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Lincoln and the Language of Hate and Fear: A View from the South

by
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In 1854 we come to the central portion of Lincoln's career, and to the sequence of speeches which made of him a national figure and, finally, a President. To be specific, the watershed occurs after he had played a minor role in the campaign of Winfield Scott; after the deaths of Clay and Webster; after a brief (and maladroit) adventure as the Sucker Whig in Congress; and (more important) after Stephen Douglas had returned from Washington to Illinois to answer the objections made there among his neighbors to his part in passing the Kansas-Nebraska Act. To the Little Giant's role in the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and the opening of the new territories west of Missouri and Iowa to their organization as either free or slave states there had been a general remonstrance in the Northwest. And, in the fall of 1854, Douglas went home to face the electorate which had raised him to a seat of power in the Senate of the United States and to account for the decisions that he had made in order to facilitate the development of the West. Douglas began this campaign of persuasion upstate, and then worked his way south. Outside of Chicago he was well received. But when he reached the Springfield area, Lincoln rose to give him answer. A few days later he repeated this reply to Douglas's set speech in Peoria, Illinois. It is with this second version of Lincoln's rejoinder (known since as

the “Peoria Speech”), given October 16, 1854, that he puts behind him his identify as a disciple of Henry Clay. Though he does not officially leave the party until 1856 – after many of its members have located themselves, with varying degrees of discomfort, under a heterogeneous Republican tent.



Stephen Arnold Douglas (April 23, 1813 – June 3, 1861) was a politician from Illinois, and was the Northern Democratic Party nominee for President in 1860. He lost to the Republican Party's candidate, Abraham Lincoln, whom he had defeated two years earlier in a Senate contest following a famed series of debates. He was nicknamed the "Little Giant" because he was short of stature but was considered by many a "giant" in politics. As chairman of the Committee on Territories, Douglas dominated the Senate in the 1850s. He was largely responsible for the Compromise of 1850 that for some settled the issue. However, in 1854 he reopened the slavery question by the highly controversial Kansas-Nebraska Act that allowed the people of the new territories to decide for themselves whether or not to have slavery (which had been prohibited by earlier

compromises). The protest movement against this found a home in the Republican Party. Douglas supported the Dred Scott Supreme Court decision of 1857, and denied that it was part of a Southern plot to introduce slavery into the northern states, and argued it could not be effective when the people of a territory declined to pass laws supporting it. When President James Buchanan and his Southern allies attempted to pass a Federal slave code, to support slavery even against the wishes of the people of Kansas, he battled and defeated this movement as undemocratic. This caused the split in the Democratic Party in 1860, as Douglas won the nomination but a breakaway southern faction nominated their own candidate, Vice President John C. Breckinridge. Douglas believed in democratic principle, arguing the will of the people should always be decisive. When Lincoln's War to Prevent Southern independence began in April 1861, he rallied his supporters to the Lincoln's view of union with all his energies, but he died a few weeks later.

In considering what Lincoln now becomes it is *extremely* important to remember what he had been in all the years before, how he has conducted himself as a man and an Illinois politician, and what shifts have occurred in the intellectual atmosphere in which he moves. For it is a consensus of *all* the scholarship that the "Peoria Speech" brings before us a "second Lincoln," a figure greatly altered from the moderate opportunist of the early years. The usual explanation of this metamorphosis is that "devotion to a cause" has had a magic effect on the prairie lawyer. Or that "the Kansas-Nebraska Act transformed his thinking on the whole subject [of slavery]." In the quiet years following his return from the single (and disastrous) term in the House of Representatives, Lincoln had probably thought of himself as a man with no political future. Then, with the Kansas-Nebraska Act, he got another chance, but not as an orthodox Whig. He was not about to let it pass.

With his 1854 reappearance in the political arena, we encounter suddenly (and without forewarning) an orator who suggests the character we have so often been encouraged to admire: encounter a foreshadowing of the man in the myth. And indeed Lincoln's change in manner is remarkable, but it is only a

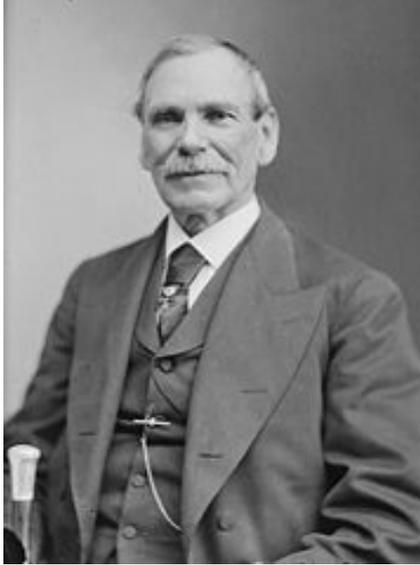
change in strategy. Knowing him as he was before Douglas left the opening on his flank, we find it difficult to believe that the human substance concealed within this altered persona is so very different from the clever, ruthless, and yet ordinary country politician who as a leader among Illinois Whigs, from what one of his biographers describes as “an essentially self-centered, small-town politician.” Such transformations, wrought from such materials, belong only to hagiography, and even with God’s grace, the saints rarely come so far.

