



Abraham Lincoln and the Wisdom of History

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Abraham Lincoln and the Wisdom of History

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A Thesis in the Field of History
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Abstract

While many historians have commented on Abraham Lincoln's use of the past, none have systematically analyzed it throughout his political career. To conduct this analysis, it was necessary to consult Lincoln's surviving written records, the reminiscences of those who knew him, and the historical sources that he potentially had available to him. This thesis argues that Abraham Lincoln used the past as an essential source of wisdom to guide himself and the nation throughout the course of his political career. From the very beginning, Lincoln made highly emotional appeals to the past, which were frequently about but not limited to the memory of the Founding Fathers. Starting in 1839, Lincoln began conducting serious research using many skills commonly used by historians to construct arguments. When he emerged from political obscurity to challenge the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, he began to use history as a source of motivation, namely that by opposing slavery, their memory could be cherished in the future just like that of the Founding Fathers. Although he may never have been a believing Christian, in the final years of his life, he began using religious language to argue that there were greater forces at work in history than human intention. While Lincoln always used the past to help him make sense of his present, he was never limited by its precedents and was willing to set new ones when he thought necessary. By analyzing Abraham Lincoln's use of the past, it not only sheds light on an important figure in American history, but it also demonstrates how people can properly use history as a source of wisdom to guide them in their personal and public lives.

Preface

“Lincoln was a profound mystery, a Sphinx sitting at the road side making no revelations of himself—his origin—his feelings—thoughts or purposes to any one.”¹ This was Lincoln as his former law partner William Herndon remembered him. No American has been studied so thoroughly as Lincoln, and this is for good reason. History investigates the study of change over time, and Lincoln presided over the most radical change in American history. Furthermore, his story is what Americans like to believe is the archetypical American story, the idea that no matter how humble one’s origins, one can rise to the greatest heights. Yet, despite how much he has been studied, Herndon understood that Lincoln will always be something of a mystery confounding our understanding. Perhaps the best a historian can hope for, inspired by their unique perspective and life experience, is to correct some previous misunderstanding or elucidate some aspect of the man once obscured. The historian must delicately balance the lights one has been endowed with to illuminate something new without writing themselves into the man.

This paper is born in my doubts, namely in my long-held skepticism of people’s ability to understand the past to properly guide the present. It seems evident that it is too easy to misapply the lessons of the past to justify one’s current political views. Likewise, many respected historians seem to be incapable of translating their knowledge of the past into wisdom to guide them in present. With these doubts in my mind, as I was

¹ William H. Herndon, *Herndon on Lincoln: Letters*, ed. by Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 284.

researching Lincoln, one thought struck me: he did not seem to make the mistakes that so many historians and politicians had made. In fact, the more I read, the more it seemed like he could possibly be an exemplar of how one could use history in politics both effectively and justly. As I continued my research, I asked myself the following question: “How did Abraham Lincoln use the past in his political career?” By history, I am using the term in its broadest sense, meaning that it will include not only the *past*, but also what historians term *memory* (how individuals and societies choose to remember events in the past) and *historical study* (reasoned narratives based on extensive historical research). As Lincoln used the term history to mean all three of these understandings, so will I.

This paper will argue that Abraham Lincoln used the past as an essential source of wisdom to guide himself and the nation throughout the course of his political career.

There are four distinct elements to Lincoln’s use of the past in his political career:

1. From the very beginning Lincoln made emotional appeals to the past as it was collectively understood. It was rooted in a deep personal attachment to the past that is evident in the earliest surviving documents that he created.
2. Starting about the time he turned thirty, Lincoln no longer simply relied on emotional appeals to the past but rather he began to develop logical arguments derived from careful personal research using many skills that modern historians practice today. Lincoln began making these types of arguments after studying to become a lawyer, and his legal training most likely taught him skills that were transferable to the study of history. Lincoln believed that by uncovering an accurate interpretation of the past, one could better understand the present and shape the future.

3. Beginning in 1854 when he began his fight against the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Lincoln started to inspire people by arguing that their present will one day be someone else's past and that not only can their actions provide wisdom for the future but also that they could live on in memory.
4. In the later years of his life Lincoln began to exhibit a religious sense of history. In his "Second Inaugural Address," Lincoln combined two things that typically do not mix well with politics, religion, and history. In this speech, he described the causes of the Civil War more accurately than professional historians would do so in succeeding generations as well as contemplate the role of God in history. He may never have had the faith of an orthodox Christian, but he used the language of Christianity to highlight the imponderables of the past and to argue that there are greater forces at work than human intention.

Even though he developed new sensibilities about the past in his later political career, he never abandoned the ones he used earlier, making highly emotional arguments about the past as well as studying it to guide his present right up to his final days. Lincoln did not solely rely on history to guide him, but he tempered its insights with the wisdom he derived from humor, literature, religion, and logic. Through all these sources, Lincoln was able to develop more accurate reconstructions of the past than not only his political opponents but also many professional historians, both contemporary and generations after.

Many doubt, for good reason, that history can be used in politics without distorting the past for the needs of the present. As author Rebecca West pithily noted,

“When politics enters the door, truth flies out the window.”² Many people, both contemporary and modern, have accused Lincoln of doing just that, abandoning truth about the past in pursuit of political power. For example, shortly after delivering his “Cooper Union Speech,” one newspaper said that it was “characterized throughout with perversions of history and facts,” while another claimed that he used “special pleading and sophistical reasoning... [to] lead the mind of his hearer and reader from the true facts in the controversy.”³ In terms of modern scholars, Pauline Maier referred to Lincoln’s historical interpretations of the Declaration of Independence as the “wishful suppositions” of someone who had not done research, while another, the Pulitzer Prize winning Gordon S. Wood, said that his interpretations were useful politics but still represent a “false heritage.”⁴ Pulitzer Prize winning historian Joseph J. Ellis portrayed Lincoln as “bending the arc of American history” to better suit his political needs.⁵ Pulitzer Prize winning historian Eric Foner wrote that Lincoln had a highly “selective reading of history” in his 1854 “Peoria Speech” that effectively “erased proslavery

² Gordon S. Wood, *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 308.

³ Harold Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech That Made Abraham Lincoln President* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 165-166.

⁴ Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 206.; Wood, *The Purpose of the Past*, 308.

⁵ Joseph J. Ellis, *The Quartet: Orchestrating the Second American Revolution, 1783-1789* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 1.

Americans from the nation's founding.”⁶ To attempt to argue against such an array of distinguished historians is no easy task.

However, we should not accept this proposition that politics and history do not mix *a priori*, especially about Lincoln. Despite all his earlier harsh criticisms of him, Frederick Douglass wrote about Lincoln in 1864 that “I have not yet come to think that honesty and politics are incompatible,”⁷ and this honesty applied to history as much as anything else. There have been those, both during his time and later, who have acknowledged his historical skills. In 1860 Charles C. Nott and Cephas Brainard of The Young Men's Republican Union of New York published Lincoln's “Cooper Union Speech” with footnotes they provided after they spent weeks trying to replicate Lincoln's historical research. In the introduction, Nott and Brainard wrote that the “Cooper Union Speech,” while a political act, was also “a historical work” that was “profound, impartial, and truthful.” They praised Lincoln's efforts, stating that, “No one who has not actually attempted to verify its details can understand the patient research and historical labor which it embodies.”⁸

⁶ Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 72.

⁷ Frederick Douglass, *Frederick Douglass Papers: Series Three: Correspondence, Volume 2: 1853-1865* (Yale University Press, 2018), 463.

⁸ Abraham Lincoln, Charles C. Nott, and Cephas Brainerd, *The Address of the Hon. Abraham Lincoln, in Vindication of the Policy of the Framers of the Constitution and the Principles of the Republican Party, Delivered at Cooper Institute, February 27th, 1860* (New York: G. F. Nesbitt & Printers, 1860), 3.

In terms of modern scholars, Harold Holzer, author of *Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech that Made Abraham Lincoln President*, wrote that Lincoln did not “merely voice his opinions” like other politicians but “he armed himself with facts” derived from his historical study.⁹ Speaking of Lincoln’s “Peoria Speech,” Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote, “For the first time in his public life, his remarkable array of gifts as historian, storyteller, and teacher combined with a lucid, relentless, yet always accessible logic.”¹⁰ Even Eric Foner, who was highly critical of Lincoln’s attempt at history during his “Peoria Speech,” wrote that Lincoln’s “Cooper Union Speech” was a “surprisingly scholarly presentation.”¹¹

Virtually all modern historians mention his appreciation for the Founding Fathers, but that could be said about just about anyone of that era. Many do not comment on his historical scholarship, and for those who do, Lincoln’s skills as a historian were at best tangential to the arguments that they were making. Besides the editors of his “Cooper Union Speech” in 1860, there are no scholarly works whose fundamental focus was Lincoln’s use of the past. This paper will examine Lincoln’s use of the past, including his skills as a historian, and attempt to shed greater light on an important aspect of Lincoln’s political career that is little understood.

⁹ Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 225.

¹⁰ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 166.

¹¹ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 333.

Author's Biographical Sketch

Jesse Derber was born on July 8, 1982, in Mendota, Illinois. He is the son of Wayne and Melody (Roys) Derber who grew up on family farms near Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and Clayton Center, Iowa, respectively. For most of his childhood, he lived in rural Princeton, Illinois, just west of Hollowayville, in the parsonage of St. John's Lutheran Church on the Hill where his father was the pastor. He attended elementary school in Ladd where he had the privilege of having Mr. John Kopina as a history teacher. In 2000 he graduated from Hall High School in Spring Valley and from Augustana College in Rock Island in 2004. He has served as a teacher, in one form or another, since 2004. Through the National History Day organization, he won Missouri's 2016 Joseph Webber Teacher of Merit Award and was Missouri's nominee for the 2019 Hannah E. (Liz) MacGregor Teacher Award. He married Lyndsey Bieber in 2006 and they have three kids: Nathan Lee, Eliana Corinne, and Elijah Owen. He lives together with his family in Lebanon, Illinois.

Dedication

For Lyndsey, with all my love, and for our children and posterity. May you always pursue and treasure wisdom, wherever it may be found.

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Dr. Asher Orkaby provided invaluable insight into narrowing my topic. I am grateful that he rejected some of my earlier proposals that were not good and helped me find something that could work. During my first visit on campus, he, without prompting, gave me a personal tour of the campus, showing me his favorite spots in the Widener and Pusey libraries.

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Trudi Goldberg Pires and Dr. Ariane Liazos helped with the formatting review and guided me through the final stages of the thesis submission.

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question I had about one of Lincoln's references to the first president. Sara Trotta of the Congregational Library & Archives in Boston helped me in my pursuit of trying to assess the credibility of a source.

Also, the generations of scholars who have made information about Lincoln readily available allowed me to continue my work, even in the height of the pandemic lockdown. This includes Anne Wootton who graciously shared her research with me when I was unable to travel to a library.

My family provided me with love, support, and humor that helped sustain me through this process.

I would like to thank all the aforementioned people who made this paper possible. All the errors contained within this paper are entirely my own.

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Chapter I.

A Living History (1809-1839)

Two Statesmen Historians

Sitting in the waiting room of the Manhattan studio of the nation's first great photographer, Matthew Brady, on a February afternoon in 1860 was the nation's first great historian, George Bancroft. Going to Brady's was not just about getting a picture, it was meant to be an experience. Brady, according to the historian Harold Holzer, installed in his Broadway studio "velvet curtains, satin wallpaper, cut-glass decorations, and highly polished marble and rosewood furniture." Displayed throughout "Brady's Gallery of Photographs and Ambrotypes" were the images of the most famous Americans of the era, all of whom Brady had photographed, such as Presidents Van Buren, Taylor, Polk, Pierce, and Buchanan along with other mid-century luminaries such as Dolley Madison, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, Commodore Matthew Perry, Henry Clay, Jenny Lind, and the man many people believed would be the next president, Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois. Bancroft, by that February afternoon in 1860, was a man who had seen and accomplished as much in politics as many on that wall.¹

Born in 1800 in Worcester, Massachusetts and educated at Harvard, Bancroft had already earned success as a Jacksonian Democrat from Massachusetts, serving as Secretary of the Navy during the Mexican War and then later as the U.S. Minister to the United Kingdom. In spite of his political achievements, Bancroft was best known as the

¹ Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 88-89.

first great American historian. In 1834 Bancroft published his first volume of *The History of the United States of America*, a work that would bring him national fame. He established, according to his biographer Lilian Handlin, a “quasi-monopoly” on the historical field for decades that “was so strong that others could only chip away at the edges, without damaging the monument.” For Bancroft, there was no contradiction between the two careers but rather the work of the statesman and the work of the historian were mutually reinforcing. Justifying his dual roles, Bancroft asked rhetorically, “What possible conception can a man in his study form of public popular transactions? What mere student dreams of the manner in which negotiations are conducted by the cabinet? How then can a recluse write philosophic history?” As Handlin wrote, “In a sense he entered politics to become a better historian, and he wrote history to explain his political career... He turned into a historian and politician, the man of letters and intellect, as well as the man of action he had always wanted to be.”² When the slavery issue roiled the country in 1854, Bancroft became a supporter and advisor of Stephen Douglas of Illinois. He provided research for Douglas’s lengthy 1859 article in *Harper’s*, arguing that Douglas’s popular sovereignty policy was supported by the Founders.³ He began traveling throughout the country delivering lectures to packed audiences in both the North and the South. By 1860 Bancroft achieved virtually all a historian could hope for in a career: prestige, power, influence, and wealth. His name had become

² Lilian Handlin, *George Bancroft, the Intellectual as Democrat* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 112, 115, 245.

³ M. A. De Wolfe Howe and Henry C. Strippel, *The Life and Letters of George Bancroft* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1908), 2. 130-131.

synonymous with history. Today he was in Brady's studio to document and preserve the memory not of others this time but rather of himself.

While sitting in Brady's waiting room on that February afternoon in 1860, a lanky man whose flesh was as spare as his prose walked in with some friends wearing a new yet heavily wrinkled suit. Unknown to him, years earlier Bancroft had inspired this man so much with one of his addresses that he decided to try to become a traveling lecturer himself. A virtual unknown outside of his state until 1854, he began to make a name for himself when he challenged Bancroft's savior of the Union, Stephen Douglass, debating him formally and informally throughout the Prairie State for the previous six years. This new man was Abraham Lincoln.

In many ways, the differences in their life experiences could not be more striking. Lincoln was born in 1809 in a cabin his father raised on a knoll overlooking a sinking spring in the Kentucky wilderness. Unlike Bancroft's Harvard-educated father, Lincoln's was barely literate. Lincoln wrote that his father "grew up literally without education" and "never did more in the way of writing than to bunglingly sign his own name."⁴ When he was old enough, Lincoln's father sent him to a one-room-schoolhouse for brief periods of time. One local resident remembered that Caleb Hazel, one of Lincoln's teachers, "could perhaps teach spelling reading and indifferent writing and perhaps could Cipher to the rule of three," but whose strongest qualification was his "large size and bodily Strength to thrash any boy or youth that came to his School." One humble schoolhouse he attended in Indiana was a "hewed log house-had two Chimneys-one door-holes for

⁴ Abraham Lincoln, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols., ed. Roy P. Basler (History Book Club ed.) (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 4: 61.

windows-greasy paper was pasted over the holes in winter time to admit light.”⁵ By Lincoln’s reckoning, he spent less than a year total in these rude “A.B.C. schools.” These “so called” schools, Lincoln later admitted, offered “absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education.”⁶

While Bancroft was at the age of sixteen a student at Harvard and propounding on the “glories and pleasures” of his intellect soaring over the “common sphere of mankind” as an eagle with the “calm indifference [of] the labours of ordinary men” who were nothing but “inferior beings,” Lincoln at sixteen was one of those “inferior beings” hacking out a living in the Indiana wilderness.⁷ He spent most of his days felling trees, grubbing stumps, splitting rails, cutting trails, raising log cabins and out-buildings, hunting game, plowing fields, harvesting and shucking corn, and slaughtering hogs. Unlike Bancroft, he never went to college or travelled in Europe. The only opportunity he had for travel were two flatboat trips to New Orleans, in which the most remarkable thing that happened, according to Lincoln, was that one night off the sugar coast of Louisiana, he and his companion “were attacked by seven negroes with intent to kill and rob them.”⁸

⁵ Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 67, 128.

⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3: 511, 4:61.

⁷ Howe and Strippel, *The Life and Letters of George Bancroft*, 1. 30.

⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 62.

Despite his limited formal schooling and life experience, by the time he reached adulthood, Lincoln was a reasonably educated man. This, according to his former law partner John T. Stuart, was because, “He dug it out himself.” His stepmother remembered, “He read all the books he could lay his hand on” when he was a child. If he found a passage particularly striking, he would write it down on a board with charcoal or red ochre if no paper was available, and “when the board would get too black he would shave it off with a drawing knife and go on again.” If it was too noisy in the cabin, he would take a book and go to the stable or the woods and read. According to one friend, “What Lincoln read he read and re-read-read and Studied thoroughly.” One Indiana acquaintance remembered that Lincoln frequently “packed books when at work” and would read them “when he rested from labor.” Another remembered that “while others would romp and lafe he would be engaged in the arithmetic or asking questions about Som history heard or red of.” What he learned, he sometimes would teach his friends, using analogies to make difficult concepts for children easy to understand.⁹

Lincoln continued his self-education when he grew into manhood and set out on his own in New Salem, Illinois. According to one New Salem friend, “History and poetry and the newspapers constituted the most of his reading,” doing this mostly in the early morning and late at night after work. Another friend wrote that he would go off by himself down to the river or “took a strole to the Cuntry as he said for Refresh ment,” with a book in hand, reclining on the forest floor with his feet up on a tree. “He Read all of histry that he Could Get hold of,” including biographies of Jefferson, Washington,

⁹ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 64, 94, 107, 114-115, 121, 126, 151.

Clay, and Webster.¹⁰ When he decided to become a lawyer, he did not attend a college or study in a law office but rather read legal books that he borrowed when he could spare the time from his work. Even after he established himself as a lawyer and politician, Lincoln continued his self-education throughout the rest of his life.

Despite the hardships, his education afforded Lincoln many advantages. As many have noted, very few books were available to him, but those that trickled into the frontier were considered the finest in the English language, like the King James Bible, the plays by Shakespeare, and the poetry by Burns and Byron. Furthermore, except for a few brief periods when he did attend school, his education was entirely self-driven as Lincoln never spent a moment on anything unless he saw a direct benefit to it. Even though most commentators see his farm work as a hindrance to his education, it must not be seen this way. Most of the manual labor he performed was not very mentally taxing, providing the young Lincoln extended time to meditate on all that he was reading. An hour spent immersed in Shakespeare before breakfast and then spending hours in the fields gave him the time to think deeply about the lessons and language of Shakespeare.

At twenty-three the young Lincoln knew exactly what he wanted, a career in politics, running unsuccessfully for the Illinois legislature in 1832. However, two years later he ran again and was successful. He served four terms in the Illinois legislature and one in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1847-1849, but his principled yet unpopular opposition to the Mexican War diminished his chances for elected office in Illinois for the foreseeable future. He spent the next five years dedicated solely to his law

¹⁰ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 90-91, 142.

career and improving his mind, which he attempted to do by mastering the principles of Euclid.

Lincoln came out of political retirement when slavery agitation began in earnest in 1854. Lincoln had opposed and debated Bancroft's favorite politician off and on since the 1830's, but it was his challenge to Douglas in recent years, especially their senatorial debates of 1858, that brought him national attention. In a speech a few months before arriving at Brady's studio, Lincoln disparaged Douglas's lengthy article on the history of popular sovereignty, the one Bancroft helped research, stating that Douglas's "explanations explanatory of explanations explained are interminable."¹¹ Although a master of imitation and mockery, Lincoln had come to New York to respond to Douglas's article with something more substantial than a sneer.

Bancroft and Lincoln shared a brief and pleasant conversation before Lincoln went before Brady's camera. Although the meeting was of little significance in and of itself, it represented in some ways a type of a passing of the guard. That evening Lincoln was scheduled to deliver his first speech in front of New York's high society at Cooper Union. Although he was known as an excellent stump speaker who could hold his audience's attention for hours with his extemporaneous addresses, he had spent months carefully researching and crafting this lecture, and in these months of preparation he had armed himself with the facts of history. Unlike Bancroft and his hero Douglas, Lincoln centered his history on slavery, especially the national government's actions to restrict its spread. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. once described Bancroft as being a man "who both wrote

¹¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3: 405.

and wrought American history.”¹² How much truer would this be of Lincoln. This night he would astonish his East Coast audience, making him, in their minds, a viable candidate for the presidency. Hundreds of thousands of copies of this speech paired with the picture Brady took that day introduced him to the nation. As Harold Holzer argued, this was the speech that made Lincoln president, and this was a speech, more than anything else, about history.¹³ This historical performance was no aberration but rather the culmination of more than two decades of using history in his political career, skills he would continue to utilize into his presidency. Lincoln’s belief in a usable past had deep roots.

Prairie Roots and Memory

When Lincoln left Illinois for good in 1861, he sped across the state “on the wing,” as the *Chicago Daily Tribune* phrased it, in the Presidential Special, a train fitted out for him to begin his journey to the White House. The *Tribune* described his journey across the state as being almost a continual “ovation,” as “at every station and crossing and cabin, near the road, the people gathered... to see the train and strive to catch a glimpse of one who bears the hopes of so many.” Even the roar of the “flying train” could not “drown the cheers and ‘God speed you,’” of the crowds.¹⁴

¹² Arthur Schlesinger, “The Education of a Historian,” *The New Republic*, vol. 191, no. 11, 1984, 29.

¹³ Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, cover.

¹⁴ “The People’s Choice,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 12, 1861.

When Lincoln first arrived in Illinois more than three decades prior in 1830, there were no ovations or cheers when Lincoln stepped off the boat onto the muddy shores of the Wabash. Instead of a special train gliding across the plains powered by coal and steam, Lincoln drove an ox-drawn wagon through the river bottom muck powered by muscle and sinew. The Illinois that Lincoln drove the ox team across to his destination in some woods west of the tiny village of Decatur was not yet the quilt patterned landscape of corn, wheat, and bean fields of small-family farms that Jefferson envisioned but rather an open and undulating landscape of long bluestem and native wildflowers.

When Lincoln started traveling the legal circuit as a lawyer in the 1830s, the prairie was still wild, and it still was not fully tamed after thirty years of settlement when he tried his last case in 1860. By the 1850s bears, elk, and panthers had been hunted to extinction, but other game was still abundant like deer, turkey, partridges, and prairie chickens. In these days before barbed wire, farmers sometimes drove their hogs in the winter more than a hundred miles across the open plains to market in St. Louis or Chicago. Well into the 1850s, wolves posed dangers to both man and livestock.¹⁵

Located in these prairies were the county seats of the eighth judicial circuit, which could be as untamed as the prairies that surrounded them, especially on court days. While the trials were usually solemn and prosaic, sometimes crowds in this entertainment starved era would pack into these timber courthouses to hear all the lurid private details of their neighbors aired in public. One example is an 1851 trial in Urbana, the county seat

¹⁵ James Edward Davis, *Frontier Illinois* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 390-391.

of Champaign County that was then anything but urban, being home to just a few hundred settlers. Here Lincoln prosecuted a prominent resident, A. G. Carle, for seduction for impregnating a woman out of wedlock. During the trial, Lincoln's friend, Judge David Davis, wrote to his wife commenting sarcastically on the "beautiful State of morals, amongst the young men & young girls of this Grove." The defendant appears not to have argued that he did not sleep with the woman but rather that just about every other man in the neighborhood had also slept with her, attempting, as Davis wrote, to "blacken her character desperately."¹⁶ The defense called witnesses to corroborate Carle's claim, including Simeon Harrison Busey, a wealthy farmer who would later found a successful bank with his brother. Busey, at least according to his biography in the *Early History and Pioneers of Champaign County*, was "not particularly adverse to mild frolicking."¹⁷ Judge Davis wrote that the defense's attacks on the woman angered Lincoln and that he "bore down savagely" on Carle and his witnesses as the trial became "heated" and "very,

¹⁶ David Davis to Sarah W. Davis, May 3, 1851, in *The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln: Complete Documentary Edition*, 2nd edition, edited by Martha L. Benner and Cullom Davis et al., <http://www.lawpracticeofabrahamlincoln.org/>.

¹⁷ "Abraham Lincoln As Attorney for Plaintiff in Unusual Seduction Case," *UniversityArchives.com*, University Companies Inc., 2019.; Milton W. Matthews and Lewis A. McLean, *Early History and Pioneers of Champaign County* (Urbana, IL: Champaign County Herald, 1886), 60.

very sore,” but Davis declined to provide his wife details.¹⁸ Lincoln’s performance left quite the impression on Davis as, years later, he recounted to Lincoln’s former law partner how Lincoln “went at” the witnesses and “crushed them” but did not specify how. Even though he almost certainly did not attend the trial, Henry C. Whitney, who was Lincoln’s lawyer friend from Champaign, was still telling the story of the trial in 1887 that corresponds with all the documentary evidence that still exists as well as detailed what perhaps was the means of how Lincoln *bore down savagely* on one witness: “There is Busey-he pretends to be a great heart smasher-does wonderful things with the girls-but I’ll venture that he never entered his flesh but once & that is when he fell down & stuck his finger in his ---.”¹⁹ (Decades later, perhaps with unintended irony, the city of Urbana placed Lorado Taft’s famous sculpture *Lincoln the Lawyer* in Carle Park, named in honor of the man that Lincoln successfully prosecuted for seduction.)

People not only came to see the trials, but also to watch the traveling shows and even play games in empty lots like early forms of baseball. At night, visitors packed into rustic taverns, with the men usually sleeping two to three to a bed. People played cards, drank whiskey, and told stories around the fire.

Many of Lincoln’s friends recounted that he, with certain abstentions, participated in this fun as much as anyone. Whitney remembered once that when he opened the door

¹⁸ David Davis to Sarah W. Davis, May 1, 1851, in *The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln: Complete Documentary Edition*, 2nd edition, edited by Martha L. Benner and Cullom Davis et al., <http://www.lawpracticeofabrahamlincoln.org/>.

¹⁹ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon’s Informants*, 348, 630.

to the sleeping quarters in a tavern, he saw two grown men in their night clothes, one the 6'4" and skinny as a rail Lincoln and the other the shorter and exceedingly rotund Judge David Davis, bouncing around the room in a pillow fight. Whitney also remembered Lincoln and Davis along with many of the "local wits" in the tavern frequently "talking politics, wisdom & fun."²⁰ Lincoln loved this atmosphere, and as many friends on the circuit recalled, nearly everything reminded Lincoln of a story, which people gathered around to hear.

For example, one friend, John B. Weber, recounted one of Lincoln's stories about judging people before getting to know them. Lincoln told him about the time he was living in New Salem and working as a surveyor shortly after his failed first run for the Illinois legislature when he was only twenty-three. According to Weber, Lincoln recalled that there was a German from Pennsylvania living a few miles away, and the rumor was that he was an old miserable "miser." One day Lincoln was hired to survey some land for the Pennsylvanian, which Lincoln and a few other men performed. When the work was done, the Pennsylvanian invited them to their home and served them an excellent supper, and after dinner, the men gathered around the fire telling stories. Lincoln told one, and everyone applauded, to which the Pennsylvanian offered his own, which "was approved by an uproar of laughter." After several hours of this side-aching hilarity, it was time for Lincoln and his men to leave. Before departing, Lincoln told their host that "I wish to show how easy persons may be deluded by forming conclusions upon ideas not based upon facts." He confessed that they had heard he was "an old miserly Dutchman" but that

²⁰ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 648, 732.

he was “happy to acknowledge that I have been very agreeably disappointed.” The Pennsylvanian thanked him for the honor and said that he too would like to share how meeting the young Lincoln disabused him of his first notion of Lincoln. The Pennsylvanian had heard that he had been a candidate for the state legislature, so, when Lincoln first arrived, he too had been disappointed because he expected to see a “smarter looking man.” After telling this story to Weber, Lincoln “laughed heartily.” Weber remembered feeling indignant, telling Lincoln that the Pennsylvanian had treated him unjustly after he had paid him a compliment. Lincoln said, “No, No... He meant all he said, for it was before I was washed.” The thought of not being washed up yet reminded Lincoln of another story that he had heard, and he proceeded to tell it to Weber to give him “some idea of the fix” he had been in before he washed.

He then said, when I was a little boy, I lived in the state of Kentucky, where drunkenness was very comon on election days, At an election said he, in a village near where I lived, on a day when the weather was inclement and the roads exceedingly muddy, A toper named Bill got brutally drunk and staggered down a narrow alley where he layed himself down in the mud, and remained there until the dusk of the evenng, at which time he recovered from his stupor, Finding himself very muddy, immediately started for a pump... to wash himself. On his way to the pump another drunken man was leaning over a horse post, this, Bill mistook for the pump and at once took hold of the arm of the man for the handle, the use of which set the occupant of the post to throwing up, Bill believing all was right put both hands under and gave himself a thorough washing, He then made his way to the grocery for something to drink, On entering the door one of his comrades exclaimed in a tone of surprise, Why Bill what in the world is the matter Bill said in reply, [My] G-d you ought to have seen me before I was washed.²¹

This was typical for Lincoln, as one man later recalled that he “appeared to have an endless repertoire” of stories that were “always ready, like the successive charges in a

²¹ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 395-396.

magazine gun, and always pertinently adapted to some passing event.”²² Lincoln’s mind was a storehouse of humorous anecdotes, some that he had heard, some that he made up, and others that he experienced, and he always seemed to have the perfect story for the right occasion. As this series of stories shows, Lincoln had a remarkable memory, but it was not limited simply to frontier humor.

Silences and Memory

Lincoln impressed his friends with his exceptional memory, often surprising them with how he could recall even minor events from years or decades prior. As one friend observed, “His memmory was remarkably tenacious.”²³

People tend to think that having a good memory is a natural trait, which no doubt has some truth to it but not necessarily the whole truth. Lincoln’s friends and associates left clues to the possibility that Lincoln’s remarkable memory was not simply naturally inherent but something that he worked at.

With nearly remarkable consistency, many people who knew him at different stages in his life noted a peculiar feature, his meditations, or his deep and extended silences, where he had the time to think about and process his memory. One Kentucky resident remembered the young Lincoln as a quiet boy. Other old settlers from Kentucky

²² Benjamin Perley Poore, “Benjamin Perley Poore,” in *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time*, ed. by Allen Thorndike Rice (New York: North American Publishing Company, 1886), 218.

²³ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon’s Informants*, 541.

remembered that his most noticeable trait was that “he always appeared to be very quiet during play time Never Seemed to be rude Seemed to have a liking for Solitude.” His stepmother, Sarah Bush Lincoln, who lived with him for twelve years recalled:

Abe, when old folks were at our house, was a silent & attentive observer-never speaking or asking questions till they were gone and then he must understand Every thing-even to the smallest thing-Minutely & Exactly-: he would then repeat it over to himself again & again- sometimes in one form and then in another & when it was fixed in his mind to suit him he became Easy and he never lost that fact or his understanding of it.

According to Mrs. Lincoln, “What he thus learned he stowed away in his memory which was Extremely good- what he learned and stowed away was well defined in his own mind-repeated over & over again & again till it was so defined and fixed firmly & permanently in his Memory.” James H. Matheny, Lincoln’s best man when he married Mary Todd and his friend for decades, remembered him regularly spending much of the day “abstracting” and “glooming,” consuming much more time thinking than reading. Stating that he became more abstracted and silent as he got older, Matheny said that Lincoln had two sides- one the public man who craved attention and renown and the other the secretive and private man who would rather “Stick his head in a hollow log, & see no one.” Lincoln’s sister-in-law, Frances Todd Wallace, recalled visiting her sister at home while Lincoln would “lean back-his head against the top of a rocking Chair-sit abstracted,” and only break his extended silence with a joke, “though his thoughts were not on a joke.” She remembered him as a sad and “abstracted” man.²⁴

Lawyers who travelled the circuit recalled how peculiar the man was that could hold a whole audience wrapped up in his stories one moment and then completely

²⁴ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon’s Informants*, 82, 106-108, 241, 432, 486.

withdraw within himself the next. Judge David Davis, Lincoln's pillow fighting opponent, said that Lincoln was "as happy as *he* could be" travelling the circuit with his fellow lawyers and that he was not a "social man" but rather told his jokes and stories to "whistle off sadness." Another lawyer, Jonathan Birch, remembered that when Lincoln visited Bloomington, he spent much of his time in the clerk's office with other lawyers when not trying cases. Birch recalled:

Very often he could be seen there surrounded by a group of lawyers and such persons as are usually found about a courthouse, some standing, other seated on chairs or tables, listening intently to one of his characteristic and inimitable stories. His eyes would spark with fun, and when he had reached the point in his narrative which invariably evoked the laughter of the crowd, nobody's enjoyment was greater than his. An hour later he might be seen in the same place or in some law office near by, but, alas, how different! His chair, no longer in the center of the room, would be leaning back against the wall; his feet drawn up and resting on the front rounds so that his knees and chair were about on a level; his hat tipped forward as if to shield his face; his eyes no longer sparkling with fun or merriment, but sad and downcast and his hands clasped around his knees. There, drawn up within himself as it were, he would sit, the very picture of dejection and gloom... No one ever thought of breaking the spell by speech; for by his moody silence and abstraction he had thrown about him a barrier so dense and impenetrable no one dared to break through.²⁵

Lincoln's law partner of sixteen years, William Herndon, likely knew him better than anyone else besides his wife. Herndon wrote that Lincoln, "could sit and think without rest or food longer" than any other man he knew. Herndon remembered frequently meeting and greeting him in the street without Lincoln taking notice as he walked past him locked deep in thought. In the law office, Lincoln was little better as he would lay reflecting on the sofa with his legs propped up on chairs. Remarking on his "eternal

²⁵ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 348-349, 727-728.

silences,” Herndon said Lincoln, “embodied reflection itself.” According to Herndon, Lincoln was “the most secretive—reticent—shut-mouthed man that Ever Existed.”²⁶

Two astute observers believed that these silences and meditations were the key to his success. Adolphe de Chambrun, a French diplomat, was frequently with Lincoln in his final two months of life. In this brief time, he had observed Lincoln’s extended silences. He hypothesized that Lincoln in his earlier years had “formed himself by [the] difficult and powerful process of lonely meditation.” While de Chambrun formed his opinion after only the acquaintance of a few weeks, Joshua Speed, who knew Lincoln for more than two decades, reached the same conclusion. Lincoln lived with Speed when he first moved to Springfield, and after Speed moved back to his home in Kentucky, Lincoln wrote him the most revealing personal letters of his that survive. Speed visited Lincoln in the White House several times, and if Lincoln ever had a best friend, Speed was it.

According to Speed,

Lincoln studied and appropriated to himself all that came within his observation. Everything that he saw, read, or heard, added to the store of his information—because he thought upon it. No truth was too small to escape his observation, and no problem too intricate to escape a solution, if it was capable of being solved. Thought; hard, patient, laborious thought, these were the tributaries that made the bold, strong, irresistible current of his life... Lincoln drew his supplies from the great storehouse of nature. Constant thought enabled him to use all his information at all times and upon all subjects with force, ease, and grace.²⁷

During these extended silences, Lincoln reflected deeply on the past. Memories may be born in the hustle and bustle of active life but can only be sustained and made

²⁶ Herndon, *Herndon on Lincoln*, 142, 158, 183, 205, 240, 254.

²⁷ Rufus Rockwell Wilson, *Intimate Memories of Lincoln*, (Elmira, NY: Primavera Press, 1945), 105, 584.

meaningful in the silences and meditation. Without reflection, these events are, as Lincoln's favorite author would state, nothing but "sound and fury, signifying nothing."²⁸ For Lincoln, the memory of the past possessed an almost sacred nature.

Early in his legal and political career, Lincoln developed the rational and investigative skills of the historian, but what preceded was a strong emotional attachment to the past, aided by his memory. This emotional attachment is the antecedent of rational investigation and they then work concurrently. Just as a sense of wonder at Manhattan skyscrapers precedes a desire of an architect to design buildings or one marveling at the stars precedes a desire to become an astronomer, a mystical attachment to the memories of the past can precede the desire to study it analytically as a historian.

Of course, it is impossible to truly know everything he was meditating on in these silences. However, he left enough of a written record to grant insight into these early reflections. From the written records it is evident that Lincoln formed a mystical and almost sacred attachment to the past and a melancholic fascination with the relentless passage of time. Furthermore, he believed that these memories were not just meant to be pondered, but rather they were essential sources of wisdom to guide his personal life and public career.

Ciphering Book

²⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), 84.

“Abraham Lincoln is my nam/And with my pen I wrote the same/I wrote in both hast and speed/and left it here for fools to read.”²⁹ The earliest document to survive in Lincoln’s handwriting, which contains the preceding doggerel, is his “Ciphering Book.” Since they were too expensive for every student to own, Lincoln stitched together several pieces of paper to create a workbook so that he could copy math problems from his teacher. Throughout the surviving sheets there are word problems for calculating interest and long division problems up to four digits. While doing his calculations, his mind must have wandered as he wrote, “Abraham Lincoln his hand and pen he will be good but god knows When.” He evidently took pride in his book as he wrote “Abraham book,” “Abraham Lincoln book,” and “Abraham Lincolns book” throughout.³⁰

His stepmother, Sarah Bush Lincoln, reported that the young Lincoln would use it to write down anything that particularly “struck him.”³¹ In one heavily damaged page survives the following:

Time What an emty vaper
tis and days how swift they are swift as an indian arr [...]
fly on like a shooting star the presant moment Just [...]
then slides away in [...] that we [...]ever say they [...]

²⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1: 1.

³⁰ “Ciphering Book, [1819-1826],” *Papers of Abraham Lincoln Digital Library*, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Foundation, 2018, <https://papersofabrahamlincoln.org/documents/D200001>.

³¹ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon’s Informants*, 107.

But [...] past³²

These lines are the two opening stanzas of Isaac Watts's "Hymn 58: The Shortness of Life and the Goodness of God." Due to the misspellings and irregular line breaks that do not match the original, the young Lincoln was most likely writing from memory. The correct line breaks and lyrics of the first two stanzas are below:

Time, what an empty vapor 'tis!
And days, how swift they are!
Swift as an Indian arrow flies,
Or like a shooting star.

[The present moments just appear,
Then slide away in haste,
That we can never say, "They're here,"
But only say, "They're past."]³³

The hymn continues by praising the mercy of God, man's only safe refuge. In the age of the Second Great Awakening, many frontier settlers would have memorized hymns like those of Isaac Watts, and Dennis Hanks, a family member who lived with him for a time in Indiana, recalled that Lincoln was fond of singing Watts's hymns.³⁴ In it and of itself, the fact that he wrote only the first two stanzas proves little. They may be all that he

³² "A Leaf from Abraham Lincoln's Earliest Handwritten Manuscript, His Homemade Student 'Sum-Book,'" *shapell.org*, Shapell Manuscript Foundation, 2020, <https://www.shapell.org/manuscript/abraham-lincoln-sum-book-manuscript/#transcripts>.

³³ Isaac Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs. In Three Books* (London: W. Strahan, J. and F. Rivington, J. Buckland, G. Keith, L. Hawes W. Clarke & B. Collins, T. Longman, T. Field, and E. and C. Dilly, 1773), 181-182.

³⁴ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 105.

memorized or that he grew tired and stopped after these few lines. Even though it appears that the writing ends with the final line from the original second stanza, it is impossible to determine if he wrote more of the lines because the original document is so heavily damaged.³⁵

However, these verses can be seen as the beginning of several larger patterns in Lincoln's sentiments and thus prove significant. First, it is noteworthy that the only lines that survive from this hymn describe the "Shortness of Life" but not the "Goodness of God" of the later verses. These first few lines may correspond to the sentiments of Ecclesiastes but by themselves they certainly have no redeeming grace of the Gospel. His close friends in young adulthood knew that Lincoln did not subscribe to any form of orthodox Christianity, and his stepmother reported that even in childhood Lincoln "had no particular religion" and "he never talked about it."³⁶ Secondly, they mark the beginning of the written record of Lincoln's fascination with time, the past, and wisdom. Lincoln would return repeatedly to the themes of the fleeting nature of the present, the mystical nature of the past, and the chastening humility that can be derived from this understanding.

Lincoln may never have held scripture to be sacred, but he certainly had a mystical and almost sacred relationship to the past, and that sense of mysticism derived

³⁵ "A Leaf from Abraham Lincoln's Earliest Handwritten Manuscript," <https://www.shapell.org/manuscript/abraham-lincoln-sum-book-manuscript/#transcripts>.

³⁶ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 107.

from personal memory. Furthermore, Lincoln rarely mentioned his past in the surviving documents, but when he did, it is usually to mention some lesson he has derived from it.

Communication to the People of Sangamo County

“Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition. Whether it be true or not, I can say for one that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem.”³⁷ Thus wrote the twenty-three-year-old Abraham Lincoln in 1832 announcing his candidacy for the Illinois legislature. While at this point in his life he hoped to be esteemed in the present, later he would later express his hope to live on in memory in the future.

In this first campaign address, Lincoln referred to his personal memory several times. He described in detail his investigations into the navigability of the Sangamon River in the preceding year and how his memory informs what practical actions that could be taken to make it more navigable. Lincoln, who had only lived in New Salem for about a year, wrote to his constituents that, “I was born and have ever remained in the most humble walks of life.” He closed with “if the good people in their wisdom shall see fit to keep me in the background, I have been too familiar with disappointments to be very much chagrined.”³⁸ Like his comments on his humble origins, he did not elaborate on what these disappointments were, but focused rather on the lesson he has learned from them, namely that he should not take setbacks too hard nor should he get his hopes too

³⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 8.

³⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 6-9.

high. In his first campaign address, he is already showing that his personal memory of the past can inform the formation of public policy as well as give him wisdom to prepare for the inevitable setbacks of a political career.

According to Lincoln, however, personal memory was not the sole or most important source of wisdom that could be derived for the past. Lincoln wrote that education was “the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in.” The reason education was so important was because men would “thereby be enabled to read the histories of his own and other countries, by which he may duly appreciate the value of our free institutions,” which was of a “vital importance.”³⁹ This demonstrates Lincoln’s early opinion that if this history was broadly cultivated, it would provide the wisdom they would need to remain a free people.

Her Unfortunate Corpulancy: Lincoln the Suitor

“I knew she was over-size, but she now appeared a fair match for Falstaff.” Thus wrote Lincoln in 1838 about a failed courtship in one of his most revealing letters of his personal memory. Lincoln wrote these personal reflections to Eliza Caldwell Browning, the wife of Orville Browning, one of his friends in the Illinois legislature. Lincoln had confided in Mrs. Browning in person about his relationship with a woman named Mary Owens from Kentucky, and Lincoln decided to write a short “history” to her to elaborate on why the relationship failed.⁴⁰

³⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 8.

⁴⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 117-188.

Lincoln explained that he had met Miss Owens in 1833 when she visited her family in New Salem. At that time, Lincoln found her “intelligent and agreeable,” and three years later when her sister proposed that she invite her again on condition that Lincoln commit to marry her, Lincoln agreed (probably without much thought). When she arrived, Lincoln was most disappointed as she no longer looked like she did three years prior, at least the way he said he imagined her in his memory. He wrote that this “old maid” reminded him of his mother, not because of her “withered features,” which she did not possess because “her skin was too full of fat, to permit its contracting in to wrinkles.” It was rather because of “her want of teeth, weather-beaten appearance in general, and from a kind of notion that ran in my head, that nothing could have commenced at the size of infancy, and reached her present bulk in less than thirtyfive or forty years,” describing it as her “unfortunate corpulancy.” However, Lincoln felt honor bound to his word and commenced courting her, even if he had never in his life wanted to be free more than he did now from this engagement. When Lincoln finally proposed, to his surprise, she rejected him. He proposed to her several more times, and she rejected him each time. The rejections, according to Lincoln, mortified him as he felt foolish in not understanding her intentions as well as humbled by being rejected by someone he felt so superior to. According to Lincoln, “Others have been made fools of by the girls; but this can never be with truth said of me. I most emphatically, in this instance, made a fool of myself,” and claimed that he was giving up marrying anyone.⁴¹

⁴¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 118-119.

One of Lincoln's proposals survives in letter form, and what is most noteworthy is how calculated it seems to be rejected. He wrote to this respectable woman of a good upbringing that life in Springfield was "dull," that she would "not be satisfied," that they would be "poor" and suffer "hardship," and that he had no plans to attend church because he did not think he could "behave" himself. To top it off, he told her that he would accept marriage with her, but he advised her that she better not do it for all the aforementioned reasons.⁴² This tepid marriage proposal appears to be calculated to invite rejection and could not be accepted unless the recipient was willing to submit to what would seem to be a loveless marriage.

What are we to make of this most colorful letter to Mrs. Browning about his personal history? First, no matter how brief and indirect, it provides his most detailed description of his mother, however unflattering. In his few accounts of her that survive, he usually relates little more than the fact that his mother existed, and then at some point, she ceased to exist. He certainly did not intend this letter to primarily be a reflection of her, but it is unfortunate that this is his most personal account of his mother that survives, and it describes her as having *withered features* and *having a weather-beaten appearance*.⁴³ (In all the manifold of ways that his words live on in contemporary society, it is perhaps no accident that these words have not made it into any Mother's Day cards.) With the paucity of evidence, we can do little more than speculate on his feelings of his mother.

⁴² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 78.

⁴³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 118.

Secondly, even though it shows Lincoln willing to portray himself in an unflattering light, he does not tell the whole story, and he exaggerated the truth for effect. For example, Mary Owens was still in her twenties during their courtship, not 35 or 40. Furthermore, while others reported her being larger than average, only Lincoln claimed that she had reached Falstaffian proportions. Furthermore, he does not relate to Mrs. Browning the nature of his proposals, including the letter that he sent to Miss Owens that borders on rudeness. After his death, she (then Mrs. Mary Vineyard) wrote to his law former partner that, "Mr. Lincoln was deficient in those little links which make up the great chain of womans happiness, at least it was so in my case." In a later letter she elaborated by relating that one day Lincoln and her were riding with two other couples when they reached a dangerous creek to traverse. The other two gentlemen helped their ladies cross safely. Lincoln forded the creek on his own and did not look back. When she crossed and caught up with him, she told him in a huff that he must not care if she snapped her neck. Lincoln, according to her, replied, that she was "plenty smart to take care of" herself. After she rejected Lincoln's marriage proposal, she moved back to Kentucky and they broke contact, save for Lincoln passing a message to her through her sister stating that she was a "great fool" for rejecting him. She caustically remarked that this was "characteristic of the man."⁴⁴

Thirdly, he professed that there was a lesson to be learned from this embarrassing episode. He wrote to Mrs. Browning that, "I have now come to the conclusion never again to think of marrying; and for this reason; I can never be satisfied with any one who

⁴⁴ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 256, 262-263.

would be block-head enough to have me.”⁴⁵ While much of the letter was written light-heartedly and he appears to be fishing for sympathy from a friend, it is significant that he did not believe in memory for memory’s sake, but rather there were lessons for him to learn, in this case he should have serious reservations about any woman who would wish to marry him with all his imperfections. His subsequent history shows that he did not follow this lesson, and based on the stormy nature of his marriage to Mary Todd, he perhaps should have heeded this bit of wisdom.

In one letter to Miss Owens, Lincoln wrote, “I want in all cases to do right, and most particularly so, in all cases with women.” Did he live up to this standard? On one level, he did in that he kept his word, however hastily made and ill-thought-out, to marry her if she came to Illinois. He never wavered from this resolution, even going above and beyond by proposing multiple times. However, while keeping to the letter of his commitment, it certainly seems he violated the spirit of it. His diffident treatment of her and his cold marriage proposal lacked the warmth and affection that any woman could reasonably expect in the situation. On another level, he may have done right by rectifying a mistake. Lincoln related to Mrs. Browning that he was already having second thoughts before Miss Owens arrived from Kentucky, and upon his arrival, he realized he had made a terrible mistake. He could have told her frankly of his error, but that would have violated his word and would have deeply embarrassed Miss Owens to be summoned hundreds of miles away for a potential marriage only to be rejected upon arrival by her suitor. His cool treatment of her seems calculated to be able to both keep his word while

⁴⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 119.

at the same time give her valid reasons to initiate the breakup, thus maintaining her honor and releasing him from his commitment and a likely unhappy marriage. His letter to Mrs. Browning and his message to Miss Owens after the breakup shows his immaturity; he was far away from the Lincoln that would one day say, “with malice toward none; with charity for all.”⁴⁶ He may have extricated himself from a difficult situation while still maintaining his word, but he did not always act charitably. He gained experience, no matter how painful and embarrassing, in maintaining his word and still forcing a split, allowing the other party to take the fault for the breakup.

Address before the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield

Francis McIntosh, a free black man who worked on a riverboat as a porter and cook, was walking on the St. Louis landing after his boat had docked on the afternoon of April 28, 1836 when he witnessed two police officers chasing two other men. Accounts differ as to what happened next, but the police ended up arresting McIntosh, either for helping the other two get away or for not aiding the police when they ordered him to help. As the two police were leading McIntosh up the hill to prison in the bustling downtown St. Louis, he pulled out a knife and stabbed both police officers, killing one and severely wounding the other. McIntosh ran, but an angry crowd chased him, caught him, and put him in jail. As news spread and as more people saw the bloody and lifeless body of the police officer laying in the street, an angry mob gathered outside the jail demanding that they take possession of McIntosh to lynch him. The sheriff refused and kept his cell locked, but realizing he could not resist the mob, he took the jail’s keys and

⁴⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 94, 1. 117, 8. 333.

his family and fled. McIntosh sat silently while some mob members left to get tools and worked for an hour to try and pry his door open. Once they got in, mob members dragged him out of the cell and took him a few blocks to the outskirts of town. There they tied him to a locust tree, stacked railroad ties and other logs around him, and lit it on fire. McIntosh begged for someone to shoot him, but no one heeded his plea. McIntosh prayed and sang hymns until he finally died ten to twenty minutes after the fire had been lit.⁴⁷

During a grand jury hearing, Judge Luke E. Lawless urged the jurors not to charge anyone in the mob that had committed the lynching because mob violence had been known since time immemorial and that it could not be restrained by the law. Instead of the mob leaders, he blamed the entire affair on abolitionists, namely Elijah Lovejoy, a Presbyterian pastor and publisher of the *St. Louis Observer*. He said that abolitionists like Lovejoy “fanatize the negro and excite him against the white man.” Lovejoy, after he read the aptly named Judge Lawless’s comments, replied that he would rather “be chained to the same tree as McIntosh and share his fate” than accept such sophistry. The judge, rather than protect the law, according to Lovejoy, subverted it, making mob violence more likely in the future.⁴⁸

Lovejoy’s prediction proved prophetic as a mob destroyed his St. Louis office and printing press. Lovejoy moved his family out of the slave state of Missouri to what he believed was a safer location, Alton, a small but growing town in the free state of Illinois.

⁴⁷ Paul Simon, *Freedom's Champion-Elijah Lovejoy*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), 45-48.

⁴⁸ Simon, *Freedom's Champion*, 52-54.

Located upriver from St. Louis, Alton was situated on limestone bluffs near the confluence of the Mississippi, Missouri, and Illinois rivers. There Lovejoy started the *Alton Observer* and continued publishing his abolitionist views.⁴⁹ Lovejoy outlined his beliefs in an article published in the *Observer* on July 20, 1837. He wrote, “Truth is eternal, unchanging... And truth will prevail, and those who will not yield to it must be destroyed by it.” He then cataloged the reasons why abolitionists were against slavery. For the Reverend Lovejoy, his first reason was not inspired by the Bible but had more secular origins. Lovejoy wrote, “Abolitionists hold that ‘all men are born free and equal, endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable-rights, among which are life, *liberty*, and the pursuit of happiness,’” and that these rights are not “abrogated, or at all modified by the color of the skin.” The slight misquotation of the lines from the Declaration of Independence shows that Lovejoy was likely writing from memory. He also criticized the hypocrisy of the slave owning apologist John Calhoun who threatened nullification and secession if tariffs were not repealed. Alluding to Genesis 3:19, Calhoun wrote that, “He who earns the money, who digs it from the earth with the sweat of his brow, has a just title to it against the universe. No one has a right to touch it without his consent, except his government, and this only to the extent of its legitimate wants; to take more is robbery.” After quoting Calhoun, Lovejoy argued, “Now, this is precisely what slaveholders do, and abolitionists do but echo back their own language when they pronounce it ‘robbery.’”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ “Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy,” *Alton Observer*, December 28, 1837.

⁵⁰ Elijah P. Lovejoy, “Anti-Slavery Principles,” *Alton Observer* December 28, 1837.

Even though Alton was in a free state, Lovejoy would not enjoy peace as this town had many pro-slavery sympathizers. Mobs smashed and threw three of his printing presses into the river, and when the fourth one arrived in a warehouse, Lovejoy and his supporters armed themselves to defend it. When residents learned that the press was there on November 7, 1837, a mob gathered, and a pitched battle ensued. When the attackers attempted to set fire to the roof, Lovejoy rushed out and to tip over the ladder and was then shot five times, dying moments later. The defenders then relented, and the mob tore apart the printing press and threw it into the Mississippi. The next morning, onlookers jeered and taunted the body of Lovejoy as it was carried through the streets to his home. As the body passed, one doctor shouted, “I would like to kill every damned abolitionist fanatic in town.” No one was ever punished for his murder.⁵¹

These events, if not all these specifics, were still fresh in the memory of Springfield residents seventy miles away in January of 1838 when the twenty-eight-year-old Abraham Lincoln delivered one of his most remarkable speeches of his early career. Lincoln delivered his address on January 27, 1838, to Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, a public speaking organization in the Second Presbyterian Church of Springfield, a one-story wooden structure that measured only 20’x 25’.⁵² In this humble setting, he delivered his most ambitious speech to date, and it is the first in which Lincoln made extensive appeals to the past, especially to the memory of the Founding Founders.

⁵¹ Simon, *Freedom's Champion*, 139.

⁵² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 108.; “History of Westminster,” *wpcspi.org*, Westminster Presbyterian Church, 2020, <http://www.wpcspi.org/history-of-westminster.html>.

Lincoln announced that the topic of his speech was “the perpetuation of our political institutions” and began with a paean to the Founders.⁵³ While Lincoln in many ways would make appeals to the past that did not include the memory of the Revolution, the Founding Fathers would prove to be a powerful source of inspiration and wisdom for his era, including Lincoln. When Lincoln was born in 1809, the touchstone of national memory was the American Revolution. Accounts of the war were not the domain of historians, but rather there was a living memory of it. Washington, Franklin, and Hamilton were in their graves, but Jefferson was in the Executive Mansion, Madison would soon succeed him, and Adams was in retirement in his Peacefield home with nearly two more decades yet to live. When Lincoln was born, the youngest veterans of the Revolution were not yet 50, and while firsthand memory of that war would fade during his lifetime, it would not completely flicker out until after his death.⁵⁴ Every sizable community would have had someone who fought in it, not to mention the non-combatants who had memories of it. During a time when many people were illiterate, especially on the Kentucky frontier, the spoken word formed much of the understanding of that war. This past was something sacred to be revered, cherished, and preserved as a source of inspiration.

⁵³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 108.

⁵⁴ “Revolutionary War Veterans Reminisce (And Get Their Pictures Taken),” *newenglandhistoricalsociety.com*, The New England Historical Society, 2019, <https://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/revolutionary-war-veterans-reminisce-and-get-their-pictures-taken/>.

Lincoln praised their common heritage and the importance of protecting their inheritance against the biggest threat to those institutions as he saw it, namely the rising mob violence throughout the country. He gave several examples to provide evidence of this lawlessness, including the murders of McIntosh and Lovejoy. He argued that the lynching of McIntosh was among “the most dangerous in example, and revolting to humanity” as it was “highly tragic.” Besides the length of time he mentioned, Lincoln got McIntosh’s story correct: “A mulatto man, by the name of McIntosh, was seized in the street, dragged to the suburbs of the city, chained to a tree, and actually burned to death; and all within a single hour from the time he had been a freeman, attending to his own business, and at peace with the world.” Lincoln argued that this “mobocratic spirit” threatened the “attachment of the People” to that government and thus endangering its existence. In a clear reference to Elijah Lovejoy, Lincoln maintained that, “whenever the vicious portion of population shall be permitted to gather in bands of hundreds and thousands, and... throw printing presses into rivers, shoot editors, and hang and burn obnoxious persons at pleasure, and with impunity; depend on it, this Government cannot last.”⁵⁵

Lincoln offered the cure for their present troubles:

Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well wisher to his posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violation by others. As the patriots of seventy-six did to the support of the Declaration of Independence, so to the support of the Constitution and Laws, let every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor;---let every man remember that to violate the law, is to trample on the blood of his father, and to tear the character of his own, and his children's liberty. Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American

⁵⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 109-111.

mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap---let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges;---let it be written in Primmers, spelling books, and in Almanacs;---let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the *political religion* of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.⁵⁶

Here he is appealing to the memory of the Founders and deliberately arguing for a *political religion* supporting the rule of law that would imbue every aspect of the society's culture and embed itself thoroughly in the collective consciousness of the nation.

For Lincoln the Founders had earned undying glory: "they were to be immortalized; their names were to be transferred to counties and cities, and rivers and mountains; and to be revered and sung, and toasted through all time." However, Lincoln worried that all the glory had been "harvested" by the Founding generation. He argued that there will be some in later generations who will seek their own paths to glory:

This field of glory is harvested, and the crop is already appropriated. But new reapers will arise, and *they*, too, will seek a field. It is to deny, what the history of the world tells us is true, to suppose that men of ambition and talents will not continue to spring up amongst us. And, when they do, they will as naturally seek the gratification of their ruling passion, as others have *so* done before them.

