

Lincoln's Team of Rivals

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In early March 1861, newly-inaugurated President Abraham Lincoln met with his cabinet to discuss the issue of the secession of the seven Deep South slave states and to ponder the question of how to deal with the federal installations in the seceded states that still remained in United States' possession. These issues would dominate the initial meetings of the cabinet.

Lincoln's cabinet consisted of an eclectic group, many of whom had been rivals for the Republican nomination in 1860, and none of whom had been personally close to the new president. Lincoln had selected William Seward for the critical position of Secretary of State. An early member of the Whig Party and outspoken U.S. Senator, whose Higher Law Speech had expressed the dissatisfaction of many northerners over the Compromise of 1850, Seward had joined the new Republican Party in the mid-1850s. Though an early favorite for the 1860 nomination, he was viewed by some as too radical and this contributed to him losing at the convention to Lincoln. Believing himself more politically adept, Seward attempted to dominate Lincoln in the early months of the administration, even implying in a memo that he should assume effective control of the executive branch. Seward even urged involvement in a foreign war to unite the various factions in the country. Eventually, as Lincoln became more comfortable and assertive in his role as commander-in-chief, Seward warmed to the new president, and became a loyal and influential member of the cabinet for the war's duration.

The president nominated Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania to serve as Secretary of War, a choice that would prove unfortunate. A prominent businessman, Cameron had also been long active in state and national politics. He began his political career as a Democrat, but in the 1840s

joined the Whig Party and won election to the U.S. Senate, completing the term of James Buchanan. He then returned to Pennsylvania and became an active force in state politics. He ran unsuccessfully for the Senate in the 1850s as a member of the American or Know Nothing Party, before switching his allegiance to the new Republican Party. Elected Senator in 1857, he ran for the Republican presidential nomination in 1860, though at the convention he soon threw his support to Lincoln's candidacy in return for a cabinet seat. Lincoln had concerns about Cameron's honesty, but because of Pennsylvania's importance to the party, the president eventually offered him leadership of the War Department. A poor administrator, Cameron also had no real military experience and rumors of corruption soon surfaced. In early 1862, Lincoln pressured Cameron to step down to accept the position of minister to Russia. In his place Lincoln nominated Edwin Stanton, who successfully administered the department for the remainder of the war.

Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase represented the third major figure in Lincoln's initial cabinet. The Ohioan had early in his career left the Whig Party for the anti-slavery Liberty and Free Soil Parties. After serving in the Senate for more than a decade, he joined the Republican Party and won the Ohio governorship. Like Seward and Cameron, he also hoped for the 1860 Republican nomination for president, but his anti-slavery background tainted him as unelectable by some. Instead he accepted the position of Secretary of the Treasury, and he performed effectively in guiding the nation's financial system through the exigencies of civil war. His political ambitions led him to entertain thoughts of a run against Lincoln in 1864, which led to his resignation from the cabinet and his appointment as Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

In addition to Seward, Cameron, and Chase, Lincoln's initial cabinet was rounded out by Attorney General Edward Bates, Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, Secretary of the Interior

Caleb Smith, and Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles. Most had long tenures in their positions, with Welles in particular being viewed as a strong supporter of the president and an able administrator. Overall, with the exception of Cameron, Lincoln's cabinet proved to be competent and loyal to the president. He would need and depend upon their sound advice in the coming months.