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MEETING THEM — RADICALS AND ALL: ROBERT W. JOHANNSEN'S LINCOLN, THE SOUTH, AND SLAVERY

By Matthew Noah Vosmeier

In 1856, Lincoln's political fortunes were beginning to rise in the newly organized Republican party of Illinois. The previous year, Lincoln, as the Whig candidate for United States Senator, had been defeated when party realignment and political maneuvering worked in favor of Lyman Trumbull, an anti-Nebraska Democrat and later Lincoln supporter (see *Lincoln Lore* number 1815, May 1990). But in February 1856 Lincoln moved closer to the Republican party by attending a meeting of anti-Nebraska editors in Decatur, Illinois, where plans were being made for the coming presidential election.

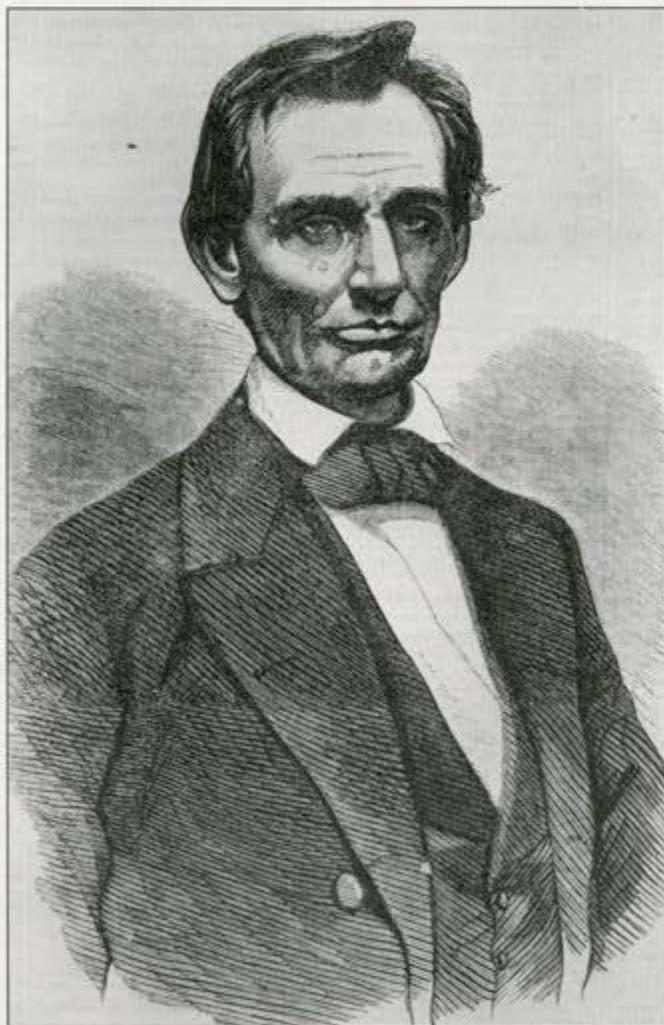
In May, law partner William Herndon attached Lincoln's name, without the latter's knowledge, to a list calling for a county convention to elect delegates to a Republican state convention meeting later in the month in Bloomington. Several friends were upset that Herndon had associated Lincoln's name with this new party, and John Todd Stuart reportedly even argued that the younger partner had "ruined" Lincoln's political career. Lincoln, who had already decided to join the Republicans,

thought Herndon's act "All right," however, and explained to him that he was willing to "meet you — radicals and all." Attending the convention in Bloomington, Lincoln was chosen presidential elector and delivered an address now known as the "Lost Speech." His words caused the *Illinois State Journal* to exclaim that: "When he concluded, the audience sprang to their feet, and cheer after cheer told how deeply their hearts had been touched." Lincoln dedicated much of the

following summer and fall to giving speeches for the Republican presidential candidate, John C. Fremont.¹

Having joined the new party, Lincoln wrote to Senator Trumbull in early June and warned him of the danger of ignoring the conservative sentiments of old Whigs. He even suggested his preference for Justice John McLean, a conservative member of the Supreme Court, for the Republican ticket. He was willing to support anyone not "platformed" on bad policy, however, and when the Republican Convention in Philadelphia nominated Fremont, Lincoln endorsed the choice. He was surprised to learn he had been suggested as a running-mate, reportedly commenting that, "I reckon that ain't me; there's another great man in Massachusetts named Lincoln, and I reckon it's him."²