There will always be, of course, a certain number who will believe Lincoln’s statement that his only motive for returning to the campaign trail was a desire to assist Richard Yates of Jacksonville in his candidacy for re-election as representative of the Seventh District of Illinois; and that, at that time, he had “no thought of a new political career for himself.” These credulous souls who accept on its face Lincoln’s every word may also be persuaded that his newfound anxiety at the expansion of slavery, and his new rhetoric for treating of that prospect, issued from nothing more complex than his disinterested concern for the common good. Or that he was just an overgrown country boy, the *vir bonus* of the classical description: a “warm hearted and simple minded man,” as Herndon says in mocking summary of this view. To convince these men of trust that the cause cannot interpret the man, that Lincoln should not be seen through the prism of his assassination, is to threaten something of themselves which is made specific in their attachment to the Lincoln myth. But the reading of these middle years, and of the language by which they are defined, which we will test in the following discussion is of another kind, resting on the theory that we should explicate our Lincoln *seriatim*, from the beginning, forward; and that, as Herndon insisted, he was a “cool man,” guided by “policy” in all things, by “profound calculation and logical precision.” It will be our argument that he proceeded and spoke as he did in order to get the way to the Senate open for himself. With his good friend, Senator Lyman Trumbull, we will assume that it is

. . . a popular mistake to suppose Mr. Lincoln free from

ambition. A more ardent seeker after office never existed. From the time when, at the age of twenty-three, he announced himself a candidate for the legislature from Sangamon County, till his death, he was constantly either in office or struggling to obtain one.

Let us see how well this perspective accounts for what Lincoln said and did.



James Shields (May 10, 1810 – June 1, 1879) was an United States Army officer who was born in Altmore, County Tyrone, Ireland. Shields, a Democrat, is the only person in U.S. History to serve as a U.S. Senator for three different states and strongly opposed Lincoln. Shields was a senator from Illinois 1849 to 1855, from Minnesota from May 11, 1858 to March 3, 1859, and from Missouri from January 27, 1879 to March 3, 1879.

While discussing Lincoln's earliest reactions to the Kansas-Nebraska Act and his effort to capture the Senate seat of his old adversary, James Shields, Donald W. Riddle has written,

Lincoln was not fighting for a cause. He was using the slavery issue, conveniently presented by the Kansas-

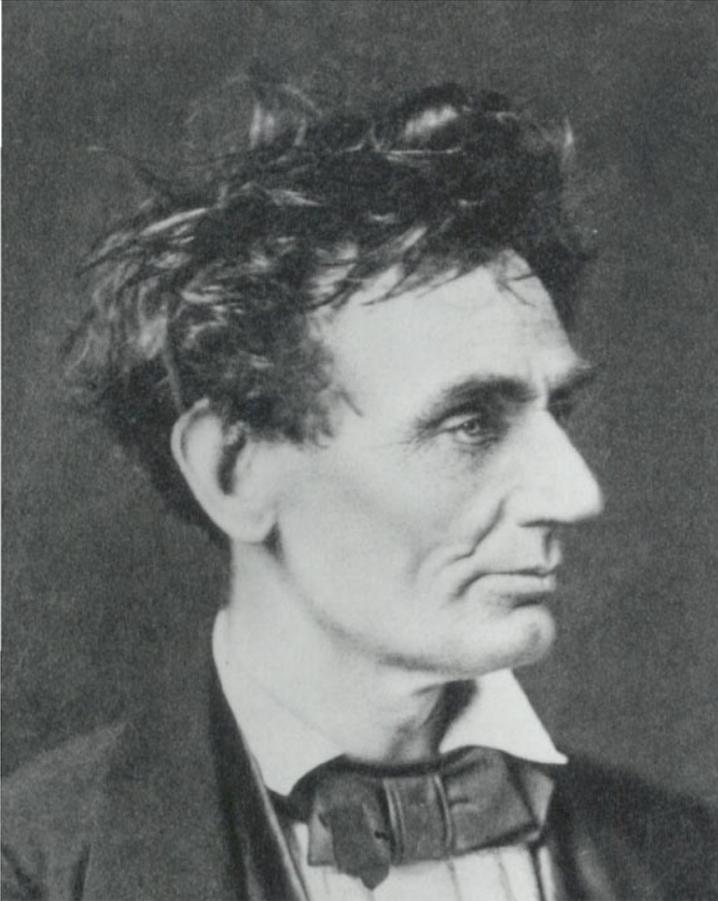
Nebraska Act, to advance his own political standing. He was using the Act to run for office; . . . [without it] there was not the slightest likelihood of his election.

A bit later, the Illinois historian adds, “Never before had Lincoln run for office on the slavery issue, but never afterward would he run on any other.” Riddle’s reading of Lincoln’s conduct in this period is sound enough, so far as it goes. But it might easily lead us to ignore the fact that Lincoln’s true target is never slavery or even the regime of the South, but rather certain public men in the North who are skilled in working with the established powers below the Old Surveyor’s Line. Which is to say that his true target has not really changed at all. It is the Democratic party, and particularly the Illinois Democrats. The Whigs had ceased to be a national force when Tyler and Fillmore disappointed the reasonable expectations of their “Old Federalist” wing. That party had died with Webster and Clay. In its place was left a vacuum, partially filled by two or three almost viable new organizations. But these almost-parties were apparently too narrow to grow. To win against the hated Locos, a candidate at the national level would have to combine strength from most of these with what remained of the Whigs, and with the disaffected Democrats. And the same situation obtained in many state and local races. Irregular Democrats were especially important in this formula. For the special synthesis achieved by Andrew Jackson was also on its way to dissolution and no equivalent catalyst was in sight. The year of 1854 was therefore a good time for a Midwestern politician to turn his coat – or at least retailor it with curious (and contradictory) additions. We must admit in fairness that Lincoln was not quick to change his political identity and did not invent the new persona which he adopted, though he finally got on with the new job of self-recreation and became the master of a new political style. All of which we can demonstrate from the text of his works. Lincoln’s formula was simple: if the Whigs could lose their national following, so might the Democrats. The old spirit of sectional accommodation could be easily discredited, particularly in the Northwest, a territory filling rapidly with new citizens who did not

understand it, or its importance to the possibility of Union: a region rapidly developing a proud identity of its own. With Illinois politicians who spoke another language Lincoln was now prepared to deal, attacking with a great host already at his back.

