

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

CHAPTER XXX

Lincoln Sits at Home

A talking presidential nominee is often his own worst enemy. The more excited the public, the sharper the division of opinion, the more damage he does himself and his party every time he opens his mouth or writes a letter. To be sure, we have candidates who must talk, never having said anything before nomination. Abraham Lincoln was not in this ^{class} situation. He had something to show - the soundest thinking, the most complete as well as the clearest statement of the subject that divided the country - the extension of slavery - made by any man in the long conflict. For six years he had given at least half of his conscious mind and probably all of his unconscious, ^{to} developing his arguments. No national campaign committee ever had a more dignified and convincing body of material to send out than that which Lincoln provided the Republicans. And they made the most of it. Editions of his speeches, particularly of the debates with Douglas and the Cooper Union speech, were published in New York, Ohio and Chicago by different agencies, and spread liberally over the country.

Lincoln now took the position that he had said repeatedly all he had to say on the ^{subject} ~~question~~ which divided the people. He may have had some idea that everybody knew what he thought, but he must have been soon dissuaded after his nomination for there descended

upon him from North and South crowds of visitors and floods of letters, asking his opinions, begging him to come and tell them what his policy would be if elected, or to put it down in a letter so that they might show it to their friends. It was the discouraging experience that every public man suffers when, after having spent himself for years in expounding his views, he suddenly faces the fact that, after all, only a handful of people have listened to him and only a few of them understand what he has been saying.

Lincoln was lucky, however, in having ^{there} books and pamphlets at his hands to turn over to those of his correspondents and visitors who seemed to him serious enough to really absorb the content of his argument. Copy after copy of the thin black covered book containing the debates with Douglas, published in 1860 in Columbus, O., has been turning up from that day to this, bearing the inscription "A - B - from A. Lincoln," on its title page. But there were not books and pamphlets enough to give to everybody, nor did everybody seem worthy of them, so that Mr. Lincoln finally instructed his new secretary, John G. Nicolay, to prepare a circular letter to fit the case. It is entirely Lincolnesque in terms. He had received many letters asking for his opinions, ^{he said} but he had also received a greater number beseeching him to say nothing whatever on any point of political doctrine. His positions, this second class of letters declared, were well known when he was nominated and he

must not embarrass the canvass by undertaking to shift or modify them, and that was his judgment and decision. Hundreds of copies of this letter probably went out.

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~~Campaign documents and circulars~~ did not prevent his answering many correspondents, particularly those from the South, with painstaking personal letters. Would he not write something disclaiming all intention to interfere with slavery in the states, they asked him. "It would do no good," he would answer. "I have already done this many, many times, and it is in print and open to all who will read. Those who will not read or heed what I have already publicly said would not read or heed a repetition of it. 'If they hear not Moses and the prophets neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead.'"

They wanted his "conservative views." "If I were to labor a month," he answered, "I could not express my conservative views and intentions more clearly and strongly than they are expressed in our platform and in my many speeches already printed and before the public". . . yet . . . "I have not decided that I will not do substantially what you suggest, I will not forbear from doing so merely on punctilio and pluck. If I do finally

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Of course he was right in thinking that any expression that came from him now would be maliciously twisted and turned. Misrepresentation, ridicule, willful lying are recognized tools in political campaigns. The more acute the division of opinion the more freely they are employed. Good men go yearly into office in these United States hampered by the suspicion and false judgments born of the reckless indifference to the truth which characterizes our political campaigns. They are handicapped from the start in their best efforts. We have it always with us, but our history affords no more flagrant example than what happened now to Abraham Lincoln. We are far enough away from his nomination - public opinion upon the man's worth is too well grounded for us not to read with shocked indignation the characterizations that were freely circulated and freely accepted by those who opposed his doctrines.

"He was a vulgar village politician," one great metropolitan daily declared, "a fourth rate lawyer." The Cooper Union speech of which Horace Greeley who heard it and who at the moment was not too friendly to Lincoln declared to be the very best political address to which he had ever listened, and he added, "I have heard some of Webster's greatest," his opponents now sneered at as "hackneyed," "illiterate," "unmitigated trash interlarded with coarse clumsy jokes." This of course was angry, uncontrolled partisan expression, intended to besmirch and belittle Lincoln. It had no relation to fact nor was it intended to have. ~~However, it is what everyone of us has seen, at~~

~~least in a degree, done to the candidates we have supported in our own times, and perhaps which we have, in a degree, helped to do for opposition candidates; but it is a wicked and dangerous practice.~~

Mischievous and misleading accusations began to spread - he had belonged to the Know Nothing or American party - had been seen going into Know Nothing lodges. So widespread and serious was the charge that he had to deny it to individuals. "I suppose" he wrote one gentleman, "that as good or even better men than I may have been in Know Nothing lodges but in point of fact I never was in one. . . . And now a word of caution. Our adversaries think they can gain a point if they can force me to openly deny the charge by which some degree of offense would be given to the Americans. For this reason it must not publicly appear that I am paying any attention to the charge."

