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ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Political Writings and Speeches

Abraham Lincoln occupies a unique place in the American pantheon. Symbol, sage, myth, and martyr, he is an American icon – Honest Abe and The Great Emancipator, a Janus-faced demigod sculpted in marble. But this is the post-assassination Lincoln. During his lifetime Lincoln elicited very different reactions. The writings and speeches presented in this scholarly edition illuminate Lincoln as a political thinker in the context of his own time and political situation. Opening with a concise yet rich introduction, the texts that follow are complete and carefully edited, with extensive annotation and footnotes to provide a clearer insight into Lincoln the man, the politician, and the political thinker. His views on race and slavery, on secession and civil war, and on the contradiction (as he saw it) between the Declaration of Independence (“all men are created equal”) and the original Constitution (which condones slavery) are laid out in Lincoln’s own well-crafted words.

TERENCE BALL is Professor of Political Science and Philosophy at Arizona State University. He is the author of several books, including *Transforming Political Discourse* (1988), *Reappraising Political Theory* (1995), and a mystery novel, *Rousseau’s Ghost* (1998), and is coeditor (with Richard Bellamy) of *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought*, among other works. He has previously edited *The Federalist* and coedited (with Joyce Appleby) *Jefferson: Political Writings* for the Cambridge Texts series.

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Frontmatter

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Frontmatter

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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 Frontmatter
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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
 Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521897280

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First published 2013

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by the MPG Books Group

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Lincoln, Abraham, 1809–1865.

[Selections. 2013]

Abraham Lincoln : political writings and speeches / edited by Terence Ball.

p. cm. – (Cambridge texts in the history of political thought)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-89728-0 (hardback) – ISBN 978-1-521-72226-1

(paperback) 1. Lincoln, Abraham, 1809–1865. 2. Presidents –

United States – Biography. 3. United States – Politics and government – 1815–1861.

4. United States – Politics and government – 1861–1865. 5. Speeches, addresses,

etc., American – 19th century. I. Ball, Terence. II. Title.

E457.92 2012c

973.7092-dc23

[B]

2012023157

ISBN 978-0-521-89728-0 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-72226-1 Paperback

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

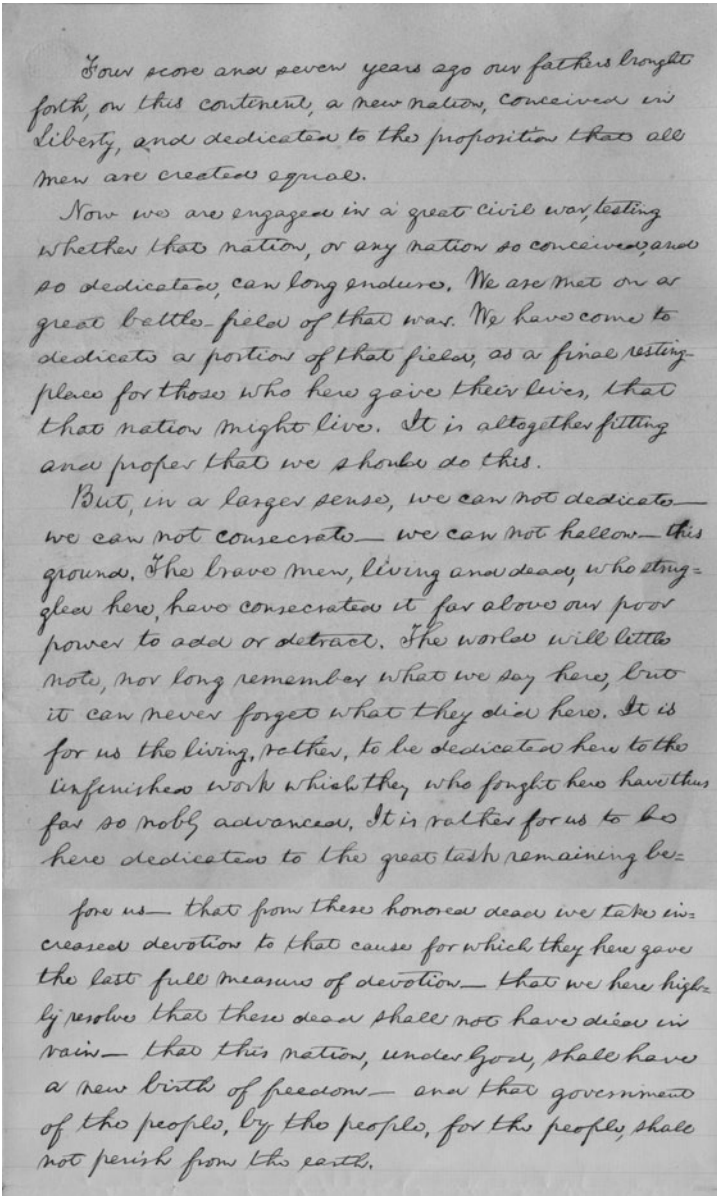
*For Mary Dietz
and
James Farr
In friendship*

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Edited by Terence Ball

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The Gettysburg Address, Bancroft copy.

