

Lincoln Love

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

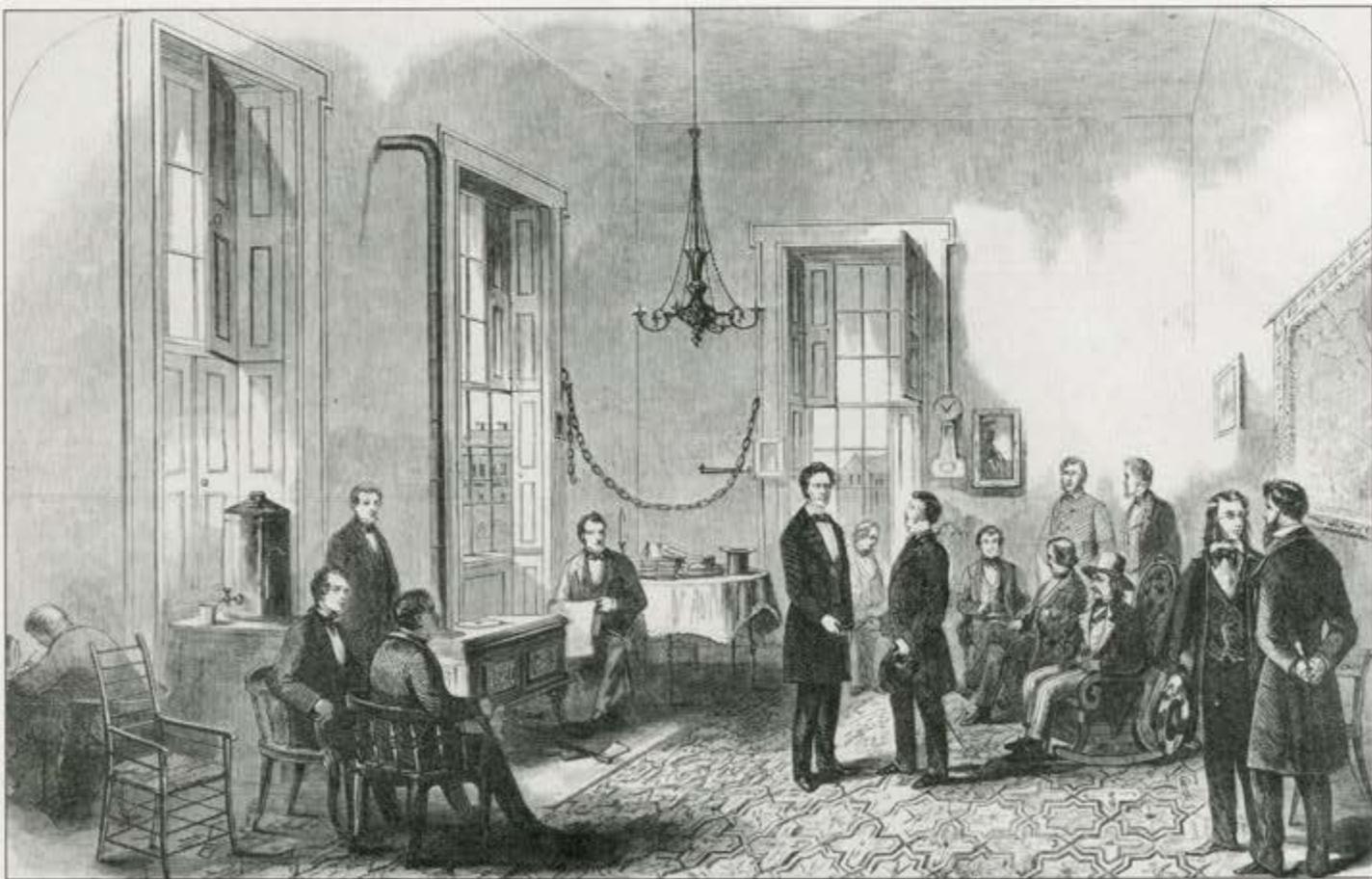
By Matthew Noah Vosmeier

(continued from previous issue)

Between 1854 and 1860, Johannsen explains, Lincoln's position "moved from what he initially labeled a middle-ground stand to a more radical position, and that this movement was directly influenced by the exigencies of a fluid and often confused and uncertain political situation." Two forces in particular compelled Lincoln to the more radical

position that would gain him political success: Stephen A. Douglas and the rise of a sectional Republican party (p. 8).