They tried to stir up trouble for him in Kentucky. Samuel Hayercraft of Elizabethtown, Ky. - we met this gentleman in an earlier chapter - wrote asking if it would not be a pleasure for him to visit his old home. "Indeed it would be," he replied, "but would it be safe? Would not the people lynch me?" He meant it to be jocular, and told the story to friends. It was not long before it was spread over the country that Mr. Lincoln said that a trap had been set to inveigle him into Kentucky in order to do violence to him. He was distressed, particularly on Mr. Hayercraft's account. It took much explaining to be sure he was set right in

his old neighbor's mind, as well as cautioning to see that he did not make matters worse by his explaining.

Forged extracts, pretending to be from old speeches of his were circulated. An outrageous one which particularly incensed him characterized Jefferson as a man of "repulsive" character, "continually pining about liberty, equality and the degrading curse of slavery, yet he brought his own children to the hammer and made money by his debaucheries. Even at his death he did not manumit his numerous offspring but left them still a prey to degradation and the cart whip." - a nasty bit for a man as decent in thought and as careful of his facts as Mr. Lincoln to see passed from newspaper to newspaper. He could do nothing more than to tell those who sent the clippings to him, asking an explanation, that he never said anything like it, at any time or place.

A forgery of this sort, once it is set on its lawless round of the press, however out of character with the man to whom it is credited, is hard to kill. This dishonest practice of putting into Lincoln's mouth for political purposes words that he never spoke still goes on. Only a few months ago there was spread through the press of the country an alleged quotation from Lincoln, beginning "I see a dark cloud on the horizon and that dark cloud is coming from Rome," followed by a prophecy of a disastrous struggle with "Rome and her allies". The quotation was a clumsy fabrication. Lincoln was the last man in the world to harbor bigotry.

For many years there has cropped up at intervals a

forged quotation in regard to prohibition. I should not bring this up in this connection if it were not that very recently so important a newspaper as the New York World published on its editorial page a communication giving what looked like documentary evidence of ^{of this quotation} its authenticity. According to the World's correspondent, Mr. Lincoln said, in a speech in the Illinois House of Representatives in December 1840, when an act to regulate tavern and grocery licenses was under discussion:

"Prohibition will work great injury to the cause of temperance. It is a species of intemperance within itself, for it goes beyond the bounds of reason, in that it attempts to control a man's appetite by legislation and makes a crime out of things that are not crimes. A Prohibition Law strikes a blow at the very principles upon which our Government was founded."

But the Journal of the House shows no such remarks. The only recorded connection of Lincoln with the bill was moving that the following amendment be laid on the table:

"That after the passage of this act no personal shall be licensed to sell vinous or spirituous liquors in this State, and that any person who violates this act by selling such liquors shall be fined the sum of \$1,000. to be recovered before any court having competent jurisdiction."

This was done by a vote of 75 to 8.

Years ago I myself had a careful search made in the House Journal and in the Springfield newspapers of the period for this quotation, but without result. On reading the confident correspondence in the World, I wrote to the Illinois State

Historical Library, asking if any proof of the authenticity of the quotation had been ^{recently} discovered; and this was my reply:

"We have had hundreds of letters in regard to this from all over the United States and also from England. This statement cannot be found in any of the public writings or speeches of Lincoln and I herewith enclose to you the extract from the House Journal of December 19th, 1840-41, page 136 entitled 'An Act to amend an Act,' etc.

"There were no speeches made on the subject. The files of the Springfield newspapers covering that period have been gone over very carefully time and time again by both the people in favor of Prohibition and those against it, and they have failed to find that Mr Lincoln ever made such a statement, so I do not know whether they could go to verify it. . . ."

Throughout this period that we are now following, from Lincoln's nomination in May to his election in November, he lived in an atmosphere of caricaturing, misrepresentation, intriguing, and lying, which became darker and thicker as public feeling on the slavery question became more intense and angry. One of the tests of a man's fitness for public office is the control, the humor, and the discretion with which he meets this deplorable but inevitable feature of public life. Lincoln had had experience enough with the meanness of men to know something of what he was in for, and the general good temper, quiet and cleverness with which he handled these partisan attacks augured well for the future; he must have realized that what was happening to him now was but an insignificant sample of what would come in the near future unless the public excitement could be allayed.