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	page xiii
<i>Introduction</i>	xv
<i>Chronology</i>	xxxviii
<i>Biographical synopses</i>	xlii
<i>A note on sources and abbreviations</i>	1
<i>Bibliographical note</i>	lii
I Political Writings and Speeches	1
1. Autobiographical sketch (<i>c.</i> June 1860)	3
2. “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions”: Address to the Springfield Young Men’s Lyceum (January 27, 1838)	11
3. Limits of Presidential Power: To William H. Herndon (February 15, 1848)	20
4. Speech on the Kansas–Nebraska Act (October 16, 1854)	22
5. To Joshua F. Speed (August 24, 1855)	36
6. Speech on the Dred Scott Decision (June 26, 1857)	41
7. “A House Divided” Speech: Acceptance Speech for the Republican Senatorial Nomination (June 16, 1858)	54
8. Portion of a Speech at Edwardsville, Illinois (September 11, 1858)	63
9. Seventh Lincoln–Douglas Debate: Lincoln’s Reply (October 15, 1858)	68
10. On Thomas Jefferson: To Henry L. Pierce and Others (April 6, 1859)	89
11. Cooper Union Address (February 27, 1860)	92

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89728-0 - Abraham Lincoln Political Writings and Speeches

Edited by Terence Ball

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

12. Speech at Indianapolis, Indiana (February 11, 1861)	111
13. Speech at Independence Hall, Philadelphia (February 22, 1861)	113
14. First Inaugural Address (March 4, 1861)	115
15. Message to Congress in Special Session (July 4, 1861)	124
16. Appeal to Border-State Representatives for Compensated Emancipation (July 12, 1862)	139
17. Address on Colonization to a Committee of Colored Men (August 14, 1862)	142
18. To Horace Greeley (August 22, 1862)	147
19. Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation (September 22, 1862)	149
20. Proclamation Suspending the Writ of <i>Habeas Corpus</i> (September 24, 1862)	153
21. Second Annual Message to Congress (December 1, 1862)	155
22. Final Emancipation Proclamation (January 1, 1863)	167
23. To General John A. McClernand (January 8, 1863)	170
24. To Erastus Corning and Others (June 12, 1863)	172
25. To Matthew Birchard and Others: Reply to the Ohio Democratic Convention (June 29, 1863)	181
26. To James C. Conkling (August 26, 1863)	186
27. The Gettysburg Address (November 19, 1863)	191
28. Third Annual Message to Congress (December 8, 1863)	193
29. Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction (December 8, 1863)	197
30. Reply to the New York Working-men's Democratic Republican Association (March 21, 1864)	201
31. To Albert G. Hodges (April 4, 1864)	203
32. To Charles D. Robinson (August 17, 1864)	206
33. Reply to a Southern Woman (December 6 [?], 1864)	209
34. "With Malice toward None": Second Inaugural Address (March 4, 1865)	210
35. Speech on Reconstruction (Lincoln's last speech) (April 11, 1865)	213
II Notes and Fragments	219
36. On Government (1854?)	221
37. On Slavery (1854?)	223

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89728-0 - Abraham Lincoln Political Writings and Speeches

Edited by Terence Ball

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

38. On Slavery and Democracy (1858?)	224
39. On Pro-slavery Theology (1858?)	225
40. On the Struggle against Slavery (c. July 1858)	227
41. On Racial (In)equality 1: First Lincoln–Douglas Debate (August 21, 1858)	228
42. On Racial (In)equality 2: Fourth Lincoln–Douglas Debate (September 18, 1858)	229
43. The Declaration of Independence includes all men: Fifth Lincoln–Douglas Debate (October 7, 1858)	231
44. On Slavery, Property, and the Constitution: Fifth Lincoln– Douglas Debate (October 7, 1858)	233
45. On Labor and Capital 1 (1846 or 1847)	235
46. On Labor and Capital 2: Address to the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society (September 30, 1859)	236
47. On Labor and Capital 3: Speech at New Haven, Connecticut (March 6, 1860)	239
48. On Liberty: Address at Sanitary Fair, Baltimore, Maryland (April 18, 1864)	240
49. On the Thirteenth Amendment (abolition of slavery): Fourth Annual Message to Congress (December 6, 1864)	241
<i>Index</i>	242

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89728-0 - Abraham Lincoln Political Writings and Speeches

Edited by Terence Ball

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

Abraham Lincoln is legendary among American presidents. And yet the Lincoln legend sometimes makes it difficult to find Lincoln the man, the politician – and the political thinker. My hope is that this addition to the vast literature on Lincoln aids that search in some small way.

Anyone who undertakes the task of selecting and annotating Lincoln's writings immediately faces several difficulties. First, Lincoln was a skilful politician who played his cards close to his vest. It is often difficult, if not impossible, to discern his "real" meaning. When he writes or says something that sounds despicably racist, for example, is he speaking from the heart or attempting to placate an audience of rabid racists? A second difficulty is that it is impossible to master the voluminous secondary literature on Lincoln, which continues to grow apace. This I know because when I agreed to edit this volume I tried – and finally failed – to master this massive *corpus*. But the attempt, although futile, was an education in itself.

On a happier note, I have gratefully incurred a number of debts to scholars and students who have helped me by commenting critically and constructively on my Introduction. I owe a special debt to Russell Hanson and James Read for their close and careful reading of and extensive comments on a first full draft. Randolph Clay Aldridge and Robert W.T. Martin supplied several suggestions and corrections. I owe a more unusual debt to several of my students. I issued a challenge to those taking my undergraduate course in American Political Thought. I asked them to comment critically on my draft Introduction, paying particular attention to obscure references or unclear prose and to passages that could be reduced or eliminated entirely. Three undaunted students –

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-89728-0 - Abraham Lincoln Political Writings and Speeches
Edited by Terence Ball
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

Joseph Campa, David Moakley, and Shane Newlands – accepted that challenge, and this book is the better for their astute comments, criticisms, and suggestions. I would also like to thank my wife Judith for checking the typescript and for preparing the index.

Finally, though not least, I am indebted once again to Richard Fisher and to the editors of this series, Raymond Geuss and Quentin Skinner, for their patience and for commenting very helpfully on my Introduction.

