

# LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor  
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 793

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

June 19, 1944

## LINCOLN'S WHIG INHERITANCE

The fact that Abraham Lincoln was nominated for the presidency at a Republican convention in Chicago always adds special interest to the Lincoln student for other similar political gatherings held in the city. On the eve of the Republican Convention now about to assemble, it might be of interest to observe one or two factors which were inherited from a parent political group, and which influenced the thinking of Lincoln on certain political questions.

The Republicans in the beginning of this movement secured much of their strength for organization from the Whigs, and it is accepted generally that this group contributed most to the leadership of the new party. While the slavery question overshadowed all others under consideration, there were some basic doctrines of the Whigs which were bound to be felt in the deliberations of the newly organized group.

It appears as if Lincoln may have come by his personal political views through inheritance, as most people do. John Hanks once said, "Abe was always a Whig, so was his father before him." We are sure the first statement is true and we are inclined to believe that John Hanks was correct about the early political faith of Thomas Lincoln.

As late as 1858 Lincoln remarked, "I have always been an old-line Whig," and by further comment on another occasion, "I am somewhat acquainted with the old-line Whigs. I was with the old-line Whigs from the origin to the end of that party. I became well acquainted with them." In an autobiographical sketch prepared for Fell he stated, "always a Whig in politics."

When Abraham Lincoln was elected a Whig representative to Congress, he became affiliated with a group of young men who became known as "The Young Indians." The group consisted of Stephens and Tombs, of Georgia, Ballard Preston, Flournoy and Pendleton, of Virginia, Truman Smith, of Connecticut, and Lincoln, of Illinois. Stevens organized the group which was composed of seven young Whigs.

There is evidence in Lincoln's own writings and also in his recorded votes that he adhered strongly to the Whig doctrines. This led him to make a speech during the early part of the Thirtieth Congress on the Mexican War and his "spot" resolutions as they were dubbed were most certainly to the point.

The often criticized position which Lincoln took on the Mexican War was in harmony with the Whig attitude. From the very beginning of the Whig movement the party had advocated, "resistance to executive power." Accordingly, the Whigs generally and Lincoln in particular, felt the President had seized authorities not vested in his office and as stated by Lincoln, "The war was unnecessarily and unconstitutionally commenced by the President."

On July 24, 1848, one of the spokesmen of the Whigs from the far South, H. W. Hilliard, of Alabama, who under the Tyler administration became a minister to Belgium, presented on the floor of Congress the viewpoint of the Whigs on the question of executive authority. This is what he had to say in part:

"The glory of our political system hitherto has been, that power was distributed, checked, guarded; that the Legislative power was one thing, the Executive power another, and that of the Judiciary distinct from both these. But if the President is to be allowed to seize and exert one of the most important powers of Congress—no less a power than that of deciding the question of war or peace; and if, in the very body whose authority has been thus violated and contemned; if in this body, representing the people directly; this body, which ought forever to stand between Executive aggressions and popular rights; this body, which is to decide whether the country shall go to war or continue at peace; this body, without whose votes not a single tax can be laid, not a single dollar expended; if, I say, in this representative body, men are to rise up and sustain this usurpation of the President, then it will hardly be worth while long to go through the forms of legislation. We may take down the mace from beside your chair; we may leave these seats vacant, and, placing all the powers of the Government in the hands of one man, commit the prosperity, the liberties, and the glory of the country to his keeping. . . . There are great principles which are essential to liberty; it cannot exist without them. These the Whigs seek to preserve. The very first of these principles is resistance to Executive power. It is a singular fact that the party styling itself Democratic, seeks to clothe the President with almost royal attributes; it sustains him in all his assumptions of authority, in all his usurpations of power."

We are not to assume that this criticism of the President by Hilliard grew out of personal animosity, but from a

deep-rooted party conviction. As Lincoln once stated, about a problem, "There is a principle involved, and if we once yield to a wrong principle, that concession will be the prolific source of endless mischief."

There is no doubt but what Lincoln would have subscribed to these principles laid down by Hilliard, as they were basic in the thinking of the old-line Whigs. It is not strange that some of these party dogmas would find expression in the new Republican Party, which was so largely formed from the Whigs, and would determine to some extent the reaction of the party to each succeeding emergency.

Further elaborating on the Whig position, Lincoln said in a speech before Congress: "To you, the President and the country seem all to be one. You are interested to see no distinction between them, and I venture to suggest that probably your interest blinds you a little. We see the distinction, as we think, clearly enough; and our friends who have fought in the war have no difficulty in seeing it."

When Lincoln himself became President, in 1861, he was confronted with testing the old Whig doctrine from the executive viewpoint. In his first message to Congress at the very beginning of his address he said in the face of an insurrection: "Of all that which a President might constitutionally and justifiably do in such a case, everything was foreborn, without which it was believed possible to keep the government on foot."

In the same address he defended his attitude toward the aggressors by referring to this statement in his inaugural address: "You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors." He then said that "he took pains not only to keep this declaration good but also to keep the case so free from ingenious sophistry that the world should not be able to misunderstand it."

Lincoln was undoubtedly thinking of the old Whig doctrine about executive authority when he said in his first annual message to Congress, "I have been unwilling to go beyond the pressure of necessity in the usual exercise of power."

This attitude towards usurpation of power was an inheritance from the Whigs which Lincoln could never relinquish, and even when he became President, he was especially careful that he did not obstruct or make obsolete either the legislative or judiciary functions.