

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

CHAPTER XXVI

Educating Illinois

These United States have so far produced no finer model for would-be politicians than Abraham Lincoln. But they must be politicians more interested in achieving justice than securing places for themselves. His methods would keep one out of office as often as they put him in. He is a hopeless model for the dyed-in-the-wool partisan. But if a man or woman really wants to lend a hand to upsetting wrong and strengthening decency and right, he cannot do better than to study Lincoln's political methods and temper.

These years that we are now following, from 1850 to 1860, have their high spots, and the inclination has always been to see nothing in them but these spots - moments when Lincoln emerged from what we have regarded as obscurity and delivered a prophetic and soul-stirring message and then dropped out of sight. Now, the high spots are very high indeed, but heights were never reached by more persistent, day in and day out, climbing, every step of which was carefully and considerably placed.

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These years that we are now following, from 1850 to 1860, have several political "high spots", and the inclination has always been to see nothing in them but these spots - moments when Lincoln emerged from what we have regarded as obscurity and delivered a prophetic and soul-stirring message and then dropped out of sight. Now, the high spots are very high indeed, but heights were never reached by more persistent climbing, every step of which was carefully and considerately placed.

There was the first period of this decade, marked by the speech he made in 1854 on the Repeal of the Missouri Compromise - a speech at once profound and prophetic, which, as I pointed out

two weeks ago, was the crystalization of years of conscious and unconscious reflection and study of the question of the extinction of slavery, of the wrong of which he had never had any doubts.

Then followed two years of experiment - the search of himself and those who felt as he did about the Repeal and had a need for something more than protest - to fuse the revolting elements into a practical working unit. It ended in his bolting the Whigs and joining the anti-Nebraska or Republican party. His second "high spot" came at the first formal convention of the new enterprise when, in the speech which has become one of Illinois' pet traditions - the "Lost Speech" of May 29, 1856.

Now, in this interval between 1854 and '56, Lincoln had given probably half of his time to political work - unpaid of course - a tremendous sacrifice. It no doubt caused domestic irritation for it kept him poor, and yet he seems not to have hesitated after the election of 1856 about going on. It is the way he went on that matters. He was committed with his fellows to educating Illinois to Republican principles - the chief of which he declared was the Declaration of Independence - that was what was at stake, and that was what people must be made to understand. But he realized as well or better than any man in Illinois that political education begins at home and that if he was to teach he must learn. One of the significant things about Lincoln at this time was his incessant study of public opinion, the effort to understand its fluctuations -

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its misconceptions and its progress. It was the press on which he chiefly relied for this. I think it is probably fair to say that there was not a paper in the State that he did not know. He even got himself into domestic trouble by the number to which he subscribed. ^{One at least} A carrier attempting to deliver a copy of a new paper at the house was sent off by Mrs. Lincoln - curtly, we imagine, from the note which Mr. Lincoln felt obliged to send to the editor. "When the paper was brought to my house," he wrote, "my wife said to me, 'Now, you are going to take another worthless little paper.' I said to her, evasively, 'I have not directed the paper to be left.' In my absence she gave the message to the carrier - this is the whole story." Considering the amount of time Mr. Lincoln had been giving to public service, it is not at all surprising that Mary Lincoln should feel grieved at further subscription to what she called a "worthless little paper!"

It was not only the Illinois press that Lincoln followed. The Lincoln and Herndon law office in Springfield was one of the chief newspaper headquarters of the town. Mr. Henry B. Rankin, who was a student in ^{their} office from 1856 to 1861 gives an illuminating picture of the way the two men kept themselves abreast of public opinion, North and South. Mr. Herndon subscribed to the leading Abolitionist papers of the North, and it was Lincoln who said "Let us have both sides on our table. Each is entitled to its day in court." The result was that there came regularly to the office The Charleston Courier, The Richmond Enquirer, The Louisville

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Journal and The Southern Literary Messenger. To this latter, Mr. Rankin says, Mr. Lincoln was particularly devoted, preserving the copies. When he was 'ridding up' in 1861 before leaving for Washington, he turned the file of Messengers over to Mr. Rankin asking him to keep them for him as he wanted to have them bound when he came back. These periodicals are now in Mr. Rankin's library. *J* All of this periodical literature was thoughtfully read and discussed.

