

# LINCOLN LORE

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## CENTENNIAL OF LINCOLN'S SENATE SETBACK

The first serious setback which Abraham Lincoln received in his political career occurred one hundred years ago this week when he withdrew his name as a candidate for the United States Senate in favor of his friend Lyman Trumbull. It will be recalled that Lincoln's political rebirth took place when Stephen A. Douglas succeeded in having the Missouri Compromise repealed in 1854. In order to help Richard Yates to be returned to Congress from Illinois, Lincoln had come from retirement and was elected to the Illinois Legislature for the fifth time. The result of the fall elections indicated that a Whig might have a good chance to gain a seat in the U. S. Senate. Lincoln refused to accept the seat in the legislature to which he was elected in order to be eligible for the senatorship.

Lincoln immediately laid plans for entering the contest by writing to many members of the legislature who were responsible for the choice of the senator. Apparently on New Year's day 1855 he prepared one of the most interesting surveys of his political career. He listed alphabetically the twenty-five members of the Illinois Senate and the seventy-five members of the House of Representatives. This made just a hundred members. He noted the counties they represented and each one's political affiliation. There were three large divisions of party affiliation: Democrats, Anti-Nebraska Democrats, and Whigs.

Lincoln identified the Senate vote as follows: Democrats 11, Anti-Nebraska Democrats 3, and Whigs 11. He does note, however, that many of the last two classifications have gone into the new Republican organization. With reference to the House he listed the Democrats with 30, Anti-Nebraska Democrats 14, Whig 28, Nebraska Whig 1, Abolitionist 1, Vacancy 1. It will be observed that with the vacancy filled there would be 75 votes cast.

On January 6, 1855, Lincoln wrote to Hon. E. B. Washburne about his prospects. With reference to the number of candidates for the office he said: "Besides the ten or a dozen on our side who are willing to be known for candidates I think there are fifty secretly watching for a chance. . . . I cannot doubt that I have more committals than any other one man. . . . I understand myself as having 26 committals; and I do not think any other man has ten—may be mistaken though." Lincoln then sums up the party affiliation, this time breaking the earlier group of 100 into two divisions, Anti-Nebraska (including Whigs), 57 Nebraska (Democratic) 43, leaving the Anti-Nebraska with a 14 majority. Lincoln then states all delegates are in session except Kenny, an Anti-Nebraska man from St. Clair county.

The one vacancy mentioned on Lincoln's January 1 list was caused by his own failure to accept the post, but soon would be filled by a special election. Lincoln seemed optimistic on January 6, but strange shifting of support occurred during the balloting.

In another letter written to Washburne on February

9, the day after the election, Lincoln gives a good summary of what happened: "The agony is over at last; and the result you doubtless know. I write this only to give you some particulars to explain what might appear difficult of understanding. I began with 44 votes, Shields 41, and Trumbull 5—yet Trumbull was elected. In fact 47 different members voted for me—getting three new ones on the second ballot, and losing four old ones. How came my 47 to yield to T's 5? It was Govr. Matteson's work. He has been secretly a candidate ever since (before even) the fall election. . . . The Nebraska men, of course, were not for Matteson; but when they found they could elect no avowed Nebraska man they tardily determined to let him (Matteson) get whomever of our men he could by whatever means he could and ask him no questions. . . . With the united Nebraska force, and their recruits, open and covert, it gave Matteson more than enough to elect him. We saw into it plainly ten days ago; but with every possible effort, could not head it off. . . . We went into the fight yesterday; the Nebraska men very confident of the election of Matteson, though denying that he was a candidate; and we very much believing also, that they would elect him. . . . On the seventh ballot, I think, the signal was given to the Nebraska men to turn on to Matteson, which they acted on to a man, with one exception; my old friend Strunk going with them giving him 44 votes. Next ballot the remaining Nebraska man, and one pretended Anti- went on to him, giving him 46. Then next ballot the remaining Nebraska man and another, giving him 47, wanting only three of an election. In the meantime, our friends with a view of detaining our expected bolters had been turning from me to Trumbull till he had risen to 35 and I had been reduced to 15. These would never desert me except by my direction; but I became satisfied that if we could prevent Matteson's election one or two ballots more, we could not possibly do so a single ballot after my friends should begin to return to me from Trumbull. So I determined to strike at once; and accordingly advised my remaining friends to go for him, which they did and elected him on that the 10th ballot."

Lincoln injects a personal note into the conclusion of the letter: "I regret my defeat moderately, but I am not nervous about it . . . on the whole, it is perhaps as well for our general cause that Trumbull is elected." About ten weeks later Lincoln wrote a letter to William H. Henderson in which he paraphrased a biblical quotation in commenting on his defeat. He wrote, "The election is over, the Session is ended and I am not Senator." He then reviews for Henderson the process by which he was defeated and admits, "It was rather hard for the 44 to have to surrender to the 5" and concluded, "I could not, however, let the whole political result go to ruin, on a point merely personal to myself."

As late as March 10 he was also commenting on his Senate setback when he wrote in a business letter to Messrs. Sanford, Porter and Striker of New York: "When I received the bond, I was dabbling in Politics; and, of course, neglecting business. Having since been beaten out, I have gone to work again."