

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum
PresidentLincoln.org

Cabinet Campaigning

Grade Level: 11–12

Illinois Learning Standards:

1B, Stage F; 1C, Stage F; 2B, Stage F; 2B, Stage G; 1C, Stage H; 2B, Stage H; 2A, Stage I; 2A, Stage J; 2B, Stage J

Objectives:

- Recognize the use of language, tone, motivation, emphasis, and confidence in letters
- Understand the complexities facing presidents when they make cabinet selections
- Read and interpret historical transcriptions

Materials Needed:

Dictionary

Paper, pencil, pens

Transcribed letters to Gideon Welles provided in this lesson plan

Background:

In May 1860 Abraham Lincoln unexpectedly won the Republican nomination for president. The surprise candidate now faced the difficult task of trying to balance the many factions of the young political party. On May 19, 1860, his first day as the Republican presidential nominee, on a blank card Lincoln wrote the names of seven men he considered to be potential cabinet members, provided he won the election. One of those names was Gideon Welles.

Welles was a former newspaper editor, state legislator, state comptroller, and U.S. Navy Department Bureau Chief. A Connecticut native, Welles could represent the New England region and help balance the cabinet geographically. Even though Welles had caught Lincoln's eye early, his appointment was not guaranteed.

During the Republican convention, Welles was a supporter of Salmon P. Chase—not Abraham Lincoln. Yet, Lincoln set this aside and focused on the benefits of Welles as a cabinet member, although Lincoln considered others from New England as well. Even if chosen, it was unclear what position Welles would hold in the cabinet.

In a series of letters written to Welles in the early months of 1861, his supporters sent regular correspondence promoting him and estimating his chances for appointment to Lincoln's cabinet. Supporters eventually saw their predictions fulfilled. President Lincoln appointed Welles as Secretary of the Navy in March of 1861.

Activity Procedure:

- As a class, students read and discuss the four selected letters to Gideon Welles provided in this lesson in which the writers speculate whether Lincoln will offer a cabinet position to Welles.
- Divide the class into four groups.
- Each group will research Gideon Welles and focus on one of the following four areas of qualification that Welles possessed:
 1. Personality traits
 2. Political experience and compatibility
 3. Education
 4. Geographical location

Consider:

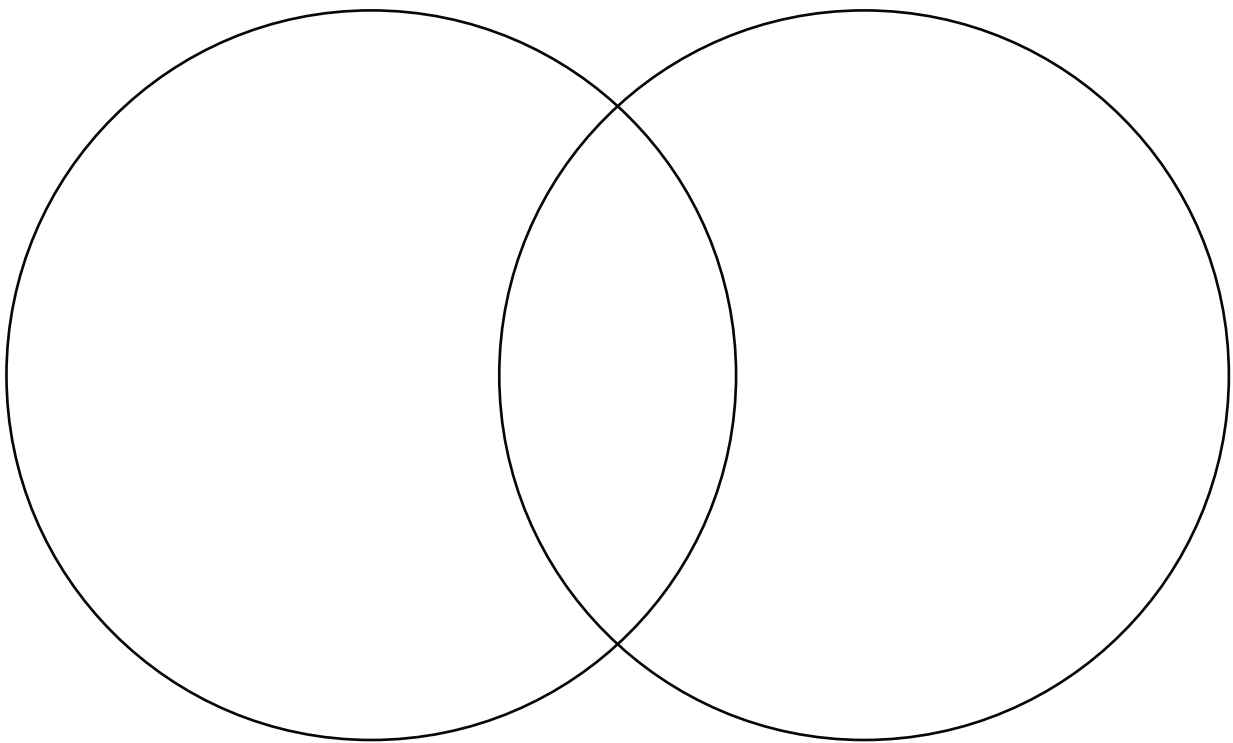
How did Welles fulfill the need in each of these areas? Was he lacking qualifications in particular elements?

- Student groups will present their findings to the rest of the class.
- As a class, discuss the presented information and the following:
 - Benefits and risks presented to Lincoln in choosing Welles.
 - What motivations might have been behind these letters to Welles from supporters.
 - What the letters reveal about how one obtained a cabinet post in Lincoln's time.
 - Why an aspiring cabinet member wouldn't simply ask Lincoln for the job.
- Through the use of the Venn diagram included in this lesson, compare the process of candidate investigation and scrutiny for a 19th-century presidential cabinet to a candidate for a 21st-century cabinet.