T.B.
Madeline Island in Lake Superior

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89728-0 - Abraham Lincoln Political Writings and Speeches

Edited by Terence Ball

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

Abraham Lincoln occupies a unique place in the American pantheon. Symbol, sage, myth, and martyr, he is an American icon and touchstone – Honest Abe and The Great Emancipator, a Janus-faced demigod sculpted in marble. But that is the post-assassination Lincoln. During his lifetime Lincoln elicited very different reactions. To the abolitionist agitator Wendell Phillips, he was “that slave-hound from Illinois.”¹ To the abolitionist author and orator Frederick Douglass Lincoln was “preeminently the white man’s President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men.”² In the eyes of southern slave-holders and sympathizers Lincoln was a radical abolitionist turned tyrant, a view shared by John Wilkes Booth. “*Sic semper tyrannis!*” – thus always to tyrants – Booth shouted after shooting Lincoln.

My purpose here is to look at Lincoln as a political thinker. This is a more difficult task than might at first appear, for we cannot hope to understand Lincoln the thinker without understanding the constraints under which he thought and wrote and spoke. For Lincoln was, above all, a canny and shrewdly practical politician who had to win elections in order to accomplish anything at all. He was not an armchair philosopher who had the luxury of thinking and discoursing candidly (much less publicly) on the

¹ Wendell Phillips to WHH, n.d., in Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds, *Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), p. 704.

² Frederick Douglass, “Oration delivered on the Occasion of the Unveiling of the Freedman’s Monument in memory of Abraham Lincoln, April 14, 1876,” in Harold Holzer, ed., *The Lincoln Anthology: Great Writers on His Life and Legacy* (New York: Library of America, 2009), p. 226.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89728-0 - Abraham Lincoln Political Writings and Speeches

Edited by Terence Ball

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

great moral and political issues of the day – slavery in particular. As president he steered a complex course between the shoals of radical abolitionism and pro-slavery secessionism, southern sympathizers in the North and border-state loyalists. He was more on the abolitionists' side than they knew or acknowledged; but his actions were constrained by the Constitution, by his oath to uphold it, and by practical political necessity. If we are to understand Lincoln the political thinker, then we must put primary emphasis on the adjective “political,” for his thought is embedded in his actions and the justifications he offers in their defense.

Early life and education

Little is known of Lincoln's early life, and much of what we think we know is mistaken. This much we can say for certain. Lincoln was born in 1809, in humble circumstances – and, yes, in a log cabin – on the rugged Kentucky frontier. That, however, did not distinguish him from most babies born in that hardscrabble region. His mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, died when he was nine, and Thomas Lincoln married the widow Sarah Bush Johnston shortly thereafter. Lincoln showed little affection for his hard driving father but he never ceased to sing the praises of his stepmother, who showed him the love and affection of a real mother. He had little formal education, and that was spotty and sporadic at best. He later tried to teach himself by reading every book he could lay his hands on, including the King James Bible and Shakespeare, whose lingering influence can be seen in the rolling periods of his later oratory. His illiterate father demeaned and discouraged Abraham's efforts at self-education and, with the notable exception of his stepmother, he received little or no encouragement from any other quarter. In an autobiographical sketch written for the 1860 presidential campaign Lincoln, describing himself in the third person, said that “the aggregate of his schooling did not amount to one year. He was never in a college or Academy as a student ... What he has in the way of education, he has picked up ... He regrets his want of education, and does what he can to supply the want.”³

And to that end he did quite a lot. A voracious reader throughout his life, he never ceased to marvel at the wonders of the written word. “*Writing* – the art of communicating thoughts to the mind, through the

³ AL, “Autobiographical Sketch,” c. June, 1860 (see selection 1).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89728-0 - Abraham Lincoln Political Writings and Speeches

Edited by Terence Ball

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

eye – is the great invention of the world.”⁴ His youngest stepsister recalled that “Abe was not energetic except in one thing – he was active & persistent in learning,” and she marveled at her brother’s practice of copying out, memorizing, and reciting long passages.⁵ Throughout his life Lincoln preferred to read aloud, to take words in through the ear as well as the eye. As Richard Hofstadter observes, “these are the reading habits of a man who is preparing for the platform.”⁶

The Lincoln family moved frequently. Abraham was seven when the Lincolns left Kentucky for Indiana. His youth there and later in Illinois was spent in hard physical labor, which ranged from splitting logs to make fence posts and rails, to plowing, planting, and harvesting, to working on a flatboat plying the waters of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. Twice (in 1828 and 1831) he and a friend floated their produce-laden flatboat all the way to New Orleans, an experience that both broadened and darkened his horizons. In a New Orleans slave market he saw men, women, and children being sold at auction like cattle. On another trip, to Louisville, Kentucky, he saw “ten or a dozen slaves, shackled together with irons. That sight was a continual torment to me; and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio, or any other slave-border.”⁷ Lincoln’s aversion to slavery was acquired early on.

So, apparently, was his fondness for politics. In 1832 the 23-year-old Lincoln announced his candidacy for the Illinois House of Representatives. He campaigned hard but lost decisively everywhere except in New Salem where he was well known and respected. When he volunteered to serve briefly in the militia during the Black Hawk War he was elected captain. He later joked that the only blood shed was his, drawn by hungry mosquitoes.⁸

Returning to New Salem, Lincoln worked by turns as hired hand, store clerk, mill hand, ferryman, surveyor, and other odd jobs. He longed for a less laborious and more genteel and respectable life. Frugal and hard-working, he invested his meager savings in a partner’s general store.

⁴ AL, “Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions,” April 6, 1858, *SW* II, p. 7.

