

# LINCOLN LORE

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## BUILDING POLITICAL PRESTIGE

### Steps to the Wigwam, No. 1

Availability, or the theory of the right man from the right place, at the right time, has been recognized as a tremendous factor in determining the choice of candidates at a political convention. In no case, as far as presidential nominees are concerned, has this quality of availability been more strikingly displayed than in the choice of Abraham Lincoln at the wigwam convention in 1860.

There seems to have been associated with the term availability, or as Professor Randall qualifies it "a presumption of availability," a large element of chance or the changing of a normal course of procedure. This has resulted in many authors' drawing the conclusion that Lincoln's nomination was an "accident." Other students are convinced that Lincoln became available through a long and important series of events which were carefully directed, and which eventually placed him in the commanding position he occupied in May, 1860.

A political emergency which might be considered one of the earliest stepping-stones on which Lincoln climbed to the Presidency, was the Senatorial Contest of 1854. Lincoln's candidacy was the almost immediate result of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. For this political blunder Douglas, its sponsor, was severely chastised by the voters of Illinois, and it broke his own party up into two warring factions called the Nebraska and the Anti-Nebraska groups.

Lincoln was at the train to greet Richard Yates when he returned to Springfield from Washington, and complimented him on his stand against the repealing of the compromise. Lincoln voluntarily promised to campaign for him for reelection. Lincoln himself became a candidate for the Illinois Legislature, and was elected to this body for the fifth time, leading the ticket. Those who have alleged that Lincoln was discredited, or lost his local political constituency because of his stand in Congress during the Mexican War, might have some difficulty in explaining his sudden return to popular favor in the brief period of five years which had elapsed since his return from Washington.

Largely because of the new note which Lincoln sounded during the campaign for the legislature, in which he eloquently discussed the Nebraska question, he was put forth also as a candidate for the U.S. Senate. As early as September 29, 1854, he received a letter from William H. Randolph of Macon, which advised him "your name is also spoken of as a candidate for the United States Senate." A little over a week before, A. Jonas at Quincy, inviting Lincoln to come to Quincy for an address commenting, "The Douglasites would as soon see Old Nick here as yourself."

William Fithian of Danville advised Lincoln after the November election that "Dr. Courtney's promise to go for you was made a condition precedent to his election. (Legislature). Otherwise he should not have been elected." This note clearly reveals that even before the fall election Lincoln's candidacy for the Senate was made a matter of campaign promises.

Immediately after his election to the Illinois Legislature on November 9, Lincoln began his concerted drive for a seat in the U.S. Senate. On November 11, P. Willard of Metamora put this query in a letter to Lincoln: Don't you see Lincoln on his way to Washington? Elihu Powell wrote to Lincoln from Peoria on November 16, that he should "decline acceptance of the seat in the Legislature" to which he had already been elected. This would make him a bona fide candidate for the Senate.

From the November election day up to the very hour that the Illinois Legislature came together to cast their ballots for a United States Senator, Lincoln was carrying on a voluminous correspondence with his friends through-

out the state. The editor of Lincoln Lore has just finished reading the entire correspondence in the Robert T. Lincoln papers, received by Lincoln during this period.\* It is a remarkable group of testimonials promising support of Lincoln to replace James Shields, the incumbent, and reveals the almost unanimous support given to him by the Wigwam element.

Three men seem to stand out as the promoters of Lincoln's candidacy, Elihu B. Washburne, David Davis, and Leonard Swett. Washburne states on November 14, "You are my choice above all others," and then in a long letter gives detailed information about those who may be expected to support him. Judge Davis was particularly active and was in constant touch with Lincoln throughout the campaign.

As early as December 22, Leonard Swett advised Lincoln, "Governor Matteson is secretly working for himself and hopes to be a compromise candidate." From Richard Yates came the information that William H. Bissell, "a bosom friend" of James Shields, was to run and then give way to Shields. Washburne states however, in a letter to Lincoln on January 12, "Yates wants to come in terribly," then continues in the same letter, "You would feel flattered at the great interest there is felt for you here (Washington) by all who know you either by reputation or personally."

The Illinois Legislature went into session on February 8th and proceeded to ballot for a Senator with 50 votes needed for election. On the first ballot Lincoln received 45 votes; James Shields, Nebraska Democrat, 41 votes; Lyman Trumbull, Anti-Nebraska Democrat, 5 votes; and 8 votes scattering. On the tenth ballot Governor Matteson, Nebraska Democrat, was leading the candidates with 47 votes, three less than the number needed for election. It was on this ballot that Lincoln observed Matteson possibly would be able to pick up the three necessary votes unless, he, Lincoln, sacrificed himself for the sake of the Anti-Nebraska cause. Whereupon Lincoln released his delegates to Trumbull, who was declared elected.

Upon hearing the result Judge Davis said he "never would have consented to the forty-seven men being controlled by the five," but Lincoln commented, "I could not, however, let the whole political result go to smash, on a point merely personal to myself," and furthermore stated, "On the whole, it is perhaps as well for our general cause that Trumbull is elected." One man put it: "Lincoln won the victory but did not reap the reward."

One bit of compensation came to Lincoln, somewhat belated, in a letter written to him by Lyman Trumbull as late as 1858. At that time Lincoln was again a candidate for the U.S. Senate. Trumbull mentioned Lincoln as "that Friend who was instrumental in promoting my own (election)." However a postscript is the important part of this letter for our purposes wherein Trumbull writes:

"P.S. My wife who is sitting by me says you are too modest to understand whom I mean by 'that friend' but he who so magnanimously requested his friends just at the right moment to cast their votes for me, and without which I could not have been elected will I think understand it."

The magnanimous part which Lincoln played in the Senatorial contest was not overlooked by the Illinois Whigs and those at Washington, nor by the leaders of the new party just about to be born. Possibly the episodes associated with this contest might serve as forming the initial step in Abraham Lincoln's triumph at the Chicago wigwam five years later. This deliberately sacrificing of self for a cause was no accident, but the result of a purposeful and intelligent decision.

\* Robert Todd Lincoln Collection of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln, Library of Congress.