Because of Chase’s incessant criticism of Lincoln’s administration there was considerable strain on their relationship.

Salmon P. Chase

On June 30, 1864 Lincoln accepted Chase’s resignation. Although he praised his secretary’s fidelity and ability, Lincoln noted that their official relations had reached a point of mutual embarrassment.
Abraham Lincoln nominated Salmon P. Chase of Cincinnati as Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court on December 6, 1864. This prestigious appointment climaxed an already illustrious public career. Chase had twice been elected United States Senator (1848 and 1860) and Governor (1855 and 1857) of Ohio, and had served almost four years as Secretary of the Treasury in Lincoln's Civil War Cabinet. The President's selection of fellow-Republican Chase seems logical except that Lincoln and Chase were more often in conflict with each other than in harmony. On several occasions they opposed each other for the presidential nomination. They frequently disagreed on policy, the administration of the national government, and the conduct of the war. They were never friends. Yet Lincoln named Chase to his cabinet, kept him there during a tumultuous period in which Chase was his outspoken critic and rival, and honored him with the highest judicial position in the country.

Lincoln's choice of Chase as Secretary of the Treasury in 1861 is more understandable than his later appointment to the Supreme Court. Until that time Lincoln knew Chase primarily by reputation. He considered the Ohioan "renowned,"1 "distinguished,"2 "right-minded,"3—a man with "ability, firmness and purity of character."4 Chase's reputation, especially to another Republican and opponent to slavery, was formidable. As a U.S. Senator he had led the Congressional opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 by publishing the "Appeal of the Independent Democrats in Congress to the People of the United States."5 Lincoln was aware of Chase's opposition to this Act, as evidenced by his frequent references to Chase's stance in the second debate with Stephen Douglas on August 27, 1858.6

Elected as a Free-Soiler and calling himself a Free Democrat, Chase returned to Ohio in 1855 convinced that a third party was needed to "fuse" other political party members opposed to slavery.7 He consequently became actively involved in the formation of the Ohio and national Republican parties. Indicative of his primacy in both organizations was his own election as Governor in 1855, the only significant Republican victory in that year. He and his friends skillfully combined different political elements in Ohio, an endeavor known as the "Ohio Plan," which served as a model for
the national Republican effort in 1856. They additionally helped organize several other state Republican parties, including Illinois', established committees of correspondence to communicate within the party organization, and pressed for the first Republican national convention.8

Chase desired the presidential nomination in 1856, and his political star appeared high enough within the party structure to warrant the possibility. He was eliminated from the race, however, when he failed to gain the support of strong Eastern leaders such as Thurlow Weed, John Bigelow, and Francis Blair, Sr., who settled on John C. Fremont, a more suitable, controllable, and innocuous alternative to Chase.9 Also, he was gutted from within his own state when his Know-Nothing Lt. Governor Thomas Ford, who feared Chase weak on nativism, prompted Supreme Court Justice John McLean to announce his candidacy, thus dividing the Ohio delegation.10

After the 1856 presidential election, the political paths of Chase and Lincoln more directly crossed. Chase campaigned for Lincoln in Illinois against Stephen Douglas in 1858, an effort for which Lincoln repeatedly expressed his gratitude.11 Lincoln and Chase also corresponded in the summer of 1859 regarding the repeal of the Fugitive Slave Law. Chase wanted repeal as part of the 1860 Republican platform. Lincoln, although not disagreeing with the principle espoused by Chase, thought it should be excluded because its explosiveness might irreconcilably divide the national Republican convention.12

Salmon Chase's first major rivalry with Abraham Lincoln came unexpectedly for Chase at the 1860 Republican Nominating Convention held in Chicago on May 16-19. Although Lincoln considered Chase a viable presidential candidate, in fact along with William Seward of New York as one of the front runners, Chase never saw Lincoln as a rival until the time of the convention.13 As in 1856, Chase fervently desired the nomination and actively pursued it. He attended dinners, wrote letters to political allies, sought press coverage, stumped for Republican candidates in other states, and even attended a commencement at his alma mater, Dartmouth College, for the first time in thirty-two years.14 He believed his reelection as Ohio's Governor in 1857 and his election to the U.S. Senate in 1860 were signs of his political strength. Yet on the first ballot at Chicago Chase received only forty-nine out of 465 votes.15

