; a month later, Lincoln called together his Cabinet and surprised them with his draft of the document. The following discussion

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<sup>8</sup> McClure, *Abraham Lincoln and Men of War-Times*, 232.

<sup>9</sup> William Marvel, *Lincoln's Darkest Year: The War in 1862* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2008), 81-83.

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revealed a deeply divided Cabinet, much more so than Lincoln had anticipated. Much of the criticism surrounded the timing of the document, with Secretary Seward warning of its possible effect on European nations eager to intervene in the conflict. Thus, unbeknownst to the public or the governors at large, Lincoln’s draft for emancipation was tucked quietly into his desk, awaiting an opportune moment.<sup>10</sup>

In early September, a panic swept the North. Confederate General Robert E. Lee, emboldened by recent victories and hoping to influence the coming elections in the North, invaded Maryland. Furthermore, to the outrage of many of the Northern Governors, as well as his Cabinet, Lincoln restored the cashiered McClellan to his command. Secretary Chase, who as a Radical had no love for the General and believed he “ought to be shot,” led a group of Cabinet members in a confrontation with Lincoln in which they delivered a signed protest regarding McClellan’s service. Lincoln was forced to defend McClellan, arguing that he was best equipped for defensive tactics in the area. Furthermore, Lincoln had not only once again rejected calls for the admittance of African-American soldiers, but he openly threatened the governors with a possible national draft.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Hesseltine, *Lincoln and the War Governors*, 247-48; Guelzo, *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America*, 118-24.

<sup>11</sup>Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 478-79; Hesseltine, *Lincoln and the War Governors*, 250-52.

With events unraveling in the capital, Governor Andrew called a clandestine meeting of the New England governors. Under the auspices of attendance at the commencement ceremony of Brown University in Providence, five of the six New England governors met with three representatives from the National War Committee, a newly established, Radical-dominated committee based in New York. The governors discussed their views on the war as well as the President's policies and Cabinet. After much discussion, those in attendance formally agreed that "the unanimous choice of New England was for a change of the cabinet and a change in the generals" and sent the New York delegates to Washington to convey their message. The delegates, upon their arrival, met with Lincoln personally, yet they immediately clashed with the President, who accused them of a zealous hatred for Seward and dismissed their pleas as immaterial.<sup>12</sup>

Lincoln was not wrong in his characterization of the Radicals' feelings towards his Secretary of State; the Radical wing of the party had distrusted Seward since the crisis at Ft. Sumter and the day his stint as Secretary of State began. Specifically, they charged him with being too complacent and conciliatory in his negotiations with the South, paralleling the complacent McClellan, whom he championed. Likewise, they believed Seward was the greatest obstacle preventing the Lincoln Administration from fully embracing abolitionism. This impression of

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<sup>12</sup> Hesselstine, *Lincoln and the War Governors*, 252-53; Hesselstine and Wolf, "The Altoona Conference and the Emancipation Proclamation," 199.

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Seward was linked to the popular Radical belief that Lincoln was ineffectual as president and was simply the political puppet of Seward. Joseph Medill, a prominent Republican as the editor of the partisan *Chicago Tribune*, wrote: “Seward must be got out of the Cabinet. He is Lincoln’s evil genius. He has been President *de facto*, and has kept a sponge of chloroform to Uncle Abe’s nose all the while, except one or two brief spells...” Thus, Lincoln’s vehement defense of Seward to the New York delegates did nothing to assuage the New England governors’ fears of Lincoln’s inefficacy as the leader of his administration.<sup>13</sup>

It was in this contentious climate, perhaps the “darkest hour of the war,” that the idea for a meeting of all of the governors of the loyal states began to emerge. Governor Andrew, incensed over Lincoln’s rebuff of the New York delegates, arrogantly claimed to an acquaintance that he was “sadly but firmly trying to organize some movement, if possible, to save the president from the infamy of ruining our country.” But Governor Andrew was not alone in his sentiment. Leaders across the nation, mostly Radicals, welcomed the idea of a governors’ conference, one whose result Lincoln would actually listen to and perhaps even trigger his resignation. Indeed, there was no denying that the unofficial grumblings for the

