

LINCOLN LORE

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THE HOUSE DIVIDED SPEECH

We are constantly observing in the writings of both the mighty and the lowly the statement, "This world cannot endure permanently half totalitarian and half democratic." This is of course a paraphrase of Lincoln's reference to slavery and freedom.

This discussion is not concerned with the purely hypothetical parallel drawn above or any statement about the prospects of the political unity or dissolution of civilization, but it will attempt to make clear the occasion for and the evolution of one of the widely quoted comments which fell from the lips of Abraham Lincoln.

The occasion for the address which contained the startling truth was the Republican State Convention of Illinois which convened in Springfield on June 16, 1858. There was much optimism in the Republican ranks, partly because of the division among the Democrats and partly because of the Buchanan vs. Douglas feud.

The convention proceeded with the adoption of the platform and selection of the state central committee. Some minor nominations were followed with a resolution declaring "that Abraham Lincoln is the first and only choice of the Republicans of Illinois for the United States Senate as the successor to Stephen A. Douglas." The resolution was carried unanimously.

It was in acknowledgment of this nomination that Lincoln appeared on the evening program of the convention and read from a manuscript the famous "House Divided Speech." The introductory paragraph of the speech which contains the oft-quoted words is printed here verbatim.

"Mr. President and Gentlemen of the Convention: If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do, and how to do it. We are now far into the fifth year since a policy was initiated with the avowed object and confident promise of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only not ceased, but has constantly augmented. In my opinion, it will not cease until a crisis shall have been reached and passed. 'A house divided against itself cannot stand.' I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward till it shall become alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new, North as well as South."

It is likely that Lincoln from his early childhood had been familiar with the twelfth verse of the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew referring to the divided house. His mother had read the Bible to him habitually and many of the passages he had memorized.

Possibly it was not until 1843 that Lincoln first had occasion to use this biblical quotation in a public document. He had been appointed on March 1, 1843, along with A. T. Bledsoe and S. T. Logan to prepare an address to the Whigs of Illinois. The circular was ready for the printer two days later, and it is generally accepted that Lincoln wrote the major part of it. In the emphasis which he placed on the unity of the Whigs, he said:

"That 'union is strength' is a truth that has been known, illustrated, and declared in various ways and forms in all ages of the world. That great fabulist and philosopher, Aesop, illustrated it by his fable of the bundle of

sticks; and he whose wisdom surpasses that of all philosophers has declared that 'a house divided against itself cannot stand.'"

Abraham Lincoln wrote a letter to George Robertson of Lexington, Kentucky, on August 15, 1855, about the Missouri Compromise and its effect on slavery, and in the concluding paragraph of his letter he stated, "Our political problem now is, 'Can we as a nation continue together permanently—forever—half slave and half free?'"

Lincoln is said to have told Henry C. Whitney that an editorial in the Richmond (Va.) *Enquirer* for May 6, 1856, was largely responsible for the keynote of the "House Divided Speech." In this issue the editor, Roger A. Pryor, drew a vivid picture of the war between the two systems.

Whitney's reminiscences largely confirmed the statement which Lincoln made at Cincinnati when he said "Again, I have alluded in the beginning of these remarks to the fact that Judge Douglas has made great complaint of my having expressed the opinion that this government 'cannot endure permanently half slave and half free.' He has complained of Seward for using different language, and declaring that there is an 'irrepressible conflict' between the principles of free and slave labor. (A voice: 'He says it is not original with Seward. That is original with Lincoln.') I will attend to that immediately, sir. Since that time, Hickman, of Pennsylvania, expressed the same sentiment. He has never denounced Mr. Hickman. Why? There is a little chance, notwithstanding that opinion in the mouth of Hickman, that he may yet be a Douglas man. That is the difference. It is not unpatriotic to hold that opinion, if a man is a Douglas man.

"But neither I, nor Seward, nor Hickman is entitled to the enviable or unenviable distinction of having first expressed that idea. That same idea was expressed by the *Richmond Enquirer* in Virginia, in 1856, quite two years before it was expressed by the first of us."

Just when Lincoln began to apply the "house divided" phrase to his conclusions about the extension of slavery cannot be learned, but there were great numbers of Americans both north and south who were believing just what Lincoln said in 1858, long before he made the public pronouncement. As early as 1850 Theodore Parker was stating from the pulpit that the two ideas then at variance over the slavery question could not "continue to live in peace." Possibly Lincoln would have used the "house divided" expression in the Presidential campaign of 1856 if he had not been persuaded to forego it.

There can be little question but that *The Impending Crisis* by Helper influenced Lincoln greatly and further convinced him that the truism which he had considered using in public was sound. The book was published in 1857 and a copy was made available to Lincoln.

Lincoln apparently came to a decision to use the famous "house divided" quotation after giving careful thought to the consequences which might result from it. Most of his friends advised against the use of the expression. It is difficult to learn just what Herndon's conclusion was with respect to it.* In one statement he claims to have said to Lincoln, "It is true, but is it wise or politic to say so?" Later Herndon claimed he told Lincoln, "Deliver that speech as read and it will make you President."

* Compare Herndon's *Life of Lincoln* edited by Angle, pp. 324-327 and notes, with Hertz' *The Hidden Lincoln*, p. 97.