Chase lost that which he most earnestly wanted because he failed to garner the requisite support outside Ohio and, more disastrously, was unable to consolidate his strength from his home state. His strategy and tactics immediately prior to the Convention undermined him in both areas. He lacked a skilled lieutenant or campaign manager to work in the party caucuses and state conventions. Instead he tried to pledge delegates by sending letters.16 Although he heard favorable reports from other states, Chase received not one commitment from any state convention.17 He
neither made concessions immediately before or during the convention nor promised any cabinet positions. One explanation for Chase's approach is that he truly believed his cause just and his past contribution significant so that the people through their representatives at the convention would naturally draft him.

Chase's prior affiliations also hurt him. The Know-Nothings in the party distrusted him because he tried cultivating German-Americans. His earlier connections with the Democrats antagonized two elements. Old-line Whigs never forgave him for his courting the Democrats in his 1848 Senatorial bid and his supporting a Democrat for Governor in 1853. Strict protectionists thought his Democrat associations made him a free trader.

Consequently, "not a single strong man in the nation or in his own state rallied enthusiastically to his standard." The Ohio delegation in fact was divided between Chase and a newcomer to the presidential race, Benjamin Wade. On the first ballot, Chase received thirty-four out of forty-six votes, and on the second and third ballots, forty-two and a half and fifteen respectively. An often recounted story contends that the Chase delegates switched their votes to Lincoln when he was but a few short of nomination, thus putting the Illinoisan over the top and gaining favor for their candidate in the new administration.

Lincoln's and Chase's personal and official association began in January 1861 when the President-elect summoned Chase to a conference in Springfield, Illinois. Two months later Lincoln appointed Chase his first Secretary of Treasury. Lincoln had several reasons for this choice. As described above he respected Chase's ability and "purity of character," appreciated his position as a standard bearer of the party, and was grateful to him for his support in 1858 and at the convention. Moreover, by appointing Seward and Chase Lincoln wanted to avoid dissension within his party and to balance his cabinet between East and West, Whig and Democrat, Conservative and Radical.

The Springfield Conference and the manner of Chase's Treasury appointment are significant because they set the tone for the President and Secretary's subsequent relationship. Soon after Chase arrived in Springfield, Lincoln surprised him, a man devoted to formalities, by coming to his hotel room. In their discussions, Lincoln implied he might appoint Chase to his cabinet, but never offered him a position. Chase left bewildered about his status. Then, without further consulting Chase, Lincoln sent his nomination to the Senate on March 6, 1861, two days after Chase had been sworn in as a U.S. Senator. This delay of two months hurt Chase's pride, and only after conferring with the President that day did Chase accept the appointment. From these initial personal contacts there developed an uneasy and strained partnership marked by differences in temperament and difficulties in communication.
The clash in their personalities apparent at Springfield is understandable. "Chase was always the quintessence of cold dignity and reservation; the type of man who was admired and respected but never loved as was Lincoln." 29 Chase adhered to forms and disliked humor at official gatherings. 30 This image is easily contrasted with the familiar picture of the unconventional, affable, and witty Lincoln. Chase never felt close to the President and often resented the friendship which he believed existed between Lincoln and Seward. 31

As significant as Lincoln's and Chase's personal incompatibility were their differences in opinion and policy. Chase publicly disapproved of Lincoln's approach to the slave question. Unlike Lincoln, Chase advocated military emancipation whereby advancing troops would enlist and arm the slaves they encountered. 32 Lincoln's endorsement of colonization in a meeting of Northern blacks frustrated Chase and led him to write: "How much better would be a manly protest against prejudice against color!—and a wise effort to give free men homes in America." 33 By April 1863 Chase was advocating Negro suffrage as the best security for the black man's freedom. 34