He continued to appeal to the wisdom of the past, arguing that the "towering genius" of the likes of Caesar or Napoleon (both men who tore down republics):

sees *no distinction* in adding story to story, upon the monuments of fame, erected to the memory of others. It *denies* that it is glory enough to serve under any chief. It *scorns* to tread in the footsteps of *any* predecessor, however illustrious. It thirsts

⁵⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 112.

and burns for distinction; and, if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves, or enslaving freemen.”⁵⁷

Throughout his life, Lincoln would thirst and burn for distinction, but we must not read too much into this last statement because we know his future in a way he could never foresee.

He hoped that the Revolutionary generation would live on in memory for all coming time, but it would necessarily fade and not hold the same strong influence as it had in the past. This is because a, “*living history was to be found in every family---a history bearing the indubitable testimonies of its own authenticity, in the limbs mangled, in the scars of wounds received, in the midst of the very scenes related---a history, too, that could be read and understood alike by all.*” This *living history* was necessarily a strong support to the institutions they created, and there was a danger to the survival of the republic as the Revolutionary generation passed and this memory fades. According to Lincoln, “They were the pillars of the temple of liberty; and now, that they have crumbled away, that temple must fall, unless we, their descendants, supply their places with other pillars,” which, derived from reason, would be “*general intelligence, morality and, in particular, a reverence for the constitution and laws.*” By doing so, they will be able to perpetuate their institutions by protecting the memory of Washington. He closed by alluding to Matthew 16:18, stating the rock that their

⁵⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 113-114.

freedom was built on was not that of the Apostle Peter but rather the continued reverence of the past and commitment to reason to support it.⁵⁸

Even though he made an impassioned appeal to reason, he did not create a rational argument based on historical research. Most of the speech is an emotional appeal to the memory of the recent past as well as that of the Founders. There were two enemies that threatened the government, anarchy and tyranny, with the former frequently begetting the latter, and these dangers will likely increase over time if the memory of the Founders fades. He appealed to their cherished heritage and reason to combat the growing lawlessness in the country. For Lincoln, memory and the reverence for the past had the power to help protect themselves from undoing everything they have done and provide an everlasting source of wisdom for the future.

Conclusion

Lincoln's earliest surviving documents illuminate his belief in the importance of the past. They show his powerful attachment to the Founders, but they also show that he believed that memory of the past in general, including his own personal memories, was useful in achieving a greater understanding of the present. When Lincoln referenced their national past in these early documents, he only referred to aspects of the past that any well-informed citizen, literate or not, would already know. However, in the following years, Lincoln began to develop a new understanding of history. Lincoln would no longer

⁵⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 115.

be simply content to rely on the knowledge of others. As we shall see, Lincoln began to do what historians do, investigate what evidence survives in the present to construct a narrative about the past in order to make meaning, or, as Lincoln would see it, provide wisdom.

Chapter II.

The Emerging Historian (1839)

A Mind Full of Terrible Inquiry

In order to understand Lincoln the historian, we must first understand Lincoln the man.¹ Throughout his life, Lincoln was uncommonly inquisitive. From his investigation of the navigability of the waterways when he first arrived in Illinois to his research into military tactics in the White House, Lincoln was never one to accept something based solely on authority or what he heard. One friend said that Lincoln's "mind was full of terrible Enquiry" and that he "was skeptical in a good sense." Another friend wrote that he "analysed every proposition with startling clearness."²

One of Lincoln's lawyer friends on the circuit, Henry Clay Whitney, left the following account of Lincoln's inquisitive nature:

While we were traveling in anti-railway days, on the circuit, and would stop at a farm-house for dinner, Lincoln would improve the leisure in hunting up some farming implement, machine or tool, and he would carefully examine it all over, first generally and then critically; he would "sight" it to determine if it was straight or warped: if he could make a practical test of it, he would do that; he would turn it over or around and stoop down, or lie down, if necessary, to look under it; he would examine it closely, then stand off and examine it at a little distance; he would shake it, lift it, roll it about, up-end it, overset it, and thus ascertain every quality and utility which inhered in it, so far as acute and patient investigation could do it.

¹ Emerson, Jason Emerson, *Lincoln the Inventor* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 2.

² Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 441, 506-507.

Whitney wrote that this inquisitiveness was not simply limited to the mechanical world. Lincoln, according to Whitney, “would bore to the center of any moral proposition, and carefully analyze and dissect every layer and every atom of which it was composed, nor would he give over the search till completely satisfied that there was nothing more to know, or be learned about it.” According to Whitney, “Lincoln would not take anything on faith or trust; that he would not walk in any beaten path; that he must make his own analysis; that he considered and tested all things as if he was the first man and totally without guide or precedent.”³

Lincoln’s inquisitiveness and his relentless questioning and testing were essential elements to his nature. When Lincoln wanted to understand something, he did not blindly accept someone else’s testimony, but he first questioned and investigated it. Lincoln understood that only by questioning and testing a proposition could he truly understand it. This innate inquisitiveness naturally extended to his understanding of the past.

Lincoln believed that wisdom could be derived from the past, and to discover this wisdom, it was necessary not to solely rely on common understandings of the past but to investigate it through critical analysis. Memory, while it may have a powerful emotional appeal, by itself it is insufficient to fully understand the past and derive the greatest wisdom from it.

³ Henry Clay Whitney, *Life on the Circuit with Lincoln: With Sketches of Generals Grant, Sherman and McClellan, Judge Davis, Leonard Swett, and Other Contemporaries* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1892), 109-110.

While many historians today believe that only those who are professionally trained in universities deserve the title of a historian, the autodidactic Lincoln used many of the skills necessary in study of history in his reconstructions of the past. The work of history is a complex process, but historians can construct reasonably accurate interpretations of the past by beginning with inquiry. The historian then investigates and researches, looking for answers to these questions. In the process of investigation, new questions arise and are explored. Historians develop a thesis, which they present in some form with evidence to support it. They analyze the evidence and provide warrants to show how the evidence given supports their claim. Historians seek corroboration for any evidence they find and provide source and context information. They, whenever possible, use primary rather than secondary sources. Historians acknowledge the limits to understanding with hedges and address alternative viewpoints. They define key terms and seek to provide clarity rather than mystify and muddle. They explain the significance of the thesis and argue why it is relevant. They seek to increase the understanding of fellow historians and the general public.

At times, Lincoln's arguments about the past only appealed to that which existed already within the memories of his audience and the voting public. At other times, Lincoln made arguments not by appealing to what was already common knowledge but based on his research into the past to bring these new aspects into a common understanding of the community.

Although Lincoln naturally possessed some of these habits, such as his inquisitive nature, these skills, the tools of the historian, are skills that he worked at not through formal training to become a historian, but rather through his legal training and practice.

Lincoln the Lawyer

There are few who both practice the law and history, but in order to be successful in one field, one must practice many of the skills that are essential in the other. Lawyers, by the very nature of their work, must research past events, ask questions, develop a thesis, and construct a narrative with evidence to support that thesis. Like a historian, their arguments must be convincing, or they will not have a long career in their field.

Lincoln learned about and developed these skills in his legal training. Just as Lincoln never studied history in college, he never attended law school. He studied on his own with the legal books he could acquire, and these works provided useful insight on skills that could be used by both the lawyer and the historian. Lincoln studied two books in particular that could be useful to the study of history, William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* and Simon Greenleaf's *A Treatise on the Law of Evidence*.

Blackstone's *Commentaries*

In the minds of early Americans, perhaps no greater authority on the law existed than William Blackstone. An 18th century British jurist, Blackstone was best known for his *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. Many of Lincoln's New Salem friends and acquaintances reported seeing him reading it, and in his later years Lincoln advised other aspiring lawyers to master it if they wanted to be successful in the profession. While much of this work deals with arcane details that would prove little use to Lincoln, there are several aspects of the *Commentaries* that would be beneficial for both a lawyer and a historian.

The most salient feature of the *Commentaries* for the historian is the importance of defining key terms. Blackstone, throughout his *Commentaries*, defined dozens of words, usually at the very beginning of each chapter. From commonly understood words like “law” and “title” to complex and more obscure legal terms such as “defeasance” and “lineal consanguinity,” Blackstone defined every term he deemed important.⁴ According to Henry B. Rankin, who was not only a friend of Abraham Lincoln but also the son and grandson of friends of Lincoln, remembered that when he was a law student in his law office, Lincoln “would take up a volume of Blackstone and read pages aloud, occasionally commenting on the author’s judicial acuteness as he went along,” and he told them that “he caught his inspiration in the art of defining words and stating principles from this master.”⁵ Throughout his political career when making arguments about the past, Lincoln would define key terms to provide clarity for his audience.

Blackstone also taught that if there was any confusion or controversy over the law, it was important to ascertain the original intentions of those who crafted and passed the legislation. Blackstone wrote: “The fairest and most rational method to interpret the will of the legislator is by exploring his intentions at the time when the law was made, by signs the most natural and probable. And these signs are either the words, the context, the subject matter, the effects and consequence, or the spirit and reason of the law.” Blackstone argued that it was important to understand “the cause which moved the

⁴ William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England in Four Books* (London: Printed by A. Strahan for T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1809), 1: 38, 2: 195, 2: 202, 2: 237.

⁵ Henry B. Rankin, *Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1916), 101.

legislator to enact it” in the past in order to determine how it applies in the present, a principle Lincoln would apply in his historical arguments.⁶

In order to present evidence to support one’s claim, Blackstone wrote that the records should be consulted in order to search for the proper precedent. “Public repositories” should be utilized “when any critical question arises in the determination of which former precedents may give light or assistance.” The court’s records were of “such high and super eminent authority that their truth is not to be called in question” and are preserved for “perpetual memorial and testimony.” The evidence found in these records was anything “that which demonstrates, makes clear, or ascertains the truth of the very fact or point in issue, either on the one side or on the other.” The evidence allowed one to ascertain relevant precedents, which were of the utmost of importance because people of the present must “abide by former precedents, where the same points come again in litigation.” According to Blackstone, “we owe such a deference to former times as not to suppose that they acted wholly without consideration” and only overturn precedent when “the former determination is most evidently contrary to reason” or “clearly contrary to the divine law.” For Blackstone, the only evidence from the records that should be admitted are those that are directly relevant to the issue at hand. Blackstone also taught that corroborating evidence was important because, “One witness (if credible) is sufficient evidence to a jury of any single fact, though undoubtedly the concurrence of

⁶ Blackstone, *Commentaries*, 1. 59, 61.

two or more corroborates the proof.”⁷ Each of these principles would prove to be useful for making sense of the past.

Finally, Lincoln read in Blackstone a principle that he would hold fast to, that the law was “always ready to catch at anything in favor of liberty.”⁸

Greenleaf’s *Evidence*

Another law book that Lincoln read and recommended is Simon Greenleaf’s three-volume work, *A Treatise on the Law of Evidence*. Greenleaf, a professor at Harvard’s nascent law school, wrote his *Treatise* to use as a textbook in his classroom and published his first edition in 1842.⁹ Like Blackstone in his *Commentaries*, Greenleaf defined dozens of terms and demonstrated the importance of precedents by citing hundreds of them. However, the bulk of his work explores the nature of evidence and how it can be used in the courtroom.

He began, of course, by defining “evidence,” which he described as being “all the means, by which any alleged matter of fact, the truth of which is submitted to investigation, is established or disproved.” Since much of what we “know” is not derived from our own senses and own experience but rather learned from what others have sensed and experienced, it is essential to be able to determine what constitutes “competent” or

⁷ Blackstone, *Commentaries*, 1. 61, 1. 68-70, 3. 24, 3. 366, 3. 370, 3. 374.

⁸ Blackstone, *Commentaries*, 2. 94.

⁹ Simon Greenleaf, *A Treatise on the Law of Evidence*, 3 vols. (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1842), 1: vii.

“satisfactory” evidence and use it properly. “Reason,” especially that which is gained through “experience and observation,” can aid in determining the veracity of a claim. According to Greenleaf, we can never determine what happened in the past with the certainty that a mathematician may prove an axiom, and it is necessary to a certain extent to rely on faith.¹⁰ This faith, however, is not blind because we can determine what happened in the past with satisfactory certainty (at least enough certainty in order to take action) by analyzing the evidence, searching for corroborating testimony, considering source and context information, and by using human reason aided by experience.

Greenleaf stressed that evidence only directly related to the issue at hand was permissible, and the evidence presented should be the best evidence available. It must not distract the court from the central issue but rather directly address the charge. By best evidence available, Greenleaf meant “that no evidence shall be received, which is merely substitutionary in its nature, so long as the original evidence can be had. The rule excludes only that evidence, which itself indicates the existence of more original sources of information.” According to Greenleaf, “This rule naturally leads to the division of evidence into Primary and Secondary. Primary evidence is... the best evidence,” which is the “kind of proof which, under any possible circumstances, affords the greatest certainty of the fact in question.” In certain circumstances, secondary sources are permissible. However, in order to best reconstruct a narrative of the past, one must never settle for a secondary source when a primary source is available. What is essential, according to

¹⁰ Greenleaf, *A Treatise on the Law of Evidence*, 1: 3-4, 10-11, 15-16.

Greenleaf, is that whenever possible, “all information must be traced to its source.”¹¹ By primary sources, Greenleaf did not mean transcribed copies of original documents but rather the original documents themselves. While very rarely did Lincoln have access to the original documents, when it is possible to determine the sources Lincoln used, he always tried to get as close to the original source as possible. He rarely relied on secondary sources written by historians but rather attempted to use information from official journals, collections of speeches and letters, and contemporary newspaper accounts when available.

Taking context and source information into account, according to Greenleaf, can be essential to determining the issue under contention. Human actions occur in a highly complex environment, and in order to understand them, it is necessary to determine the “surrounding circumstances,” because they “necessarily make a part of the proofs of human transactions.” Furthermore, to a certain extent, the court must determine the truth based on its confidence in the testimony of witnesses. This confidence is “sanctioned by experience,” which allows the court to believe the testimony of “men of integrity” who are devoid of “apparent influence, from passion or interest.” This faith in their testimony “is strengthened by our previous knowledge of the narrator’s reputation for veracity; by the absence of conflicting testimony; and by the presence of that, which is corroborating and cumulative.” The court must consider the “interest” of the witness, which can help determine the veracity of their testimony. Applying the criterion of embarrassment, if a witness testifies against what appears to be their interests, that witness holds more

¹¹ Greenleaf, *A Treatise on the Law of Evidence*, 1: 58, 93-95.

credibility than one who testifies in what appears would support their interests.¹² While Lincoln would be weaker in the areas of contextualizing and sourcing than he would be in other methods of the historian (he frequently would quote something with attribution but with little to no information about the author or the time period), he could usually assume that his audience would have been reasonably familiar with these details (i.e. citing Jefferson during any period of his lifetime). He, nevertheless, would include context and source information when he felt it relevant. Furthermore, he frequently used the principle that a person testifying against their perceived interests was more credible than one testifying who did not. For example, when he would later make arguments that slavery was wrong, he never openly quoted abolitionists but rather cited the authority of prominent slaveholders like Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Clay. To Lincoln, the statements of these slaveholders against the morality of slavery were more powerful than any arguments made by abolitionists because they, unlike abolitionists, testified against their apparent economic interests.

Lincoln may not have received any formal training in the field of history, but the research he performed in his ongoing legal studies did much to give him a solid grounding in the skills needed to be an analyze the past analytically.

Law Career

While Lincoln practiced many skills that would be useful as a historian in his legal studies, the question naturally arises: When Lincoln was making arguments about

¹² Greenleaf, *A Treatise on the Law of Evidence*, 1: 14, 119-120, 295, 434, 455.

history, was he simply treating the past as a lawyer would, spinning the version of the truth of his side wished to tell, regardless of whether it was right or wrong? To better understand this question, there is one aspect of his legal career that sheds some light on this. While all his colleagues recognized that Lincoln was one of the best lawyers in the state, his greatest weakness was his inability to effectively argue a case when he did not believe his party was in the right. One lawyer, Orlando B. Finklin, wrote that in a case where he felt that “he had the right none could surpass him.” Another lawyer, Samuel C. Parks, wrote that “when he thought he was wrong he was the weakest lawyer I ever saw,” sometimes allowing other lawyers on his team to make the arguments because he felt the jury would see through him. Likewise, Judge David Davis said that Lincoln was, “Great in court anywhere if he thought he was right,” but he one time refused to make an argument after hearing the testimony of witnesses, believing his client guilty. Lincoln’s friend, Joshua F. Speed, who sometimes hired Lincoln for his legal services, wrote, “He must believe that he was right and that he had truth and justice with him or he was a weak man- But no man could be stronger if he thought that he was right.”¹³ When Lincoln believed his cause just, he was, as his law partner William Herndon wrote, a “hoss” of a lawyer.¹⁴ This tendency must be kept in mind when considering his use of the past in his political career. While one could critique facets of his use of history, few would doubt his sincerity or his belief that he was in the right.

¹³ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon’s Informants*, 58, 238, 347, 499.

¹⁴ Herndon, *Herndon on Lincoln*, 5.

One further aspect of his legal career that would affect his use of history is the way that he argued cases. To one lawyer, Lincoln advised, “In law it is good policy to never *plead* what you *need* not, lest you oblige yourself to *prove* what you *can* not.”¹⁵ A few lawyers reported how he put this principle in action, but the most evocative account was made by Lincoln’s lawyer friend, Leonard Swett. According to Swett:

As he Entered the Trial, where most lawyers object, he would say he “reckoned” it would be fair to let this in or that and sometimes, where his adversary could not quite prove what Lincoln Knew to be the truth he would say he “reckoned” it would be fair to admit the truth to be so & so When he did object to the Court after it heard his objection answered he would say “Well I reckon I must be wrong. Now about the time he had practised this $\frac{3}{4}$ through the case if his adversary didnt understand him he would wake up in a few minutes finding that he had the Greeks too late and wake up to find himself beat. He was wise as a serpent in the trial of a cause but I have got too many scars from his blows to certify that he was harmless as a dove. When the whole thing is unravelled, the adversary begins to see that what he was so blantly giving away was simply what he couldnt get & Keep. By giving away 6 points and carrying the 7th he carried his case and the whole case hanging on the 7th he traded away every thing which would give him the least and in carrying that. Any man who took Lincoln for a simple minded man would very soon wake with his back in a ditch¹⁶

In making his claims about the past in his political career, he would accept the arguments of his adversaries, even if he did not believe them to be true, if he felt they were not necessary to convince his audience. However, he held fast to the one line of argument he felt would persuade his listeners.

Thoughts on a Useable Past

¹⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 453.

¹⁶ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon’s Informants*, 635-636.

Almost all of those who reported on what Lincoln read in his youth mentioned Lincoln's love of reading history. Some of these books, such as Parson Weems's biography of George Washington, would today be characterized more as myth while others could be considered the best works of history then available, such as Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Western Empire*. However, he rarely cited works of history or biography in his speeches about the past, and two men who knew him well in his adulthood, Joseph Gillespie and John T. Stuart, claimed that Lincoln didn't read much history. According to Stuart, Lincoln's former law partner, Lincoln "read hard works-was philosophical-logical-mathematical-never read generally-didn't know anything about history-had no faith in it nor biography." Gillespie, a fellow lawyer, colleague in the Illinois legislature, and friend, commented on Lincoln's thoughts on works of history:

Mr Lincoln never I think studied history except in connection with politics with the exception of the history of the Netherlands and of the revolutions of 1640 & 1688 in England and of our revolutionary struggle he regarded it as of trifling value as "teaching by example" Indeed he thought that history as generally written was altogether to unreliable¹⁷

According to Gillespie, it was not the *past* but rather the *history*, as it was then written in many of the books he had read, that was so fruitless. Lincoln valued good history so much that when he wrote it himself, he sought to get it right by going to the original sources and using his own reason to create his narrative of the past. As his friend and law colleague Henry Clay Whitney wrote, "His clear perception and vigorous reasoning

¹⁷ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 78, 508-509, 519.

faculties forbade him from taking anything at second-hand; he must grind everything through the mill of his own logic.”¹⁸

Although Lincoln may have doubted the utility of many of the histories then available, he never doubted his belief in a usable past. Experience, especially his years in the White House, caused him to modify some of his early beliefs, but he never wavered in his belief in its utility. Throughout his political career, he frequently and explicitly justified the usefulness of the past, and these beliefs justified in his mind why he should practice history in his political career.

Lincoln expressly stated both in letters and speeches in his early political career why the past was important. As mentioned earlier, he argued in 1832 that education was so important so that people would be able to “read the histories” in order to “duly appreciate the value of our free institutions,” which was of “vital importance.” Furthermore, in one letter, he wrote about the past, stating that “we dare not disregard the lessons of experience.” In a speech to the Springfield Scott Club, he said that “History is philosophy teaching by example.” In two separate speeches, one in front of the U.S. House of Representatives and one in Peoria, Lincoln, when dealing with a controversial topic, told his audience that they should be “judging of the future by the past” in order to determine the best course in the present. In his 1839 “Speech on the Sub-Treasury,” Lincoln mused on the value of “the experience of the past,” which “I rely chiefly upon experience to establish” an argument. He continued:

How is it that we know any thing---that any event will occur, that any combination of circumstances will produce a certain result---except by the

¹⁸ Whitney, *Life on the Circuit with Lincoln*, 112.

analogies of past experience? What has once happened, will invariably happen again, when the same circumstances which combined to produce it, shall again combine in the same way. We all feel that we know that a blast of wind would extinguish the flame of the candle that stands by me. How do we know it? We have never seen this flame thus extinguished. We know it, because we have seen through all our lives, that a blast of wind extinguishes the flame of a candle whenever it is thrown fully upon it. Again, we all feel to *know* that we have to die. How? We have never died yet. We know it, because we know, or at least think we know, that of all the beings, just like ourselves, who have been coming into the world for six thousand years, not one is now living who was here two hundred years ago.

I repeat then, that we know nothing of what will happen in future, but by the analogy of experience.

For Lincoln, studying the past had a clear and direct purpose-to guide the present and predict the future. According to the thirty-year-old Lincoln in his “Speech on the Sub-Treasury,” predicting the future based on previous experience was relatively uncomplicated, as simple as knowing from experience that a gust of wind will extinguish a candle. The wisdom of the past was there and readily available for anyone to find it. All one had to do was “examine it.”¹⁹

Of course, Lincoln was not speaking and writing in a vacuum but rather was reflecting current trends on the value of studying history. His ideas about the past and even some of his wording were not original. For example, Lincoln probably learned the phrase “judging of the future by the past” from Patrick Henry’s “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death!” speech where Henry proclaimed, “I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience. I know of no way of judging of the

¹⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 8, 1. 165-166, 2. 60, 2. 148, 2.158.

future but by the past.”²⁰ The phrase “history is philosophy teaching by example” was a well-known phrase during Lincoln’s era traditionally ascribed to the Greek historian Thucydides. While not Thucydides exact words, they are true to the spirit of what he wrote in *The Peloponnesian War*: “The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content.”²¹ People of Lincoln’s era revered the Founding Fathers and the ancient Greeks, and it is not surprising that he would derive inspiration from their thoughts on history.

More generally, the 19th century has been called the “Golden Age of History” as many historians in the Western World not only attained real political power for themselves but helped forge new national identities and gave individuals a sense of meaning in a collective process greater than the individual. A professionalized academic field in history would not be fully realized until after Lincoln’s death. Those who wrote history in America were usually college educated but made their living in some other profession besides history. Historians wrote for the general public and crafted their narratives to suit their tastes and interests. Leading American historians, such as George

²⁰ Patrick Henry, “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death,” The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy, Yale Law School, 2008, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/patrick.asp.

²¹ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Perseus Digital Library, Tufts University, <http://perseus.uchicago.edu/perseus-cgi/citequery3.pl?dbname=GreekFeb2011&getid=1&query=Thuc.%201.20.3,1.22.4>.

Bancroft, Francis Parkman, William Prescott, John Motley, wrote didactic histories, believing their field to be key to maintaining and perpetuating the freedoms earned by their fathers and grandfathers.²² Politicians who did not publish separate works of history nevertheless made frequent and abundant appeals to the past, sometimes based on their own personal research, to shape the present and guide the future, which would become even more true in years following the Kansas-Nebraska crisis of 1854.

Lincoln, like many others of his era, saw no reason to separate history and politics. While much of it has been lost to the irrecoverable past, there is still enough surviving evidence to give us insight into how Lincoln practiced the skills of the historian during his early political career.

Searching for Primary Sources

Compared with his later years, Lincoln's writings that survive during his early years are paltry. Nevertheless, an interesting pattern does emerge from the few that do, namely Lincoln's search for the original sources of information. In January of 1840, the thirty-year-old Lincoln wrote to his senior law partner, John T. Stuart, for help. Lincoln, then serving in the Illinois legislature, had risen to be one of the leading Whig politicians in the state. Stuart was then serving in the U.S. House of Representatives as a Whig. Preparing to help lead the Whigs in Illinois for the coming presidential election that fall, Lincoln wrote to his senior law partner that he must, "Be verry sure to procure and send

²² Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 1, 227, 255-268.

me the Senate Journal of New York of September 1814. I have a newspaper article which says that that document proves that Van Buren voted against raising troops in the last war.” Likewise, later that spring Lincoln wrote to his friend, Dr. Richard F. Barrett, asking him to procure newspaper articles from 1821 during his visit to New York City along with the journal of the New York Senate for the fall session of 1812. Lincoln had seen reference to these sources, and he wanted to verify the second-hand information he had. He was so eager to get them that he told his friend to go to Albany if they were not available in New York City and that he “would not miss your getting them for a hundred dollars.”²³ Before launching himself into the political battles of the election year, he wanted to arm himself with the facts that he had personally verified.

Like Stuart before him, by 1847 Lincoln was himself both a senior law partner and a Whig member of the U.S. House of Representatives. While in Washington, he wrote to his junior law partner, William Herndon, that he was going to start sending him the *Congressional Globe*, which was the official record and journal of the U.S. Congress. Herndon could read them if he pleased, but most importantly Lincoln wanted him to “be careful to preserve” them all so that they “can have a complete file” of them.²⁴ They would be little use to Lincoln in his Springfield law office while he was in Washington, but, even though he had already forsworn running for reelection, he hoped that his political career would not be over and he wanted a careful preservation of the records so that he could use them when needed in the future.

²³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 184, 1. 209.

²⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 419.

While serving in Congress, Lincoln would experience first-hand why it was important to carefully preserve written documents. In 1848, the Whig congressman Lincoln along with Democratic congressman James H. Thomas petitioned Secretary of State James Buchanan for a translated copy of a letter sent by Santa Ana to Andrew Jackson concerning agreements between Mexico and Texas. They heard reference to it in official Senate documents, but after searching diligently, they could not find copies of it. Lincoln and Thomas asked Buchanan if the State Department still had the record.²⁵ Buchanan replied that while the letter had been in the department temporarily for the purpose of translating it, the letter was returned to the president and no copies were preserved in the department.²⁶ One document Lincoln was able to locate was the 1836 Treaty of Velasco, which he transcribed in its entirety and used for a speech he delivered before Congress in 1848.²⁷

²⁵ Abraham Lincoln and James H. Thomas to James Buchanan, August 4, 1848, in *Papers of Abraham Lincoln Digital Library*, <https://papersofabrahamlincoln.org/documents/D206860>.

²⁶ James Buchanan, *The Works of James Buchanan, Comprising His Speeches, State Papers, and Private Correspondence*, collected and ed. by John Bassett Moore (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1909), 8: 152.

²⁷ Abraham Lincoln, "Transcription of Treaty of Velasco, [7 December 1847 - 12 January 1848]," *Papers of Abraham Lincoln Digital Library*, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, 2020, <https://papersofabrahamlincoln.org/documents/D210342>.

These few records that survive corroborate the testimony of Lincoln's friends and colleagues, that Lincoln adhered to his legal training in that he should not settle for second-hand testimony when the primary sources were available.

Lincoln, in searching for these documents, was not solely looking to construct a narrative as accurately as possible. In his letter to Stuart, after asking him to track down old newspapers, Lincoln wrote that he should "send me every thing you think will be a good 'war-club.'"²⁸ In analyzing Lincoln's speeches on history, it is necessary to determine if he was making disciplined arguments about the past that consider different viewpoints or if his speeches were nothing but a series of *war clubs* to bludgeon his opponents.

The Process of Historical Writing

Lincoln was known to be able to speak extemporaneously for hours, but he also would carefully craft what he felt would be his most important addresses. One document that sheds light on this process is a series of notes Lincoln wrote in the period between the time he was elected to Congress in August of 1846 and when he finally took his seat in December of 1847. Some of these fragments seem to be an outline for a speech, while other parts appear to be drafts for the words that he planned to say. By analyzing these notes, we can see the process he used to write history.

He began the outline by stating a question: "Whether the protective policy shall be finally abandoned, is now the question." The second line addressed the context of the

²⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 184.

current debate: “Discussion and experience already had; and question now in greater dispute than ever.” In order to answer the central question, it was necessary to “test” it by “*experience*,” in other words, to examine the history of the protective tariffs to determine if it was more beneficial than not. To test this question, he noted that he will limit the investigation from the years 1816 to the present, arguing that, “The *period* selected, is fair; because it is a period of peace---a period sufficiently long to furnish a fair average under all other causes operating on prices---a period in which various modifications of higher and lower duties have occurred.” Not only would he limit his discussion by time period but also topic, writing that he would not address all products but only “*Protected articles*” and the “*labour price*” needed to produce these goods, and he would argue why these limits are correct. He did not provide a clear thesis in his outline, but he likely meant it to be derived from the following question, which, in his mind, would answer whether protective tariffs should remain: “Propose a single issue of fact, namely--- ‘From 1816 to the present, have protected articles [co]st us more, of labour, during the *higher*, than during the *lower* duties upon them?’” To support his eventual thesis, he wrote that he would, “Introduce the evidence.” He does not detail what the evidence will be, but since he meant to prove the thesis based on “*experience*,” he was likely planning to provide evidence pertaining to the history of the protective tariff of the previous three decades. In his outline, he wrote that he would “Analyze this issue, and try to show that it embraces the *true* and the whole question of the protective policy.”²⁹ Not only would he analyze the evidence, but he would also provide a warrant to show that the evidence given does address the central issue. Even though these notes are rough and exceedingly

²⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 407-408.

spare, they show Lincoln planning how to use many of the tools essential to writing good history.

The remainder of the document shows Lincoln writing and rewriting the words he planned to use in his address. He wrote a few passages several times, tinkering with the wording and the ideas from one draft to another. The notes show a potential thesis, wisdom from the Bible, and reasoning from his own thought experiments. The one thing these notes do not show is any evidence derived from research.³⁰ He, perhaps, did not deliver this speech because he knew that he did not have the evidence to support his claims. However, during this political career, there are instances where he labored diligently in researching the history of a political topic for the speeches he did deliver.

The Emergence of the Historian: The “Sub-Treasury Speech” of 1839

According to Lincoln’s friend Joshua Speed, one evening in 1839 the leading young politicians in the state, including Lincoln and the future senators Stephen Douglas and Edward Baker, gathered in his store in downtown Springfield and “got to talking politics” when things “got warm,” “hot,” and “angry.” Then, according to Speed, “Douglas sprang up and said-Gentlemen, this is no place to talk politics” and proposed to debate those issues publicly. Thus began the first great debates between Lincoln and Douglas, nearly two decades before the more famous ones of 1858.³¹ While several of the top Whigs and Democrats participated in the debates, they were dominated by Lincoln

³⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 408-415.

³¹ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon’s Informants*, 476.

and Douglas. The most contentious issue was the sub-treasury system proposed by the Democrats that was meant to replace the national banking system that had initially been founded by Alexander Hamilton in 1791. Lincoln and his fellow Whigs opposed the sub-treasury system and wished to return to the original national banking system.³² Lincoln's "Speech on the Sub-Treasury" delivered December 26, 1839, is his earliest extant speech where his use of the tools of the historian is evident.

Lincoln's thesis was that the proposed sub-treasury system should not be adopted and that they should return to the old national banking system. He supported this thesis with three specific reasons, that the sub-treasury system will hurt the value and circulation of the currency, that it will be more expensive than the national bank, and that the money entrusted to the sub-treasury would be less secure than the money deposited with the national bank. He used logic to support the first assertion, arguing that since the proposed system will lock money away for months at a time until disbursement, it will limit the circulation of the currency compared to the national bank that would lend out deposits frequently and thus keep the money circulating. This, along with the proposal of paying in specie, would cause deflationary pressures that would hurt the economy. He believed his second argument to be self-evident, that while the National Bank paid the government \$75,000 annually for the privilege of handling its money, the sub-treasury, according to its proponents, would cost tens if not hundreds of thousands of dollars a

³² Abraham Lincoln, "Speech of Mr. Lincoln, at a Political Discussion, in the Hall of the House of Representatives, December 1839, at Springfield, Illinois, December 1839," *Papers of Abraham Lincoln Digital Library*, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, 2020, <https://papersofabrahamlincoln.org/documents/D200193>.

year. He used logic to support his third assertion, arguing that the proposed sub-treasury system would encourage rather than deter corruption. Lincoln noted that the interests of a bureaucrat in the sub-treasury went against his official responsibilities because he could never grow rich by merely doing his duty, personally storing public's money until it came time for disbursement, but he would have both the opportunity and interest to abscond with this money if he was dishonest. He appealed to their memory those officials who had done that very thing.³³

To those who would argue that the administration would only pick honest officials, Lincoln appealed to the wisdom of the Bible, noting that “The Saviour of the world chose twelve disciples, and even one of that small number, selected by super-human wisdom, turned out a traitor and a devil. And, it may not be improper here to add, that Judas carried the bag—was the Sub-Treasurer of the Saviour and his disciples.” Conversely, the interests of a banker were aligned with his duty, as one could grow wealthy by discharging one's duties faithfully, as a bank will prosper only when the public deems it trustworthy.³⁴ Lincoln primarily used reason and common sense, as he saw it, to support his thesis.

In the second part of his speech Lincoln addressed contrary viewpoints, and in this section, Lincoln demonstrated, for the first time, that he was using the tools of the historian. Some argued that the national bank was unconstitutional, but Lincoln noted that a majority of the Founders who acted on this issue voted in favor of it, and it was deemed

³³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 160-170.

³⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 167.

constitutional by subsequent administrations, Congresses, and Supreme Court rulings. Lincoln did not provide detailed evidence to support this assertion, but it is noteworthy because in many of his later speeches he would more fully develop this method, namely his asserting some proposed action in the present was not only expedient but also constitutional by analyzing in detail how the Framers voted on the same issue in their day. To those who support the sub-treasury proposal because they think the national bank was unconstitutional, Lincoln argued that the national bank was just as constitutional as the sub-treasury, noting that the provisions in the Constitution that allowed a sub-treasury applied equally to a national bank. He then used history to show how damaging the Jackson and Van Buren administrations were, arguing that government expenditures had increased rapidly and unnecessarily under their watch. After Lincoln noted that he had analyzed all the relevant documents, he made four assertions: 1. The ten years under Jackson and Van Buren had cost more than the previous twenty-seven years combined, years that included the expensive War of 1812; 2. In the final year of the last Whig president, John Quincy Adams, the federal expenditures were roughly \$13 million while the last year of the Democratic Van Buren had cost \$40 million; 3. During the final year of the War of 1812, the national government spent only \$30 million, even with all the additional expenses attendant to conducting that war, while Van Buren during a year of relative peace had spent \$40 million; 4. Van Buren had spent more in one year (\$40 million) than were spent under George Washington's eight years combined (\$16 million). Lincoln does note that increases in population will necessitate increases in expenditures, but even keeping this in mind, expenses had still proportionately increased much more

rapidly under Van Buren.³⁵ What he did not note is the fluctuation in the value of money that would have altered these figures in real terms. Had there been significant inflation, it would have undermined Lincoln's arguments because in real terms the expenses under Madison could have been equal to that of Van Buren despite the nominal difference. However, the opposite is true, as the U.S. had experienced *deflation* and not *inflation* in those years. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, average prices fell between 1814 and 1838 by 47.16%, meaning that \$100 in 1814 had the same purchasing power of \$52.84 in 1838.³⁶ If Lincoln had these figures available to him, he could have shown that this deflation significantly enhanced rather than detracted from his argument. Lincoln provided a warrant for these four pieces of evidence, namely "that there is no parallel between the 'errors' of the present and late administrations, and those of former times, and that Mr. Van Buren is wholly out of the line of all precedents."³⁷

While it may be impossible to determine with absolute certainty all the sources Lincoln used, some of them Lincoln cited explicitly while others can be reasonably inferred from the information he provided. Almost all of them seem to be primary sources. For example, Lincoln noted that in order to determine the expenditures under various administrations, he examined all of the annual reports made by treasury secretaries from the Washington to Van Buren administrations, records spanning five decades. In order support his assertion that one reason for the increase of expenditures

³⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 172-173.

³⁶ Ian Webber, "Value of \$100 from 1814 to 1838," *officialdata.org*, Official Data Foundation, 2020, <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1814?endYear=1838&amount=100>.

³⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 173.

was the increase in corruption, Lincoln referred to a senate hearing and told his audience not only what book and on what page the information could be found in, but also where the book could be found: “Their report is found in the Senate Documents of 1033-’34—Vol. 5, Doc. 422—which Documents may be seen at the Secretary’s Office, and I presume elsewhere in the State.” When discussing the value of currency, he cited an official letter that could be found “in Senate Document, page 113, of the Session of 1838-’39.” Other times he neither cited nor mentioned that the information came from research, but it appears that almost all the evidence that Lincoln provided originated in the official records published by Congress. The exception is when Lincoln attempted to prove that the Seminole War was costing more money than it should, he gave an account of government waste and noted that, “This fact is not found in the public reports, but depends with me, on the verbal statement of an officer of the navy, who says he knows it to be true.”³⁸ He provided no corroborating evidence, and in it and of itself, does not prove the point he made. While throughout his speech he used reason and the wisdom from the Bible to make his argument, Lincoln’s labor-intensive research in order to use history to better support his claims for the first time is evident in much of his address.

Not only does this early speech prefigure those more extensive and mature addresses he would make later in his career, but it also foreshadowed the debates Lincoln would later have with Stephen Douglas about history. In this speech, Lincoln devoted seven paragraphs to refuting the assertions Douglas made in an earlier address. Lincoln argued that Douglas’s arguments were either patently untrue or, when true, had no just

³⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 162, 172, 174-176.

application for the use Douglas attempted to make it for. After this analysis, Lincoln uncharitably noted that Douglas was “stupid enough to hope” that Lincoln “would permit such groundless and audacious assertions to go unexposed.”³⁹ According to Lincoln, Douglas was *stupid* for thinking that Lincoln would not do his research, and Lincoln would spend the next two decades conducting research to disprove the assertions of the “Little Giant.”

Conclusion

Throughout the rest of his career, Lincoln continued to use highly emotional language about the past, crafting some of the most enduring words in American history. However, beginning in 1839, Lincoln began engaging in a new sensibility for understanding the past, using the tools of the historian to make his arguments. Although not without flaws, he would continue to make these kinds of reasoned arguments until the very end of his life. For Lincoln, having a solid and well-informed knowledge of the past provided wisdom, especially in understanding human nature.

³⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 173-177.

Chapter III.

History and Human Nature (1840-1853)

Sharpened Perceptions

In many ways Lincoln was unusual for a man for his time and place. He did not smoke, drink, or chew. He did not gamble, and he rarely hunted. He never joined a church, was never baptized, and infrequently attended church. He did not take part in many of the social pastimes around him, even when he would have been under considerable peer pressure to do so. However, he was able to not only befriend but also inspire those who took part in all those activities.¹ How was he able to stand apart from and yet lead his community?

One explanation is that even from an early age, Lincoln seemed to have almost intuitive understanding of human nature. As a young boy he was able to read and write so well that not only would some adults ask him to read their correspondence and newspapers for them, they sometimes asked him to compose their letters as he could write in a clearer language than they were able to express verbally.² According to one friend, Lincoln told him that “his perceptions were sharpened” because “he learned to see

¹ William Lee Miller, *Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 30-35.

² J. L. Scripps, *Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961), 31.

other people thoughts and feelings and ideas by writing their friendly confidential letters.”³

However, he acquired this skill, very early in his political career Lincoln showed that he was able to understand the motives of those very different than him, a skill that would be useful in interpreting the past.

Temperance Address

The best early example of Lincoln’s understanding of human nature in his early political career is his “Temperance Address” that he delivered in Springfield on February 22, 1842, Washington’s birthday, to the Washingtonians, a temperance organization. Founded two years earlier, this group of former alcoholics had spread rapidly throughout the country, preaching the evils of alcohol as ones with the experience to know.⁴

In this speech Lincoln argued that the temperance movement had worthy goals and had made great progress in the past twenty years. However, many of those who had promoted the movement earlier had used poor tactics, and if it were to achieve its ultimate objectives, it must have a better understanding of human nature, as, he argued, the Washingtonians had done. To better understand human nature, Lincoln utilized several sources of wisdom to prove his point, including wisdom derived from the Bible, humor, hymns, history, and his own reasoning.

³ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 450.

⁴ Ronald C. White, Jr., *A. Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2009), 95.

To show that those who drink alcohol should not be demonized, Lincoln described the history of drinking and the temperance movement. He argued that the movement was enjoying more success now than in earlier years because those who previously led the movement were less sympathetic, namely preachers, lawyers, and hired agents, than those leading it now. Washingtonians cannot be said to have an ulterior motive and a member is filled with “sincerity” and “sympathy” for those who drink, making their arguments more persuasive. He also gave a short account of drinking in the past, saying that the practice was “just as old as the world itself.” Until about twenty years prior, it was “recognized by every body, used by every body, and repudiated by nobody.” From infants to elderly, from preachers to the homeless, everyone used it. It was used at every “rolling or raising, a husking or hoe-down” and “any where without it, was *positively insufferable*.” He provided a hedge, stating that, “It is true, that even *then*, it was known and acknowledged, that many were greatly injured by it; but none seemed to think the injury arose from the *use* of a *bad thing*, but from the *abuse* of a *very good thing*.” The point of this short account of the past was to argue that those who wish to convince those who drink, manufacture, or sell alcohol should not “condemn” or “despise” a practice that has been so universal.⁵

Even though all the evidence shows that Lincoln did not believe in any traditional form of Christianity, at least at this stage in his life, he believed that there was an abundance of wisdom to be found in scripture as well as the hymns of Isaac Watts. After comparing the curse of alcohol to the angel of death, Lincoln emphasized that those who

⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 272-275.

have succumbed to this curse may still be saved by quoting Ezekiel 37:9: “Come from the four winds, O breath! and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” In order to show the authority of the testimony of former alcoholics, he quoted Mark 5:15 and Luke 8:34 by describing the powerful effect that seeing these former madmen “clothed, and in his right mind” using “simple... language” that is full of “logic” and “eloquence” that “few, with human feelings, can resist.” Lincoln sought to sanctify the words of the reformed alcoholics by combining quotes from Matthew 12:34 and Acts 2:4:

“Benevolence and charity possess *their* hearts entirely; and out of the abundance of their hearts, their tongues give utterance.”⁶ To further this point, Lincoln said, for these reformed men, “Love through all their actions runs, and all their words are mild,” which is a quote Isaac Watts’s hymn “Against Quarrelling and Fighting.”⁷ Lincoln argued that the Washingtonians are true to the original Christian message that all may be saved when he quoted “Hymn 88: Life the Day of Grace and Hope” by Watts: “While the lamp holds out to burn, The vilest sinner may return.”⁸ Perhaps alluding to the Apostle Paul who had persecuted Christians before converting, he said the Washingtonians “were the chief of sinners, now the chief apostles of the cause” who were casting out demons and the “drunken devils” so that the lost may be “redeemed from his long and lonely wanderings in the tombs” as the man was saved in Mark 5 and Luke 8. To those who will not support

⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 274.

⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 272, 274, 278; Isaac Watts, *Divine Songs: Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children* (London: Printed for J. Buckland, J.F. and C. Rivington, T. Longman, W. Fenner, T. Field, and C. Dilly, 1780), 17.

⁸ Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, 71.

a society such as the Washingtonians because they have not suffered the sin of alcoholism, Lincoln appealed to their faith:

Surely no Christian will adhere to this objection. If they believe, as they profess, that Omnipotence condescended to take on himself the form of sinful man, and, as such, to die an ignominious death for their sakes, surely they will not refuse submission to the infinitely lesser condescension, for the temporal, and perhaps eternal salvation, of a large, erring, and unfortunate class of their own fellow creatures. Nor is the condescension very great.⁹

At times he referred to Christian texts because it was a cultural touchstone for his audience and helped illustrate the points he was making more clearly, while at other times he was clearly using the Bible as a source of wisdom. He may have scorned the theology at this time in his life, but he did not shun the wisdom.

Lincoln did not solely rely on external sources of wisdom but also used his own reasoning and logic. Lincoln's "Temperance Address" is unique in his early speeches in that it contains many epigrams and aphorisms that his later addresses would be known for. For example, Lincoln criticized those who promote a temperance system that some believed would take 100 years to work: "Few can be induced to labor exclusively for posterity; and none will do it enthusiastically. Posterity has done nothing for us; and theorise on it as we may, practically we shall do very little for it, unless we are made to think, we are, at the same time, doing something for ourselves." He used humor to illustrate the point that it is human nature to not be too concerned with benefits or punishments in the distant future: "'Better lay down that spade you're stealing, Paddy,--- if you don't you'll pay for it at the day of judgment.' 'By the powers, if ye'll credit me so long, I'll take another, jist.'" According to Lincoln at this stage of his life, for any system

⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 276-278.

to work, its benefits must be much more immediate. He also argued that those who used recriminations to try and change the minds of those who produced and drank alcohol would not be successful because “it is not much in the nature of man to be driven to any thing; still less to be driven about that which is exclusively his own business; and least of all, where such driving is to be submitted to, at the expense of pecuniary interest, or burning appetite.” Continuing his postulates on human nature, Lincoln argued, “To have expected them to do otherwise than as they did---to have expected them not to meet denunciation with denunciation, crimination with crimination, and anathema with anathema, was to expect a reversal of human nature, which is God's decree, and never can be reversed.” Instead of denunciations, “If you would win a man to your cause, *first* convince him that you are his sincere friend. Therein is a drop of honey that catches his heart, which, say what he will, is the great high road to his reason, and which, when once gained, you will find but little trouble in convincing his judgment of the justice of your cause, if indeed that cause really be a just one.” According to Lincoln, “Such is man, and so *must* he be understood by those who would lead him, even to his own best interest.” He also argued that positive peer pressure, or “*moral influence*,” can also help promote temperance. To those who disagree with him, Lincoln offered the following thought experiment:

Let me ask the man who would maintain this position most stiffly, what compensation he will accept to go to church some Sunday and sit during the sermon with his wife's bonnet upon his head? Not a trifle, I'll venture. And why not? There would be nothing irreligious in it: nothing immoral, nothing uncomfortable. Then why not? Is it not because there would be something egregiously unfashionable in it? Then it is the influence of *fashion*; and what is

the influence of fashion, but the influence that *other* people's actions have actions, the strong inclination each of us feels to do as we see all our neighbors do?¹⁰

This speech, more than any other in his early career, shows the young Lincoln using his own reasoning to create wisdom to help him make his case.

Lincoln closed his “Temperance Address” by appealing to the memory of the American Revolution, arguing that if the temperance movement were to achieve its ends, this moral revolution could have an even greater effect than the earlier political revolution.¹¹

In this “Temperance Address” we see Lincoln using many different sources of wisdom, including the Bible, hymns, humor, his own reasoning, and the memory of the past. Lincoln, the life-long teetotaler, showed that he was able to empathize with those different than him and had been meditating on how to convince those who act and think differently. Even though he made many references to the past, he did not use any wisdom derived from historical research in this speech. However, he showed himself thinking about how to convince people, which is useful for anyone who would attempt to make a historical argument (history is a persuasive art), especially a contentious one.

Oh Memory! Thou Mid-way World/‘Twixt Earth and Paradise: Lincoln the Poet

Lawrence Weldon, a lawyer from Clinton who travelled with Lincoln on the circuit, remarked that Lincoln typically rose before the other lawyers. Weldon usually found him alone by the fire stirring the coals and staring silently into the embers. There,

¹⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 272-277.

¹¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 278-279.

according to Weldon, Lincoln would “muse ponder and soliliquize wisper.” Weldon remembered one time he found Lincoln in this position reciting from memory the poem “Mortality” by the Scottish poet William Knox. Lincoln, according to Weldon, told him that that poem “sounded as much like true poetry as any thing he had ever heard,” especially the final two verses.¹²

Lincoln loved poetry, and his friends, family members, acquaintances, and colleagues all attested to the fact that they regularly found him reading poetry or reciting verses from memory. His favorite poets were well known: Robert Burns, Lord Byron, and William Shakespeare. However, his favorite poem was by an obscure Scottish poet, William Knox (he was so obscure that for much of his life Lincoln did not even know the name of the man who had written it).

Knox’s poem “Mortality” in many ways matched the sentiments of the Watts hymn Lincoln recorded in his ciphering book as a boy as well as the poetry he would write as an adult. The poem began:

Oh! why should the spirit of mortal be proud?
Like a swift-fleeting meteor, a fast-flying cloud
A flash of the lightning, a break of the wave
He passeth from life to his rest in the grave.¹³

Knox’s thoughts on a mortal’s life neatly matched Watt’s thoughts on time. Both used the word “swift” to describe life and used similes to express this swiftness. For Watts time is

¹² Wilson and Davis, *Herndon’s Informants*, 88.

¹³ William Knox, “Mortality,” *poets.org*, Academy of American Poets, 2020,

<https://poets.org/poem/mortality>.

“Swift as an Indian arrow flies.”¹⁴ For Knox human life is like a “meteor,” a “fast-flying cloud/ A flash of the lightning, a break of the wave.”¹⁵

Knox’s poem continued by describing how beloved family members and fair maidens would all belong to the dust. These lines resonated with Lincoln who had lost several close family members along with the woman who was perhaps his first love (Ann Rutledge). Knox described how both the high and low have been felled by death, which is something that Lincoln, who would know both, would always remember.¹⁶

For four stanzas, Knox argued that the living of the past are just like the living of the present:

So the multitude goes -- like the flower or the weed
That withers away to let others succeed;
So the multitude comes -- even those we behold,
To repeat every tale that has often been told.

For we are the same our fathers have been;
We see the same sights our fathers have seen;
We drink the same stream, we view the same sun,
And run the same course our fathers have run.

The thoughts we are thinking, our fathers would think;
From the death we are shrinking, our fathers would shrink;
To the life we are clinging, they also would cling; --
But it speeds from us all like a bird on the wing.

They loved -- but the story we cannot unfold;
They scorned -- but the heart of the haughty is cold;
They grieved -- but no wail from their slumber will come;

¹⁴ Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, 181-182.

¹⁵ William Knox, “Mortality,” *poets.org*, Academy of American Poets, 2020,
<https://poets.org/poem/mortality>.

¹⁶ Knox, “Mortality.”

They joyed -- but the tongue of their gladness is dumb.¹⁷

The idea that the people of the past were just like the people of the present- that they had the same thoughts, feelings, hopes and fears- was a powerful idea for Lincoln.

Throughout his political career, Lincoln appealed to and researched the past because he believed that since the people of the past were just like the people of the present, they could provide eternally relevant lessons on human nature. The final two stanzas were his favorite:

Yea! hope and despondency, pleasure and pain,
Are mingled together in sunshine and rain;
And the smile and the tear, the song and the dirge,
Still follow each other, like surge upon surge.

'Tis the wink of an eye -- 'tis the draught of a breath--
From the blossom of health to the paleness of death,
From the gilded saloon to the bier and the shroud:--
Oh! why should the spirit of mortal be proud?¹⁸

According to Weldon, “The weird and melancholy association of eloquence and poetry had a strong fascination for Mr. L” because it “contrasted the realities of eternity with the unstable and fickle fortunes of time.”¹⁹ This poem provided Lincoln with wisdom, that the people of the past were just like the people of the present, and since they were now dust, so his generation would be one day, and thus there was no reason for a mortal to be proud. This lesson would aid Lincoln in his political career as he never would let his pride get in the way of his political goals, as it would for his opponents and colleagues.

¹⁷ Knox, “Mortality.”

¹⁸ Knox, “Mortality.”

¹⁹ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 88.

Lincoln reportedly wrote poetry in his childhood, but the only poems he is proven to have written that survive come from his adulthood after visiting his boyhood home in Indiana in 1844 while he was campaigning for Henry Clay. One, which was probably written in 1846, is divided into three cantos, which all relate to his personal memory of his youth in Indiana.

It is impossible to read Lincoln's "My childhood-home I see again" without seeing the influence of Knox's "Mortality." From the first stanza, it is evident that the poem, more than anything, is a musing on the memory of the past.

My childhood-home I see again,
And gladden with the view;
And still as mem'ries crowd my brain,
There's sadness in it too.²⁰

Visiting his childhood home for the first time in years was bittersweet. The next two stanzas are a paean to memory.

O memory! thou mid-way world
'Twixt Earth and Paradise,
Where things decayed, and loved ones lost
In dreamy shadows rise.

And freed from all that's gross or vile,
Seem hallowed, pure, and bright,
Like scenes in some enchanted isle,
All bathed in liquid light.²¹

Memory has the power to give one access to a sacred netherworld where the living commune with the dead. Lincoln continued in the fifth stanza:

As leaving some grand water-fall
We ling'ring, list it's roar,
So memory will hallow all

²⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 367.

²¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 367.

We've known, but know no more.²²

The memory of everything that has been lost has the power to render the past sacred. As Lincoln visited those remaining and the landmarks of his childhood, he heard that time had felled half of those he had known and loved. For those still among the living, he saw “Young childhood grown, strong manhood grey.” Lincoln concluded this spiritual pilgrimage with the following two stanzas:

I hear the lone survivors tell
How nought from death could save,
Till every sound appears a knell,
And every spot a grave.

I range the fields with pensive tread,
And pace the hollow rooms;
And feel (companions of the dead)
I'm living in the tombs.²³

Here Lincoln was silently wandering the scenes of his childhood, meditating on those that have been lost and the ephemeral nature of life. Lincoln, perhaps, implied that these memories were driving him to madness, possibly alluding to the Gospels and the story of the demon possessed man who lived in the tombs and would cry out and cut himself at all hours of both day and night.

Many people who commented on his silences noted how “melancholy” he appeared when he withdrew within himself. In these silences it is not much of a stretch to assume that he was at times communing with loved ones lost and *living in the tombs*.²⁴

²² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 368.

²³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 368.

²⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 367.

The next canto recalls a madman he knew in his childhood named Matthew. Lincoln described him as having been an intelligent youth who at one point maimed himself and attacked his mother and father. His mind had gone completely mad, but his body survived much longer than his reason.²⁵ Lincoln may have chosen this topic because he had already suffered two bouts of suicidal depression, and he knew how slippery sanity could be.

The final and shortest canto returns to his meditations on the past and the passage of time:

And now away to seek some scene
Less painful than the last---
With less of horror mingled in
The present and the past.

The very spot where grew the bread
That formed my bones, I see.
How strange, old field, on thee to tread,
And feel I'm part of thee!²⁶

As his poetry shows, Lincoln believed that the past was not dead but rather lived within him.

Before leaving Lincoln's poetry, one minor controversy should be explored. After Lincoln's death, Lincoln's closest friend, Joshua Speed, wrote to Lincoln's law partner William Herndon that Lincoln had once written a poem on suicide and had it published anonymously in the *Sangamo Journal* around 1838. Herndon looked and claimed that he believed that the poem had been cut out from the back files, supposedly

²⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 368-370.

²⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 370.

by Lincoln himself.²⁷ The poem was thought to have been lost, but historian Richard Lawrence Miller announced that he believed he found the missing poem entitled “The Suicide’s Soliliquy” in the August 25, 1838 issue of the *Sangamo Journal*. Miller argued that he believed it to be the missing poem because it was published during the correct time period, it was about suicide, its somber theme matched other poems Lincoln wrote, and it possessed technical features such as length of stanzas, meter, and rhyme scheme that were similar to other poems he wrote. While it is unlikely that the “The Suicide’s Soliliquy” will ever be proved to be Lincoln’s with any certainty, Miller’s arguments are reasonable and compelling.²⁸

Two further things could be said to support Lincoln’s authorship. The poem contains an introduction, stating that, “The following lines were said to have been found near the bones of a man supposed to have committed suicide, in a deep forest, on the Flat Branch of the Sangamon, sometime ago.” The Flat Branch enters the Sangamon in a forest just east of Taylorville, which is approximately twenty-five miles southeast of Springfield. The author, since he or she wished to remain anonymous, would not likely have given such a specific location in the poem if that is near where they lived as that would remove their anonymity. However, it is likely that the author would have chosen a location far from where they lived yet one they were familiar with. Although it was far from Lincoln’s home, he would have known the location as the confluence of the Flat

²⁷ Herndon, *Herndon on Lincoln*, 87.

²⁸ Richard L. Miller, “Lincoln’s ‘Suicide’ Poem: Has It Been Found?” *For the People: A Newsletter of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 6, no. 1 (2004): 1, 6.

<http://www.abrahamlincolnassociation.org/Newsletters/6-1.pdf>.

Branch and Sangamon is located along the state road connecting Springfield to Vandalia, which was then the state capital and a road Lincoln travelled frequently as a legislator. Furthermore, another indication that it is probable that Lincoln penned this poem is that, like his other extant poetry, the author of these verses seems to be fixated on memory. In the poem, the narrator detailed why he felt he must commit suicide:

To ease me of this power to think,
That through my bosom raves,
I'll headlong leap from hell's high brink,
And wallow in its waves.

