

# LINCOLN LORE

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## WAS LINCOLN'S ELECTION TO THE PRESIDENCY, ACCIDENTAL?

The Republican National Convention which meets at Philadelphia this week for the purpose of nominating candidates for the fall election, and the Democratic assembly which convenes later on for the same purpose, are being given a tremendous amount of publicity. The several prospective nominees in the one instance, and the thus far lone aspirant in the other, have built up during the past few weeks an unusual interest in these political convocations.

The atmosphere created invites students of history to restudy the preliminaries which led up to the nomination of Abraham Lincoln for the presidency at the Chicago Wigwam eighty-eight years ago. This present election year with its sustained political interest over a period of months invites the publication of a series of monographs on various episodes which contributed to the selection of Abraham Lincoln as the Republican nominee in 1860 and his subsequent election.

The timeliness of such a series is evident from the many propositions set forth, still in the controversial stage, which attempt to account for the elevation of Lincoln to leadership in his party. Subsequent issues of Lincoln Lore will attempt to compile some of the arguments on debated questions, and allow the reader to draw his own conclusions whether Lincoln reached the Presidency by a series of accidents or through his ability to create or cultivate a political emergency and then capitalize upon it.

William O. Stoddard prepared an editorial for the *Central Illinois Gazette* of Jan. 18, 1860 in which he stated that "four questions will be asked about every candidate who is before the convention. 1st. Is he honest? 2nd. Is he capable? 3rd. What is his geographical position? 4th. What is his political record?" (p. 140).

One of the earliest proponents of the "accidental" theory was Henry J. Raymond, supporter and close friend of Seward, who wrote in a letter to the *New York Times* shortly after the convention, "The final selection of Lincoln as a candidate was a matter of accident. I mean by this, that down to the time of taking the first ballot, there had been no agreement among the opponents of Seward as to the candidate upon whom they should unite."\*

Henry C. Whitney in his *Life on the Circuit* summarizes the success of Lincoln's candidacy by calling attention to these high points: "First—The State convention which met at Decatur in the spring of 1860 enthusiastically nominated Lincoln, and also injected into the canvass the novelty and glamour of the "rail-splitting" episode: which took like wild-fire. Second—Norman B. Judd, one of the shrewdest and most effective of politicians, being member of the National Committee for Illinois, secured Chicago as the seat of the convention. Third—Reduced railway fares and other inducements were secured to guarantee a large attendance of Illinoisans; and in other ways the machinery of enthusiasm was set in motion for Lincoln. Fourth—Whereas the Indiana delegation had been selected with the primary object of securing control of the Indian bureau; and the Pennsylvania delegation, in part, had been organized with the intent of controlling the Treasury Department, therefore it was essential to pander to those wishes, in order to secure the delegations, so far as might be, of those States. Fifth—And to have a good 'send off' it was needful that Indiana and Illinois should be solid for Lincoln on the first ballot." (p. 84-85).

Many years ago Lord Charnwood, reviewing from across the ocean the results of the choice of Lincoln by the Republicans, stated: "This was the most surprising nomination ever made in America. Other presidential candidates have been born in poverty, but none ever wore the scars of poverty so plainly; others have been intrinsically more obscure, but these have usually been chosen as bearing the hallmark of eminent prosperity or gentility."

Many of the recent publications which touch on the subject of Lincoln's Nomination and Election leave the impression that Lincoln was swept into the 1860 campaign as the Republican standard bearer by certain incidents over which he had no control. Little credit seems to be given him for having any part in directing his course in such a way that he finally arrived at the anticipated destination.

The most recent of the Lincoln books, *Lincoln and the War Governors* by William B. Hesseltine\* implies, at least, that mother "accident" was the guiding genius that landed Lincoln in Washington, Hesseltine in the fourth paragraph of the first chapter of his book refers to Lincoln as "this inexperienced prairie politician whom accident had elevated to the Presidency." (p. 4)

G. Lynn Sumner in his interesting book published in 1946 under the title *Meet Abraham Lincoln* names five events which he feels "made Lincoln President." 1st. The Cooper Institute \$200 speech. 2nd. Robert Lincoln's failure to pass the Harvard entrance examinations. 3rd. Dramatic presentation at Decatur Convention of rails split by Lincoln. 4th. Delayed delivery of ballots at Chicago Convention. 5th. Political conspiracy in a Chicago hotel room. (p. 36)

Inasmuch as all five of these incidents occurred previous to Lincoln's nomination and no one of them occurred during the subsequent campaign, they were more definitely associated with his nomination than his election.

The attitude of Professor Randall towards the consummation of Lincoln's nomination is well set forth in part in his *Lincoln the President* (Vol. II, p. 168) as follows: There were numerous factors that contributed to Lincoln's nomination, and not the least of them was the strategy of his managers." He further continues that "availability or a presumption of availability was the secret of the choice at Chicago." (Vol. II, p. 170).

Carman and Luthin in their study of *Lincoln and the Patronage* tabulate the groups contributing to Lincoln's election as follows: (1) The antislavery Whigs. (2) Free Soil Democrats. (3) Disgruntled Democrats. (4) Know-Nothing groups. (5) German-born naturalized citizens. (6) Homestead and internal-improvement people. (7) Protective-tariff advocates. (8) Groups in favor of a Pacific Railroad. (9) Those favoring an overland mail. (10) Union minded conservative men. (p. 10)

A book which will be used as one of the authentic sources in the series of monographs contemplated is *Lincoln's Rise to Power* by William E. Baringer. In his concluding chapter which he calls "Afterword" he makes this statement: "Soberly analyzed, Lincoln's chances in the Convention depended on two controlling factors: (a) Could the Party be persuaded that Seward could not be elected; (b) could the Party be led to believe that Lincoln could be elected?" (p. 332).

\**The Life of Horace Greeley* by Parton, p. 446.

\*Published by Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 405 pp., Price \$4.50.