⁵ WHH interview with Matilda Johnston Moore, September 8, 1865, *Herndon’s Informants*, p. 109.

⁶ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition: And the Men Who Made It*, 2nd edn (New York: Knopf, 1973), p. 125.

⁷ AL to Joshua Speed, August 24, 1855 (selection 5).

⁸ AL’s remarks ridiculing his part in the Black Hawk War take the form of a humorous aside in his otherwise serious “Speech on the Presidential Question,” July 27, 1848, *SW* I, pp. 205–21, at 214. Hofstadter ranks these remarks as “one of the classics of American frontier humor” (*American Political Tradition*, p. 159).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89728-0 - Abraham Lincoln Political Writings and Speeches

Edited by Terence Ball

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

After his feckless partner drank up all the profits and died the store went bankrupt, leaving Lincoln with enormous debts. Although legally liable for his half only, Lincoln insisted on paying all creditors in full. His reputation as “honest Abe” would soon stand him in good stead.

Lincoln’s first campaign, although unsuccessful, had whetted his appetite for politics. In 1834 he ran again for the Illinois House of Representatives, as a Whig, and was elected. Whigs favored a protective tariff to encourage domestic manufacturing, and federal and state government expenditures on roads, railroads, bridges, and canals as a means of encouraging commerce within and between the states. The leading national Whig was Henry Clay of Kentucky, whom Lincoln called “my *beau ideal* of a statesman.”⁹ Closer to home, Lincoln was befriended by the prominent Illinois Whig, John Todd Stuart, the minority leader in the House. The two men roomed together at the state capital in Vandalia, and Stuart encouraged Lincoln to study the law in his spare time. Under Stuart’s tutelage he read Sir William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* and other works. Lincoln passed the Illinois bar examination and in September 1837 was licensed to practice law, which raised his standing among House colleagues and also helped secure his financial future. During his time in the Illinois House he also came to know another up-and-coming politician, the 21-year old Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, who was later to become Lincoln’s arch-rival and most formidable foe.

Lincoln’s career in the Illinois House of Representatives was undistinguished. He was instrumental in moving the state capital from Vandalia to Springfield, and in 1837 he and fellow representative Dan Stone sponsored a resolution opposing slavery and abolitionism alike – the former because “the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and on bad policy,” and the latter because “abolition doctrines” make matters worse by stirring the pot.¹⁰ Whether his rather conventional and conservative political views came from conviction or ambition we do not know. “He was always calculating and planning ahead,” his law partner later recalled. “His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest.”¹¹ Lincoln longed for

⁹ AL, “A House Divided,” June 16, 1858 (selection 7). “Henry Clay was his favorite of all the great men of the nation[;] he all but worshiped his name”: J. Rowan Herndon to WHH, May 28, 1865, in *Herndon’s Informants*, p. 8. See also AL’s eulogy for Henry Clay, July 6, 1852, *SWI*, pp 259–72.

¹⁰ “Protest in the Illinois Legislature on Slavery,” March 3, 1837, *SWI*, p. 18.

¹¹ WHH and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon’s Life of Lincoln*, ed. Paul M. Angle (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1961), p. 304.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89728-0 - Abraham Lincoln Political Writings and Speeches

Edited by Terence Ball

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

a larger stage, and to that end he cultivated friendships, campaigned for the Whig presidential candidate William Henry Harrison in 1840, married his social superior Mary Todd (of the slave-owning Kentucky Todds) in 1842, and sought (unsuccessfully) the Whig nomination for the US Congress in 1843. All the while he never refused an invitation to speak on topics ranging from temperance to the preservation of American political institutions.

Written and delivered not only to inform his audience but to impress them with his eloquence, Lincoln's early orations were rather conventional, and a far cry from the deft and self-assured speeches of the 1850s and early 1860s. But some, such as his 1838 speech to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, show the young lawyer-legislator to be a political thinker who had thought deeply about some serious questions. One of these is the question of the proper role of religion and remembrance in public life.

Little is known of Lincoln's religious beliefs. Critics claimed that he had none and was in fact a free-thinker or atheist. So widespread and persistent was this politically damning criticism that Lincoln felt it necessary to issue a public denial.¹² Although his denial was vague and apparently half-hearted, Lincoln wholeheartedly embraced and espoused an American *civil* religion. Like Machiavelli, Rousseau, and other republican thinkers he had probably never read, Lincoln believed that a shared civil religion was needed to cement the citizenry together from generation to generation. He spoke of the need for a "*political religion*" to bind Americans together.¹³ The English word "religion" derives from the Latin *ligare*, "to bind fast." A republican civil religion would tie citizens tightly to their origins, reminding them from where the republic came, and why. Thus a key feature of republican political thinking is its emphasis on *time* and *memory* or *remembrance*, especially of foundings and founders. The passage of time does what cannons cannot: It dims and even erases memory, most especially of the American Revolution and the Founding. "[What] invading foemen could *never* do, the silent artillery of time *has done*."¹⁴ Lincoln thought it imperative that citizens of the

¹² "Handbill Replying to Charges of Infidelity," July 31, 1846, in *SWI*, pp 139–40.