Though devils yell, and burning chains
May waken long regret;
Their frightful screams, and piercing pains,
Will help me to forget.

Only death will cease his *power to think* and even hell with all its tortures will in some ways be a comfort because they *will help me to forget* whatever the memories are that are torturing him.²⁹

If it was Lincoln who wrote this poem, he published it three years to the day after the death of Ann Rutledge. Friends and neighbors reported that after her death the memory of her drove him to insanity and he became suicidal.

If we accept Lincoln's authorship, we have written proof of how powerful memory was, so powerful that Lincoln nearly ended his life. Memory has the power to

²⁹ "The Suicide's Soliloquy," *The Sangamo Journal*, August 25, 1838,

<https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=SJO18380825.2.180&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN----->

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destroy, but, as we shall see, memory also has the power to restore and drive one to spectacular feats of accomplishment.

History in the Halls of Congress

Since Lincoln's youth he had been an avid reader. During his childhood when he did not have many options, Lincoln seems to have read every book he could get his hands on. However, after he had moved to Springfield and then later in his two stays in Washington, he was never far from a library, and he became much more selective. Lincoln does not seem to have read *generally* but rather *purposefully*. According to his law partner Herndon, Lincoln explained his reading habits thusly:

As I am constituted I don't love to read generally, and as I do not love to read I feel no interest in what is thus read. I don't, & can't, remember such reading. When I have a particular case in hand I have that motive, and feel an interest in the case- feel an interest in ferreting out the questions to the bottom- love to dig up the question by the roots and hold it up and dry it before the fires of the mind.³⁰

In 1847 Lincoln began his first and only term in Congress, and he was determined to leave a mark, and in order to do so, he spent hours of diligent research to prepare for speeches that he hoped would win him a national reputation. Lincoln, the man who has lived on in history as a war president, sought to make his mark as an anti-war Congressman by directly challenging the commander in chief, President James Polk.

Freshman Congressmen typically stay relatively silent and learn from more experienced legislators, but little more than two weeks into his congressional career on

³⁰ William H. Herndon, "Analysis of the Character of Abraham Lincoln," *The Abraham Lincoln Quarterly* 1 (1940): 431.

December 22, 1847, Lincoln threw down the gauntlet, seeking to challenge the morality of the Mexican War. Lincoln analyzed President Polk's earlier messages justifying the war, quoting Polk's argument that Mexico "invaded *our territory*, and shed the blood of our fellow *citizens* on *our own soil*." Lincoln introduced a series of resolutions determined to show that the war was based on false premises because the "spot" that fighting began was Mexican territory and thus America was guilty of unprovoked aggression and not vice versa.³¹ While these "spot resolutions," as they came to be known, were ignored in Washington, the war was popular in Lincoln's home district and for years afterward he would be derisively called "Spotty" Lincoln.

Lincoln followed up these resolutions three weeks later on January 22, 1848, with a tightly reasoned argument on the recent past, the start of the Mexican War. Whereas his resolutions asked the president to prove that the spot where fighting started was American territory, he would now attempt to use historical research to prove his thesis that the location where fighting commenced was at best disputed and at worst Mexican territory. In this address, Lincoln referenced several of President Polk's speeches, the Louisiana Purchase Treaty of 1803, the Adams-Onís Treaty, an agreement that Lincoln had transcribed from *Niles' Register* that Santa Anna had signed after his capture by the Texan Army in 1836, the 1836 Constitution of the Republic of Texas, and the State Constitution of Texas of 1845. He argued that while the boundary was disputed on paper, in fact Mexico exercised authority in some settlements north of the Rio Grande while the U.S. exercised authority in some settlements south of the Nueces and thus the de facto

³¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 420-422.

border was somewhere in between. Lincoln criticized President Polk for sending “the army into the midst of a settlement of Mexican people, who had never submitted, by consent or by force, to the authority of Texas or of the United States,” and thus leading the Mexican army to defend what it saw as its territory.³² Although Lincoln did exaggerate the significance of certain things, such as the importance of the 1845 state constitution making no mention of its southern border, the argument was largely historically accurate. In fact, one scholar in 1967 wrote that “Lincoln’s analysis of the several aspects of the boundary question, and his appraisal of President Polk’s responsibility for the initiation of the War in that address in the House, is superior to the treatment in any histories of the Mexican War now available.”³³ However, during his day Lincoln’s speech was not remembered for his tightly reasoned arguments at the beginning but rather the highly emotional and personal attacks on the president at the end, arguing that he must feel the “blood of this war, like the blood of Abel,” which is “crying to Heaven against him,” and that the president’s last message was “like the half insane mumbling of a fever-dream.”³⁴

Lincoln believed that President Polk abused history not only in his justification of the war but also in his opposition to the national government funding internal improvements, and Lincoln challenged the president’s interpretations of the past in his June 20, 1848 speech before the House. One of Polk’s objections to these improvements

³² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 431-438.

³³ Glenn W. Price, *Origins of the War with Mexico: the Polk-Stockton Intrigue* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), 158.

³⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 439-440.

was that it would lead to excesses, and Polk noted that in one year there were proposals for funding various projects in excess of \$200 million.³⁵ Lincoln argued, “Let us, judging of the future by the past, ascertain whether there may not be, in the discretion of congress, a sufficient power to limit, and restrain this expansive tendency.” Lincoln asked why Polk cited the amount of money “*applied* for” and not “how much was *granted*.” Lincoln asked, “Would not that have been better evidence?” After searching “authentic documents,” most likely the Secretary of the Treasury reports, the aggregate total spent on internal improvements was less than \$2 million, much less than the \$200 million figure President Polk brought forth. Lincoln provided a warrant, stating that the past proved that the federal government could spend money on improvements without it necessarily leading to excess, contrary to Polk’s assertion. He also criticized Polk’s use of a quote by Thomas Jefferson. Polk correctly noted that Jefferson believed that government funding of internal improvements required an amendment to make it constitutional but did not acknowledge that Jefferson also believed that these programs could be beneficial to the country. Lincoln openly admitted that he disagreed with Jefferson on the constitutionality aspect and cited two legal experts to justify his opinion.³⁶ Lincoln agreed with Polk that the past can help guide the present, but the past can be a hindrance rather than a help if history is not done correctly. In these early

³⁵ *Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, edited by James D. Richardson (New York: Bureau of National Literature, 1917), 4. 621.

³⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 482, 485-486.

speeches Lincoln sought to challenge the most powerful man in the country, but even if Polk heard about Lincoln's speeches, he sensibly ignored them.³⁷

What is perhaps most remarkable about this speech is that it demonstrates Lincoln's understanding of human nature and the limits of collective action. Lincoln noted that many had pointed out the problems that any internal improvement program would have, and he readily agreed. However, for Lincoln, this was not the real test whether action should be taken. Lincoln argued:

The true rule, in determining to embrace, or reject any thing, is not whether it have *any* evil in it; but whether it have more of evil, than of good. There are few things *wholly* evil, or *wholly* good. Almost every thing, especially of governmental policy, is an inseparable compound of the two; so that our best judgment of the preponderance between them is continually demanded. On this principle the president, his friends, and the world generally, act on most subjects. Why not apply it, then, upon this question?³⁸

This shows Lincoln already held a deep understanding of the nature of human affairs and public policy, and he would continue to use this wisdom to guide him in the future.

As noted earlier, Lincoln's friends and law colleagues Joseph Gillespie and John T. Stuart said that Lincoln had little faith in the biographies and histories written in his day, and a speech delivered in the House of Representatives in 1848 corroborates that assertion. Lincoln delivered a campaign speech in support of General Zachary Taylor, but much of it denigrated his Democratic opponent, Lewis Cass, and his supporters. Lincoln criticized "all his biographers (and they are legion)" for trying to turn Cass, despite his limited combat experience, into the type of military hero Andrew Jackson was. He

³⁷ Miller, *Lincoln's Virtues*, 168.

³⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 484-485.

mocked the myth that was growing up around Cass's broken sword: "Some authors say he broke it, some say he threw it away, and some others, who ought to know, say nothing about it. Perhaps it would be a fair historical compromise to say, if he did not break it, he did n't do any thing else with it." Recalling his personal experience in the Black Hawk War, he mocked the military pretensions of the biographers who glorified Cass:

By the way, Mr. Speaker, did you know I am a military hero? Yes sir; in the days of the Black Hawk war, I fought, bled, and came away. Speaking of Gen: Cass' career, reminds me of my own. I was not at Stillman's defeat, but I was about as near it, as Cass was to Hulls surrender; and, like him, I saw the place very soon afterwards. It is quite certain I did not break my sword, for I had none to break; but I bent a musket pretty badly on one occasion. If Cass broke his sword, the idea is, he broke it in de[s]peration; I bent the musket by accident. If Gen: Cass went in advance of me in picking huckleberries, I guess I surpassed him in charges upon the wild onions. If he saw any live, fighting indians, it was more than I did; but I had a good many bloody struggles with the musketoes; and, although I never fainted from loss of blood, I can truly say I was often very hungry. Mr. Speaker, if I should ever conclude to doff whatever our democratic friends may suppose there is of black cockade federalism about me, and thereupon, they shall take me up as their candidate for the Presidency, I protest they shall not make fun of me, as they have of Gen: Cass, by attempting to write me into a military hero.

Lincoln then added, for good measure, what he felt the biographers left out, namely Cass's flip-flopping on the issue of the extension of slavery along with his ability to receive excessive amounts of governmental compensation for his work and provided detailed evidence based on what appears to be extensive research to support these assertions.³⁹ While not much of a work of history itself, it shows Lincoln's views on the importance of getting history right and was perhaps his most effective political speech in Congress.

Niagara Falls: The Indefinite Past

³⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 509-514.

Despite all his experience with nature, Lincoln almost never celebrated its beauty. Even though he grew up in the age of Romanticism and loved its poetry, one will search Lincoln's *Collected Works* in vain for any Wordsworthian praises of "jocund daffodils" or the like.

However very rarely he left his impressions in written form about nature, there are a few times when nature inspired him, and the best example is his notes on Niagara Falls. After a series of speeches in Massachusetts in 1848, Congressman Lincoln stopped at Niagara Falls on his way back to Illinois. The falls, like so many before and since, inspired Lincoln as he jotted some private notes on the experience, possibly while riding on a steamer on the Great Lakes back to Chicago. Typical for Lincoln, the Niagara Falls inspired him to meditate on the past:

It calls up the indefinite past. When Columbus first sought this continent---when Christ suffered on the cross---when Moses led Israel through the Red-Sea---nay, even, when Adam first came from the hand of his Maker---then as now, Niagara was roaring here. The eyes of that species of extinct giants, whose bones fill the mounds of America, have gazed on Niagara, as ours do now. Cotemporary with the whole race of men, and older than the first man, Niagara is strong, and fresh to-day as ten thousand years ago. The Mammoth and Mastadon---now so long dead, that fragments of their monstrous bones, alone testify, that they ever lived, have gazed on Niagara. In that long---long time, never still for a single moment. Never dried, never froze, never slept, never rested.

The Niagara Falls inspired him to contemplate the meaning of the infinite and *indefinite* past, the continuities they represented, and the wisdom of the ephemeral nature of life.

Furthermore, Lincoln wrote that "The geologist will demonstrate that the plunge, or fall, was once at Lake Ontario, and has worn it's way back to it's present position; he will ascertain how *fast* it is wearing now, and so get a basis for determining how *long* it has been wearing back from Lake Ontario, and finally demonstrate by it that this world is

at least fourteen thousand years old.” According to Lincoln, geologists are able to use what exists in the present (“how *fast* it is wearing now”) to reconstruct what happened in the past (“so get a basis for determining how *long* it has been wearing back from Lake Ontario”) in order to make meaning of that past (“finally demonstrate by it that this world is at least fourteen thousand years old”).⁴⁰ For Lincoln, this process was not simply limited to the domain of geologists. Lincoln, finding inspiration all around him, was not simply content to rely on others to investigate what happened in the past. Lincoln would continue to do what historians do, investigate what evidence survives in the present to construct a narrative of the past in order to make meaning, or, as Lincoln would see it, provide wisdom.

Clay Eulogy

Lincoln criticized biographers of Cass, but he was not above hagiography himself, as he demonstrated with his eulogy of Henry Clay. Henry Clay died in 1852, a time when Lincoln was out of office and had no immediate hopes to attain any as his principled stand against the Mexican War left him unpopular with voters. Many people delivered eulogies across the country, and Lincoln delivered one in the Illinois statehouse on July 6, 1852. While much of this eulogy could be considered hagiography, as most are, he showed in this speech how the past inspired him.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 10-11.

⁴¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 121.

As Lincoln historian William Lee Miller once wrote, what the orator chooses to highlight and praise “tells as much about the eulogist as about the eulogee.”⁴² Lincoln began by appealing to the memory of the nation’s founding, noting that within a year of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Henry Clay was born, and, “The infant nation, and the infant child began the race of life together.” For nearly five decades, Clay was a leading statesman who helped guide that young nation from weakness and obscurity to strength and prominence. Clay possessed many of the qualities that Lincoln admired, such as his lifelong self-education, sound judgement, strong will, love of liberty, wisdom, logic, the ability to inspire action in his fellow men, and his eloquence that was born not of flowery oratory but rather from his “deeply earnest and impassioned tone, and manner, which can proceed only from great sincerity and a thorough conviction, in the speaker of the justice and importance of his cause.”⁴³ Much of what he spoke about Clay seems to come from his own personal memory rather than any new research.

Until this time, Lincoln rarely spoke about slavery, focusing primarily on traditional Whig economic issues such as tariffs and internal improvements. While Lincoln would not make his opposition to the expansion of slavery the focus of his politics until 1854, his eulogy of Clay shows him already moving in that direction. Lincoln detailed Clay’s positions on slavery, and it appears that he performed some research to do this. Lincoln argued that although Clay “was the owner of slaves,” he “ever was, on principle and in feeling, opposed to slavery.” He noted that one of his very

⁴² Miller, *Lincoln’s Virtues*, 227.

⁴³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 121, 124-127.

first and very last acts in public life, separated by nearly five decades, were the same, namely a proposal for the gradual abolition of slaves in Kentucky. Citing a St. Louis newspaper, Lincoln worried that some were beginning to deny the beliefs laid out in the Declaration of Independence. Those who would do so would betray the principles the country was founded on and disagreed with the most admired statesman of that country. Lincoln argued that Clay was against slavery not just because of practical considerations but rather moral ones. To prove this, Lincoln quoted at length a speech Clay delivered to the American Colonization Society in 1827:

If they would repress all tendencies towards liberty, and ultimate emancipation, they must do more than put down the benevolent efforts of this society. They must go back to the era of our liberty and independence, and muzzle the cannon which thunders its annual joyous return. They must renew the slave trade with all its train of atrocities. They must suppress the workings of British philanthropy, seeking to meliorate the condition of the unfortunate West Indian slave. They must arrest the career of South American deliverance from thralldom. They must blow out the moral lights around us, and extinguish that greatest torch of all which America presents to a benighted world---pointing the way to their rights, their liberties, and their happiness. And when they have achieved all those purposes their work will be yet incomplete. They must penetrate the human soul, and eradicate the light of reason, and the love of liberty. Then, and not till then, when universal darkness and despair prevail, can you perpetuate slavery, and repress all sympathy, and all humane, and benevolent efforts among free men, in behalf of the unhappy portion of our race doomed to bondage.⁴⁴

Lincoln would return to these words repeatedly throughout the rest of his career, especially the phrase *blow out the moral lights around us*.

Lincoln argued that slavery was the greatest threat to that Union that strove for liberty, and the two greatest American statesmen of the 19th century, Thomas Jefferson and Henry Clay, concurred. Lincoln quoted a letter Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1820 at

⁴⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 130-131.

the height of the Missouri crisis about whether it should be admitted as a slave state.

Jefferson wrote:

I had for a long time ceased to read newspapers, or to pay any attention to public affairs, confident they were in good hands, and content to be a passenger in our bark to the shore from which I am not distant. But this momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened, and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union. It is hushed, indeed, for the moment. But this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence. A geographical line, co-inciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once conceived, and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated; and every irritation will mark it deeper and deeper. I can say, with conscious truth, that there is not a man on earth who would sacrifice more than I would to relieve us from this heavy reproach, in any *practicable* way. The cession of that kind of property, for so it is misnamed, is a bagatelle which would not cost me a second thought, if, in that way, a general emancipation, and *expatriation* could be effected; and, gradually, and with due sacrifices I think it might be. But as it is, we have the wolf by the ears and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.⁴⁵

Lincoln agreed with every one of Jefferson's sentiments here, but cut short Jefferson's quote, because in the very next sentence Jefferson espoused his theory that slavery would dissipate the more it spread and dispersed and lost its concentration in any one locality, an idea Lincoln could not have disagreed with more.⁴⁶ However, for Lincoln, Clay represented a bridge from the Founders like Jefferson and their highest principles to his day.

Lincoln admired Clay the statesman who opposed slavery but was able to compromise with his fellow slave owners to hold the country together with his Missouri

⁴⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2.128-129.

⁴⁶ From Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, April 22, 1820, *Founders Online*, National Archives, 2020, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-1234>.

Compromise and then his leadership during the Nullification Crisis and the Compromise of 1850. Lincoln noted that God punished the Egyptians, the slave masters of the Hebrews, and he hoped for the ultimate abolition of slavery so that a just God would not see fit to render his judgement on the nation when it no longer had Clay's leadership to guide it. Through wisdom and compromise, Clay was able to sustain the Union that, according to Lincoln, was the world's champion of liberty.⁴⁷

Lincoln was inspired by Clay's leadership in the American Colonization Society, of which Clay was president. Lincoln, like Clay and Jefferson before him, believed that gradual emancipation and the colonization of the freed slaves was the most humane and liberal policy feasible. He quoted Clay's support for this policy, stating:

There is a moral fitness in the idea of returning to Africa her children, whose ancestors have been torn from her by the ruthless hand of fraud and violence. Transplanted in a foreign land, they will carry back to their native soil the rich fruits of religion, civilization, law and liberty. May it not be one of the great designs of the Ruler of the universe, (whose ways are often inscrutable by short-sighted mortals,) thus to transform an original crime, into a signal blessing to that most unfortunate portion of the globe?⁴⁸

Lincoln was never as eloquent as Clay in his support of the colonization of freed slaves, but it was an idea Lincoln professed for nearly the rest of his life, until experience and changing circumstances led him to alter his views. It is curious to note that while Lincoln's heroes (Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Clay) did not live up to their public sentiments (that slavery was wrong) in their private actions, Lincoln seems to have acted more liberally in private than his publicly espoused views as, by all accounts, he

⁴⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2.128-130.

⁴⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2.132.

appears to have treated African Americans as neighbors, at least as much as one could do at that time under the law.

However, Lincoln's eulogy of Clay shows the beginning of an important pattern; when Lincoln cited authorities on the moral evils of slavery, he would not quote abolitionists, no matter how eloquent or apt, but rather slave owners like Jefferson and Clay. As Simon Greenleaf taught, a witness's testimony holds more credibility if it seems to go against one's personal interests, and Lincoln held true to this principle when using the arguments of prominent slaveowners to argue against slavery.

Conclusion

After he left Congress in 1849, Lincoln was in the political wilderness with no immediate prospects for the future. He was no doubt a talented politician, but he was no statesman. In his "Temperance Address" Lincoln had shown his deep understanding of human nature, but his time in Congress had shown him not effectively applying this understanding to politics as his immature attack on Polk seriously misunderstood the president's character, such as it was, and was not well calculated to win support either at home or in Washington. However, the years following his term in Congress were a time of deep reflection, and when he would reemerge in 1854, Lincoln made much more effective use of his understanding of human nature and history in his speeches.

Chapter IV.

Thunderstruck (1854-1856)

Lincoln Music

After a long day in court in 1854, according to one story, a group of lawyers gathered in a tavern and discussed the most controversial topic of the day, Senator Stephen Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Act. Lincoln listened intently and engaged in the lively debate with his fellow lawyers and continued the discussion upstairs in their sleeping quarters. When the others went to sleep, one lawyer noticed Lincoln was sitting on the edge of his bed brooding, and when he woke up in the morning, Lincoln was still sitting on the edge of his bed lost in thought.¹

Lincoln left no written account of his feelings immediately after the passage of the Kansas Nebraska, except for the brief statement, "I was losing interest in politics, when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused me again," or, more graphically, that he had been "thunderstruck."² Whether apocryphal or not, one thing the preceding story does get right is that in the immediate aftermath of the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, while the country was being roiled in conflict and people were debating the issue for the first time from coast to coast, Lincoln remained silent. For months after

¹ William Pitt Kellogg, "Notes: Interview with the Honorable William Pitt Kellogg of Louisiana," *The Ida M. Tarbell Collection*, Allegheny College, 2011, <https://dspace.allegheny.edu/handle/10456/32198>.

² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 512, 2. 282.

the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Lincoln studied in the state library, jotted down notes, pondered the issues pertaining to it, and tested his ideas in anonymously published articles in the local paper. Only after months of historical research, thought, and forming and reforming his ideas, did Lincoln speak. When Lincoln did emerge, he was no longer the petty party politician promoting banks, roads, and the like, but rather a statesman, fighting for what he believed the American project to mean. In describing this change that became evident in his 1854 speeches, historian Shelby Foote wrote “and now the Lincoln music began to sound.”³ This *Lincoln music*, more than anything, was sung by the muse of history.

Kansas-Nebraska Act

Even though he has been given the lion share of the credit for the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and rightly so, it did not emerge as Stephen Douglas wanted it. It has been remembered as the act that repealed the Missouri Compromise line, allowing slavery into new territories if the residents so chose where, for more than three decades, it had been prohibited. While the expansion of slavery became the preeminent issue in the country, slavery for Douglas was a sideshow, a trifling detail he would rather not deal with. Douglas was an ultra-nationalist and expansionist who wanted more land, states, and wealth. He wanted a transcontinental railroad to permanently unite the country, and he wanted to take credit for it publicly and profit from it privately. As chairman of the Senate Committee on Territories, he saw it as his responsibility to organize the west and find a way to build a transcontinental railroad. In 1853 he proposed a bill that would

³ Shelby Foote, *The Civil War, a Narrative* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 1.27.

organize the Nebraska territory adhering to the Missouri Compromise, but southern Democrats balked at the notion of creating more free territories that would become free states. In January of 1854, Douglas proposed a new bill that was essentially the same except it remained silent on whether it was adhering to the Missouri Compromise. This was still not good enough for southern senators. As Senator David Rice Atchison of Missouri proclaimed, “I am free to admit that at this moment, at this hour, and for all time to come I should oppose the organization of the settlement of the territory unless my constituents and the constituents of the whole South...could go into it upon the same footing, with equal rights and equal privileges, carrying that species of property with them.”⁴ Douglas began to realize that he could not get his bill through Congress any other way, and after a Kentucky senator formally proposed tacking on a repeal of the Missouri Compromise, he relented, but not without misgivings. As he said, “I will incorporate it in my bill, though I know it will raise a hell of a storm.”⁵ By repealing the Missouri Compromise and allowing settlers to determine whether they would allow slavery in Kansas and Nebraska if they wished, Douglas was finally able to get the bill to pass both houses of Congress and signed into law May 30, 1854.

Douglas knew there would be problems, but he made a virtue of necessity, and argued that rather than being a flawed compromise that he never wanted, it was in fact consistent with the original American principles he cherished. Douglas claimed that the

⁴ Roy Morris, *The Long Pursuit: Abraham Lincoln's Thirty-year Struggle with Stephen Douglas for the Heart and Soul of America* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2008), 68.

⁵ Susan Bullitt Dixon, *The True History of the Missouri Compromise and Its Repeal* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke Company, 1899), 445.

Kansas-Nebraska Act was a reaffirmation of popular sovereignty, that the majority of any locality had the right to determine how it was to be governed without any interference by outside powers. Furthermore, it promised to move the debate from the national level that threatened to tear the country apart to local level, thus making it much less dangerous so that the country could focus on, as Douglas saw it, more important issues. Douglas was right about one thing, it did cause one hell of a storm, and it had consequences that neither Douglas nor his supporters could foresee.

Man of Self-Invention Reinvents Himself

For all intents and purposes, Lincoln seemed to have reached a dead end in his political career in 1849 when he left Washington after his one term in Congress. By prior arrangement, Lincoln had agreed not to run for reelection, but had he chosen to, it is questionable whether he could have been reelected because his opposition to the Mexican War was deeply unpopular. Stephen T. Logan ran in his place, but he lost this reasonably safe Whig seat to a Democratic contender. On his way out of office, Lincoln fought for patronage jobs for his supporters and unsuccessfully sought for himself a Land Office position. A likely contributing factor for this loss was the fact that a group of Springfield Whigs petitioned against him, citing his opposition to the war.⁶ The winner of the coveted post, Justin Butterfield, had opposed the War of 1812 but had subsequently learned his lesson. When someone asked him if he was against the Mexican War, he replied, “No, by

⁶ White, A. *Lincoln*, 164-165.

God, I oppose no wars. I opposed one war, and it ruined me, and henceforth I am for *War, Pestilence, and Famine.*”⁷

For the next five years, Lincoln did involve himself with Whig politics from time to time, but primarily he rededicated himself to his legal career, becoming one of the most sought-after lawyers in the state. When he could spare a moment, he did a curious thing- he took up studying Euclid, the ancient Greek founder of geometry. His former law partner, John T. Stuart, recalled that in the evenings after court on the circuit, “Lincoln would strip off his coat and lay down on the bed” and read “till late of night” by candlelight and then “reflect and digest.”⁸ With a sense of pride, Lincoln later recalled in the third person, “He studied and nearly mastered the Six-books of Euclid, since he was a member of Congress. He regrets his want of education, and does what he can to supply the want.”⁹ Euclid’s *Elements* had no direct application to his legal career, besides sharpening his already ultra-logical mind.

From the day Douglas first proposed the bill in January until the day it became law in May, Lincoln remained silent. As debate roiled the halls of Congress and reverberated throughout the country, Lincoln said nothing. He read the debates in Congress in the *Congressional Globe* with keen interest, and likely marveled at how Douglas seemed to best the greatest orators in the country. When Cassius M. Clay, a

⁷ Usher F. Linder and Joseph Gillespie, *Reminiscences of the Early Bench and Bar of Illinois* (Chicago: Chicago Legal News, 1879), 87.

⁸ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon’s Informants*, 519.

⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4.62.

prominent abolitionist from Kentucky and a relative of Henry Clay, came to Springfield that July, he was denied use of the statehouse as previously arranged, and instead delivered a speech against the Kansas-Nebraska Act in a grove about five blocks southwest of the Capitol outside of Springfield. Clay declared that the statement of rights in the Declaration of Independence was more than a “rhetorical flourish” but rather an “immortal truth.” He argued that slavery was contrary to the “letter, spirit, and history” of the Constitution, stating that Madison did not want the word “slave” in the Constitution because he did not want the word to stain the document when day the day arrived that institution would “pass away.”¹⁰ Clay recalled that Lincoln “lay on the turf” as he listened silently and was “whittling sticks,” contemplating all that was said.¹¹

He could have chosen to remain silent. He had no obvious political position available to tempt him, his potential opponent was so formidable, and he had earned a comfortable living. As historian William Lee Miller wrote, “We tend to think of ‘moral’ choices as those that life forces upon us—quandaries, perplexities, choices among goods and evils that we cannot evade.” This was not true of Lincoln in 1854. He could have easily evaded challenging Douglas and no one, besides perhaps his wife, would have

¹⁰ “Mr. Clay’s Speech,” *Illinois Daily Journal*, July 11, 1854,

<https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=SJO18540711.2.23&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN----->.

¹¹ Cassius Marcellus Clay, *The Life of Cassius Marcellus Clay: Memoirs, Writings, and Speeches, Showing His Conduct in the Overthrow of American Slavery, the Salvation of the Union, and the Restoration of the Autonomy of the States*, (Cincinnati: J. Fletcher Brennan & Co., 1886), 1. 232.

criticized him for it. As Miller argued, “There are also those latent possibilities lying all around us all the time if we bestir ourselves. Lincoln in 1854 bestirred himself.”¹²

How did Lincoln begin to *bestir* himself? He began with careful study. As the *Illinois State Register*, a hostile Democratic newspaper, put it, Lincoln that summer “had been nosing for weeks in the State Library pumping his brain and his imagination for points and arguments.”¹³ Lincoln’s future secretaries in the White House and later biographers John G. Nicolay and John Hay wrote about Lincoln’s study, “Where others were content to take statements at second hand, he preferred to verify citations as well as to find new ones” so that when he did speak out, his arguments would be “not only bold but original.” Nicolay and Hay wrote that he was still the good-humored man his friends had known for years, “but it became noticeable that he was less among the crowd and more in the solitude of his office or his study, and that he seemed ever in haste to leave the eager circle he was entertaining.”¹⁴ At the same time he was doing his research, he was writing notes, testing his thoughts and experimenting with his ideas, arming himself with logic and history for the coming political combat. When Lincoln finally emerged from this Aeschylean silence, he had transformed himself from a politician to a statesman. This man who consciously invented himself in his teens and twenties

¹² Miller, *Lincoln’s Virtues*, 233.

¹³ White, A. *Lincoln*, 198.

¹⁴ John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History* (New York: The Century Co., 1914), 1. 372, 376.

reinvented himself in his forties. It was this moment of solitary study and silent reflection when Lincoln became *Lincoln*.

Illinois State Fair

In the late summer of 1854, Lincoln began experimenting with his new ideas in public with speeches in Winchester and Bloomington. However, the main test would come in October when Douglas would deliver a speech at the Illinois State Fair on October 3. According to William Lee Miller, “This manifestation of that great institution the midwestern state fair brought together not only the usual prize cows and prize pigs and prize jams and prize jellies and farmers and city dwellers, but also, as we might say, the usual prize politicians- the civic leaders of the state, happy to find a ready-made statewide audience.” Douglas, the most formidable politician in the country, was the greatest prize politician of them all. Because of rain, Douglas’s speech was moved to the hall of the House of Representatives, which Lincoln listened to attentively in the lobby. When it was over, Lincoln stood on the stairway above the crowd filing out and announced that he would deliver a speech the next day. When it would come time for Lincoln to speak, Douglas sat front and center. For two decades Douglas had listened to Lincoln’s speeches against him, but even he had to be surprised at the new Lincoln.¹⁵

The Springfield Speech

Horace White, a young reporter from Chicago fresh out of college, recalled Lincoln’s speech more than five decades later: “He began in a slow and hesitating

¹⁵ White, *A. Lincoln*, 198-199, 251.

manner, but without any mistakes of language, dates, or facts. It was evident that he had mastered his subject, that he knew what he was going to say, and that he knew he was right.”¹⁶ Lincoln began with a carefully worded thesis: “The repeal of the Missouri Compromise, and the propriety of its restoration, constitute the subject of what I am about to say.” He then proceeded to tell his audience what he would not do: “I do not propose to question the patriotism, or to assail the motives of any man, or class of men; but rather to strictly confine myself to the naked merits of the question.” Perhaps thinking of the lessons of Blackstone and Greenleaf, Lincoln promised to stick solely to the subject at hand, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and would not introduce irrelevant evidence or ad hominem attacks to confuse and mislead the audience. Like Blackstone and Greenleaf, he clarified key terms, namely slavery: “I wish to MAKE and to KEEP the distinction between the EXISTING institution, and the EXTENSION of it, so broad, and so clear, that no honest man can misunderstand me, and no dishonest one, successfully misrepresent me.”¹⁷ In this introduction, Lincoln set the parameters for the arguments he would make.

In the second section of his speech, Lincoln provided “a short history” of the Missouri Compromise,” which he thought “will perhaps be proper.” Douglas and his supporters argued that popular sovereignty was the bedrock of the American Revolution and that any attempt to restrict this right, including the right to determine if slavery will

¹⁶ Horace White, “Abraham Lincoln in 1854,” (Illinois State Historical Society, 1909), 10.

¹⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 248.

be legal, trampled on those sacred rights. Lincoln would use history to prove the opposite was true. He began with a short history of the national government's attempts to limit the spread of slavery into new territories. Lincoln noted that it was the slave-holder Thomas Jefferson from the slave state of Virginia who was the primary inspiration for the Ordinance of 1787, which prohibited slavery in the territories that the national government owned north of the Ohio River. Lincoln, with history, proved Douglas's views to be false: "Thus, with the author of the declaration of Independence, the policy of prohibiting slavery in new territory originated," proving, according to Lincoln, that his position concurs with what was generally considered to be greatest authority on the original principles of America.¹⁸

Lincoln then paused his history to contrast the values of the past (the Founders) with the values of the present (the supporters of the Kansas-Nebraska Act). With withering sarcasm, Lincoln proclaimed, "But *now* new light breaks upon us. Now congress declares this ought never to have been; and the like of it, must never be again. The sacred right of self government is grossly violated by it!" Lincoln believed that those who would make a virtue of the spread of slavery violate their heritage because this position "assaults upon all we have ever really held sacred."¹⁹

Lincoln then returned to his history lesson, tracing the spread of slavery and the compromises made from 1803 to the present day. He noted that even though slavery was spreading, the Missouri Compromise represented a continuity in principle, since in it "the

¹⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 248-249.

¹⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 250.

same language is employed as in the Ordinance of '87" in prohibiting slavery north of 36°30'. He provided an extended quote from a speech Stephen Douglas delivered in 1849 in which he argued that "this Compromise had been canonized in the hearts of the American people, as a sacred thing which no ruthless hand would ever be reckless enough to disturb." His historical research blended seamlessly with his personal memory as he alluded to his own experience fighting to restrict the spread of slavery with his support of the Wilmot Proviso along with the national memory of recent events, such as the Compromise of 1850 and the passage of the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act. Above all, he highlighted how rapidly Douglas went from fully supporting the Missouri Compromise, to remaining neutral about it, to writing legislation to repeal it, and finally to his full-throated justification of that repeal. Lincoln finished his short history lesson on the Missouri Compromise by providing a hedge: "The foregoing history may not be precisely accurate in every particular; but I am sure it is sufficiently so, for all the uses I shall attempt to make of it, and in it, we have before us, the chief material enabling us to correctly judge whether the repeal of the Missouri Compromise is right or wrong."²⁰

After this short history lesson and hedge, Lincoln provided an extended warrant to explain why this history supports his thesis that the repeal of the Missouri Compromise was wrong. The young reporter in the audience, Horace White, remembered many years later: "Gradually he warmed up with his subject, his angularity disappeared, and he passed into that attitude of unconscious majesty."²¹ Those who supported the repeal of

²⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 250-256.

²¹ White, "Abraham Lincoln in 1854," 10.

the Missouri Compromise could only have done so because they support or are indifferent to the spread of slavery. Lincoln passionately proclaimed:

This *declared* indifference, but as I must think, covert *real* zeal for the spread of slavery, I can not but hate. I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world---enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites---causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity, and especially because it forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty---criticising the Declaration of Independence, and insisting that there is no right principle of action but *self-interest*.²²

Time and time again Lincoln would claim that the Revolutionary War stood for something higher than *self-interest*, and that it was the bedrock of the *fundamental principles of civil liberties*. According to Lincoln, his opponents were abusing or ignoring history to support their perceived interests in the present.

In the third section, the lengthiest of his speech, Lincoln addressed contrary viewpoints in a deliberate and meticulous manner. Just as he was heating up, he cooled it down. Before countering opposing arguments, he acknowledged his opponents had many valid points, and even when he might disagree with them, the fact that they hold those opinions matter and cannot be easily disregarded. Speaking of Southerners, Lincoln argued that “They are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist amongst them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist amongst us, we should not instantly give it up. This I believe of the masses north and south.” No group of people were innately morally superior to another but rather context, interest, and inertia rendered a powerful hold over people’s actions. Rather than proclaiming the guilt of his

²² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 255.

opponents, he acknowledged the collective complicity of the country in both the introduction and continuance of the sin of slavery: “When southern people tell us they are no more responsible for the origin of slavery, than we; I acknowledge the fact. When it is said that the institution exists; and that it is very difficult to get rid of it, in any satisfactory way, I can understand and appreciate the saying. I surely will not blame them for not doing what I should not know how to do myself.” Even though he already stated how much he hated slavery, he granted that he believed that the Southerners were right in that there were abundant difficulties in attempting to end the institution. When he acknowledged that he and Southerners might be wrong in their feelings about political and social equality for blacks, Lincoln argued that “A universal feeling, whether well or ill-founded, can not be safely disregarded.” While many Northerners opposed the forcible return of fugitive slaves to their masters in the South, Lincoln acknowledged the Constitutional rights Southerners had, which he would respect. Just like the lawyer Lincoln who would *reckon* that those opposing viewpoints *may* be true, Lincoln gave away all the points that he felt he could not prove to his audience’s satisfaction, but he held fast to the one core point of his argument: “But all this; to my judgment, furnishes no... excuse for permitting slavery to go into our own free territory.”²³

After acknowledging that Southerners made many valid arguments, Lincoln cataloged a list of assertions of those that supported the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, and Lincoln countered these arguments one by one. For several of them, Lincoln used the advice of Blackstone to look at the original intentions of those who

²³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 255-256.

wrote the law. For example, some argued that those who voted for the Wilmot Proviso were repudiating the Missouri Compromise. Lincoln spoke as an expert to the contrary, stating that he and his fellow legislators did not think that by voting to stop the spread of slavery into the new territories acquired from Mexico they were therefore voting to allow slavery to spread in the old territories acquired from France. Furthermore, if those who wrote the Missouri Compromise believed that the principle should apply to all future territories acquired, not just the land bought from the French, they would have said so. Lincoln argued, “An intention to extend the law is not only not mentioned in the law, but is not mentioned in any contemporaneous history. Both the law itself, and the history of the times are a blank as to any *principle* of extension; and by neither the known rules for construing statutes and contracts, nor by common sense, can any such *principle* be inferred.”²⁴ To infer that legislators who wrote and approved the Missouri Compromise meant the line to extend to lands that it did not mention corrupts history, and to insist that those who voted for the Wilmot Proviso were repudiating the Missouri Compromise corrupts logic.

Some argued that the repeal of the compromise was a non-issue because the lands of Kansas and Nebraska were not conducive to slavery and thus remain free territories. Lincoln acknowledged that he relied on hearsay to argue that “there are more slaves, in proportion to whites, in the north western county of Missouri, than within any county of the State.” Assuming he meant Atchison County, the one that is in Missouri’s extreme northwest, this claim, as he would have seen if he had consulted the 1850 census, was not

²⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 256-258.

true. In 1850 there were 1,678 people living in Atchison County, 30 of whom were enslaved, meaning the proportion of people enslaved in the far northwestern county was 1.8%, which was far from the highest proportion in the state. However, had Lincoln looked further south to the counties of Platt, Jackson, and Clay, which lie in the central region on Missouri's extreme western border that abutted Kansas, he would have discovered that the percentage of those people enslaved were 17%, 21%, 27%, respectively, which had some of the highest proportions in the state.²⁵ Even if Lincoln was mistaken in specifics, he was not mistaken in his overall argument that "Slavery pressed entirely up to the old western boundary of the State," and that it will surely spread to the west bank of Missouri River into Kansas because it had the same climate and would have the same people as the east bank. Some argued that Missouri residents would not cross over into Kansas because there was no law to protect the rights to slaves. Using the wisdom of history, Lincoln argued, "Wherever slavery is, it has been first introduced without law. The oldest laws we find concerning it, are not laws introducing it; but regulating it, as an already existing thing." Furthermore, some argued that it did not matter if some Missouri residents brought their slaves to Kansas because more anti-slavery people can move there and thus outlaw it. Lincoln countered that experience had shown how difficult it is to remove slavery once it is firmly rooted in the society. To those that argued that a restriction would make no difference because people would still bring their slaves in, Lincoln argued that they should look at history. When the United

²⁵ "The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850-Missouri," *census.gov*, United States Census Bureau, 2015, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1850/1850a/1850a-40.pdf>.

States acquired the lands that would become Illinois and Missouri, there were already slave-owning French residents living on both sides of the Mississippi River. However, because of the Ordinance of 1787, slavery was prohibited in Illinois and it slowly died out, while in Missouri, where there was no law against it, slavery grew exponentially. The only difference between the two cases was that in one territory the U.S. government outlawed slavery while in the other it did not. Some argued, as Thomas Jefferson did in a private letter, their belief in the “dispersal theory,” the idea that since the importation of slaves was illegal, the spread of slavery across the country would diffuse the slave power and weaken it as it would not be as strong as it was if it centralized in any locality. While not responding to Jefferson by name, Lincoln countered that the increase in the slave population could not be wholly accounted for by natural reproduction, that the slave trade had not been adequately suppressed, and the increasing of territories that allowed slavery would only increase the demand and rewards for those who would traffic in this illicit trade.²⁶ By using both history and logic, Lincoln showed that the repeal of the prohibition of slavery in Kansas and Nebraska did matter, and steps must be taken to reverse it.

Some argued that Northerners should not be concerned with the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and not object when Southerners take their slaves to new territories the way Southerners do not object when Northerners take their hogs there. Lincoln argued that this point would be valid if there was no difference between the two and were only property. Rather than quoting the arguments of Northern abolitionists to argue for the common humanity of blacks, Lincoln used the behavior of Southern slave

²⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 262-263.

owners themselves to show that they too believed that they are something more than mere property. Referring to history, Lincoln noted that in 1820 Congress, with near unanimous Southern support, declared that kidnapping people from Africa to be sold in the slave trade to be the equivalent of piracy and thus punishable by death. Lincoln noted, "But you never thought of hanging men for catching and selling wild horses, wild buffaloes or wild bears," showing that Southerners really thought that Africans were really something more than beasts to be owned. Lincoln, who had ample social experience with slave owners, noted that respectable people would not associate with slave dealers if they could help it, but they had no such qualms with those who traded in "corn, cattle, or tobacco." Probably using census records, Lincoln noted that there were more than 400,000 free blacks in the country, and if one calculated their value at \$500 a person, then there was more than \$200,000,000 worth of property going unowned. Lincoln asked rhetorically, "How comes this vast amount of property to be running about without owners?" While he does not account for those who liberated themselves, Lincoln correctly pointed out that many of them were legally freed because there was "SOMETHING which has operated on their white owners, inducing them, at vast pecuniary sacrifices, to liberate them." Lincoln provided the warrant: "In all these cases it is your sense of justice, and human sympathy, continually telling you, that the poor negro has some natural right to himself--- that those who deny it, and make mere merchandise of him, deserve kickings, contempt and death."²⁷ Lincoln could have relied on the authority of well-known abolitionists to eloquently argue the humanity of blacks, but he adhered to the advice of Greenleaf, that the most powerful testimony comes from those who testify against their apparent self-

²⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 264-265.

interest, and Southerners, against their pecuniary interests, had testified through their actions that they too believed in the humanity of African Americans.

Lincoln argued that Northerners should also be concerned about the spread of slavery because it hurt their own personal interests. For those who wished to move west to start over, they would be at a severe economic disadvantage if they had to compete against slave labor. For those who did not wish to emigrate, they would be at a political disadvantage if more slave states came into the union. Because of the Three-Fifths Compromise in the Constitution, slave states received a greater proportion of representatives in Congress in proportion to their free citizens than free states. Probably using census records, Lincoln showed that even though there were twice as many whites in Maine as there was in South Carolina, they each received the same number of representatives in Congress. Although he did not challenge the Constitution itself, he argued that the effects of it made it the interest of free people to arrest the spread of slavery.²⁸

Many orators and politicians will content themselves to attack the weakest link of their opponent's arguments (if they even bother to address any of them at all), adhering to the fallacy that if part of the argument can be shown to be false, then all of it is so. Lincoln did not do that, and he went after the strongest argument that Stephen Douglas had, namely the Kansas-Nebraska Act was merely upholding the essential principle of democracy, that of popular sovereignty. Lincoln began by stating that he, too, believed in popular sovereignty, noting that "My faith in the proposition that each man should do

²⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 268-270.

precisely as he pleases with all which is exclusively his own, lies at the foundation of the sense of justice there is in me,” a proposition he believed was true for both individuals as well as communities. He agreed with Douglass on this point, but the disagreement was merely on how to apply it. Lincoln professed:

The doctrine of self government is right---absolutely and eternally right---but it has no just application, as here attempted. Or perhaps I should rather say that whether it has such just application depends upon whether a negro is *not* or *is* a man. If he is *not* a man, why in that case, he who *is* a man may, as a matter of self-government, do just as he pleases with him. But if the negro *is* a man, is it not to that extent, a total destruction of self-government, to say that he too shall not govern *himself*? When the white man governs himself that is self-government; but when he governs himself, and also governs *another* man, that is *more* than self-government---that is despotism. If the negro is a *man*, why then my ancient faith teaches me that “all men are created equal;” and that there can be no moral right in connection with one man's making a slave of another.

Here he returned to first principles, claiming that the despotism of monarchy rests on the same principle as the despotism of slave ownership, that some people by the nature of their birth are to enjoy the right to rule others. Douglas had argued that whites in Nebraska were fully capable of governing themselves as well as “*a few miserable negroes.*” Lincoln responded:

What I do say is, that no man is good enough to govern another man, *without that other's consent*. I say this is the leading principle---the sheet anchor of American republicanism. Our Declaration of Independence says: “We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, DERIVING THEIR JUST POWERS FROM THE CONSENT OF THE GOVERNED.”

As no person or group of people would willingly consent to their own enslavement, slave ownership and popular sovereignty cannot exist consistently in principle. While he noted that slave owners could appeal to necessity as there was no way, as they saw it, to

immediately free all the slaves without serious difficulties, Lincoln provided the warrant: “I have quoted so much at this time merely to show that according to our ancient faith, the just powers of governments are derived from the consent of the governed.”²⁹ Here Lincoln appealed to their common heritage, the Declaration of Independence and the Revolution, to argue that they must preserve all that was best with their inheritance.

Douglas argued that his policy was the true popular sovereignty supported by the Founding Fathers because several states would only support independence from Britain if they were allowed to regulate their own domestic concerns without outside interference. Lincoln was more than happy to let the opinions of the Founders be the test: “I am glad he has done this. I love the sentiments of those old-time men; and shall be most happy to abide by their opinions.” Lincoln noted that the idea that slavery should be quarantined did not originate with his generation but rather the Founders:

This same generation of men, and mostly the same individuals of the generation, who declared this principle---who declared independence---who fought the war of the revolution through---who afterwards made the constitution under which we still live---these same men passed the ordinance of '87, declaring that slavery should never go to the north-west territory. I have no doubt Judge Douglas thinks they were very inconsistent in this. It is a question of discrimination between them and him. But there is not an inch of ground left for his claiming that their opinions---their example---their authority---are on his side in this controversy.³⁰

Lincoln was never one to accept that something should be done in the present solely because it had been done in the past, but he believed that precedents were powerful, especially if they adhered to reason, and he clearly believed that history and reason were on his side on this issue.

²⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 265-266.

³⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 266-267.

Some argued that those who oppose slavery should not agitate against it because it was threatening the Union and it did not directly involve them. Lincoln said that this went against basic human nature:

Slavery is founded in the selfishness of man's nature---opposition to it, is his love of justice. These principles are an eternal antagonism; and when brought into collision so fiercely, as slavery extension brings them, shocks, and throes, and convulsions must ceaselessly follow. Repeal the Missouri compromise---repeal all compromises---repeal the declaration of independence---repeal all past history, you still can not repeal human nature. It still will be the abundance of man's heart, that slavery extension is wrong; and out of the abundance of his heart, his mouth will continue to speak.³¹

While he did paraphrase Matthew 12:34 and Luke 6:45 to sanctify his words, Lincoln primarily used his own reasoning to show that agitation against slavery will not cease until slavery is ended. As Lincoln was delivering this speech, the young reporter Horace White recalled, "Sometimes his manner was very impassioned, and he seemed transfigured with his subject. Perspiration would stream from his face, and each particular hair would stand on end. Then the inspiration that possessed him took possession of his hearers also."³²

In the fourth section of his speech, Lincoln provided prophecies of what will happen if the Kansas-Nebraska Act was not repudiated. If the American people allowed Douglas's popular sovereignty plan to proceed, Lincoln foresaw bloodshed:

Through all this, bowie-knives and six-shooters are seen plainly enough; but never a glimpse of the ballot-box. And, really, what is to be the result of this? Each party WITHIN, having numerous and determined backers

³¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 271.

³² White, "Abraham Lincoln in 1854," 10.

WITHOUT, is it not probable that the contest will come to blows, and bloodshed? Could there be a more apt invention to bring about collision and violence, on the slavery question, than this Nebraska project is?

If the question of slavery in Kansas was to be determined not by ballots but by bullets, Lincoln foresaw only one outcome: “And if this fight should begin, is it likely to take a very peaceful, Union-saving turn? Will not the first drop of blood so shed, be the real knell of the Union?”³³ Blood, once shed, was not likely to remain contained in one locality but rather spread and metastasize, threatening the Union.

From this dire prospect, Lincoln moved to the fifth section of his speech where he highlighted what should be done and why. First, he reiterated his thesis, namely “that the Missouri Compromise ought to be restored,” which he believed was the best way to save the Union. Even if an immediate repeal may be difficult, a victory of Anti-Nebraska candidates in the 1854 election would repudiate the principle and may sway some senators not up for reelection who originally supported it to vote for its repeal. Those who opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act must not let their different party affiliations divide them because they must, “Stand with anybody that stands RIGHT. Stand with him while he is right and PART with him when he goes wrong.”³⁴

They should also restore the original views of the Founders towards slavery, not as a positive good that must be protected but as a moral evil that must

³³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 271-272.

³⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 272-273.

be tolerated only as long as necessity dictates. It could not be reiterated enough—slavery was evil and should be treated as such. Lincoln proclaimed:

I object to it because it assumes that there CAN be MORAL RIGHT in the enslaving of one man by another. I object to it as a dangerous dalliance for a few people---a sad evidence that, feeling prosperity we forget right---that liberty, as a principle, we have ceased to revere. I object to it because the fathers of the republic eschewed, and rejected it. The argument of 'Necessity' was the only argument they ever admitted in favor of slavery; and so far, and so far only as it carried them, did they ever go.³⁵

Lincoln portrayed himself as a conservative, as he sought to uphold what he believed to be the highest ideals of the Revolutionary generation.

To support this assertion, he provided a short history of their attitudes to slavery. The Founders did not invent the institution of slavery but rather “found the institution existing among” them and sought to limit its influence as much as possible. Before the Constitution was signed, they forbid the spread of slavery into the Northwest Territory. When they drafted the Constitution, they did not use the word slave but referred to the institution obliquely. Lincoln used an analogy to explain why they did this: “Thus, the thing is hid away, in the constitution, just as an afflicted man hides away a wen or a cancer, which he dares not cut out at once, lest he bleed to death; with the promise, nevertheless, that the cutting may begin at the end of a given time.” He then detailed how they took several actions after the adoption of the Constitution to restrict slavery, namely abolishing the exportation of slaves in 1794, banning the importation of slaves in the slave territory of Mississippi in 1798, the outlawing of Americans participating in the

³⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 274.

slave trade among foreign nations besides the United States in 1800, the restricting of the internal slave trade “in aid of one or two State laws” (here Lincoln may be referring to the 1804 act that organized the lands purchased from France in 1803 that placed limitations on the internal slave trade into those territories), the prohibiting of African slave trade immediately when it was Constitutional to do so in 1808, and the passing of a law that equated the slave trade with piracy and instituting the death penalty for the crime. For Lincoln, this history showed that “the plain unmistakable spirit of that age, towards slavery, was hostility to the PRINCIPLE, and toleration, ONLY BY NECESSITY.”³⁶ Lincoln did not argue that the Founders were unanimous in their condemnation of slavery or always enacted their public professions in their private lives but rather that there was a generalized feeling if not unanimity amongst the Founding generation that slavery was wrong in principle and should be treated as such in their national life.

Just as at the beginning of the speech, Lincoln contrasted the principles of the Revolutionary generation with his more degenerate age:

Little by little, but steadily as man’s march to the grave, we have been giving up the OLD for the NEW faith. Near eighty years ago we began by declaring that all men are created equal; but now from that beginning we have run down to the other declaration, that for SOME men to enslave OTHERS is a ‘sacred right of self-government.’ These principles can not stand together. They are as opposite as God and mammon; and whoever holds to the one, must despise the other.

Rather than a continuity with the Founders, Lincoln used history to show that

³⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 274-275.

Douglas and the Kansas-Nebraska Act supporters represented a fundamental break with the past. He warned his audience, “Let no one be deceived. The spirit of seventy-six and the spirit of Nebraska, are utter antagonisms; and the former is being rapidly displaced by the latter.”³⁷ The study of history is always an important check on those who would seek to pervert the understanding of the past to sanctify the perceived interests of the present.

Lincoln closed with a peroration that challenged his audience to a renewed commitment to original principles:

Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it. Let us turn and wash it white, in the spirit, if not the blood, of the Revolution. Let us turn slavery from its claims of ‘moral right,’ back upon its existing legal rights, and its arguments of ‘necessity.’ Let us return it to the position our fathers gave it; and there let it rest in peace. Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it. Let north and south---let all Americans---let all lovers of liberty everywhere---join in the great and good work. If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have so saved it, as to make, and to keep it, forever worthy of the saving. We shall have so saved it, that the succeeding millions of free happy people, the world over, shall rise up, and call us blessed, to the latest generations.³⁸

In his peroration, Lincoln not only appealed to the memory of the past but reminded his audience that they can live on in memory forever.

Lincoln’s speech, judging by the reaction it generated, was an unqualified success. The next day the *Illinois Daily Journal* noted:

Mr. Lincoln was frequently and warmly applauded. It was indeed a proud day for all who love free principles and the unstained republicanism of our revolutionary days. Mr. Lincoln’s argument was clear and logical, his arrangement of facts methodical, his deductions self-evident, and his applications striking and most effective. We venture to say that Judge Douglas never, in the Senate Chamber or

³⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 275.

³⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 276.

before the people, listened to just such a powerful analysis of his Nebraska sophisms, or saw such a remorseless tearing of his flimsy arguments and scattering them to the winds, as he endured yesterday from Mr. Lincoln.

According to the *Journal*, “Mr. Lincoln closed amid immense cheers. He had nobly and triumphantly sustained the cause of a free people, and won a place in their hearts as a bold and powerful champion of equal rights for American citizens, that will in all time be a monument to his honor.”³⁹ The reporter Horace White recalled more than five decades later that this speech “made so profound an impression on me that I feel under its spell to this day.” The reason why this was so was because, “His speaking went to the heart because it came from the heart. I have heard celebrated orators who could start thunders of applause without changing any man’s opinion. Mr. Lincoln’s eloquence was of the higher type, which produced conviction in others because of the conviction of the speaker himself.”⁴⁰ Lincoln’s private secretaries in the White House and biographers John G. Nicolay and John Hay noted the abrupt change in Lincoln:

Men were surprised to find him imbued with an unwonted seriousness. They heard from his lips fewer anecdotes and more history. Careless listeners who came to laugh at his jokes were held by the strong current of his reasoning and the flashes of his earnest eloquence, and were lifted up by the range and tenor of his argument into a fresher and purer political atmosphere.

What his audience especially appreciated, according to Nicolay and Hay, was, “the overwhelming current of his historical arraignment” that “extorted the admiration of even his political enemies.” While in town, many of the abolitionists and anti-Nebraska politicians who witnessed his speech met and signed Lincoln up without his consent for a

³⁹ “Hon. A. Lincoln’s Speech,” *Illinois Daily Journal*, October 5, 1854, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=SJO18541005&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN----->.

⁴⁰ White, “Abraham Lincoln in 1854,” 10-11.

newly formed party, the Republican Party. For Nicolay and Hay, his Springfield speech transformed his political career: “Lincoln had hitherto been the foremost man in his district. That single effort made him the leader on the new question in his State.”⁴¹

While the reactions to his history were overwhelmingly positive, it is important to look at it critically to determine how he constructed his historical arguments. In this speech it is difficult at times to determine how much Lincoln based his assertions on research and how much he relied on memory. When he cited specific population figures, it seems evident that he relied on his research of the census records. Conversely, his discussion of the Wilmot Proviso was based perhaps exclusively on personal memory. The rest of the facts discussed in speech would lie somewhere on a continuum in between the likelihood of the evidence being derived from historical research and those based on memory. In his discussion of the past, he made a few errors, some inconsequential (like the exact location of the Missouri counties with the highest percentage of slaves) to others more serious. For example, towards the beginning of the speech, he asserted that Jefferson convinced the Virginia legislature to cede its claims to the Northwest Territory conditional on “the prohibition of slavery therein.” While Jefferson certainly wanted slavery prohibited in that territory, Virginia did not approve its cessation of those claims upon those terms. Several years later, Lincoln wrote to John L. Scripps, who was writing a biography of Lincoln for his 1860 presidential campaign, to inform him that he had made a mistake six years earlier in his speech delivered at Springfield. He wrote that his claim, “is an error. Such prohibition is not a condition of the deed; and in any reprint of

⁴¹ Nicolay and Hay, *Abraham Lincoln*, 1. 373, 379-380.

the speech, the text should be preserved, but there should be a note stating the error.”

That same year Lincoln wrote a pair of letters to James O. Putnam, and in one of them Lincoln corrected a historical error Putnam made about John Adams. When Putnam wrote back apologizing, Lincoln replied:

You must not lay much stress on the blunder about Mr. Adams; for I made a more mischievous one, in the first printed speech of mine, on the Slavery questions--- Oct. 1854---I stated that the prohibition of slavery in the North West Territory was made a condition in the Virginia deed of cession---while, in fact, it was not. Like yourself, I have since done what I could to correct the error.⁴²

It is not known how Lincoln discovered the error, but when he discovered it, he readily admitted it. Since Lincoln continued to research the history of slavery in the United States for years, it is likely that he discovered his error in his subsequent investigations, but the possibility that someone else informed him of his error cannot be ruled out.