In the midst of this increased political activity, Lincoln periodically expressed doubts about his own political future (like the



Southerners who saw this woodcut in *Harper's Weekly* during the 1860 campaign did not feel reassured about the Republican candidate for President, writes Johannsen.

reported quotation above). As the end of 1856 neared, Lincoln doubtfully compared himself to the leader of the Northern Democracy, and his own rival in Illinois, Stephen A. Douglas, pondering how

Twenty-two years ago Judge Douglas and I first became acquainted. We were both young men; he a trifle younger than I. Even then we were both ambitious; I, perhaps, quite as much as he. With me, the race of ambition has been a failure — a great failure; with him it has been one of splendid success. His name fills the nation; and is not unknown, even, in foreign lands. I affect no contempt for the high eminence he has reached. So reached, that the oppressed of my species, might have shared with me in the elevation, I would rather stand on that eminence, than wear the richest crown that ever pressed a monarch's brow.³

Yet, four years later, Lincoln led a vigorous Republican party into the White House, while Douglas, recognizing the futility of the Democratic party's chances, toured the South and pleaded for the preservation of the Union. That region, however, had repudiated both northern candidates.

Just as Lincoln compared himself to Douglas and pondered his role amid the political realignments and agitated sectional controversies of the 1850s, contemporary historians, too, have looked to that decade to understand how a little-known Illinois lawyer and single-term Congressman came to express Northern political sentiment and captured Northern support in 1860. Recently, Robert W. Johannsen, author of the biography *Stephen A. Douglas* (1973), has turned his attention to Douglas' emerging rival of the 1850s in *Lincoln, the South, and Slavery: The Political Dimension*, published by the Louisiana State University Press in 1991. In this work, based on his addresses given at the Walter Lynwood Fleming Lectures in Southern History at Louisiana State University and the Twelfth R. Gerald McMurtry Lecture at the Lincoln Museum, Professor Johannsen explores "Lincoln's role in the politics of the slavery question" (p. xi).

In an earlier work that focuses on these important years, *Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850's* (1962), Don E. Fehrenbacher accounts for Lincoln's "rise to power" by looking at favorable external conditions, such as "fundamental changes in the political environment," the political importance of Illinois, and Stephen A. Douglas' prominence. Professor Fehrenbacher, too, assumes an internal consistency in Lincoln's political views, yet notes as well

a perceptible change — a strengthening of mind and will in response to the challenge of circumstances. Much has been written about the extraordinary growth revealed in Lincoln the president, but anyone who follows him through the preceding decade will

find ample evidence of the same quality and may even conclude that the moral stamina, the humane judgment, and the profound sense of history had been there within him, waiting only to be called forth.

He concludes that while "ambition drove him hard in these years of preparation," it was "free of pettiness, malice, and overindulgence," and was "leavened by moral conviction and a deep faith in the principles upon which the republic had been built."⁴

Professor Johannsen is more reserved in his assessment of Lincoln and explains that his positions on the South and slavery in the 1850s were neither unchanging nor wholly consistent, contrary to Lincoln's own perception as expressed in his 1860 campaign autobiography. He focuses specifically on the "political dimension of Lincoln's evolving antislavery position ... from his dramatic resumption of an active political life in 1854 to his election as president in 1860." Aware of the difficulties of studying one who is "almost literally 'beyond history,'" Johannsen hopes to recapture "the prepresidential Lincoln in the way his own generation, including Douglas, saw him," by interpreting Lincoln's own writings and actions in context. In Johannsen's view, Lincoln was politically cautious, unsure, and introspective. He had human flaws, misread events, and suffered from political short-sightedness, particularly where the South was concerned. He "was a man of his times, and the times did not always induce clear, careful, and profound observation" (pp. 8, xii, 5).

Too, Lincoln was politically ambitious. Antebellum party politics deeply influenced many ambitious men like Lincoln and shaped their understanding of good government and of their own place in society; and, like his political contemporaries, Lincoln was a partisan and campaigned aggressively. Johannsen does not "doubt his sincerity" when Lincoln maintained he was pressed by "something higher than anxiety for office." In him, "the two forces — morality and politics — merged, for Lincoln ultimately argued that the moral character of the republic depended on the political success of the Republican party and specifically upon his own election to office. For that reason, party loyalty and regularity were for him always moral obligations" (p. 7).