¹³ "Address to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois," January 27, 1838 (selection 2); *AL*'s italics.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* On the importance attached to time and memory by the republican tradition, see Bruce James Smith, *Politics and Remembrance* (Princeton University Press, 1985): A republic is "a type of regime erected upon the injunction: remember" (p. 7).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89728-0 - Abraham Lincoln Political Writings and Speeches

Edited by Terence Ball

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

American republic should resist the ravages of time by commemorating – that is, remembering together – the origins of their republic, those who founded it, and the texts that serve as its secular scripture. As we shall see shortly, in the 1850s and finally and most memorably at Gettysburg in 1863, Lincoln elevated the Declaration of Independence to the status of American scripture.¹⁵

In addition to substantive speeches, Lincoln wrote letters to and satirical pieces for newspapers, and poetry that was nostalgic and sentimental, in the manner of the songs of Stephen Foster. And, not least, Lincoln presided over an increasingly successful law practice with his junior partner (and future biographer), William H. Herndon. For Lincoln the courtroom was a theater in which to practice and perfect his craft, not only as a lawyer but as a politician and orator. The tall, raw-boned, and physically powerful young attorney impressed clients and adversaries alike with his hard work, conscientious preparation, and capacity to build a convincing case backed by argument and evidence and illustrated with apt and often amusing anecdotes.

His increasingly lucrative law practice notwithstanding, Lincoln had lost none of his political ambition, and in 1846 he was nominated for and elected to the United States Congress. Determined to stand out and make a name for himself, Congressman Lincoln publicly and courageously questioned the constitutionality of President James K. Polk's decision to wage war with Mexico.¹⁶ But the Mexican–American War (1846–48) was wildly popular with most Americans – not least because it annexed Mexico's northern territories (most of present-day New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, California, and Nevada) to the United States – and Lincoln was not nominated for a second term.¹⁷ His first and only congressional term at an end, Lincoln returned to Illinois to practice law full time. The profitability of his law practice, along with his ever-growing family, seems to have quieted his political ambitions, at least for a time. He campaigned for other candidates but did not stand for office himself.

¹⁵ See Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Knopf, 1997), especially pp. 197–215.

¹⁶ “Speech in the US House of Representatives on the War with Mexico,” January 12, 1848, *SW I*, pp. 161–71. AL defends his speech in a letter to Herndon, February 15, 1848 (selection 3).

¹⁷ Lincoln's opposition to the war with Mexico continued to be used against him by political opponents. “While still in Congress,” Senator Stephen A. Douglas said, “he distinguished himself by his opposition to the Mexican war, taking the side of the common enemy against his own country.” First Lincoln–Douglas debate, August 21, 1858, *SW I*, pp. 500–501.

Introduction

Then, in 1854, lightning struck. Senator Stephen A. Douglas, Democrat of Illinois, successfully sponsored the Kansas–Nebraska Act, which overturned the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and allowed the extension of slavery into the western territories acquired in the Louisiana Purchase and the Cession following the war with Mexico. Written into the Act was Douglas’s doctrine of “popular sovereignty,” according to which white male settlers in the territories would decide democratically whether theirs was to be a free or a slave state. Outraged and unwilling to remain silent, Lincoln was determined to act.

Into the gathering storm

Writing of himself in the third person Lincoln recalled, “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.”¹⁸ Although angry, he at first held his fire. He studied the language and the reasoning of the Act, looking for logical fallacies and historical inaccuracies. He made a careful study of the history of and justification offered for the Missouri Compromise. Like the lawyer he was, Lincoln constructed his case carefully and meticulously. After three months of preparation he was ready, and armed at all points.

With pro-slavery forces fighting “free soilers” in “bleeding Kansas,” and alarmed at the controversy he had helped to create, Senator Douglas returned to Illinois to defend his Act. Following Douglas all across the state, Lincoln took to the stump with the longest and best speech of his heretofore undistinguished career. His 17,000-word address took three hours to deliver and was fiery, learned, passionate and dispassionate by turns, and a *tour de force*. He tore into Douglas, his Kansas–Nebraska Act, and his doctrine of popular sovereignty in particular. How is it, Lincoln asked, that free men are entitled to decide, democratically, to enslave others?¹⁹ For his part, Douglas claimed to be indifferent to the spread of slavery and to be a democrat who would leave that decision to the will of the people (or rather, strictly speaking, to a majority of enfranchised white men). To this, Lincoln thundered:

¹⁸ “Autobiographical Sketch,” June 1860 (selection 1).

¹⁹ “Speech on the Kansas–Nebraska Act” (selection 4).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89728-0 - Abraham Lincoln Political Writings and Speeches

Edited by Terence Ball

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

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*.²⁰

With the passage of the Kansas–Nebraska Act,

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 re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it ... If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have saved it, as to make, and keep it, forever worthy of the saving.²¹

Fired up as never before, Lincoln reentered politics and won election to the state legislature. But when it became clear that anti-Nebraska Democrats and Whigs had gained control of the legislature, he resigned his seat to stand for the US Senate in 1855. (Under the original Constitution, and before the Seventeenth Amendment [1913], US senators were elected not by popular vote but by state legislatures.) Lincoln led in early balloting but began to lose ground. When it seemed certain that a Douglas ally and pro-Nebraska Democrat would win, Lincoln withdrew and threw his support to the anti-Nebraska Democrat Lyman Trumbull, who won on the tenth ballot. To say that Lincoln was disappointed would be an understatement. He had come close, but not close enough, to winning a seat in the United States Senate. He would have his turn again three years later.

The Kansas–Nebraska Act had set Kansas ablaze and divided the Democratic and Whig parties. The only party that was foursquare against the spread of slavery was the newly formed “free soil and free labor” Republican Party. Lincoln joined.

In Lincoln’s view the Kansas–Nebraska Act was nothing short of disastrous, but it was at least a disaster with the legislative remedy of repeal. And if the growing ranks of Republicans had their way, it would

²⁰ Ibid. ²¹ Ibid.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89728-0 - Abraham Lincoln Political Writings and Speeches

Edited by Terence Ball

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

be remedied. But in 1857, three years after the Act, came another and even heavier blow in the form of a decision handed down by the United States Supreme Court.