This unpleasant side of his experience as a nominee was, after all, but an episode. He was too busy from morning until

night receiving in the Governor's room at the state capitol which had been hospitably turned over to him as a reception office, men and women from one end of the country to the other, hordes of them merely friendly and curious, but numbers politically significant.

Judge David Davis and Leonard Swett, who had been his most important backers in Chicago, went East soon after the nomination urging men important in the Republican organization - most of them men who had been bitterly disappointed by the result at Chicago, who knew little of Lincoln other than his opinions, and who doubted his political wisdom and executive ability - to come to Springfield. Conspicuous among the visitors thus secured was Thurlow Weed, the editor of the Albany Argus, the friend and backer of Seward, the enemy of Horace Greeley - an enmity returned with interest! Weed had been so overwhelmed by the defeat that all he wanted was to get far away and forget the whole campaign, but Davis and Swett persuaded him to visit Lincoln in Springfield, and he finally came - to go away as many another man was doing now, with the conviction that here was a sagacious, frank, self-directed man that would have to be dealt with intelligently and honestly.

Practically everybody that came of understanding and good will went away reconciled. One of the finest of recent contributions to this getting acquainted with Mr. Lincoln after the nomination, comes in a letter of Carl Schurz to his wife, for here you find another Seward man, of very different type of mind and training from Weed, well satisfied. His letter was the best picture, I think, that

we have of the simplicity and naturalness of Mr. Lincoln's home and public life at this period.

"I was with Lincoln yesterday," Mr. Schurz writes to his wife under date of July 25, 1860. "He is the same kindly old fellow, quite as unpretentious and ingenuous as ever. The reception committee had reserved quarters for me at the hotel, and Lincoln was one of the first to knock at my door. He wears a linen sack-coat and a hat of doubtful age, but his appearance is neat and cleanly. We talked in my room nearly two hours. I was lying on my bed resting, when he came, and he insisted on my remaining so. He talked of the Presidential election with as much placid, cheerful frankness as if he were discussing the potato crop. . . . In the evening I took supper with Lincoln. The Madam was very nicely dressed up and is already quite skillful in handling her fan. She chats fairly well and will adapt herself to the White House cleverly enough. Lincoln's boys are typical Western youngsters. One of them insisted on going about bare-footed. After supper to which a number of 'leading men' had been invited, we lit our cigars and chatted. At eight o'clock the Wideawakes came to escort me to my mass-meeting in the capitol. I have never seen so large a torch-light procession. Lincoln insisted on accompanying us, although he had not appeared in public since his nomination. He declared that he must once hear 'that tremendous speaker.' And so the Wideawakes surrounded 'Old Abe' and me; thus arm, in arm we marched to the capitol."

Such a visit as Schurz' must have been a great delight to Mr. Lincoln. And then in scores of ways he was receiving proofs of personal friendship, always so dear to him. With this article there is printed a fac-simile of a letter from one of his boyhood friends, Nathaniel N. Grigsby, whose brother Aaron had married Lincoln's sister. Grigsby was now living in Missouri, and he evidently had announced to Lincoln his intention of voting for him. ~~It is evident that~~ Lincoln was pleased to hear from his old acquaintance, but his reply shows him more interested in giving him the news of his own family than he is of the possibility of a vote, for, after telling him various bits of family history,

he adds that the Republican party has been organized in Missouri so that Grigsby can vote for him if his neighbors will let him, but he would advise him not to get into trouble about it.

Other friends from southwestern Indiana as well as from Kentucky wrote him. Lincolns from different parts of the country tried to discover if there was any relationship between them. All this personal side he enjoyed. Then, too, he took real satisfaction in the way the elections were going. He watched every state, almost every precinct, like a hawk, and in this period undoubtedly vastly extended his knowledge of the personnel of the Republican party. He learned not merely the names but something of the abilities and character of all the state, as well as many of the local leaders. This of course was an extending into the nation his old political practice of mapping out the area in which a political struggle was on and learning the actors, to the last man.

We have had evidence enough already of the way in which Lincoln went through the minds of men with whom he talked. He put his habit to good use now. These scores upon scores of politicians who wrote him or visited him in person, underwent a more or less unconscious scrutiny and appraisal of which they could have had no knowledge. He found out from them an enormous amount about local situations, local personages. He found out whom they hated or suspected and balanced it by more or less

knowledge of those who hated or suspected them, for it was not only misrepresentation of himself that he was obliged to meet, it was misrepresentation of the factions in the party. He had a busy time trying to pull together these divisions. When it was known, for instance, that Thurlow Weed had visited him, he was bombarded with warnings against Weed. It was taken as a certainty that Weed was intriguing with him, and he had to write and say to more than one that he "saw no signs whatever of the intriguing, that he had asked for nothing." His general attitude towards those who gave him what he called "historical details of local troubles" was that he had not heard so much upon the subject as they had supposed, that he was slow to listen to incriminations among friends, and that "his sincere wish was that both sides and everybody would let by-gones be by-gones and look to the present and future only."