To understand how it came to be possible to divide the Democrats and create a Northern sectional party it is necessary for us to review what happened to change Illinois and the remainder of the Northwest between 1834, when Lincoln and Douglas first encountered one another in the old capitol in Vandalia, and the time of their exchange in Peoria, some twenty years later. For as the line of settlement moved westward and the empty lands were filled, the spirit of comity left by the Revolution and early years within the Union was subjected to periodic strains. Almost always the unstated issue was whether an additional state would lend its political support to the South or the Northeast; to the agricultural or the commercial interest, to limited or energetic government. Yet often the idiom in which these possibilities were explored, the framework for the distribution of power, was a dispute over the advantage and disadvantage of holding Negro slaves. Or at least it was safe to predict that slavery would be brought into the discussion. At times it seemed that neither side would agree to increase the voting strength of the other, even when geography and the movements of population left them with little choice. These problems of rightful distribution of power reached a climax after the conclusion of the Mexican War. The Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act follow in this train. Expansion of the national boundaries to the Pacific, with the Oregon Treaty of 1846 and the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, had brought matters to a head. The South was reluctant to agree to any further admissions of new states unless it could expect its share. It spoke of the example of its own generosity in surrendering the region above the Ohio to the Northern states as their outlet for growth. Indeed, the 1787 Northwest Ordinance is the datum for much of this dispute – and also the circumstances surrounding its adoption. For they play a major role in Lincoln's years as an affected or pseudo-Puritan – are the centerpieces of his jeremiad against Democratic innovation,

his accusation that there is a plan to nationalize the Peculiar Institution, a plan designed by Northern politicians, though he understood the Ordinance and its 1787 meaning not at all, or else distorted both with conscious intent. And as with Lincoln, so with many other “new breed” Northern politicians – spokesmen who practiced upon the paranoia of the Free States in speaking of a Slave Power and its dark designs, when in fact nothing new to the operation of American politics was being attempted in the West.



[Editors note: Abraham Lincolns photographer wrote that Lincoln would often muss his hair before permitting his picture to be taken, a

suitable look for man who felt free to distort the past for his own use.]

What Lincoln maintained with monotonous iteration throughout these middle years is that the nation's Fathers had specified their desire to put slavery "on the road to extinction" through the provisions which they had made, while we were yet governed under the Articles, to preclude its spread into the lands north of the Ohio ceded into their care by Virginia; and that, with and by this instrument of exclusion, they had established a fixed precedent for future restrictions. Which is to misconstrue this business altogether; and also to deny certain self-evident truths concerning human nature. For it is not to be believed that any society would self-consciously arrange for the possibility of its own destruction. The proper reading for the almost total support given to the Northwest Ordinance by the representatives of the Southern states voting in the Continental Congress is that the antislavery clause was put into the text to certify that these lands were to be reserved for settlers from New England and the Middle Atlantic states: to provide these Americans, through a gesture both practical and symbolic, with a fresh incentive to loyalty toward a confederation of which many were afraid; and, incidentally, to prevent competition with established Southern agriculture. It does not occur to Father Abraham that, in 1788, everyone expected the South to be the region of rapid growth. Or that the South, out of generosity, would provide for new states without slavery, hoping thereby to make of many a Yankee a sound Union man, and still have absolutely no notion of giving up slavery itself. The spirit which perceived that a balance, half-slave, half-free, should be kept he did not comprehend, nor the truth that even the abolitionists recognized: that the South had, it believed, provided for its security against any external interference in the Constitution and Bill of Rights, and felt that it could afford a little generosity.

As to Federal encouragement or regulation of the spread of slavery into the open territories, there is no consistent evidence that the Founders were of one mind concerning their legal authority and

its limitation. But Jefferson and Madison both counseled against such regulation, using arguments from law or precedent and arguments from definition. As did James Monroe and Henry Clay. They encouraged the expansion of slavery into the West. John C. Miller in summarizing Jefferson's "diffusionist theory" condenses the great Democrat's advice to a new generation of bondsmen as follows: "Go West, young slave, go West. There you will find kind treatment, more humane masters, a better chance of eventual emancipation." And this irony could be applied just as well to statements concerning the "positive good" of such distribution made by a complete set of early American statesmen, champions of freedom and Founders, beginning in 1798 with those solid Jeffersonians, William Giles and George Nicholas of Virginia.

Lincoln, in treating of this question, of course always invokes his version of the Founders' intentions. But if Jefferson and Madison do not qualify as Founders, it is difficult to say who does. To the idea that section 9 of Article I in the Federal compact even "hinted . . . at a power . . . to prohibit an interior migration of any sort," the latter spoke directly:

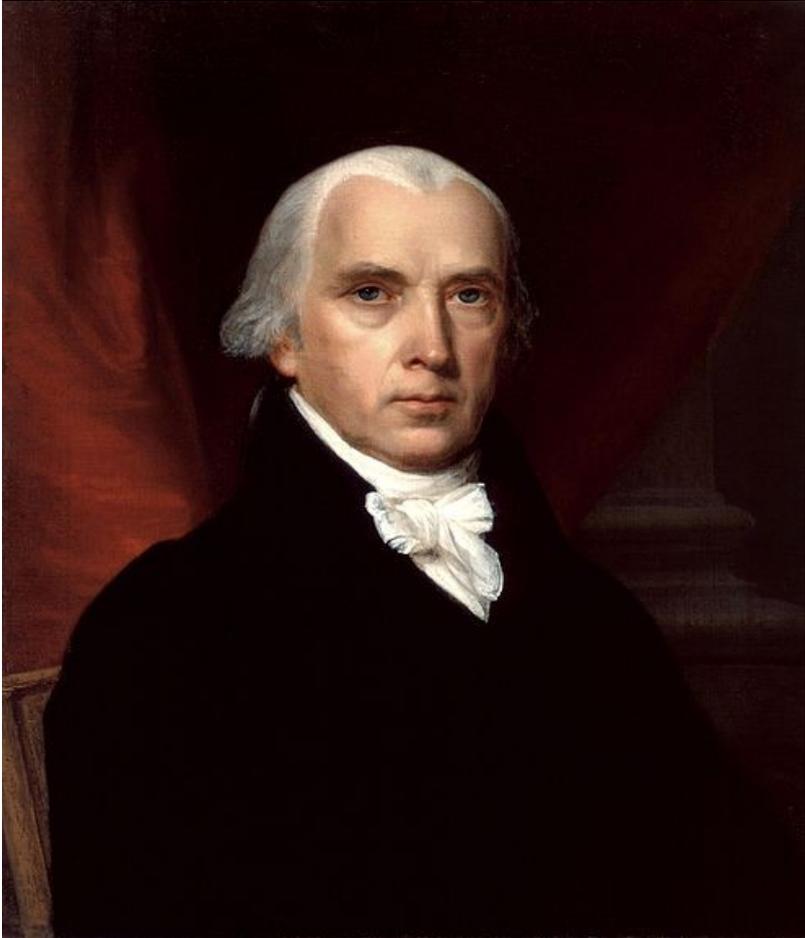
But whatever may have been intended by the term "migration" or the term "persons," it is most certain, that they referred, exclusively to a migration or importation from other countries into the United States; and not to a removal, voluntary or involuntary, of Slaves or freemen, from one to another part of the United States. Nothing appears or is recollected that warrants this latter intention. Nothing in the proceedings of the State conventions indicates such construction there.

Wrote Mr. Madison in 1819,

. . . it is easy to imagine the figure [such a construction] would have made among the numerous amendments to it proposed by the state conventions, not one of which amendments refers to the clause in question

The rest of Lincoln's historical argument is as fragile as his comment on the Northwest Ordinance and his imagination of a 1787 Philadelphia plan to restrict the spread of slavery into the

West. Its centerpieces were a notion that criticism of a simplistic view of the Declaration was an ominous innovation, unheard of in the early years of the Republic, and a highly selective narrative of various measures passed by Congress to interdict American participation in the international slave trade.



James Madison was born at Belle Grove Plantation near Port Conway, Virginia on March 16, 1751. He grew up as the oldest of twelve children, of whom nine survived. His father, James Madison Sr., (1723–1801) was a tobacco planter who grew up on an estate in Orange County, Virginia, which he inherited on reaching maturity. He

later acquired still more property and became the largest landowner with 5,000 acres and leading citizen of Orange County. His mother, Nelly Conway (1731–1829), was born at Port Conway, Virginia, the daughter of a prominent planter and tobacco merchant.

But contrary to Lincoln's claim, outrage at misunderstanding or misuse of the equality clause was as old as the Declaration itself: and, as early as 1804-1805, a commonplace, not heresy, when the youthful John C. Calhoun learned it from Lincoln's intellectual forebears while reading law in the Federalist citadel at Litchfield, Connecticut. Even earlier, Henry Lee called the broad view of the Declaration "a splendid edifice built upon kegs of gunpowder." In 1789 General James Jackson of Georgia developed the same theme in a speech before the House of Representatives. By the time of the debates on Missouri, many legislators were calling the Declaration "a fanfaronade of metaphysical abstraction" with "No standing in American Law." In a 1796 Independence Day oration, Congressman William L. Smith spoke in Charleston to the same effect. As, at other times, spoke the younger John Tyler, William Pinkney, Josiah Quincy, Jr., John Randolph of Roanoke, John Taylor of Caroline, and Joseph Clay. The last of these, a representative from Pennsylvania, summarized moderate sentiment on the subject. In his opinion, "The Declaration of Independence is to be taken with great qualification." Of this kind of evidence there is a plethora. Just as soon as American politicians began to read our instrument of separation as Lincoln was to read it in later years, other Americans said them nay; and, therefore, the interpretation of the document made by Douglas (and then by Chief Justice Taney) was nothing more than the forceful expression of a conventional view of the subject.

Lincoln's explanation of laws passed to restrict the importation of slaves from overseas is equally artificial. He sees in the widely supported 1807 bill to end the trade from Africa and the West Indies a movement against the institution itself and supports this view with reference to earlier bills forbidding foreign importation into the territories. But the truth of things is very

different. For many in the South saw in open importation a threat to the value of their property and also a threat of black overpopulation. Which is to say nothing of a general fear of difficult slaves, perhaps touched off by the spirit of the uprising in Santo Domingo – a fear which reached far beyond the boundaries of the slaveholding states.