An additional strain on the relationship of Chase and Lincoln was the incessant criticism leveled by Chase against Lincoln and his administration. Chase directed this criticism in private and in public, in writing and in conversation, against Lincoln, blaming him personally for the mismanagement of the war and the failures of the Executive Branch. 35 In Chase's opinion there was no real administration and what existed was reckless, negligent and extravagant. He openly courted disaffected and disgruntled military and political figures, never hesitating to give his advice on how the war and the government should be run. 36 His attitude was not incongruous with his self image for he believed himself capable and his colleagues inept. 37 Needless to say, he was consulted less and less, and the more remote he became from Lincoln the more he criticized. 38

In late 1863 Chase's criticism evolved into open conflict when he again sought the Republican nomination for President. Earlier in that year he had acted as a candidate by campaigning for Republicans in Ohio, Indiana, and Maryland; by permitting his friends to represent his interests in Pennsylvania and New York, by soliciting newspaper support, and by writing scores of letters. His approach was reminiscent of 1860. Again, he believed he could stand on his record and the people would call him. 39 Again, he failed to organize his efforts into a systematic, coordinated campaign. 40 Events in December 1863, however, almost did that for him.

On December 8, 1863, Lincoln issued his proclamation of amnesty. 41 Since this proclamation threatened to take the matter of reconstruction out of their hands, the Radicals wanted to prevent Lincoln's nomination in 1864. 42 A group met on the following day in Washington and formed
what was soon called the Republican National Executive Committee. They favored Chase as their standard-bearer because he supported their program and because he needed no encouragement to run. Although Chase was not present at this meeting, he later consented to the use of his name and became publicly involved. His one condition was that he would withdraw if he failed to win the support of Ohio.

Ironically this committee effectively removed Chase from the running. In early February it issued a pamphlet entitled “The Next Presidential Election” which was a scathing denunciation of the Lincoln administration and a scurrilous attack on Lincoln personally. Although there was an immediate and negative reaction to this publication, the committee proceeded to issue on February 20 another pamphlet called the “Pomeroy Circular” which continued the attack on Lincoln and specifically suggested Chase as his replacement. The public furor to this circular was so great that the Ohio Legislature, in which repeated efforts to secure a Lincoln endorsement had been thwarted by Chase advocates, declared in favor of the President on February 25. In early March, Chase officially withdrew his name by writing Ohio friends who had his letters published in Columbus and Cincinnati newspapers.

Immediately following the publication of the “Pomeroy Circular” Chase wrote Lincoln disavowing any connection with it and offering his resignation. Five days later Lincoln replied with a half-hearted rejection of the resignation. In the interim Lincoln’s ally Frank Blair introduced a resolution in the House demanding a Congressional investigation of Chase’s department. Relations between the President and his Treasury Secretary, already strained, were now reaching the breaking point.

The question arises why they were still intact, considering Chase’s outspoken criticism and his obvious rivalry for the presidency. Apparently Lincoln understood Chase’s character, and needed and trusted him to handle the Treasury Department. He understood a man who not unlike himself had a “voracious” desire for the presidency. He realized that Chase could “do no more harm [by his criticism] in the [administration] than he [could] outside. If the lure of the presidency made Chase work harder at the Treasury Department, so much the better for Lincoln. And Lincoln, with a distaste for finances, needed a strong administrator in that department to raise the revenue required to pay for an unexpectedly and increasingly expensive war.

