Military absentee ballots

And how they influenced the election of 1864

By D.M. Giangreco and Kathryn Moore

One of the oft-repeated lines Al Gore used to beat back charges that he was a big government man was "we've shrunk the federal government by over 300,000 jobs" under the Clinton-Gore administration. George W. Bush never challenged this statement during the presidential debates but as U.S. military personnel across the globe are only too well-aware, these cuts have come either exclusively or almost exclusively from the armed services. Ironically the question of who will become the next president of the United States may hinge on this Friday's Florida count of several thousand absentee ballots mailed by service men and women overseas.

This is not a new phenomenon, but one has to reach back nearly three dozen election cycles, to 1864, before finding a presidential campaign where military votes were so crucial. Union soldiers numbering in the hundreds of thousands were fighting and dying far from their homes, and state governments began looking into the possibility of allowing these citizens to cast votes from the front lines. Originally the party of Lincoln was none too thrilled at the prospect. In January 1863, the Republican Congressional Caucus decided not to lend any support to soldier enfranchisement largely because all of the senior Union generals, including Abraham Lincoln's likely opponent, George B. McClellan, were Democrats.

The emergence of a new — and somewhat more successful — crop of Republican commanders such as George Meade, William Tecumseh Sherman, and future president Ulysses S. Grant, allayed such fears in Washington and northern state houses. Republicans proclaimed the cause their own and the speaker of the New Hampshire House even accused Democrats of "selfish opposition" to soldiers' voting rights. Fully 11 of the 25 states then represented in Congress were able to provide for participation of the troops in time for the presidential election.

The results were a bitter disappointment for McClellan. Although the dashing young general was immensely popular with the troops, particularly those in the Army of the Potomac outside Washington, the mens' ballots went for Lincoln in resounding majorities. Historian Bruce Catton found that McClellan was still "almost worshiped" by soldiers who believed that there's had been a better, stronger army when he commanded in 1862.

Yet, said Catton, these same men all agreed that if the war horse Grant had been in command then, the fighting would have already been over. McClellan even lost his current and former home states of Pennsylvania and Ohio on the strength of the soldier vote.

Scholars differ, however, on the actual impact of the new absentee ballots and participation by soldiers home on furlough. Allan Nevins maintained that although the military vote for Lincoln ranged as high as ten-to-one in some districts, "in not a single state was it the decisive factor." Shelby Foote disagrees, stating that although the president received a wide electoral margin, "the contest had been a good deal closer than these figures indicated." Said Foote, "Connecticut was carried by a mere 2,000 votes and New York by fewer than 7,000, both as a result of military ballots." Lincoln biographer Carl Sandberg related what was perhaps the most poignant story of the 1864 election; that within the foul, disease-infested rooms of Richmond, Virginia's Libby Prison for Union prisoners of war "the votes were 276 for Lincoln and 95 for McClellan."

Of more than 4,000,000 votes cast, the president received 2,203,831 versus the general's 1,797,019. The military's tally was even more disproportionate as Lincoln took nearly 120,000 of 154,000 soldiers' votes.

What will future historians a generation from now say about the effect of military absentee ballots on the Florida election? Pundits, lawyers and political operatives will be happy to share their views, but one can only wait and see. But another event during the election of 1864 may shed some light on whether or not those votes may even count toward the election of the next president.

Lincoln received 212 of 233 electoral votes and both he and his opponent might have received even more. In a historical event never repeated, the votes of soldiers and civilians alike from Louisiana and Tennessee were not factored into the final count. The Senate deemed these states' elections invalid and Vice President Hannibal Hamlin, the presiding officer of the Senate, broke with Lincoln's wishes and declined to present their Electoral College votes. In the election of 1864, the disavowal of two states' electoral votes had scant effect on the outcome. If the state of Florida, its process tangled up in a web of lawsuits, is unable to send its electors to Washington on Dec. 18, no majority built on the strength of military absentee ballots will bring an Electoral College victory to Mr. Bush, who lags* in electoral votes behind the current presiding officer of the Senate, Mr.Gore.

*Original text: "would lag"

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