

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN'S TWO POLITICAL EPOCHS

Early November days, whether during an "off" year or not, reminds one of the political contests which have changed the course of domestic and foreign policies in American history. None of the Nation's November elections has caused quite so drastic a reaction to the choice of a President as the results of the balloting in 1860.

Abraham Lincoln's success at the polls in that memorable campaign, which elevated him to the President's chair, was a high point in his second political era. The first one had ended with his election to Congress, but the second one was brought to a close by a vile assassin.

If we take the literal meaning of the term epoch, which refers primarily to the starting point of a project and embraces the sensations and convictions which ignite the new flame of interest, we will sense the purpose of this monograph as indicated by the title.

There has been a tendency on the part of many historians to use Lincoln's inauguration to the Presidency as the dividing point of his political history, but the second era, in reality, began at the time the Missouri Compromise was repealed.

Lincoln's motives and reactions in the epochs of the first and second eras were so essentially different that it is doing him a great injustice to pay no attention to the change of attitude on his part, which took place at the close of the transition period between 1849 and 1854. To continue the story of his political career as if nothing had elapsed during these intervening years except an "interval of time" makes him just another ambitious politician.

The first epoch gives us no startling phenomena to analyze, which would imply that Lincoln had any ambition in gaining a seat in the legislature other than the satisfying of his own personal desire for recognition. He said, "If elected I shall be thankful, if not it will be all the same." Nothing in his preliminary notice that he would be a candidate, indicates that he had any "axe to grind," any reform to advocate, or any unusual sentiments and political principles to publicize. Later, in a much more extensive announcement, his appeal for support was largely based on his practical knowledge of the Internal Improvement System, gained by the building and navigating of a flat-boat, and observing the stage of the water in the Sangamon river. On two other questions, one about rates of interest and the other education, he had no innovations to offer, and concerning "existing laws" he remarked, "Considering the great probability that the framers of those laws were wiser than myself, I should prefer not to meddle with them."

Furthermore, he was very frank in stating that his great ambition at that time was to gain the esteem of his fellowmen by proving himself worthy of their confidence. He was so successful in gaining the good will of the people that they continued to support him politically until he had served four terms in the legislature and then they sent him to Congress, the lone Whig from Illinois.

During his term in the legislature he made an unusual protest about the powers of Congress with respect to slavery, but did not follow through with any aggressive action. His congressional term seemed to offer little opportunity for sponsoring any constructive legislation, as in-

ternal improvements, the Mexican War and politics were in the foreground. He did, however, in his speech at Worcester, Massachusetts, on his way home from the long session of Congress, have a few words to say on the extension of slavery. This theme was again taken up when he returned for the short session of Congress and on January 6, 1849, he presented an amendment that looked forward to the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. If Abraham Lincoln had any hopes of making some outstanding contribution to the solution of the slavery question, they must have faded out with his return to his law practice in 1849. After the consummation of the land office and Oregon appointments, which served as the anti-climax of his congressional term, the first era of Lincoln's political efforts came to a close. We might say that he buried his own political desires, if he had any, along with the body of the recently deceased President Taylor, for whom he had put forth his best efforts, to have elected.

For five years after the congressional term, Lincoln stated that he went to the practice of law "with greater earnestness than ever" and that in 1854 "his profession had almost superseded the thought of politics in his mind when the Missouri Compromise aroused him as he had never been before." The above quotation is his own account of the second epoch given to us in his own words told in the third person. He also stated that, "his speeches at once attracted a more marked attention than they had ever before done."

No one has emphasized sufficiently the tremendous change which took place in Lincoln's thinking at this time. Howell in his Lincoln book states "Ambition could not tempt him," and these words were left standing by Lincoln after reading the copy. Ambition, the motivating influence of the first epoch, was dead and from its ashes came the new flame of patriotism. As Howell puts it, "It required the more thrilling voice of danger to freedom, to call the veteran of so many good fights into this field."

At the close of the senatorial campaign in 1858, Lincoln made a speech at Springfield in which he used these words: "Ambition has been ascribed to me. God knows how sincerely I prayed from the first that this field of ambition might not be opened." He then admitted that he claimed "no insensibility" to political honors, but qualified his personal ambition by this remarkable affirmation: "Today could the Missouri restriction be restored, and the whole slavery question be replaced on the old ground of 'toleration,' by necessity where it exists, with unyielding hostility to the spread of it, on principle, I would, in consideration, gladly agree, that Judge Douglas should never be out, and I never in, an office, so long as we both, or either, live."

Those who have portrayed Abraham Lincoln as a selfish, scheming, politician will undoubtedly account for this statement by asserting that it was just some campaign talk. To most people, however, who still like to believe in Lincoln's proverbial integrity, it was the pronouncement of a new epoch. Ambition for office had given way to a patriotic passion for country which found expression in his oft repeated slogan, "No extension of slavery," and which later changed to the slogan on which he waged a civil war, "The Union must be preserved."