"The most remarkable circumstance that now impresses me," says Mr. Rankin, "as I look back over daily intimacies with this law firm from 1856 to 1861, was the student-like ways in which they both steadfastly kept the average political affairs of the whole nation under attention; using all sources and, in their private conference and discussions with each other, reviewing and sifting all conflicting opinions on national questions that came to their office table from North and South, East and West. Had they foreseen the political and executive battles before Lincoln, his preparation could not have been more thorough, exact and comprehensive to fit him for his duties as President in 1861-65." ~~It was his wish that led to their subscribing for Southern papers and periodicals, and he was a more diligent reader of these than his partner. The latter had first supplied the office table with the leading Abolitionist papers of the North. It was their first discussion on the extreme opinions which Northern papers presented which brought the Southern views, represented in Southern papers to the office table. This was Lincoln's suggestion and choice, for, as he then expressed it: 'Let us have both sides on our table; each is entitled to its "day in court."~~

Lincoln spent much time on party organization. In his judgment, you should be able to know the political opinion of every man in a district, and he believed this could be done by making what he called a map of the field. "From the poll books in the county clerk's office," he wrote in August 1857 to a friend in Putnam County, "have made alphabetical lists of all the voters in each precinct or township. This will not be a heavy job. . . . and you see how like

a map it lays the whole field before you and you know at once how and with whom to work."

And he adds this significant advice, "Let all be so quiet that the adversary shall not be notified!"

One of his chief jobs was keeping the bolting Whigs and Democrats from bolting their new allegiance. Many of them hated and feared the Abolition element, did not want to recognize it. "The new party," as he said once, was of the strangest description and even hostile elements, gathered from the four windows." It was a difficult matter for life-long conservatives to pull in the same harness with life-long Abolitionists. Particularly did they doubt the wisdom of allowing them office in the new party. Here was Lovejoy seeking a place. It must not be. What wiser, fairer counsel could a man give in such a situation than that which Lincoln gave? "If . . . upon a common platform which all are willing to stand upon, one who has been known as an Abolitionist, but who is now occupying none but common ground, can get the majority of votes for which all look for election, there is no safe way but to submit."

There is often amazement expressed at Lincoln's skill in handling men in the Civil War, he who is supposed to have had so little experience with men. Here was his school. From 1854 to 1860 he was a leader - in organizing the conservatives, liberals and radicals of Illinois into a practical political organization.

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He dealt with every variety of rashness, emotionalism, timidity, cowardice, trickery, as well as with all grades of nobility and unselfishness. There was not much left for him to learn about human beings when he graduated into the presidency! That is, they could not feel him long. ^{His success in the War} It was not divination. It was intensive experience.

Although we have but one published address of Lincoln's between the election of 1856 and his nomination for the senatorship in ^{June of} 1858, he did much talking. He felt so poor that he did not accept invitations to speak that would necessitate special journeys, but wherever his legal work carried him he talked. I spoke in the last article of the Duff Armstrong ^{trial} case in Beardstown in May of 1858 - the case in which ~~he~~ ^{Lincoln} has been accused of using a falsified almanac - a charge which all the documents as well as the kind of man he was seem to show to be untrue. The evening after the trial he spoke in the court house, not a political speech, rather an adaptation, I take it, of his lecture on inventions.

