

LINCOLN LORE

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CLAY'S INFLUENCE OVER LINCOLN

Abraham Lincoln referred to Henry Clay as "my beau ideal of a statesman". This expression is significant indeed if we would understand the early trend of Lincoln's political philosophy and the loyalty to those ideals which caused him to exclaim that Clay was "the man for whom I fought all my life." One cannot exaggerate the far-reaching influence which Henry Clay exerted over Abraham Lincoln as a youth or the inspiration which continually came to Lincoln throughout the years from the Sage of Ashland and his writings.

When Abraham Lincoln moved with his parents across the Ohio River from Kentucky to Indiana in 1816, there was but one strong political party in the United States. The Jeffersonian Republicans in 1805 had changed their name to Democrats. Their opponents, the Federalists, had collapsed as an organized group by 1812, and were so completely routed that James Monroe was almost unanimously elected President in 1820, but one electoral vote being cast against him. It was then that Jackson wrote to President Monroe saying, "Now is the time to exterminate that political monster called Party Spirit." Practically all Americans were then in the one party sometimes known as the Jeffersonian Republican party and later called the Jeffersonian Democrats.

The year Abraham Lincoln was born, 1809, Henry Clay was serving as a Senator from Lincoln's native state, Kentucky. Clay first entered politics in 1803 and steadily advanced until he occupied the speaker's chair in the lower branch of congress, and by 1824 he was a candidate for the Presidency.

The first Presidential campaign which Abraham Lincoln could have observed with any intelligent interest was the campaign of 1824 which occurred when he was fifteen years old. This was a struggle between great leaders rather than a contest of political parties. Three of the four candidates for President, Jackson, Clay, and Adams, were bitter personal enemies. Crawford also ran. The political units were called after the names of the respective candidates, and the Adams group was often referred to as the anti-Jackson party.

During the bitter campaign of 1824 the *Western Sun* published at Vincennes was printing in full the speeches of Henry Clay. In the issues of the paper preceding the election ten Clay speeches appeared, some of them extending through eight columns of fine print. These papers are known to have been available to the Lincoln family then living in Spencer County. In this campaign Clay spoke against the extension of slavery and expounded his well-known propositions on protection and internal improvements which became known as the American System.

At the impressionable age of fifteen Abraham Lincoln was beginning to form certain opinions with respect to the conduct of public affairs, and these were to become the basic elements in his theory of government. William Wood, a friend of the youthful Lincoln, tells us that the boy wrote out a remarkable discussion dealing with our political institutions, and it became the talk of the neighborhood. It is evident that Lincoln never wandered very far away from the principles advocated by Henry Clay in the campaign speeches of 1824.

Adams was elected to the Presidency in 1824, and Clay was made his Secretary of State which placed his name continually before the people. Lincoln was not old enough to vote in the 1828 campaign won by Jackson, but in 1832 he cast his first Presidential vote for his favorite, Henry Clay.

The *Sangamon Journal* published at Springfield became Lincoln's medium of information with reference to the 1832 Presidential campaign. In the issue of January 5, he read the caption, "Henry Clay for President." On Febru-

ary 23, Clay's famous speech to the senate was reported, and in three consecutive issues, March 22, March 29, and April 5, Clay's defense of the American System was printed. Lincoln's own defeat as a candidate for the legislature at this time could not have pained him more than the failure of Clay to gain the Presidency.

The best evidence we now have would indicate that from this very first contest in which Clay appeared, Abraham Lincoln's sympathies were with the famous Whig leader from his native state. When Lincoln corrected a biography which speaks of his early political affiliations, he stated that he was "a staunch anti-Jackson or Clay man," and this is the same Clay for whom he said he had fought "all his life."

One of Lincoln's most notable fights for Clay was in the election of 1844 when, as presidential elector for Clay in Illinois, Lincoln not only canvassed the state but also went down into southern Indiana on behalf of the candidacy of his hero.

It must have been a glorious occasion when Lincoln had an opportunity to meet this hero of his youth. The only vacation Abraham Lincoln is known to have taken extended over a period of three weeks spent in the home town of Henry Clay, Lexington, Kentucky. This was the home of Lincoln's wife, Mary Todd, who herself was a great admirer of Clay. Mr. Clay was a very close friend of her father, Robert S. Todd.

Here in Lexington, on November 13, 1847 Lincoln heard Henry Clay give a remarkable lecture on The Conduct of The Mexican War, and the impression it left on Lincoln is evident from his reaction to the question in the next congress. How often Lincoln may have visited Mr. Clay during this Lexington sojourn is not known, but it is very likely that there were several personal contacts. Abraham Lincoln's eulogy on Henry Clay at the time of his death is one of Lincoln's best known speeches.

A letter written by Henry Clay in 1844 was recently acquired by the Lincoln National Life Foundation from which this excerpt has been taken: "My wife's maiden name was Hart. Her father was Col. Thomas Hart who had two brothers, one named David, and the other named Nathaniel. Their residence was North Carolina near Hillsborough. During the revolutionary war Col. Thomas Hart removed to the state of Maryland, and about the year 1794 removed to Lexington in Kentucky where in 1799 I married my wife."

It was the family history in this letter which recalled the beautiful tribute in which Abraham Lincoln sent greetings to the widow of the lamented Clay, a tribute which also reveals the real esteem in which Abraham Lincoln always held Henry Clay, the Sage of Ashland, who exerted such a great influence over him.

Executive Mansion
Washington, August 9, 1862

Mr. John M. Clay.
My dear Sir:

The snuff-box you sent, with the accompanying note, was received yesterday. Thanks for this memento of your great and patriotic father—Thanks also for the assurance that, in these days of dereliction, you remain true to his principles—In the concurrent sentiment of your venerable mother, so long the partner of his bosom and his honors, and lingering now, where he was, but for the call to rejoin him where he is, I recognize his voice, speaking as it ever spoke, for the Union, the Constitution, and the freedom of mankind.

Your Obt Servt
A. Lincoln