Accompanying letters to Gideon Welles are from the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Manuscripts Collection, SC 1637.

19th Century

20th Century



Office of the Independent Democrat
Concord, N.H. Jan'y 5 1861

My dear Sir,

I am pretty certain that Banks is desirous of a place in the Cabinet. This he ought not to have. He has accepted the vice-presidency of the Illinois Central Railroad, and moved his family thither. He refused to take part in the recent Presidential Canvass, on the ground of his retirement from politics. He is, therefore, not properly a New England man.

Seward, as you believed, is going to accept the State Secretaryship. This ought to make your selection a certainty. Still, I fear adverse councils may prevail. I have written Mr. Lincoln several letters, urging your appointment; but not intimating that it is with your knowledge. I know that within ten days, he still inclined towards [commitment?]

[Tuck?], of our State, is now West, and, as I told you, has aspirations, and is somewhat strongly indorsed. Of course, I could not object to him. But I told and have written Mr. Lincoln that my judgement prefers yourself. I take it that Weed + might not prefer you.

Banks goes West immediately.

In view of these and sundry considerations, I incline to think you had better send E.S. Cleveland, to Springfield, to see and talk with Lincoln. I suggest him, not as the most discreet man in the world, But because he is your friend and enthusiastic. He can say more to Lincoln than almost any other man, only give him, careful instructions as to what he should say. Should you think favorably of his going, you had better give him the general idea of what he may say, in writing, and let him take his instructions along with him.

I submit this idea to your beter judgement. I have just written Mr. L. stating my reasons why you should be preferred to Banks, and why Banks should not be taken as from New England.

If C. goes, don't let him go as from you, but on his own [mere?] motion.

Very sincerely yours

Geo. G. Fogg

Hon. G. Welles

Hartford Conn.

Worcester, Jan. 7, 1861

My Dear Sir,

What I see in the papers and find in my private letters induced me to believe that you will be a member of Mr. Lincoln's Cabinet, and probably Postmaster General. Nothing in connection with the nomination and election of Mr. Lincoln has given me as much satisfaction; and it will disappoint me sorely to see this expectation fail.

I have written to Mr. Lincoln to express to him my sense of your character and eminent fitness for a Cabinet office, and to say how much it will heighten the very great satisfaction with which I remember my vote for him in the Convention, (for I gave him my vote of the ballot that secured his nomination,) to have him select you for a place in the cabinet. It is the only letter I have ever written to any man in reference to appointments to office. Of course I did not suppose that a letter from me would have much influence to decide such a question, but I presumed that the opinion of a Massachusetts delegate to the Chicago Convention might at least add a very little to the stronger influences at work in your favor.

At the right time, after you are installed in office, I shall have a petition to present, which I hope you will grant, if you can do so without embarrassment to yourself, I am intending to withdraw from this daily and nightly confinement to the work on a morning paper and leave it chiefly in the hands of my sons who have been trained in the business, reserving only a general control of its movement. In your department at Washington, perhaps there may be some place where my faculty, and habit of regular attention to business, may render satisfactory service. If so, and if you can with propriety give me that place, I hope you will do so; and when my term is finished, I might have wherewith to realize my old dream of a fruit garden and a quiet life, without interfering with what I have invested in the [...?] If you were but little acquainted with me, I should not say all this. I have never been a place-seeker, and I shall not now press very eagerly to get a place; but situated as I shall be, for once in my life some situation that comes easily and seems proper for me to have, will seem desirable, If my desire in this respect can not be realized without too much seeking, I shall relinquish it and turn in some other direction. Very truly yours, J.D. Baldwin

[13 Feb. 1861]

My dear Sir

From facts that have come to my knowledge I think you will have occasion, before long, to study naval affairs. Connecticut will seem to have a [lien?] on the Navy department. The Post office I think will go to Indiana either in the person of C. B. Smith or Colfax. This is a guess on my part. That you are to be in Mr Lincoln's cabinet is I think a fixed fact and I do not know that your friends ought to object to your over-looking the past proceedings of Gov. Toucey.

The above information I give you on information received from Colfax, how much it is worth you can judge.

The belief here is that Lincoln will recommend a National Convention,

Feb: 13 Truly yours

J Dixon

Private

Albany Feb 19. 1861

My Dear Mr. Welles

I have not before written to, or conversed with you upon the subject of an appointment in the Cabinet of the New Administration. I wrote in your favor to Mr. Lincoln in Jany, and last night conversed with him in relation to yourself. He intends to offer you an appointment. I believe he will.

Faithfully truly yours

E.D. Morgan



Secession Fever

In the winter of 1860–61, as secession fever swept the Southern United States, federal military and civilian installations were quickly seized by state authorities who later turned over control of these facilities to the Confederate government. Among the assets seized were more than 50 military installations (forts, arsenals, naval yards, etc.), more than 30 customs houses, more than 60 lighthouses, and more than 9,000 post offices. All of these locations had been paid for with Congressional appropriations. The people who maintained them were federal employees who were forced either to resign their position and move north, or become employees of the Confederate government. Nearly 10,000 facilities costing well over \$100 million in 1860—and worth at least \$40 billion today— were taken without provocation and served as the physical foundations of the government of the Confederate States of America.



“The Cost of Secession,” a digital map provided in DVD format to Illinois public and private school libraries and generously funded by JPMorgan Chase & Co., highlights the seizure of federal assets by seceding states and the massive financial strain this created for the U.S. This map also demonstrates how “secession fever” often outpaced secession politics as many locations were taken over before the states officially seceded.