One of his Beardstown audience remembered that he spoke about matches, recalling the first match that he ever saw, and commenting on what a misfortune it would be if they were wiped out. He talked on inventions but dropped in more or less political gospel. A story he told that stuck long in the minds of his audience was of a man who appeared at a Democratic rally, with a basket of pups for sale. He called them "Democratic pups;" a few

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days later, at a Republican meeting, he labeled them "Republican pups." Somebody recognized him and asked him how it was that one week they were Democratic and the next week Republican. "Oh," said the man, "the pups have their eyes open now." There was more than one shrewd hearer in those times who listening to Lincoln's sober and earnest talk, concluded "That's what he's up to - 'opening our eyes.'"

The pro-slavery party certainly gave him plenty of fresh material to use in opening their eyes, and He seized it with avidity, turning it over and over, fitting it into what had gone before, using it to build up his argument - each thing was a part of a whole. There was the famous Dred Scott decision.

Only four months after the election of 1856, with its big demonstration of the strength of Republican feeling in the country, the Supreme Court declared that Congress had no power to keep slavery out of the territories. There was tremendous fury in Illinois, angry talk, angry threats. Lincoln kept so cool that he was irritating to many. His whole mind was centered on working out the logic of this new position and making others understand it. And what did it mean but that all the efforts of the past to prevent the spread of slavery were scrapped? No use now to talk about restoring the Missouri Compromise. The Compromise meant nothing - never had meant anything, was ^{illegal} illegal. The very Ordinance of 1787 on which the freedom of Illinois itself was based was of no account. And where did it leave the negro? "Condemned to universal and eternal

bondage. "All the powers of the earth seem rapidly combining against him," Lincoln said. "Mammon is after him, ambition follows, philosophy follows, and the theology of the day is fast joining the crowd. They have him in his prison house. They have searched his person and left no prying instrument with him."

They must take a new tack - overrule the decision! Now, the public has always been sensitive about criticism of the Supreme Court. Naturally enough it would like to believe it infallible - the one final authority which makes no mistakes. Mr. Douglas quickly seized on Mr. Lincoln's criticism of the Court - his call for an over-ruling. He was severe in his denunciations of what he called Lincoln's resistance. "But who is resisting it?" said Lincoln. "The over-ruling of a decision is no new thing in the history of the Court. How about Gen. Jackson and his resistance in the matter of a national bank? I have heard Mr. Douglas denounce that decision and applaud Gen. Jackson for disregarding it again and again. It would be interesting," he said, "for him to look over his recent speech and see how exactly his philippics for resisting Supreme Court decisions fall upon his own head."

There is an admirable ^{contemporary} lesson in his carefully thought out and carefully worded explanation of his position:

"We believe as much as Judge Douglas (perhaps more) in obedience to, and respect for, the judicial department of government. We think its decisions on constitutional

questions, when fully settled, should control not only the particular cases decided, but the general policy of the country, subject to be disturbed only by amendments to the Constitution as provided in that instrument itself. More than this would be revolution. But we think the Dred Scott decision is erroneous. We know the court that made it has often overruled its own decision, and we shall do what we can to have it overrule this. We offer no resistance to it.

"Judicial decisions are of greater or less authority as precedents according to circumstances. That this should be so accords both with common sense and the customary understanding of the legal profession.

"If this important decision had been made by the unanimous concurrence of the judges, and without any apparent partisan bias, and in accordance with legal public expectation and with the stead practice of the departments throughout our history, and had been in no part based on assumed historical facts which are not really true; or, if wanting in some of these, it had been before the court more than once, and had there been affirmed and reaffirmed through a course of years, it then might be, perhaps would be, factious, nay, even revolutionary, not to acquiesce in it as a precedent.

"But when, as is true, we find it wanting in all these claims to the public confidence, it is not resistance, it is not factious, it is not even disrespectful, to treat it as not having yet quite established a settled doctrine for the country."