Other elements of Lincoln's theory of the Fathers' "ancient faith" in a plan for eventual abolition deserve some mention. For, like most of the elements already examined, these last components tell us much about the widespread confusion concerning slavery and the birth of the nation current in the Midwest when Lincoln answered Douglas in 1854. One has to do with the refusal of the Framers to mention slavery by name. Some hostility to allowing the general government to speak of the institution *in any way* may be inferred from this silence, and also the desire of the authors, "so far as possible, to take [slavery] out of the national arena." Another error concerns the meaning of the Mississippi Ordinance of 1798 and the policy of prohibiting slavery "except where it already existed," which is related to his ignorance of the Southwest Ordinance of 1790 and the Louisiana Ordinance of 1804. Each of these bills was subject to debate and in the case of the first, opponents of slavery made specifically the point that slavery had not yet taken root in the Mississippi Territory any more than it was established in Iowa and Illinois. Congress refused, by a clear majority vote, to prevent such introduction, and likewise refused to interfere in Louisiana, even though it was a "national acquisition." The absence of debate on the Southwest Ordinance identifies it as either a quid pro quo or the product of intersectional amity, in both cases reflecting a connection with its companion ordinance for the Old Northwest. Kentucky and Tennessee came into the Union under its term, and not a word about slavery in either case. In each and every instance to which Lincoln refers, the policy which he recommends for the entire West has been rejected by his predecessors. For they recognized in such total exclusion a violation of the principle first followed in the allocation of unsettled lands to various spheres of influence: the principle of

compromise and rough equity in division.

Concerning the Northwest Ordinance, Donald L. Robinson has written, “Perhaps the most important reason for Southern support for the ordinance was that its passage signaled the end of the attempt to prohibit slavery south of the Ohio River.” We must remember that there were no “federal lands” before the old states gave up their legitimate claims to Western lands. Virginia and North Carolina did not surrender Kentucky and Tennessee to federal control until they were certain that no question of slavery would be raised when they were ready for admission as states. Indeed, they withdrew earlier offers of such cession during the sectional hostilities surrounding Jay's Treaty; and the same pattern holds true with later cessions by Georgia and South Carolina. Robinson's detailed narrative of discussions of slavery in the early years of the Republic should be required reading with students of Lincoln and the years leading up to the War Between the States. But most particularly the pages dealing with the 1819 ordinance for the territory of Arkansas. This law, passed by the very Congress that broke apart over Missouri, came into being with the clear understanding of those who voted in its support that they were introducing “the smudge of slavery” upon a veritable “tabula rasa.” Taylor of New York moved to prohibit such an introduction in precisely these terms. His motion was rejected. Which proves that many Northern legislators “saw the issue strictly in terms of political power within the Union and felt that Arkansas belonged to the South.” Even in the time of the debate over Missouri, many Northerners continued to acknowledge the “Compromise of 1787.” Missouri seemed to them a little far to the north but the idea of prohibiting slavery from all the new territories was not their plan. Usually, after push and pull, most Americans were drawn back to the original formula, *quid pro quo* – Maine for Missouri – though tilted a little in favor of the North not tilted all the way. Hence the line of the Missouri Compromise. Says Robinson elsewhere, “Northerners were far more concerned to halt the spread of slavery's influence than to wrestle with the institution itself.” In other words, concerned with the Slave Power. Upon the basis of

such fears, Lincoln worked his will, invoking always his myth of “those old-time men” who “hedged and hemmed” the inherited evil “to the narrowest limits of necessity.” Preserving both spirit and letter of the basic law that had first made us a country was not the task he had set for himself.

To grasp the implications of the early Liberty party or Free Soil movement (as opposed to the honest abolitionists, who simply desired to divide the country or change the Constitution), it is necessary for us to learn the neglected truth about the attitude towards Negroes in the Old Northwest, plus the limited objectives of antislavery benevolence throughout the country. For this will tell us why the repeal of the Missouri Compromise so outraged the people who became Lincoln supporters and what the Slave Power signified to most of them. Antebellum Midwesterners were, to speak bluntly, more anti-Negro than the slaveholders themselves. Many of them opposed the spread of slavery simply because it meant the distribution of black men into places where whites, their kindred and friends, might come to live. Even those who could imagine a benefit to the country in the destruction of the Peculiar Institution included nothing in the way of additional liberties for the freedman to attach to the end of bondage per se. Lincoln, as I have argued frequently, was extremely careful not to offend against any of this sentiment – in part because he shared in much of it, and also because if he crossed the line it drew his political career would come to a sudden end. David Potter calls this kind of anti-slavery thinking empty and likely to engender an “ ‘equality’ ... somewhere between freedom and slavery.” Thereafter he adds that its “attenuated” commitment to a technical freedom was easily “embarrassed” when set over against fierce claims of a moral superiority over those whose position appeared to deny that the Negro was a man. Lincoln spoke well for the movement he later came to lead when he called for the open lands to be reserved for “the settlement of free white labor,” as an “outlet for *free white people, everywhere*, the world over.” The advanced views of Negro rights promised by the opponents of slavery’s extension, in 1820, 1850, and 1854 are well summarized in the often-analyzed

Black Codes of Illinois – laws against which Lincoln never complained, or which he helped to enact. And in the one-way boat trip to Liberia which was (since Jefferson) always a corollary of the design to acknowledge the humanity hidden behind a sable complexion. The meaning of extinction, as Lincoln used the word, thus becomes clear in the original constitutions of Kansas and Oregon – excluding slavery and excluding Negroes. Antislavery meant, among other things, white, or as close to white as circumstances allowed: with a provision in most cases for a kind of control over the freedman, should he be around, that was morally inferior to slavery itself.