Lincoln's process of adaptation to the agitated political situation of the 1850s began during the campaign of 1854 and 1855, when he stumped for the Whig party and appealed for the restoration of the Missouri Compromise. A devout follower of Henry Clay and his American System for economic progress, Lincoln, Johannsen points out, did not make antislavery "'the leading idea' in his political feelings" through the 1830s and 1840s. In fact, in his eulogy for Henry Clay given in Chicago in 1852, the ambitious Lincoln sought to succeed the great statesman as



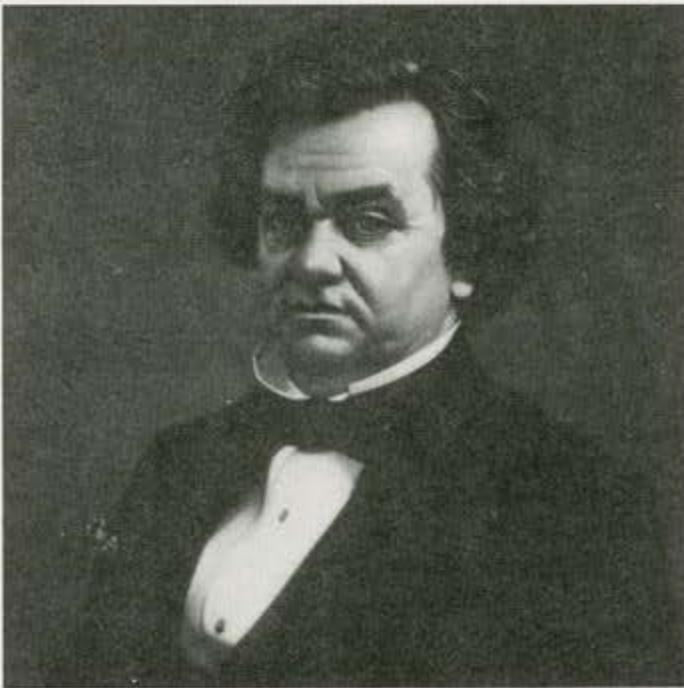
After his election to the presidency in November, Lincoln received visitors in the Governor's room in the Illinois State House. According to Johannsen, as a result of his isolation in Springfield, "Lincoln was insulated from the crisis that threatened the Union."

the western Whig who could reinvigorate the declining national party along Clay's middle-ground stance on slavery (pp. 18, 22).

Upon hearing the news of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, Lincoln was "thunderstruck," but also recognized that this was the coming of a "critical moment that in its urgency would overcome the differences within his party." Lincoln "bided his time," prepared with an "uncommon thoroughness," and was seen "nosing" about the state library. It was eight months after the Act's passage that Lincoln announced his own candidacy for state legislature, but "it soon became clear he had higher stakes in mind": the senate seat of Douglas' friend, James Shields. Thus, Lincoln's response to the news of Kansas-Nebraska

was a political act, undertaken in a political context, and directed toward certain immediate political goals. Deeply disturbed by slavery's potentially destructive impact upon the stability of the party system, he set out to inject new life into both his dying party and his political career by redefining Henry Clay's antislavery position into a strong new platform for combating Douglas and the Democratic party (pp. 24, 22, 26, 25, 22-23).

Focusing his attacks against Douglas and popular sovereignty, Lincoln kindly considered the plight of Southern slaveholders, who were "just what we would be in their situation." Johannsen, too, points out that the politically wise Lincoln, who hoped to rebuild the Whig party, never



Stephen A. Douglas

mentioned that the initial proposal for the repeal of the Missouri Compromise came from Kentucky Senator Archibald Dixon. Dixon, the Whig successor to Henry Clay's Senate seat, was apparently influential in convincing Douglas that repeal would be necessary if the Kansas-Nebraska Act were to pass (pp. 29-31).