Dred Scott was a slave whose master had taken him to the free state of Illinois and the Wisconsin Territory, and Scott argued that he was therefore free since slavery was not legal in any free state or territory. When the case reached the US Supreme Court, a majority (seven of nine Justices) ruled that Scott was not and could not be a citizen and so had no “standing” to bring a case; but, clearly contradicting itself, the Court took the case anyway, ruling against Scott. That tortured and lengthy majority opinion, written by Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, is succinctly summarized by Lincoln:

The Constitution of the United States forbids Congress to deprive a man of his property, without due process of law; the right of property in slaves is distinctly and expressly affirmed in that Constitution; therefore, if Congress shall undertake to say that a man’s slave is no longer his slave, when he crosses a certain line into a territory, that is depriving him of his property without due process of law, and is unconstitutional.²²

But the loss was not Scott’s alone. The Dred Scott decision was radical and far-reaching. Indeed, it went much further than the Kansas–Nebraska Act, in that it declared the Missouri Compromise to have been unconstitutional and said that Congress could not exclude slavery anywhere, including already-existing free states and future states to be carved out of the Western territories.²³ The Court also declared that even free Negroes and mulattos were not and could never be citizens of the United States, adding that blacks are “beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”²⁴

²² AL, “Speech at Columbus, Ohio,” September 16, 1859, *SW* II, p. 52. The Dred Scott decision reads like an extended gloss of the argument advanced by South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun in his “Speech on the Oregon Bill” (June 27, 1848), in *Union and Liberty: The Political Philosophy of John C. Calhoun*, ed. Ross M. Lence (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1992), especially p. 557.

²³ On the decision’s impact see Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 1978).

²⁴ *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), in Henry Steele Commager, ed., *Documents of American History*, 2 vols, 7th edn (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), vol. I, pp. 339–45, at 342.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89728-0 - Abraham Lincoln Political Writings and Speeches

Edited by Terence Ball

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

The Dred Scott decision seemed to have dealt a decisive blow to the Republican Party's goal of stopping the spread of slavery.²⁵ Greatly alarmed at the prospect of slavery's further extension, Lincoln once again entered the fray with a measured but blistering attack on that decision and on Douglas, who had defended it. The core of Lincoln's critique was the error and absurdity of Taney's and Douglas's assertion that the Declaration of Independence's promise of equality applies only to whites, not to blacks. This, says Lincoln, is a blatant distortion of the plain words of the Declaration that "all men are created equal." The words "all men" mean "*all* men." Slavery tramples the right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and sometimes the right to life itself. Once held sacred, the Declaration is now demeaned and defamed: "To aid in making the bondage of the negro universal and eternal, it is assailed, and sneered at, and construed, and hawked at, and torn, till, if its framers could rise from their graves, they could not at all recognize it."²⁶

To read the Declaration as Lincoln and the Republicans read it, Douglas claimed, not only would eventually destroy the institution of slavery but would allow blacks to associate with whites on equal terms. The unacceptable upshot will be that blacks will intermarry (or "amalgamate") with whites. Lincoln's reply was by turns humorous, acerbic, and principled. Douglas and other Democrats are "especially horrified at the thought of the mixing blood by the white and black races: agreed for once – a thousand times agreed. There are white men enough to marry all the white women, and black men enough to marry all the black women; and so let them be married."²⁷ And: "I protest against that counterfeit logic which concludes that, because I do not want a black woman for a *slave* I must necessarily want her for a *wife*. I need not have her for either, I can just leave her alone." And then, anticipating an argument he would use against Douglas a year later, Lincoln added: "In some respects she certainly is not my equal; but in her natural right to eat the bread she earns with her own hands without asking leave of anyone else, she is my equal, and the equal of all others."²⁸

In the wake of the Dred Scott decision American slavery had acquired a new lease on life. Having been both ardent and articulate in his opposition

²⁵ The Dred Scott decision could be countermanded in only one of two ways: Either the Court could reverse itself by rescinding its decision; or the Constitution could be amended (which is what happened in 1865 with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment). See selection 49.

²⁶ "Speech on the Dred Scott Decision," June 26, 1857 (selection 6). ²⁷ *Ibid.* ²⁸ *Ibid.*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89728-0 - Abraham Lincoln Political Writings and Speeches

Edited by Terence Ball

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

to Douglas's Kansas–Nebraska Act and Douglas's defense of the Dred Scott decision, Lincoln was well positioned to secure the nomination of Illinois Republicans for the 1858 Senate race. Upon receiving their nomination Lincoln delivered his most electrifying speech to date. “A house divided against itself cannot stand,” he said, quoting the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark (3: 25). “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.”²⁹ The Kansas–Nebraska Act, followed by the Dred Scott decision, pointed in one direction only: If not stopped, slavery would spread until it became universal in the United States.

The Lincoln–Douglas Debates

Having made his name and reputation in Republican circles in Illinois and beyond, Lincoln was the party's obvious choice to run against Douglas in the 1858 Senatorial election. The two had tangled before, but the stage was now set for their most memorable and protracted encounter yet. The more established and better-known Douglas graciously assented to Lincoln's suggestion that they engage in seven debates at various venues around the state. The debates drew large and frequently raucous audiences. In mid-nineteenth-century America political rallies and debates were a source of mass entertainment, amusement, and information. Under the US Constitution of the day, voters could not vote directly for Douglas or for Lincoln – that would be done by the state legislature – but legislators leaned the way their constituents wanted them to.³⁰

The two men made an odd pair. At nearly six and a half feet, the tall and gangly Lincoln towered over the five-foot four-inch “Little Giant.” Renowned as a fierce and formidable debater, Douglas was to meet his match in Lincoln. In their first debate, however, Lincoln stumbled, taken aback by Douglas's repeated references to the “Black Republican Party” which he claimed was really a front for the “Abolition Party” led by Lincoln's good friend “Fred Douglass” (i.e., the former slave turned

²⁹ “A House Divided” Speech, June 16, 1858 (selection 7).