But if the crusade to confine slavery was not really about the Negro himself, what was its impetus? The question takes us back to the explanation of Midwestern reaction to the Kansas-Nebraska Act. In Peoria, Lincoln could not hope to get the rhetorical effect to which he aspired from his support for the Wilmot Proviso or his efforts to forestall the spread of slavery into New Mexico or Utah or the other portions of the Mexican Cession. What gave him an edge was the general impression spreading across the North that Democratic politicians were going against the Compromise of 1787, the formula of *quid pro quo*, and opening the way to Southern development and control of *all* the open lands under national jurisdiction. His best argument was against Democratic innovation, a cry of conspiracy. These are the central words of the Peoria Speech: “The declared indifference, but as I must think covert *real* zeal for the spread of slavery, I cannot but hate.” In years to come, this imaginative construct grows to include the charge that an eventual expansion of slavery into free states is contemplated in the enemy’s long-range plan – and a further charge that both black and white are to be bound. I will return to this bugbear as it unfolds. But for the moment it is my point that Lincoln conflates opposition to the expansion of slavery into the New Northwest with opposition to slavery *per se* and both with opposition to Stephen Douglas and the Democrats – all the while swaddling around the innovations which *he* introduces as ostensible reverence for the established ways.

What Lincoln ignores throughout his discourse is the reason behind Douglas's support of a repeal of the Missouri Compromise – a reason well known. Douglas could not promote his favorite dream of a new empire reaching to the Pacific, of railroad building and land speculation, of farms for the immigrants pouring in from Europe, and of everlasting credit for the Democrats *without Southern votes*. He was the legislative leader of a party dominated by Southerners. To get a bill organizing new territories in Kansas and Nebraska (legislation necessary to his plan for a transcontinental railroad), he required the help of legislators who could gain nothing for their own constituents with his plan. New senators from the free states were the only certain results, plus more immigration into the North and more Yankee votes. The Midwest had a genuine stake in these prospects. Lincoln is correct in asserting that “the public never demanded the repeal of the Missouri Compromise.” But they did demand the authorization that went with, and was tied to, that repeal. Professor Riddle is therefore correct in observing that Lincoln left out of his performance in Peoria “a fair estimate of the purpose of the Kansas-Nebraska Act,” and that he was “shrewd” to do so. It is a powerful speech, sometimes lacking in logic; but the confusion it fosters is not by accident.

The structure of this address is a close study in itself. In design, it pretends to be deliberative; in fact, it is forensic. Its ostensible objective is to recommend restoration of the Compromise of 1820; but its actual burden is the necessity to distrust Stephen Douglas, his friends, and all their works. In truth, the restoration of the Missouri Compromise in 1854 would have been to Lincoln like the peaceable conclusion of the Civil War in 1863: politically fatal! With a brief exordium (247-48), claiming a horror of everything that is “narrow, sectional, and dangerous to the Union” and a clear disclaimer of any threat to slavery as an “existing institution,” Lincoln is ready to declare his good intentions and review the history of the Missouri Compromise. The historical blunders included in this argument from the record are indicated in my discussion just above; or rather, a

representative selection of these blunders. Added to them is an account of events subsequent to the Missouri Compromise, running on through the Compromise of 1850, the general election of 1852, and Douglas's introduction of a new bill to give Nebraska territorial government (248-55). To this point, Lincoln has said little that is outrageous. We can be irritated with the invention by the future emancipator of a bit of Virginia history, made up to suit his purposes, and also by his feigned surprise at the Democrats' claim to see in certain kinds of federal legislation, touted to be benevolent, a threat to the corporate liberty. But these errors are standard political fare and are couched in a tone consonant with Whit moderation. No so the charge that follows.

Lincoln's initial public reference to a "Slave Power Conspiracy," noted above as the central passage of his speech, combines accusation with the word *hate*. It is an unusual term to appear in a Whig political discourse and marks an intensification in the tone of Lincoln's argument. True, it is covered up quickly with lofty references to the "republican example" of the United States in the world and by an invocation of the Declaration of Independence as the text of our political religion – both beside the point if one does not read the Declaration as Lincoln does. But he returns throughout the remainder of the speech to water the seed he has sown.

The crucial paragraph (255) is followed by a full-page (255-56) of rhetorical concession: a digression on Lincoln's good feeling toward the South and his ambivalence about blacks. That it contains matter in contradiction to the general principle which he announces in his subsequent remarks is typical of Lincoln during these middle years. But that such doubts about what may be done if the slaves are freed might conflict in logic with his assumption of a moral advantage through loyalty to the Declaration as including Negroes in its generalizations about "all men" Lincoln never stops to think. Or else denies. The conceding done, however, this rural Cicero returns to his prosecution.

Lincoln takes some time to answer these arguments used to

justify the repeal of the Missouri Compromise: that Nebraska needed a territorial government; that the public had demanded repeal; and that “repeal establishes a principle which is intrinsically right.” Lincoln’s responses to his own set of questions take up a major portion in his dispute with Douglas. These responses are on the surface plausible. If the Congress could be persuaded to vote for it, it was legal for Nebraska to be organized as a free territory. Lincoln omits to mention, however, that no such votes were available. That many Northern states wanted to facilitate developments in the West, possible only if Nebraska were organized as a territory, Lincoln does not acknowledge. And though in this portion of his speech he praises the principle of “equivalents” as that of the Missouri Compromise, the 1850 Compromise, and the original Constitution of 1787 (272), he denies that he had violated that principle when he himself voted not to extend the line of separation westward to the Pacific (257). To violate the principle of mutual concession in behalf of the higher principle, that slavery is a wicked thing, all men are equal, and Negroes are men in their “natural rights,” is the formula he achieves. Or else he offers no logic at all. He reinforces his construction with attendant arguments concerning the side effects of slavery – the three-fifths clause, the South’s attitude toward slave-dealers, the size of the Negro population, both free and bond, and rumors of continued slave importation. But he has not asked these questions just in order to respond to them. Rather, he is concerned with other charges that those answers give him an opportunity to declare. For a moment he repeats the earlier concession, still insisting that his position does not necessitate “political and social equality” for the freedman, and that it rests upon his veneration for those “old-time men” who defined the original American “SPIRIT OF COMPROMISE” (272). Yet he withdraws these reservations elsewhere, contending that any extension of slavery is a threat to every American’s liberties (270), and that the “ancient faith” of the Declaration is violated by Douglas’s doctrine of “popular sovereignty.” He then returns swiftly to his charge that the friends of the South have no interest in compromise, and are bent upon the inculcation of a “NEW

faith” (275).

