

# LINCOLN LORE

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## THE SPOT RESOLUTIONS

The episode which has caused more comment than any other incident during Lincoln's term in Congress is his presentation of the "Spot Resolutions," and they were presented at the very beginning of the first session.

Lincoln was elected to the lower house of Congress in August 1846, three months before the war with Mexico broke out. His term of office did not begin until the winter session of 1847-1848, so he had more than a year's interval before leaving for Washington. He was in Springfield nearly all of the time while the State Legislature which began in December 1846 was in session, and as congressmen would naturally be interested in the measures presented to the body.

The Whigs had opposed entering the war with Mexico, and now that it was under way, almost the entire Whig block refused to support a resolution in the legislature stating that the war had been started by Mexico. Lincoln was in agreement with this position of the Whigs in the Illinois Legislature when he left for Washington and his viewpoint was in harmony with the majority of his political associates in Illinois.

Lincoln and his family enroute to the Capitol in November 1847 stopped with his wife's people at Lexington, Kentucky for three weeks, at a time when Henry Clay was in retirement at his home in the city. There can be no question but what Lincoln was in the audience as a special guest when Clay, on November 13, gave one of the most remarkable speeches of his life, choosing as his subject, "The Mexican War." He discussed the causes which had brought on the war and then concluded, "Thus the war commenced; and the President (Polk) after having produced it, appealed to Congress. . . . A preamble was inserted, falsely attributing the commencement of the war to the act of Mexico." Clay concluded his speech by the presentation of eight resolutions.

A little over a week after Clay made his speech the Lincolns left Lexington for Washington, and a little over a month after the speech on the Mexican War was delivered by Clay, Lincoln presented the "Spot Resolutions" before Congress. When Lincoln read the resolutions he had been a member of the House but two weeks and it was an auspicious introduction indeed for the "Lone Whig from Illinois." Clay had presented eight resolutions at Lexington on the Mexico situation and Lincoln included eight resolutions in his appeal. At the time Lincoln read his "Spot Resolutions" Clay was in Washington and remained there most of the winter.

While students of Lincoln often refer to the resolutions the verbatim contents of them are not so well-known. Both the preamble and the resolutions follow:

"Whereas the President of the United States, in his message of May 11, 1846, has declared that 'the Mexican government not only refused to receive him' (the envoy of the United States) 'or listen to his propositions, but, after a long continued series of menaces, have at last invaded our territory, and shed the blood of our fellow-citizens on our own soil:'"

"And again, in his message of December 8, 1846, that 'we had ample cause of war against Mexico, long before the breaking out of hostilities; but even then we forbore to take redress into our own hands, until Mexico herself became the aggressor, by invading our soil in hostile array, and shedding the blood of our citizens:'"

"And yet again, in his message of December 7, 1847, that 'the Mexican government refused even to hear the

terms of adjustment which he' (our minister of peace) 'was authorized to propose; and finally, under wholly unjustifiable pretexts, involved the two countries in war, by invading the territory of the State of Texas, striking the first blow, and shedding the blood of our citizens on our own soil.'

"And whereas this House desires to obtain a full knowledge of all the facts which go to establish whether the particular spot of soil on which the blood of our citizens was so shed was, or was not, our own soil, at that time: therefore,

"Resolved, by the House of Representatives, That the President of the United States be respectfully requested to inform this House,

"First. Whether the spot of soil on which the blood of our citizens was shed, as in his messages declared, was, or was not, within the territories of Spain, at least from the treaty of 1819 until the Mexican revolution.

"Second. Whether that spot is, or is not, within the territory which was wrested from Spain by the Mexican revolution.

"Third. Whether that spot is, or is not, within a settlement of people, which settlement had existed ever since long before the Texas revolution, until its inhabitants fled from the approach of the United States army.

"Fourth. Whether that settlement is, or is not, isolated from any and all other settlements, by the Gulf of Mexico and the Rio Grande on the south and west, and by wide uninhabited regions on the north and east.

"Fifth. Whether the people of that settlement, or a majority of them, or any of them, had ever, previous to the bloodshed mentioned in his message, submitted themselves to the government or laws of Texas, or of the United States, by consent, or by compulsion, either by accepting office, or voting at elections, or paying taxes, or serving on juries, or having process served upon them, or in any other way.

"Sixth. Whether the people of that settlement did, or did not, flee from the approach of the United States army, leaving unprotected their homes and their growing crops, before the blood was shed, as in his messages stated; and whether the first blood so shed was, or was not, shed within the inclosure of the people, or some of them, who had thus fled from it.

"Seventh. Whether our citizens, whose blood was shed, as in his messages declared, were, or were not, at that time, armed officers and soldiers, sent into that settlement by the military order of the President, through the Secretary of War; and,

"Eighth. Whether the military force of the United States, including those citizens, was, or was not, so sent into that settlement after General Taylor had, more than once, intimated to the War Department that, in his opinion, no such movement was necessary to the defence or protection of Texas."

The fact that Lincoln's law partner differed from him on the Mexico question and has elaborated in the Hurdon volumes on Lincoln's failure to comprehend the real issues involved, has led many historians to believe that the congressman from Illinois went into political eclipse by taking the position he did in the "Spot Resolutions." It should be observed, however, that he followed the lead of Clay, represented the opinions advanced by the Whigs in the Illinois Legislature, and adhered to the almost unanimous view of the Whigs in Congress.