However, neither Scripps nor Putnam seems to have brought it up, and Lincoln likely mentioned this error without prompting. Furthermore, rather than going back and correcting the earlier record, Lincoln made a point to tell Scripps that he must retain the error and have it noted as such. In his Springfield speech Lincoln professed that he could not swear that every detail was accurate, but that the facts in general were correct to prove his argument, namely that the Kansas-Nebraska Act was a dangerous break from precedent. Furthermore, while this speech shows Lincoln making errors, it also shows Lincoln’s commitment to the truth, willing to bring embarrassment to himself in order to protect the pursuit of it. This was a flawed history, but it is not likely one could find a history from 1854 less flawed. It shows how Lincoln believed that the truth about the past is too precious to be abandoned by expedients to meet the perceived interests of those of

⁴² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 249, 4. 77, 4. 89.

the present, and it shows Lincoln growing in his skills to present an accurate depiction of that past, skills that were not static but which he would keep honing for years to come.

The Peoria Speech

Confusingly, the speech Lincoln delivered in Springfield on October 4, 1854, is not known today as his “Springfield Speech” but rather his “Peoria Speech.” This is because even though the *Daily Journal* provided an accurate summary of his address in Springfield, it was not published verbatim until after he delivered essentially the same speech in Peoria.⁴³ In the transcript of his “Peoria Speech,” Lincoln noted that he was ending the words that he delivered in Springfield and that he had a few words that he would like to add in order to address points subsequently made by Stephen Douglas.⁴⁴ Like the original Springfield speech, this short addendum centered on history.

An example how Lincoln continued to rework and refashion the same arguments based on more research can be seen in his “Peoria Speech,” and he provided a more detailed argument on the topic of slavery in Illinois than he did twelve days earlier in Springfield. Douglas argued that it was not the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 that restricted slavery north of the Ohio River but rather the popular sovereignty of each individual state that did it. Douglas also contended that when Illinois was admitted into the Union, it was admitted as a slave state. Lincoln called this “quibbling all the way through.” Without defining what was meant by a “slave state,” Lincoln admitted there

⁴³ “Hon. A. Lincoln’s Speech.”

⁴⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 276.

were some slaves held legally in Illinois when it came in as a state in 1818. Lincoln correctly noted slavery was introduced into what would become Illinois by the French long before the United States took possession of the territory. They settled in the fertile floodplain of the Mississippi between Kaskaskia in the south and Cahokia in the north, and they were allowed to retain possession of their slaves after the United States took control of the territory. While the first state constitution did not outlaw slavery outright in Illinois, Lincoln correctly noted that it forbade any new slaves from being brought into the state and it banned the practice of quasi-slavery through indentured servitude while still honoring prior contracts. Lincoln contrasted Illinois with Missouri since both states already possessed slavery when acquired by the United States and there was no significant natural difference between them besides which side of the Mississippi they lay on. While slavery died out in Illinois, it thrived and multiplied in Missouri, and Lincoln argued that was because the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 outlawed slavery in Illinois and not in Missouri. To support this assertion, he provided evidence from the census figures: “Between 1810 and 1820 the number of slaves in Missouri INCREASED 7,211; while in Illinois, in the same ten years, they DECREASED 51. This appears by the census returns.” Lincoln noted that a little more than a year after the signing of the 1818 Illinois Constitution, there only “117” slaves compared to a total population of “55,094,” which, according to Lincoln, was a ratio of “about 470 to one.” His warrant was that “During this time, the ordinance forbid slavery to go into Illinois; and NOTHING forbid

it to go into Missouri. It DID go into Missouri, and did NOT go into Illinois. That is the fact. Can any one doubt as to the reason of it?"⁴⁵

Had Lincoln's numbers been accurate, his reasoning would have been sound, but he seems to have made one error in his figures which threw his calculations off and would have weakened his argument had anyone caught it. Lincoln said that the 1820 census showed that there were 117 slaves residing in Illinois when in fact the census records show that there were 917. Lincoln is unlikely to have deliberately altered this number because, besides his reputation for honesty, he was willing to go out of his way to point out the factual errors he made in the past and because he told everyone exactly where he found his evidence, making it easy to contradict him. A more likely scenario is that he either misread it or the copy he used contained a misprint. Some figures from this era, even when printed, can be difficult to discern because of poor printing quality, making it likely that the 9 in 917 could have been easily mistaken for a 1, thus making it appear to be 117. Without the original copy Lincoln used, it is impossible to know with certainty. Whatever the cause, the error is significant because he used the figure to show that slavery was diminishing in Illinois in the decade of 1810-1820 when in fact it was increasing rapidly. The census figures show that in 1810 there were 168 enslaved persons living in Illinois, making it 1.37% of the total population of 12,282. In 1820 the number of slaves jumped to 917, making it 1.7% of the total population of 55,211. This means, rather than a *decrease* of 51 slaves during that decade as Lincoln asserted, there was an *increase* of 749 slaves. This amounted to a 446% increase in the number of slaves, which

⁴⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 277.

outpaced the total population increase in Illinois, which was 350%, and outpaced the increase of the enslaved population in Missouri during that decade, which was 240%.⁴⁶ Furthermore, these figures do not include the number of slaves registered in other states who nonetheless labored in Illinois. There is no accurate data for their numbers, but Lincoln was aware of their existence. The reality of slavery during this decade was much more complex than Lincoln asserted, and having correct figures certainly would have allowed him to present a more accurate argument.

Even though his evidence is faulty, it does not necessarily invalidate his overall premise that the Ordinance of 1789 was the primary reason why Illinois was a free state and Missouri was a slave state. Lincoln correctly noted that slavery had been introduced in Illinois before there were any laws to prohibit it, and if there will be no laws to prohibit slavery to go into Kansas, it will go there too.⁴⁷ Like Missouri, when Illinois applied for statehood, it not only had a preexisting French population that had owned slaves for more than a century, but that it also was predominantly settled by people born in southern slave states, especially Kentucky. However, the Federal ban on slavery likely discouraged many slave owning Kentuckians from moving to Illinois who instead chose Missouri, understanding correctly that their “property” would be more secure there. When Illinois applied for statehood, it copied much of the language of the prohibition of slavery in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 in its constitution, while Missouri, on the other hand,

⁴⁶ “1850 Census: The Seventh Census of the United States,” *census.gov*, United States Census Bureau, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1853/dec/1850a.html>.

⁴⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 277.

insisted on protecting slavery, remaining defiant even when the admission of them as a slave state threatened to tear the country apart in 1820. Since Congress nearly rejected Missouri's admission as a slave state where there were no prior prohibitions against slavery, it is nearly impossible to conceive of a scenario where Congress two years prior would have admitted Illinois if the residents petitioned to join the Union as a slave state under the guise of popular sovereignty in defiance of the Northwest Ordinance. Furthermore, while slavery did increase in the decade of 1810-1820 (both numerically and proportionally), they decreased every decade thereafter until there were no slaves reported in 1850, while Missouri's slave population had risen to more than 87,000.⁴⁸ While Lincoln acknowledged that Illinois did not adhere completely to the Ordinance of 1787 when it became a state, it adhered to it enough by adopting its language in its constitution so that in the coming three decades it would dwindle and eventually be outright abolished in 1848. The only meaningful difference between Illinois and Missouri in their early years of statehood was that the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 applied to the former and not the latter, and thus resulting in vastly different outcomes.

In the rest of his speech in Peoria, Lincoln more effectively countered several other of Douglas's claims. While Douglas believed popular sovereignty led to the abolition of slaves living in the original Northern states, Lincoln noted that they all abolished slavery either during or shortly after the Revolution and no more slave states had voted to abolish slavery in more than five decades. For Lincoln, "it was the principle of the REVOLUTION, and not the principle of Nebraska bill, that led to emancipation in

⁴⁸ "1850 Census: The Seventh Census of the United States."

these old States,” ideas which he had delineated earlier in his address. Douglas argued that God himself endorsed popular sovereignty as he allowed man to choose between good and evil. Lincoln, showing the wisdom he learned from the Bible, responded, “God did not place good and evil before man, telling him to make his choice. On the contrary, he did tell him there was one tree, of the fruit of which, he should not eat, upon pain of certain death. I should scarcely wish so strong a prohibition against slavery in Nebraska.”

When Douglas argued that free states held an electoral advantage over slave states because, while in most cases blacks could not vote, they still counted free blacks as one whole person while enslaved blacks were only counted as $\frac{3}{5}$ a person for representation purposes, Lincoln correctly noted that slave states had 33,000 more free blacks than free states did, and they were counted in the same way as they were in the North.⁴⁹ When Stephen Douglas denied that the Compromise of 1850 was a compromise because it was made up of series of separate acts, Lincoln defined key terms by reading the definition in *Webster’s* for the term compromise and argued that what they did meets the exact definition of compromise because the legislators understood that those bills were a mutually dependent and packaged deal. When Douglas argued that the 1853 act to establish the territory of Washington repealed both the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and the prior ban on slavery when it was part of the Oregon Territory, Lincoln scornfully replied, “Now I had seen the Washington act before; and I have carefully examined it since; and I aver that there is no repeal of the ordinance of '87, or of any prohibition of slavery, in it. In express terms, there is absolutely nothing in the whole law upon the

⁴⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 277-279.; “1850 Census: The Seventh Census of the United States.”

subject---in fact, nothing to lead a reader to THINK of the subject.” Stephen Douglas took the positions that he did because he “has no very vivid impression that the negro is a human; and consequently has no idea that there can be any moral question in legislating about him,” while “the great mass of mankind... consider slavery a great moral wrong; and their feelings against it, is not evanescent, but eternal. It lies at the very foundation of their sense of justice; and it cannot be trifled with. It is a great and durable element of popular action, and, I think, no statesman can safely disregard it.”⁵⁰ Douglas in his responses to Lincoln had thrown up a litany of charges and counter arguments that Lincoln was able to effectively disprove with wisdom derived from history, the Bible, and his own reasoning.

The most remarkable aspect of his Peoria addendum is the peroration where Lincoln assaults Stephen Douglas’s misuse of history:

This is no other than a bold denial of the history of the country. If we do not know that the Compromises of '50 were dependent on each other; if we do not know that Illinois came into the Union as a free state---we do not know any thing. If we do not know these things, we do not know that we ever had a revolutionary war, or such a chief as Washington. To deny these things is to deny our national axioms, or dogmas, at least; and it puts an end to all argument. If a man will stand up and assert, and repeat, and re-assert, that two and two do not make four, I know nothing in the power of argument that can stop him. I think I can answer the Judge so long as he sticks to the premises; but when he flies from them, I can not work an argument into the consistency of a maternal gag, and actually close his mouth with it.⁵¹

While in this speech Lincoln provided numerous hedges and acknowledged that not everything may be completely accurate, he argued passionately there were historical

⁵⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 280-282.

⁵¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 282-283.

truths that were knowable and should be faithfully adhered to. He was against what would become a later interpretation of history, that the written facts do not really matter but what really matters is power. For Lincoln, there was no conflict between truth and power.

Lincoln continued to deliver essentially the same speech throughout the campaign of 1854, and even though he was only on the ballot for the relatively minor position in the Illinois House of Representatives, he had emerged as the leading anti-Nebraska man in the state. In fact, he received a plurality of votes on the first ballot for U.S. senator in 1855, but he released his supporters to vote for Lyman Trumbull because he was the only anti-Nebraska candidate who could receive a majority. Many of Lincoln's supporters were understandably upset, but Lincoln, who knew since his childhood not to be prideful, graciously congratulated Trumbull. Those who supported Trumbull would then become ardent Lincoln supporters, helping unite the nascent Illinois Republican Party around Lincoln.

We Are Not What We Have Been

Even though Lincoln's political star was rising in Illinois, privately he grew pessimistic about the direction the country was heading. This is evident in a letter he wrote to George Robertson in 1855. Robertson had provided legal work for him in Kentucky, and he was a former member of Congress. The purpose of Lincoln's letter was to thank Robertson for giving him an inscribed copy of his recently published book,

Scrap Book on Law and Politics, Men and Times, which was a collection of his papers and speeches.⁵²

Lincoln praised the work, writing that it had “afforded me much of both pleasure and instruction,” especially Robertson’s personal account of his experience with the Missouri crisis while he was in Congress as a representative from Kentucky.⁵³ He praised one speech Robertson delivered in 1819 in opposition to Congress limiting the spread of slavery into the Arkansas Territory, arguing instead it should be left to the residents of Arkansas to determine if slavery should be legal or not.⁵⁴ Even though Robertson professed opinions in 1819 that were nearly identical to Douglas’s popular sovereignty opinions in 1855, Lincoln wrote to Robertson that “Your short, but able and patriotic speech upon that occasion, has not been improved upon since, by those holding the same views; and, with all the lights you then had, the views you took appear to me as very reasonable.”⁵⁵

Unlike Douglas, Robertson in 1819 expressed his belief that one day America will see a “peaceful extinction of slavery,” but Lincoln, at least in this letter, disagreed with this assessment. He wrote:

Since then we have had thirty six years of experience; and this experience has demonstrated, I think, that there is no peaceful extinction of slavery in prospect for us. The signal failure of Henry Clay, and other good and great men, in 1849,

⁵² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 319.

⁵³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 317-318.

⁵⁴ George Robertson, *Scrap Book on Law and Politics, Men and Times* (Lexington, KY: A. W. Elder, 1855), 25.

⁵⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 318.

to effect any thing in favor of gradual emancipation in Kentucky, together with a thousand other signs, extinguishes that hope utterly. On the question of liberty, as a principle, we are not what we have been. When we were the political slaves of King George, and wanted to be free, we called the maxim that “all men are created equal” a self evident truth; but now when we have grown fat, and have lost all dread of being slaves ourselves, we have become so greedy to be *masters* that we call the same maxim “a self-evident lie” The fourth of July has not quite dwindled away; it is still a great day---for *burning fire-crackers!!!*

For Lincoln, experience had shown that rather than working towards a gradual abolition, slavery was becoming more entrenched into American society. Lincoln continued:

That spirit which desired the peaceful extinction of slavery, has itself become extinct, with the *occasion*, and the *men* of the Revolution. Under the impulse of that occasion, nearly half the states adopted systems of emancipation at once; and it is a significant fact, that not a single state has done the like since. So far as peaceful, voluntary emancipation is concerned, the condition of the negro slave in America, scarcely less terrible to the contemplation of a free mind, is now as fixed, and hopeless of change for the better, as that of the lost souls of the finally impenitent. The Autocrat of all the Russias will resign his crown, and proclaim his subjects free republicans sooner than will our American masters voluntarily give up their slaves.

Lincoln exaggerated here as the spirit had not become extinct, but he is right in noting that it was the men of the Revolutionary generation who had abolished slavery in half of the states, and since then not only had no single state followed suit, but slavery had also spread into entirely new regions. This degeneration of common principles is a theme Lincoln would continue to refer to in the coming years. Showing that Lincoln was already brooding over ideas he would discuss in his famous “House Divided Speech” three years later, Lincoln wondered, “Can we, as a nation, continue together *permanently--forever---*half slave, and half free?”⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 318.

Lincoln would never express sentiments this pessimistic in public. Both before and after this letter Lincoln voiced his hope that by limiting the spread of slavery that one day it may be peaceably abolished, even if he had no definite plan for how or when this would be accomplished. However, in this letter Lincoln argued that history had shown that Americans were rapidly losing the spirit of the Revolutionary generation, and this history led him to the belief that slavery would never be peaceably abolished.

Princeton

One man who was present at Lincoln's 1854 Springfield address was no stranger to history. He had worked, lived, and studied under Elijah Lovejoy in Alton. He stood guard of Lovejoy's home the night he was murdered several blocks away, and he watched the next day when crowds jeered at the lifeless corpse as it was brought home by his friends.⁵⁷ He recalled that his body "looked perfectly natural, but little paler than usual, and a smile still resting upon his lips."⁵⁸ This witness to history was Elijah's younger brother, Owen Lovejoy, and he had sworn over his brother's lifeless body that he would dedicate his life to continue his brother's work to end slavery.⁵⁹

Like his brother before him, Owen Lovejoy went into the ministry and became an outspoken abolitionist leader, but unlike his brother, he did it from the relative safety of a

⁵⁷ Simon, *Freedom's Champion*, 134.

⁵⁸ Joseph C. Lovejoy and Owen Lovejoy, *Memoir of the Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy Who Was Murdered in Defence of the Liberty of the Press at Alton, Illinois Nov. 7, 1837* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1838), 292.

⁵⁹ Simon, *Freedom's Champion*, 148.

small town in north-central Illinois, Princeton. Unlike Alton, which bordered Missouri and was mostly settled by Southerners with proslavery sympathies, Princeton was 125 miles from Missouri and settled largely by abolitionist-minded Northerners. Even though it was still a small frontier village when Lovejoy arrived, it was not an uncultured community. Several of the poet William Cullen Bryant's brothers settled in Princeton, and the most prominent of them, John Bryant, was a poet himself, if not as accomplished.⁶⁰

Lovejoy was called to serve at Hampshire Colony Church in 1838, the year after his brother's death. Congregationalists had founded the church in 1831 in Northampton, Massachusetts, and travelled west on the Erie Canal and the Great Lakes to plant the seed of their faith on new soil.⁶¹

Lovejoy took up the mantle of his fallen brother and quickly earned a reputation as the most eloquent abolitionist in Illinois, as evidenced by his 1843 sermon entitled "Supremacy of Divine Law." In it Lovejoy proclaimed to his congregation that the fugitive slave clause in the Constitution was "null and void" and ought to be "disregarded and disobeyed" and urged them to "trample in the dust" any law that breaks with God's laws. First and foremost, they must not fear men and their laws but rather fear God and obey his commands. He catalogued a list of those in the past who obeyed God by defying earthly authority, from the mother of Moses who subverted Pharaoh's command to kill

⁶⁰ H. C. Bradsby, *History of Bureau County, Illinois* (Chicago: World Publishing Company, 1885), 155-169, 326-340, 408-409.

⁶¹ Bradsby, *History of Bureau County, Illinois*, 181.

Hebrew baby boys, to the three Jewish captives who refused to bow down to the statue of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, to early martyrs of the Christian church who defied Rome, to their Protestant ancestors who defied earthly authority. He reminded them that their nation was founded by rebels who shed their blood rather than submit to the tyranny of a king and Parliament. They must preserve their heritage of defiance to unjust laws. To those who might feel that breaking the law was wrong, Lovejoy reminded his congregation that “human legislation does not make right and wrong; that is not its object; that it cannot do-it’s only aim is, or at least ought to be, to establish and secure right; to prevent and suppress wrong.” To determine what is right, they, “must have some other standard besides the ever varying and contradictory enactments of Congresses, Legislatures and Parliaments.” Even though the authorities had the power to take their liberty and property should they give aid to the fugitive slave and extralegal mobs had the power to take their lives, they must, like their forebearers before them, fear God and not men. Turning to his mother in the Congregation he asked, “Mother, can you not spare another son?” He closed by making meaning of the memory of his brother’s martyrdom: “Beside the prostrate body of that murdered brother, while the fresh blood was oozing from his perforated breast, on my knees while alone with the dead and with God, I vowed never to forsake the cause that was sprinkled with his blood. The oath was written in blood. It must stand.”⁶²

Lovejoy practiced what he preached, and he was skilled in hiding and defending fugitive slaves in his home, which was a station on the Underground Railroad. For

⁶² Owen Lovejoy, “Supremacy of Divine Law,” *Western Citizen*, September 14, 1843.

example, in 1849 Missouri men kidnapped a black man, John Buckner, in Princeton and attempted to take him to Missouri. They were arrested for kidnapping and Buckner was arrested for being a fugitive slave. A crowd of both proslavery and antislavery men crowded the courthouse to see the drama. Buckner was secreted out and he fled to Lovejoy's home. A race ensued with proslavery men chasing him and antislavery men running to defend him. Buckner, Lovejoy, and some of their abolitionist friends arrived first. Lovejoy, a powerfully built man, guarded the gate to the house and slammed it on someone who attempted to break in. Meanwhile, the crowd saw a man take off running from the Lovejoy property into the field and chased after him. When they finally caught him, they realized he was a decoy as Buckner had hidden in the empty bottom of a wagon that was carted off and was a safe distance away before the mob discovered the ruse.⁶³

Lovejoy, to the consternation of many in Illinois and throughout the country, was elected to Congress in 1856, and he openly declared on the House floor not only his opposition the fugitive slave clause but also his open defiance of it:

I do assist fugitive slaves. Proclaim it, then, upon the house-tops; writ upon every leaf that trembles in the forest; make it blaze from the sun at high-noon, and shine forth in the milder radiance of every star that bedecks the firmament of God; let it echo through all the arches of heaven, and reverberate and bellow along all the deep gorges of hell where slaver-catchers will be very likely to hear it. Owen Lovejoy lives at Princeton, Illinois, three-quarters of a mile east of the village and he aides every fugitive that comes to his door and asks it. Thou invisible demon of Slavery! Dost thou think to cross my humble threshold, and forbid me to give bread to the hungry and shelter to the houseless? I BID YOU DEFIANCE IN THE NAME OF GOD!⁶⁴

⁶³ Bradsby, *History of Bureau County, Illinois*, 155-169, 326-340, 408-409.

⁶⁴ Bradsby, *History of Bureau County, Illinois*, 334-335.

While Lincoln was typically cool and dispassionate and counseled strict adherence to the law, Lovejoy burned with the zeal of righteousness that no law could restrain.

Even though of widely disparate temperaments and differing views on the Fugitive Slave Law, Lovejoy greatly admired Lincoln after listening to his 1854 Springfield speech. While in Springfield, Lovejoy attempted to enlist Lincoln in the nascent Republican Party, but Lincoln was not yet willing to abandon the Whigs, to which he had loyally supported for two decades. However, when the Whig Party finally disintegrated, Lincoln joined Lovejoy's Republican Party and travelled throughout Illinois and the Midwest in 1856 campaigning for the first Republican nominee for president, John C. Fremont.

Typical of these campaign speeches was the one Lincoln delivered in Princeton on July 4, 1856. The Independence Day rally was held in Bryants Woods, a grove south of town that was owned by John Bryant. According to the *Tiskilwa Independent*, approximately 8,000-10,000 people attended the rally. One of those was Owen Lovejoy, who would deliver his own address immediately after Lincoln.⁶⁵

According to the *Independent*, Lincoln gave a lengthy history lecture that included a discussion of the Declaration of Independence, the Ordinance of 1787, the Missouri Compromise, the Nullification Crisis, the Texas controversy, the organization of the Utah and Washington territories, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. When he finished, "Mr. Lincoln took his seat amid loud and enthusiastic cheers."⁶⁶ In spite of their

⁶⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 346-347.

⁶⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 346-347.

differences, Lovejoy and Lincoln would become both personal friends and political allies. Like he did to Lovejoy in 1854 in Springfield, Lincoln would continue to inspire his audiences in 1856 with his campaign speeches that were, like those in 1854, primarily lectures on history.

Election of 1856

To Lincoln's surprise, he received a significant number of votes to be the Republican vice-presidential nominee, which was a sign of how he was beginning to earn a national reputation. Just as at Princeton, Lincoln travelled throughout the Midwest campaigning for the Republicans, making logical arguments derived from history, which, according to surviving press reports, his audiences loved.

On July 19, Lincoln delivered a speech at Dearborn Park in Chicago. The *Chicago Democratic Press* reported that Lincoln's address was about the "indisputable facts in our political history" and that he drew conclusions from those facts that were "unanswerable." According to the *Democratic Press*, "we have never seen an audience held for so long a time in the open air to listen to an argumentative speech," while the *Peoria Weekly Republican* wrote that his speech could not "fail to produce a telling effect upon the political sentiment of Chicago."⁶⁷

On August 27, Lincoln delivered an address in Kalamazoo, Michigan, that was warmly received. Perhaps referring to the charge from Jefferson's first draft of the Declaration that did not make it into the final, Lincoln noted that slavery had been

⁶⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 349.

“deplored” by Founding generation and they blamed Britain for its introduction and maintenance. He argued that James Buchanan was now taking the position not of Jefferson but rather King George III, allowing slavery to spread anywhere where people desired it. Lincoln mentioned that he had been reading Southern newspapers like the *Richmond Enquirer* that were advocating for the spread of slavery not as a necessity but as a positive good for both slave and slave owner. When Lincoln finished, he was saluted with “great cheering.”⁶⁸

The rapport that Lincoln was building with his audiences can be best seen in his speech in Vandalia on September 23 in south-central Illinois. It was less of a speech than a public conversation with his friend “Long Jim” Davis, a Democrat, with significant input from the audience. Davis recalled that when Lincoln was in Congress he had “abused” Lincoln for his vote on the Wilmot Proviso, yet he applied to Lincoln to get a government job, and, to the crowd’s delight, “he got it!” Davis bragged that he delivered the first speech that was printed in Illinois against the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and, referring to Republicans, added that “if any of these little men want a speech on the subject I will send them one of mine.” Lincoln replied that he “thought it must be a *very* little man who could learn anything from that speech,” which elicited laughter from the crowd. When Lincoln delivered his speech, he advocated walking down the “old paths” of Washington, Jefferson, and Clay, quoting them extensively. Republicans in south-central Illinois communities like Vandalia were much less popular than in the north, and they were derogatively referred to as “Black Republicans.” This explains the comment

⁶⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 361-366.

one Democratic doctor made when he interrupted Lincoln's speech to exclaim "I must be a woolly head!" Lincoln challenged this racial prejudice indirectly through humor: "Very well, shave *off* the wool then." A reporter noted that there was a "twist in the doctor's hair and whiskers," and that the cut "was evidently enjoyed by the audience more than by himself." After finishing his history lecture on the prominent Americans opposed to slavery, Lincoln asked the doctor, "What more than this has Fremont said, that you call him a woolly head? I ask you, sir?" When the doctor struggled to find words to respond, Lincoln quipped, "You can make this charge, and yet, when called upon to justify it, your lips are sealed." After the doctor huddled with some friends for a few moments, he replied, "He found the woolly horse and ate dogs," referring to the myths surrounding Fremont's exploration of the West. Lincoln replied that it was not true, but even if that was, "how does it prove that Fremont is a *woolly head*---how?" According to the reporter, the doctor, standing feet planted on the ground, "wearing the expression of a man standing on a bed of live coals, did not get off any answer." After a long pause, Lincoln exclaimed, "You're *treed*, my friend!" and the audience erupted into laughter. According to the reporter, even though it was a "hand-to-hand fight," he praised "the self-possession, wit, and unflagging good nature of the speakers," which "made the discussion *tell* on the sober, honest men who listened."⁶⁹ Even in presumptively enemy territory thick with racial prejudice, Lincoln was able to win over his audiences with both humor and history.

Conclusion

⁶⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 377-378.

Although he had not held political office in seven years, by 1856 Lincoln had become, outside of Stephen Douglas, the leading statesman in Illinois, and he had done it through his lectures that were primarily on history. From his extended address in Springfield in 1854 to his campaign speeches in 1856, Lincoln was using history to build a movement. Lincoln had shown exceptional growth to become the man he was now, and he was marshalling all his intellectual and rhetorical strength to confront the “Little Giant.”

Chapter V.

The Logic of History (1857-1858)

Personal Memory

Even though the Republicans did not win the presidency in 1856, they performed well for their first national election. Lincoln, although not a candidate, campaigned extensively for Republicans, and with the election over, he sought to gather his thoughts. On a single piece of paper, Lincoln jotted down some of his ruminations about the past and what that meant for the future. He wrote:

Twenty-two years ago Judge Douglas and I first became acquainted. We were both young then; he a trifle younger than I. Even then, we were both ambitious; I, perhaps, quite as much so as he. With *me*, the race of ambition has been a failure---a flat failure; with *him* it has been one of splendid success. His name fills the nation; and is not unknown, even, in foreign lands. I affect no contempt for the high eminence he has reached. So reached, that the oppressed of my species, might have shared with me in the elevation, I would rather stand on that eminence, than wear the richest crown that ever pressed a monarch's brow.¹

Typically for Lincoln, he concluded these private musings on the past with the lesson to be learned, that all the power and glory in the world is but a trifle if one cannot benefit one's fellow man.

When people tend to think about Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln, they think of the senatorial debates of 1858. However, their competition was more than a quarter century long. Even within the timeframe of 1858, people tend to overlook the

¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 382-383.

dozens of speeches outside of their formal debates that they delivered as they crisscrossed the state. Some of Lincoln's campaign addresses are more praiseworthy than his debate speeches, even if they lose somewhat of their dramatic appeal of the head-to-head contest. While in the 1830s and 1840s their disagreements centered on tariffs and banks, Lincoln had renewed his challenge to Douglas in 1854 based on his opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act that Douglas had sponsored. However, history did not pause, events moved swiftly, and Lincoln and Douglas would have new issues to debate, including the Dred Scott Decision.

The Plainest Print Cannot Be Read through a Gold Eagle: Lincoln's 1857 Springfield Speech

Lincoln delivered only one major address in 1857, and it was primarily about the Dred Scott decision and what was the correct interpretation of history. Lincoln had already been musing privately on the potential harmful consequences before the decision was even announced, and after extensive research, Lincoln was amply prepared to attack Douglas's support of the Dred Scott decision when he rose to address his audience in the Capitol on June 26, 1857.

Typical of Lincoln, he began his speech slowly, stating why he was there, namely, to attempt to rebut the arguments made by Stephen Douglas in favor of the Dred Scott decision two weeks prior. Lincoln announced his opposition to the Supreme Court decision along with its arguments made to justify it. To support his reasoning, Lincoln primarily appealed to the past, stating that Democratic leaders were abusing history to satisfy their economic interests.

After explaining that it was possible to disagree with a Supreme Court decision without violently opposing it, Lincoln stated that he believed that the decision was “erroneous,” partly because it was “based on assumed historical facts which are not really true.” One of these is that Chief Justice Taney argued “that negroes were no part of the people who made, or for whom was made, the Declaration of Independence, or the Constitution of the United States.” Lincoln then cited Justice Benjamin Robbins Curtis’s dissenting opinion that noted that free blacks in five of the original thirteen states participated in voting when the Constitution was being ratified and thus, at the very least, were part of the “We, the people of the United States” in the preamble of the Constitution.²

Next, Lincoln refuted Taney’s assertion that the opinion of “civilized and enlightened portions of the world” on negroes had improved since the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the framing of the Constitution. Taney asserted that the words of the Declaration of Independence “would seem to include the whole human family, and if they were used in a similar instrument at this day, would be so understood,” but at that time were not. The implication that Taney made is that since the Founders and Framers denied the full humanity of blacks, it should not be affirmed in his present. Lincoln countered that, “This assumption is a mistake” because “the change between then and now is decidedly the other way; and their ultimate destiny has never appeared so hopeless as in the last three or four years.” Even though the number of states had more than doubled, not a single new state allowed black suffrage, while two of the

² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 401, 403.

original five, New Jersey and North Carolina, rescinded it and New York severely curtailed it. Not only that, but states had also passed laws restricting the rights of owners to legally free their slaves as well as written into their state constitutions forbidding state legislatures from declaring a general emancipation. While the spread of slavery was once restricted, Congress now opened new territories to it and the Supreme Court declared that it can no longer impede it. The Declaration of Independence was once revered by all, but now it is openly assaulted. He concluded this argument with a powerful statement of the direction the country was moving:

All the powers of earth seem rapidly combining against him. Mammon is after him; ambition follows, and philosophy follows, and the Theology of the day is fast joining the cry. They have him in his prison house; they have searched his person, and left no prying instrument with him. One after another they have closed the heavy iron doors upon him, and now they have him, as it were, bolted in with a lock of a hundred keys, which can never be unlocked without the concurrence of every key; the keys in the hands of a hundred different men, and they scattered to a hundred different and distant places; and they stand musing as to what invention, in all the dominions of mind and matter, can be produced to make the impossibility of his escape more complete than it is.³

If the goal is to return to first principles, as Taney asserted, then it is Taney, Douglas, and the Democrats who are mistaken, not the Republicans.

While Lincoln was largely correct in all these assertions, he is wrong when argued that “In those days,” meaning during the Revolution, “our Declaration of Independence was held sacred by all.”⁴ In the first two decades after the Declaration of Independence, the act was cherished but the text was little known. It was not until partisan contests at the end of the century that the text was celebrated and its primary author became public

³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 403-404.

⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 404.

knowledge. Only by the early 19th century did Americans in general consider the text itself to be sacred. As historian Pauline Maier, author of *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*, once wrote, “Considering how revered a position the Declaration of Independence later won in the hearts and minds of the American people, their disregard for it in the earliest years of the new nation verges on the incredible,” saying that it was treated as an “all-but-forgotten testament.”⁵ Lincoln’s assertion was not technically true, but the principles of the Revolution, if not the text of the Declaration of Independence itself, were revered, as it was before the text was cherished when half of the states began the process of gradual or immediate abolition of their slaves and the Framers kept the word “slave” out of the Constitution, lest it be stained by what they considered a moral evil.

While Taney and Douglas argued that the Declaration of Independence did not mean to include black Americans because they were neither free at the time nor did the Founders immediately move to free them, Lincoln dissented. He countered that at that time not all whites were equal (as there was no universal male suffrage) nor did the Founders immediately make them equal, but until recently no one ever questioned if the Declaration meant to include all white men. Anyone who started whittling down the phrase “all men are created equal” to something less than that was committing “obvious violence to the plain unmistakable language of the Declaration.” Lincoln then moved into perhaps his most eloquent defense of the Declaration of the Independence:

I think the authors of that notable instrument intended to include *all* men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal *in all respects*. They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity.

⁵ Maier, *American Scripture*, 160.

They defined with tolerable distinctness, in what respects they did consider all men created equal---equal in “certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” This they said, and this meant. They did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet, that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the *right*, so that the *enforcement* of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit. They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere. The assertion that “all men are created equal” was of no practical use in effecting our separation from Great Britain; and it was placed in the Declaration, nor for that, but for future use. Its authors meant it to be, thank God, it is now proving itself, a stumbling block to those who in after times might seek to turn a free people back into the hateful paths of despotism. They knew the proneness of prosperity to breed tyrants, and they meant when such should re-appear in this fair land and commence their vocation they should find left for them at least one hard nut to crack.⁶

Although Lincoln did not cite it, Lincoln almost certainly was referring to Jefferson’s foresight in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, a portion of which Lincoln had cut and pasted into one of his scrapbooks.⁷ In the portion that Lincoln clipped, Jefferson, who was writing in the midst of the war, argued that his era was the time to secure the maximum amount of rights because the “spirit of the times” would not endure. Once the Revolution was over, they shall be “going down hill” and they will “forget themselves” and the fight to secure rights will be subverted by the “sole faculty of making money.” Jefferson, who was not writing about slavery in particular but rather tyranny in general,

⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 405-406.

⁷ Abraham Lincoln, “The Herndon-Weik Collection of Lincolniana: Group I: Arithmetic Book and Scrapbooks, Circa 1824 to 1860; Scrapbooks; Newspaper Clippings, Circa 1854 to 1860, Undated,” Library of Congress, 2020, https://www.loc.gov/resource/mss25791.mss25791-001_0067_0157/?sp=47&r=-0.052,0.075,0.693,0.426,0.

warned his readers, “The shackles, therefore, which shall not be knocked off at the conclusion of this war, will remain with us long, will be heavier and heavier, till our rights shall revive or expire in a convulsion.”⁸ Lincoln believed the principles Jefferson elucidated in the Declaration best represented the *spirit of the times* in elucidating goals that would forever be the *stumbling block* that will reproach those who will subvert the rights of man in the pursuit of their own self-interest.

Lincoln then contrasted his view of the Declaration of Independence with Douglas’s. In his recent speech, Douglas declared that,

No man can vindicate the character, motives and conduct of the signers of the Declaration of Independence except upon the hypothesis that they referred to the white race alone, and not to the African, when they declared all men to have been created equal---that they were speaking of British subjects on this continent being equal to British subjects born and residing in Great Britain---that they were entitled to the same inalienable rights, and among them were enumerated life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Lincoln challenged his audience: “My good friends, read that carefully over some leisure hour, and ponder well upon it---see what a mere wreck---mangled ruin---it makes of our once glorious Declaration.” He then reread it again to make sure they understood the full implications of Douglas’s words and then elucidated the logical conclusion: “Why, according to this, not only negroes but white people outside of Great Britain and America are not spoken of in that instrument. The English, Irish and Scotch, along with white Americans, were included to be sure, but the French, Germans and other white people of the world are all gone to pot along with the Judge's inferior races.” Again, Lincoln

⁸ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (London: John Stockdale, 1787), 269-270.

attacked Douglas's view of the Declaration: "I had thought the Declaration promised something better than the condition of British subjects; but no, it only meant that we should be *equal* to them in their own oppressed and *unequal* condition. According to that, it gave no promise that having kicked off the King and Lords of Great Britain, we should not at once be saddled with a King and Lords of our own." According to this formulation, the Declaration meant only a formal separation from Britain without a repudiation of the ancient principles that had, in some ways, still governed that nation. He then directly addressed his audience with biting irony:

I understand you are preparing to celebrate the "Fourth," tomorrow week. What for? The doings of that day had no reference to the present; and quite half of you are not even descendants of those who were referred to at that day. But I suppose you will celebrate; and will even go so far as to read the Declaration. Suppose after you read it once in the old fashioned way, you read it once more with Judge Douglas' version. It will then run thus: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all British subjects who were on this continent eighty-one years ago, were created equal to all British subjects born and *then* residing in Great Britain."⁹

Lincoln then challenged Douglas's fellow Democrats in the audience: "And now I appeal to all---to Democrats as well as others,---are you really willing that the Declaration shall be thus frittered away?---thus left no more at most, than an interesting memorial of the dead past? thus shorn of its vitality, and practical value; and left without the *germ* or even the *suggestion* of the individual rights of man in it?" Lincoln believed that politicians like Douglas were warring with history to justify their expedients of the present. According to Lincoln, the fight was clear, he and other Republicans were fighting for a living and meaningful history over the Democrats version of a dead and irrelevant past.

Lincoln argued that there were two main reasons the Democrats made war on the

⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 406-407.

past, one explicit and the other largely implicit. The explicit reason was because of racial prejudice. Lincoln noted that after Douglas proposed his Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, “The country was at once in a blaze,” and many of Douglas’s supporters had suffered at the polls. Douglas knew that he would be fighting for his political survival, so Lincoln argued that Douglas was going to attempt to appropriate the nearly universally held racial prejudice for his campaign.¹⁰

Lincoln, at this time, not only did not denounce this racial prejudice but professed that he readily agreed with it. He said, “Judge Douglas is especially horrified at the thought of the mixing blood by the white and black races: agreed for once---a thousand times agreed.” If it was to be prevented, Douglas argued that slaves must not be freed, but Lincoln argued that experience showed the opposite was true. According to Lincoln, it was not the freedom for blacks that was leading to the mixing of the races but rather slavery, and he used statistics from the census to prove it. According to the 1850 census, not only were there many more mulattoes in slave states than in free states, the proportion of free mulattoes to free blacks was much higher in slave states and states that severely curtailed rights for free blacks than in free states and in states that have relatively liberal laws for free blacks. All the figures he cited are correct, and Lincoln argued, “These statistics show that slavery is the greatest source of amalgamation; and next to it, not the elevation, but the degeneration of the free blacks.”¹¹ Moving from dry statistics to

¹⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 405.

¹¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 407-408.; “1850 Census: Compendium of the Seventh Census,” *census.gov*, United States Census Bureau, 2015,

something more personal, Lincoln expressed his wish that Dred Scott and his family could have been declared free. Speaking of Dred Scott's two daughters, Lincoln continued:

Could we have had our way, the chances of these black girls, ever mixing their blood with that of white people, would have been diminished at least to the extent that it could not have been without their consent. But Judge Douglas is delighted to have them decided to be slaves, and not human enough to have a hearing, even if they were free, and thus left subject to the forced concubinage of their masters, and liable to become the mothers of mulattoes in spite of themselves---the very state of case that produces nine tenths of all the mulattoes---all the mixing of blood in the nation.¹²

The historian Eric Foner noted that this was “one of the few times in his career that he referred even obliquely to the sexual abuse of slave women.”¹³ Lincoln used the argument to show why he believed that colonization was the best course for all involved. He did not yet profess to believe in a multi-racial United States of America where all enjoyed equal rights. Like his heroes Jefferson and Clay before him, he believed that they should be returned to their homeland where he felt they were most likely to be able to enjoy the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence.¹⁴

Throughout much of his speech, Lincoln highlighted the hypocrisy of Douglas and many of the Democrats to show the second reason why they were making war on the past. For example, Lincoln expressed his agreement with Douglas that Utah must be

<https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1850/1850c/1850c-04.pdf?;> Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 408.

¹² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 408-409.

¹³ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 98.

¹⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 409.

made to respect the authority of the United States but noted that in this case Douglas did not support his theory of popular sovereignty because he opposed the right of the people of Utah to be polygamous if they so choose. Furthermore, after the Dred Scott case Douglas argued that the decisions of the Supreme Court must be adhered to, but Lincoln pointed out that Douglas did not believe this was the case when the Democratic president Andrew Jackson disagreed with the Supreme Court. Lincoln provided a couple of quotes from President Jackson arguing why he did not have to follow the ruling of the Supreme Court, an attitude Douglas had agreed with. Declaring him to be guilty of hypocrisy, Douglas ought to be wary “and see how exactly his fierce philippics against us for resisting Supreme Court decisions, fall upon his own head.” Lincoln’s description of these acts was not simply a *tu quoque* fallacy as he did directly address the issues involved in other parts of the speech. The reason why he brought out these examples is to clarify to his audience the true principles of his opponents, which were not high-minded adherence to the precedents of the past but rather for the pursuit of their own financial and political interests. The avarice of Douglas and the Democrats, according to Lincoln, had blinded them to their true history that was right there in front of them. Speaking of a coin, Lincoln quipped, “the plainest print cannot be read through a gold eagle.”¹⁵

Over the coming years, Lincoln would repeatedly argue that his opponents were trying to erase the country’s true history so that they could more readily pursue their profits. Lincoln fought so that their heritage would not simply be a *memorial of a dead*

¹⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 399, 402, 409.

past but rather a *living history* that would guide their present.¹⁶

House Divided

For more than a year, Lincoln's 1857 Springfield address was the only one that he would deliver, dedicating himself to his law career, but this lull was temporary. From June to November of 1858, Lincoln delivered more speeches than he ever would in a comparative timeframe. At the time, this was seen as Lincoln's last chance at high office as he would not run to unseat his fellow Republican Senator Trumbull in 1860 and he might not receive much support for a repeat campaign for the Senate in 1864 if he had already failed twice. He spent weeks crafting a new address to start his senatorial campaign, writing new ideas on scraps of paper as they came to him and carefully revising it until he felt satisfied. It was during this time that his law student Henry B. Rankin remembered:

He was in the State Library nearly every day, searching old volumes of the *Congressional Globe*, and other original sources of information. He went through the clippings he and Mr. Herndon had made since 1848 from the *Charleston Mercury*, *Richmond Enquirer*, *Louisville Journal*, and other Southern papers; and with especial care he again went through the back numbers of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, re-reading articles by the best Southern writers on the politics that divided public opinion on the question of slavery and States' rights.

Even though, "He lived through laborious days and often late into studious nights," his reward was that "when he went forth into that debate it was with a firm foundation of well-settled principles, and fully equipped with all historical and collateral data possible to be acquired by him on the live political issues of the day."¹⁷ This research prepared

¹⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 407.

¹⁷ Rankin, *Personal Recollections*, 245.

him not only for his upcoming speech at the Capitol but would sustain him throughout the campaign.

After Stephen Douglas broke with party ranks to oppose the Lecompton Constitution that would have legalized slavery in Kansas because he did not believe his popular sovereignty policy had been honored, some East Coast Republicans urged their compatriots in Illinois to support Douglas's reelection bid. To forestall this movement, Lincoln's Republican supporters organized a nominating convention, only the second one in the country's history, to unify support behind him before the campaign began in earnest. On June 16, 1858, the convention met in the Springfield statehouse and officially nominated Lincoln for the Senate. That evening, Lincoln delivered his acceptance speech, which in many ways was more radical than any other he would deliver in these years and would live on in memory more than all but two of his public addresses.¹⁸

The opening lines of his address are the most famous:

If we could first know *where* we are, and *whither* we are tending, we could then better judge *what* to do, and *how* to do it.

We are now far into the *fifth* year, since a policy was initiated, with the *avowed* object, and *confident* promise, of putting an end to slavery agitation.

Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only, *not ceased*, but has *constantly augmented*.

In *my* opinion, it *will* not cease, until a *crisis* shall have been reached, and passed.

¹⁸ White, *A. Lincoln*, 248-252.

“A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*.

I do not expect the Union to be *dissolved*---I do not expect the house to *fall*---but I *do* expect it will cease to be divided.

It will become *all* one thing, or *all* the other.

Either the *opponents* of slavery, will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in course of ultimate extinction; or its *advocates* will push it forward, till it shall become alike lawful in *all* the States, *old* as well as *new*---*North* as well as *South*.¹⁹

As he had so often done before and would do later, Lincoln used wisdom from the Bible to support his argument, specifically Matthew 12:25. This metaphor would burn into the memories of his listeners and would spread throughout the country. However, in order to prove his argument, he used the events of the past to gain wisdom about where they were headed.

After his introduction, Lincoln posed a question to his audience, namely, “Have we no *tendency* to the latter condition?” with the latter condition being the movement to legalize slavery throughout all the free states. He detailed a series of events extending from Douglas’s introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill in January of 1854 to events of that year in 1858. Each of these would have been familiar to his audience, but it was

¹⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 461-462.

important to recount them because each action in it and of itself may seem small, but the totality of the recent past shows the slave power moving irresistibly towards making slavery declared legal everywhere the American flag flew. He argued that the Democratic leaders in the past four years, Stephen Douglas, Franklin Pierce, Roger Taney, and James Buchanan, were constructing a building for this slave power piece by piece, with each man fulfilling his role perfectly. To switch metaphors, Republicans had not suffered a decisive battle, but they were gradually losing a war of posts as the slave power slowly advanced forward. To clearly see where they were heading, they must not look entirely to the present but rather the past in its entirety in order to understand more subtle movements and changes in direction. Since some Republicans were supporting Stephen Douglas because of his opposition to the Lecompton Constitution, Lincoln wished to draw a sharp distinction between Douglas and true Republicans. To arrest the slave power, they must not elect someone who had helped build it up for the previous four years but rather someone who was their earnest opponent. At the beginning of the speech, he argued that the Union would either become entirely slave or entirely free, and that if Democrats continued to be elected, the former course would become inevitable. What he left unsaid was if he really believed that the Union could soon become entirely free, how that would come about, which left much to the imagination that was taken advantage of by his opponents. This speech, both its strengths and weaknesses, would set the tone for the rest of the campaign.²⁰

Fragment on the Struggle against Slavery

²⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 461-469.

Whenever Lincoln thought of an idea that he might use one day for a speech, he would quickly jot it down on whatever scrap of paper or back of an envelope that he had available. Many of these notes that survive made it into his finished speeches. However, others did not, but they still reveal Lincoln's thinking in his private moments.

One note that he wrote during this time period that he did not use in the campaign shows him musing over the memory of the abolition movement in Great Britain. He saw the movement to eradicate slavery in the British Empire as a direct analog to the struggle the Union was currently enduring. He wrote:

I have not allowed myself to forget that the abolition of the Slave-trade by Great Britain, was agitated a hundred years before it was a final success; that the measure had it's open fire-eating opponents; it's stealthy "dont care" opponents; it's dollar and cent opponents; it's inferior race opponents; its negro equality opponents; and its religion and good order opponents; that all these opponents got offices, and their adversaries got none. But I have also remembered that though they blazed, like tallow-candles for a century, at last they flickered in the socket, died out, stank in the dark for a brief season, and were remembered no more, even by the smell. School-boys know that Wilbeforce, and Granville Sharpe, helped that cause forward; but who can now name a single man who labored to retard it? Remembering these things I can not but regard it as possible that the higher object of this contest may not be completely attained within the term of my natural life. But I can not doubt either that it will come in due time. Even in this view, I am proud, in my passing speck of time, to contribute an humble mite to that glorious consummation, which my own poor eyes may not last to see.²¹

The wisdom Lincoln gained from this memory of the past was that others had faced the same difficulties he and his contemporaries were then enduring, and after a struggle of generations, they too may be able to overcome the same forces arrayed against them, and the reward for their struggle can be to forever live on in memory.

²¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 482.

1858 Chicago Speech

Although not an official debate, Lincoln delivered his July 10, 1858, address a day after Douglas delivered his in that city. Throughout the campaign, Lincoln used all the rhetorical weapons he had been amassing in his quarter century in politics and aimed them squarely at Stephen Douglas.

The first weapon he used against Douglas was humor. Near the beginning of the speech, Lincoln read a quote from Douglas's speech accusing Republicans and Buchanan Democrats of forming an unholy alliance against him, but like the Russians at Sevastopol, he did not care what array of allies was firing at him because he was going to take them all on at once. After reading this, Lincoln, with mock fear, replied, "Well now, gentlemen, is not that very alarming?" with the crowd laughing. He continued (with the audience's reaction in brackets): "Just to think of it! right at the outset of his canvass, I, a poor, kind, amiable, intelligent, [laughter] gentleman, [laughter and renewed cheers] I am to be slain in this way. Why, my friend, the Judge, is not only, as it turns out, not a dead lion, nor even a living one---he is the rugged Russian Bear! [Roars of laughter and loud applause.]" Lincoln continued that he did not think this was exactly the analogy Douglas meant to make because, after all, the Allies defeated the Russians at Sevastopol, to which the audience responded with "long and tremendous applause." Lincoln did not reserve his cutting humor for Douglas alone; he used it on his audience as well. When one audience member interrupted him with a question, Lincoln replied, "You don't know what you are talking about, my friend. I am quite willing to answer any gentleman in the crowd who asks an intelligent question. [Great applause.]" Lincoln was also not above poking fun at himself. Early in the speech when he announced that he was going to read a document, an

audience member yelled out, “Get out your specs.” Later in the speech he held another document in his hand but told the audience that he would not “waste your time by trying to read it.”²² When they shouted for him to do so, Lincoln quipped, “Gentlemen, reading from speeches is a very tedious business, particularly for an old man that has to put on spectacles, and the more so if the man be so tall that he has to bend over to the light,” to which the audience delighted in.²³ Lincoln frequently used humor to elicit a bit of wisdom, but he also used it to build a rapport with his audience when he had more serious arguments to make.

Like Blackstone and Greenleaf before him, Lincoln countered Douglas’s arguments by defining words that were at the heart of contention, in this case it was alliance and popular sovereignty, and with the latter he used the wording of the Declaration of Independence as his guide.²⁴

In his “House Divided Speech” Lincoln did not elucidate what Republicans would do if they gained power in Washington, and his opponent pounced and attempted to fill in the blanks for his constituents. Douglas professed that Lincoln meant that either the Republicans would lead an abolitionist war against the South or goad the South into making a war on the North, either way with the same end in mind. Recognizing he had left an opening for his opponent, Lincoln acknowledged that he had only expressed a prediction and not a hope, but to clarify matters “so there need be no longer any

²² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 489.

²³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 485-486, 489-490.

²⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 486-489.

difficulty” he expressed his hope that “slavery should be put in course of ultimate extinction.” This hope is still a little too vague, so he gave a rather lengthy explanation of what he meant. He acknowledged that the Union had survived more than eight decades with half of it free and half of it slave, saying that, “I am tolerably well acquainted with the history of the country.” He then proceeded to argue that the Union had been maintained not because this was the natural state of equilibrium but because that there was a general “belief that slavery was in course of ultimate extinction.” According to Lincoln, “The adoption of the Constitution and its attendant history led the people” to believe this was so, and briefly illustrated the Founders’ willingness to restrict the spread of slavery into new states and to allow the supply of new slaves to be cut off by the banning of the slave trade within twenty years. Lincoln told them frankly, “I have always hated slavery, I think as much as any Abolitionist... but I have always been quiet about it until this new era of the introduction of the Nebraska Bill began,” because he believed that the attitude had shifted from a hope of a gradual extinction of what was generally agreed as a bad thing to the expansion and perpetuation of a something that more and more people were arguing was a very good thing, or at the very least, something that was of no moral concern to those not directly involved. He then specified that he was not in favor of a general war but rather a return to the only policy that allowed there to be peace and unity for so long, which was a return to treating slavery as a bad thing and taking measures to restrict its spread and put it on the path of ultimate extinction.²⁵ For Lincoln,

²⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 491-493.

a return to the policies of the past was the best way to secure union, peace, and liberty in the future.

After repeating essentially the same ideas about the Dred Scott decision that he expressed in his 1857 Springfield speech, Lincoln built up to one of the most powerful perorations of his career, an ardent statement against the dilution of the rights delineated in the Declaration. Moving into his closing slowly, Lincoln stated, “Now, it happens that we meet together once every year, sometime about the 4th of July, for some reason or other.” What was this reason? Contrasting the levels of size, strength, and prosperity between the United States in 1776 and his present, Lincoln continued his ruminations on the meaning of the memory of the Founding Fathers:

We find a race of men living in that day whom we claim as our fathers and grandfathers; they were iron men, they fought for the principle that they were contending for... We hold this annual celebration to remind ourselves of all the good done in this process of time of how it was done and who did it, and how we are historically connected with it; and we go from these meetings in better humor with ourselves---we feel more attached the one to the other, and more firmly bound to the country we inhabit. In every way we are better men in the age, and race, and country in which we live for these celebrations.

Many Americans in 1858 were directly connected by blood to this *race of iron men* who heroically *fought for the principle that they were contending for*. This naturally leads to the questions “What principle did they fight for?” and “What about the people not connected to this race of heroes by blood?” Lincoln continued:

We have besides these men---descended by blood from our ancestors---among us perhaps half our people who are not descendants at all of these men, they are men who have come from Europe---German, Irish, French and Scandinavian---men that have come from Europe themselves, or whose ancestors have come hither and settled here, finding themselves our equals in all things. If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none, they cannot carry themselves back into that glorious epoch and make

themselves feel that they are part of us, but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are. That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.²⁶

For Lincoln, the Revolution was revolutionary, fought for the rights of all men for all coming time. To be a true American does not mean to be committed to the promotion of a certain race or ethnicity but rather to be committed to the simple idea of the dignity of all men. Lincoln expressed his belief that the heritage of America could be treasured by all, no matter where they came from or who their ancestors were.

He then warned his audience what the inevitable outcome would be if they are successful in diluting the meaning of the Declaration, that by stating that only the British subjects of 1776 were created equal, it would “tend to rub out the sentiment of liberty in the country.” According to Lincoln, the idea that some groups of people are inherently better than others because of their birth is the same argument monarchs had been making for centuries. He proclaimed:

They are the arguments that kings have made for enslaving the people in all ages of the world. You will find that all the arguments in favor of king-craft were of this class; they always bestrode the necks of the people, not that they wanted to do it, but because the people were better off for being ridden. That is their argument, and this argument of the Judge is the same old serpent that says you work and I eat, you toil and I will enjoy the fruits of it. Turn in whatever way you will---whether it come from the

²⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 499-500.

mouth of a King, an excuse for enslaving the people of his country, or from the mouth of men of one race as a reason for enslaving the men of another race, it is all the same old serpent, and I hold if that course of argumentation that is made for the purpose of convincing the public mind that we should not care about this, should be granted, it does not stop with the negro. I should like to know if taking this old Declaration of Independence, which declares that all men are equal upon principle and making exceptions to it where will it stop. If one man says it does not mean a negro, why not another say it does not mean some other man?²⁷

The surest guarantee for the rights for Americans was the maintenance of their heritage by continuing to the pursuit of liberty for all.

Lincoln, using the wisdom of the Bible, quoted Matthew 5:48, admonished his audience, “As your Father in Heaven is perfect, be ye also perfect.” Lincoln acknowledged that no mortal could achieve perfection, but that was nevertheless the standard set up for Christians, and so should the standard be for Americans. For Lincoln, this meant that “in relation to the principle that all men are created equal, let it be as nearly reached as we can. If we cannot give freedom to every creature, let us do nothing that will impose slavery upon any other creature.”²⁸

Lincoln concluded not with his hope in the relatively modest goal that slavery will be put on the course of ultimate extinction but rather a bold vision of the total equality among the races. In a statement he would later walk back in subsequent speeches in the campaign, he proclaimed, “Let us discard all this quibbling about this man and the other man---this race and that race and the other

²⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 500.

²⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 501.

race being inferior, and therefore they must be placed in an inferior position--- discarding our standard that we have left us. Let us discard all these things, and unite as one people throughout this land, until we shall once more stand up declaring that all men are created equal.”²⁹

In this speech Lincoln made very little use of the study of history, instead making emotional appeals to their common heritage and common understanding of the past. This set a pattern for the rest of the campaign. For years he had researched history and had delivered almost scholarly dissertations on America’s past. Now he was to make his most impassioned appeals to national memory in his career. Something else begins to become evident in his 1858 Chicago speech. When Lincoln concluded, the reporter noted that “Mr. Lincoln retired amid a perfect torrent of applause and cheers.” Lincoln was building a passionate movement with every speech he made. Earlier in the address, Lincoln told his audience that he would attempt to quote a portion of this “House Divided Speech” from memory. After he concluded his quotation, an audience member interjected, “That’s the very language.”³⁰ Not only was Lincoln making appeals to memory of the past; he was now beginning to shape it.