After some additional historical misinformation, Lincoln perorates. I will return to the tone of this passage in a moment. But it is proper to note that his own peculiar gloss upon the Declaration of Independence is at its heart: the idea that it contains serious and critical allusions to Negro slavery, and that to say about it anything to the contrary is an astonishing impiety toward the Fathers. The remainder of Lincoln’s address is rather anticlimactic (276-83). It amounts to a reply to what he expects Douglas to offer in rejoinder. But he makes it clear that what he means by “re-adopt the Declaration of Independence by restoring the Missouri Compromise” comes to something more than that. It is also a direct and personal reproach to Senator Douglas and his kind: a reproach which marks Douglas as an enemy to popular sentiment in the North, particularly with respect to his view of the black man’s place in the future of America. This conclusion, however, is a more organic portion of the document than at first appears, for it enables Lincoln to leave his audience thinking about Stephen Douglas, and the charges brought against him.

The basic rhetorical strategy of Lincoln’s “Peoria Speech” is familiar to us from his earlier work. In the effort to ruin Douglas with the Illinois electorate, he employs a version of the false dilemma. For though he pays lip service to the sacrosanct principle of the Founders, Webster and Clay, that principle of accommodation is finally denied by the rest of his appeal and replaced by the argument which we ordinarily connect with the “House Divided Speech” of 1858. The difference between these two orations consists of the aforementioned lip service to equivalence or compromise and a more tentative view of how slavery can be extinguished through containment: a difference in tone. He is content with only the implication of what he states openly in the speeches to come: that legal confinement with reprobation will produce emancipation of *some* sort, at *some* undetermined time. In 1854 Lincoln still wishes to keep one foot in the Whig camp. But only one. He still pretends civility and claims not “to question the patriotism or to assail the motives of

any man, or class of men.” But there is no doubt that with “covert *real* zeal” he is on his way to a larger objective. To a neo-Puritan war on the powers of darkness: “Two universal armed camps, engaged in a death struggle against each other.” For the final burden of his remarks cannot be mistaken: either the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 will be applied throughout the West, and the balance of sections destroyed forever, or the bugbear of slavery expansion will be released to spread throughout the land, leaving, in the end, no free states – and few free men. We understand now what Lincoln meant when, later, he told his friends that his debating strategy would, finally, leave Stephen Douglas “a dead cock in the pit,” and what combative, utterly partisan spirit – determined to “beat the Democrats,” to “Fight the devil with fire; that is, with its own weapons . . . whether true or false, fair or foul” – was hidden beneath the rambling informality and apparent righteous indignation of the surface of the speech, or in the design of the seemingly artless oratory that followed – the oratory which made of Lincoln the American Caesar of his age.

In the “Peoria Speech” Lincoln was doing precisely what his Whig mentors had taught that the patriotic statesman did not do. He congratulates the Free Soilers for lofty motives which he elsewhere admits were less noble than they claimed. For his talk of conspiracies and trends threatens the identity of Midwestern society – its sense of its own worth and hopes for its future. And this, in its turn, was calculated to drive a breach between it and the South, redounding to the disadvantage of the hated Northern Locos, who must be beaten “or the country will be ruined.” The reasoning went thus: with *the distinctive Southern institution* went other Southern modest and orders; and the exclusion from all roles of importance of those who were not, by birth and training, part of the Slaveocracy. Hatred of slavery was thus a logical corollary of Know-Nothing hatred of Roman Catholic and free black immigration. Both excited the fear of the Yankee and immigrant that a familiar, accepted, and soon-to-be-beloved way of life would not expand and, perhaps, would not even survive. Which would explain the development in the North of an attitude well described

by David Potter, holding that “slavery was objectionable not because it gave pain to slaves but because it gave pleasure [and power] to slaveowners.” Henry Clay had mocked such attitudes as contradictory and hypocritical in Congress and during a visit to Indiana. Daniel Webster had warned that disunion would result if American politicians were moralistic for effect and failed “to treat each other with respect.” But that was an older politics. It would not defeat the Democrats. It had not studied under William Seward and Salmon P. Chase, and would not move the Midwest to accept the necessity of a “new founding,” or of a “new founder,” operating with the authority of an expurgated version of our collective past.

Here, in the already mentioned peroration, is Lincoln’s summary of the case from precedent against the Kansas-Nebraska Act:

Thus we see, the plain unmistakable spirit of that age, towards slavery, was hostility to the PRINCIPLE, and toleration, ONLY BY NECESSITY.

But NOW it is to be transformed into a “sacred right.” Nebraska brings it forth, places it on the high road to extension and perpetuity; and, with a pat on its back, says to it, “Go, and God speed you.” Henceforth it is to be the chief jewel of the nation – the very figure-head of the ship of State. 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 the “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. When Pettit, in connection with his support of the Nebraska bill, called the Declaration of Independence “a self-evident lie” he only did what consistency and candor require all other Nebraska men to do. Of the forty odd Nebraska Senators who sat present and heard him, no one rebuked him. Nor am I apprized that any Nebraska newspaper, or any Nebraska orator, in the

whole nation, has ever yet rebuked him. If this had been said among Marion's men, Southerners though they were, what would have become of the man who said it? If this had been said to the men who captured André, the man who said it, would probably have been hung sooner than André was. If it had been said in old Independence Hall, seventy-eight years ago, the very door-keeper would have throttled the man, and thrust him into the street.