Douglas had hoped to avoid a direct repeal of the Missouri Compromise by assuming the principles of the Compromise of 1850 would apply in Nebraska. Just as the latter Compromise had acknowledged Mexico's prohibition of slavery in the territories of the Mexican Cession to be in effect until the territorial legislatures met, so too would the Missouri Compromise apply in Kansas and Nebraska until the legislatures in those territories could apply the principle of popular sovereignty. His overriding hope was to see the West open to settlement, railroad construction, economic development, and free-soil farmers. Earlier, Douglas may have written privately his desire to "repeal altogether that compromise," but knowing the controversy that would result, only "reluctantly acquiesced" to ensure his act's passage. Although Douglas' advocacy of legislation that included the repeal of the Compromise made him a fair target in Lincoln's campaign against the Illinois Democratic party, Johannsen points out Lincoln's political motivation to make Douglas look guilty for an act for which he was not primarily responsible (p. 23).⁵

Lincoln realized the hopelessness of rebuilding a national Whig party along antislavery lines after his defeat in the 1855 senatorial race. If Lincoln were to continue to play an active role in political affairs, he would have to abandon his loyalty to the Whigs. According to Johannsen, "it was not an easy time for a politically ambitious individual, but Lincoln was more fortunate than many others." Ultimately, he did not regret his choice to join the Republican party, for it was "the result of long and careful calculation," and "although undertaken with some trepidation, was smooth and politically rewarding" (pp. 8, 53, 65).

Political circumstances required Lincoln to modify his antislavery approach, however. With the new party's "unusually radical" platform in 1856, "Lincoln found it necessary to adjust to the political realities that followed his affiliation" and adopted "the harsh anti-Southern stance" of that party. Too, after the Fremont campaign and through the senatorial race against Douglas, Lincoln added the more radical notions of the "ultimate extinction of slavery" and of the "house divided." For example, the controversies over the Dred Scott case and Kansas, which Lincoln believed would advance the cause of slavery, prompted him to connect "his demand for the restriction of slavery to the total elimination of slavery everywhere." In fact, if the former occurred, Lincoln had "no doubt that it [slavery] would become extinct, for all time to come" (pp. 56, 59).

Yet, Lincoln was concerned about conservative members of his party and continued to use the whiggish argument that the government could not "constitutionally or rightfully interfere with slaves or slavery where it already exists." Johannsen argues that his simultaneous accommodation to abolition and to the legal protection of slavery "at times appeared to be ambiguous," but that "that was in the nature of politics." Actually, Johannsen explains, the term "ultimate extinction" was "little more than a euphemism for abolition," for whether undertaken immediately or far in the future, "ultimate extinction" would mean the end of slavery (pp. 59-60, 58, 67).

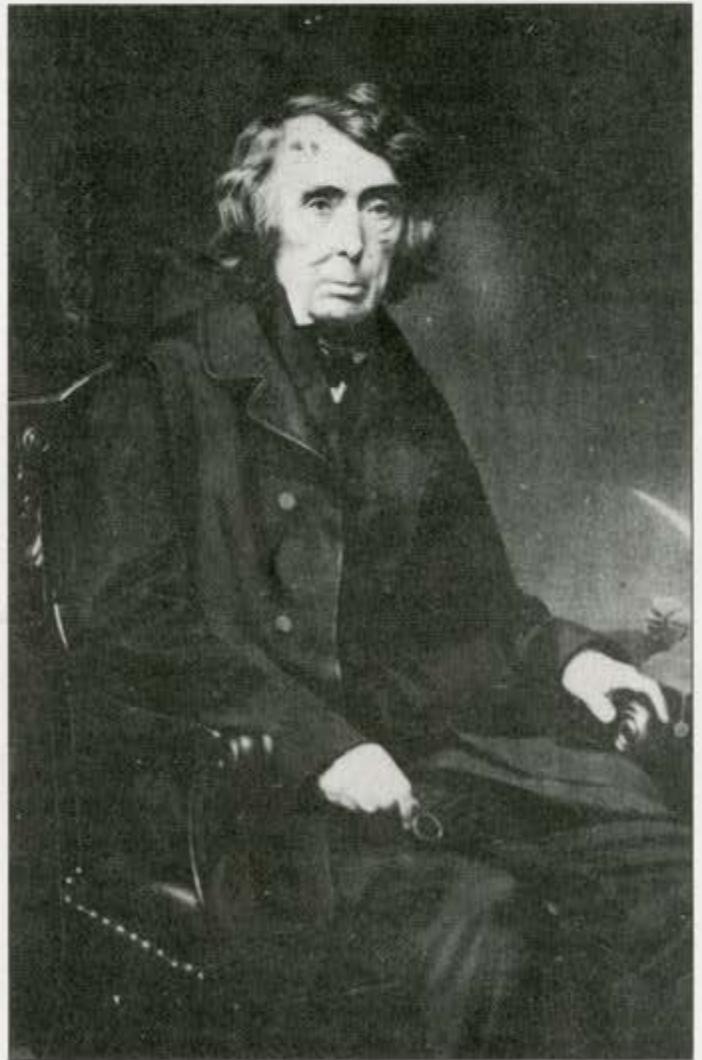
Important, too, for the development of Lincoln's political outlook was that in 1857, Douglas's popularity in the North rose when he stood against President James Buchanan and the Lecompton Compromise (see *Lincoln Lore* Number 1820, October 1990). Fearing a conservative bolt to the Democratic party, Lincoln needed a compelling argument to discredit Douglas and to keep both wings of the new party together. In 1858, he opened the senatorial campaign with his "House Divided" speech, which framed slavery as a moral issue and argued that sectional compromise would give way to either emancipation or national slavery. Because of this position, writes Johannsen, "Lincoln's supporters would find it morally impossible to switch sides" to Douglas and the Northern Democrats. Too, although Douglas had already been rejected by Buchanan and Southern Democrats, during the campaign, Lincoln pressed the notion of a "Slave Power" conspiracy. According to Lincoln's stump speeches, Douglas was either in league with, or the dupe of, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, Presidents Pierce and Buchanan, and the slave interest in their efforts to nationalize slavery (pp. 62-63, 74, 63, 75, 85-88).