Lincoln is often described as having held certain convictions about slavery early in life, even if he did not forcefully express them. In the unsettled 1850s, he worked to restrict slavery's extension and as a result, developed into the capable politician of the debates of 1858 and presidential campaign of 1860. Johannsen offers an alternative view and suggests that Lincoln's convictions were actually changed by external pressures. Specifically, he studies Lincoln's views on the issues of slavery and the South to see how they influenced his personal convictions and spurred his political

ambition. More important, he looks at how Lincoln balanced these two human tendencies in the rough-and-tumble world of antebellum Illinois politics (pp. 13-14, xii, 5, 8).

(To be continued)

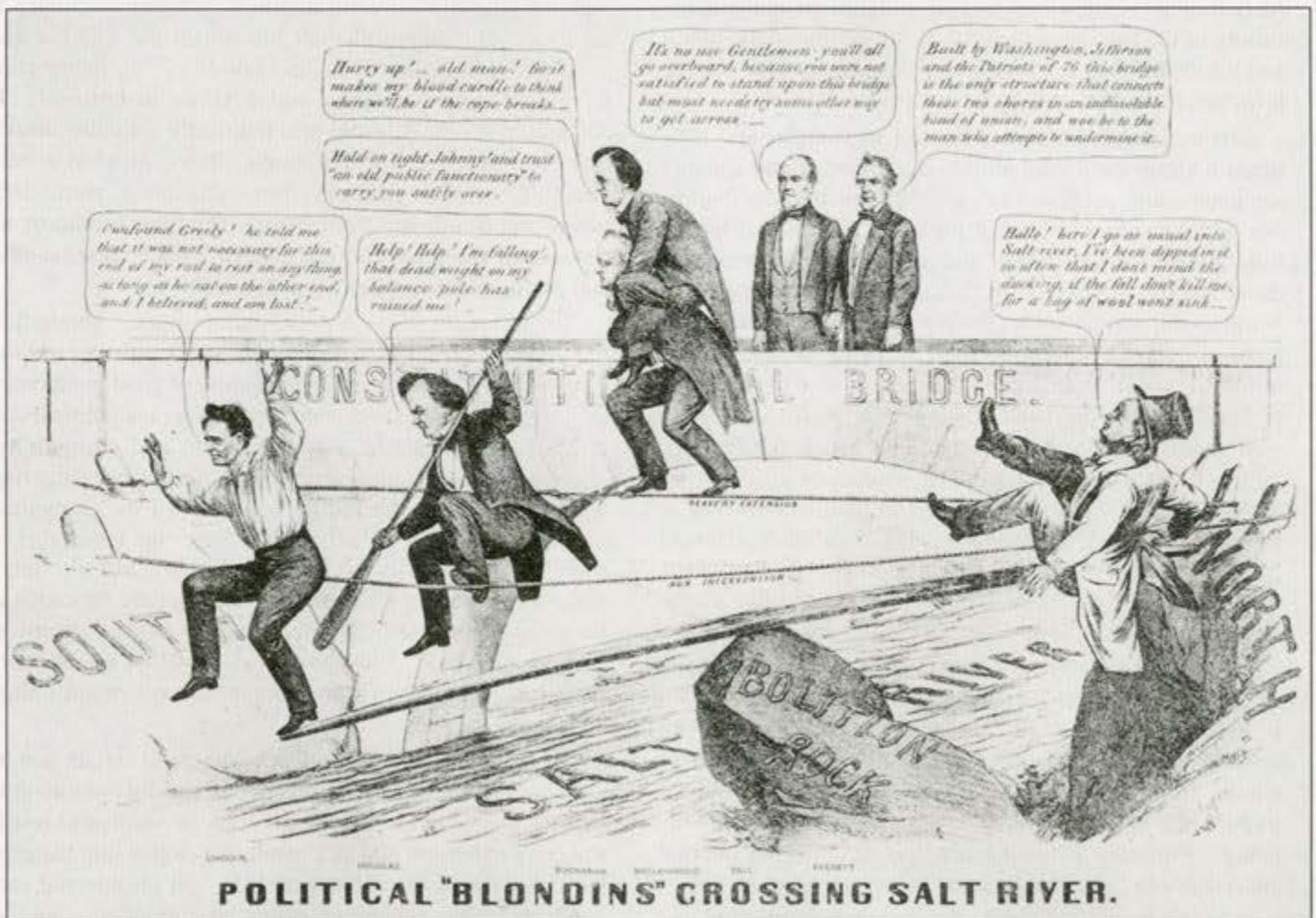
Notes

1. Earl Schenck Miers, ed., *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology* (Washington: Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission, 1960), II, 168, 170; Paul Angle, ed., *The Lincoln Reader* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1947), pp. 215-216; Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850's* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), p. 45-46.
2. Miers, *Day by Day*, II, 170-171; Angle, *Lincoln Reader*, p. 219.
3. Fragment on Stephen A. Douglas (December 1856?), in *Collected Works II*, 382-383.
4. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness*, pp. vii, 5, 17, 18, 161.



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This political cartoon from the campaign of 1860 supported the Constitutional Union party's John Bell for the presidency and compared the other candidates to I. F. Blondin, the tight-rope walker. According to this view, Breckinridge and Douglas balance precariously between North and South (though Douglas is nearly thrown off by "popular sovereignty"). Meanwhile, Lincoln finds that his rail falls short of the South.

NEWS FROM THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN ASSOCIATION

A.L.A. DONATES LINCOLN LETTER

A hitherto unknown, unpublished Lincoln campaign letter has been purchased by the ALA and donated to the Illinois State Historical Library.

The important item was written in August 1860 to A.K. McClure, chairman of Pennsylvania's Republican Committee, in response to an assessment of Lincoln's election chances there which the candidate worried was "less hopeful" in tone than earlier correspondence. Pennsylvania Republicans were at the time bitterly split between factions loyal to Simon Cameron and Andrew Curtin, and Lincoln was worried that the feud could hurt his own prospects in the presidential race. "When you say you are organizing every election district," Lincoln wrote bluntly to McClure, "do you mean to include the idea that you are 'canvassing' — 'counting noses?'"