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.

I have already examined the historical distortions behind these lines. From them Lincoln goes further to make to Douglas's refusal to read the Declaration as he does a threat to the liberties of white men, while neglecting to explain how the usual Midwestern view of the document came closer to conveying "a very vivid impression that the negro is a human." But what distinguishes the passage is not its content but its tone, with its talk of hanging and throttling, and its allusion to André, the enemy spy, and his fate. We are, with such elements, drawn beyond debate and toward indictment. The appeal is to violent emotions, and in no way subtle. Despite its official piety toward the law, there is a violent edge to the new politics of this quondam Whig. Yet he follows it quickly with a reversion to his familiar claim of moral superiority. Echoes from the scripture are included. Suddenly, we are in the presence of Puritan rhetoric, with an unmistakable lineage going back to the Protector and the Holy Commonwealth. The new Lincoln is never without it. To that authority the South could not submit.

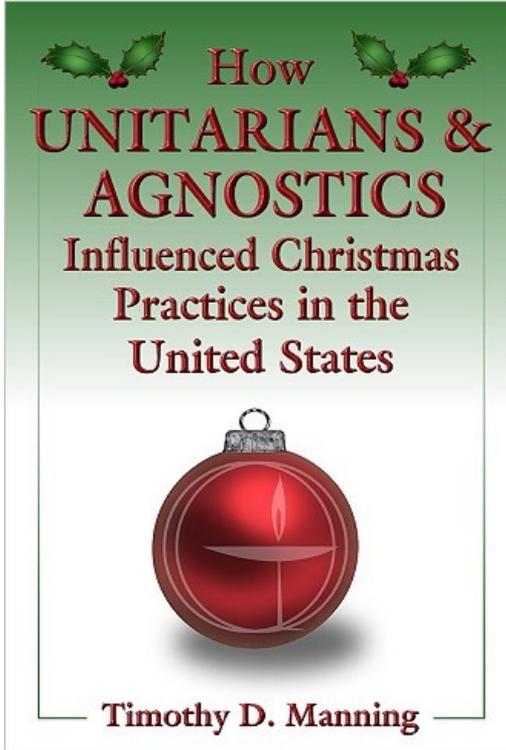
By 1854, the Midwest was rapidly filling with people who did not understand American history, politics, or constitutional law and with people who had fewer ties with the South than the earlier settlers "down in Egypt" or in the central counties. Many of these could see in the South only an analogy to the European societies from which they had fled. In 1854, Lincoln recognized these changes and Stephen Douglas did not. The repeal of the Missouri

Compromise, when couple with renewed Southern truculence concerning new states, railroads, internal improvements, tariffs, and the rest of the familiar “Federalist model,” gave a certain plausibility to charges that political innovation was underway. The difference between legal or political questions and moral questions in a nation in which basic law is sovereign and not a particular generation of men thus slipped from public perception while the role of slavery in the West was put in doubt. Lincoln rose in this inflamed atmosphere, keeping always one step behind the “higher law” spokesmen and two behind the abolitionists per se. His trick, learned basically from Salmon P. Chase and his “Appeal of the Independent Democrats,” was to combine efforts looking toward federally sponsored abolitionism and reverence for an imaginary American past: radicalism and antiradicalism, all of the time being very careful not to suggest that the Negro had any natural rights apart from the right to be free at some very remote date and to be then returned to an Africa that would be even more unfriendly to him than were the prairies and hamlets of Illinois.

That this kind of politics would destroy the Union did not worry Mr. Lincoln. Instead, he scrawled in envy little meditations on his own humble state (due countless to principle) and the Little Giant’s fame. He burned with ambition to have a “name” and found in vilification his *modus vivendi*. In Peoria he had only begun, was still in transition – offering “equivalents” (concessions to the South) at one point, and drawing the line at another. But once he was finished in his career, he had left behind him a trail of blood, an emancipation under the worst possible circumstances, and a political example which continues to injure the Republic which he did so much to undermine. It is at our peril that we continue to reverence his name.

END

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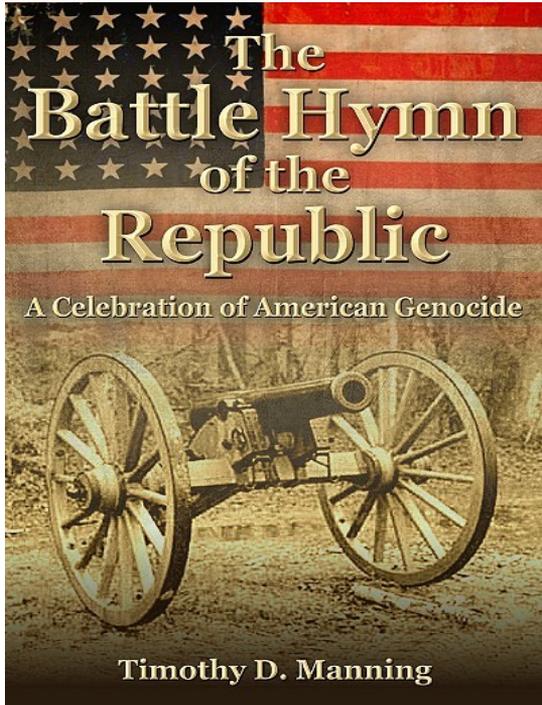
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