October 2026

Headquarters District Iowa General Order No. 513

The Second meeting of the 2026 Fall campaign will be Wednesday, October 7th, 2026, at the Machine Shed

Speaker – Frank McCaw (Cedar Falls/CVCWRT)

Presentation – Iowa's Civil War Generals.

5:30 pm – Social Hour – Cash Bar Opens
6:30 pm – Dinner by Reservation and advance payment
7:15 pm – 8:00 pm - Program

Dinner – Machine Shed meals are served family-style. $27.00
2 Entrées:
Steak Tips with Mushrooms and Onions in a rich beef demi-glace
Hickory Smoked Chicken, glazed in BBQ sauce
Sides: Coleslaw, cottage cheese, vegetable, Chedder Hash Brown Casserole Potatoes, and fresh bread
Beverages are included: coffee, tea, milk, or soda.

Dinner Reservation

Reservation Deadline – Sunday, October 4th, 2026

President: Gordon McKenzie
Program Director: Marv Wilson Thanks to John Liepa for many years of outstanding service!
Treasurer: Dave Moraniec Thanks to Ron Nurmi for many years of outstanding service!

Our web address: dmcivilwar.org email: dsmcivilwar@gmail.com
Link to Upcoming Programs

The Election That Could Have Changed the War: Lincoln, McClellan, and the Soldier Vote

— DES MOINES CIVIL WAR ROUNDTABLE —

By late summer 1864 Abraham Lincoln believed he might lose reelection, and a Democratic victory could have transformed the political context in which the war was fought. The election turned on more than party loyalty: battlefield news, emancipation, war weariness, absentee voting, and the political voice of soldiers all converged in an election held while armies were still in the field.



Pennsylvania soldiers voting, Army of the James, October 1864, by William Waud. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-21710; no known restrictions on publication.

A wartime election with no precedent

No previous American presidential election had been conducted during a civil war of this scale. Eleven seceded states were outside the regular electoral process, hundreds of thousands of citizens were under arms, and the administration was asking voters to continue a conflict that had produced staggering casualty lists. The central constitutional fact is remarkable: despite rebellion and emergency powers, the presidential election proceeded on schedule. [1]

The political danger to Abraham Lincoln was real. In August 1864 he wrote and sealed a memorandum stating that it seemed "exceedingly probable" that his administration would not be reelected. The document was not campaign theater; members of his cabinet signed the outside without knowing its contents. Lincoln was preparing for the possibility that he would need to cooperate with a president-elect committed to a different policy before inauguration in March 1865. [2]

McClellan and the Democratic contradiction

The Democrats nominated former Army of the Potomac commander George B. McClellan. The choice was politically potent and internally contradictory. McClellan was a War Democrat who favored restoration of the Union, but the party platform included language calling for an immediate effort to end hostilities through negotiation. McClellan distanced himself from the strongest peace language without repudiating the party that nominated him. [3]

This tension allowed Republicans—running under the broader National Union label—to frame the election as a referendum on whether military victory should be pursued to completion. Yet the contest was not simply "war versus peace." Voters also judged emancipation, conscription, civil liberties, taxation, corruption, and Lincoln's leadership. Many Unionists who wanted the rebellion crushed remained uncomfortable with the transformation of Union war aims from restoration alone toward emancipation and Black military service.



Analytical timeline prepared for this newsletter.



Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan, Democratic presidential nominee in 1864 and Lincoln's principal challenger in the wartime election.

Battlefield news becomes political news

The military calendar reshaped the campaign. David Farragut's success at Mobile Bay in August, Sherman's capture of Atlanta in early September, and Philip Sheridan's Shenandoah Valley victories changed public perceptions of whether the Union was making progress. Atlanta was especially important because it undercut the argument that years of sacrifice had produced stalemate. [4]

The connection between battlefield and ballot should not be reduced to a simplistic claim that one victory "reelected Lincoln." Political loyalties were deeper than headlines, and Republican organization was strong. Still, wars are judged through expectations. By summer, casualties in Grant's Overland Campaign and the apparent deadlock before Petersburg had made victory seem distant. By autumn, Union forces had produced visible strategic gains. The same administration could therefore be evaluated through a different emotional and political lens.

The soldier vote

The election also accelerated a major change in American voting practice: permitting soldiers away from home to cast ballots. States adopted different mechanisms, and the legal arrangements varied, but the principle was significant. An army of citizen-soldiers was not to be politically silent merely because it was deployed. Campaign organizations on both sides paid close attention to the military vote. [5]

Where surviving returns allow comparison, soldiers voted heavily for Lincoln, though exact national percentages should be used cautiously because procedures and records differed by state. The meaning of that vote is contested. It cannot prove that every soldier embraced emancipation or every administration policy. It does show that large numbers of men bearing the immediate costs of the war were willing to sustain the government's effort rather than change leadership in the final months of conflict.

Reelection and the meaning of continuation

Lincoln won decisively in the Electoral College and secured a clear popular majority. The result gave the administration political authority to continue the war. It also strengthened the environment in which the House of Representatives passed the Thirteenth Amendment in January 1865 after having failed to do so the previous June. [6]

The 1864 election is therefore best understood as a moment when military and constitutional history became inseparable. Armies affected the political climate, soldiers participated as voters, and voters determined which government would direct the armies. The election did not make Appomattox inevitable. It did, however, close one major path by which war policy might have changed before the war ended.

Notes and Sources

1. Library of Congress, Presidential Election of 1864 research guide and Abraham Lincoln papers.

2. Abraham Lincoln, memorandum of August 23, 1864 ('blind memorandum'), Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

3. Jonathan W. White, Emancipation, the Union Army, and the Reelection of Abraham Lincoln (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014).

4. David E. Long, The Jewel of Liberty: Abraham Lincoln's Re-election and the End of Slavery (Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1994).

5. National Park Service, studies of the 1864 election and soldier voting, including voting associated with the Cedar Creek campaign.

6. U.S. Constitution, Amendment XIII; congressional action culminating in House passage on January 31, 1865.

onal cemeteries.