July 17 Springfield Speech

²⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 501.

³⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 490-491, 501.

“If you conscientiously believe that his principles are more in harmony with the feelings of the American people and the interests and honor of the Republic, elect him. If, on the contrary, you believe that my principles are more consistent with those great principles upon which our fathers framed this Government, then I shall ask you to so express your opinion at the polls.”³¹ Thus spoke Stephen Douglas to his audience in Springfield on the afternoon of July 17, 1858. Although not considered one of their seven formal debates, Lincoln had been following Douglas throughout the state in order to take advantage of the crowds Douglas’s fame naturally drew, and he delivered another speech that evening. Stephen Douglas told his audience that they should support not the candidate with the most qualifications or best reputation but rather the one who they believed had the most accurate interpretations of the past, a sentiment Lincoln did not challenge.

Much of what Lincoln argued that evening was a reiteration of what he had said earlier in the campaign, such as defining key terms (when explaining the difference between a purpose and expectation, Lincoln said, “I have often expressed an expectation to die, but I have never expressed a *wish* to die”) and his quoting of President Jackson in his argument that the Supreme Court’s rulings should be blindly accepted. He added a couple of new wrinkles to this address. Lincoln told his audience, “In public speaking it is tedious reading from documents,” yet he nevertheless proceeded to not only do so but

³¹ Douglas, Stephen Douglas, “Speech Delivered at Springfield, Ill, by Senator S. A. Douglas,” *Northern Illinois University Digital Library*, Northern Illinois University, 2020, <https://digital.lib.niu.edu/islandora/object/niu-lincoln:35822>.

also to cite his source, stating the letter by Thomas Jefferson he was quoting from was “found in the seventh volume of his correspondence, at page 177.” In this letter Jefferson wrote to “consider the judges as the ultimate arbiters of all constitutional questions” was “a very dangerous doctrine” that “would place us under the despotism of an oligarchy.” Rather than this attitude, Jefferson promoted the idea that all the branches should be “co-equal and co-sovereign.” After citing another Supreme Court decision, the one that declared the National Bank to be constitutional and showing how Douglas had worked against it for two decades, Lincoln argued that the real principle that Douglas stood on was not reverence for the Supreme Court but rather, “He is for the Dred Scott decision because it tends to nationalize slavery.”³²

Lincoln then noted that Preston Brooks, the South Carolina congressman who had caned Charles Sumner on the floor of the Senate, stated that the Framers did not believe slavery would last to their day and worked towards its extinction, but because of the invention of the cotton gin, slavery had now become necessary.³³ Brooks delivered the speech Lincoln referred to in 1854 on the floor of the House of Representatives during the debate over Douglas’s Kansas-Nebraska Bill, debates Lincoln had carefully followed in Illinois. In this speech, Brooks admitted that many of the Founders, “men high in fame for wisdom and patriotism,” spoke out against slavery, with some expressing their belief that the institution would not last. Brooks said that it was not surprising that men who had fought a destructive war for their own liberty would be guilty of “extravagances of

³² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 514-518.

³³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2. 514-515.

opinion and of act” that were “dangerous.” Victory brought the “intoxications of liberty,” and it was only natural that wise men should form unwise opinions, believing “that the light of liberty... should have been reflected from the white to the black man.” Not only were they made delusional by the Revolution, they also did not have the advantage of the experience of the intervening years that men of 1854 then had. In this speech, Brooks proclaimed that, “It is worse than absurd to quote the individual opinions of any man against the institution of slavery which were expressed before those great staples which are now grown so abundantly in the South and Southwest,” had become so profitable. The main reason why many of the Founding generation spoke out against slavery was because at that time the destruction of the war had “rendered property in slaves not only valueless, but an absolute incumbrance.” The Founders could not have foreseen how an invention like the cotton gin along with new circumstances would make slavery so profitable. According to Brooks, “The times were propitious both to schemes of emancipation and to the entertainment of sentiments of pseudo-philanthropy.” According to Brooks, the statements of the Founders against slavery should not be adhered to because they made them not out of an enduring principle but of temporary interest. During the Revolution, the perpetuation of slavery was not in their financial interest, so they opposed it, but now that slavery had become so profitable, it was both necessary and right.³⁴ Lincoln would allude to this speech repeatedly in the next two years to show that Southerners were corrupting the original ideas of a majority of the Founders in pursuit of no higher principle than their own financial interest, or as he later put it, they do not “stand upon the basis upon which our fathers placed” slavery, which was the course of

³⁴ Cong. Globe, Appendix, 33rd Cong., 1st Sess., 371-372 (1854).

ultimate extinction, but rather they have “*put it upon the cotton gin basis,*” thus perpetuating it as long as men possessed a financial interest in it.³⁵ Lincoln alluded to Brooks’s speech many times because, as he learned in his readings of Greenleaf, a witness that testifies against one’s perceived interests can be considered more credible than one that doesn’t, and the most ardent of the Fire-Eaters, the cane-wielding Preston Brooks of South Carolina, admitting that proponents of the slave power were in disagreement with a majority of the universally revered Founder Fathers would meet this criterion.

Crisscrossing the Prairie State

While Lincoln trailed Douglas throughout the state attempting to speak to the same crowds, Republican newspapers needled Douglas, implying cowardice on Douglas’s part for not accepting to formally debate Lincoln. Even though he had much to lose and little to gain, Douglas eventually agreed as long as Lincoln accepted his terms, which Lincoln did. They would conduct one formal debate in each of the seven Congressional districts they had not yet spoken, so that meant all the districts excluding the two that represented Chicago and Springfield. In four of the debates, Douglas would have the privilege of speaking both first and last while Lincoln would be able to do so three times. In addition to these seven dates, they would crisscross the state, each delivering several dozen speeches from July to November. Douglas travelled the new railroads in a private car, (possibly provided free of charge by the vice president of the Illinois Central Railroad,

³⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 276.

George McClellan) stocked with liquor and a booming cannon to announce his arrival in town. Lincoln, conversely, travelled in regular cars with ordinary passengers.³⁶

Carl Schurz, a leader of the failed 1848 revolution in Germany and an immigrant living in Wisconsin, vividly recounted meeting Lincoln for the first time on one of these trains and the general atmosphere these debates produced. Schurz was quickly becoming a leader of the German American community, a group that had become an important demographic group after thousands like Schurz migrated after the failed revolution of 1848, and the Republican State Committee invited Schurz to campaign on Lincoln's behalf. Schurz recalled:

All at once, after the train had left a way station, I observed a great commotion among my fellow-passengers, many of whom jumped from their seats and pressed eagerly around a tall man who had just entered the car. They addressed him in the most familiar style: "Hello, Abe! How are you?" and so on. And he responded in the same manner: "Good-evening, Ben! How are you, Joe? Glad to see you, Dick!" and there was much laughter at some things he said, which, in the confusion of voices, I could not understand. "Why," exclaimed my companion, the committee-man, "there's Lincoln himself!"

After a lengthy description of Lincoln's appearance, Schurz wrote that he had never seen someone who looked "so uncouth, not to say grotesque." After several minutes of shaking hands in the crowded car, Lincoln was introduced to Schurz and sat down next to him. Schurz recalled, "He received me with an off-hand cordiality, like an old acquaintance. In a somewhat high-pitched but pleasant voice he began to talk to me, telling me much about the points he and Douglas had made in the debates at different

³⁶ Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 89-95, 204-206.

places, and about those he intended to make.” Schurz felt flattered by the attention and he remembered:

When, in a tone of perfect ingenuousness, he asked me — a young beginner in politics — what I thought about this and that, I should have felt myself very much honored by his confidence, had he permitted me to regard him as a great man. But he talked in so simple and familiar a strain, and his manner and homely phrase were so absolutely free from any semblance of self-consciousness or pretension to superiority, that I soon felt as if I had known him all my life and we had long been close friends. He interspersed our conversation with all sorts of quaint stories, each of which had a witty point applicable to the subject in hand, and not seldom concluding an argument in such a manner that nothing more was to be said. He seemed to enjoy his own jests in a childlike way, for his unusually sad-looking eyes would kindle with a merry twinkle, and he himself led in the laughter; and his laugh was so genuine, hearty, and contagious that nobody could fail to join in it.

They arrived the night before a debate, and Schurz recalled the tumult they witnessed when they exited the train: “The blare of brass bands and the shouts of enthusiastic, and not in all cases quite sober, Democrats and Republicans, cheering and hurraing for their respective champions, did not cease until the small hours.” The next morning there was an almost carnival like atmosphere:

The country people began to stream into town for the great meeting, some singly, on foot or on horseback, or small parties of men and women, and even children, in buggies or farm wagons; while others were marshaled in solemn procession from outlying towns or districts with banners and drums, many of them headed by maidens in white with tricolored scarfs, who represented the Goddess of Liberty and the different States of the Union, and whose beauty was duly admired by everyone, including themselves.

Even though it was a heated campaign about the most serious of issues, “the crowds remained very good-natured, and the occasional jibes flung from one side to the other

were uniformly received with a laugh.” Schurz, who fled autocratic Prussia, reveled in this newfound democratic atmosphere.³⁷

The Lincoln-Douglas debates have lived on in memory as the most famous debates in American history, and justly so. The excitement of the crowds and the thrust and parry of the debaters brought a sense of urgency and excitement while the issues they debated cut to the core of the American experiment. In each of the seven formal debates and in the dozens of speeches interspersed throughout the campaign, Lincoln repeated many of the same arguments about the past that he had been making since his Springfield speech in 1854 and do not bear repeating. However, in each of these debates there was a flicker of something new, sometimes based on prior research, but mostly we see him crafting and recrafting his emotional appeals to the past.

Ottawa

Lincoln and Douglas held their first joint debate on August 21 in Ottawa, a newly settled town in north-central Illinois at the confluence of the Fox and Illinois rivers. Lincoln had travelled through there more than a quarter century earlier as part of the Illinois militia during the Black Hawk War before the village had been founded. One of the dignitaries on stage with them was Chief Shabbona, a warrior of the Ottawa Tribe who during the war had warned white settlers of impending attacks and was one of the few Native Americans to remain in northern Illinois in the 1850s. Also on stage was

³⁷ Carl Schurz, Frederic Bancroft, and William Archibald Dunning, *The Reminiscences of Carl Schurz* (New York: McClure, 1907), 324-326.

Lincoln's friend and political ally Owen Lovejoy of Princeton who now represented Ottawa's Congressional district.

In his speech, Douglas attacked Lincoln's "house divided" metaphor, and Lincoln quipped that if Douglas disagreed with him, then the point of contention was "not between him and me, but between the Judge and an authority of a somewhat higher character." Lincoln acknowledged that Douglas may not disagree with the maxim but rather how Lincoln applied it, arguing that the house really was not divided. Lincoln agreed that there were many differences between the states that frequently helped unite the country, as some states could produce goods that other states were lacking. Lincoln then asked, "But can this question of slavery be considered as among *these* varieties in the institutions of the country? I leave it to you to say whether, in the history of our government, this institution of slavery has not always failed to be a bond of union, and, on the contrary, been an apple of discord and an element of division in the house."

Alluding to the ancient Greek myth of Eris and the golden apple that caused a disagreement that eventually led to the Trojan War, Lincoln argued that slavery had always threatened the Union in the past. Lincoln then asked rhetorically if after their generation passed away if slavery would continue to bring division and argued that it always will so long as it existed, thus proving his application of the metaphor correct. Like earlier speeches, Lincoln argued that the Union survived thus far not because the division of free and slave states provided a stable equilibrium but rather that slavery was treated as a bad thing that was supposedly put on the course of its ultimate extinction. Lincoln argued, "Now, I believe if we could arrest the spread, and place it where Washington, and Jefferson, and Madison placed it, it *would be* in the course of ultimate

extinction, and the public mind *would*, as for eighty years past, believe that it was in the course of ultimate extinction.”³⁸ Here Lincoln is using wisdom derived both from the Bible and the past to promote a course for the future.

After making the same arguments that he had made in earlier speeches in how Presidents Jefferson and Jackson did not believe the Supreme Court was the sole authority on what was constitutional, Lincoln introduced a new argument to show that Douglas did not also treat judicial decisions to be sacred. Lincoln explained that this story could be found in *A History of Illinois*, which is one of the few history books he ever cited. At first glance it may appear to be a secondary source, but it was written by a former governor of Illinois, Thomas Ford, and much of what he wrote was based on his personal experience. Lincoln accurately recounted how more than a decade earlier Democrats in Illinois did not agree with a decision of the state supreme court so they packed it with Democrats like Douglas so that it could be overturned, and that happened to be how Stephen Douglas earned the title “judge.”³⁹ Lincoln provided the warrant, stating that when Douglas claims that if Republicans will support the nomination of justices who will overturn the Dred Scott decision and thus make the court “prostituted,” and politicized, “You know best, Judge; you have been through the mill.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 17-18.

³⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 28; Thomas Ford, *A History of Illinois: From Its Commencement as a State in 1814 to 1847* (Chicago: S. C. Griggs and Co., 1854), 213-222, 304.

⁴⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 28.

The crowd loved this type of humor, and they erupted in laughter after a heckler interrupted Lincoln to demand that he talk about someone other than Dred Scott: “Yes; no doubt you want to hear something that don’t hurt.”⁴¹

More seriously, Lincoln explained why he believed Douglas’s words were more dangerous than his legislation. Lincoln argued, “In this and like communities, public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. Consequently he who moulds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed.”⁴² By trying to dilute their heritage and make slavery palatable and thus perpetual, Lincoln believed Douglas was the more dangerous form of politician.

Lincoln’s *beau ideal of a statesman* was not Stephen Douglas, of course, but Henry Clay, and Lincoln scorned Douglas’s attempt to argue that he was his true successor. As he had done in earlier speeches, he quoted from memory his favorite lines from Clay about those who would dilute the statement of rights in the Declaration of Independence. Douglas, according to Lincoln, was not only not a statesman in the mold of Henry Clay but rather the type of demagogue Clay warned people about:

To my thinking, Judge Douglas is, by his example and vast influence, doing that very thing in this community, when he says that the negro has nothing in the Declaration of Independence. Henry Clay plainly understood the contrary. Judge Douglas is going back to the era of our Revolution, and to the extent of his ability, muzzling the cannon which thunders its annual joyous return. When he invites any people willing to have slavery, to establish it, he is blowing out the moral lights around us. When he says he “cares not whether slavery is voted down or voted up,”---that it is a sacred right of self government---he is in my judgment

⁴¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 29.

⁴² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 27.

penetrating the human soul and eradicating the light of reason and the love of liberty in this American people.⁴³

For Lincoln, they must draw wisdom and inspiration from the past if they want to protect everything they hold dear in their heritage.

Freeport

The second debate was held on August 27 in the extreme northern edge of the state in Freeport. It is mostly known for Lincoln getting Douglas to say what he had said before, namely that territories had the lawful right to exclude slavery if they choose. This was significant because his words would now travel throughout the country because of the national interest in the debates and because it was an issue that threatened to divide the Democratic Party.

This debate is important for understanding how Lincoln used the past because of how Lincoln reacted to a historical error Douglas made in the first debate. In Ottawa Douglas read from a document a series of radical resolutions and accused Lincoln of attending the Republican meeting in Springfield in 1854 and being responsible for drafting them. Lincoln denied the accusation in Ottawa because he was not at that meeting and was unfamiliar with the resolutions. It was true that a group of Republicans met in Springfield in 1854 and passed a series of resolutions, but the ones Douglas read in Ottawa were not them. In the six days after the debate, the press had discovered and reported that those resolutions were not passed in Springfield but rather at an obscure

⁴³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 29.

meeting in Aurora more than 150 miles away.⁴⁴ After pointing out the specifics of the error, Lincoln proclaimed that it was “*most extraordinary*” that someone of Douglas’s station and fame would “venture upon the assertion of that which the slightest investigation would have shown him to be wholly false.” What made this even “more extraordinary” was that “he is in the habit, in almost all the speeches he makes, of charging falsehood upon his adversaries.”⁴⁵ Lincoln, no doubt, made mistakes about the past, but he always fought against the idea that power matters more than truth when discussing the past.

Edwardsville: Liberty is the Heritage of All Men

Lincoln crisscrossed the center of the state between his second and third debates, delivering several addresses, some of which were recorded, and the best of which was his September 11 speech in Edwardsville, which was located thirteen miles southeast of Alton on bluffs above the broad Mississippi flood plain. Before the coming of the railroads, Edwardsville was connected to Springfield by the Edwards Trace, one of the old paths that wound through forests and prairies linking distant communities throughout the state. Even though it was relatively old by Illinois standards, Edwardsville was still a primarily small and agrarian community like many of the other towns Lincoln campaigned in.

⁴⁴ Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America*, 131-133.

⁴⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 44.

At the beginning of the speech, Lincoln told his audience that a man in their town had asked him to explain the difference between Republicans and Democrats as he saw it. Lincoln professed that he believed the question to be a good one, and, always a stickler for clarity, explained his views: “The difference between the Republican and the Democratic parties on the leading issue of this contest, as I understand it, is, that the former consider slavery a moral, social and political wrong, while the latter *do not* consider it either a moral, social or political wrong.” All the disagreements and strife were boiled down to one issue: Republicans thought slavery wrong and treated it as such while Democrats did not and acted accordingly. They may disagree amongst themselves about tactics, but Republicans in general sought to restore the “policy of the fathers” and “they will oppose, in all its length and breadth, the modern Democratic idea that slavery is as good as freedom.”⁴⁶

Some have claimed that Lincoln never used any racial slurs in his public addresses, which is not true. When he did so after 1854, he almost always did by paraphrasing or mocking the racial attitudes of his opponents, and this can be seen in his Edwardsville address. Like many of his earlier speeches, he defined the term popular sovereignty, showing how he believed his definition was truer to the original intent of the Founders than Douglas’s definition. Lincoln then mocked Douglas, claiming that Douglas, “discovered that the right of the white man to breed and flog niggers in Nebraska was POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY!”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 91-92.

⁴⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 94- 95.

The point of this part of his address was not to denigrate but rather to affirm the humanity of African Americans, which he believed Douglas was attacking. Lincoln rebuked the ideas put forth by Justice Taney and Douglas that blacks have no more rights than cattle:

Now, when by all these means you have succeeded in dehumanizing the negro; when you have put him down, and made it forever impossible for him to be but as the beasts of the field; when you have extinguished his soul, and placed him where the ray of hope is blown out in darkness like that which broods over the spirits of the damned; are you quite sure the demon which you have roused *will not turn and rend you?*

In many ways Lincoln had asserted the arguments of masters to own slaves were of the same nature and principle of monarchs to rule men, and here was one of the few times Lincoln alluded to the fact that just as men can rise up and overthrow those who profess to be their monarchs, so too can men rise up and overthrow those who profess to be their masters. Lincoln argued that it was in the slave owner's long-term interest to recognize and respect their common humanity. Lincoln closed:

What constitutes the bulwark of our own liberty and independence? It is not our frowning battlements, our bristling sea coasts, the guns of our war steamers, or the strength of our gallant and disciplined army. These are not our reliance against a resumption of tyranny in our fair land. All of them may be turned against our liberties, without making us stronger or weaker for the struggle. Our reliance is in the *love of liberty* which God has planted in our bosoms. Our defense is in the preservation of the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands, every where. Destroy this spirit, and you have planted the seeds of despotism around your own doors. Familiarize yourselves with the chains of bondage, and you are preparing your own limbs to wear them. Accustomed to trample on the rights of those around you, you have lost the genius of your own independence, and become the fit subjects of the first cunning tyrant who rises. And let me tell you, all these things are prepared for you with the logic of history, if the elections shall promise that the next Dred Scott decision and all future decisions will be quietly acquiesced in by the people.

Seldom did Lincoln wax so eloquent in defense of universal liberty. It was the *love of liberty*, not military strength, which was the sole guarantee of strength. With the ancient

Roman and more recent French republics in mind, Lincoln argued that it was the *logic of history* that shows how republican societies can be overthrown and ruled by a Caesar or Napoleon when too many citizens make a virtue of trampling on the rights of others. According to Lincoln, only by heeding the wisdom of history would they be able to preserve their liberty.⁴⁸

Jonesboro

For their third debate, Lincoln and Douglas journeyed south to Jonesboro which lay at a more southerly latitude than Richmond, Virginia. The extreme southern tip of Illinois was solidly Democratic, and Douglas claimed in a speech that when he mentioned the fact that he was going to take Lincoln down to Jonesboro in their debate in Ottawa, Lincoln trembled in his knees and needed to be carried off the stage and was laid up for seven days. After Lincoln read to his Jonesboro audience Douglas's words from a newspaper article, Lincoln quipped, "Now that statement altogether furnishes a subject for philosophical contemplation." After pausing for the laughter to subside, Lincoln continued, "I have been treating it in that way, and I have really come to the conclusion that I can explain it in no other way than by believing the Judge is crazy." He challenged Douglas to see if he could "set my knees trembling again, if he can." In another part of the speech, Lincoln claimed that Douglas had been repeatedly lying about another matter, and Lincoln admitted that, "I have no way of making an argument up into the consistency

⁴⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 95-96.

of a corn-cob and stopping his mouth with it” besides demanding evidence for the charge or he should drop it altogether.⁴⁹

Lincoln demanded proof and evidence for far more serious matters in this debate. For example, he reiterated an argument he had been making, that the biggest cause of discord in their past has always been slavery and that it always will be so long as it threatens to grow and spread. Lincoln professed to his audience, “Like causes produce like effects.”⁵⁰ This idea was not new to Lincoln, and, consciously or unconsciously, Lincoln was quoting from David Hume, whom Lincoln likely read.⁵¹ Hume, an 18th century British historian and philosopher, wrote in his 1739 *A Treatise on Human Nature*:

The same cause always produces the same effect, and the same effect never arises but from the same cause. This principle we derive from experience, and is the source of most of our philosophical reasonings. For when by any clear experiment we have discovered the causes or effects of any phaenomenon, we immediately extend our observation to every phaenomenon of the same kind, without waiting for that constant repetition, from which the first idea of this relation is derived.⁵²

While Lincoln did not quote Hume in his 1839 Sub-Treasury speech, Lincoln expressed nearly the same ideas almost two decades prior when he argued that, “What has once happened, will invariably happen again, when the same circumstances which combined

⁴⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 118, 133-135.

⁵⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 121.

⁵¹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning Into Moral Subjects and Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Volume 1 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1890), 467.; Robert C. Bray, *Reading with Lincoln* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 142.

⁵² Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 467.

to produce it, shall again combine in the same way,” such as when “blast of wind extinguishes the flame of a candle.”⁵³ In the 1858 Jonesboro debate, Lincoln catalogued the manifold ways the spread of slavery had been a source of discord in the country’s past and predicted that it always would be in the future. Consciously or unconsciously, Lincoln echoed the title of Hume’s *A Treatise on Human Nature* when asked rhetorically, “Do you think that the nature of man will be changed---that the same causes that produced agitation at one time will not have the same effect at another?”⁵⁴ Even though Lincoln knew that most of the people in his Jonesboro audience did not care about slavery, he believed that they cared passionately about the Union, and Lincoln argued that the wisdom of history showed that the best way to preserve the Union was to stop the spread of the one thing that threatened to destroy it.

Charleston

On September 18 Lincoln and Douglas travelled to Charleston for their fourth debate. Located near the border with Indiana, Lincoln was familiar with this community as he occasionally visited his family who settled south of town. Lincoln’s address has lived in infamy because, even though Lincoln argued for the common humanity of blacks and the protection of their natural rights, it was here in Charleston that Lincoln gave his clearest and lengthiest statement on his belief in the social and political inferiority of blacks. He did so to ward off the attacks made by Douglas that a vote for Lincoln would mean voting, service on juries, and racial intermarriage for blacks, ideas that were

⁵³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1. 165.

⁵⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 121.

politically suicidal to support in statewide offices in Illinois in 1858. Douglas, perhaps even earlier than Lincoln did, understood that in concrete terms, protecting one's natural rights would necessarily entail voting and jury service to secure them, and, for those who wished, intermarriage to enjoy them.

One theme Lincoln returned to repeatedly throughout his campaign that became most evident here in Charleston was that when Douglas talked about the past, he did everything he could to avoid the real issues by obfuscating and resorting to outright lies. For example, Douglas charged Lincoln and the Republican U.S. senator from Illinois, Lyman Trumbull, with conspiring to "sell out" the Whig and Democratic parties, but Lincoln demanded Douglas supply proof. When he did not, Lincoln taunted him, saying that "He didn't bring the record" to support his claims "because there was no record for him to bring." Douglas also accused Trumbull of forging "his evidence from beginning to end, and by falsifying the record he endeavors to bolster up his false charge" against Douglas. Lincoln demanded that Douglas specify exactly what evidence Trumbull forged, and when Douglas failed to do so during his part of the debate, Lincoln asked his audience a series of questions:

You all heard me call upon him to say *which of these pieces of evidence was a forgery?* Does he say that what I present here as a copy of the original Toombs bill is a forgery? ["No," "no."] Does he say that what I present as a copy of the bill reported by himself is a forgery? ["No," "no," "no."] Or what is presented as a transcript from the *Globe*, of the quotations from Bigler's speech is a forgery? [No, no, no.] Does he say the quotations from his own speech are forgeries? ["No," "no," "no."] Does he say this transcript from Trumbull's speech is a forgery? [Loud cries of "no, no." "He didn't deny one of them."] *I would then like to know how it comes about, that when each piece of a story is true, the whole story turns out false?* [Great cheers and laughter.]

Time and time again Lincoln ruthlessly attacked Douglas's distortions of the past, and Lincoln told his audience he knew what Douglas was really doing:

I take it these people have some sense; they see plainly that Judge Douglas is playing cuttlefish, [Laughter] a small species of fish that has no mode of defending itself when pursued except by throwing out a black fluid, which makes the water so dark the enemy cannot see it and thus it escapes. [Roars of laughter.] Ain't the Judge playing the cuttlefish? ["Yes, yes," and cheers.]⁵⁵

Here Lincoln the statesman is exposing the true talent of demagogues of all times and places, the ability to confuse others and hide who they really are and what they are doing. Lincoln always believed that clarity of expression and truthfulness of argument were the best ways to defeat demagogues and their lies about the past.

Fragment on Pro-Slavery Theology

Throughout Lincoln's career, he frequently argued that self-interest blinded people from seeing the truth. As Lincoln travelled across the state, he continued to jot down his thoughts about slavery, and one he likely wrote at this time shows how Lincoln thought men's interests corrupted their perceptions and virtues.

In this surviving private note, Lincoln argued that if blacks really were inferior as many Christians argued, shouldn't they be aiding rather than enslaving them? "Give to him that is needy' is the christian rule of charity," according to Lincoln, but "Take from him that is needy' is the rule of slavery."⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 181, 184.

⁵⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 204.

During this time, many Christians were using their religion to sanction the peculiar institution. Lincoln in his note summed up their argument thus: “Slavery is not universally *right*, nor yet universally *wrong*; it is better for *some* people to be slaves; and, in such cases, it is the Will of God that they be such.” Lincoln stated the will of God was difficult to ascertain, and he created a thought experiment to illustrate how he thought slave owners divined His purpose:

We will suppose the Rev. Dr. Ross has a slave named Sambo, and the question is “Is it the Will of God that Sambo shall remain a slave, or be set free?” The Almighty gives no audible answer to the question, and his revelation---the Bible--gives none---or, at most, none but such as admits of a squabble, as to it's meaning. No one thinks of asking Sambo's opinion on it. So, at last, it comes to this, that *Dr. Ross* is to decide the question. And while he consider it, he sits in the shade, with gloves on his hands, and subsists on the bread that Sambo is earning in the burning sun. If he decides that God Wills Sambo to continue a slave, he thereby retains his own comfortable position; but if he decides that God will's Sambo to be free, he thereby has to walk out of the shade, throw off his gloves, and delve for his own bread. Will Dr. Ross be actuated by that perfect impartiality, which has ever been considered most favorable to correct decisions?

This story provides a metaphor for how Lincoln saw those who would justify slavery using religion or the Founders as authorities. Lincoln believed that self-interest blinded people to correctly understanding the past. In the coming years, Lincoln continued pondering not only whether the “Will of God” was discernible, but also if this will could be discerned in history.⁵⁷

Galesburg

“WHITE MEN OR NONE” was the message embroidered on a group of young women's dresses attending the fifth debate in Galesburg on the campus of Knox College.

⁵⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 204-205.

Located about 90 miles northwest of Springfield, Galesburg was Lincoln country as anti-slavery New Englanders settled the community two decades prior, and it was a stop on the Underground Railroad. Nevertheless, as the group of women attested, there were still plenty of Douglas supporters there.⁵⁸

Lincoln used humor here frequently to illustrate his points. Lincoln accused Douglas of recycling a “fraud” from 1854 used to get a Democrat, Thomas L. Harris, elected to Congress in his 1858 campaign. Lincoln told a story to describe what Douglas was doing: “As the fisherman's wife, whose drowned husband was brought home with his body full of eels, said when she was asked, ‘What was to be done with him?’ ‘*Take the eels out and set him again.*’[great laughter]” To those who failed to understand the parable, Lincoln elaborated: “Harris and Douglas have shown a disposition to take the eels out of that stale fraud by which they gained Harris' election, and set the fraud again more than once. [Tremendous cheering and laughter.]” Lincoln then urged them to check the Congressional records to see that his assertions were true.⁵⁹ Lincoln used the earthiest of humor to bring clarity when a bare statement of facts alone would not do.

In the Galesburg debate Lincoln opened a new line of attack on the Dred Scott decision and, as Lincoln saw it, Chief Justice Taney’s misrepresentation of the past. Lincoln argued that the “essence” of the decision was to be found in the following assertion by Taney: “The right of property in a slave is distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution.” After repeating it again to make sure his audience fully understood,

⁵⁸ Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas*, 217-219.

⁵⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 228.

Lincoln set about to define key terms by asserting that “‘*affirmed*’ in the Constitution” means “Made firm in the Constitution---so made that it cannot be separated from the Constitution without breaking the Constitution---durable as the Constitution, and part of the Constitution.” Lincoln argued that if one accepts Taney’s premises, that property in slavery is explicitly guaranteed by the Constitution, then nothing can be legally done by the Federal government or state governments to restrict, curtail, or abolish that right. However, this argument is not logical because “the right of property in a slave *is not* distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution.” As Lincoln would argue in other speeches, quite the opposite was true, and the Framers deliberately and purposefully avoided using the word “slave” in the Constitution.⁶⁰ Lincoln had previously said that the Dred Scott decision was based on a false history, and he used the tools of the historian to clarify matters and give them wisdom for the present.

Like earlier speeches, Lincoln continued to quote Jefferson and Jackson on the Supreme Court and Henry Clay on the Declaration of Independence. He also, for the first time, added a new quote by Jefferson that he would return to in the future. After he reminded his audience that Jefferson was a slave owner, he quoted Jefferson as writing that he “trembled for his country when he remembered that God was just.”⁶¹ Lincoln was speaking from memory and got some of the wording but not the meaning wrong. In his 1785 *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson wrote, “Indeed I tremble for my country

⁶⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 230-231.; James Madison, “Power of Congress to Prohibit the Slave Trade, [25 August] 1787,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, 2020, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0106>.

⁶¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 220.

when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever.”⁶² Again, Lincoln was challenging his audience to not be deluded by Douglas and used examples from the past to help illustrate his belief that slavery was wrong and must be treated accordingly.

Quincy

Lincoln and Douglas held their sixth debate on October 13 in Quincy, a burgeoning port city on the Mississippi. They held the debate in the crowded Washington Park, which was just three blocks up the bluff from the river and railroad station.

In Douglas’s portion of the debate, he summarized how he understood America’s past and how he envisioned the future. Douglas proclaimed:

If we will stand by that principle, then Mr. Lincoln will find that this republic can exist forever divided into free and slave States, as our fathers made it and the people of each State have decided. Stand by that great principle and we can go on as we have done, increasing in wealth, in population, in power, and in all the elements of greatness, until we shall be the admiration and terror of the world.

For Douglas, slavery was never the real issue; he was an ultra-nationalist who saw nothing at all wrong with America one day becoming the world’s *terror*.⁶³

Lincoln thanked Douglas for stating succinctly what Lincoln had been arguing Douglas really meant all along: “I wish to return Judge Douglas my profound thanks for his public annunciation here to-day, to be put on record, that his system of policy in regard to the institution of slavery *contemplates that it shall last forever*. [Great cheers,

⁶² Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 272.

⁶³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 274.

and cries of ‘Hit him again.>]” Since Douglas got the past wrong, he drew the wrong conclusion about the future:

Judge Douglas asks you “why cannot the institution of slavery, or rather, why cannot the nation, part slave and part free, continue as our fathers made it *forever?*” In the first place, I insist that our fathers *did not* make this nation half slave and half free, or part slave and part free. [Applause, and “That’s so.”] I insist that they found the institution of slavery existing here. They did not make it so, but they left it so because they knew of no way to get rid of it at that time. [“Good,” “Good,” “That’s true.”]

Slavery had existed in the thirteen colonies for more than 150 years before the Declaration of Independence had been signed and in the world from time immemorial. The Founders did not decide to create a country that was half slave and half free as if that were the optimal condition but rather, as Lincoln asserted, they limited what they considered a bad thing as much as they could without tearing the country apart. Lincoln proclaimed:

When Judge Douglas undertakes to say that as a matter of choice the fathers of the government made this nation part slave and part free, *he assumes what is historically a falsehood*. [Long continued applause.] More than that; when the fathers of the government cut off the source of slavery by the abolition of the slave trade, and adopted a system of restricting it from the new Territories where it had not existed, I maintain that they placed it where they understood, and all sensible men understood, it was in the course of ultimate extinction [“that’s so”]; and when Judge Douglas asks me why it cannot continue as our fathers made it, I ask him why he and his friends could not let it remain as our fathers made it? [Tremendous cheering.]⁶⁴

Lincoln, who had researched the issue for years, decried Douglas’s vision of the future because it was based on a mistaken view of the past. Lincoln and Douglas were battling over how the Revolutionary generation should live on in memory because it spoke to their identity in their present and thus the type of future they hoped to inhabit. Judging

⁶⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 276.

from the reactions Lincoln was getting from the crowds, he was not altogether unsuccessful in this attempt.

Alton

The day after the Quincy debate both Lincoln and Douglas took the same steamboat downriver and arrived in Alton at five in the morning the next day, October 15. They held their debate in front of the new city hall, which was just a few blocks east of the warehouse Elijah Lovejoy died defending his printing press two decades prior. Douglas was wearing down under the strain of the campaign and for days had struggled with his voice to make himself be understood. One prominent Republican from nearby Belleville who had not seen Douglas in two years, Gustave Koerner, was shocked by his appearance. Koerner recalled that Douglas's face looked "bloated" and that "his looks were haggard, and his voice almost extinct." According to Koerner, Douglas delivered a good speech, but it could only be heard by "a very small circle immediately near him." While Douglas was breaking down, as most men weary under the brunt of heavy labor, Lincoln was growing stronger, as a few men only really start pitching into it once the going gets tough. According to Koerner, Lincoln was just "as cool and collected as ever," and Lincoln grew more eloquent in this final debate than any of the preceding six.⁶⁵

Lincoln started off by remarking how much he enjoyed watching Douglas attack his fellow Democrat President Buchanan, and how he hoped Buchanan would

⁶⁵ Gustave Koerner, *Memoirs of Gustave Koerner: 1809-1896*, edited by Thomas J. McCormack (Cedar Rapids, IA: The Torch Press, 1909), 2. 67.

reciprocate. Lincoln said that reminded him of the story of a woman whose no-good husband was attacked by a bear. Instead of shooting the bear or getting help, she yelled out, “Go it, husband!---Go it, bear!”⁶⁶

Much of this final speech was fought over the meaning of Henry Clay’s legacy. Lincoln had quoted Henry Clay in the Galesburg debate arguing that Clay believed blacks were included in the Declaration of Independence, but in the intervening days someone had written in a Chicago paper that the opposite was true. Lincoln quoted Clay’s speech at greater length, explaining that it was delivered on the occasion when Clay was travelling through Indiana when he was petitioned to free all his slaves. Even though Clay said that he would not and that there would be many practical problems if there was a general abolition immediately declared, he stated that on principle, “*there is no doubt of the truth of that declaration*” that “that all men are created equal” and “it is desirable *in the original construction of society, and in organized societies*, to keep it in view as a great fundamental principle.” Lincoln quoted Clay in which Clay professed to be against slavery itself:

I desire no concealment of my opinions in regard to the institution of slavery. I look upon it as a great evil; and deeply lament that we have derived it from the parental government; and from our ancestors. But here they are and the question is, how can they be best dealt with? If a state of nature existed and we were about to lay the foundations of society, *no man would be more strongly opposed than I should be, to incorporating the institution of slavery among its elements.*

Lincoln never attempted to prove that Clay was an abolitionist or that his private actions always matched his public words, but rather that Clay believed that both slavery was wrong in principle and that blacks were included in the Declaration of Independence.

⁶⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 297-298.

Furthermore, he added that by Clay's standard, slavery should not be introduced into new societies, and Lincoln argued that this principle could be logically applied to new territories in the west. Lincoln proclaimed, "I insist that we have *his warrant*---his license for insisting upon the exclusion of that element, which he declared in such strong and emphatic language *was most hateful to him.*"⁶⁷

Quite often Lincoln used authorities from the past to buttress his argument, but he just as frequently used a unique mixture of both reason and passion to move his audience, such as here where he displayed his own thoughts on his opponent's idea that rights delineated in the Declaration of Independence were not meant for blacks:

And when this new principle---this new proposition that no human being ever thought of three years ago,---is brought forward, *I combat it* as having an evil tendency, if not an evil design; I combat it as having a tendency to dehumanize the negro---to take away from him the right of ever striving to be a man. I combat it as being one of the thousand things constantly done in these days to prepare the public mind to make property, and nothing but property of the *negro in all the States of this Union.* [Tremendous applause. "Hurrah for Lincoln."]⁶⁸

Lincoln then moved into a lengthy discussion on the Founders and Framers' attitudes to slavery. As he had done many times before, he argued that they limited the spread of slavery and banned the importation of new enslaved people for a reason. He asked rhetorically, "Why stop its spread in one direction and cut off its source in another, if they did not look to its being placed in the course of ultimate extinction?" He then detailed what the Constitution said about slavery and that it was no accident that the word "slave" was not used within it. Lincoln argued:

⁶⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 303-304.

⁶⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 304-305.

I understand the contemporaneous history of those times to be that covert language was used with a purpose, and that purpose was that in our Constitution, which it was hoped and is still hoped will endure forever---when it should be read by intelligent and patriotic men, after the institution of slavery had passed from among us---there should be nothing on the face of the great charter of liberty suggesting that such a thing as negro slavery had ever existed among us.

The Revolutionary generation, according to Lincoln, not only did not justify slavery but rather “left this institution with many clear marks of disapprobation upon it.” Speaking of the wisdom that can be gained from the past, Lincoln proclaimed that “experience does... speak in thunder tones, telling us that the policy which has given peace to the country heretofore, being returned to, gives the greatest promise of peace again.”⁶⁹

Lincoln argued that slavery was not just threatening to divide the country politically but that it was a poisonous miasma overspreading and rending social society. Lincoln asked, “Is it not this same mighty, deep seated power that somehow operates on the minds of men, exciting and stirring them up in every avenue of society---in politics, in religion, in literature, in morals, in all the manifold relations of life?” This was not the work of politicians agitating their constituents in order to get votes. This was the fundamental issue that was dividing the country, and it must be addressed.⁷⁰

Lincoln then challenged Douglas, saying no statesman would seek to avoid the only issue that for decades had threatened to tear the country apart both politically and socially. Douglas had claimed that he did not care one way or another if slavery spread into new territories and tried to convince Northerners to think likewise:

This is the policy here in the North that Douglas is advocating---that we are to care nothing about it! I ask you if it is not a false philosophy? Is it not a false

⁶⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 307-310.

⁷⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 310.

statesmanship that undertakes to build up a system of policy upon the basis of caring nothing about *the very thing that every body does care the most about?* ["Yes, yes," and applause]---a thing which all experience has shown we care a very great deal about? [Laughter and applause.]

A statesman, according to Lincoln, does not disregard experience but learns from it to lead the people. Lincoln knew that these would be his final words to the people of Illinois in the campaign, and he wanted to make sure they understood this difference:

That is the real issue. That is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles---right and wrong---throughout the world. They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time; and will ever continue to struggle. The one is the common right of humanity and the other the divine right of kings. It is the same principle in whatever shape it develops itself. It is the same spirit that says, "You work and toil and earn bread, and I'll eat it." [Loud applause.] No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle.⁷¹

Seldom did Lincoln reach the heights of eloquence that he did near the end of the Alton debate.

Conclusion

Once again, Lincoln lost. At that time, state legislatures elected senators and not the people by popular vote. Illinois elected more Democrats than Republicans to the legislature, and thus Douglas won the vote 54 to 46. However, this vote did not accurately reflect how the people voted. Since the districts had not been reapportioned to adequately reflect the influx of new settlers to the predominantly Republican voting northern half of the state, Democrats in the southern half possessed disproportionate

⁷¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 311, 315.

power in the legislature. According to historian Allen C. Guelzo, even though Democrats won a majority of seats, Democratic candidates only received 176,325 of the votes in the state compared to 190,468 for Republicans. Although not a direct analog, this provides the closest measurement of the people's views on the two candidates because they understood these state representatives would be electing the next senator. As Guelzo has dryly noted, "Oddly, it was the candidate whose gospel was popular sovereignty who would be reelected to the Senate on the basis of a popular vote he had, technically, lost."⁷²

Lincoln was disappointed but not disheartened. He counselled friends not to grow despondent and that there will be more fights before long. He wrote to one friend about his campaign, "I hope and believe seed has been sown that will yet produce fruit."⁷³ From the reactions of the audience at the debates and speeches, it was clear that he was building a movement in his state that was by no means spent.

While Lincoln's 1857 Springfield speech showed extensive historical research, Lincoln predominantly used emotional appeals to the past in the largely extemporaneous speeches of his 1858 campaign. Even then, Lincoln's historical research is still discernible as he cited collections of public speeches and private correspondence, official records from Congress, newspaper articles, and even a history of Illinois. Lincoln made perhaps his most eloquent emotional appeals to the past in this raucous campaign, but in

⁷² Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas*, 285-286.

⁷³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 340.

the next two years he would return to the cool and dispassionate analysis of the past, delivering his strongest address using the study of history to a much different audience.

Chapter VI.

Right Makes Might: Cooper Union (1859-1860)

Preserving Personal History

During the debates, Bloomington resident Jesse Fell was travelling through the northeast and the upper Midwest, and everywhere he went people were talking about his old friend Lincoln. The debates were printed in full throughout the North and people kept asking him who this Lincoln was. Even though they had been friends for more than two decades, Fell felt that he did not know enough to satisfy their curiosity, especially his personal life. When he returned, he met Lincoln at his brother's law office on the courthouse square when Lincoln was in town for court after the failed campaign. Fell told Lincoln all that he heard in his travels and said that if people knew more about him, he could have a shot at the presidency in 1860. If Lincoln would only write him a brief history of his life, he could share it and give him greater exposure and make him a viable candidate. Lincoln said he would very much like to be president, but he rejected his suggestion, stating that there were far more famous and deserving candidates, and it would be useless to spend time on the effort. However, a year later Lincoln changed his mind, thinking that maybe he had a chance after all, and wrote a short autobiography.¹

¹ Jesse W. Fell, "Jesse W. Fell," in *The Lincoln Memorial: Album-immortelles*, ed. by Osborn H. Oldroyd (New York: G. W. Carleton & Co., 1887), 472-477.

Until 1859, almost all of Lincoln's writings about the past were about American history. However, as his fame grew, people wanted to know more about the man who had challenged the "Little Giant," and there was now a demand for his own history. He supplied this in two spare autobiographies along with a collection of his and Douglas's speeches in 1858. It was these works of personal history in the years 1859-1860 that introduced him to a wider audience, and it was a speech he delivered in New York in 1860 about American history that made him a viable candidate for the presidency.

The first of these two autobiographies is especially short for someone hoping to reach the highest office in the land. Before delving into his personal information, Lincoln stressed to Fell that any biographies made from it must be "modest" and, besides information from his speeches, must "not... go beyond the materials." He did not want any myths to grow up that would be embarrassing to have to refute. Lincoln emphasized the facts about his life that he felt would benefit him in his political career, like his experience growing up on the frontier (i.e., When he moved to Indiana, it was a "wild region, with many bears and other wild animals still in the woods") and his self-education. He expressed pride in being chosen captain of his unit of militia during the Black Hawk War, "a success which gave me more pleasure than any I have had since." He wrote that he studied law, became a lawyer, and spent four terms in the Illinois legislature and one term in the U.S. Congress. After leaving Congress, Lincoln wrote that he "was losing interest in politics" until 1854 when the "the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused me again." He closed by stating that the balance of his political career since then was well known and gave a brief physical description of himself. Even though this autobiography is both brief and modest, it still shows the pride of a self-made

man highlighting the things he felt would benefit him politically. Lincoln left out much about his life, especially his personal relationships as he only briefly discussed his parents and made no mention at all of his wife and children.²

Lincoln wrote his brief autobiography to Fell in December 1859 when his candidacy to the presidency was becoming a possibility, and he wrote a second and longer one after the Republican Party nominated him for president in May of 1860. He wrote this autobiography for John L. Scripps who wanted to publish a campaign biography in the *Chicago Press and Tribune*. By now Lincoln had become the “rail splitter” candidate, and in this autobiography, he highlighted his humble rural origins. Lincoln noted that when he moved to Indiana when he was eight, it was “an unbroken forest,” and, even “though very young,” he “had an axe put into his hands at once; and from that till within his twentythird year, he was almost constantly handling that most useful instrument.” He highlighted other aspects of his life on the frontier, including plowing, harvesting, hunting, getting knocked unconscious by the kick of a horse, driving wagons drawn by ox teams, building a log cabin, splitting rails, surviving the winter of the “deep snow,” building a flatboat, and tying the eyes of hogs shut that could not be driven onto that flatboat. Continuing to focus on his humble origins, Lincoln detailed his formal education at the “A.B.C. schools” he attended and stated the rest he has learned “he has picked up,” including when he “studied and nearly mastered the Six-books of Euclid” since leaving Congress. Not only did he not go to college, when he wanted to become a lawyer, Lincoln stressed that he “studied with nobody.” Even though in this

² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 511-512.

autobiography he mentioned he had a wife and children, his description of his family members was still incredibly spare, dedicating 41 words to his wife and kids, 25 to his mother, but 122 to the story of tying the hogs' eyes shut. Like his autobiography to Fell, Lincoln expressed greater pride in being elected captain during the Black Hawk War than anything else he had yet accomplished. He gave a more detailed report of his political career, providing rebuttals to those political opponents who would choose to attack it. Lincoln also included a "protest" he had written in 1837 stating "that the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy" and that he still felt that way. Like his earlier autobiography, Lincoln saw the passing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act as a turning point in his political career: "In 1854, his profession had almost superseded the thought of politics in his mind, when the repeal of the Missouri compromise aroused him as he had never been before."³ Although longer than his autobiography to Fell, there is still much that he left out. Lincoln, curator of his own history, included only the aspects of his past he felt would help his chances for the presidency, namely his youth on the frontier, his self-education, his becoming a self-made man, and his opposition to slavery. Although he was always reluctant to talk about himself, he knew now that he was likely to live on in memory and he now saw the necessity of personally shaping that memory.

It was also during this period that Lincoln began preserving the record of his Senate campaign so that he could use it to advance his political career. Just two weeks after his defeat to Douglas, Lincoln began the process of preserving their speeches in order to create a "scrapbook" that he would publish. In March of 1859, Lincoln wrote to

³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4. 60-68.

William A. Ross about his plans for publication. He rejected Ross's suggestion that they include the Republican Party platform in it because "that would give the work a onesided & party cast, unless the democratic platform was also included." Lincoln also rejected Ross's proposal to use all the speeches as written in the Republican leaning *Chicago Press and Tribune*, stating that while his speeches could come from there, Douglas's should come from the *Chicago Times* because "This would represent each of us, as reported by his own friends, and thus be mutual, and fair." In a later letter to another correspondent, Lincoln wrote that "It would be an unwarrantable liberty for us to change a word or a letter in his." Lincoln made a few typographical edits to some of these speeches and wrote that Douglas could make edits, too, if he wished, but he argued it probably would not be necessary because Douglas had the opportunity to look over the notes from the stenographers of the Democratic papers before they were published but Lincoln did not. Another reason why Lincoln may not have wanted Douglas to edit his speeches as published was because of his well-known feelings on Douglas's honesty, or lack thereof. Lincoln originally wanted it to be printed in Springfield if possible so that he could supervise the printing and protect his scrapbook because, as he said, "it cost me a good deal of labor to get it up, and as I am very desirous to preserve the substance of it permanently, I would not let it go out of my own control."⁴ When he found a company to publish it in Ohio when he couldn't get it published in Springfield, he paid for his young friend John Nicolay to go to Ohio to supervise the publishing to make sure that it was done to his specifications and to make sure that his scrapbook was preserved. As before, Lincoln made it very clear that "Of course I wish the whole to be accurately done; but

⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 372-373, 510.

especially let there be no color of complaint, that a word, or letter, in Douglas' speeches, has been changed.”⁵ Lincoln knew that the records of his 1858 campaign were the most important documents that he had in his possession thus far, and he diligently labored to locate, preserve, and accurately publish them. Like his autobiographies, Lincoln had begun to realize that his personal and political history were beginning to matter nationally, and he took active steps to preserve and shape his history to advance his political career.

The Elevation of Men: Two Letters from 1859

As Lincoln’s fame grew, he began receiving invitations to speak at different events throughout the North. For example, a group of Bostonians invited him to speak at their celebration for Jefferson’s birthday. Lincoln declined because of the press of business, but he wrote them a letter that he must have hoped would have been made public. He noted that it was ironic that he had been invited to a celebration of Jefferson’s birthday in Boston because during Jefferson’s presidency his strongest opposition came from New England, and now he is being celebrated there while he was out of fashion in the South where he had received his strongest support. Lincoln said that this reminded him of time when he saw “two partially intoxicated men engage in a fight with their great-coats on, which fight, after a long, and rather harmless contest, ended in each having fought himself *out* of his own coat, and *into* that of the other.” More seriously,

⁵ Abraham Lincoln to Samuel Galloway, December 19, 1859, in The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, 2020, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/collection/glc00365>.

Lincoln warned that the principles of Jefferson were being eroded in the present. He wrote that “The principles of Jefferson are the definitions and axioms of free society,” but in the present they were being attacked. Lincoln argued that these principles were being supplanted with the restoration of those that say that some people are born with greater rights than others, the same principles that justify monarchy. Lincoln closed with praise for Jefferson, stating that the Declaration of Independence shall forever “be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.”⁶ Lincoln derived principles from a very specific time and place and argued that they were not true only in that particular context but for all people and all time.

Later that year Theodore Canisius wrote Lincoln to ask him what he thought of an amendment passed in Massachusetts restricting the right for recent immigrants to vote. Lincoln wrote that while it was not his business to critique what is done in Massachusetts, he stated that he would oppose it if it was proposed in Illinois. He wrote that it was a matter of principle as to what our government’s purpose was: “Understanding the spirit of our institutions to aim at the *elevation* of men, I am opposed to whatever tends to *degrade* them.”⁷ Lincoln always sought to uphold this principle he derived from the past in his political career.

The Dividing Line between Federal and Local Authority: Popular Sovereignty in the Territories

⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 375-376.

⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 380.

As the country was beginning to split apart, Douglas was attempting to hold it together by taking the middle ground. On one political side, he had Republicans who argued that the Federal Government had absolute constitutional authority to forbid slavery from spreading into new territories, and on the other side he had members of his own party in the South who argued that neither Congress nor local territorial governments had any right to ban slavery. With his eye towards the presidential election next year, Douglas began planning an article he felt would justify his middle position of popular sovereignty. This article, which would be published in the September 1859 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, would be Douglas's lengthiest and most serious work of history. As historian Robert W. Johannsen noted, "Like so many others, both in his own day and in ours, Douglas was convinced that his position would be unassailable if he could trace it back to the Founding Fathers," and that is what he set out to do.⁸

When he had time to spare from his work in the Senate, Douglas diligently studied works of history in the Library of Congress, including Blackstone's *Commentaries* and George Bancroft's *History of the United States*. Douglas also wrote to Bancroft for additional help, who, as a Democrat and Douglas supporter, was more than willing to do so. Bancroft wrote back that the principle of popular sovereignty could be traced back to the colonial era and argued that matters of emancipation "were always decided as the colonies pleased." He supplied additional documents for Douglas to use. Douglas also received help from his private secretary and a prominent Springfield

⁸ Robert W. Johannsen, "Stephen A. Douglas, 'Harper's Magazine,' and Popular Sovereignty," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 45, no. 4 (1959): 612-613.

resident, Ninian W. Edwards, who happened to be Abraham Lincoln's brother-in-law. When he published the article, Douglas argued that popular sovereignty was the guiding principle of the Revolution and that slavery was always meant to be regulated at the state level. Reviews for "The Dividing Line Between Federal and Local Authority: Popular Sovereignty in the Territories," were mixed, but the *New York Times*, no friend of Douglas, praised Douglas's work of history, stating admiringly that he did "not leave the work of manufacturing a public sentiment in favor of his position to ingenious friends and elaborate advocates."⁹ After publication, Douglas took his message on the road, arguing that his popular sovereignty was the true policy of the Founders.

Lincoln carefully read Douglas's article in *Harper's* and the transcripts of Douglas's autumn speeches in the newspapers. Almost immediately, he began taking notes privately in preparation for speeches he planned to give in the coming months.¹⁰ Even though they would not be competing for a Senate seat, Lincoln had every reason to believe that Douglas would be the Democrat's nominee for president the following year, and Lincoln knew that he at least had an outside chance at the Republican nomination, so Lincoln refused to let Douglas's article and speeches go unchallenged. Douglas's essay was a deeply researched work of history, and Lincoln knew that in order to effectively challenge Douglas's work, he too must use the tools of the historian. What transpired in the final months of 1859 and the first two months of 1860 was Lincoln gradually honing his arguments in speeches he delivered in 1859 and then his greatest historical effort in

⁹ Johannsen, "Stephen A. Douglas," 613-616.

¹⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 397-399.

his “Cooper Union Speech” on February 27, 1860. Douglas’s article and his and Lincoln’s subsequent speeches over the coming months deserve, according to historian Harold Holzer, “to be recognized as the final round of the Lincoln-Douglas debates: Harper’s vs. Cooper Union.”¹¹ In his challenge to Douglas, Lincoln would not deny the Founders’ beliefs in popular sovereignty, but, unlike Douglas, Lincoln would assert that popular sovereignty was the method to achieve the goal of protecting natural rights and that popular sovereignty was the means and not the ends.

The Speeches of 1859

Lincoln began to challenge Douglas’s *Harper’s* article almost immediately, beginning with an address in Columbus, Ohio, nine days after Douglas had spoken in the same city. Lincoln reused many of the same arguments about the past he had been making since 1854. These included his belief that the passage of the Kansas Nebraska Act in 1854 was a great break with the historical precedent, that Douglas was using a corrupted definition of popular sovereignty, that the Founders in general saw slavery as an evil that they hoped would one day be abolished, and that the Ordinance of 1787 and not Douglas’s version of popular sovereignty was primarily responsible for keeping the states north of the Ohio free. Lincoln even repeated the same mistaken argument he made five years prior in his 1854 speech in Peoria that the number of slaves in Illinois from 1810 to 1820 declined when in fact increased significantly. These show that he was reusing his stock of historical arguments he had been using for years and had not

¹¹ Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 35.

continued to investigate certain aspects of the past.¹² However, his 1859 speeches show that he continued new avenues of research as he introduced and tested new ideas in front of his audiences that autumn.

At Columbus, Lincoln mocked Douglas's most recent statements on popular sovereignty: "His explanations explanatory of explanations explained are interminable." Lincoln then called his audience's attention to Douglas's *Harper's* article, noting that Douglas wrote that the first recorded instance of discord in America over the issue of slavery was in 1699. In the past, Douglas had tried to downplay the slavery controversy, but Lincoln, who had many times prior stated that history shows that slavery was the only true threat to the Union, remarked, "Now it would seem to me that it might have occurred to Judge Douglas, or anybody who had turned his attention to these facts, that there was something in the nature of that thing, Slavery, somewhat durable for mischief and discord." Lincoln critiqued several other aspects of the article, but he felt the most important problem with it was that while Douglas attempted to show that the Founders believed in his conception of popular sovereignty, he never addressed how they applied this principle to the spread of slavery into new territories. Lincoln reused several of the same arguments he had made about the past that he had made in earlier speeches about the Revolutionary generation consistently working to restrict slavery as much as possible. He also brought a new argument, stating that while Indiana was still a territory, it petitioned Congress to remove the article in the Ordinance of 1787 that banned slavery, which Congress rejected. Although somewhat vague in this claim, Lincoln did note that

¹² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 400-425, 438-462.

“Mr. Randolph,” a slaveholder from Virginia, rejected this petition because it violated the Ordinance of 1787.¹³ Lincoln was correct in this assertion because in 1803 Congressman John Randolph of Virginia chaired the committee in charge of responding to the petition, which they rejected, noting that they “deem it highly dangerous and inexpedient to impair a provision wisely calculated to promote the happiness and prosperity of the Northwestern country.”¹⁴ Lincoln was demonstrating that had Douglas’s principle of popular sovereignty been allowed in Indiana, it would not have come in as a free state, thus proving the value of the Ordinance of 1787. Like he had done before, Lincoln chastised Douglas for getting his history wrong: “Is it not a most extraordinary spectacle that a man should stand up and ask for any confidence in his statements, who sets out as he does with portions of history calling upon the people to believe that it is a true and fair representation, when the leading part, and controlling feature of the whole history, is carefully suppressed.” Lincoln theorized that “There are two ways of establishing a proposition. One is by trying to demonstrate it upon reason; and the other is, to show that great men in former times have thought so and so, and thus to pass it by the weight of pure authority.”¹⁵ He argued that Douglas neither proved his position by reason nor precedent.