³⁰ The Lincoln–Douglas debates doubtless helped pave the way for the Seventeenth Amendment (1913) which changes Art. I, sec. 3 to require that senators be elected by direct popular vote.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89728-0 - Abraham Lincoln Political Writings and Speeches

Edited by Terence Ball

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

eloquent abolitionist Frederick Douglass) who, he alleged, consorted with white women.³¹

Douglas knew his audience well. Many, perhaps most, citizens of Illinois were negrophobes and racists, some were favorably disposed to the institution of slavery, and most were ill-disposed to abolitionists and to the very idea that blacks were (or conceivably could ever be) full and free citizens of the United States. Ten years before the Lincoln–Douglas debates seven out of ten Illinois voters had approved a constitutional amendment to keep all blacks out of their state. When campaigning against Douglas, Lincoln had to tread a fine line on the issues of race and slavery. Douglas did not demur from making blatantly racist appeals to the Illinois electorate, and tried time and again (albeit unsuccessfully) to lure Lincoln into a contest to decide which of the two contenders was the more ardent racist.

Not surprisingly, the Lincoln–Douglas debates focused on the intensifying conflict over slavery and what it portended for the future of the American republic. Douglas disputed Lincoln's view that the nation could not continue to exist half free and half slave. It had done so since the Founding; why should it not continue? Besides, Lincoln's attacks on slavery would only alienate the South and give it good reason to secede from the Union. Lincoln's alleged abolitionist leanings and belief in "negro equality" were like sparks to gunpowder. And, reiterating his defense of the Dred Scott decision, Douglas denied that the Declaration of Independence referred to "all men" regardless of race. Douglas repeated his and Chief Justice Taney's claim that, in writing "all men are created equal," Jefferson meant all *white* men. To argue otherwise, as Lincoln had, is a "monstrous heresy."³² Such assertions were typically met with loud applause all across the state, and especially in its southern counties.

When campaigning in the negrophobic southern part of the state, Lincoln was not above defending himself in terms that were racist, or close to it: "I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races. I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people."³³ Even so, Lincoln argued for a rough kind of racial equality, even as he appeared to equivocate. He assuaged his negrophobic audience by speaking

³¹ First Lincoln–Douglas Debate, August 21, 1858, *SW I*, pp 495–536, at 505.

³² Fifth Lincoln–Douglas Debate, October 7, 1858, *SW I*, pp 697–8.

³³ Fourth Lincoln–Douglas Debate, September 18, 1858, *SW I*, pp 636–84, at 636.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89728-0 - Abraham Lincoln Political Writings and Speeches

Edited by Terence Ball

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

in favor of racial segregation and black inferiority even as he argued for the natural rights of *all* races.

Lincoln had a talent for turning quickly and seamlessly from pandering politician to principled moralist, as can be seen in the following excerpt from the first debate. First comes the pander:

I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and the black races. There is a physical difference between the two, which in my judgment will probably forever forbid their living together upon the footing of perfect equality, and inasmuch as it becomes a necessity that there must be a difference, I, as well as Judge Douglas, am in favor of the race to which I belong, having the superior position. I have never said anything to the contrary, but [he continues in a more elevated and principled vein] I hold that notwithstanding all this, there is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. [Loud cheers.] I hold that he is as much entitled to these as the white man. I agree with Judge Douglas he is not my equal in many respects – certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment. But in the right to eat the bread, without leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, *he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man.* [Great applause.]³⁴

The apparent pander is a prelude to a ringing reaffirmation of the natural rights of all human beings, regardless of race. After making so bold as to declare that the Declaration applies to all human beings, Lincoln seems to slip – “I agree with Judge Douglas he is not my equal in many respects – *certainly* not in color, *perhaps* not in moral or intellectual endowment” – but this is no slip: It is an interjection between two then-radical and quite daring statements of moral principle.

Lincoln had been nominated because he was best able to articulate the Republicans’ “free soil, free labor” view that slavery is the institutionalized theft of one man’s labor by another.³⁵ Time and again Lincoln drove the point home. Slavery not only degrades individual slaves and deprives them of the fruits of their labor; it demeans the dignity of labor itself, whether the laborer be white or black, free or slave. And, not least,

³⁴ First Lincoln–Douglas Debate, August 21, 1858, *SWI*, pp 495–536, at 512.

³⁵ See Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War*, 2nd edn (Oxford University Press, 1995).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89728-0 - Abraham Lincoln Political Writings and Speeches

Edited by Terence Ball

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

Lincoln attempted to allay his audiences' deep-seated negrophobia by appealing to their self-interest as free laborers. Because crops grown and goods manufactured by slaves are cheaper than those grown and made by free men, slavery threatened the livelihood of free laborers in Illinois and elsewhere.

Lincoln's contest with Douglas ended with the latter's reelection. But if Lincoln's debates with Douglas did not secure the victory he sought, he gained something else: increasing national prominence, particularly in Republican circles.

