

Wartime Elections and Military Operations in the East and West

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In the fall of 1862, the results of the congressional elections would serve as a referendum on the Lincoln administration's prosecution of the war, as well as an early predictor of the 1864 presidential race. Despite successes early in the year in the western theater the staggering casualty lists, along with a dismal string of losses in the east, had undermined support for the war. While the recently-issued preliminary Emancipation Proclamation was hailed by abolitionists for expanding northern war goals to include the eventual death of the south's "Peculiar Institution," more conservative northerners showed little enthusiasm for the measure.

It appeared likely as the elections approached that Republicans would lose seats in congress as well as in state races. The administration could only hope that the losses would prove manageable. In the mid-nineteenth century a number of states had elections earlier than the traditional first Tuesday in November. In 1862, Indiana, Iowa, Ohio, and Pennsylvania would hold their election on Tuesday, October 14. The early results seemed to confirm the administration's fears. Only in Iowa did the Republicans triumph, while the Democrats gained seats in Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. The returns in the preliminary contests foreshadowed those of the main election day in early November. In all, Democrats picked up 28 seats in the House of Representatives, while the Republicans lost 22. In addition to the states mentioned previously, New York also voted Democrat, though overall the Republicans managed to maintain a majority in the House. One historian has noted that the reasons for this electoral defeat included the administration's "failure to deliver a speedy end to the war, as well as inflation, high new taxes, ugly rumors of corruption, the suspension of habeas corpus, the draft

law, [and] fears that freed slaves would undermine the labor market.” The political future looked bleak for President Lincoln and his party as the nation progressed towards the third year of the war and yet more bloody battles.

Though no major battles occurred during the week of October 14-20, minor military operations took place in both the eastern and western theaters. In the east General George McClellan, goaded into action by President Lincoln, finally sent some elements of the Army of the Potomac on a scout from Maryland into western Virginia. The friction between the two men would only increase over the next several weeks, however, resulting in McClellan’s removal from command early the following month.

Preparations for a movement against Vicksburg, Mississippi also began this week when President Lincoln directed General John McClernand to organize an independent command to operate against this strategic Confederate position. McClernand had been a prominent Democratic congressman from Illinois in the pre-war years. Because of his political connections he received a general’s commission at the outbreak of the war, though as his biographer has noted “[f]rom the very beginning of the war McClernand mixed war and politics, and was unable to separate politics from the military.” By early the next year McClernand had captured the Confederate fort at Arkansas Post, though his command was later subordinated to that of Ulysses Grant.

Also in the western theater Braxton Bragg’s Confederate army continued its retreat, arriving at the Cumberland Gap following the failed invasion of Kentucky. Confederate cavalryman John Hunt Morgan, meanwhile, continued to operate in the Bluegrass State. On

October 18 he captured the garrison and briefly occupied his hometown of Lexington before withdrawing.