The next day Lincoln delivered a speech in Cincinnati with many of the same ideas he expressed the day before in Columbus, with the noted exception that he

¹³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 405, 415.

¹⁴ 6 Annals of Cong. 1353 (1803).

¹⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 416.

addressed specifically any Kentuckians who would have crossed the river to hear him speak. Fears in the South had been growing about what would happen if a Republican were to be elected president, and Lincoln sought to allay their concerns by appealing to history, noting that they would be treated the same way they had been by Washington, Jefferson, and Madison. Lincoln followed up this promise of peace with a not-so-veiled threat that if the South attempted to secede and start a war, they would not be successful. He said that there was no doubt that Southerners were both “gallant” and “brave,” but not more so than Northerner men, and since there were more men in the North than the South, the South will fail in their attempt at “whipping” Northern men.¹⁶

On October 1 he delivered a speech in Janesville, a small town located in south central Wisconsin. There he argued that “history of the country proves” that “slavery will have a great advantage over freedom” under a system of popular sovereignty because every single new state to come in the Union that could decide for themselves chose to legalize slavery while every new free state came in locations where it had already been forbidden.¹⁷

In December Lincoln travelled to the territory of Kansas and admitted that Kansas had broken the rule as it was going to become the first free state to come in the Union under popular sovereignty, but not without a good deal of unnecessary bloodshed. On December 1, Lincoln delivered a speech in Elwood, a tiny village across the river from St. Joseph, Missouri. Lincoln praised John Brown, then on death row in Virginia for his

¹⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 453-454.

¹⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 485-486.

failed assault on Harpers Ferry, stating that Brown had “shown great courage” and “rare unselfishness.” However, Brown, who, along with his gang had killed five men with broadswords 100 miles further south in the Pottawatomie Massacre, was wrong to resort to violence. The correct way, according to Lincoln, to fight slavery was through the ballot box, not broadswords.¹⁸

When Lincoln spoke two days later in Leavenworth, John Brown was already dead, having been hanged by the state the day before. Tellingly, Lincoln believed there was a lesson to be learned from this event from the recent past. Lincoln argued that Brown’s hanging was just, even if “he agreed with us in thinking slavery wrong.” At the same time, Southerners had been threatening to “destroy the Union” if the Republicans were successful in the presidential election. Lincoln saw this as being tantamount to treason, and if they make good on that threat, then “it will be our duty to deal with you as old John Brown has been dealt with.”¹⁹ Although this speech did not become widely known, here he was laying hints for those that would listen that, should he ever be entrusted with executive authority, he would not be a hothouse orchid, ready to wilt at the first sign of Southern pressure.

Invitation and Research

His law partner William Herndon later remembered that shortly after returning from one his trips, Lincoln “came rushing into the office one morning, with the letter

¹⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 496.

¹⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 502.

from New York City, inviting him to deliver a lecture there.”²⁰ Lincoln had received a telegram inviting him to speak in the Brooklyn church of Henry Ward Beecher, the famous abolitionist preacher and brother of the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe. He would be paid \$200 for his services and he would have the opportunity to address influential New Yorkers, and even more important, their press, for the first time. Sensing a perfect opportunity to introduce himself to an East Coast audience just months before the Republican convention, Lincoln readily accepted and began preparing almost immediately for the speech he would deliver in February.²¹ With his Ohio speeches fresh in his mind, he would use them as a starting point. Like them, Lincoln would focus on Douglas’s claim that the Founder’s had supported his interpretation of his popular sovereignty policy. Unlike his Ohio speeches, Lincoln would thoroughly research the topic, replacing vague and sometimes rambling and loose claims with a specificity and tightness to his assertions. There was nothing new to what Lincoln was doing; rather, Lincoln’s speech at Cooper Union in 1860 was the culmination of more than two decades of historical work, representing his mastery of the process.

From October of 1859 to February of 1860, Lincoln spent untold hours researching for his New York address. He was not without distraction, as it was during the same period that he travelled to Kansas to give a series of speeches, he was working to get his 1858 speeches published, and he was engaged in a busy and ever more

²⁰ William Herndon and Jesse William Weik, *Herndon’s Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life* (Chicago: Belford-Clarke Co., 1890), 3. 453.

²¹ Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 10.

profitable legal career. Unlike Douglas, he performed all the labor himself, spending every moment he could spare in the State Library, at home, or in his law office reading and carefully piecing together the history of those who signed the Constitution.

Although it is impossible to trace Lincoln's process and methods with any certainty, there is more testimony that survives for his research for this speech than any other one he delivered. Herndon recalled that, "No former effort in the line of speech-making had cost Lincoln so much time and thought as this one." According to Herndon, "He was painstaking and thorough in the study of his subject" as he "searched through the dusty volumes of congressional proceedings in the State library, and dug deeply into political history." The source Lincoln consulted the most, according to Herndon, was Jonathan Elliot's *Journal and Debates of the Federal Constitution*, which included a large compilation of documents from the proceedings, the ratification process, and the aftermath.²² According to Robert Todd Lincoln many years later, he wrote that he had in his possession his father's copy of John Sanderson's *Biography of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence*, which he believed his father must have used in preparation for this speech.²³ When asked after delivering his speech about his research, Lincoln confessed that he had not preserved his notes but did write that he used an article in the *New York Weekly Tribune* that copied a particular piece of evidence from the "Journal of the Confederation Congress for the session at which was passed the Ordinance of 1787,"

²² Herndon and Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln*, 454-455.

²³ Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 51.

which he could not find locally.²⁴ This source, an open letter by Horace Greeley, was likely both a source of information as well as inspiration as parts of Lincoln's "Cooper Union Address" parallel Greeley's letter, while the opposite may also be true, as Greeley made some of the exact same arguments Lincoln made a month earlier in his speeches in Ohio.²⁵ According to the historian Harold Holzer, some of the other works Lincoln likely consulted were James Kent's *Commentaries on The Constitution*, Charles Lanman's *Dictionary of the United States Congress*, the *Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson*, *The Papers of James Madison*, Madison's *Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787*, the *Annals of Congress*, the *Congressional Globe*, old newspaper clippings, and Douglas's article in *Harper's*.²⁶

Henry B. Rankin, one of the law students who worked in his office, remembered many years later that Lincoln had become "absorbed in the collection of data upon which to build his speech." According to Rankin, "The finished speech grew very slowly." Lincoln went through several drafts, and he was always open to new ideas as they came to him. Rankin remembered:

Every day until it was placed in his travelling satchel, he took out the sheets and carefully went over the pages, making notations here and there, and even writing whole pages over again. In his later years in Springfield he became more and more in the habit of revising all he had written down to the latest hour possible

²⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4. 118-119.

²⁵ Horace Greeley, "History Vindicated: A Letter to the Hon. Stephen A. Douglas on his 'Harper' Essay," *New-York Daily Tribune*, October 15, 1859.

²⁶ Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 51-53.

before delivery... His mind was ever alert to catch his last moment's thought and intuition before public delivery.²⁷

After four months of labor, Lincoln was finally ready to deliver it on February 27, 1860.

Lincoln never labored over any other speech as much as he did for this one. As Holzer wrote, "With no researchers to assist him, no professional scholars to feed him documents, no secretary to take dictation, Lincoln sought his own 'access to history,' and, amidst the pressures of law and politics, the 'leisure to study it.' And now, armed with history, he was ready to answer Stephen A. Douglas one last time."²⁸

Cooper Union

When Lincoln checked into the Astor House in New York City, he found out for the first time by reading in the *New York Tribune* that he would not be delivering his speech at the Rev. Beecher's church but rather at the Great Hall of Cooper Union in Manhattan. Lincoln had prepared his address for a church audience, and he now spent a day revising it to match his new circumstances.²⁹

It was the morning that he was scheduled to deliver his speech that he fortuitously met George Bancroft in Matthew Brady's studio. One witness to their meeting in Brady's studio later recalled, "The contrast in the appearance of the men was most striking—the one courtly and precise in his every word and gesture, with the air of a trans-Atlantic statesman; the other bluff and awkward, his every utterance an apology for his ignorance

²⁷ Rankin, *Personal Recollections*, 244-247.

²⁸ Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 53.

²⁹ Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 65, 72-73.

of metropolitan manners and customs.”³⁰ It is a remarkable coincidence that on the day that Lincoln delivered his greatest speech on history, he met the first great historian in American history. We can only wonder what ran through Lincoln’s mind while he talked with Bancroft, but he may have wondered how his history would compare to Bancroft’s.

Chairing the event was William Cullen Bryant, the famous poet and older brother of John Bryant, whose woods south of Princeton Lincoln spoke in for an Independence Day celebration in 1856. On the stage with Lincoln and Bryant were many dignitaries, including Horace Greely, founder and editor of the *New York Tribune* and perhaps the nation’s most famous member of the press. Witnesses reported that Lincoln seemed nervous before the speech, and Lincoln later confessed to Herndon that he felt embarrassed about his ill-fitting and wrinkled suit. Lincoln began slowly and softly, too quiet to reach people in the back of the hall. As he warmed up, his nerves seemed to leave him, and his voice grew stronger. As one eyewitness recalled, “pretty soon, he began to get into his subject: he straightened up, made regular and graceful gestures; his face lighted as with an inward fire; the whole man was transfigured. I forgot his clothes, his personal appearance, and his individual peculiarities.”³¹

His speech can be divided into three parts with his first one being an extended lesson in history. He started off slowly remarking that much of what he was going to discuss was not new, except perhaps his “mode of presenting the facts, and the inferences and observations following that presentation.” Lincoln introduced Douglas’s statement

³⁰ Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 92.

³¹ Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 104-114.

from a speech he delivered in Columbus in 1859 that would frame his lecture: “*Our fathers, when they framed the Government under which we live, understood this question just as well, and even better, than we do now.*” Lincoln accepted Douglas’s premise but disagreed with its implications. Lincoln turned this statement into his analytical question for the whole speech: “*What was the understanding those fathers had of the question mentioned?*”³²

After clearly stating his question, he then followed the lessons of Blackstone by defining the key terms involved in his research. The “frame of Government under which we live” was the Constitution and the amendments subsequently added. “Our fathers that framed the Constitution” were the thirty-nine men who created and signed the Constitution, also known as the Framers. For Lincoln, the question Douglas referred to as being understood by the Framers better than they understand it then was this: “Does the proper division of local from federal authority, or anything in the Constitution, forbid *our Federal Government* to control as to slavery in *our Federal Territories*?”³³ Thus, in order to answer his question, he must investigate what Framers of the Constitution believed about the Federal Government’s ability to regulate slavery in the new territories.

Lincoln then described how he would test this question. In order to best understand if the Framers believed that the Federal Government could rightfully regulate and restrict slavery in the new territories, Lincoln argued that the best way to determine this is to see how these Framers voted when they had the chance to vote on this issue. As

³² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 522.

³³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 522-523.

Lincoln explained, “actions speak louder than words, so actions, under such responsibility, speak still louder.” Lincoln listed a series of votes that regarded the national government’s ability to control slavery in the territories stretching from 1784 to 1820 and detailed how each one of the Framers voted on each specific issue.³⁴

The first relevant test was the vote in 1784 by the Confederation Congress, three years before the Constitution was signed, concerning slavery in the new territories. The bill before them would ban slavery in the territories then owned by the national government, which at that time were the lands north of the Ohio River. Three of the men who would three years later sign the Constitution voted in favor of the ban, Roger Sherman, Thomas Mifflin, and Hugh Williamson. One, James McHenry, did not, but he did not leave a record explaining his vote, never stating whether he voted against it because he did not believe that the national government had the power to regulate slavery in the territories or for some other reason.³⁵

The second test in 1787 involved the same issue, whether or not slavery should be allowed in the territories north of the Ohio, and two members of the Confederation Congress who were concurrently serving in the Constitutional Convention, William Blount and William Few, voted to prohibit slavery in the territories.³⁶

Neither the final document of the Constitution nor the records of the debates at the convention directly address the issue, so the third test regarded the bill before the first

³⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 530.

³⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 523-224.

³⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 524.

Congress under the Constitution in 1789 concerning the enforcement of the Ordinance of 1787 that prohibited slavery in the territories north of the Ohio. The bill passed unanimously and without opposition, thus showing that the sixteen Framers who served in the 1st Congress, (John Langdon, Nicholas Gilman, William S. Johnson, Roger Sherman, Robert Morris, Thomas Fitzsimmons, William Few, Abraham Baldwin, Rufus King, William Paterson, George Clymer, Richard Bassett, George Read, Pierce Butler, Daniel Carroll, and James Madison) approved of the Federal Government's ban on slavery in those territories. This bill became law when one of the Framers, President Washington, signed it.³⁷

Shortly thereafter, the states of North Carolina and Georgia ceded to the Federal Government the lands that would become the states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. They did this on the stipulation that Congress would not abolish the slavery that already existed in these territories. However, Congress still believed it had the power to regulate slavery in these territories, and when they did, they regulated it with an eye towards further restriction.³⁸

The fourth test came in 1798 when Congress organized the Mississippi Territory and banned the foreign importation of slaves into the new territory ten years before it was constitutionally allowed to do so in the states. It was unanimously approved with the Framers John Langdon and Abraham Baldwin then serving in Congress.³⁹

³⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 525-227.

³⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 528.

³⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 528.

The fifth test came in 1804 when Congress organized the newly acquired Louisiana Territory. In the part that would become Louisiana, slavery had already grown pervasive under French control, and Congress did not abolish slavery but strictly regulated it by not only banning the foreign importation of slaves into the territory but also setting severe limits on the moving of slaves from other parts of America into it. The bill passed unanimously, with two Framers, Abraham Baldwin and Jonathan Dayton, then serving.⁴⁰

The sixth test came in 1819 and 1820 over the controversy of allowing Missouri in as a slave state. One of the Framers, Rufus King, consistently voted for the abolition of slavery in Missouri, while another Charles Pinckney, voted against those proposals.⁴¹

After each piece of evidence Lincoln detailed, he provided a warrant to show that the Framers in that case believed the Federal government had a right to regulate slavery in the territories. For example, after showing that George Washington signed a law that prohibited slavery in the Northwest Territories, Lincoln argued that Washington was “thus showing that, in his understanding, no line dividing local from federal authority, nor anything in the Constitution, forbade the Federal Government, to control as to slavery in federal territory.”⁴²

Lincoln then stated that these six cases were the only ones where any of the Framers had the opportunity to vote on the issue of the national government’s power to

⁴⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 528.

⁴¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 529.

⁴² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 527.

regulate slavery in the territories, “which I have been able to discover,” thus providing a hedge to note uncertainty and the need for further research.⁴³ Tabulating the results, Lincoln showed that of the twenty-three of the thirty-nine Framers who had the opportunity to vote on the issue, twenty-one voted in favor of the national government’s power to regulate slavery in the territories. Lincoln noted that he had limited his research to the Framers who voted on that issue and argued that many of those sixteen who never had the opportunity to do so were some of the “most noted anti-slavery men of those times,” like Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, and Gouverneur Morris, and almost without a doubt would have voted in favor of the Federal government regulating slavery in the territories while only John Rutledge of South Carolina may have voted against it. Through inductive reasoning, Lincoln had built up to his thesis for his section on history:

The sum of the whole is, that of our thirty-nine fathers who framed the original Constitution, twenty-one---a clear majority of the whole---certainly understood that no proper division of local from federal authority, nor any part of the Constitution, forbade the Federal Government to control slavery in the federal territories; while all the rest probably had the same understanding. Such, unquestionably, was the understanding of our fathers who framed the original Constitution; and the text affirms that they understood the question “better than we.”⁴⁴

Lincoln had made this general argument in the past, but he never had supported it so thoroughly with the research that is evident in this lecture.

Lincoln then proceeded to address contrary viewpoints. Some argued that the Fifth Amendment, which protects a person’s right to property, shows that the Federal Government could not regulate slavery in the territories, while others argue that Tenth

⁴³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 530.

⁴⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 531.

Amendment, which explains that all rights not given to the Federal Government belong with the state governments or the people. To counter these assertions, Lincoln applied the lesson he learned in his reading Blackstone, namely, that if there was any confusion or controversy over the law, it was necessary to look at the original intentions of the legislators.⁴⁵ Those amendments, according to Lincoln, must not be interpreted to mean that Congress had no right to regulate slavery in the territories because the legislators who voted for those amendments were the very same legislators who voted to enforce the Ordinance of 1787 that prohibited slavery in the territories north of the Ohio River. Lincoln asked his audience, “Is it not a little presumptuous in any one at this day to affirm that the two things which that Congress deliberately framed, and carried to maturity at the same time, are absolutely inconsistent with each other?” Hammering home his point with irony, Lincoln asked, “And does not such affirmation become impudently absurd when coupled with the other affirmation from the same mouth, that those who did the two things, alleged to be inconsistent, understood whether they really were inconsistent better than we---better than he who affirms that they are inconsistent?”⁴⁶ Lincoln used both humor and irony to prove that those two amendments were not meant to ban the Federal Government from interfering with slavery in the territories.

Lincoln ended this first section of his speech by discussing the importance of getting history right along with the limitations of the lessons of the past. After having

⁴⁵ Blackstone, *Commentaries*, 1. 59.

⁴⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 533-534.

spent so much time establishing the true opinions of the Framers, Lincoln declared, “I do not mean to say we are bound to follow implicitly in whatever our fathers did. To do so, would be to discard all the lights of current experience---to reject all progress---all improvement.” Lincoln here was limiting his argument, stating that the precedents of the past must not be blindly followed. Lincoln continued: “What I do say is, that if we would supplant the opinions and policy of our fathers in any case, we should do so upon evidence so conclusive, and argument so clear, that even their great authority, fairly considered and weighed, cannot stand; and most surely not in a case whereof we ourselves declare they understood the question better than we.”⁴⁷ This statement echoes what he read in Blackstone’s *Commentaries*, that the people of the present must “abide by former precedents” because “we owe such a deference to former times as not to suppose that they acted wholly without consideration,” only overturning their precedents when they were “most evidently contrary to reason” or “clearly contrary to the divine law.”⁴⁸ Lincoln would always be inspired by the lessons of the past but never imprisoned by its precedents. Lincoln then argued that any man had the right to claim they now understood the matter better than the Framers did and support their assertion with evidence, but they had no right to abuse the past to claim the Founders really supported their position when all the evidence is to the contrary. Lincoln argued that people have, “no right to mislead others, who have less access to history, and less leisure to study it, into the false belief” that the Framers believed the Federal Government had no right to regulate slavery in the territories. When they do so, they are guilty of “substituting

⁴⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 534-535.

⁴⁸ Blackstone, *Commentaries*, 1. 68-70.

falsehood and deception for truthful evidence and fair argument.” As he had done so many times in his political career, Lincoln reserved his harshest attacks for those who would manipulate the past to justify their political positions in the present.⁴⁹

Lincoln then moved into his second part of the speech, and even though his primary focus was no longer the past, he continued to use the lessons of history to support his arguments. Like he had done several times since 1854, he used the rhetorical device of addressing Southerners, even though there were not likely many in his audience that night. He first criticized Southerners, stating that people are not allowed to voice their opinions in the South on slavery unless they agree with those of the majority who support the slave power. He addressed the criticism Southerners had of the Republican Party, that it was a sectional party, by arguing that they had not changed in their primary view that the precedents of the Framers should be upheld, but it was the sectional Southerners who proposed to abandon this view. While some Southerners criticized Republicans because Washington warned about sectional parties, Lincoln noted that not only did Washington sign legislation limiting the spread of slavery, but he also wrote in a letter to General Lafayette expressing his support of this limitation and his hope that one day all the states be free. Lincoln claimed that Republicans were the true conservatives, and he invited Southerners to once again adhere to the spirit of the Founders which would cease their discord.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 535.

⁵⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 536-538.

He then addressed the claim of Southerners that Republicans promoted slave uprisings. Again, touching on the matter of free speech, Lincoln argued that even if it were true, slaves would never know of it because slave owners control what they hear. Southerners blamed Republicans for the raid on Harpers Ferry the year before, which Lincoln denied as none of the assailants were technically Republican Party members. Republicans, according to Lincoln, were not responsible for slave uprisings, and Lincoln alluded to the memory of the worst slave uprising in U.S. history, the Nat Turner rebellion, which preceded the formation of the Republican Party by more than two decades. It was not any agitation on the part of any party looking for votes that led to rebellions, but the very fact that human nature finds the institution repelling. Lincoln quoted Jefferson's thoughts on the matter: "It is still in our power to direct the process of emancipation, and deportation, peaceably, and in such slow degrees, as that the evil will wear off insensibly; and their places be, *pari passu*, filled up by free white laborers. If, on the contrary, it is left to force itself on, human nature must shudder at the prospect held up." Lincoln argued that Southerners could defeat and break up the Republican Party but could never erase human nature. He proclaimed, "Human action can be modified to some extent, but human nature cannot be changed. There is a judgment and a feeling against slavery in this nation, which cast at least a million and a half of votes. You cannot destroy that judgment and feeling---that sentiment---by breaking up the political organization which rallies around it." The Republican Party was the just and peaceful expression of human nature, and Lincoln, with what may have been a veiled threat, argued that the

Party must not be broken up because then human nature will then likely seek less peaceful methods to express itself.⁵¹

Lincoln then moved to the Dred Scott decision, asserting that it did not permanently settle the issue of slavery in the territories. Lincoln argued that there was a difference between a “decision and dictum,” meaning that the Supreme Court decided that Dred Scott was still a slave, but that they could not restrict slavery from being forbidden in the territories based on the opinion on only one of the justices in a divided court.⁵² He then reused many of the same arguments he made in his 1857 Springfield speech, only they were now tighter and clearer. As he had earlier, Lincoln argued that Taney’s opinion in the Dred Scott decision was “based upon a mistaken statement of fact--the statement in the opinion that ‘the right of property in a slave is distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution.’” Taney, according to Lincoln, did not argue that the Constitution implied a right to own slaves but “distinctly and expressly” affirmed this right. Lincoln, following the lessons of Blackstone, defined distinctly as “not mingled with anything else” and expressly as “words meaning just that, without the aid of any inference, and susceptible of no other meaning.” According to these definitions, the Constitution did no such thing as distinctly and expressly affirm the right to own slaves. Instead, the Framers deliberately employed circumlocutions to avoid using the word. According to “contemporaneous history,” the Framers avoided using the term “to exclude

⁵¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 538-542.

⁵² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 543-544.

from the Constitution the idea that there could be property in man.”⁵³ Although he did not mention him by name, Lincoln was quoting the notes James Madison kept during the Constitutional Convention in which he explained that he believed that the Constitution shouldn’t admit and validate “the idea that there could be property in men.”⁵⁴ Lincoln reiterated that the Framers by their actions showed that they agreed with the position the Republicans now held in relation to slavery in the territories.⁵⁵

Lincoln then concluded that by all appearances, the South was not motivated by reverence to the Constitution and the precedents set by the Framers because they were threatening to break up the Union and defy the Constitution if they lost power in 1860. The South, according to Lincoln, was not committed to any higher principle than power.⁵⁶

In the third and final section of his speech, Lincoln detailed what Northerners must and must not do. Lincoln argued that they must not compromise on the extension of slavery into the territories. Some argue that if Northerners give in and allow slavery there, then the controversy will then end, but this will not work because Southerners are now demanding what Northerners do not have the power to give, the end of slave insurrections in the South. According to Lincoln, there was only one thing that will satisfy Southerners: “This, and this only: cease to call slavery *wrong*, and join them in

⁵³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 543- 545.

⁵⁴ Madison, “Power of Congress.”

⁵⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 546.

⁵⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 546-547.

calling it *right*. And this must be done thoroughly---done in *acts* as well as in *words*.

Silence will not be tolerated---we must place ourselves avowedly with them.”

Northerners must abandon free speech, snuff out any word of disapprobation of slavery, return all fugitive slaves, remove prohibitions against slavery in their state constitutions, and join Southerners in expressing their belief in the moral good of the peculiar institution for both the slave and slave master.⁵⁷ Lincoln understood that the very nature of the slave power was tyranny, and tyrants will always see free speech as a threat to their power. Lincoln intuitively understood that authoritarians will not be happy with anyone to disagree yet acquiesce because that implies a legitimate source of morality outside of themselves. They will not accept anyone to remain silent, because silence in their minds implies dissent. Tyrants demand not acquiescence but affirmative approval and submission in both word and deed. Lincoln had a deep understanding of human nature, believing that anyone who demands not acquiescence or silence but rather cheerful obedience is not sowing the seeds of liberty but something else entirely.

As Lincoln had argued in the past, the biggest difference between Republicans and Democrats is that Republicans believe slavery wrong while Democrats do not. Republicans could give in to all the demands of the Democrats if they thought slavery right, but since they do not, they must not.⁵⁸

Before closing, Lincoln left his charge for the audience:

Let us stand by our duty, fearlessly and effectively. Let us be diverted by none of those sophistical contrivances wherewith we are so industriously plied and belabored---contrivances such as groping for some middle ground between the

⁵⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 547-549.

⁵⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 549-550.

right and the wrong, vain as the search for a man who should be neither a living man nor a dead man---such as a policy of “don't care” on a question about which all true men do care---such as Union appeals beseeching true Union men to yield to Disunionists, reversing the divine rule, and calling, not the sinners, but the righteous to repentance---such as invocations to Washington, imploring men to unsay what Washington said, and undo what Washington did.⁵⁹

By appealing to morality, religion, common sense, and history, Lincoln made an emotional appeal to his audience to hold fast to their beliefs.

In Lincoln's peroration, Lincoln admonished his audience that they must take heed and act with courage because there was strength inherent in their values. Lincoln closed: “Neither let us be slandered from our duty by false accusations against us, nor frightened from it by menaces of destruction to the Government nor of dungeons to ourselves. LET US HAVE FAITH THAT RIGHT MAKES MIGHT, AND IN THAT FAITH, LET US, TO THE END, DARE TO DO OUR DUTY AS WE UNDERSTAND IT.”⁶⁰

According to one witness, when Lincoln finished, the audience “broke out in wild and prolonged enthusiasm,” and the “cheering was tumultuous.” Another witness recalled, “When I came out of the hall, my face glowing with an excitement and my frame all a quiver, a friend, with his eyes aglow, asked me what I thought of Abe Lincoln, the rail-splitter. I said, ‘He's the greatest man since St. Paul.’” Mason Brayman, another witness who knew Lincoln in Springfield, described the speech “MASTERLY,” a “triumph,” and the reaction he received from his audience “might justly awaken the pride

⁵⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3. 549-550.

⁶⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3: 550.

of any living statesman.” Brayman, who had heard Lincoln speeches at home in Illinois, marveled at Lincoln’s transformation:

It was . . . somewhat funny, to see a man who at home, talks along in so familiar a way, walking up and down, swaying about, swinging his arms, bobbing forward, telling droll stories and laughing at them himself, here in New-York, standing up stiff and straight, with his hands quiet, pronouncing sentence after sentence, in good telling english, with elaborate directness, though well condensed, and casting at each finished period, a timid, sidelong glance at the formidable array of Reporters who surrounded the table close at his elbow, as if conscious, that after all the world was his audience, on whose ear his words would fall from the thousand multiplying tongues of the Press.

The press did reprint his speech in full the next day, and he received laudatory compliments from them. Lincoln’s address had an immediate effect on Republicans and non-Republicans alike. One editor remembered “that he made an army of friends at once,” and that even proslavery men who hated abolitionists were telling him, “I like that man, if I don’t agree with him . . . He doesn’t make you mad as Garrison and Phillips do.”⁶¹ In his “Cooper Union Speech,” Lincoln, in a clear and crisp lecture, was able to illuminate the lessons of history to both inspire and guide the public and help shape their understanding of the past.

Work of History

Two men who had helped organize the event, Charles C. Nott and Cephas Brainard, decided to publish Lincoln’s “Cooper Union Speech” in a small book form. Not only did they send a copy to Lincoln with proposed stylistic changes, but they also asked Lincoln if he had preserved his research notes. Lincoln, pleased with the idea, wrote that he had not done so, and he did not have the time to recreate his research and rejected

⁶¹ Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 144-150.

most of the proposed changes. Nott and Brainard then set about to recreate his research and added copious footnotes to Lincoln's speech to provide further historical background on his assertions. They spent three weeks deep in research in the New York libraries and interviewing experts, including George Bancroft, to evaluate and delineate Lincoln's historical work. Among the manifold assertions Lincoln made about history, the editors found two small errors: in one quotation Lincoln used that word "granted" when it should have been "delegated" and Lincoln asserted that Abraham Baldwin had voted for the Ordinance of 1787 when he had not been present in Congress at the time so the total of him voting in favor of the national government to regulate slavery was changed from four times to three.⁶² Another likely error wasn't spotted until many years later when the historian Richard Brookhiser discovered that George Read was not in Congress in 1798 as Lincoln probably confused him with another Read then serving, thus changing the number of times he voted to restrict slavery from two times to once.⁶³ However, none of these errors changes the total number of Framers who at some point voted for the national government's right to restrict slavery.

Nott found another potential error in the speech, but it was not until after the annotated speech had been published and Lincoln elected president that Nott notified him. Nott wrote that some had recently questioned the authenticity of a quote that Lincoln paraphrased in his speech, namely a letter from Washington to Lafayette, which

⁶² Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 221-224.; Charles C. Nott to Abraham Lincoln, August 28, 1860, in *Abraham Lincoln: The People's Leader in the Struggle for National Existence* by George Haven Putnam (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1910), 228.

⁶³ Richard Brookhiser, *Founders' Son* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 152-153.

Lincoln said he wrote “about one year after he penned” his “Farewell Address” in which he expressed his hope that all the states would become free states.⁶⁴ Nott and Brainard in their footnote gave the full quotation of Washington’s letter to Lafayette along with another letter Washington wrote, this one to Robert Morris in 1786, in which he stated that he hoped for the abolition of slavery through legislative authority, which he would always vote for when given the chance. Neither Lincoln nor Nott and Brainard provided citations for these letters, but today Washington’s letter to Morris can be found in the Washington Papers collection at the Founders Online website by the National Archives, but the letter to Lafayette cannot. Katie Blizzard and Bill Ferraro from The Washington Papers both believe this quotation to be “spurious” because the language does not match Washington’s style, there is no letter to Lafayette that survives that uses this language, there is no known missing letters from Washington to Lafayette during this time, and there are no contemporary references to this correspondence.⁶⁵ Lincoln almost certainly first encountered this quotation in a newspaper, as it appeared in his local *Daily Illinois State Journal* and other papers throughout the North as early as 1855.⁶⁶ The Library of Congress owns one of Lincoln’s scrapbooks from this time period, and in it there is what appears to be a newspaper clipping showing George Washington’s quote, but neither its

⁶⁴ Charles C. Nott to Abraham Lincoln, November 20, 1860, in *Library of Congress*, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mal0457200/>.

⁶⁵ Katie Blizzard, email message to the author, July 9, 2020.

⁶⁶ “Old Time Sentiments,” *Daily Illinois State Journal*, August 31, 1855. <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=SJO18550831&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN----->.

source nor its date is recorded.⁶⁷ Lincoln did not challenge the common understanding that the quote was authentic, but it would have been difficult for him to do so because even if he had access to the only official collection available during his lifetime, which was Washington's papers organized by Jared Sparks, he would have been at a disadvantage because the collection was not complete, and, according to Blizzard, it contained "numerous inaccuracies, including fabricated letters."⁶⁸ Furthermore, Lincoln did not have a team of researchers to contact like there is today at The Washington Papers to verify the quotation. Lincoln, in practicing history, was working within the limitations of his context. Even though the letter to Lafayette almost certainly was not legitimate, it would not disprove either the argument Lincoln was making here or his overall argument because Washington expressed himself in similar terms in other bona fide documents, like his letter to Morris. In a lecture of more than 7,000 words, Lincoln made three historical errors and likely a fourth, but none as serious as his population error in his Peoria speech of 1854, and none that detract, disprove, or weaken in any significant way his overall argument that a solid majority of the Framers believed the Federal Government had a right to interfere with slavery in the territories. Despite its flaws, Lincoln's "Cooper Union Speech" exemplifies perhaps the best historical work that was possible in his time and place.

⁶⁷ Abraham Lincoln, "The Herndon-Weik Collection of Lincolniana: Group I: Arithmetic Book and Scrapbooks, Circa 1824 to 1860; Scrapbooks; Newspaper Clippings, Circa 1854 to 1860, Undated." Library of Congress, 2020, https://www.loc.gov/resource/mss25791.mss25791-001_0067_0157/?sp=52.

⁶⁸ Blizzard, email message.

Nott and Brainard in their introduction to Lincoln's annotated "Cooper Union Speech" praised Lincoln's work as a historian. They wrote the lengthiest defense of Lincoln as a historian thus far:

No one who has not actually attempted to verify its details can understand the patient research and historical labor which it embodies. The history of our earlier politics is scattered through numerous journals, statutes, pamphlets, and letters; and these are defective in completeness and accuracy of statement, and in indices and tables of contents. Neither can any one who has not travelled over this precise ground, appreciate the accuracy of every trivial detail, or the self-denying impartiality with which Mr. Lincoln has turned from the testimony of "the fathers," on the general question of Slavery, to present the single question which he discusses... A single, easy, simple sentence of plain Anglo-Saxon words contains a chapter of history, that, in some instances, has taken days of labor to verify, and which must have cost the author months of investigation to acquire. And, though the public should justly estimate the labor bestowed on the facts which are stated, they cannot estimate the greater labor involved on those which are omitted—how many pages have been read—how many works examined—what numerous statutes, resolutions, speeches, letters, and biographies have been looked through.

Many historians today may scoff at the idea that Lincoln performed anything close to the work of the historian, but Nott and Brainard, the two who actually spent weeks attempting to replicate his research, did not. They pronounced it a "historical work" that was "profound, impartial, truthful-which will survive the time and the occasion that called it forth, and be esteemed hereafter."⁶⁹

What is striking is that even though he received no formal training as a historian, he included in his "Cooper Union Speech" many of the elements that any professional historian would recognize and utilize today. These include such aspects as posing an analytical question (i.e., What did the fathers who framed our government think about the Federal Government's ability to control slavery in the territories?), defining key terms ("I

⁶⁹ Lincoln, Nott, and Brainerd, *The Address of the Hon. Abraham Lincoln*, 3.

suppose the ‘thirty-nine’ who signed the original instrument may be fairly called our fathers who framed that part of the present Government”), answering that question with a thesis (A clear majority understood that “the Federal Government...has the power of restraining the extension of the institution”), supporting the thesis with evidence (21 of the 39 signers of the Constitution as members of the federal government voted at least once in their careers against the extension of slavery while many of those who did not leave a voting record on that topic likely would have since they were the “most noted anti-slavery men of those times”), addressing opposing viewpoints (some of his opponents believed that the 5th and 10th amendments should be interpreted as limiting the federal government’s right to restrict slavery), and providing hedges for his arguments (saying that his facts were based on the best information that he was “able to discover”).⁷⁰ The “Cooper Union Speech” was not an anomaly, but rather a culmination of more than two decades of creating works of history to provide wisdom for the present.

Effects and Aftermath

Harold Holzer, who has written the definitive book on Lincoln’s “Cooper Union Speech,” argued convincingly that this speech was essential to Lincoln winning the Republican nomination and then the presidential election later that year in 1860.⁷¹ At this point it is worth noting that it was Lincoln’s 1854 speeches in Springfield and Peoria that brought him prominence in the state of Illinois, it was his 1858 debates with Stephen Douglas that brought him national renown, and it was his 1860 “Cooper Union Speech”

⁷⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3: 520-550.

⁷¹ Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 221-224.

that made him acceptable to East Coast voters that propelled him to the Republican nomination and ultimately the White House. In each one of these, Lincoln was making his arguments primarily about history. Unlike other men who have become president, Lincoln was not a general, senator, vice president, ambassador, cabinet member, businessman, or held any other powerful position that placed him in the public eye on the national stage. He won the office not by any of the other traditional ladders to the presidency, but almost entirely on the speeches he made, and all the important ones were lectures on history. Perhaps at no other time would America's sense of its past matter more than during the ongoing conflict over slavery of this era, as the conflict was fundamentally centered on what the principles of the American experiment was founded in. People of every political stripe looked to the past for wisdom, and it is only fitting that in this moment they elevated to the highest office in the land the preeminent historian statesman of the era, Abraham Lincoln.

Conclusion

Many historians tend to think that the goal of historical study is solely to create as accurate of an account as possible and usually abjure any political motivation. Many tend to think that any attempt to use the past for political purposes or to attain power, either explicitly or implicitly, will inevitably corrupt history, and experience demonstrates ample evidence of people and communities manipulating the events of the past to support their own interests in the present. Throughout his political career, including his "Cooper Union Speech," Lincoln scorned and combatted those who he felt were misusing the past in this way. He did this not by manipulating the past in a different way, but by going straight to the original sources whenever possible, performing countless hours of research

and constructing accurate narratives for his audiences in his speeches spanning more than two decades. Lincoln spent so much time researching and constructing accurate arguments about the past because there is wisdom to be found there that can only be accessed through truthful reconstructions and not willful manipulations. For Lincoln, there is an unrelenting, inescapable, and irrepressible power to be found in the pursuit of the truth about the past that can only be discovered through the process of history. As Lincoln eloquently put it at Cooper Union, “Let us have faith that right makes might.”⁷²

⁷² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3: 550.

Chapter VII.

The Mystic Chords of Memory (1861-1862)

Principles of Southern Secession

Speaking on the floor of the House of Representatives on April 4, 1860, Lincoln's friend Owen Lovejoy began to say, "I cannot go into a Slave State and open my lips in regard to the question of Slavery..." before being interrupted by Elbert S. Martin of Virginia: "No: we would hang you higher than Haman." When Lovejoy continued, William Barksdale of Mississippi interrupted him again: "The meanest slave in the South is your superior." What prompted these remarks were Lovejoy's fiery denunciation of slavery:

Slaveholding has been justly designated as the sum of all villainy. Put every crime perpetrated among men into a moral crucible, and dissolve and combine them all, and the resultant amalgam is slaveholding... It has the violence of robbery, the blood and cruelty of piracy; it has the offensive and brutal lusts of polygamy, all combined and concentrated in itself, with aggravations that neither one of these crimes ever knew or dream of.

One congressman interjected that he must surely be joking, while the threats and accusations caused chaos on the floor of the House. Lovejoy did not back down, stating that they may kill all the abolitionists they like just as they "shed the blood of my brother on the banks of the Mississippi twenty years ago," but it will do them no good because, "I am here to-day, thank God, to vindicate the principles baptized in his blood." They may

kill one abolitionist, but that will only inspire even more men to rise up in righteous indignation.¹

Southern congressmen interrupted him throughout the course of his address, calling him “crazy,” a “black-hearted scoundrel,” a “despicable wretch,” an “infamous, perjured villain,” a “negro-thief,” and a “nigger-stealing thief.” At one point, the reverend paused his speech and addressed them directly: “Now, gentlemen, I know you are in a mood to take a little advice. [Laughter.] I tell you I love you all. [Renewed Laughter.]” Congressman John McQueen replied, “I utterly repudiate your love.” When Lovejoy finished his speech, Congressman Martin warned him, “if you come among us we will do with you as we did with JOHN BROWN -- hang you up as high as Haman. I say that as a Virginian.” Lovejoy replied, “I have no doubt of it.”² These Congressmen were not content to disagree with Lovejoy or settle for name-calling, but they were willing to go so far to threaten the reverend with a lynching.

Such was the mood of Southern congressmen before the election of 1860. Many Southerners promised that if a Republican were to be elected president, they would break up the Union, and after the election of Abraham Lincoln, that is what they set out to do. Most of the Southern men who served in Congress would renounce their vows to the United States and join the Confederacy, including Elbert S. Martin, William Barksdale,

¹ “The Slavery Question: The Congressional Melee about the Lovejoy Debate,” *New York Times*, April 14, 1860,
<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1860/04/14/76651065.html?pageNumber=9>.

² “The Slavery Question,” *New York Times*.

and John McQueen. After South Carolina declared its independence from the Union, John McQueen of that state wrote that it was unconscionable to remain in a union with a people who “have chosen their leader upon the single idea that the African is equal to the Anglo-Saxon, and with the purpose of placing our slaves on equality with ourselves and our friends of every condition!” According to McQueen, they must hold “sacred” the “memory of a common ancestry” so that “white men shall rule our destinies, and from which we may transmit to our posterity the rights, privileges and honor left us by our ancestors.”³

South Carolina detailed its official reasons for separation when it issued the *Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union* on December 24, 1860. It cited the precedent of the Declaration of Independence in that a people can separate and form a new country when the old one no longer is living up to its obligations. It went into a lengthy discussion of the Northern states and their lack of enforcement of the fugitive slave laws, and it complained that a man “whose opinions and purposes are hostile to slavery” had been elected president, and it bitterly denounced Northern states for “elevating to citizenship,

³ From John McQueen to Messrs. T. T. Cropper, J. R. Crenshaw, and Others, December 24, 1860, *Perseus Digital Library*, Tufts University, 2019, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2006.05.0178%3Aarticle%3Dpos%3D47>.

persons who, by the supreme law of the land, are incapable of becoming citizens,” i.e., blacks.⁴ Therefore, South Carolina felt justified in leaving the Union.

Not all the other states that seceded before Lincoln became president officially detailed their justifications for leaving the Union, but those that did listed similar complaints. The second state to secede, Mississippi, announced that, “Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery-- the greatest material interest of the world” and it justified secession because the North “denies the right of property in slaves,” “advocates negro equality,” and elected a man that “destroyed the last expectation of living together in friendship and brotherhood.” They declared, “For far less cause than this, our fathers separated from the Crown of England,” and now they will “follow their footsteps.”⁵ When Georgia seceded, they gave a lengthy history of wrongs committed by antislavery Northerners including their refusal to return fugitive slaves and their fight to keep them from bringing their slaves to the new territories. They argued that the “avowed purpose” of the Republican Party “is to subvert our society and subject us not only to the loss of our property but the destruction of ourselves, our wives, and our children, and the desolation of our homes, our altars, and our firesides,” therefore they

⁴ “Confederate States of America - Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union,” *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School, 2008, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/csa_scarsec.asp.

⁵ “Confederate States of America - Mississippi Secession,” *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School, 2008. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/csa_missec.asp.

must “seek new safeguards for our liberty, equality, security, and tranquillity.”⁶ Texas, which was an independent republic only fifteen years prior, declared their separation and justified it by blaming Northern states for not enforcing the fugitive slave laws, the restrictions placed upon them from taking their slaves in the territories, and for electing as president a man who will bring about the “ruin of the slave-holding States.” They criticized Republicans for “proclaiming the debasing doctrine of equality of all men, irrespective of race or color-- a doctrine at war with nature, in opposition to the experience of mankind, and in violation of the plainest revelations of Divine Law.” Their society of Texas was to be based on the principle that “all white men are and of right ought to be entitled to equal civil and political rights,” and they professed that slavery was “mutually beneficial to both bond and free,” which “should exist in all future time.”⁷ These Southern states believed they were following the precedent of their fathers by separating from an unjust union led by a man they felt threatened to deny them the protection of their natural right to property.

For nearly a year, from May of 1860 when he was nominated for president until he took the oath of office in March of 1861, Lincoln largely remained silent. Lincoln did not publicly campaign for the presidency, holding to the precedent that candidates should *stand* and not *run* for office. After he was elected and the secession crisis deepened, he

⁶ “Confederate States of America - Georgia Secession,” *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School, 2008, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/csa_geosec.asp.

⁷ “Confederate States of America - A Declaration of the Causes which Impel the State of Texas to Secede from the Federal Union,” *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School, 2008, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/csa_texsec.asp.

largely remained silent for the simple reason that any words he spoke would do no good, at least until he was invested in the power to properly back them up.

When he would finally speak, he had a difficult course ahead of him. At first glance, the secessionists seemed to have the advantage of precedent because they believed they were doing nothing different than what the Founding Fathers, who were universally revered, had done. After all, Lincoln himself had said on the floor of the House of Representatives in 1848 that, “Any people anywhere, being inclined and having the power, have the *right* to rise up, and shake off the existing government, and form a new one that suits them better.” This principle, according to Lincoln then, was “a most sacred right---a right, which we hope and believe, is to liberate the world.”⁸ However, Lincoln saw nothing sacred or liberating in this new revolution. Lovejoy’s speech in 1860 in Congress showed that his opponents were not the freedom fighters they claimed to be. Lincoln would now make the case that revolutions are not always just and there are some contexts when they are justified while in others they are not. He would attempt to argue that now was not one of those times, and he would use the lessons of the past to delegitimize the Confederacy.

Lincoln faced a dilemma. He felt he should not say anything new without the authority to back up his words nor would he unsay anything he already said lest it be interpreted that threats of secession could cow a constitutionally elected president from the principles on which he was elected. However, in order to assume the presidency, he would travel by train from Springfield to Washington. Along the way, people in every

⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1: 438.

city and every village would gather to see him and expect a speech. Lincoln, who prided himself with his clarity of expression, would now attempt a series of speeches where he must speak but at the same time say nothing of his intentions. This would prove in some cases to be too much of a challenge, but at some places Lincoln expressed himself more eloquently than at almost any other time in his political career, and many of these short speeches centered on the past.

Farewell

On the gloomy, cold, and rainy morning of February 11, 1861, one of the most unusual political gatherings in American history took place in Springfield. Lincoln was scheduled to depart from the Great Western Railway depot at eight o'clock. In contrast to the festive atmosphere that seemed to accompany Lincoln wherever he went in Illinois during the past few years, the mood this day was somber, reinforced by a cold February rain. As a crowd of hundreds gathered outside, dozens of friends and well-wishers lined up to shake his hand as Lincoln waited inside the brick depot. Lincoln largely remained silent and downcast, and the journalist Henry Villard reported, "His face was pale, and quivered with emotion so deep as to render him almost unable to utter a single word."⁹

The Illinois Daily State Journal reported: "A subdued and respectful demeanor

⁹ Henry Villard, *Lincoln on the Eve of '61: A Journalist's Story* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1941), 71.

characterized the vast assemblage. All seemed to feel that they were about to witness an event which, in its relations to the future, was of no ordinary interest.”¹⁰

When it was time to leave, Lincoln slowly walked to the platform on the back of the train, shaking hands along the way. Lincoln removed his hat, and, despite the rain, many in the crowd did so as well. According to the *Journal*, Lincoln “paused for several seconds, till he could control his emotions,” and then proceeded to speak “slowly, impressively, and with profound emotion.”¹¹ This short farewell address was the most poignant of his career:

My friends---No one, not in my situation, can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe every thing. Here I have lived a quarter of a century, and have passed from a young to an old man. Here my children have been born, and one is buried. I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being, who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him, who can go with me, and remain with you and be every where for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell¹²

According to Villard, during his speech, both Lincoln and his audience “were moved to tears.”¹³ The *Journal* wrote, “We have known Mr. Lincoln for many years; we have

¹⁰ “Departure of Mr. Lincoln-Parting Address,” *Illinois Daily State Journal*, February 12, 1861, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=SJO18610212&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN----->

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¹¹ “Departure of Mr. Lincoln.”

¹² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 190.

¹³ Villard, *Lincoln on the Eve of '61*, 72.

heard him speak upon a hundred different occasions; but we never saw him so profoundly affected.”¹⁴ After the train pulled off, Lincoln recorded his short speech and then sat alone silently brooding.¹⁵

Lincoln had rarely appealed to his personal memory before in his political career. When the twenty-eight-year-old Lincoln arrived in Springfield in 1837, he was nearly penniless, but upon arrival he was given a place to stay and befriended by Joshua Speed. Nearly twenty-four years later, he was departing Springfield as the president elect. Rarely did Lincoln acknowledge the aid of others, fashioning himself as the archetypal self-made man. However, here at his farewell, he acknowledged that he owed everything to “the kindness of these people.”¹⁶ Lincoln’s attachment was not just to the people but the place itself, noting that it was not only where his sons had been born, but he emphasized that it was the place where one was buried, recognizing that he was leaving a part of himself behind. Lincoln, who since his twenties had publicly doubted how much longer he would live, acknowledged that he may never return.

Lincoln briefly appealed to America’s history, noting that the challenge before him was greater than any president before him, including Washington. Few would have questioned him. Lincoln always looked to the past to light the path ahead. However, Lincoln was beginning to realize that he was in a truly unprecedented situation, and that he would need to rely more on the light of his own reasoning to guide him.

¹⁴ “Departure of Mr. Lincoln.”

¹⁵ Villard, *Lincoln on the Eve of '61*, 74.

¹⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 190.

This speech is also unique because it begins to show Lincoln making more explicit remarks about God and faith. Regardless of the nature of his belief at this stage, Lincoln was beginning to acknowledge he needed aid because there were much greater forces at work.

The historian Ronald C. White has noted the contrast between Lincoln's first speech in Springfield, his 1838 "Lyceum Address," and his last one, his 1861 "Farewell Address." According to White, in 1838, "Lincoln had spoken of the lesser role of his own generation in relation to the giants of the revolutionary generation, of whom George Washington stood in the lead." As a young man, Lincoln feared that the richest fruits of glory had all been harvested by the Revolutionary generation and the most his generation could hope for was to maintain and transmit what had been gloriously achieved earlier. However, according to White, in 1861, "by some unsearchable fate or providence he was being summoned to *a task ... greater than ... Washington.*"¹⁷ Lincoln understood that his future was fraught with peril, but he was beginning to recognize that he had the opportunity to live on in memory unlike another American before him.

The Almost Chosen People

Lincoln stopped at every city and many little towns along the way to Washington, delivering short speeches that lasted a few minutes to others that could not have lasted more than a few seconds. Lincoln's difficult task was to both speak and not say anything too specific about his plans. While these addresses were delivered mostly

¹⁷ White, *The Eloquent President*, 16.

extemporaneously and are largely forgettable, a few do offer some insights into how he was interpreting his past as he was preparing to take office.

The same day that he delivered his “Farewell Address” in Springfield, he addressed a large crowd in Indianapolis. After quoting Ecclesiastes 3 in the Bible (“there is a time to keep silence”), Lincoln, intentionally or not, broke his silence on the secessionists. After a short definition of terms and critique of their views, Lincoln returned to the humor of his stump speeches. Speaking of secessionists, Lincoln quipped, “In their view, the Union, as a family relation, would not be anything like a regular marriage at all, but only as a sort of free-love arrangement,---[laughter,]---to be maintained on what that sect calls passionate attraction. [Continued laughter.]” Then he questioned what gave a state a right to secede and not a county or any other or any other like-minded community. He did not then elaborate on the principle, but he would explore it further in his inauguration.¹⁸

Lincoln delivered perhaps his best short address of this trip to the New Jersey Senate in Trenton, site of a famous battlefield of the Revolutionary War. Lincoln recalled being a young boy reading Parson Weems’s “Life of Washington,” and of all the events detailed in it, “none fixed themselves upon my imagination so deeply as the struggle here at Trenton, New-Jersey. The crossing of the river; the contest with the Hessians; the great hardships endured at that time, all fixed themselves on my memory more than any single revolutionary event.” He remarked that they all knew “how these early impressions last

¹⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 195-196.

longer than any others.” For Lincoln, it was not simply a good story but there was wisdom to be gained from this memory. He continued:

I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that those men struggled for. I am exceedingly anxious that that thing which they struggled for; that something even more than National Independence; that something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come; I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made, and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle.

As Lincoln had been arguing for years, he believed that the War of Independence was more than just that but rather one for a higher principle, that it was truly revolutionary. These ideas truly existed outside of time; they were true for all people in all ages. Like the Israelites of old, they have a sacred mission, and they must not relent or lose heart and give in to their fears or short-sighted self-interest because they possessed the heritage of the *almost chosen people*. Later that day he expressed his hope that this inheritance would be preserved peacefully, but he noted that “it may be necessary to put the foot down firmly. [Here the audience broke out into cheers so loud and long that for some moments it was impossible to hear Mr. L.'s voice.]”¹⁹

Lincoln had another opportunity to explore the memory of the American Revolution when he spoke at Independence Hall in Philadelphia on February 22. Lincoln opened his remarks by stating, “I am filled with deep emotion at finding myself standing here in the place where were collected together the wisdom, the patriotism, the devotion to principle, from which sprang the institutions under which we live.” He then expressed

¹⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 235-237.

what the Declaration had meant to him: “I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence. [Great cheering.]” Lincoln took comfort from the memory of all the dangers and tribulations the founding generation had endured and yet were able to create something revolutionary:

I have often pondered over the dangers which were incurred by the men who assembled here and adopted that Declaration of Independence---I have pondered over the toils that were endured by the officers and soldiers of the army, who achieved that Independence. [Applause.] I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the mother land; but something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time. [Great applause.] It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that *all* should have an equal chance. [Cheers.] This is the sentiment embodied in that Declaration of Independence.

For Lincoln, it was never just the words of a single document, but he cherished the principles that embodied the generation that had sacrificed so much for liberty. Lincoln closed: “I have said nothing but what I am willing to live by, and, in the pleasure of Almighty God, die by.”²⁰

In all these short speeches, Lincoln appealed to their national memory, arguing that their heritage was so precious that they must be willing to endure terrible sacrifices to preserve it, including life itself.

Mystic Chords of Memory

There was an element of uncertainty in Lincoln’s first inauguration unlike any other in history. Seven states in the Deep South had already seceded and the slave states

²⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 240-241.

in the Upper South were threatening to follow suit. Since the government was unable to provide adequate security as the president elect crossed through the slave state of Maryland, Lincoln did not arrive in the capital in triumph as planned but rather had to sneak in under the cover of darkness. The city was still filled with secessionists and their sympathizers, and one could never be too sure about the loyalties of government workers. As Lincoln rode in a carriage down Pennsylvania Avenue to the ceremony with the outgoing President Buchanan, they were greeted with cheers, boos, and a shouted, “Three cheers for the southern Confederacy!”²¹ The city was filled with rumors of war, treason, and assassination. Even some of those who remained loyal were dubious allies, like the man who would administer Lincoln’s oath of office, Justice Roger Taney. There were also many abolitionists who wanted to let the Confederate states go so that they would no longer have to compromise with them, and they could then live under a pure government free from the taint of slavery.

Lincoln’s first inaugural marks a turning point of sorts for Lincoln’s use of the past. As president, he would never have the months of time to dedicate to research for a single address like he did for Cooper Union. When hostilities broke out, people would no longer attempt to settle the disagreements between the North and South by appeals to history but rather appeals to arms, and Lincoln began researching methods of war and war tactics. However, he would never completely abandon the process of the study history, as Lincoln continued to research the past for guidance. In his presidential addresses, Lincoln showed that he was inspired by multiple sources of wisdom including

²¹ Morris, *The Long Pursuit*, 210.

history, logic, analogies, and wisdom literature, and his “First Inaugural Address” was a perfect example of this.

His overall thesis was that the Union must be preserved, and one way he chose to support this assertion was with legal arguments informed by history. Lincoln asserted that “in legal contemplation, the Union is perpetual, confirmed by the history of the Union itself.” One reason this is true is because the “Union is much older than the Constitution.” He first cited the 1774 Articles of Association, a document written by the first Continental Congress to bind the colonies together in an attempt to get the British government to respect their natural rights. This Union, according to Lincoln, “was matured and continued by the Declaration of Independence in 1776.”²² He then cited the Articles of Confederation, a document that, when finally ratified in 1781, called for a “perpetual union” three times and stated the “union shall be perpetual” twice. In fact, the official title of the document is not the “Articles of Confederation” as commonly assumed but rather the “Articles of Confederation and *Perpetual Union*” (emphasis added).²³ Then he cited the Constitution itself, which, according to its preamble, one of its purposes was “*to form a more perfect union.*” Then Lincoln argued that secession inherently makes the Union “less perfect” and no longer perpetual, and thus, unconstitutional. Since he was taking an oath to uphold the Constitution, he argued that it was his duty to maintain and perpetuate the Union.²⁴ The historian Garry Wills in his

²² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 265.

²³ “Articles of Confederation: March 1, 1781,” *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School, 2008, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/artconf.asp.

²⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 265.

Pulitzer Prize winning *Lincoln at Gettysburg* noted that Lincoln was not the first person to make this type of argument, as Supreme Court justices James Wilson and Joseph Story along with the renowned lawyer and senator Daniel Webster also argued that the people and not the states created the Union and that this Union preceded the Constitution.²⁵

Lincoln also used logic and reason to argue that the Union must be preserved. Some Southerners believed the United States was not a true nation but rather a group of states bound together by a contract. Lincoln argued that if this really were true, then, like a contract, it cannot be lawfully absolved without an agreement by all parties. Lincoln argued that there was a correct time and place for revolution, namely if people were deprived of a “vital” Constitutional right.²⁶ He argued that not only had Southerners not been deprived of any Constitutional rights, but his party had also pledged repeatedly to uphold them. Although he does not cite it here, he is referring to the same principle expressed in the Declaration of Independence, that people should rebel when the government violates their natural rights, but short of that: “Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes.” The natural rights of Southerners had not been violated but rather they lost an election, and Lincoln thought that was the very definition of a “light and transient cause.”²⁷ If a minority can secede because it loses an election, it will set a dangerous precedent. If a state can secede because it did not like the results of a national election, what is to stop a

²⁵ Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, 145.

²⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 265-267.

²⁷ “Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776,” The Avalon Project, Yale Law School, 2008, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/declare.asp.

county to secede from a state if it does not like the results of a state election? This process of breaking up into even smaller political units will go on ad infinitum. Lincoln argued, “Plainly, the central idea of secession, is the essence of anarchy.”²⁸ This principle, that a minority may secede whenever it loses an election, was not only a threat to the Union but to democracy itself.

Lincoln, just as he had in his speeches since 1854, used the rhetorical device of addressing the South when his real audience were men like Stephen Douglas, his political foe of more than a quarter century who sat behind him during his address. As Lincoln rose to deliver his speech, he fumbled awkwardly looking for somewhere to place his hat. Douglas rose and said, “Permit me, sir,” and held his hat during the entire address that he had worked so hard to be able to deliver himself.²⁹ In his speech, Lincoln promised to maintain the Union, but he would not invade or assail the South. He promised to protect their rights, including their rights to own slaves, just as they always had. Lincoln vowed there would be no war, unless the Southerners were the aggressors.³⁰ “Good,” “That’s so,” and “Good again,” were Douglas’s responses to Lincoln’s promises throughout.³¹ Just as he had as a lawyer, Lincoln did not press every issue of contention but rather he gave up all of them except the one that could garner the broadest amount of support, that the Union must be maintained. Even though in three short months Douglas would be in his grave, he spent his last few weeks on Earth drumming up support for the

²⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 268.

²⁹ Morris, *The Long Pursuit*, 210.

³⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 265-271.

³¹ Morris, *The Long Pursuit*, 213.

administration and its policies. Although Lincoln would always face virulent opposition from Democrats over the next four years, a majority of Democrats were prepared to endure terrible sacrifice to preserve the one principle Lincoln held fast to in this address. By limiting his objectives and practicing strategic patience, Lincoln was able to preserve the unity in the North necessary to successfully confront the secessionists in the South.

After making logical arguments through history and reason, Lincoln concluded by making an emotional appeal to the memories that united them. Although his primary audience may have been those in the North, his final appeal to Southerners to recall their truly common history was sincere:

I am loth to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.³²

Despite all that had been said and done, Lincoln still expressed his hope that their common heritage will one day reunite the country. Here he was looking both to a past and hoped-for future memory that will unite the country.

He expressed his hope that the people would be once again touched again by the better angels of their nature, but his words would not be heeded. More than any words, a single shot helped unite the North unlike it had ever been before. At 4:30 in the morning of April 12, “the first shot of the war,” according to historian Shelby Foote, “drew a red parabola against the sky and burst with a glare, outlining the dark pentagon of Fort

³² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 271.

Sumter.”³³ This shot, fired by Confederates in South Carolina who were determined to deny provisions to the Union fort in the Charleston Harbor, was fired in a state that declared that its independence was dedicated to the idea that blacks were “incapable of becoming citizens.”³⁴ For decades the American people had fought a war of words over the meaning of the past. Now this war would be made up of something more than words, and Lincoln would be caught in the maelstrom.

Baltimore

More than two months prior while still en route to the capital, the railroad detective Alan Pinkerton provided Lincoln with information that there were credible threats on his life when he was to pass through Baltimore on his way to Washington. While Maryland had not seceded, it was still a slave state and was rife with secessionists. Not only were men planning to form mobs in Baltimore to attack him, but the police were also rumored to have been told to stand down or at least do no more than appear that they were doing their duty should a mob attack the president-elect. Pinkerton proposed to Lincoln that rather than sticking to his published schedule, he should secretly board a night train so that he could pass through Baltimore unobserved. After listening to Pinkerton deliver his report, Lincoln sat in silence for a few minutes in contemplation before agreeing to his plan. In the early evening after delivering a speech to the Pennsylvania General Assembly, Pinkerton, Lincoln, and his friend and bodyguard Ward

³³ Foote, *The Civil War*, 1. 49.

³⁴ “Confederate States of America - Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union.”

Lamon covertly boarded a night train to Baltimore. They arrived there about 3:30 in the morning and secretly switched to a train bound for Washington. As they lay silently waiting for their train to depart, they were amused to listen to a night watchman bang on the side of a wooden building with his club for twenty minutes trying to wake up the ticket agent. Perhaps to alleviate the fear, Lincoln told several jokes about this in a hushed breath. The train pulled off at 4:15 and they arrived in D.C. at 6:00. When they stepped off the car, a man approached Lincoln and said, "Abe you can't play that on me," and thinking their ruse had been discovered, Pinkerton punched the man and would have done more had Lincoln not stopped him, explaining that this was his friend from Illinois, Congressman Elihu B. Washburne.³⁵

Things did not improve in Baltimore after hostilities began. After Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to put down the rebellion, Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee seceded. Before the troops arrived, the capital lay virtually defenseless, surrounded on three sides by the restive Maryland and Confederate Virginia on the other. To reach Washington, they had the same problem as Lincoln, the only rail link to that city from the North was through Baltimore. The Sixth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry arrived in the city on April 19 and had to switch trains just as Lincoln had. When word arrived that there were Yankees in the city, an angry mob gathered and began throwing stones and bricks at the Massachusetts men. The city authorities were either unwilling or

³⁵ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 286, 296, 313.

unable to restrain them. The fully armed volunteers opened fire, and twelve civilians and four soldiers died in the melee.³⁶

In the immediate aftermath, Baltimore mobs with police escorts spread out into the countryside to destroy bridges to deny “foreign troops” the use of the railroad so that they would not “pollute the soil of the State of Maryland” and “slaughter... Southern citizens, who only ask to be let alone and allowed to govern themselves.” The day of the riot, the mayor of Baltimore, George William Brown, wrote a letter and sent a committee to dispatch it to the president along with a separate letter by Governor Thomas H. Hicks expressing his full agreement with the mayor. Brown wrote to Lincoln to demand that he no longer bring troops through the city, and if he continues to do so, “the responsibility for the bloodshed will not rest upon me.”³⁷

The committee delivered their letter to the president, and another committee, the Young Men's Christian Associations of Baltimore, arrived on April 22 to demand likewise that he send no more troops through the city. In indignation Lincoln replied by letter that very day. He first decried the hypocrisy of these Baltimore men: “You, gentlemen, come here to me and ask for peace on any terms, and yet have no word of condemnation for those who are making war on us. You express great horror of bloodshed, and yet would not lay a straw in the way of those who are organizing in

³⁶ White, A. Lincoln, 413-414.

³⁷ “The Revolution,” *The Daily Exchange*, April 22, 1861,

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83009573/1861-04-22/ed-1/seq-1/>.

Virginia and elsewhere to capture this city.”³⁸ Others may be prepared to give in to rebellion and mob violence, but not Lincoln: “The rebels attack Fort Sumter, and your citizens attack troops sent to the defense of the Government, and the lives and property in Washington, and yet you would have me break my oath and surrender the Government without a blow. There is no Washington in that--- no Jackson in that--- no manhood nor honor in that.”³⁹

Because of geographic necessity, the troops must pass through Maryland to defend the capital. Using vivid figurative language, Lincoln argued, “Our men are not moles, and can't dig under the earth; they are not birds, and can't fly through the air. There is no way but to march across, and that they must do.”⁴⁰ The Union troops would continue to cross Maryland, but there need not be any violence as long as the Baltimore mobs would leave them alone. However, Lincoln warned darkly, “if they do attack us, we will return it, and that severely.” Some mistook him for soft as he freely gave away all that he felt he could not convince others the truth of, but he always held fast to the single most important point of contention, and he would do so ruthlessly. On April 27, in order to prevent railroads from being destroyed and telegraph wires being cut, Lincoln ordered the suspension of habeas corpus in Maryland.

This letter shows Lincoln attempting to make sense of these unsettled early days of the war by looking to the past for precedent. It was Washington who raised and rode at

³⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 341.

³⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 341.

⁴⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 342.

the head of an army to put down the Whiskey Rebellion in 1794. It was Jackson who threatened to use the full force of the military if South Carolina rebelled in the Nullification Crisis of 1832-1833. Even though his crisis was much greater than the ones they experienced, he drew wisdom from their responses, and he would not break their precedents.

Furthermore, Lincoln would not allow rebellion and mob violence to deter him from doing what he felt was right. Considering the costs in terms of both blood and treasure, giving in to it might be the path of least resistance and in many ways might have been expedient, but, according to Lincoln, there is *no manhood nor honor in that*.⁴¹

Message to Congress in Special Session

Lincoln called for a special session of Congress to meet starting July 4, 1861. There had been minor skirmishes both east and west, but the first major battle of the war, the First Battle of Bull Run, was still a few weeks away. Like many wartime leaders before and since, Lincoln exaggerated how well the Union was doing in certain cases, such as his argument that a majority of the people in the South really wanted to remain loyal to the Union.⁴² This may have been true in Appalachia, but for the vast majority of the South in 1861 the rebellion was incredibly popular. However, the main part of his argument was his claim that the war was not just about whether the Union would survive in particular but whether or not democracy could endure in principle and practice. In his

⁴¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 342.

⁴² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 437.

Independence Day message, he used both history and logic to argue the necessity of preserving the Union.

Lincoln was careful to frame this war as a struggle to determine whether the government they cherished was fatally flawed. The question of the war was “Is there, in all republics, this inherent, and fatal weakness?” or in other words, “Must a government, of necessity, be too *strong* for the liberties of its own people, or too *weak* to maintain its own existence?”⁴³ This war was a test to see if the people really could govern themselves.

Lincoln addressed the obvious question as to how this could be a war to maintain freedom if he has taken on unprecedented power. To protect the vital rail link through Baltimore, he had suspended the writ of habeas corpus in Maryland before Congress had convened. Lincoln argued that he had taken an oath to uphold the Constitution, and in order to do so, it was necessary that the laws must be enforced in all the states and the Union be maintained. To those who would argue that the suspension of habeas corpus was unconstitutional, Lincoln asked, “To state the question more directly, are all the laws, *but one*, to go unexecuted, and the government itself go to pieces, lest that one be violated?” While Lincoln was always ready to concede an argument he deemed unnecessary to hold his position, he did not concede what he did was illegal. He noted that the federal government does have the lawful right to do so, as the Constitution states, “The privilege of the writ of habeas corpus, shall not be suspended unless when, in cases of rebellion or invasion, the public safety may require it,” and the current rebellion clearly necessitated it. There were questions as to whether the president had the authority

⁴³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 426.

to unilaterally suspend it because, as Lincoln noted, the Constitution does not clearly and explicitly say how and by whom it may be suspended. However, it may be implied that the power rested solely with Congress because it was mentioned in Article I of the Constitution, which is the article dedicated to the legislative branch. Congress would later end the controversy by explicitly granting him that authority. Nevertheless, Lincoln argued that “it cannot be believed the framers of the instrument intended, that in every case, the danger should run its course, until Congress could be called together; the very assembling of which might be prevented, as was intended in this case, by the rebellion.”⁴⁴

Lincoln also used history to elaborate on the arguments he made during his “First Inaugural Address.” Like then, Lincoln argued that the Union not only preceded the Constitution, but it also preceded independence. When the “United Colonies,” did declare their independence, they did not “declare their independence of one another, or of the Union,” but rather as a united country. Paraphrasing the conclusion to the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln argued that they were united in a “mutual pledge” and through their “mutual action.” Lincoln then addressed the idea of state sovereignty in the same way he had addressed issues for years, by defining the term of contention and by showing how this definition clarified the point. “What is a ‘sovereignty,’ in the political sense of the term? Would it be far wrong to define it ‘A political community, without a political superior’? Tested by this, no one of our States, except Texas, ever was a sovereignty.” Even Texas, which was once an independent republic, had agreed to submit to the full authority of the Constitution and was no longer independent. Therefore, “The States have

⁴⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 430-431.

their *status* IN the Union, and they have no other *legal status*.” Should they declare their independence from the Union, “they can only do so against law, and by revolution.”

Lincoln argued that past experience showed it was only through the Union, and not individual states, that they had achieved their liberty: “The Union, and not themselves separately, procured their independence, and their liberty. By conquest, or purchase, the Union gave each of them, whatever of independence, and liberty, it has.”⁴⁵ Lincoln here touches here upon a universal principle, namely that only in a people’s union can liberty flourish.

Lincoln argued that the secessionists were rebelling both in fact and in principle against the American Revolution. Lincoln read the several declarations of independence by the seceding states and noted a curious omission: “unlike the good old one, penned by Jefferson, they omit the words ‘all men are created equal.’ Why?” In fact, they explicitly state the opposite. Lincoln had also read the Constitution for the Provisional Government of the Confederate States of America, and while much of it is the same as the American Constitution, Lincoln noticed another curious difference: “They have adopted a temporary national constitution, in the preamble of which, unlike our good old one, signed by Washington, they omit ‘We, the People,’ and substitute ‘We, the deputies of the sovereign and independent States.’ Why?” Lincoln then asked rhetorically, “Why this deliberate pressing out of view, the rights of men, and the authority of the people?” For Lincoln, the seceders were radicals and revolutionaries, but rather than fighting for the rights of men, they were fighting to suppress them. According to Lincoln, “This is

⁴⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 433-434.

essentially a People's contest. On the side of the Union, it is a struggle for maintaining in the world, that form, and substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men---to lift artificial weights from all shoulders---to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all---to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life.”⁴⁶ The American Revolution expressed the essential dignity of mankind, that the people are capable of governing themselves, and that they will break the shackles that bind them. For Lincoln, they were fighting this war to protect this dream.

The American project was an experiment, and while it had already passed two tests, it must pass a third to show that it has been successful: “Our popular government has often been called an experiment. Two points in it, our people have already settled---the successful *establishing*, and the successful *administering* of it. One still remains---its successful *maintenance* against a formidable attempt to overthrow it.” Their political antecedents have provided precedents to guide them, but now they must set their own precedents:

It is now for them to demonstrate to the world, that those who can fairly carry an election, can also suppress a rebellion---that ballots are the rightful, and peaceful, successors of bullets; and that when ballots have fairly, and constitutionally, decided, there can be no successful appeal, back to bullets; that there can be no successful appeal, except to ballots themselves, at succeeding elections. Such will be a great lesson of peace; teaching men that what they cannot take by an election, neither can they take it by a war---teaching all, the folly of being the beginners of a war.⁴⁷

No government of the people can survive if the results of an election are not respected, that any minority may rise up and violently rebel any time they lose a constitutionally

⁴⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 438.

⁴⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 439.

sanctioned contest. As Lincoln argued, this principle will lead to anarchy. Instead, they must prove the lesson that an appeal to ballots and not bullets is the only proper action in a democracy. Throughout his life, Lincoln looked to the past to provide wisdom in his present. Now, at this early stage in the war, he was becoming increasingly aware that his present will provide precedents for the future, and he was determined that his actions will provide wisdom for future generations.

A Vast Future

Both in public and in private during the early months of the war, Lincoln increasingly expressed his understanding of how his actions would be interpreted in the future. On November 15, 1861, the historian George Bancroft wrote to him, telling him that his administration “will be remembered as long as human events find a record,” and “posterity will not be satisfied with the result” unless slavery is rooted out. Bancroft, a prominent Democrat, argued that this was the “hope of men of all parties.” Lincoln already knew that regardless of success or failure, he would live on in memory, but he also knew the desire for abolition was far from unanimous. Lincoln wrote back, stating that he was grateful to receive a letter from him, and that he was already contemplating his suggestion but not ready to act on it, stating that it “does not escape my attention, and with which I must deal in all due caution, and with the best judgment I can bring to it.” These two men for whom history was so important understood intuitively at this early date the significance of present for the future and were motivated by how they would live

on in posterity. As Lincoln would state later that year, “The struggle of today, is not altogether for today---it is for a vast future also.”⁴⁸

On May 9, 1862, Lincoln revoked General David Hunter’s unilateral order to emancipate slaves in the states of Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, stating the power to do so rests solely with the commander in chief, and he only has that power to do so if it is a military necessity. However, he did not stop with a simple revocation. Under his urging, Congress had already passed a resolution to support states who would voluntarily enact gradual emancipation schemes, and he appealed to states to take advantage of it using language reminiscent of Matthew 16:3: “You can not if you would, be blind to the signs of the times.” He appealed not only to their sense of justice, but also their thirst for historical glory: “So much good has not been done, by one effort, in all past time, as, in the providence of God, it is now your high privilege to do.” He exhorted them, stating, “May the vast future not have to lament that you have neglected it.” Lincoln continued to urge border states to agree to an emancipation scheme when he invited their representatives in Congress to the White House on July 12, 1862. After describing to them the benefits of gradual emancipation, Lincoln reminded them of his personal hope that “all men everywhere, could be free,” but there was not a consensus among those with this hope on how to accomplish this. Lincoln argued that their “common country is in great peril” and only “the loftiest views” and “boldest action” can save it. Lincoln appealed to their patriotism and linked emancipation with the principles of the Revolution, stating that if it is saved through emancipation, their country’s “beloved

⁴⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 5: 25-26, 53.

history, and cherished memories, are vindicated.” After appealing to the memory of the past, he appealed to the idea that they could live on in memory in the future: “To you, more than to any others, the privilege is given, to assure that happiness, and swell that grandeur, and to link your own names therewith forever.”⁴⁹ The names of these congressmen are relatively unknown today, and perhaps it could be because they rejected Lincoln’s proposal.

In the coming weeks, Lincoln addressed the fears of those who worried about the consequences of a potential emancipation. On August 14 Lincoln invited a group of black leaders to promote the act recently passed to colonize free blacks in Africa, the Caribbean, or Latin America. Lincoln used many of the same arguments he had been making for years, yet he was never eloquent in his support as Henry Clay was, and he certainly was not here. He told them, “Your race are suffering, in my judgment, the greatest wrong inflicted on any people.” Even if slavery were to end, he felt whites were too prejudiced to allow anything like equality, so he argued the best way to end that suffering was for them separate and go to a land to rule themselves. He acknowledged that many would be unwilling to do so, noting that for some this will incur great sacrifice. Lincoln then used the memory of Washington to argue his point, stating that Washington could have lived more comfortably under British rule, but he challenged it, enduring terrible sacrifices for the hope of a better future.⁵⁰ Lincoln did not repudiate his frequent statements of his hope that all men could be free because, still at this time, he believed

⁴⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 5: 222-223, 317-319.

⁵⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 5: 371-375.

that different races could only practically enjoy this freedom separately and not collectively.

Eight days later Lincoln responded to an open letter to him published in the *New York Tribune* by Horace Greely criticizing his policy towards slavery. Lincoln took the opportunity to make it abundantly clear what his war aims were:

If there be those who would not save the Union, unless they could at the same time *save* slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time *destroy* slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount object in this struggle *is* to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do *not* believe it would help to save the Union. I shall do *less* whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do *more* whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause. I shall try to correct errors when shown to be errors; and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views.

Lincoln acknowledged that his duties as president did not always allow him to act on his personal views: “I have here stated my purpose according to my view of *official* duty; and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed *personal* wish that all men every where could be free.”⁵¹ For Lincoln, preserving the Union was the paramount issue. As he had been arguing since taking office, the conflict was about more than the immediate issues at hand. This conflict was to show whether people were capable of governing themselves. If secession along the principles promoted by the Confederates was left to stand, it would lead to tyranny or anarchy, a situation in which nobody's natural rights would be protected.

⁵¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 5: 388-389.

In his address to prominent black leaders at the White House and his letter to Greely, Lincoln was burnishing his conservative credentials and preparing the nation to understand that his primary goal was to save the Union. He did not want them to forget this after he publicly issued the paper that was then laying inside his desk in the White House, a document that would prove to be the most radical document in American history.

Conclusion

Because of the press of events, Lincoln rarely researched the past to make new historical arguments during his presidency, but he never completely abandoned it. Like he had all his political career, he continued to follow the lessons of history as he interpreted them. However, since he had a deep appreciation of the past, he began to understand that he must not be solely guided by it but rather act with concern with what lessons future generations will learn from his present. Furthermore, in order to *preserve* and *vindicate* the precedents of the past, he came to understand that he would have to establish new precedents for the future, including precedents on slavery.

Chapter VIII.

We Cannot Escape History (1862-1863)

Infernal Work

Just outside of Sharpsburg, Maryland, on the night of September 16, 1862, some of Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan's soldiers bedded down in a cornfield a short distance from Robert E. Lee's army, each man taking up a spot between the rows. Light rain fell and the evening was quiet, save the occasional picket shots. Miles C. Huyette, a private from the 125th Pennsylvania Infantry, remembered, "The air was perfumed with a mixture of crushed green corn stalks, ragweed, and clover." Knowing that the morning would bring a battle, many soldiers lay sleepless in the field "anxiously awaiting the morning."¹

Before dawn, the officers roused their men, who wiped away the dew and gathered up their bundles. A late summer fog hovered over the Antietam Creek and a breeze out of the south blew low hanging clouds over the hills.² Soldiers hurriedly ate their breakfast as best they could. One soldier, Pvt. David L. Thompson of the 9th New York Volunteers, remembered vividly what happened next: "Suddenly a stir beginning far up on the right, and running like a wave along the line, brought the regiment to its

¹ "Eyewitness to Battle," *Antietam National Battlefield*, National Park Service, 2015, <https://www.nps.gov/anti/learn/historyculture/eyewitness-to-battle.htm>.

² Charles Carleton Coffin, *Following the Flag: From August 1861 to November 1862 with the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Hurst and Company, 1864), 187.

feet. A silence fell on everyone at once, for each felt that the momentous ‘now’ had come.”³

The attack began at 5:30 when stars still hung in the sky with a duel of Union and Confederate artillery and the swell of rifle fire. Federal artillerist Albert Monroe remembered the opposite Confederate hill lined with artillery that “seemed suddenly to have become an active volcano, belching forth flame and smoke.”⁴ Confederates tore apart an oak grove and a farmhouse, knocking over beehives and sending angry swarms to attack Yankees and Rebels alike.⁵ The immediate Union objective was the small, whitewashed Dunker Church that housed a small congregation that stressed pacifism and modesty. It was located ahead on a low rise past the cornfield, and the two sides fought fiercely throughout the morning with neither side gaining the advantage. Gen. Joseph Hooker, who had command of the Union right wing at the cornfield, later recalled, “In the time that I am writing, every stalk of corn in the northern and greater part of the field was cut as closely as could have been done with a knife, and the slain lay in rows precisely as they had stood in their ranks a few moments before.”⁶

As the morning progressed, the most intense fighting moved south to the center of their lines near the Sunken Road. The road, aptly named, provided a natural breastwork

³ “Eyewitness to Battle.”

⁴ “Virtual Tour,” *Antietam National Battlefield*, National Park Service, 2020, <https://www.nps.gov/anti/learn/photosmultimedia/virtualtour.htm>.

⁵ Coffin, *Following the Flag*, 191.

⁶ “Eyewitness to Battle.”

for the rebel defenders. At 9:30 the Union attacked and for the next three-and-a-half hours, they fought valiantly in the open field in front of the well-defended Rebels.⁷ Charles Carleton Coffin, a war correspondent and eyewitness, described the scene: “There are flashes, jets of smoke, iron bolts in the air above, also tearing up the ground or cutting through the ranks; they feel the breath of the shot, the puff of air in their faces, and hear the terrifying shriek. A comrade leaps into the air, spins around, or falls like a log to the ground. They behold a torn and mangled body.” At about 1:00 the Union forces gained the top of the ridge over the Sunken Road, slaughtering the Rebels who were unable to escape. Coffin wrote that the Rebel line was “consumed like a straw in a candle’s flame. It melts like lead in a crucible. Officers and men go down, falling in heaps.” The Union troops “plunge[d] into the road, trampling down the dying and dead,” scattering the surviving rebels.⁸ They, however, had suffered too many casualties to offer effective pursuit.⁹

While the battle raged in the morning to his left and center, Lee weakened his right to reinforce his threatened points, leaving a scant force to defend a low ridge overlooking a stone bridge spanning the Antietam Creek. Beginning at 9:30, Union forces wedged into the bridge trying to advance to the ridge beyond.¹⁰ Coffin described the advance: “Up to the bridge, upon it, dash the men in blue, their eyes glaring, their muscles iron, their nerves steel. The front rank goes down. Men pitch headlong from the

⁷ “Virtual Tour.”

⁸ Coffin, *Following the Flag*, 207, 211.

⁹ “Virtual Tour.”

¹⁰ “Virtual Tour.”

parapet into the water. Stones fly from the arches. Shells, shrapnel, canister, tear the ranks asunder.”¹¹ The first two charges failed, but the third proved successful, scattering the Rebels beyond.¹²

After gaining the hill, the Union troops reformed, creating a line that stretched for a mile and prepared to advance. The Rebels regrouped as well with additional reinforcements, and when the Union line advanced, they put up the stiffest fight yet. The Union moved into, what to some soldiers felt, a maelstrom of fire and iron. Lt. Matthew J. Graham of the 9th New York Volunteers recalled: “I was lying on my back, supported on my elbows, watching the shells explode overhead and speculating as to how long I could hold up my finger before it would be shot off, for the very air seemed full of bullets,” when he was given the order to attack. Pvt. David L. Thompson remembered “when bullets are whacking against tree trunks and solid shot are cracking skulls like eggshells, the consuming passion in the breast of the average man is to get out of the way.” However, they kept advancing and were about to push the Rebels back into Sharpsburg when Confederate reinforcements arrived, driving them back. Fighting continued as long as there was daylight, but neither side gained the advantage. Clara Barton, who nursed men on the field, recalled bringing a cup of water to a soldier’s lips, “when I felt a sudden twitch of the loose sleeve of my dress--the poor fellow sprang from my hands and fell back quivering in the agonies of death--a ball had passed between my body--and the right arm which supported him--cutting through the sleeve, and passing

¹¹ Coffin, *Following the Flag*, 226-227.

¹² “Virtual Tour.”

through his chest from shoulder to shoulder.” The correspondent Coffin wrote, “I recall a soldier with the cartridge between his thumb and finger, the end of the cartridge bitten off, and the paper between his teeth when the bullet had pierced his heart, and the machinery of life--all the muscles and nerves--had come to a standstill.” As the battle was ebbing, Pvt. Thompson was left lying on the battlefield as bullets struck a locust tree above, too frightened to attack and too scared to run away. He lay there until dusk, speculating “on the impatience with which men clamor, in dull times, to be led into fight.”¹³

When night fell, it was not all dark. The burning buildings and thousands of fires lit by soldiers created a lurid glow so that both armies were able to carry the wounded from the field.¹⁴ The next day, the two foes stood face to face daring the other to attack, but by the third day the Rebels had gone, fleeing in the night. The Battle of Antietam was the bloodiest single day of the Civil War as more than 3,000 Union and Confederate soldiers were killed, and thousands were wounded. Major William Child, a surgeon with the 5th Regiment New Hampshire Volunteers, recalled: “The days after the battle are a thousand times worse than the day of the battle – and the physical pain is not the greatest pain suffered. How awful it is... The dead appear sickening but they suffer no pain. But the poor wounded mutilated soldiers that yet have life and sensation make a most horrid picture.” Contemplating the scene, Child wrote, “I pray God may stop such infernal work

¹³ “Eyewitness to Battle.”

¹⁴ Coffin, *Following the Flag*, 236.

- though perhaps he has sent it upon us for our sins. Great indeed must have been our sins if such is our punishment.”¹⁵

Great Sins

We see the thief preaching against theft, and the adulterer against adultery. We have men sold to build churches, women sold to support the gospel, and babes sold to purchase Bibles for the *poor heathen! all for the glory of God and the good of souls!* The slave auctioneer’s bell and the church-going bell chime in with each other, and the bitter cries of the heart-broken slave are drowned in the religious shouts of his pious master.¹⁶

While the Union surgeon in 1862 outside of Sharpsburg, Maryland, had to wonder about the great sins of the nation, thirty years prior and ninety miles away outside of Saint Michaels, Maryland, a teenaged Frederick Douglass did not have to abstractly ponder the inequities of the land. Born in 1818, by the time he was a teenager, he was able to read and, unlike most enslaved people, he had mostly avoided heavy field work.

That changed in 1833 when his master hired him out to Edward Covey in order to break him. Douglass was unused to field work and was initially bad at it and was punished severely for any mistake. When he lost control of the oxen he was driving and they destroyed a gate, Covey demanded that he take off his shirt so that he could switch him. When Douglass refused, Covey came at him “with the fierceness of a tiger,” tore off his clothes, and lashed him until all of his switches broke, leaving gaping wounds into his “flesh as large as my little finger.” In those first few months, Douglass noted sadly that

¹⁵ “Eyewitness to Battle.”

¹⁶ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston: The Antislavery Office, 1845), 119.

Covey had succeeded in breaking him, and at times he felt he had no option but to take his own life. He wrote: “My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!”¹⁷

That August he collapsed from heat and exhaustion while carrying wheat to have it fanned. When Covey found him lying on the ground, he kicked him in his side and told him to get up. Douglass attempted to but fell again. Covey kicked him again and got a slat of hickory wood and beat him in the head with it until blood gushed out onto the floor. When Douglass recovered enough to stand again, he did not go back to work but instead fled and staggered seven miles to his master’s house to plead with him to send him somewhere else. Douglass reported that by the time he got there, “My hair was all clotted with dust and blood; my shirt was stiff with blood. My legs and feet were torn in sundry places with briars and thorns, and were also covered with blood.” Although not unaffected by the sight, his master sent him back because he would lose all the money for hiring him out if he did not fulfill the contract. Douglass returned and hid in the woods until Sunday morning and Covey, who was deeply religious, treated him that day as though nothing had happened. The next morning while Douglass was feeding the horses, Covey took a rope and tried to tie him up by the legs, but Douglass grabbed him by the throat. When Covey yelled for another man to help him, Douglass kicked and felled him, leaving Covey alone to confront him. They, according to Douglass, fought for two hours until Covey left, claiming that he would not have whipped him so hard if he had not

¹⁷ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 58-60, 63-64.

resisted. He had done no such thing but rather was trying to maintain the reputation of a slave breaker that was so key to his livelihood. Although he continued to threaten Douglass, he never whipped him again. Douglass reported with satisfaction, “This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free.”¹⁸ From his youth Douglass had a very concrete understanding of the meaning of tyranny, and he also learned, no matter how hopeless the situation may seem, that tyranny could be successfully resisted, by force if necessary.

Four years later, Douglass successfully escaped and became a famous abolitionist, author, and lecturer. Even though Lincoln was a Republican, Douglass was deeply critical of him during his first two years in office and pushed public sentiment to demand immediate abolition. Douglass criticized Lincoln’s “First Inaugural Address,” arguing that Lincoln was “announcing his complete loyalty to slavery in the slave States” and showed Lincoln to be “weak.”¹⁹ In September of 1862, Douglass called emancipation a “national necessity” and that the “wisest and best statesmen in the national councils are lifting up their voices in favor of employing the sable arm of the nation for the salvation of the country.”²⁰ Douglass contrasted the work of the best statesmen with Lincoln,

¹⁸ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 68-73.

¹⁹ Frederick Douglass, “The Inaugural Address,” *Douglass’ Monthly*, April 1861, https://transcription.si.edu/transcribe/12935/ACM-2007.19.11_01.

²⁰ Frederick Douglass, “The Spirit of Colonization,” *Douglass’ Monthly*, September 1862, https://transcription.si.edu/view/13220/ACM-2007.19.25_01.

eviscerating him for his short speech to black leaders on colonization: “The President of the United States seems to possess an ever increasing passion for making himself appear silly and ridiculous” and that he had “been unusually garrulous, characteristically foggy, remarkably illogical and untimely in his utterances.”²¹ Douglass argued that, “Mr. Lincoln is quite a genuine representative of American prejudice and Negro hatred and far more concerned for the preservation of slavery,” and that speech “leaves us less ground to hope for anti-slavery action at his hands than any of his previous utterances.”²² By September of 1862, Frederick Douglass had almost abandoned hope that Lincoln would address what he believed to be the true cause of the war.

My Fondest Hopes

The president, according to Attorney General Edward Bates, “seemed wrung by the bitterest anguish-said he felt almost ready to hang himself.”²³ Bates wrote this following a September 2, 1862 cabinet meeting after the disastrous Second Battle of Bull Run, which marked the low point for the Union during the war. The North had won a series of victories in the west, but in the east, they had suffered nothing but defeat. In January, Lincoln had told one of his generals that “the bottom was out of the tub,” and that was before the Union suffered embarrassing defeats during Stonewall Jackson’s

²¹ Frederick Douglass, “The President and His Speeches,” *Douglass’ Monthly*, September 1862, <https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/4387>.

²² Douglass, “The President and His Speeches.”

²³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 5: 404.

Valley Campaign, the Seven Days Battle, and the Second Battle of Bull Run.²⁴ This doesn't count personal tragedies Lincoln suffered during the first year of the war: the death of Col. Elmer Ellsworth who studied in his law office before the war, the death of Col. Edward Baker who was his friend for nearly three decades and namesake of his second son, and the death of his third son Willie.

Lincoln had presented to his cabinet a draft of the Emancipation Proclamation in July and requested their comments. The Secretary of State Seward recommended that he wait until the North won a major victory so that it would appear to be issued from a position of strength rather than desperation. Five days after the Union victory at Antietam, Lincoln called his cabinet together and announced that he was ready to issue it publicly and sought their advice on its language. Even though Lincoln almost never talked about his personal faith, Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Chase recorded in his diary that Lincoln told them "I made the promise to myself, and (hesitating a little) to my Maker," that if the Rebel army was driven from Maryland, he would issue the Emancipation Proclamation, an account confirmed by Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles who wrote in his diary about Lincoln's professed "covenant" with God.²⁵ On

²⁴ Brooks D. Simpson, Stephen W. Sears, and Aaron Sheehan-Dean, editors, *The Civil War: The First Year Told by Those Who Lived It*, (New York: Library of America, 2011), 681.

²⁵ Salmon P. Chase, *Inside Lincoln's Cabinet: The Civil War Diaries of Salmon P. Chase*, ed. by David Herbert Donald (New York: Longmans, Green, 1954), 150.; Gideon Welles, *The Civil War Diary of Gideon Welles, Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy: The Original Manuscript Edition*, ed. by William E. Gienapp and Erica L. Gienapp (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 54.

September 22, Lincoln issued his Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, declaring that all slaves in territories still under rebellion January 1, 1863, would be free.

When the new year arrived and the Rebels had yet to put down their arms, Lincoln delivered the official Emancipation Proclamation declaring that “all persons held as slaves” within the rebellious territories “shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free” and made provision for black men join the army and navy.²⁶

Lincoln did not ground the Emancipation Proclamation in abstract morality or eternal truths but rather on military necessity. By freeing slaves and arming those who wished to enlist, Lincoln was subtracting power from the South and adding it to the North. The slaves in the Border States were not freed because he could not justify that as a military necessity as those slave states had remained loyal.

The Emancipation Proclamation was a military document issued by the commander in chief in time of war as a military necessity, but unlike other military proclamations that Lincoln had issued, like those on the blockade of the South, this one was revolutionary. For the rest of his life, Lincoln would be committed to not just restoring the Union but also to freeing slaves. Lincoln had come to understand that if he wanted to vindicate the principles of the Revolution that he had cherished, that he must lead the nation to live them out more fully. While many in that generation hoped for an eventual abolition of slavery, Lincoln believed that in order to preserve the Constitution

²⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 6: 29-30.

and the principles of the Declaration of Independence, the time had come to make that long-hoped-for future a reality in the present.

Lincoln's former roommate and perhaps closest friend Joshua Speed of Kentucky visited Lincoln several times in the White House. Two decades earlier Lincoln was so depressed that Speed had taken away his knives and razors in fear that he might harm himself. Many of Lincoln's closest friends also reported that they believed Lincoln had been suicidal. One time when Speed travelled to the White House, Speed, a slave owner, told Lincoln he felt the Emancipation Proclamation was a mistake. Lincoln defended it and then reminded Speed of a conversation they had more than two decades prior when Speed feared Lincoln might take his life. As Speed remembered it, "At the time of his deep depression- He said to me that he had done nothing to make any human being remember that he had lived" and he desired to live so that he could achieve something so that he could live on in memory, a sentiment that his law partner William Herndon recalled him expressing to him as well. According to Speed, "He reminded me of the conversation-and said with earnest emphasis-I believe that in this measure (meaning his proclamation) my fondest hopes will be realized."²⁷

1862 Message to Congress

Lincoln's first major communication with the public after issuing the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation was his "Annual Message to Congress" on December 1, 1862. In it Lincoln cataloged a range of issues for the Congress to consider, including

²⁷ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 197, 212, 475.

colonization, which he now insisted must be voluntary. For the first time, Lincoln also made the argument that should blacks remain in America as free people, it would do no harm to whites, as they will be no greater competition for labor as free people than as slaves and the free communities in the North have proven that the fears that many whites had were unfounded. Lincoln dedicated the lengthiest portion of this message to a new scheme for the gradual emancipation of slaves. Unlike earlier plans, this would be mandatory for all states and it would provide that all slaves, including in the loyal states, would be freed by the end of the century. He argued that while expensive, if it were stretched out over the course of decades, it would not be onerous on the taxpayer. He used facts from the past, namely census records, to predict the future, that if the population of the United States continued to increase at the same rate that it had been in previous decades, then the ever-increasing tax base over the coming decades would find it more and more affordable to continue to pay for this gradual emancipation. Despite this plan, he did not revoke his Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation and by the end of the month he declared all slaves held within Rebel territory to be free immediately. Lincoln believed his plan for emancipation “would end the struggle now, and save the Union forever.”²⁸

Lincoln understood that there was a broad spectrum of opinion among Unionists about slavery. It ranged from those who were against all forms of emancipation to those who demanded immediate and uncompensated emancipation among loyal and disloyal states alike. This issue threatened to irrecoverably divide the Unionists and make it

²⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 5: 518-536.

impossible to win the war, so Lincoln knew he must tread carefully. Lincoln argued that emancipation would shorten the war and lessen the expenses committed. Understanding that a likely majority of Unionists thought him either too radical or not radical enough, Lincoln asked, “It is not ‘can *any* of us *imagine* better?’ but ‘can we *all* do better?’” Lincoln had already abandoned his long-standing belief that slavery should not be interfered with in the states it was already located in, and he urged people to understand that the struggle they were undergoing demanded radical new thinking: “The dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall our selves, and then we shall save our country.”²⁹

Lincoln’s generation, who grew up listening to and cherishing the memories of the past, must come to understand that like the Founders, they too, for better or worse, will live on in memory:

Fellow-citizens, *we* cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration, will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance, or insignificance, can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation. We *say* we are for the Union. The world will not forget that we say this. We know how to save the Union. The world knows we do know how to save it. We---even *we here*---hold the power, and bear the responsibility. In *giving* freedom to the *slave*, we *assure* freedom to the *free*---honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best, hope of earth. Other means may succeed; this could not fail. The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just---a way which, if followed, the world will forever applaud, and God must forever bless.³⁰

²⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 5: 537.

³⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 5: 537.

Lincoln's conclusion in his message to Congress is perhaps his most remarkable statement on the past. In his three decades in politics, the wisdom of the past along with his personal logic had guided him more than anything else. In this message, Lincoln is still inspired by the past and used it to guide his current decisions, including what appears to be some significant research that he conducted to predict future population growth based on past figures. However, Lincoln here believed that while the past can serve as a guide, it must not be a limit to their actions in the present. They should be inspired by the past but not imprisoned by it. By *giving* something new- freedom for the slave- they *preserve* and *assure* the heritage of the Revolution, earth's *last* and *best hope*. In order to guide themselves through this *fiery trial*, they must not just look to the precedents of a *quiet past*, they must act *anew* with the understanding that they *cannot escape history*, that they will live on in future history *to the latest generation*.

Correspondence

In the coming months, Lincoln mostly remained silent publicly as the press of events forced him to focus on the war effort. However, his correspondence during this time offers valuable insights to Lincoln's evolving thoughts about the past.

In December of 1862, Lincoln received word that Lieutenant Colonel William McCullough, the clerk at the court in Bloomington, had died in a battle in Mississippi. Lincoln wrote to his daughter, Fanny McCullough, to console her. In this letter, he was guided by the personal memory of the tragedies he had suffered in the past. Perhaps thinking of his mother who died when he was eight, Lincoln wrote, "In this sad world of ours, sorrow comes to all; and, to the young, it comes with bitterest agony, because it

takes them unawares. The older have learned to ever expect it.”³¹ Lincoln wrote that he wished he could alleviate her suffering, but only time could do so, which he knew because, “I have had experience enough to know what I say.”³² Lincoln concluded with his thoughts on the nature of memory: “The memory of your dear Father, instead of an agony, will yet be a sad sweet feeling in your heart, of a purer, and holier sort than you have known before.”³³ Just as was evident from the hymns that he liked by Isaac Watts, the poetry that he read and wrote, Lincoln always believed there was something sacred about memory that can both bring comfort and guidance to the present.

While in office, Lincoln was constantly pressed by job seekers, and even his wife was not immune. In February of 1863 she received a letter from Edgar Harriott asking if she could influence her husband to get him an appointment, and he claimed to be a “a direct decendent of John Randolph of Roanoke,” a man Lincoln had spoken of in earlier speeches. Mary showed the letter to her husband, and Lincoln, knowing the Randolph was childless and thought impotent, inscribed on the letter without returning it, “A direct descendant of one who never was a father.”³⁴ This shows Lincoln being able to find, even in obscure details, the humor in history.

In June Lincoln responded to resolutions passed by a group New Yorkers led by Congressman Erasmus Corning. They, among other things, criticized Lincoln’s

³¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 6: 16-17.

³² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 6: 17.

³³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 6: 17.

³⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 6: 107-108.

suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, and Lincoln responded by using lessons of the past to justify his seemingly unprecedented actions. The New Yorkers cited the Constitution as protecting against military arrests of civilians and went back further into history to the rights won after the English Civil War: “They were secured substantially to the English people, after years of protracted civil war, and were adopted into our constitution at the close of the revolution.” Lincoln did not challenge the facts but questioned the appropriateness of their application: “Would not the demonstration have been better, if it could have been truly said that these safe-guards had been adopted, and applied *during* the civil wars and *during* our revolution, instead of *after* the one, and at the *close* of the other.” He wrote that he too was for protecting these rights, except during times of rebellion or invasion, as the Constitution had prescribed. Lincoln argued the reason why that provision was included in the Constitution was because of “the understanding of those who made the constitution that ordinary courts of justice are inadequate to ‘cases of Rebellion’” and thus people could be arrested and imprisoned who, under normal circumstance, would remain free. For Lincoln, context was everything. Lincoln argued that had the government acted sooner and arrested known sympathizers of secession, it could have prevented many of the best generals, like Robert E. Lee, Joseph E. Johnston, and Simon B. Buckner from joining the Rebels. To those who argue that those who induce Union soldiers to break the law and desert should not be arrested, Lincoln argued that “Long experience has shown that armies can not be maintained unless desertion shall be punished by the severe penalty of death,” and then asked rhetorically, “Must I shoot a simple-minded soldier boy who deserts, while I must not touch a hair of a wiley agitator who induces him to desert?” Lincoln used an analogy

to argue that the extreme measures undertaken during rebellion are easily discarded when peace is returned, that just as when a drug that is necessary when one is sick is not taken when one is ill, measures taken during times of rebellion are not taken during times of peace, an analogy that would have worked better when less was known about the addictive nature of certain medications.³⁵

Lincoln then argued that his actions were not without precedent. Most of the people criticizing Lincoln's actions, like Congressman Corning, were Democrats, the party founded by Andrew Jackson, a man Democrats almost universally admired. Lincoln the history teacher provided a lesson of how Jackson acted during a time of invasion:

And the name of President Jackson recalls a bit of pertinent history. After the battle of New-Orleans, and while the fact that the treaty of peace had been concluded, was well known in the city, but before official knowledge of it had arrived, Gen. Jackson still maintained martial, or military law. Now, that it could be said the war was over, the clamor against martial law, which had existed from the first, grew more furious. Among other things a Mr. Louiallier published a denunciatory newspaper article. Gen. Jackson arrested him. A lawyer by the name of Morel procured the U.S. Judge Hall to order a writ of Habeas Corpus to release Mr. Louiallier. Gen. Jackson arrested both the lawyer and the judge. A Mr. Hollander ventured to say of some part of the matter that "it was a dirty trick." Gen. Jackson arrested him. When the officer undertook to serve the writ of Habeas Corpus, Gen. Jackson took it from him, and sent him away with a copy. Holding the judge in custody a few days, the general sent him beyond the limits of his encampment, and set him at liberty, with an order to remain till the ratification of peace should be regularly announced, or until the British should have left the Southern coast. A day or two more elapsed, the ratification of the treaty of peace was regularly announced, and the judge and others were fully liberated. A few days more, and the judge called Gen. Jackson into court and fined him a thousand dollars, for having arrested him and the others named. The general paid the fine, and there the matter rested for nearly thirty years, when congress refunded principal and interest.³⁶

³⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 6: 261-267.

³⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 6: 268-269.

To Lincoln, this history lesson showed how Jackson enacted the Constitutional provision that rights could be suppressed during times of rebellion or invasion and that they were then restored and respected once peace had been established. Lincoln almost certainly remembered reading about this incident in the *Congressional Globe* when Congress debated refunding Jackson, and he likely would have researched the records to make this accurate historical argument. In this letter, Lincoln believed that history showed that his policies were both reasonable and Constitutional.

On August 26, he wrote a letter to James C. Conkling that he hoped he would read aloud at a public rally in September in Springfield. Although the end of the war was not in sight, Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg in July had considerably brightened their prospects. Near the close of the letter, Lincoln argued that they were creating historical lessons for the future by proving the principle that a people cannot take by violence what they were unable to take through Constitutional elections, and that black men were a part of that history:

Peace does not appear so distant as it did. I hope it will come soon, and come to stay; and so come as to be worth the keeping in all future time. It will then have been proved that, among free men, there can be no successful appeal from the ballot to the bullet; and that they who take such appeal are sure to lose their case, and pay the cost. And then, there will be some black men who can remember that, with silent tongue, and clenched teeth, and steady eye, and well-poised bayonet, they have helped mankind on to this great consummation; while, I fear, there will be some white ones, unable to forget that, with malignant heart, and deceitful speech, they have strove to hinder it.

As he had previously expressed, Lincoln showed how he hoped he was setting precedents that would last in America for *all future time*, and he was now beginning to envision black men living on in that history. “In more colors than one,” Lincoln wrote, “the

history” of this great conflict was being “jotted down in black and white.”³⁷ By winning a history in America, according to Lincoln, they were winning a future in America, one free of slavery.

Gettysburg Address

In the early morning light of November 19, Abraham Lincoln toured the Gettysburg battlefield with Secretary of State William Seward. He had been invited to give a few short remarks at the dedication of a cemetery for the Union soldiers who died four months prior. The cemetery was not finished as many of the Union soldiers still lay in the temporary graves on the battlefield where they fell. As Lincoln traced the locations of the most harrowing scenes of that battle, the debris of war lay all around him. Cartridge boxes, bloody uniforms, rifle pits, earthworks, haversacks, dead horses, fields dotted with the mounds of shallow graves, were all still there for Lincoln to see. We can imagine Lincoln meditating silently as he rode over those fields in, what historian Martin P. Johnson has described, as “this emerging landscape of memory.”³⁸

While Lincoln was scheduled to speak at the dedication ceremony, it was Edward Everett’s duty to provide the primary oration. In many ways Everett’s life paralleled and even exceeded that of the other great scholar politician, George Bancroft, serving as president of the Harvard as well as a governor, congressman, senator, secretary of state,

³⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 6: 410.

³⁸ Martin P. Johnson, *Writing the Gettysburg Address* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013), 145-152.

and minister to Great Britain. In the previous few years, he had become the most preeminent lecturer in the nation, travelling throughout the country to address eager audiences. Originally the dedication was scheduled for October 23, but the organizers postponed it until November 19 so that Everett would have enough time to conduct the research he needed.³⁹ The historian Garry Wills in his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America*, wrote that “Everett aspired to more than mere accuracy. Along with Bancroft and other romantic historians of his time, he meant to create a tradition that would inspire as well as inform.”⁴⁰ At the ceremony, Everett vividly recounted the battle, detailing the history of the fighting over the landscape they could view from Cemetery Ridge. Everett cited numerous historical precedents, especially the ancient Greeks, and he quoted Pericles’s famous funeral oration in his peroration: “‘The whole earth,’ said Pericles, as he stood over the remains of his fellow-citizens, who had fallen in the first year of the Peloponnesian War,— ‘the whole earth is the sepulchre of illustrious men.’”⁴¹

While Lincoln never mentioned Pericles that day, Wills argued that there are many similarities in both style and substance between Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address” and Pericles’s “Funeral Oration” (as narrated by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*). In terms of style, Wills argued that Lincoln used many of the

³⁹ White, *The Eloquent President*, 229.

⁴⁰ Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, 51.

⁴¹ Edward Everett, “Gettysburg Address,” ed. by Bjørn F. Stillion Southard, *Voices of Democracy: The U.S. Oratory Project*, University of Maryland, 2007, <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/everett-gettysburg-address-speech-text/>.

hallmarks of classical oratory found in Pericles's address: "compression, grasp of the essential, balance, ideality, [and] an awareness of the deepest polarities in the situation." There are similarities in substance, as both Pericles and Lincoln used a series of contrasts, such as life and death, present and the past, and Athens/America compared with other city-states/nations.⁴² Wills, however, did not assert a direct Periclean influence on Lincoln or even argue that Lincoln had read this speech. However, Lincoln scholar Anne Wootton observed that Lincoln was likely familiar with it. Besides a renewed interest and fascination in classical Greek culture during the antebellum years, Lincoln likely read a reprint of Pericles's speech at some point, such as in Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. Furthermore, as Wootton noted, in the White House library there was a copy of Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War* that contained Pericles's "Funeral Oration," which Lincoln could access at his leisure. Even if he had never read or heard of it before November of 1863, he would have read Everett's reference to him since he gave Lincoln a copy of his address a few days prior to the ceremony.⁴³ Lincoln is also known to have read many military texts on warfare after the firing on Fort Sumter, and it is not inconceivable that Lincoln would consult the most famous work in the Western canon on war and statesmanship, Thucydides's *Peloponnesian War*. Although it is impossible to prove, there is more than a little possibility that Lincoln was inspired by a famous speech in history in writing his most celebrated address.

⁴² Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, 52, 56-59.

⁴³ Anne Wootton, "The Classical Lincoln," Honors Thesis, Brown University, 2009, 113-114.

Lincoln's first line in his "Gettysburg Address" is a compressed history lesson: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."⁴⁴ This lesson is notable for what it does not assert, that the nation was created for the purpose of fulfilling popular sovereignty, or what Southerners were then asserting, that a nation should be created to protect one's right to own property in man. Lincoln grounded his address in the history of the nation, that it was founded on the principles of protecting natural rights and that no man had a right to rule over another because of his birth.

A government founded on these principles was not the natural order of things. As Lincoln had been arguing for the past few years, the current conflict would show if this highly unusual nation could survive: "Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure."⁴⁵

Lincoln then proceeded from the distant to the more recent past, that "The brave men, living and dead," who fought at Gettysburg will live on in memory because the world "can never forget what they did here." Lincoln then moved from the past to purpose:

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us---that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion---that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain---that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom---and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7: 23.

⁴⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7: 23.

⁴⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7: 23.

For Lincoln, the past, both recent and distant, provides meaning and purpose- that they must be *dedicated*, take *increased devotion*, and they must highly *resolve* to finish their work. Lincoln's closing parallels the beginning in that he argued the government their Fathers made was worth sacrificing for because it was *of the people, by the people, and for the people*.

Although appreciation would grow for his "Gettysburg Address" in the coming years, it was already well regarded immediately after he delivered it, despite a persistent myth to the contrary. Besides the positive reviews in the press, George Bancroft requested that Lincoln write an official copy for him to have it published in a collection of works by the most prominent contemporary American authors.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, especially his opening sentence, has come under criticism by some of the most eminent scholars in American history. Although there are some similarities in their critiques, each one is distinct and deserves to be addressed separately.

Joseph J. Ellis, a Pulitzer Prize winning historian and expert on the Revolutionary War, wrote in *The Quartet* that "the first clause in the first sentence of Lincoln's famous speech was historically incorrect," namely the idea that when they declared their independence, they were creating a *new nation*.⁴⁸ Before proceeding, it is necessary to

⁴⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7: 22.

⁴⁸ Ellis, *The Quartet*, 1.

note that when Lincoln used the word *nation*, he did not necessarily imply something analogous to a modern conception of a centralized *nation state*, and to read it thusly is anachronistic. Lincoln used the term *nation* similarly to a country or even a people, as he used the term to describe not only foreign countries but also domestic Native American tribes like the “Pottowatomie Nation of Indians” and the “Cherokee Nation.”⁴⁹ To critique Lincoln’s history lesson, Ellis wrote that, “In 1776 thirteen American colonies declared themselves independent states that came together temporarily to win the war, then would go their separate ways.”⁵⁰ Ellis’s assertion is the direct opposite of what Lincoln had been arguing through history since the secession crisis. Where Lincoln asserted that the Union was *perpetual*, Ellis argued that they were united *temporarily*. Lincoln, in his “First Inaugural,” traced the history of the idea of a perpetual union from the 1774 Articles of Association to the Declaration of Independence in 1776, to the Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union ratified in 1781, and then the Constitution itself. When Lincoln used the word *perpetual*, he was using the same word used five times in the Articles of Confederation to describe the Union.⁵¹ While the 1774 Articles of Association said that they “solemnly bind ourselves and our constituents... to adhere to this association” only until Parliament repealed certain acts that they felt violated their rights, there is no hint, either explicit or implicit, in the Declaration of Independence or

⁴⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 5: 439, 6: 109.

⁵⁰ Ellis, *The Quartet*, 1.

⁵¹ “Articles of Confederation: March 1, 1781.”

the Articles of Confederation that the Union was only meant to be *temporary*.⁵² Furthermore, Ellis wrote, “The resolution declaring independence, approved on July 2, 1776, clearly states that the former colonies were leaving the British Empire not as a single collective but rather as ‘Free and Independent States.’”⁵³ This is true, but immediately preceding this statement the resolution *clearly states* that they were the “United Colonies,” implying in its capitalizing and wording that the Union preceded independence.⁵⁴ The Declaration of Independence not only repeated the same phrase, it also *clearly states* that the delegates were “the representatives of the United States of America,” not the representatives of the *independent states of America*.⁵⁵ Ellis admits that Lincoln in his context “had some compelling reasons for bending the arc of American history,” but his opening statement in his “Gettysburg Address” was a “fundamental distortion of how history happened.”⁵⁶ Ellis is right to point out that before the Constitution the Union was extremely weak and flawed. However, the imperfect nature of the Union does not mean that the Declaration of Independence made the states

⁵² “Journals of the Continental Congress - The Articles of Association; October 20, 1774,” *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School, 2008, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/contcong_10-20-74.asp.

⁵³ Ellis, *The Quartet*, 1.

⁵⁴ Richard Henry Lee, “Resolution introduced in the Continental Congress by Richard Henry Lee (Virginia) proposing a Declaration of Independence, June 7, 1776,” *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School, 2008, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/lee.asp.

⁵⁵ “Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776.”

⁵⁶ Ellis, *The Quartet*, 1.

independent from Great Britain as well as each other. Even if the Union was fragile, it still was a union, just as an imperfect marriage is still a marriage that with some changes could become a more perfect union. To use Lincoln's words, Ellis did not see the Union as a marriage at all but more of a "free-love arrangement."⁵⁷ Of the two historians in this instance, Lincoln is not the one most guilty of bending the arc of American history to suit his needs.

Another related critique is that Lincoln's opening sentence is not based on any historical research performed by Lincoln. Pauline Maier, author of the definitive history of the Declaration of Independence, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*, wrote that "Lincoln's view of the past," both in his Gettysburg address and throughout his political career "was a product of political controversy, not research, and his version of what the founders meant was full of wishful suppositions."⁵⁸ To deny that Lincoln's views about the past were informed by current political controversies would be incorrect in the extreme. However, to deny the extensive research Lincoln performed about the Founding Fathers would also be a mistake. Lincoln's view of the Founding Fathers was grounded in diligent research comprising years of study and carefully testing his ideas in public in front of opponents. As detailed earlier, sometimes his research was flawed, but the historical arguments that he made based on that research in many ways were more accurate than not only the most eminent scholars of his era, but

⁵⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4: 196.

⁵⁸ Maier, *American Scripture*, 206.

also those of well-regarded historians of later generations. The arguments Lincoln made about the past were based on extensive historical research and not wishful suppositions.

Maier also criticized how historically accurate Lincoln's view of the Declaration of Independence was. In fact, she wrote that, "In many ways, Douglas's history was more faithful to the past and to the views of Thomas Jefferson," because he treated it as a document of separation from Britain and nothing more. According to Maier, the authors "sought to extend support for their cause and enhance the chances of victory; more they did not ask."⁵⁹ However, it was Douglas, not Lincoln, who, in an unsuccessful attempt to maintain the unity of the Democratic Party, perverted the history of the Revolution to justify a political expedient that he did not really believe. It was Douglas who mistakenly argued that America at its founding was a *tabula rasa* and that the Founders created a country half free and half slave as the optimal condition, while Lincoln correctly argued that America was born with slavery already amongst them and that the Founders, in their wisdom, abolished it and restricted it in as many places as they could while still holding the Union together. It was Douglas and not Lincoln who argued that the Founders meant for slavery to be perpetuated forever rather than wishing that future generations would get no notion from the Constitution that there was ever anything as sinister as *property in men*. It was Douglas, whom Maier even quoted but did not critique, that asserted that only British subjects were included in the phrase "all men are created equal." Just as Lincoln criticized Douglas for arguing that the Declaration of Independence really meant *all British subjects were created equal*, he would equally and vehemently challenge

⁵⁹ Maier, *American Scripture*, 206.

anyone who would argue that the phrase really meant *all men are created equal until we have fully won our independence from Britain*. History is the study of continuity and change over time, and Lincoln, quite accurately, used the Declaration of Independence, as the best expression of the spirit of the Revolutionary era, to show a continuity in history had been broken and that there had been a great change over time. As he argued in his Springfield and Peoria speeches about the Kansas Nebraska Act in 1854, “Let no one be deceived. The spirit of seventy-six and the spirit of Nebraska, are utter antagonisms; and the former is being rapidly displaced by the latter.”⁶⁰ When war broke out, Lincoln analyzed the Southern declarations of independence and argued that while they claim to be following the footsteps of the Founders, they were deliberately erasing the principles on which the Founders based their revolution. When people denied or diminished the principles of the Revolution, they were not only perverting history, but they were also, as Lincoln quoted Henry Clay, *blowing out the moral lights around us*.

