

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN'S FAILURES?

Appearing under either the caption "Lincoln's Failures" or the title "Discouraged?", there has been widely distributed a series of statements which imply that Lincoln was continually suffering defeat until at last he finally achieved the presidency. This was good psychology to emphasize during the depression, when so many people were suffering reverses, and now that another season of unfavorable business conditions is upon us the story of Lincoln's failures again find their way into the hands of the people.

After the caption "Discouraged" on this interesting broadside, there is a question mark—sort of a self-analysis reminder. For the purpose of this discussion it might better be placed after the title "Lincoln Failures" with the implication that possibly the experiences of Lincoln were not so humiliating as indicated.

One question whether or not so much emphasis should be placed on the element of failure which is featured by the compilation of experiences in Lincoln's struggle for advancement. It is very evident that Lincoln himself, did not become depressed by occasional reverses and most certainly his friends and political associates who finally secured his nomination to the presidency did not consider him a good example of a citizen whose life was a long series of failures.

The eight statements quoted in this issue of *Lincoln Lore* are those most usually found on the circulated broadsides, although various versions differ both in the number of failures tabulated and in the emphasis placed on the magnitude of the failure.

1. "When Abraham Lincoln was a young man he ran for the legislature in Illinois and was badly swamped."

Lincoln was but twenty-three years old when he announced himself as a candidate for the Illinois Legislature. He had been in the state but two years and in his home precinct but six months. He was absent from the county in the Black Hawk War during the entire campaign with the exception of a week. Yet, with no opportunities to campaign, he polled 277 votes, or all but three in his own precinct, and with thirteen candidates in the county, four to be elected, he ran in eighth position, just 159 votes behind Peter Cartright, one of the successful candidates. It does not appear that Lincoln was "badly swamped" as his total vote, even in defeat, was greater than the average vote of the entire group of candidates. Two years later he was elected to the legislature and served eight consecutive years. Certainly a summary of his early political experiences does not leave the impression that Lincoln was a failure but a tremendous success.

2. "He next entered business, failed, and spent seventeen years of his life paying up the debts of a worthless partner."

It is true that Lincoln did not succeed as a storekeeper but he sold his interest in the business before it failed. Giving security for friends, buying surveying equipment, and the death of his partner brought on bankruptcy. Obligations which otherwise would not have been his, put him in debt to the extent of about \$500. The statement that he spent "seventeen years of his life" paying this debt is certainly misleading as in the meantime, he married, raised a family, bought a home, and took his place in economic life of Springfield.

3. "He fell in love with a beautiful young woman to whom he became engaged—then she died."

Probably Lincoln was "in love" with Ann Rutledge, she may have been "a beautiful young woman", but there is

no dependable evidence that Lincoln ever "became engaged" to her, as it has been generally accepted that she still considered her engagement to the absent suitor, John McNamar, as binding. About a year after Ann's death, Lincoln proposed marriage to another young lady at New Salem and later on married a brilliant young woman who was often called the belle of Springfield. The story that Lincoln's heart was buried with Ann Rutledge is but another bit of the Herndon legend.

4. "Entering politics he ran for Congress and was badly defeated."

This notation is an interesting reference to a preliminary local rivalry in which three men including Lincoln were hoping to be nominated at a local convention. Lincoln had "entered politics" ten years before and he never "ran for Congress" in 1843 because he was not the party candidate. He was sent from the local convention to the district convention instructed to vote for one of the three men seeking the nomination. This is a typical citation which shows to what effort some one has gone to build up Lincoln's failures.

5. "He then tried to get an appointment to the United States Land Office, but failed."

Upon reviewing the whole story of Lincoln's land office experience, it is evident that in attempting to first secure the position for some one else, he sacrificed an appointment that could easily have been his own if he had gone after it at the beginning. He only failed after he had exhausted his efforts on behalf of another and then tried to rescue the appointment by becoming a candidate himself.

6. "He became a candidate for the United States Senate and was badly defeated."

One conversant with Lincoln's senatorial aspirations in 1854 scarcely could call him a "badly defeated" man. Possibly he was a badly treated man and most certainly sacrificed his personal chances for the sake of the party. Here is Lincoln's own reaction to the balloting: "I began with 44 votes, Shields 41, and Trumbull 5,—yet Trumbull was elected. In fact, 47 different members voted for me,—getting three new ones on the second ballot, and losing four old ones. How came my 47 to yield to Trumbull's 5?"

7. "In 1856, he became a candidate for the vice presidency and was again defeated."

It is inferred from the statement about the use of his name for the vice presidency in 1856 that Lincoln sought the office. The fact is that he had no knowledge that his name would be used and was surprised it had been placed before the convention. He was not even in attendance and there was no opportunity for much organized effort on his behalf, yet with his name merely put in nomination, on the first ballot he received 110 votes over against the 259 cast for Dayton whose campaign for the vice presidency was well executed.

8. "In 1858, he was defeated by Douglas."

This is the one statement in the entire list of eight that would seem to need no comment as it is widely known that the senatorial contest between Lincoln and Douglas in 1858 was won by Douglas. It is not known, generally, however, that Lincoln received a larger popular vote than Douglas and it was only by the voting of the electoral college that Lincoln was defeated. To poll more votes than the outstanding statesman of America of that day should not be counted an ignominious defeat.