

Lincoln's man from Connecticut

By Lewis E. Lehrman

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"Father Neptune" was Connecticut's representative in President Abraham Lincoln's Cabinet. Gideon Welles was an uptight, self-righteous newspaper editor who was the compromise choice to represent New England -- perhaps, Welles thought, as postmaster general. A former Democrat, Welles had a reputation as a solid opponent of slavery, but his Cabinet appointment seemed shaky. The future Navy secretary remained unsure of his nomination until the newly-inaugurated president forwarded it to the Senate.

Lincoln's nominee turned out to be a good appointment. "Welles was open and honest with Lincoln, politically adept and yet disarmingly straightforward," historian Craig L. Symonds wrote in his recent book, "Lincoln and His Admirals." Welles "was by turns blunt, challenging, cantankerous, and tiresomely earnest. He was protective of his commander in chief and jealous of the influence exercised on him by others."

Father Neptune was hard-working and diligent but he lacked the sense of humor necessary to appreciate the way President Lincoln referred to Welles as "Neptune," the Roman god of the sea, and called Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton "Mars," the Roman god of war. Welles compensated with a cranky steadiness which the president valued; he was one of just two of Lincoln's original choices to remain in office until Lincoln's death.

"Father Neptune," said Lincoln as Welles arrived at a special Cabinet meeting on Sept. 22, 1862, "you are just in time for a slight bit of entertainment before we set about the business of the day." Lincoln then proceeded to read in dialect a chapter from a book by Artemus Ward, one of the president's favorite humorists. It was the kind of humor that appealed to Lincoln -- and was lost on Welles, whose white beard and large brown wig gave rise to caricature and ridicule in Washington.

The secretary of the Navy was a serious man. Each day he recorded the day's events and his reactions in his diary. That night, he ignored the comic reading and focused on the serious deliberations in the cabinet: "The subject was the Proclamation for emancipating the slaves after a certain date, in States that shall then be in rebellion. For several weeks the subject has been suspended, but the President says never lost sight of. When it was submitted, and now in taking up the Proclamation, the President stated the question was finally decided, the act and the consequences were his, but that he felt it due to us to make us acquainted with the fact and to invite criticism on the paper which he had prepared."

Two months before, Lincoln had first broached the Emancipation Proclamation in a carriage ride with Welles, who understood that the act would stretch the limits of presidential power. Now that emancipation was about to become presidential policy, Welles wrote: "It is momentous both in its immediate and remote results, and an exercise

of extraordinary power which cannot be justified on mere humanitarian principles [by the Constitution itself], and would never have been attempted but to preserve the national existence. The slaves must be with us or against us in the war. Let us have them. These were my convictions, and this is the drift of the discussion."

These were also the president's convictions. Lincoln had long opposed slavery. Eight years earlier in his speech at Peoria, Illinois, Lincoln had called on Americans to reassert the equality principle of the Declaration of Independence: "If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have so saved it, as to make, and to keep it, forever worthy of the saving. We shall have so saved it, that the succeeding millions of free happy people, the world over, shall rise up, and call us blessed, to the latest generations."

By seceding from the Union and attacking Fort Sumter in 1861, southerners had given President Lincoln the legal opportunity to act with extraordinary war powers as commander-in-chief. Union victories on the battlefield required military power to save the Union and make it "forever worthy of the saving." Although the emphasis in the Civil War was on the military conflict on land, the struggle on the sea was critical to the war's outcome.

From the beginning of the war, the Lincoln Administration understood that it needed an "Anaconda Plan" to squeeze the life out of southern secession with a naval blockade of southern ports. And a blockade required a vastly expanded navy that could impede southern commerce and capture southern ports. Without such a blockade, European governments might provide the South with official diplomatic and economic aid. Welles oversaw an eight-fold expansion of the Union Navy in order to accomplish this task at sea and on inland rivers.

On July 4, 1863, Secretary Welles learned that Vicksburg, the last remaining Confederate stronghold on the Mississippi River, had surrendered to Union forces. He took the telegram to the White House where the president was in the middle of an intense military discussion. Abruptly, Lincoln announced: "I myself will telegraph this news to General [George] Meade" who had just defeated the Confederate army at Gettysburg. Welles wrote in his diary that Lincoln "seized his hat, but suddenly stopped, his countenance beaming with joy; he caught my hand, and, throwing his arm around me, exclaimed: 'What can we do for the Secretary of the Navy for this glorious intelligence? He is always giving us good news. I cannot, in words, tell you my joy over this result. It is great, Mr. Welles, it is great!'"

Lincoln would write of this "glorious intelligence" a few weeks later: "The Father of Waters [the Mississippi River] again goes unvexed to the sea." In this message, Lincoln praised "Uncle Sam's web feet." The president wrote: "Not only on the deep sea, the broad bay, and the rapid river, but also up the narrow muddy bayou, and wherever the ground was a little damp, they have been, and made their tracks. Thanks to all. For the great republic -- for the principle it lives by, and keeps alive -- for man's vast future, -- thanks to all."

Thanks, Lincoln felt, also went to Connecticut's Father Neptune.

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