For all his military, antislavery, and political interest, Chase gave most of his time to the Treasury Department. Although his handling of Civil War finances was greatly lauded by his contemporaries, Chase’s policies have generally been criticized by later economists as being highly inflationary. An evaluation of Chase as a finance minister is not the subject of this study. His major efforts at the Treasury Department, however, are note-
worthy because they brought in the money Lincoln needed. Beginning in 1862 Chase administered the Legal Tender Act which put into circulation millions of dollars in greenback or paper money. Later that year he acquired the services of Jay Cooke as General Subscription Agent of the Government Loan, and by December, 1863, reported $400 million in sales of government bonds. Also in 1863, Chase was able to push through Congress the National Banking Act. His purpose with this system was to restore control over the currency to the national government. He thought the system whereby state banks issued unregulated quantities of paper a menace to national prosperity.

The final break between Lincoln and his Treasury Secretary occurred soon after Lincoln had secured the Republican presidential nomination. The cause célèbre was a disagreement over a replacement for the Assistant Treasurer of New York City. Since this officer handled large sums of money and controlled over 100 patronage jobs, the position was considered a political plum. Senator Edwin Morgan of New York had made several suggestions, none of which was satisfactory to Chase. Chase's choice was Maunsell B. Field, then Assistant Secretary of the Treasury. When Lincoln expressed reservations about Chase's selection, Chase tendered his resignation. One day later, on June 30, 1864, Lincoln accepted this resignation in a letter which praised Chase's fidelity and ability but noted that their official relations had reached a point of mutual embarrassment.

Chase left Washington almost immediately after his resignation, and primarily spent the summer visiting friends and relatives in New England. His opposition to Lincoln, however, had not ceased. A self-appointed committee of Republican leaders dissatisfied with the war and Lincoln's approach to reconstruction met in New York on August 30, 1864, and called for another Republican convention. Chase's connection with this effort is unclear, although during the summer he visited many people who were involved in the movement. He also continued to criticize Lincoln in conversation and in print. More significantly, in a letter to the New York committee, he gave guarded approval of their scheme. And he sent a personal representative, William Noyes, to the August meeting.

This final Radical anti-Lincoln effort was short-lived because of Lincoln's increasing strength, especially after Sherman's army occupied Atlanta in early September. In addition, there was a strong reaction to the Democrat platform which condemned the war as a failure and called for peace, a signal for disunion to many loyal Northerners. Chase's enthusiasm consequently cooled and when he reached New York in September, he advised his friends to drop the project of a new Republican convention. By mid-September he indicated his support of the regular Republican ticket. He ceased his complaints about Lincoln, and began actively campaigning for the President in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana.
During the campaign Roger B. Taney, Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, died. His death on October 12 required Lincoln to replace a jurist who had served on the Court for twenty-eight years. The President was not without candidates. Associate Supreme Court Justice Noah Swayne and Postmaster-General Montgomery Blair both vied for the position. Senator Charles Sumner supported Chase and along with other Republicans urged his appointment. Chase, who had as early as 1863 indicated his interest in the Chief Justice position, would not openly solicit the appointment. He did, however, write Sumner that he would accept it if it were offered and Sumner showed this letter to the President. Lincoln delayed the appointment until after the election. On December 6, he sent Chase’s nomination to the Senate where it was unanimously approved. Seven days later Salmon Portland Chase was sworn in as the sixth Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

An often repeated theory about Salmon Chase is that Lincoln appointed him to the Supreme Court to neutralize him as a presidential rival. This seems unfeasible. Chase’s threat to Lincoln in 1864 was totally non-existent by the time of Taney’s death. A threat four years hence was also unrealistic. In addition to the question of Lincoln’s seeking a third term, Chase had never proved a really viable opponent earlier when he was at the height of his political career. In both 1860 and 1864, he had failed to organize an effective campaign and to gain the support of significant party vote-getters. To appoint Chase to the Supreme Court, therefore, would have been an unnecessary political tactic. A better explanation is that Lincoln understood and appreciated Chase. He knew Chase to be consistently loyal to his own principles, especially in his attitude toward slavery and the rights of the black man, and to be religiously conscientious. Unfortunately, this understanding was notably one-sided. After years of much official and some personal association, Chase wrote about the President in his diary: “I feel that I do not know him.”