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<sup>13</sup> David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 401; Frederic Bancroft, *The Life of William H. Seward* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1899), 2: 361-64.

conference had a distinct Radical and anti-Lincoln air about them.<sup>14</sup>

Governor Curtin, a disciple of Lincoln's more moderate approach to issues such as emancipation and the Border States, was suspicious of the plans brewing and believed that the governors should convene, not to assail the President but to show their support. The first official mention of the conference appeared when Governor Curtin contacted Governor Andrew in early September of 1862.<sup>15</sup> Governor Curtin's message was simple: "In the present emergency, would it not be well if the loyal governors should meet at some point in the Border States to take measures for a more active support of the government?" Andrew, who could not refuse such an offer and then subsequently call for a conference himself, replied that he would indeed attend such a conference. Within a week, an

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<sup>14</sup> Hesseltine, *Lincoln and the War Governors*, 253.

<sup>15</sup> Sources seem to conflict over the timing and the context of the original conception of the official Altoona Conference. Several reputable sources claim that the inspiration was born back when Governor Curtin was in New York alongside Secretary Seward. Most allude to the account of John Russell Young, who wrote an excerpt entitled "Curtin and the Altoona Conference" for William Egle's 1896 biography of Curtin. Young supposedly consulted an account by Governor Austin Blair of Michigan for his information on the entire conference. But Governor Blair was unable to attend the conference itself, and it seems more likely that the incorrect assumption of the inspiration occurring in New York stems from a misinterpretation of Governor Curtin's letter to A.K. McClure dated Feb. 16, 1892 (partly reproduced below). By neglecting the wording in "Governor Andrew *afterward* acquiesced, and I *then wrote* him..." (emphasis added), one could mistakenly assume that Curtin's and Andrew's correspondence occurred in a single event—coinciding with Curtin's meeting with Seward in New York on June 30-July 1, 1862.

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invitation was sent out to all of the governors from Curtin as well as two of his fellow moderate governors: David Tod of Ohio and Francis Harrison Pierpont of West Virginia.<sup>16</sup>

Attendance at the conference was impressive, considering the ten day notice and the present situation in many of the states, with governors from the Midwest to New England to the Border States. Nevertheless, very few sparks flew when all of the delegates first assembled in the Logan House on September 24. Civil War historian William Hesselstine argues that the victory at Antietam and subsequent Emancipation Proclamation, announced a mere day before the conference, completely took the wind out of the sails of the conference. He writes:

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 uncontrollable twinkle in his eye, met his colleagues...[who included] Tod...and Pierpont, a New England delegation of 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 Saloman, and Iowa's Samuel

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<sup>16</sup> Hesselstine, *Lincoln and the War Governors*, 254.

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...had refused to attend. Connecticut's William Buckingham was still enroute, and Michigan's Austin Blair was...too busy...to journey to Altoona.<sup>17</sup>

Hesseltine argues that, despite the later defensive protests from Republicans and even, once, from Lincoln himself, the impending conference was extremely influential in forcing the Emancipation Proclamation out of the desk of Lincoln, or at least in its timing; with the threat of a united front of governors against him looming, like that emerging from their previous gathering in Providence, Lincoln was forced to maneuver, albeit skillfully, and "cut the ground" from under the Radicals.<sup>18</sup>

By examining the account written by Governor Curtin himself, however, we see a different picture of the conference—and Lincoln's relationship with his governors—emerge. Instead of fearing the conference of his governors as if it was some sort of attempted "Second Hartford Convention," as claimed later by the bitter Democratic press, Lincoln actually embraced the idea of a conference. Writing a letter years afterward to his good

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<sup>17</sup>Hesseltine and Wolf, "The Altoona Conference and the Emancipation Proclamation," 202.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 196, 199-202.