A month later McClure would reassure the nominee that he was indeed "counting noses" to "the man." Lincoln went on to carry Pennsylvania in the 1860 election.

The ALA paid \$6,000 for the letter, which association President Frank J. Williams declared exemplified in style "Winston Churchill's maxim that the short words are best and the old words are best of all."

THE LINCOLN LEGALS PROJECT

The ALA's centerpiece research project is the "Lincoln Legals," an effort to locate and publish every existing document that survives from Abraham Lincoln's twenty-four year career as an attorney.

Under the direction of Professor Cullom Davis of Sangamon State University, the Lincoln Legal Papers Project has already unearthed nearly 30,000 legal documents representing over 900 cases. The massive research undertaking has identified more than 430 Lincoln cases in Illinois — far more than the 246 recorded previously.

But while the project has received funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and other sources, its annual state budgetary allocation has been reduced, and the project is redoubling its efforts to secure private donations (last year's \$10,000 fundraising goal was exceeded by \$3,000). Contributors receive a regularly-published "Lincoln Legals" newsletter featuring reports and analyses of recent discoveries.

The Lincoln Legal papers are scheduled to be made available in microfilm and CD-ROM, with the crucial documents scheduled for separate publication in book form.

ALA JOURNAL

The *Journal* of the Abraham Lincoln Association — published annually since 1979, will begin appearing twice yearly in 1993, the ALA has announced.

The *Journal* — whose pages are now devoted to publication of annual Symposium papers along with President Frank J. Williams' annual review of "Lincoln and Lincolniana," will begin featuring scholarly articles by leading Lincoln authorities.

Manuscripts are already being solicited, and historians are invited to query Thomas F. Schwartz, editor, c/o the ALA.

LINCOLN 2000 COMMITTEE

The "Lincoln 2000 Committee" — a working group of ALA board members conducting long-range planning to sustain and strengthen the Association into the 21st Century — have recommended a number of innovations to the full ALA board.

Some of its proposals — including biannual publication of the *Journal* — have already been adopted and are being implemented.

In the next issue of the *Newsletter*, look for a longer report on "Lincoln 2000" and its full menu of proposed innovations.