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(2) Lincoln, Letter to Salmon P. Chase, May 26, 1860, ibid., IV, 53.
(4) Lincoln, Letter to Lyman Trumbull, January 7, 1861, ibid., IV, 171.
36°30' parallel effective since the 1820 Compromise.


(7) Frederick J. Blue, “The Ohio Free Soilers and Problems of Factionalism,” Ohio History LXXVI (1967), p. 31. Earlier Chase had been closely aligned with the Democrat party. After the Kansas-Nebraska bill, he abandoned his hopes of an anti-slavery national Democrat party.


(10) Johnson, “Formation of the Republican Party,” p. 33. In fact the Ohio delegation went to the 1856 Convention uncommitted. A consistent undercurrent in Chase’s bids for the presidency was his inability to consolidate Ohioan support behind him.


(12) Lincoln, Letters to Salmon P. Chase, June 9, 1859 and June 20, 1859, in Collected Works, III, 284, 386.

(13) Lincoln, Letter to Samuel Galloway, March 24, 1860, ibid., IV, 34; Letter to Richard Corwine, April 6, 1860, ibid., 36;


(16) Smith, “Election of 1860,” p. 520;


(17) Smith, “Election of 1860,” p. 524. Even though the March 3 Ohio Republican Convention endorsed Chase by a vote of 385 out of 464, the selection of the actual delegates was left to the local conventions, a situation which gave Chase’s enemies an opportunity to send those unpledged or even opposed to him.

Hart, Salmon Portland Chase, p. 189.


(21) ibid.; Hart, Salmon Portland Chase, p. 192.

(22) Wiley, “Chase’s Bid,” p. 257. Chase was not without supporters. Rallying behind him were Hiram Barney, David Dudley Field, James Briggs, and George Opdyke.

(23) Smith, “Election of 1860,” p. 528; Hart, Salmon Portland Chase, p. 192. Ohio’s lack of support was a bitter disappointment and embarrassment to Chase who felt his time and effort on behalf of the Ohio Republican party were unappreciated. (Smith, “Election of 1860,” p. 531).

(24) Hart, Salmon Portland Chase, p. 194; Rothschild, Master of Men, p. 160. Interestingly, D. V. Smith credits the Wade faction with this switch. (“Election of 1860,” p. 530). However, he and Rothschild both use as their source an 1899 Saturday Evening Post interview with Lincoln’s lieutenant Joseph Medill. In that article Medill recalled that he said to Carter of Ohio, “If you can throw the Ohio delegation for Lincoln, Chase can have anything he wants.” (H. I. Cleveland, ‘Booming the First Republican President,’ Saturday Evening Post, August 5, 1899, p. 85).


(26) Lincoln, Letter to Lyman Trumbull, 258


(28) It should be noted here that Chase's antagonism toward Lincoln was not a result of Lincoln's receiving the 1860 nomination. Rather, Chase directed his resentment against Benjamin Wade whom he thought audacious for entering the race after Chase had already indicated like intentions. (Smith, "Election of 1860," p. 532).


(31) Ibid., p. 186; Thomas Graham Belden, *So Fell the Angels* (Boston, 1956), p. 73.


(33) Ibid., p. 51.


(37) Smith, *Election of 1860*, p. 773; Donald, *Civil War Diaries*, p. 12. In a letter to J. W. Hartwell on February 2, 1864, Chase wrote: 'So far I think I have made few mistakes. Indeed, on looking back over the whole ground . . . I am not able to see where, if I had to do my work all over again, I should in any manner do materially otherwise than I have.' (As quoted in Smith, *Election of 1860*, p. 773).

(38) Donald, *Civil War Diaries*, p. 44.

(39) Smith, "Election of 1860," p. 772. On October 7, 1863, Chase wrote to Joshua Leavitt: 'Perhaps I am over confident, but I really feel as if, with God's blessing, I could administer the government of this country so as to secure and imperdibilize our institutions and create a party . . . which would guarantee a succession of successful administrations. I may be over-confident I say, and I shall take it as a sign that I am, if the people do not call me, and shall be content.' (Ibid., p. 604).