As 1857 went on, it became increasingly difficult for Lincoln to adhere to his determination to keep his mind and the mind of his followers on the central issue of freedom. It became very difficult indeed when in the fall of 1857 Douglas broke with Buchanan and a majority of his party over the constitution which the pro-slavery people had managed to force on Kansas, in spite of a clear anti-slavery majority in the new State. Nobody denied the

majority, but trickery and violence had put over a pre-slavery constitution. And it was on this that Douglas broke with his associates, violently and eloquently. His doctrine of "squatter sovereignty" left it to the people to decide. It was not intended that that doctrine should be manipulated to defeat the majority rule. If the majority wanted it slave they had a right to have it so. He didn't care whether they voted slavery up or down, but he did care whether there was a free expression of public will, and there had not been that.

In a great fight the tendency is to think only of the manoeuvre of the moment; that is all important. Douglas was now on the side of a free Kansas, therefore Douglas was an asset for those who were fighting against the extension of slavery. Thousands of Democrats all over the North who had been pulling away from him flocked back. Many an Illinois Republican, a former Whig, whose mind had been so centered on the fight in Kansas that he had come to believe that the one issue was what happened in Kansas, turned with a certain relief to Douglas, who was, after all, their great ^{Council} man. Greeley and the Tribune were strong for winning him to the ^{Republican} party.

Lincoln's idea from the first had been that the Republicans should stand clear of what he called the "rumpus among the Democrats over the Kansas constitution." "In their view," he wrote, "both the president and Douglas were wrong, and they should not espouse the cause of either, because they may consider him either a little

less or farther wrong of the two." But the espousing went on, so did the eulogizing and admiring and magnifying of Douglas!

Here was a new task - to show that Douglas' revolt had nothing to do with the heart of the matter. ~~It~~ It was on a point over which he and the ^Republicans had never differed, Lincoln declared, - the right of a people to make their own constitution. It did not touch the original Nebraska doctrine. Douglas was still educating people to care nothing about slavery - and slavery was ~~wrong~~ - contrary to the Declaration of Independence.

His insistence brought ridicule from Douglas, taking advantage of course of the revulsion of feeling that his revolt against Buchanan had brought him. Why this appeal to the Declaration of Independence from Lincoln? The Declaration had nothing to do with negroes. It referred to the white race alone, and to only a limited part of the white race. "The people who framed the Declaration of Independence," announced Mr. Douglas, "were speaking of British subjects on this continent being equal to British subjects born and raised in Great Britain." This insincere and contemptuous talk gave Lincoln a fine chance to arouse his serious and reflective hearers and to set down, too, just what he thought the men who framed the Declaration of Independence did mean.

"They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, moral developments, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness in what respects they did consider all men created equal - equal with 'certain inalienable rights, among which we life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' This they said, and this they meant. They did not mean to assert the obvious untruth that all were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact, they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the right, so that enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit.

"They meant to setup a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere. The assertion that 'all men are created equal' was of no practical use in effecting our separation from Great Britain; and it was placed in the Declaration not for that, but for future use. Its authors meant it to be - as, thank God, it is now proving itself - a stumbling-block to all those who in after times might seek to turn a free people back into the hateful paths of despotism. They knew the proneness of prosperity to breed tyrants, and they meant when such should reappear in this fair land and commence their vocation, they should find left for them at least one hard nut to crack."

It was to take Douglas some time to find that it was a nut too hard for him to crack!

This persistent appeal to fundamentals was disconcerting to Douglas. One gets the impression that he felt it was hardly fair play in politics, to be so serious. One senses, too, constant irritation at Lincoln's persistent attack on his statement of facts - false through carelessness oftener probably than through malice or intent. There was something pitiless, implacable in his insistent pursuit of Douglas' careless, oratorical statements. Lincoln had sensed at the first that here was Douglas' weakness - retund periods,

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intent. Douglas was an orator. There was always a good deal of what Mr. Lincoln called "the roar of loose declamation" about his speeches. Lincoln knew - nobody better - the weakness of retund periods, how they are the pitfall of orators, trapping them into statements which when analyzed fall apart because they have little or no basis of fact. He was almost pitiless in his insistent pursuit of Douglas' reckless oratorical statements. John Bunn, one of the most interesting of the Springfield men of later years who knew Lincoln, used to tell a significant story illustrating this practice.