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friend and political ally Alexander McClure, Curtin recollected:

[After agreeing to the conference and dispensing invitations]... Governor Andrew, Governor Tod, and myself consulted Mr. Lincoln, and he highly approved of our purpose. In that interview he did not attempt to conceal the fact that we were upon the eve of an Emancipation policy, and he had from us the assurance that the Altoona conference would cordially endorse such a policy. All that was done at the Altoona conference had the positive approval of President Lincoln in advance, and he well understood that the whole purpose of the movement was to strengthen his hands and support the bolder policy that all then knew was inevitable. The address presented to Mr. Lincoln from the Altoona conference was prepared by Governor Andrew and myself. I did not then doubt that it would lose us the coming election in Pennsylvania, and so said to Mr. Lincoln, but I believed that the country then knew what the war was about, and that it was time to bring slavery to the front as the great issue.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> McClure, *Abraham Lincoln and Men of War-Times*, 270-72.

In this view, Lincoln was not forced to deviate from his plans based on the conference nor outmaneuver his own “war ministers.” Rather, Lincoln acted in a manner he so desired from his generals: he observed the looming possibility of a governors’ conference as an opportunity and marched out to meet it head-on, welcoming it and converting it into an advantage. Thus, the conference became a boon for Lincoln, shoring up support immediately after his issuance of the document which would earn him the moniker “The Great Emancipator.”<sup>20</sup>

The “address” to which Curtin refers is the final result of the discussions of the conference, which was published in newspapers as well as presented to Lincoln himself in person. Although there was some discussion of divisive topics such as the judgment of those in command, with the radicals still out for the blood of McClellan, the final document amounted to a simple yet stalwart proclamation in favor of Lincoln’s most recent actions, with the exception of the reinstatement of McClellan, who was not mentioned anywhere in the document. In the address, the Emancipation Proclamation was officially supported, although it was far from worshipped by the Radicals such as Andrew, who later called it “a poor *document*,” rife with strategic blunders, “but still a mighty act.” Other provisions included those that expressed direct loyalty to the President and his constitutional war powers, asked him to raise and hold 100,000 men in reserve for emergencies, and, of course, celebrated the heroism of the

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<sup>20</sup> Engle, *All the President’s Statesmen*, 21.

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Union soldiers. Although not all of the governors affixed their signatures, including the elected chairman of the conference, Governor Bradford, who heeded the desires of his Border State constituents, twelve governors signed it that day, with more afterwards, as some non-attending governors endorsed it after it was sent to them. Indeed, the mostly non-divisive final document could not have been written better by Lincoln himself, who would benefit from the united address of the governors endorsing his Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>21</sup>

Following the two-day conference, the attending governors traveled to Washington and met with the President in the White House on September 26. The meeting began with an uncomfortable level of courtesy yet was actually highly productive, as Lincoln listened patiently to the governors’ suggestions on a myriad of issues dealing with the logistics of the war effort, many times even requesting written recommendations from the governors. As the long interview progressed, the effects of emancipation were discussed as was the war effort. Finally, Governor Kirkwood of Iowa expressed concern over General McClellan, the lack of confidence he engendered around the nation, and even Lincoln’s own ability to control him. In an account written nearly thirty years after the fact, Governor Kirkwood recounts his version of both the conference at Altoona and the resulting meeting with

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<sup>21</sup>Davis and Shenk, eds. *A History of Blair County Pennsylvania*, 1: 91; William H. Egle and John Russell Young, *Life and Times of Andrew Gregg Curtin* (Philadelphia: Thompson Publishing, 1896), 318-20; Hesseltine, *Lincoln and the War Governors*, 256.