(40) Ibid., pp. 586, 595-97, 772; Zornow, "Ohio Radicals," pp. 16-18, 20. Tactically Chase had two enviable campaign advantages—his face was on the greenbacks and his office controlled a patronage force of 15,000 employees.

(41) By this declaration Lincoln proposed a general amnesty and restoration of property other than slaves to most of those who would take an oath of loyalty to the Union. The purpose of this proposal was to bring the seceded states back into normal relations with the federal government as painlessly as possible.


(43) Zornow, "Ohio Radicals," pp. 18-19. The original members were primarily Ohioans—Robert Schenck, Rufus Spaulding, Whitelaw Reid and Major D. Taylor. When the December 9 committee expanded, it included Senator Samuel Pomeroy of Kansas, James Winchell of New York, and Representatives John Sherman and James Garfield of Ohio. (Ibid., p. 19).

(44) Chase was in full accord with the Radical program which refused to make any concessions to the South, demanded that slavery be abolished without condition, that the Negro be accorded his full
share of political rights and that the terms for readmission into the Union should be dictated by Congress. (Zornow, “Ohio Radicals,” p. 10).


(47) Wilson, “Chase Organization Meeting,” p. 64. The “Pomeroy Circular” criticized Lincoln as being too compromising and dragging on the war so that an insurmountable debt was being accumulated.


(49) Ibid., p. 21. This was not the first time Chase had offered to resign. He had resigned in December 1862, when pressure came from the Republican Congressional caucus for Seward to resign. Lincoln was grateful because he more easily could reject two resignations than one. (Schuckers, Life and Public Services, pp. 474-75; Smith, “Election of 1860,” p. 572).

(50) Zornow, “Ohio Radicals,” p. 25. Lincoln shortly thereafter nominated Blair as a major-general of volunteers, an action which appeared to Chase as an endorsement of Blair’s attack. (Schuckers, Life and Public Service, p. 480).

(51) Donald, Civil War Diaries, pp. 23-24.

(52) Hart, Salmon Portland Chase, p. 435.


(54) Rothschild, Master of Men, p. 209. This writer recounts a story in which Lincoln compares Chase’s presidential aspirations to a ‘chin-fly’—a creature which would even make a lazy horse plow energetically.


(56) Ibid., pp. 27, 33.

(57) Chase did not originate or initially support the Legal Tender issue, but acquiesced because he believed it a war necessity. (Schuckers, Life and Public Service, p. 266). Later, on the Supreme Court, he declared the act unconstitutional. Hepburn v. Griswold (1869).

(58) Donald, Civil War Diaries, pp. 40-42.


(60) Donald, Civil War Diaries, pp. 236-238; Smith, “Election of 1860,” p. 831.

(61) Donald, Civil War Diaries, p. 239.


(63) Donald, Civil War Diaries, pp. 239, 254-259.

(64) Schuckers, Life and Public Service, p. 487.

(65) Donald, Entry for August 30, 1863, Civil War Diaries, pp. 179-180.

(66) Ibid., p. 240. Chase was not without his opponents. In fact on the morning of his nomination a self-appointed deputation of his Ohio enemies waited upon the President to protest against it. They produced letters in which Chase freely criticized Lincoln. Lincoln’s response was that while Chase had said harsh things about him so had he said harsh things about Chase, and that seemed to square the account. (Schuckers, Life and Public Service, p. 487).

(67) Donald, Civil War Diaries, p. 75.

(68) Donald, Civil War Diaries, Entry for September 17, 1864, p. 254.

Note
In the article on pages 159 to 174 in the fall 1981 issue of the Bulletin the name of the President of the Board of Education was misspelled. The president was Dr. Fred W. Heinold; the title of the article should read: “From Instability to Stability: The Courter Heinold Influence.”