

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

NUMBER 1350

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

FEBRUARY 21, 1955

LINCOLN-HARDIN CONGRESSIONAL NOMINATION CONTEST—1846

Abraham Lincoln's twelve years of untiring efforts on behalf of the Whigs of Illinois was rewarded at last by his nomination in 1846 as the party's candidate for Congress from the seventh district. This recognition was not achieved however, without a determined effort. This was one time in Lincoln's political career when he refused to follow his usual custom of withdrawing from a race in favor of an opponent when party harmony seemed to invite such a step.

John J. Hardin, Edward Baker and Abraham Lincoln, the three leading candidates for the Whig congressional nomination at the Pekin convention in 1843, apparently had some sort of an understanding with respect to rotation in office. Both Hardin and Baker had been honored with a term in Congress and now Lincoln felt that his time to represent the Illinois Whigs had arrived. It is not likely that he anticipated any opposition for the nomination as Hardin had not asked to be returned upon the conclusion of his term, and when Baker left Springfield for Washington for his first session he promised he would not seek re-election.

Baker had been in Washington but a short time before there appeared in the *Alton Telegraph and Democratic Review* a proposal that Hardin again be nominated for Congress. Lincoln wrote to one of his supporters, Benjamin F. James, editor of the *Tazewell Whig* that he hoped the Whig papers would not nominate Hardin for Congress as "It would give Hardin a great start, and perhaps use me up." When Baker had gotten a taste of congressional life and learned that Hardin was going to run against Lincoln he also changed his mind and proposed to enter the campaign. It now appeared as if the convention in the 1843 contest would be re-enacted again in 1846.

Three weeks later, after the Hardin announcement, Lincoln informed editor James: "To succeed I must have 17 votes in convention." He then tabulated those counties of which he was sure: Sangamon 8, Menard 2, Logan 1, and hoped James would help him to get Tazewell 4, Woodford 1, and Marshall 1. Lincoln then observed, "It just covers the case." He concluded the letter to James with this advice, "Let nothing be said against Hardin. . . . Let the pith of the whole argument be 'Turn about is fair play.'" This slogan definitely points back to the Pekin convention when Hardin, Baker and Lincoln apparently made some verbal agreement about "regular succession" in office.

Apparently Hardin had drawn about the same calculations which Lincoln had sent to James with respect to convention votes so he tried to maneuver Lincoln out of position by asking a change in procedure for selecting the nominee. This move Lincoln opposed on the grounds that both Hardin and Baker had received their nominations under the convention system and the Whigs in general approved the system. Lincoln furthermore showed it would be greatly to Hardin's personal advantage if the new proposal were adopted. These conclusions he presented in a letter to Hardin on Jan. 19, 1846. Hardin's reply is lost but Lincoln's answer to this missing writing is possibly the longest personal letter Lincoln wrote during the Illinois years. In it he sets forth the "Turn about is fair play" argument.

Lack of space allows but a few very brief excerpts from the long letter:

"You introduce the proposition made by me to you and Baker, that we should take a turn apiece. . . . I

never expressed or meant to express, that by such arrangement, any one of us should be, in the least restricted in his right to support any person he might choose, in the District; but only that he should not HIMSELF, be a candidate out of his turn. . . . I deny there is anything censurable in it—anything but a spirit of mutual concession, for harmony's sake. . . . I and my few friends say to the people that 'Turn about is fair play.' You and your friends do not meet this and say 'Turn about is NOT fair play.'"

Apparently Hardin had contended in a long paragraph in his letter to Lincoln that struggles for the succession will break down the party. Lincoln responded, "It is certain that struggles between candidates, do not strengthen a party; but who are most responsible for the struggles, those who are willing to live and let live, or those who are resolved at all hazards, to take care of 'number one'? . . . You have (and deservedly) many devoted friends; and they have been gratified by seeing you in congress. . . . I also have a few friends (I fear not enough) who, as well as your own, aided in giving you distinction. Is it natural that they should be greatly pleased at hearing what they helped to build up, turned into an argument, for keeping their own favorite down. . . . Is it by such exclusiveness that you think a party will gain strength?"

Two days after Lincoln had written his long letter to Hardin he wrote to Benjamin F. James about a critical article which had appeared in the *Morgan Journal* and concluded his letter with the statement, "The reason I want to keep all points of controversy out of the papers, so far as possible, is, that it will be just all we can do, to keep out of a quarrel—and I am resolved to do my part to keep peace." Possibly the fact that Lincoln's wife was a cousin of Hardin may have made Lincoln anxious to avoid an open clash with him. Here Lincoln sensed that a break with Hardin might cause the splitting of the Whig party, but this time he refused to sacrifice his chances for the nomination, which he felt justly belonged to him.

Undoubtedly the letter which Hardin received on Feb. 3 from John H. Morrison of Tremont about the situation there contributed to Hardin's final decision to withdraw from the race. Morrison said: "Lincoln will probably get all the vote even if Hardin were a candidate. The regular succession principle has been accepted. It is Abraham's turn now."

On February 16, 1846, nine days after the extensive correspondence, Hardin wrote a letter for publication declining any longer to be considered a candidate. He paid no compliments to Lincoln and denied he had stated he would not be a candidate after his first term. He concluded his announcement with this statement "to obtain a nomination in this district would under the existing conditions be equally unpleasant to myself, and to very many personal and political friends."

It must have been pleasing to Lincoln that the seventh district Whig convention was held at Petersburg, a town he had surveyed in earlier days, and not far from New Salem, his former home. Lincoln received the Sangamon vote of the convention as their choice for Congress. The *Sangamon Journal* in reporting Lincoln's nomination by the Whigs said: "Mr. Lincoln, we all know, is a good Whig, a good man, an able speaker, and richly deserves the confidence of the Whigs in district and state."