By 1860, Lincoln's adaptation to political pressures had brought him national prominence, but he "aroused a spirit of alienation in the South that augured ill for the future of the Union." Because Lincoln's political position and strategy were influenced by competition close to home, "there was no necessity for him to consider Southern positions and viewpoints; it was Douglas who stood in the way, not the South. ... With Douglas defeated and the South beaten, Lincoln told his followers, the agitation over the slavery issue would also come to an end." As a result of this narrow view, "during the 1860 election [he] seemed not to have comprehended the seriousness of Southern fears and threats. ... Where the South was concerned, Lincoln's vision was myopic" (pp. 8, 11, 5).

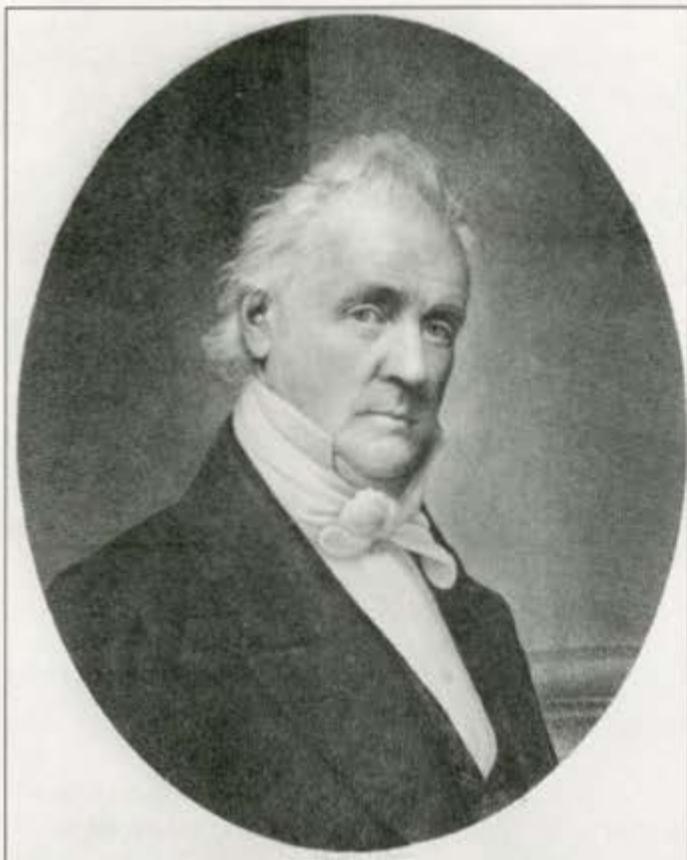
In part, the South's fears stemmed from the Republican party's nomination of an "obscure, inexperienced frontier lawyer" for the presidency. Little was known of Lincoln in the South, for there was a paucity of Republican literature

and Lincoln, believing the South would not listen to him, maintained a silence and directed Southerners to read his speeches. Too, the synthetic Republican policy that was meant to unite conservative and radical Northerners "only confused Southerners." Not only did the Republican party fail to appreciate the seriousness of Southern threats, but Lincoln, explains Johannsen, was "mentally ... still in Springfield" throughout the period of secession, for there "the crisis appeared much less serious." Ultimately, however, this did not seem to matter, for the "point of no return had long since passed" (pp. 103, 117, 105, 121, 114, 124).

