

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN TESTS HIS STRENGTH

### Steps to the Wigwam, No. 6

The young Republican party of Illinois looked upon the 1858 senatorial contest as a real test of its strength and long before the state convention was announced for June 19, Abraham Lincoln was generally accepted to be the candidate. Lincoln looked upon the canvass as a test of his own personal strength although votes would not be cast for him directly, but for candidates for the legislature who favored him.

A month and a half before the convention assembled Lyman Trumbull wrote a letter to Lincoln about Illinois politics and informed Lincoln that he was for him for the Senate "against the field." Trumbull further stated that "the party is bound by every obligation of honor and fair dealing to elect you, if it has the strength to elect anybody." The strength of Lincoln as the foremost candidate available was in reality reciprocal to the strength of the party in the state.

The senatorial contest in Illinois, however, took on the aspects of something more than a local affair, it was looked upon throughout the nation as a major test of Republican strength nationally, inasmuch as Stephen A. Douglas would seek reelection on the Democratic ticket. Just how far reaching the division in Democratic ranks had become, because of the Douglas-Buchanan feud, would be revealed in the battle for Douglas' seat in the Senate.

The letter from Trumbull to Lincoln written at Washington on May 2 was supplemented by another written from the same city on the following day by John Lucas. He advised Lincoln, "Seward speaks of you as the man, if the Republicans succeed (in Illinois) and he is quite sanguine." Lucas again wrote Lincoln from Washington on June 6, stating, "I suppose you are fully aware that your name is frequently spoken of in this city during the last few months, if you are not I can tell you such is the fact."

The prestige which the National Republican Party had at stake in this senatorial contest is observed from the local viewpoint by David Davis in these words to Lincoln: "I think if you are defeated this winter the bottom will fall out of the thing." From the Washington area came this comment: "Almost every political move that is being made in Illinois, however trivial, is known here in certain quarters."

After Lincoln's official nomination on June 19 and the delivery of his "House Divided" acceptance speech, his fame began to spread throughout the nation as revealed in some correspondence received by Lincoln from Charles H. Ray, then at Norwich, N. Y. Ray wrote in part:

"You are like Byron, who woke up one morning to find himself famous. . . ." He further commented that even in obscure places he found "hundreds of anxious enquirers wishing to know all about the newly raised up opponent of Douglas. . . . You have sprung at once from the position of a 'capital fellow' and a 'leading lawyer' in Illinois to the enjoyment of a national reputation."

All of this complimentary attitude, as revealed by eastern men, mind you, was before the sensational series of debates with Douglas was arranged. This reaction indicates quite clearly that the series of joint discussions between the candidates was not solely responsible for Lincoln's advancement in national political circles.

Just when Lincoln first conceived the idea of a series of debates with Douglas in the senatorial canvass is not definitely known. However on July 19, 1858, he received a letter from W. J. Usrey of Decatur containing this suggestion: "If Douglas desires to canvass the state let him act the honorable part by agreeing to meet you in regular debates, giving a fair opportunity for all to hear both sides." Five days later, on July 24, Lincoln wrote a brief note at Chicago directed to Senator Douglas containing this query: "Will it be agreeable to you to make an arrangement for you and myself to divide time, and address the same audiences the present canvass?"

After some correspondence, in which there was considerable jockeying for position, the acceptance of the plans proposed by Douglas were acknowledged by Lincoln on July 31 in these words: "Yours of yesterday, naming places, times, and terms for the joint discussions between us, was received this morning. Although by the terms, you take four openings and closes to my three, I accede, and thus close the arrangement."

The debates opened at Ottawa on August 21 and continued at various intervals in Freeport, Jonesboro, Charleston, Galesburg, Quincy, and concluded at Alton on October 15. For a period of approximately two months, the political world sensed the significance of these important discussions and their tendency to set the political pattern in America for the future.

The results of the voting is well known and representatives favoring Lincoln polled a larger vote than those favoring Douglas, reassuring Lincoln and the Republican party of their tremendous strength. Holdover members of the Legislature and gerrymandering practices in arranging the districts were more than Lincoln could overcome and Douglas returned to the Senate. Possibly more important than some of the seemingly unfair divisions of voting units, was the attitude of Crittenden, Seward, Greeley, and others toward the Lincoln candidacy. David Davis sums it all up in a letter to Lincoln on November 7, five days after the election in these words:

"You have made a noble canvass (which if unavailing in this state) has earned you a national reputation. It made you friends everywhere. . . . Judge Dickey drew the letter out of Mr. Crittenden and I think in view of everything that it was perfectly outrageous in Mr. Crittenden to have written anything. Some of you may forgive him and Governor Seward and Mr. Greeley but I cannot. . . ."

The famous letter which Lincoln wrote to his friend, Dr. A. G. Henry, on November 19, 1858, which contains the clause, "Though I now sink out of view, and shall be forgotten," is made more striking by Dr. Henry's reply to it from Lafayette, Oregon Territory. It follows in part: "You will not 'sink out of sight' as you seem to anticipate, nor will you be forgotten. The people, the great and glorious people, will bear you on their memories until the time comes for putting you in possession of their house at Washington which they are bound to do in their own good time."

Horace White, who was present at the debates and served as the reporter for the Chicago Tribune, concluded a brief monograph about the importance of the discussion with this statement, "It gave Mr. Lincoln such prominence in the public eye that his nomination to the Presidency became almost inevitable." Apparently Mr. White did not look upon Lincoln's success at the Chicago convention as accidental. The Debates with Douglas has proved to be another step to the Wigwam.