

# 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 1365

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

June 6, 1955

## REACTIONS TO LINCOLN'S CONGRESSIONAL TERM

One hundred years ago tomorrow, June 7, 1855, Abraham Lincoln wrote a short, terse letter about the political defeat of a former law partner in these words: "Logan is worse beaten than any other man ever was since elections were invented—beaten more than 1200 in this county." This letter written to H. C. Whitney has a direct bearing on the cause of an earlier failure of Logan. William Herndon and some modern biographers who place great confidence in his pronouncements blame Abraham Lincoln's record in Congress as primarily responsible for Logan's former setback in 1848.

A previous issue of this bulletin discussed "Lincoln's Early Political Contacts with Herndon" (No. 1353) and stressed the point that some of the junior law partner's deductions about Lincoln's political development might be challenged. This is especially true with respect to Herndon's statement about Lincoln's political status at the time he returned from Congress in 1849. In a letter to Jesse Weik written on February 11, 1887, forty years after the incidents occurred which Herndon tried to recall, he wrote in part:

"In 1847-1849 I saw Lincoln would ruin himself about the Mexican War. . . . I tried to prevent Lincoln's destruction. I wrote to him on the subject again and again and tried to induce him to silence, if nothing else . . . when Lincoln returned home from Congress in 1849 he was a politically dead and buried man."

In Herndon's three volume work which was released in the year 1889 this version of his correspondence with Lincoln appears: "I could not refrain from appraising him of the extensive defections from the party ranks and the injury his course was doing him. My object in thus writing him was not to threaten him. . . . I warned him of public disappointment over his course and I earnestly desired to prevent him from committing what I believe to be political suicide." Herndon also alleged that Lincoln's "constituents began to manifest symptoms of grave disapproval of his course on the Mexican War question." Herndon further alleged that Lincoln's "Spot Resolutions" so called "not only sealed Lincoln's doom as a congressman, but in my opinion lost the district to the Whigs in 1848 when Judge Logan had succeeded at last in obtaining the nomination."

Certainly in 1855 Lincoln had nothing to do with the defeat of Logan who was then running for an office which he was well qualified to fill. Possibly there was a common cause of Logan's defeat in both 1848 and 1855 namely, his unpopularity with the electorate at large. Herndon gives this description of him as a candidate in 1848: "Judge Logan tried his hand as successor to Lincoln, but Logan was a failure, and a fizzle. Here was a cold, avaricious and little mean man for you as the people saw him." Yet Herndon holds that Lincoln's congressional acts were responsible for Logan's defeat in 1848.

Lincoln wrote to William Schouler on August 28 of that year and stated in part, "I would rather not be put upon explaining how Logan was defeated in my district" and then concluded, "A good many Whigs, without good cause, as I think, were unwilling to go for Logan, and some of them so wrote me before the election." Lincoln also notes that Logan's opponent Harris was "a major of the war" and then concludes his analysis with the statement, "These two facts and their effects, I presume tell the whole story." Yet commenting on this letter, one present day Lincoln author makes the declarative statement:

"Stephen A. Logan's support of Lincoln's record in congress was a liability in his race to succeed Lincoln,"

and then continues "but Lincoln seems not to have been convinced of the trend recounted by Herndon."

There is no inkling by the early biographers Holland, Barrett, Arnold or Raymond of dissatisfaction on the part of Lincoln's constituents with his service as a congressman. In fact Raymond states that "his reelection, had he consented to become a candidate, was morally certain." Herndon states however referring to this probability that considering "the unfortunate result of his (Lincoln's) position on public questions that it is doubtful if he could have succeeded had he done so." Still further pressing this point Herndon directly announced Lincoln's defeat as follows: "Shortly before the close of his term in Congress he appears in a new role. Having failed reelection. . . ." The implication here is that Lincoln was a candidate—which he was not—and had been defeated.

Although Lamon in 1872 published the letters written by Lincoln to Herndon about the Mexican War he does not comment on Lincoln having lost his political prestige by having supported the Whig position relating to the hostilities. The voluminous collection of letters written by Herndon from 1881 to 1890 of questional historical value was not then available to the author of Lamon's work. The famous book does however report Judge Davis' statement about Lincoln "that after he had returned from Congress" he had "lost his practice." Herndon makes it appear that Lincoln lost his legal practice because of dissatisfaction over his congressional activities and states that Lincoln offered to withdraw from the firm of Lincoln and Herndon.

Abraham Lincoln was no novice in the field of politics when he went to Congress as the lone Whig from the state of Illinois. It is presumptuous indeed to assume that a political upstart in Illinois ten years his junior should attempt to direct his political fortunes and try to rescue him from political oblivion. One fact is certain, as the lone representative of the party in the state he would not fail to hold up the Whig banner. His fidelity to the Whig cause and his Whig constituency in Illinois cannot be successfully challenged.

It is to be expected that Albert J. Beveridge who used the Herndon sources would give undue weight to the testimony of his historical mentor for Lincoln's early years. The senator puts his reaction to Herndon's testimony about the congressional term in these words: "Lincoln's popularity at home had been seriously impaired, if indeed it were not for the moment destroyed." It is rather amusing to observe that Beveridge as well as some other historians give as their authority for the alleged Whig dissertation of Lincoln, the State Register at Springfield. This paper always violently opposed to Lincoln politically was primarily responsible for the claim that Logan was defeated in 1848 because he "unblushingly endorses the vote cast by Lincoln in Congress denouncing the war as unconstitutional." One of our most recent biographers relying on the same hostile paper as an authority on Lincoln's political status claims that it came "closer to the fact" about the explanation of Logan's defeat than the unpopularity of the candidate. There could not have been a drastic change in Logan's personal appeal in the eight years intervening between the contests of 1847 and the one in 1855, when Lincoln made the comment, "Logan is worse beaten than any other man since elections were invented." The handsome majority given in the Springfield district to the Whig presidential candidate Zachary Taylor whom Lincoln had so ardently supported should in itself be evidence enough to annul the announcement of Lincoln's political demise published in the abusive opposition press of that day.