In October of 1854, the day after Douglas had made his first speech in Springfield, explaining his doctrine of 'squatter sovereignty' Lincoln met Bunn on the sidewalk.

"Did you hear the speech of Judge Douglas last night?" he asked.

"Yes," Mr. Bunn said.

"What did you think of it?"

"Mr. Lincoln, I think it was a very able speech, and you will have a great deal of trouble to answer it."

"I will answer that speech without any trouble," Mr. Lincoln replied, "because Mr. Douglas made two misstatements of fact and upon these two misstatements he built his whole argument. I can show that his facts are not facts, and that will refute his speech."

"I was present," Mr. Bunn added, "and heard the reply which Mr. Lincoln made to Judge Douglas' speech, and to my mind he did disprove Douglas' facts, and, as I thought, completely answered his argument."

People were constantly having that experience - Lincoln was right - Douglas was wrong. It was said so often that it finally made him the unquestioned leader of the Republicans in Illinois. There were many able ^{and devoted} men in the party, but in nobody was there quite the same confidence and respect. When it came time, as it did in the spring of 1858 for the Republican party to nominate a candidate to contest the senatorship with Judge Douglas, there was little or no question that Lincoln would be the choice. So it turned out. He was nominated in Springfield in June - "the first and only choice of the convention." The night after the nomination he struck another of the high spots, the highest yet - too high for his party's safety, many of his followers thought; yet in the speech that he made on the night of June 17, 1858, all that he said was but a freer and larger putting of the ideas which you find working like seeds in what he had been saying in the last four years. The speech is a splendid example of the natural growth and development of a man's mind when concentrated on a vital expanding theme. We know this speech as "The house divided against itself speech." So important is it in the history of the Republican party that they have put up a tablet in the court room in Springfield where it was delivered.

It put the issue so unequivocally that men shrank from it. "I believe this Government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the house to fall but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other." It was something nobody could get away from. Men might not be able to read, but they could still understand what these words meant. And he followed it by that extraordinary paragraph in which he pictured the campaign of pro-slavery advocates to make the house all their kind of thing. Nobody could doubt after that speech what the Republican party was up against. It left no haze in any mind that thought.

But of course few think. And, after all, few heard him or would read the Springfield speech. He must go on, educating, bringing more and more of that great Illinois mass to see what was at stake, to understand that here was an attack on freedom, and that the time had come when they must face the fact that it was in danger, and decide whether they were willing or no to fight for it.

Douglas came into the field in June to stay until November. He sensed, probably better than anybody else in the State that he had a real fight on his hands. In those months he spoke fully 150 times and Lincoln usually trailing him, almost as many. But we forget the 140 or so speeches in the contest and as a rule think only of the seven occasions on which the two men met on the same platform, answering each other, point by point. Lincoln's friends

had been anxious for these debates; the more thoughtful of them felt that this was the only way in which Lincoln could really overcome the fascination of Douglas' presence and oratory, his "greatness," the gain he had made by his fight against the bogus Kansas constitution. Pin him down, face to face, and you have got him. And Lincoln believed it, and so, after delays and hesitation on Douglas' part, it was arranged.

Lincoln went into the debates, held in October of 1858, saturated with his theme - his mind convinced of the soundness of his argument and his faith in the end unwavering. "The result is not doubtful," he told his followers. "We shall not fail; if we stand firm, we shall not fail. Wise counsels may accelerate or mistakes delay it, but sooner or later the victory is sure to come."

The sentences have the quality of those bits of English which we call his masterpieces, and they have, too, the tone of the prophet. It was a high spirit with which to undertake a great contest. The way he went through that contest is the subject of the next paper.