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President Lincoln at the White House. On approaching discussion of the contentious issue of McClellan's command, Kirkwood writes:

I said to the President that I spoke only for the Iowa people; that in their judgment, Gen. McClellan was unfit to command his army; that his army was well clothed, well armed, well disciplined, were fighting in a cause as good as men ever fought for, and fought as bravely as men ever fought, and yet were continually whipped, and our people did not think he was a good general who was always whipped. Mr. Lincoln smiled in his genial way and said "You Iowa people, then, judge generals as you do lawyers, by their success in trying cases." I replied, "Yes, something like that; the lawyer who is always losing his cases especially when he was right and had justice on his side, don't get much practice in Iowa."<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, the tone of the discussion shifted starkly when Kirkwood pressed Lincoln, even going so far as to suggest that "the administration [was] afraid to remove Gen. McClellan." Lincoln, with incredible calmness and tact, stated: "If I believed our cause would be

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<sup>22</sup> Henry Warren Lathrop, *The Life and Times of Samuel J. Kirkwood, Iowa's War Governor* (Iowa City: Author, 1893), 229.

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benefited by removing General McClellan tomorrow, I would remove him tomorrow. I do not believe so today, but if the time shall come when I shall so believe, I will remove him promptly, and not till then.” Thus, directly, honestly, and laying out his full intentions before him—paralleling the development of the Altoona Conference—Lincoln deftly won over the situation, ending the meeting after that very statement.<sup>23</sup>

The view of the Altoona Conference as a more open and direct contrivance departs from those that depict the conference and its surrounding events as yet another lucky escape by Lincoln from a political disaster. But it does not necessarily signify that Lincoln was any more or less politically savvy. In Hesseltine’s interpretation of events, Lincoln faced a daunting showdown yet managed to not only avoid losing the Border States or being steamrolled by the Radicals but also to transform the situation into one in which the governors reinforced him and personally handed him a mandate on one of his most decisive decisions. In this essay’s view, in which Lincoln welcomed the conference, he is blessed with tremendous foresight, recognizing opportunity in a conference of governors before its conception. Furthermore, if Lincoln was being truthful when Republicans, in the face of staunch Democratic conspiracy theories regarding the Emancipation Proclamation, extracted from him the statement, “I never thought of the governors at all. When

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<sup>23</sup>Hesseltine and Wolf, “The Altoona Conference and the Emancipation Proclamation,” 203-04; Lathrop, *The Life and Times of Samuel J. Kirkwood*, 230; Hesseltine, *Lincoln and the War Governors*, 260.

Lee came over the Potomac, I made a resolve that if McClellan drove him back I would send the Proclamation after him,” then he certainly is the consummate genius of political engineering—or at least the luckiest.<sup>24</sup>

But this revised view of the Altoona Conference and its connection to Lincoln’s actions raises numerous tantalizing questions. What did Lincoln expect the political climate to be like for the conference, considering he so thoroughly embraced the idea of the conference in the war’s darkest hour? Was he somehow certain of McClellan’s impending victory, even though it would eventually hinge on the improbable discovery of Lee’s strategic plans for his Maryland Campaign? If not, and without a victory to hang it on, how could Lincoln have promised governors such as Curtin that the release of the Emancipation Proclamation was imminent? Perhaps it is possible that the Altoona Conference was even Lincoln’s reserve card: grandly announcing emancipation alongside his united “war ministers” at their conference of unyielding support for the Union cause could be a powerful statement. In fact, maybe the Altoona Conference would have become *the* decisive event instead of Antietam, with endless scholarship analyzing every key moment. The Altoona Conference, although remaining a footnote in history, seemingly raises more questions than answers. But these are questions that allow us to better investigate and attempt to understand the motivations and decisions of certainly

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<sup>24</sup> Hesselstine and Wolf, “The Altoona Conference and the Emancipation Proclamation,” 195.

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one of the most enigmatic leaders in our nation’s history, a true political general, and his approach towards a most precarious expedition.

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