Lincoln for president

Even as the Lincoln–Douglas debates enhanced Lincoln's national visibility, they helped throw the Democratic Party into disarray. At the beginning of the debates Douglas was well positioned not only to retain his Senate seat, but to be nominated for president by the national Democratic Party two years later. In the course of the debates, however, Lincoln laid a trap for Douglas and the Democrats. How, he asked in their second debate at Freeport, could settlers in a territory – relying on Douglas's doctrine of popular sovereignty – decide democratically to keep slavery out of that territory, since the Supreme Court had declared in the Dred Scott case that they could not do so? Had the Court not made Douglas's doctrine obsolete and inapplicable?

Douglas's reply, which came to be known as the "Freeport Doctrine," held that settlers in such territories could decide democratically not to enact and enforce a territorial slave code, effectively making theirs a free territory and subsequently a free state. This answer enraged southern Democrats, splitting the party into a northern and a southern wing and almost certainly ensuring the election of a Republican president in 1860. Before ensuring that Lincoln would be that Republican, he first had to assure prominent eastern Republicans that an obscure, homely, and self-educated lawyer from the western prairies would not make their party a laughingstock.

The Republican Party, and the country, needed a president to bring peace to a nation nearing the precipice of civil war. Several slave states were poised to secede from the Union, even as abolitionists goaded them to try. In 1859 the militant abolitionist John Brown led a raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia in the hope of arming slaves and inciting a slave insurrection throughout the South. Although unsuccessful, Brown's

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89728-0 - Abraham Lincoln Political Writings and Speeches

Edited by Terence Ball

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

raid greatly increased Southerners' apprehensions that their "peculiar institution" was in grave danger from abolitionists and Republicans who were, in their eyes, one and the same. As a possible Republican nominee for president, Lincoln would have to reassure the South without losing the support of the North.

In the autumn of 1859 Lincoln was invited to what was, for all practical purposes, a job interview: Under the sponsorship of the Young Men's Republican Union he was to address a large audience at New York's Cooper Union. On February 27, 1860, after months of meticulous preparation Lincoln was ready to make his case that – contrary not only to Douglas's view and the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision, but to William Lloyd Garrison and the radical abolitionists as well – the Constitution was not a pro-slavery compact. A majority of the Founders held that the federal government had the authority to prevent the spread of slavery in its territories. Patiently and painstakingly Lincoln showed that Douglas and the Court had been wrong, factually and historically, about the Founders' beliefs and intentions.³⁶ Lincoln went on to reassure the South that the Republican Party had no intention of interfering with the institution of slavery in the South; its policy was to prevent the extension of slavery, not to eliminate it. Lincoln concluded by addressing his fellow Republicans, asking them to stand by their principled policy of preventing the spread of slavery while recognizing full well the evil of that institution.

At the conclusion of his address the audience of fifteen hundred rose to their feet, roaring and clapping their approval. Prominent Republicans in the audience concluded that no other Republican could have done what Lincoln did that evening. The next day Lincoln's speech was reprinted and praised handsomely in the newspapers of New York and other eastern cities. Any lingering doubts about Lincoln's fitness for the presidency had been laid to rest.³⁷

While in the east Lincoln gave several speeches, all variations on his "Cooper Union Address." In New Haven, Connecticut to visit his son Robert, then a student at the Phillips Exeter Academy preparing to enter Harvard, Lincoln elaborated his party's pro-labor platform. A shoemakers' strike was then spreading throughout New England, and Lincoln used it to illustrate the difference between free labor and slave labor.

³⁶ AL, "Cooper Union Address," February 27, 1860 (selection 11).

³⁷ Harold Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech that Made Abraham Lincoln President* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89728-0 - Abraham Lincoln Political Writings and Speeches

Edited by Terence Ball

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

I am glad to see that a system of labor prevails in New England under which laborers CAN strike when they want to, where they are not obliged to work under all circumstances, and are not tied down and obliged to labor whether you pay them or not! I like the system which lets a man quit when he wants to, and wish it might prevail everywhere.

One of the reasons why I am opposed to Slavery is just here. What is the true condition of the laborer? I take it that it is best for all to leave each man free to acquire property as fast as he can. Some will get wealthy. I don't believe in a law to prevent a man from getting rich; it would do more harm than good. So while we do not propose any war upon capital, we do wish to allow the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with everybody else.³⁸

Using himself as a case in point, Lincoln added, "I am not ashamed to confess that twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer, mauling rails, at work on a flat-boat – just what might happen to any poor man's son!" And then, expanding upon his autobiographical aside, he continues: "I want every man to have the chance – and I believe a black man is entitled to it – in which he *can* better his condition – when he may look forward and hope to be a hired laborer this year and the next, work for himself afterward, and finally to hire men to work for him. That is the true system."³⁹ This complements his earlier statement that "the democracy of to-day holds the *liberty* of one man to be absolutely nothing, when in conflict with another man's right of *property*. Republicans, on the contrary, are for both the *man* and the *dollar*; but in cases of conflict, the man before the dollar."⁴⁰

Lincoln's eastern tour was a triumph. Republican newspapers all but nominated him for the presidency, and opposition Democratic Party papers agreed, with some trepidation, that Lincoln was the likely nominee. And indeed he was. At the Republican convention in Chicago in May 1860 Lincoln defeated his chief rival, New York senator William H. Seward, and was nominated on the third ballot. As was then the custom, presidential candidates, Lincoln included, did not give stump speeches; that was left to others. And, as expected, the Democratic Party split into a northern faction headed by Stephen A. Douglas and a southern splinter party led by Senator John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky; divided, the Democrats lost the election, and the Republican candidate from Illinois became president with not quite 40 percent of the popular vote.

³⁸ AL, "Speech at New Haven, Connecticut," March 6, 1860 (selection 47), at 144.

³⁹ Ibid. ⁴⁰ AL to Henry L. Pierce and others, April 6, 1859 (selection 10).