In *The Purpose of the Past*, Gordon S. Wood largely accepts Maier’s characterization of Lincoln’s use of the past, not challenging Maier’s assertion that Lincoln did not do research nor practiced anything remotely close to the work of a historian. In fact, Wood goes so far as to call Lincoln’s use of the past as a “false heritage,” even if he perverted the past for noble reasons.⁶¹ While flawed at times, to characterize Lincoln’s use of the past as “false” is misguided, but Wood would be correct to characterize Lincoln’s opening line of the “Gettysburg Address” on its own as merely

⁶⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2: 275.

⁶¹ Wood, *The Purpose of the Past*, 194.

heritage and not resembling the fruits of a historian. However, taking context into account, this was not simply a tightly crafted assertion made by a politician making arguments about the past he had not investigated. That one sentence represents years of research and publicly debating historical ideas condensed into a single and readily accessible idea. As Edward Everett wrote to Lincoln the day after the ceremony: “I should be glad, if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes.”⁶² Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address” does not have to be considered *either* history *or* heritage because it was *both*. At Gettysburg, Lincoln was able to do what every historian dreams of doing; he was able to distil years of research and labor into an assertion about the past that has lived on and even cherished in memory. In other words, Lincoln was able to take history and render it heritage.

⁶² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7: 25.

Chapter IX.

The Almighty Has His Own Purposes (1864-1865)

The Will of God Prevails

“There are too many pigs for the tits.” This, according to one disappointed visitor to the White House, is what Lincoln remarked to explain why he did not have a government job for him.¹ This was an era when the White House was open to all, and if one was patient enough and willing to wait in line, sometimes for days, one could get an audience with the president. In an era before polling, listening in these interviews provided the president with a sense of the mood of the people at any given moment. However, they also proved a great trial to the president, as thousands of people from throughout the country travelled to the executive mansion hoping to receive some kind of favor, usually a patronage job for themselves or for a friend or relative. Other visitors, especially religious leaders, instructed Lincoln on what God wanted him to do. Lincoln questioned one delegation of Chicago ministers why God would reveal it to others rather than revealing it directly to himself.² Lincoln, perhaps, expected more of the same when he granted access to a small group of Quakers to see him on Sunday October 26, 1862.

After brief introductions and conversation, a solemn and momentary silence, save for the sound of the driving rain outside, came over the group. Then a sixty-one-year-old

¹ Sergt. Major [pseud.], “Lincoln and Stanton,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 11, 1879, 9.

² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 5: 420.

widow and preacher who was no stranger to suffering, Eliza Gurney, removed her bonnet and began to address the president.³ She told Lincoln that she knew he was weighed down with burdens and cares and hoped that he would take these to the Lord in prayer, who would grant him comfort. The widow Gurney said that she knew that thousands on both sides of the Atlantic rejoiced that the Lord had chosen the president “to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burthens, to let the oppressed go free,” and “that for this magnanimous deed the children yet unborn will rise up and call him blessed in the name of the Lord.” Gurney told the president she had seen “how difficult it is to accomplish that which we wish, and how vain is the help of man.” She therefore “earnestly desired that the President might repair day by day... to this river of God, which is full of water, even to the well-spring of Eternal Life.” The widow Gurney expressed her hopes for the president: “May our Father in heaven guide thee by His own unerring counsel through the remaining difficulties of thy wilderness journey, bestow upon thee a double portion of that wisdom which cometh down from above,” and that when his labors were finished that he may join the “glorious company of victors whom the apostle saw standing on the sea of glass mingled with fire, having the harps of God in their hands!”⁴ She then knelt down and delivered a solemn prayer for the president, “that

³ “Eliza P. Gurney, Interview with Abraham Lincoln,” *Abraham Lincoln papers: Series 1. General Correspondence*, Library of Congress, 2020, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mal1870500/>.

⁴ Eliza Paul Gurney, *Memoir and Correspondence of Eliza P. Gurney*, ed. by Richard F. Mott (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1884), 307-311.

light and wisdom might be shed down from on high, to guide our President through the troublous times he had to pass.”⁵

Gurney’s speech and prayer brought tears to the president’s eyes. After a moment of reflection, Lincoln replied:

I am glad of this interview, and glad to know that I have your sympathy and prayers. We are indeed going through a great trial — a fiery trial. In the very responsible position in which I happen to be placed, being an humble instrument in the hands of our Heavenly Father, as I am, and as we all are, to work out his great purposes, I have desired that all my work and acts may be according to this will, and that it might be so, I have sought his aid — but if after endeavoring to do my best in the light which he affords me, I find my efforts fail, I must believe that for some purpose unknown to me, He wills it otherwise. If I had had my way, this war would never have been commenced; If I had been allowed my way this war would have been ended before this, but we find it still continues; and we must believe that He permits it for some wise purpose of his own, mysterious and unknown to us; and though with our limited understandings we may not be able to comprehend it, yet we cannot but believe, that He who made the world still governs it.⁶

One thing that is remarkable about this exchange is how frankly Lincoln discussed his religious views with this stranger. Some friends had known him for decades and yet never heard him utter any remark regarding his faith or lack thereof. Those that did, usually stated that Lincoln doubted orthodox Christian teachings and he may have been an outright atheist. Clearly, the widow Eliza P. Gurney had touched him, and he expressed himself more openly about his possible faith than he may have ever done before, and it appears to have evolved from his earlier beliefs. Lincoln, likely inspired by Gurney, continued to meditate on this theme for the rest of his life.

⁵ “Eliza P. Gurney, Interview with Abraham Lincoln.”

⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 5: 478.

At some point during 1862, perhaps after his interview with Eliza P. Gurney, Lincoln expanded on these thoughts in a private note to himself. Known today as Lincoln's "Meditation on the Divine Will," Lincoln mused on the meaning of the war:

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one *must* be wrong. God can not be *for*, and *against* the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party---and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say this is probably true---that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either *saved* or *destroyed* the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.⁷

Even though it is impossible to know what Lincoln really believed about God, Lincoln began to ponder, at least privately, that there were greater forces at work in history than human intention.

Lincoln continued to elaborate on this theme in a letter to Albert Hodges of Kentucky on April 4, 1864. Hodges was part of a delegation to the White House to express their concerns with arming blacks to join the Union forces. After listening to their complaints, Lincoln delivered a short speech and they apparently left satisfied. Before departing, Hodges asked if he could write to him the substance of this short speech, which he thought would do much good, and Lincoln obliged.

Lincoln's letter deals primarily with personal history, both his long-held beliefs on slavery and a short history of abolition during the war. He began with his clearest denunciation of slavery: "I am naturally anti-slavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is

⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 5: 403-404.

wrong. I can not remember when I did not so think, and feel.” He then contrasted his private feelings with his public duty: “And yet I have never understood that the Presidency conferred upon me an unrestricted right to act officially upon this judgment and feeling.” He had taken an oath to uphold the Constitution, and he believed that the Constitution protected slavery in the states in which it already existed, and he would do nothing to disturb the institution under ordinary circumstances. When subordinates attempted to free slaves under their own authority earlier in the war, he revoked their orders because he did not think they were legal because preservation of the Constitution did not yet necessitate it. However, he felt that in order to preserve the Union and the Constitution, he must do what under ordinary circumstances would be inadmissible. He used an analogy to prove his point: “By general law life and limb must be protected; yet often a limb must be amputated to save a life; but a life is never wisely given to save a limb.” Thus, “measures, otherwise unconstitutional, might become lawful, by becoming indispensable to the preservation of the constitution, through the preservation of the nation.”⁸ The experience of the previous year had shown that his Emancipation Proclamation had augmented the strength of the North while at the same time subtracted it from the South, proving that the best way to maintain the Union was to uphold his emancipation policy.

Lincoln closed his letter with something that he did not address in his short speech in person. Lincoln wrote,

In telling this tale I attempt no compliment to my own sagacity. I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me. Now,

⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7: 281-282.

at the end of three years struggle the nation's condition is not what either party, or any man devised, or expected. God alone can claim it. Whither it is tending seems plain. If God now wills the removal of a great wrong, and wills also that we of the North as well as you of the South, shall pay fairly for our complicity in that wrong, impartial history will find therein new cause to attest and revere the justice and goodness of God.⁹

Lincoln acknowledged there were greater forces at work in history than the intentions of any single person or party. Experience had taught him humility but not despair. He would continue to elaborate on these themes in the coming months.

The World Moves

Later that month on April 18, 1864, Lincoln addressed the Sanitary Fair in Baltimore. Sanitary fairs were popular throughout the north to raise funds for sick and wounded soldiers.

Lincoln could not help recalling the past, as it was Baltimore that he had to sneak through under the cover of darkness on his way to his first inauguration to avoid assassination. It was Baltimore that rioted and attacked Union soldiers who peaceably passed through their city. It was also Baltimore where Lincoln first suspended habeas corpus to protect the vital rail link into the city. Now, the people of Baltimore had gathered not to attack Union soldiers but rather raise funds to support them. Lincoln, who was always sensitive to the contrast between the past and the present, noted in the beginning of his speech, “We can not fail to note that the world moves....The change from then till now, is both great, and gratifying.”¹⁰ What was more, Maryland, which the

⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7: 282.

¹⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7: 301.

Emancipation Proclamation did not cover, was then in the process of abolishing slavery on its own.

Baltimore was not an isolated case but was emblematic of a larger process that the country was undergoing. Lincoln argued that neither side expected the war to last this long or believe slavery would be affected so much, but neither side's hopes were fulfilled. Lincoln then quoted a popular proverb: "So true is it that man proposes, and God disposes."¹¹ This sentiment matches not only what he had spoken to Mrs. Gurney but also what he wrote in his "Meditation on the Divine Will" along with one of his favorite lines from *Hamlet* that he had been quoting for years: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will."¹² Lincoln then argued: "But we can see the past, though we may not claim to have directed it; and seeing it, in this case, we feel more hopeful and confident for the future."¹³ While he knew his limitations, he felt more confident in interpreting the past and being able to use it to envision the future.

As he had done so frequently before, he defined a key term, in this case "liberty," and he professed the war could be considered a conflict over its true meaning:

We all declare for liberty; but in using the same *word* we do not all mean the same *thing*. With some the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself, and the product of his labor; while with others the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men's labor. Here are two, not only different, but incompatible things, called by the same name---liberty. And it follows that each of the things is, by the respective parties, called by two different and incompatible names---liberty and tyranny.

¹¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7: 301.

¹² Herndon, *Herndon on Lincoln*, 234.

¹³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7: 301.

To illustrate his point, he used an analogy of a sheep who would define liberty as being free from a wolf while the wolf would define liberty as the right to hunt the sheep. Lincoln remarked with approval that Maryland was now choosing to renounce the wolf's definition of liberty.¹⁴

Lincoln closed by discussing the news of the Fort Pillow Massacre where word had arrived that Confederate soldiers had killed 300 black soldiers after they had surrendered. While Lincoln acknowledged the incident still needed investigation and that he did not want to get in a hanging contest with the Rebels by executing its own prisoners, he still promised "retribution" if the rumors were true. He must see that justice is done because he was the one who issued the Emancipation Proclamation and had authorized recruitment of black troops, so he felt "responsible for it to the American people, to the christian world, to history, and on my final account to God."¹⁵ Increasingly, Lincoln began to see his role as not just upholding the Constitution, but that his responsibilities to history and God were inseparable.

You Were Right and I Was Wrong: General Grant

To say Lincoln had a strained relationship with his generals in the early years of the war would be an understatement. His generals chafed at his micromanaging, frustrated at taking orders from a man with almost no military experience. For his part, Lincoln felt he needed to micromanage his generals because they had lost so many of the

¹⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7: 301-302.

¹⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7: 302-303.

battles that they fought in which they outnumbered their enemies (i.e., 1st Bull Run, the Seven Days Battles, 2nd Bull Run, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville), or failed to take advantage when the enemy was in a precarious position after a victory (i.e., Antietam and Gettysburg).

However, Lincoln treated General Ulysses S. Grant differently. Lincoln wrote a letter to Grant on July 13, 1863, to congratulate him on his capture of Vicksburg nine days prior. He then proceeded to give a short history of his thoughts on Grant's Vicksburg campaign. He wrote that when he arrived near the city from the north that he hoped that he would run his troops past the southern citadel, which is what Grant eventually did. Lincoln then wrote that he had thought Grant should then move his troops further south to meet up with another Union army in Louisiana. When Grant instead marched his men east to tear out the vitals of the state of Mississippi, Lincoln thought Grant had made a mistake. However, Grant's brilliant maneuvering allowed him to capture the last Rebel city on the Mississippi and now the South was finally cut in two. Grant had no notion of Lincoln's feelings, but Lincoln chose to highlight them here: "I now wish to make the personal acknowledgment that you were right, and I was wrong."¹⁶ He did not have to admit his mistake in the past, but, after all the failures he had suffered, it must have been gratifying to know he finally had a general who knew better than him. Lincoln possessed the self-confidence and the humility to be able to admit openly when he was wrong and to be able to learn from that mistake.

¹⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 6: 326.

Before the start of the spring campaign in 1864, Lincoln again wrote to Grant who would now lead the forces in the East. Unlike the sharp letters he had written to other generals in the past, Lincoln expressed his entire confidence in Grant:

The particulars of your plans I neither know, or seek to know. You are vigilant and self-reliant; and, pleased with this, I wish not to obtrude any constraints or restraints upon you. While I am very anxious that any great disaster, or the capture of our men in great numbers, shall be avoided, I know these points are less likely to escape your attention than they would be mine.¹⁷

Lincoln had learned from the past whom he could trust, and he used this experience to guide his present and to have hope for the future.

My Most Generous Friend: Owen Lovejoy

Unlike his older brother Elijah and despite the threats against him, Owen Lovejoy died peacefully of natural causes on March 25, 1864. He lived long enough to see the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, and his life's work was nearly fulfilled. Lovejoy, who was passionate and intemperate, had an entirely different personality than Lincoln, who was cool and calculating. While the murder of Elijah Lovejoy led Lincoln to maintain that the law must be upheld, Owen Lovejoy learned the opposite lesson, that the law must be *subverted*. However, over the last ten years of his life, Lovejoy developed a personal friendship with Lincoln and they each had strong feelings of mutual respect. When other abolitionists were indignant at Lincoln's actions at the beginning of

¹⁷ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7: 324.

the war, especially when Lincoln revoked emancipation orders by his subordinates, Lovejoy never lost his faith in the president.¹⁸

Even though he recognized that it was highly unlikely that the president could travel so far during the war, John H. Bryant invited him to attend a meeting in Princeton to honor their mutual friend. Lincoln wrote back on May 30, 1864, acknowledging that he would be unable to attend but composed a few thoughts to celebrate Lovejoy. The president confessed that he had not known Lovejoy as well as his friends in Princeton who could do better in eulogizing him. However, Lincoln wrote that his acquaintance with Lovejoy for the past decade had been “quite intimate” and that “every step in it has been one of increasing respect and esteem.” Even though they used very different methods, Lincoln praised Lovejoy for these differences: “It can be truly said of him that while he was personally ambitious, he bravely endured the obscurity which the unpopularity of his principles imposed, and never accepted official honors, until those honors were ready to admit his principles with him.” Lincoln, who largely remained silent about his opposition to slavery for the first two decades of his political career, admired the zeal of Lovejoy despite all the forces arrayed against him. Earlier in his career, Lincoln had criticized the radicalism of abolitionists, but in this letter, Lincoln again tacitly acknowledged that he had been wrong. After celebrating his politics, Lincoln praised him personally, stating that Lovejoy had been “my most generous friend.” Lincoln, no doubt, knew this letter would not remain private and that it would help shape memory of Lovejoy. Lincoln wrote Bryant: “Let him have the marble

¹⁸ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 89.

monument,” but more importantly, Lovejoy’s memory must live on “in the hearts of those who love liberty, unselfishly, for all men.”¹⁹ Although a relatively obscure figure nationally, the memory of Owen Lovejoy and everything he stood for has never faded in the hearts of the people of Princeton.

An Inestimable Jewel: Speeches to the Soldiers

In 1864 Lincoln delivered several speeches to soldiers as they passed through the capital. To the 166th Ohio Regiment on August 22, Lincoln proclaimed: “It is not merely for to-day, but for all time to come that we should perpetuate for our children's children this great and free government, which we have enjoyed all our lives.” According to Lincoln, his personal history was in some ways the embodiment of the promise held out by the national history that they were fighting for:

I happen temporarily to occupy this big White House. I am a living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father's child has. It is in order that each of you may have through this free government which we have enjoyed, an open field and a fair chance for your industry, enterprise and intelligence; that you may all have equal privileges in the race of life, with all its desirable human aspirations. It is for this the struggle should be maintained, that we may not lose our birthright---not only for one, but for two or three years. The nation is worth fighting for, to secure such an inestimable jewel.

Likewise, Lincoln told the 148th Ohio Regiment nine days later, “we are striving to maintain the government and institutions of our fathers, to enjoy them ourselves, and transmit them to our children and our children's children forever.” Lincoln addressed the 42nd Massachusetts Regiment October 31, recalling that it was only three short years prior in the early days of the war when mobs in Maryland had attacked Massachusetts

¹⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7: 366.

soldiers passing through the city. However, at the stroke of midnight that night, slavery would be abolished forever in Maryland. As he had expressed earlier that year in Baltimore, Lincoln told the men that “the world has moved” since those dark early days in the war, and those soldiers had played no small role in effecting that change. In a letter he wrote that October to a correspondent he expressed that not only did he “wish all men to be free,” but that he also hoped for the end of slavery because it was the “only thing which ever could bring this nation to civil war.”²⁰ By fighting to end slavery, these soldiers would make sure that their sacrifice would not have been done in vain and their sons would not have to fight the same war over again.

All these short addresses to the soldiers were campaign speeches without appearing to be campaign speeches. These units were returning home, and he knew that the soldier vote would be essential to securing his reelection that November. In these addresses Lincoln tied the past to their present and the distant future beyond. He appealed to not just the memory of the Fathers but also his own father, as the Founding Fathers had created the type of government where every man had the chance to rise, and that even men like his semi-literate father who fought every day of his life for survival knew he lived in a country where his own son could rise to the most preeminent position in the land. For Lincoln, the promise held out by the Founders was no myth or mere abstraction because he was a living example of its great promise. For Lincoln, it was this generation’s responsibility to endure tremendous sacrifice to preserve this sacred heritage for the future forever.

²⁰ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7: 512, 7: 528, 8: 41, 8: 84.

This responsibility was not for the soldiers alone. In those same weeks that he delivered these speeches to these units returning home, Lincoln held an interview with two prominent politicians from Wisconsin, Alexander W. Randall and Joseph T. Mills. In this interview, Lincoln reiterated the importance of the past to illuminate the present with such expressions as “my own experience has proven to me...” and “let them prove by the history of this war...” However, Lincoln’s most startling statement is his comment on his responsibility to the future. Some hoped for the North to reach some kind of accommodation with the South, which included returning freed slaves, including soldiers who had fought bravely for the Union, to their former owners in the South. Lincoln stated that he must not do that because, “I should be damned in time & in eternity for so doing.”²¹ Lincoln understood that his responsibility to both history and heaven was one and the same thing.

No Mortal Could Make and No Mortal Could Stay: Letter to Eliza P. Gurney

In some ways, just as Eliza P. Gurney was to others, she had become a minister to the president. In 1863 Lincoln sent a message through a mutual friend inviting Gurney to write to him when she pleased. She replied on August 8, 1863, stating that she and many others were praying for him and that she believed that God had appointed him to his current position for a special purpose.²²

²¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7: 506-507.

²² Gurney, *Memoir and Correspondence*, 313-316.

We do not know why Lincoln first requested Gurney to write to him nor do we know why he waited more than a year to reply, but Lincoln wrote to her a heartfelt letter September 4, 1864, shortly after he learned of Sherman's capture of Atlanta. Lincoln wrote, "I have not forgotten---probably never shall forget---the very impressive occasion when yourself and friends visited me on a Sabbath forenoon two years ago," nor had he forgotten her letter of a year prior. He then expressed his gratitude for all of those who had been praying for him. He then elaborated on themes he began expressing to her during their first meeting:

The purposes of the Almighty are perfect, and must prevail, though we erring mortals may fail to accurately perceive them in advance. We hoped for a happy termination of this terrible war long before this; but God knows best, and has ruled otherwise. We shall yet acknowledge His wisdom and our own error therein. Meanwhile we must work earnestly in the best light He gives us, trusting that so working still conduces to the great ends He ordains. Surely He intends some great good to follow this mighty convulsion, which no mortal could make, and no mortal could stay.²³

Here he continued to argue two primary points. One is that there were limits to both the wisdom and agency of man. There were forces at work that were greater than human will or understanding. However, while there may be limits, that does not mean that people have not been granted some wisdom and agency, and it is their duty to pursue what is right, as God gives them the understanding to do so. Lincoln continued to ponder these thoughts in private, and it is remarkable that he continued to express his deepest thoughts on God to a woman he had only met once, but it is a testament to how deeply Mrs. Gurney had moved him.

²³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7: 535.

Philosophy to Learn Wisdom from: Lincoln's Election Victory Speech

Until the capture of Atlanta, Lincoln's reelection chances appeared grim, but victory along with the assumption that the end was near allowed Lincoln an overwhelming victory in the Electoral College. On the night of November 10, Lincoln delivered a victory speech from the White House window in response to a serenade.

Lincoln opened with a reiteration of his frequent theme that this war was a test for free government: "It has long been a grave question whether any government, not *too* strong for the liberties of its people, can be strong *enough* to maintain its own existence, in great emergencies." Part of that test was whether that government could successfully carry out a presidential election within the midst of that war. Lincoln felt it was necessary because they could not fight for a free government without free elections. The difficulties faced during the election will be instructive for the future because, "What has occurred in this case, must ever recur in similar cases. Human-nature will not change. In any future great national trial, compared with the men of this, we shall have as weak, and as strong; as silly and as wise; as bad and good." Therefore, what had just happened should be remembered and studied: "Let us, therefore, study the incidents of this, as philosophy to learn wisdom from, and none of them as wrongs to be revenged."²⁴ In this war that had killed more Americans than perhaps all the other American wars combined, there were many, both North and South, who felt they would have just cause to nurse hatreds and seek vengeance. A useful past must be used as wisdom to build a better future rather than used for the foolishness of avenging the wrongs of the past for its own sake.

²⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 8: 101.

King's Cure for All the Evils: The 13th Amendment

Lyman Trumbull, a U.S. Senator from Alton where Elijah Lovejoy was martyred, co-wrote the 13th Amendment, using much of the same language from the Ordinance of 1787 that outlawed slavery in the Northwest Territories that Lincoln had cited so much in his pre-presidential speeches. Lincoln worked largely behind the scenes to get the amendment passed in the Senate in 1864 and then in the House on January 31, 1865. It would be ratified and take effect later in the year. Even though he had no official Constitutional role in the amendment process, Lincoln signed the 13th Amendment after the House of Representatives passed it.

In response to another serenade, this time the day after the House passed the amendment, Lincoln delivered another short speech from the White House. After reminding his audience that they still had work to do to get the states to ratify the amendment, he proudly told the crowd that he had received word that day that his home state was the first to approve it, just a day after its passage in the House. He was hopeful because it would “remove all causes of disturbance in the future,” and thus slavery should be “rooted out.” Lincoln was proud to have issued the Emancipation Proclamation, but he admitted that it did not free all the slaves and the legality of which could be challenged in the future, threatening the liberty of those who had already been liberated. That is why they must work to get the amendment passed because it “is a King's cure for all the evils. It winds the whole thing up.”²⁵ For Lincoln, they were fulfilling their great responsibility to history.

²⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 8: 254.

The Second Inaugural Address

The six weeks from May 4 to June 15 in 1864, when Union and Rebel armies fought and maneuvered across the Virginia landscape only to end in a stalemate in the protracted siege of Petersburg outside the Southern capital, were the deadliest days of the deadliest war in American history.

While the Union dead from Grant's Overland Campaign were being buried in their Virginia graves, the Union capital was turning into one vast hospital to care for the thousands of wounded. Steamers brought them almost continuously from the battlefields, and ambulances filled with the wounded crowded the streets from the boats to the tent hospitals that surrounded the city. The president frequently stopped and talked with these men and attempted to provide them comfort. One of Lincoln's lawyer friends from Illinois, Congressman Isaac N. Arnold, recalled meeting the president in his carriage as he rode from the White House to the Soldiers' Home, where he spent most of his evenings during the hot months of the year. Arnold remembered Lincoln's face as being "grave and anxious, and he looked like one who had lost the dearest member of his own family." After greeting him, Lincoln pointed to the lines of ambulances carrying wounded soldiers and said, "Look yonder at those poor fellows. I cannot bear it. This suffering, this loss of life is dreadful."²⁶

²⁶ Isaac Newton Arnold, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Company, 1887), 374-375.

Friends, family members, and acquaintances who knew him in his early life all remarked on how Lincoln would periodically withdraw within himself and silently meditate for long periods of time. These grim silences, according to those who knew him during his presidency, only grew more frequent in the latter years of the war. William Stoddard, who worked in the White House as a secretary, remembered one night when he worked late into the early morning hours hearing the “sentry-like tread” of the president as he silently paced the floor in his room. Stoddard left the White House shortly before three in the morning and he could still hear Lincoln’s footsteps, and Stoddard wrote that his meditation, “was a vigil with God and with the future.”²⁷ Another of Lincoln’s secretaries, John Hay, recalled how the war years wore on him:

Under this frightful ordeal his demeanor and disposition changed-so gradually that it would be impossible to say when the change began; but he was in mind, body, and nerves a very different man at the second inauguration from the one who had taken the oath in 1861. He continued always the same kindly, genial, and cordial spirit he had been at first; but the boisterous laughter became less frequent year by year; the eye grew veiled by constant meditation on momentous subjects; the air of reserve and detachment from his surroundings increased. He aged with great rapidity.²⁸

Not only the president but also the capital had been transformed in the four short years from Lincoln’s first to his second inauguration. During the first, the remodeling of the Capitol dome was far from complete as a crane jutted out from the uncovered rotunda. Despite the scarce money and manpower, Lincoln insisted that construction must continue, and by his second inauguration, workmen had completed the dome and crowned it with the *Statue of Freedom*. While in 1861 Washington had been a

²⁷ Wilson, *Intimate Memories of Lincoln*, 236-237.

²⁸ Wilson, *Intimate Memories of Lincoln*, 586.

Confederate-sympathizing city, by 1865 those supporters had grown scarce as the capital's population swelled in the war years, almost all the new residents were pro-Union. Lincoln's first inauguration was a time of uncertainty, but uncertainty had been replaced four years later with expectation as the rebellious armies looked to be on the brink of capitulation or disintegration. In 1861 slavery was still very much legal in Washington, but by 1865 not only had slavery been abolished in the capital, but thousands of the people gathered to see Lincoln's second inauguration were black, mingling freely with white spectators. What is more, while all of the soldiers who provided security for the first ceremony were white, many of those who did the same in 1865 were black, a direct testament to the president's policies. However, Lincoln's actions that had rendered these changes possible had come at a dreadful cost as more than half a million boys and men, both white and black, who were alive for the first ceremony, were now dead. While some had been buried in orderly national cemeteries like at Gettysburg and Arlington, many of the other bodies had been dumped anonymously in mass pits at Shiloh, lay on the ocean floor of Mobile Bay, or lay consumed by flames in the Virginia wilderness.

The morning of Lincoln's second inauguration, March 4, 1865, was wet and gloomy, and the unpaved streets of the capital had become a morass of mud. Reporting for the *New York Times*, the poet Walt Whitman wrote that the weather that morning was "like whirling demons, dark, with slanting rain, full of rage."²⁹ By the time of the

²⁹ Walt Whitman, "The Last Hours of Congress—Washington Crowds, and the President," *New York Times*, March 12, 1865, 5.

ceremony, the rain had stopped but the skies were still a leaden gray. When the president emerged from the Capitol and walked to the inauguration platform, he was greeted with reverberating cheers and applause from the multitude stretched out below. When Lincoln stepped forward to the podium, the crowds again erupted in applause, and when the cheers once again subsided, Lincoln began to speak. When he did so, a most curious thing happened that many in the audience would forever remember—the reporter Noah Brooks wrote, “the sun, which had been obscured all day, burst forth in its unclouded meridian splendor and flooded the spectacle with glory and light. Every heart beat quicker at the unexpected omen, and not a few mentally prayed that so might the darkness which has obscured the past four years be now dissipated by the sun of prosperity.”³⁰

Like so many of his speeches, Lincoln started slowly. He used his first paragraph, a full fifth of his address, to tell his audience what he would not say. He would not detail how the war was going, nor would he discuss at length any new policies, and Lincoln, who had known failure so many times in the past, would not make any predictions for the future. What he would do is give the nation a history lesson. Lincoln devoted the second and third paragraphs, fully 70% of the address, to a history of why the war started and a short discourse on its ultimate cause.³¹

At his first inauguration four years prior, Lincoln noted, both sides hoped to avoid war. Why, then, had this tragedy that no one wanted happened? Lincoln asserted: “Both

³⁰ Noah Brooks, *Washington in Lincoln's Time* (New York: The Century Co., 1896), 239.

³¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 8: 332.

parties deprecated war; but one of them would *make* war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would *accept* war rather than let it perish.” Both sides, no matter how much they dreaded war, feared another outcome much more. Almost as if it was devoid of human volition, Lincoln used the passive voice to describe what happened next: “And the war came.”³²

This in and of itself did not satisfactorily explain why the war began, nor could it account for the duration and savagery with which it was fought. Lincoln knew that the historical causes of this war were more than the consternation over the result of one election or a conflict between union and disunion. Lincoln continued: “One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the Southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war.” While admitting with his *somehow* that there is always some doubt about historical causality, Lincoln, unlike generations of scholars after him, accurately centered the origin of the Civil War on slavery. Lincoln, as he had done so many times prior, argued that *interest* had been a powerful motivating factor in history, blinding those he believed to be otherwise good people from distinguishing right from wrong. This interest was the South’s primary reason for rebelling as they wanted “to strengthen, perpetuate, and extend it,” even at the cost of war. Lincoln continued his theme of the limits of human agency, arguing that not only had neither side wanted war, neither side also believed it would last so long or that

³² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 8: 332.

the original cause of it would be much affected. As Lincoln noted: “Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding.”³³

Both sides were profoundly religious, as faith played a greater role during this conflict than any other in American history. Lincoln proclaimed, “Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other.” Just as they had done with their cherished history, Americans would use the cultural touchstone of scripture to develop wildly divergent views on the most contentious issues of the day. Paraphrasing Genesis and echoing an argument made by Elijah Lovejoy three decades prior, Lincoln gave his sharpest critique of the South in his address: “It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces.” However, he followed by balancing law with Gospel, quoting Matthew 7:1: “but let us judge not that we be not judged.” Lincoln then moved to an idea he had been developing since his 1862 meeting with Eliza P. Gurney: “The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.”³⁴ No man wanted this war or expected it to last so long. Human agency had failed. Only forces greater than human intention could account for this.

Some of Lincoln’s most profound thoughts in this address dwelt on the proper recompense for sin. Quoting Matthew 18:7, Lincoln proclaimed: “Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by

³³ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 8: 332-333.

³⁴ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 8: 333.

whom the offence cometh!” Lest the wisdom of this verse be obscure to his audience, Lincoln clarified:

If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him?

Lincoln did not say *Southern* slavery but rather *American* slavery, that the nation as a whole was guilty of this *offence*, and thus they were all suffering *woe* and *terrible war*, just punishment from an active and living God. Lincoln continued with the limits of human intention: “Fondly do we hope---fervently do we pray---that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away.” However, it was not given to men to determine the length and severity of this *mighty scourge*. Lincoln concluded his history lesson: “Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.’”³⁵ Many of the men there that day bore the scars on their bodies from the blood *drawn with the lash*, and they were the same men who also bore the guns used to end that *offence* through the blood *drawn with the sword*.

While Lincoln doubted the extent of human agency, he did not negate its importance. Lincoln concluded:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up

³⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 8: 333.

the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan---to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.³⁶

Lincoln understood that this war would live on in memory, and it is human nature to use the past to create and perpetuate strife. By laying guilt at the feet of all and by arguing that all are paying for that guilt, Lincoln was tearing down the old in order to build up the new. As he had argued in his victory speech a few months earlier, the past must be used to derive wisdom and not inspire retribution. For lasting peace, they must not harbor a vengeful memory of the past. They must act with *charity*, *do right*, *bind up the wounds*, *care* for the suffering, and strive for a *just* and *lasting peace*.

During the ceremony, Lincoln had spotted Frederick Douglass in the audience. Even though Douglass had harshly criticized Lincoln at the beginning of his presidency and did not always agree with him now, Douglass had come to respect Lincoln. The two had met in the White House twice before, once upon Douglass's own initiative and a second time at Lincoln's invitation. Douglass later argued that Lincoln was not only a "great President" but also a "GREAT MAN." Douglass wrote, "In his company I was never in any way reminded of my humble origin, or of my unpopular color." When the guards barred Douglass from attending the reception the evening of the inauguration, he sent someone ahead to notify Lincoln, knowing that they were not acting on orders from him. When Lincoln found out, Douglass was quickly admitted in. When Lincoln saw him in the East Room, he announced for all to hear Douglass was his friend and he was glad to see him. Lincoln, who had spent years developing the themes he addressed in his

³⁶ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 8: 333.

speech, was eager to know what Douglass, a writer and orator surpassed by few, thought of oration. Douglass replied, “Mr. Lincoln, that was a sacred effort.”³⁷ As Douglass recognized, Lincoln, in his “Second Inaugural Address,” somehow united the past, the political, and the sacred in this great masterpiece of history.

Now He Belongs to the Ages

Just as Isaac Watts’s Indian arrow, events moved swiftly. On April 3 Union troops captured Richmond. Six days later Robert E. Lee and the chief Rebel army surrendered to Grant and his men at Appomattox Courthouse. Soon the few remaining Rebel forces would lay down their arms and the war would be over.

Two days after Lee surrendered, Lincoln delivered another victory speech from his window at the White House. While he had been discussing it privately for months, for the first time Lincoln announced publicly that some blacks should be allowed to vote. By now, he had fully abandoned the colonization schemes that were promoted by so many of the leaders that had inspired him in the past. He now was beginning to advocate for blacks to be not just free from slavery but also full citizens of the Union they had fought for. Near the end of his speech, Lincoln told his audience, “Important principles may, and must, be inflexible.”³⁸ In so many ways, Lincoln had changed course to meet the needs of the present. However, he held fast to the idea that he had learned from history that the

³⁷ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, (Hartford, CT: Park Publishing Company, 1882), 436.

³⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 8: 403, 405.

American experiment was dedicated to the *elevation of mankind*, a principle from which he would never waver.

At some point during these final days of the war, Lincoln wrote a private note laying out plans for the demobilization of the army. As he had so many times before, Lincoln looked to the past to guide his present. Lincoln noted that after the War of 1812, the army was reduced to “about one soldier to 602 souls” and later in 1820 it was reduced again to “one soldier to 963 souls.” Using these figures from the past as a guide, Lincoln believed that he could safely reduce the army to “one soldier to 1000 souls.”³⁹

Had he lived, experience would have shown him that the past in this case did not provide an adequate precedent for what would ultimately become America’s first large scale nation-building project and long-term military occupation. Lincoln, the one who did more than anyone else to save the Union of the *almost chosen people*, was shot and almost perished on Good Friday, lingering a few hours into the next morning, and thus passing from a present reality to a memory that would, in the words of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, “belong to the ages.”⁴⁰

Conclusion

It is ironic that the man who shaped American history more than anyone else is also the one who most doubted his ability to do so. As the war progressed, Lincoln deepened his conviction that there were greater forces at work than the intentions of any

³⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 8: 408-409.

⁴⁰ White, *A. Lincoln*, 675.

single person or party. Lincoln no longer made the same arguments about historical causality that he did in his early political career, reducing cause and effect in human affairs as something as simple as a gust of wind extinguishing a candle. However, he never despaired of human volition but rather redoubled his commitment to it. Lincoln frequently recalled the past in his final years to both guide and inspire the nation. By understanding the past, they could better understand the present and work towards a better future. By studying the past, we can see the mistakes that are common to all, so we must not look to avenge the mistakes of others but rather learn from them and correct them. Only then by learning the lessons of the past could they hope to “achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations” in the future.⁴¹

⁴¹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 8: 333.

Chapter X.

The Wisdom of History

Two Eulogies

Just as Washington before him, the nation already began to celebrate Lincoln's birthday, February 12, less than a year after his death. Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, chose the great historian George Bancroft to deliver a eulogy for the martyred president to Congress on Lincoln's birthday. As had so many powerful politicians before him (but not Lincoln), Johnson readily sought the historian's advice to guide him through his first few months in office, and Bancroft seemed the perfect choice to celebrate Lincoln's life and put it into context. He spent much of January of 1866 crafting his speech, and on February 12 Bancroft delivered his address to a joint session of Congress.¹

Bancroft, of course, gave much praise to the fallen president. According to him, "LINCOLN took to heart the eternal truths of liberty, obeyed them as the commands of Providence, and accepted the human race as the judge of his fidelity." Bancroft gave much credit to American people, but it was Lincoln who "finished a work which all time cannot overthrow" and he will "be remembered through all time by his countrymen, and by all the peoples of the world."²

¹ Handlin, *George Bancroft*, 283-284.

² George Bancroft, *Memorial Address on the Life and Character of Abraham Lincoln* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1866), 49.

Even though Bancroft praised Lincoln, several of those who knew the president best harshly criticized Bancroft's eulogy. In the part that gave the most offence, Bancroft professed, "A good President will secure unity to his administration by his own supervision of the various departments," but Lincoln's "supervision of affairs was unsteady and incomplete," and, "he rather confused than advanced the public business."³ Lincoln's friends might have accepted the criticism as having some merit if Bancroft didn't imply that the critique meant that Lincoln was not a *good president*. Judge David Davis, whom Lincoln had known and befriended from their days riding the circuit in Illinois and whom Lincoln elevated to the Supreme Court, harshly criticized Bancroft's eulogy, writing that he "totally misconceived Mr Lincoln's character" because he never knew him personally. What was more, Bancroft himself was "as cold as an *icicle*." John Hay, one of Lincoln's young secretaries in the White House who would later rise to become Secretary of State in the McKinley and Roosevelt administrations, used decidedly undiplomatic language to describe Bancroft and his address. Referring to him as "Miss Nancy Bancroft," the great historian belonged to the "patent leather kid glove set" that could understand the true Lincoln no more "than an owl does of a comet, blazing in his blinking eyes." Hay continued, "Bancroft's address was a disgraceful exhibition of ignorance and prejudice," and that Lincoln was better understood by the people rather than by the learned historian.⁴

³ Bancroft, *Memorial Address*, 46.

⁴ Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 218, 332.

George Bancroft was an earnest man who did his best with the lights afforded him, which were in no way insignificant as he advanced the study of history of America more than perhaps anyone else. However, Hay, despite his invective, touched on something important in his critique of Bancroft. In his commencement address at Harvard in 1817, Bancroft had declared that the learned scholar “feels himself elevated above the common sphere of mankind” as he “lives in an upper world and contemplates with calm indifference the labours of ordinary men, as of inferior beings, like the majestick eagle.”⁵ Although as a politician and historian he professed to support the wisdom and virtue of the common people, his rhetoric never ceased to soar above them with highly florid abstractions that rarely lowered itself to deal with concrete specificities. In contrast, Lincoln’s rhetoric, according to the historian Shelby Foote, was “jogtrot prose” that was “compacted of words and phrases still with the bark on,” and was more the language of the people.⁶ Furthermore, while Lincoln in his arguments about the past stressed humility and the fragmentary nature of human understanding, Bancroft, according to his biographer Lilian Handlin, was “self-righteous and absolutely certain of his judgements.”⁷ In Lincoln’s historical narratives, the history of slavery was essential for understanding his era while Bancroft, according to Handlin, made only “occasional innocuous references,” to slavery in his narratives that “offended no one,” and his books were “as popular in the South as in the North.”⁸ Finally, for all Bancroft’s learning and

⁵ De Wolfe Howe and Strippel, *The Life and Letters of George Bancroft*, 1. 30.

⁶ Foote, *The Civil War*, 1. 804.

⁷ Handlin, *George Bancroft*, 284.

⁸ Handlin, *George Bancroft*, 172.

trans-Atlantic experience, it was the self-educated Lincoln who was the historian that shaped America's memory of the past the most. Adolphe de Chambrun, a French diplomat who came to know Lincoln in his final weeks, wrote: "His incisive speech found its way to the very depths of the soul; his short and clear sentences would captivate the audiences on which they fell. To him was given to see nearly all his definitions pass into daily proverb."⁹ Writing nearly a lifetime later in 1908, Horace White, who covered Lincoln's campaigns in Illinois as a young reporter, wrote that Lincoln "though dead he yet speaketh to men, women, and children who never saw him, and so, I think, he will continue to speak to generations yet unborn."¹⁰ Even though Bancroft performed deeper research and wrote more extensively on the past, it was Lincoln who made a more *just application* of the past and was able to distill his research into burning symbols that would sear themselves into the memory of the American people.

An example of Lincoln's effect on the nation's memory can be seen in another eulogy of the president, this one given by someone whose advice Lincoln did seek out, Frederick Douglass. Two months after Lincoln's death, Douglass delivered his eulogy at Cooper Union, the same location where Lincoln delivered the speech that would transform his career six years earlier. While in his most famous eulogy of Lincoln, which Douglass delivered in 1876, he described Lincoln as being "preeminently the white man's President," in his 1865 address Douglass declared that Lincoln was "emphatically

⁹ Wilson, *Intimate Memories of Lincoln*, 584.

¹⁰ White, "Abraham Lincoln in 1854," 24.

the black mans President.”¹¹ The difference could be due to context. As he explained earlier in his 1865 eulogy, blacks had originally been banned from participating in Lincoln’s funeral procession as his funeral train passed through the city. Douglass in his 1865 speech was fighting for blacks to have the right to both participate in and shape the memory of the president. He told his audience at Cooper Union that “no people or class of people in this country, have a better reason for lamenting the death of Abraham Lincoln,” than “the colored people,” and thus they desired “to honor and perpetuate his memory.”¹² After praising Lincoln, Douglass echoed the same historical argument that Lincoln made in his “Second Inaugural Address,” that the Civil War, “was beyond the power of human will or wisdom” to have been prevented. As the historian John Stauffer has written, both Douglass and Lincoln “delved into the past to forge their way forward. They were reformers who believed that history is the activist’s muse.”¹³ History both inspired and educated these two great men. In this eulogy, Douglass professed that the epochs of history “are the great teachers of mankind,” a sentiment with which Lincoln would have fully concurred. Echoing Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address,” Douglass

¹¹ Frederick Douglass, *Oration by Frederick Douglass Delivered on the Occasion of the Unveiling of the Freedmen's Monument in Memory of Abraham Lincoln* (Washington, D.C.: Gibson Brothers, 1876), 5.; Frederick Douglass, “Eulogy for Abraham Lincoln” (1865), in *President Lincoln Assassinated!!!: The Firsthand Story of the Murder, Manhunt, Trial, and Mourning*, ed. by Harold Holzer (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2015), 310.

¹² Douglass, “Eulogy for Abraham Lincoln,” 309.

¹³ John Stauffer, *Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln* (New York, Hachet Book Group, 2008), 5.

described the Declaration of Independence as being signed “four score and nine years ago.”¹⁴ In both form and substance, Douglass was forming and transmitting the memory of the past that Lincoln had worked so hard to shape.

Sense of Historical Meaning: Abraham Lincoln and Reinhold Niebuhr

Perhaps the greatest American theologian of the 20th century, Reinhold Niebuhr, began his ministry in the small central Illinois town of Lincoln, the only community named for him during his lifetime. Although known as a theologian, he wrote perhaps as much on the philosophy of politics and history as he did on religion. Like an Old Testament prophet, Niebuhr believed these three were inextricably linked. Niebuhr derived his understanding of the past through his understanding of scripture, which, according to him, reveals that people must strive for justice but also the politician and the interpreter of the past must understand that no person or group is as virtuous or wise as it believes it is. Niebuhr spoke out against those on the one hand who recognize no higher good than self-interest (such as Nazis) and on the other those that recognize a higher sort of values but who believe that their wisdom and virtue can perfectly live up to these ideals (such as pacifists and communists, of whom he was once a member of the former and sympathizer of the latter). He understood that there will always be people who cynically promote their own interests by holding up sacred scripture (sometimes literally) who will neither read nor heed what it is inside. He denounced those who would use religion or history to sanctify one’s political views, arguing that “the most perennial sin of religion” is the tendency for people or groups of people to use the “transcendent” to

¹⁴ Douglass, “Eulogy for Abraham Lincoln,” 314-315.

“absolutize rather than to criticize the partial achievements of history.” Niebuhr accused those who would confuse one's ideas as the ultimate truth and one's virtues as the ultimate good with “idolatry.” Even though flawed creatures, humans still had a religious purpose to work for good. Niebuhr prayed, “Grant us power and grace to resist evil, knowing that even though we ourselves are sinful men you have called us to be instruments of your justice.”¹⁵

Niebuhr brought this religious sensibility not just to politics but also how the past should be interpreted. According to Niebuhr, the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians used a perfect metaphor on how we can understand the past, namely, “We see through a glass darkly.” There are always those who believe that the past can be clearly seen, as clear as a scientist can see and interpret the natural world. However, interpreting the past, according to Niebuhr, is “never purely an intellectual enterprise but a moral and spiritual one.” Niebuhr elaborated:

The highest degree of objectivity and impartiality in the assessment of historical values is achieved by a quality of religious humility, which gains awareness of the unconscious dishonesty of judgment and seeks to correct it. The difference between the knowledge of nature and the knowledge and estimate of our fellowmen is this: in the knowledge of nature the mind of man is at the center of the process of knowing; and the self with all its fears, hopes and ambitions is on the circumference. In the knowledge of historical events the self, with all its emotions and desires, is at the center of the enterprise; and the mind is on the circumference, serving merely as an instrument of the anxious self.¹⁶

Overly confident people do not recognize, “The historical character of man as both agent in, and creature of, history.” They lack “the humility to accept the fact that the whole

¹⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion and Politics*, ed. Elisabeth Sifton (New York: Library of America, 2015), 948, 956, 1063.

¹⁶ Niebuhr, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 1001-1002, 1020.

drama of history is enacted in a frame of meaning too large for human comprehension or management. It is a drama in which fragmentary meanings can be discerned within a penumbra of mystery; and in which specific duties and responsibilities can be undertaken within a vast web of relations which are beyond our powers.” According to Niebuhr, “The final wisdom of life requires, not the annulment of incongruity but the achievement of serenity within and above it.”¹⁷ There are those who argue that since we cannot see the past clearly that nothing meaningful to guide the present can be seen at all. When thinking about the past, Niebuhr argued that we must not be “overwhelmed by mystery” because there are “clues of divine meaning which shine through the perplexities of life.” The proper attitude to understanding the past is a “combination of humility and trust” that is “precisely defined when we affirm that we see, but admit that we see through a glass darkly.” Despite our limitations, wisdom can and should be derived from history. Wisdom, according to Niebuhr, “is not so much an intellectual achievement as the fruit of a humility,” and while knowledge is important, when pursuing truth, it is more important to vanquish “the pride of the heart” than the “ignorance of the mind.” True humility, however, is much more difficult to earn than extensive knowledge. Niebuhr posited, “Perhaps that is why the truest interpretations of the Christian faith have come in moments of history when civilizations were crumbling and the processes of history and the judgments of God had humbled human arrogance.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 63, 81, 88.

¹⁸ Niebuhr, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 985, 1014, 1030.

Without question, the American Civil War was one of those times, and it is no surprise that the man who would best embody how a statesman should merge religion, politics, and history would emerge during this time of trial. While nearly all statesmen in history had fallen short, Niebuhr believed Abraham Lincoln was the exemplar who possessed this highest form of wisdom, especially in his “Second Inaugural Address.” Niebuhr wrote, “Among all the statesmen of ancient and modern periods, Lincoln alone had a sense of historical meaning so high as to cast doubt on the intention of both sides and to place the enemy into the same category of ambiguity as the nation to which his life was committed.” Lincoln, unlike other politicians, did not make “more ultimate claims for their cause, whether for the nation or their party, than either a transcendent providence or a neutral posterity would validate.” Niebuhr praised Lincoln for believing just as the prophets of the Old Testament that there was a meaningful history, and that he, like the prophets, excelled at discerning that meaning. “It was Lincoln’s achievement,” according to Niebuhr, “to embrace a paradox which lies at the center of the spirituality of all western culture; namely, the affirmation of a meaningful history and the religious reservation about the partiality and bias which the human actors and agents betray in the definition of meaning.”¹⁹ For Lincoln, religion did not sanction or sanctify his actions but provided judgment and limits in which to live with humility and acceptance. People, according to Niebuhr, “are never safe against the temptation of claiming God too simply as the sanctifier of whatever we most fervently desire,” because, “the true God can be

¹⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Religion of Abraham Lincoln,” in *Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address: Commemorative Papers*, ed. by Allan Nevins (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), 75, 77.

known only where there is some awareness of a contradiction between divine and human purposes, even on the highest level of human aspirations.” Niebuhr praised Lincoln as the noble exemplar of the statesman: “This combination of moral resoluteness about the immediate issues with a religious awareness of another dimension of meaning and judgment must be regarded as almost a perfect model of the difficult but not impossible task of remaining loyal and responsible toward the moral treasures of a free civilization on the one hand while yet having some religious vantage point over the struggle.”²⁰ Because of this duality, Lincoln was able to fulfill the ultimate role of a statesman.

There are many, with good reason, who argue that both religion and history should stay out of politics. This is because both religion and history are misused in exactly the same way- to sanctify one’s preconceived notions and personal interests. We are guilty of idolatry when we use religion or history to exalt ourselves and attempt to appropriate greater wisdom and virtue than we possess.

Conversely, a religious sensibility born in humility works for both the statesman and the historian. This sensibility recognizes that there are limits to human understanding and virtue, but this does not mean human understanding and virtue do not exist or are not necessary. Barack Obama, a fan of both Lincoln and Niebuhr, praised the statesman Lincoln as someone who “acts while still admitting doubt.”²¹ This same sensibility

²⁰ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, 63-64, 172-173.

²¹ Barack Obama, “Senator Barack Obama at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum Dedication,” April 19, 2005, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum in Springfield, IL, video,

applies to the historian, who makes assertions about the past while still admitting doubt, as well as to any statesman who would attempt to make history useful. For religion and history to be used successfully in politics, they must not be sanctifiers of one's selfish interests but rather motivators and sources of discipline. It is the same sensibility that allowed Abraham Lincoln to see and proclaim that *we are not what we have been* and use the past to inspire the nation to live up to its highest ideals.

Abraham Lincoln was not free of biases that affected his interpretations or judgements about the past. However, more than any statesman before or since (and more than many historians both past and present), it was the nexus of these three sensibilities, politics, the past, and the sacred, that gave Abraham Lincoln the ability to rise above the narrow interests and interpretations of his context to discern the wisdom of history and to fulfill his role within it.

Lincoln and the Wisdom of History

Just as Lincoln believed there was wisdom to be derived from his past, so too can we learn much from Lincoln and how he used this history. His approach to and attitude towards the past can continue to inform historians and politicians so long as Lincoln is remembered and studied.

From Lincoln's earliest writings, it is evident that Lincoln possessed a heightened attachment to the past. From the poetry he read and wrote, the hymns he memorized, and

1:17:36, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?186315-1/abraham-lincoln-presidential-museum-dedication>.

the history he read, it is unmistakable that Lincoln elevated the memory of the past to something sacred. While it is possible to derive meaning from the past through cold logic, it is the inspiration derived from history that more readily propels people to action.

However, this inspiration should be informed by the reasoned study and craft of history. This process begins not in the knowing of memory but the questioning that is the source of all historical inquiry. Lincoln believed that he could use the study of history to gain wisdom for his present, and only by accurately and truthfully reconstructing this past could one find this wisdom. This understanding derived from an accurate reconstruction of the past granted power to those who possessed it over those who lacked this insight. For those who accurately interpret the past, they can see patterns of continuities and discontinuities, to better persuade people open to reason, and to make their decisions on the best evidence available rather than on faulty premises. History can cut through the groupthink of commonly held beliefs about the past in order to arrive at better solutions for the present. Basing decisions on accurate evidence and logical reconstructions of the past does not guarantee success, but it greatly increases its likelihood over making decisions based on faulty and untested assumptions. As Lincoln argued, *right makes might*, and this applies to getting right with history.

While *right* may indeed *make right*, this attitude must be tempered with a proper understanding of the limitations of people to determine that right. Ultimately, this sensibility is grounded in humility. It means, as Lincoln did, admitting mistakes when one is wrong. This humility understands that while a more accurate account of the past is more useful than an inaccurate one, it is still restricted within the limitations of human agency and our ability to predict the future. In human affairs, history can show what is

possible, it can suggest what is *probable*, but it cannot determine what is *inevitable*. As Lincoln exhibited, there is wisdom in understanding the limits of one's wisdom.

Lincoln well understood the tendency of interest to corrupt one's interpretation of the past. Lincoln accused his opponents of misinterpreting the American Revolution in order to promote their financial interests. While it is readily apparent how the interest of politicians can skew their historical interpretations, historians, both past and present, are also susceptible to these same forces. Historians as a class have a greater knowledge of the past and possess training in investigating and interpreting it. However, we are not devoid of interests and emotions, and like the rest of society, they can cloud our judgement. The interests of the historian are not necessarily concurrent with those of the greater society or aligned with the naked pursuit of truth. Human nature makes it less likely that a historian will reach a conclusion or make an argument that we feel will endanger our ability to sell a book or achieve tenure than a conclusion that would not. As Niebuhr taught, "Even the most rational men are never quite rational when their own interests are at stake."²² Likewise, historians are just as susceptible to groupthink as the rest of society. As Lincoln wrote, fashion plays a powerful force on human actions, and few historians are likely to reach the conclusions that are the intellectual equivalent of a 19th century man wearing his wife's bonnet to church. Historians will never be devoid of emotions or interests, but we should be cognizant of them to limit the effects that they will have on our work. While intelligence, training, and knowledge are important, they are no substitute for humility and sound judgement. However, historians must not be

²² Niebuhr, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 251.

devoid of emotion. Historians, to the greatest extent possible, must realize that our emotions must serve our narratives and not our narratives serve our emotions. As Lincoln has shown, emotions can be a powerful force in moving the public towards the good, but these emotions must be *informed by* rather than *dictate to* history.

For all his love of history, Lincoln well understood that the past provides a guide but not a limit to human understanding. Throughout his political career, Lincoln informed his understanding of the present by tempering his knowledge of the past with other sources of wisdom such as from scripture, literature, humor, and his own personal reasoning. Furthermore, if one has a deep understanding of history, one can better understand if there is an analogue from the past that can shed light on the present or if the situation is so unique that all precedent must be abandoned, and one must set new precedents. While in most of his pre-presidential career, Lincoln was guided by the precedents set by others in the past, but during his presidency he frequently based his decisions on his understanding that his actions would be setting precedents for the future. Since he possessed a profound understanding of history, he was able to determine when something could be *fairly judged of by the past* and when it was time to *think anew* and *act anew*.

We must also hold fast to historical truth, as we are given the light to understand this truth, and not give in to relativity for the sake of pursuing power as Lincoln felt Douglas and his allies were doing. We must not be dismayed by the manifold ways that the past is abused by others but rather be inspired by these abuses to pursue the truth more fully and forcefully. This truth is important to pursue because there is wisdom in the past that is frequently lost in the forgetfulness of the present, and often the lessons that

were necessary in the past will once again become essential in the future. We must understand that for all our technological and social improvements, we have still fallen short of the virtue and wisdom of the Infinite, and the experience of the past still has much to teach us.

For generations, Lincoln has remained popular with both liberals and conservatives, and, perhaps, it has something to do with the lessons he learned from the past. Lincoln understood through his study of history that progress was real, and that government can have a role to play in that progress. Conversely, history chastens us, granting us an understanding that there are limits to our wisdom, virtue, and agency- it teaches us that the beginning of wisdom is the fear a greater power than man.

Lincoln's memory has lived on in many ways. He is the Great Emancipator, the savior of the Union, Honest Abe, the Rail-Splitter, the self-made man, the comedian, the shrewd politician, and the orator without peer. Abraham Lincoln's political career shows us today and for all coming time the powerful potential of the use of the past as a source of wisdom for statesmen. It is time that Lincoln's skilled use of history, unlike any statesman before or since, lives on in memory.

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