Johannsen's *Lincoln, the South, and Slavery* is a perceptively argued alternative perspective on Lincoln. Johannsen shows that Lincoln's was not a thorough and consistent political philosophy. Like many Northern voters, Lincoln found himself uncomfortably in the midst of a party realignment. In his attempt to make sense of increasingly turbulent sectional crises, he shifted politically, but tried to hold both



Chief Justice Roger B. Taney



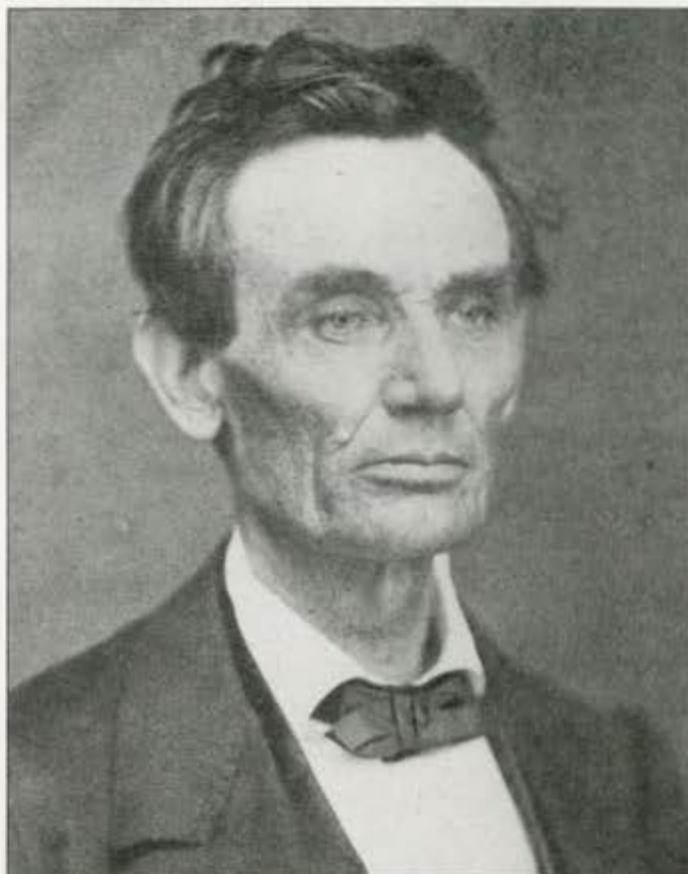
President James Buchanan

conservative and radical sides in tension. Yet, Johannsen points out that influences other than purely ideological ones affected Lincoln's political behavior in the 1850s. He places Lincoln in the political culture of his time and develops the interplay of forces — philosophical, practical, and partisan — that helped shape Lincoln's political arguments. He reinforces the idea that Lincoln's ambition was "an engine that knew no rest" and that, like his contemporaries, he jostled aggressively in campaigns, even if that meant using misrepresentation, exaggeration, and humor to make his point. More important, however, Johannsen shows that the political stand that would bring Lincoln to prominence in 1860 was shaped in Illinois in his opposition to Douglas, who was his local rival and a national symbol of misguided policy.

Thus, in *Lincoln, the South, and Slavery*, Robert Johannsen has raised intriguing questions about the interaction between the public and private sides of Lincoln and how these informed his antislavery stand of the late 1850s. By drawing out the "political dimension" of Lincoln's rise in the 1850s, he has ably mapped the forces at work in antebellum Illinois as well as Lincoln's practical, human, partisan, and sometimes short-sighted response to them. It is an engaging and useful addition to Lincoln historiography.

Notes

5. See Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 396-415; and *Lincoln Lore* Number 1626, August 1973]



Abraham Lincoln as he looked in 1860.



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