Fortunately for Lincoln and for the Republican interest there were great bodies of men in all the northern states who sensed as deeply as he did this necessity of letting by-gones be by-gones. It was a question now not of men but of the very fundamentals of human liberty. Happily enough he had evidence in his own circle of the working of this superior sense. For more than ten years now he had been alienated from a friend to whom he had once been deeply attached, Cyrus Edwards, who felt that in 1849 Lincoln had not played fair in regard to the General Land Office. No explanation of Mr. Lincoln's had ever softened Edward's

feeling of injustice; but now, with the future of the country at stake, he put his old grievance behind him and wrote to Joseph Gillespie - the friend of them both - that he pledged "a word which has never failed that he would bury the hatchet with Lincoln."

The political strength of the Republicans in the campaign of 1860 lay in the division of the Democrats. There were three tickets in the field, and so long as these three tickets ^{or any two of them} could be kept ^{from} without fusion, ^{the} Republican success was a practical certainty. Lincoln watched, catlike, every move on the part of Douglas to manage his competitors to his own advantage. He warned on all sides when he saw a sign of weakness, but there are no evidences in his letters that he ever had serious anxiety about the result. The Republicans grew not only in numbers but in determination ⁱⁿ enthusiasm as the weeks went on. Lincoln's name was on their lips, but the fervor of a great idea was stirring their souls. They were swept by something of the same depth of feeling, the same largeness of view that had been driving Lincoln himself. Sitting there in Springfield through these weeks waiting for the election, Lincoln must have felt at times almost dismay at the tremendous thing which was sweeping through the North and West, of which he in all probability soon would be the leader, which he must hold together, direct, ^{but to also} inspire. It was at the moment so much greater than any man, and yet it was something a man might wreck

by stupidity, vanity, obstinacy. At the same time, it must have been heartening to see his long faith in the fundamental unsoundness of the thing which he had been fighting, demonstrated as it was. The opposition was crumbling daily. But there was tragedy in their disunion. Numbers of his opponents, feeling defeat in the air, did not hesitate to declare that they would shake the dust of the Union off their feet if the Republicans were victorious. The threat came to Lincoln often and more often as the election approached. He dismissed it in words which sound strangely today ~~if we take them apart from the political necessities of the moment.~~ ^{up to that time} They sound as if he had never seriously considered the idea of secession. One visitor who came to him reports him as saying that there was no real disunionism in the country, and to a correspondent he wrote that "The people of the South have too much good sense and good temper to attempt the ruin of the Government, at least so I hope and believe." It was treating as impossible a fearful possibility which he had more than once in the past years resolutely declared would be met by resistance - "We won't get out of the Union, and you shan't" he had said in 1856. Again and again similar declarations are found in his speeches.

A very good idea of the seriousness of the attention he had already given to the threat is found in a letter to Alexander Stephens of Atlanta, Ga., written four months before his nomination - a remarkable letter, only in the last few years given to the public, the longest letter that he ever wrote, he declared. In

it he gives the historical basis for his belief that there was no legal way for a state to withdraw from the Union, that secession *and must be treated as revolution* was revolution. It is probable that the material for this document was collected at the time he was ransacking the records to discover what the fathers of the country thought about the right of Congress to prevent slavery in the territories - the investigation which gave so great weight and importance to the Cooper Union speech.

Lightly as Lincoln tried to treat the threat of disunion in this period there is evidence enough that he had sensed the possibility of the attempt ever since 1854 and that he was clear in his mind how it should be met. But now he must quiet alarms - ignore dangers. This was the policy of the Republicans - Seward, Schurz and Bryant were all characterizing the threats of disunion as largely political - an attempt of the opposing parties to persuade the public that Lincoln's selection was bound to drive the South into secession. And Lincoln sitting mute in Springfield must not embarrass those who were fighting the battle in the field.

His judgment of the result of the campaign was justified in November - victory, but it a victory that had its sting. 1,866,452 men had cast their votes for him, but over two and three-quarter million had cast their votes for others. The weakness of this majority was that it was divided between three candidates, the most popular of whom was Stephen A. Douglas. Lincoln

had nearly half a million votes more than Douglas. The startling feature in his election was the sectional division of the country. ^{it showed} In ten different states ^{adjoining} Lincoln had not a single vote, and in fifteen states he had no electoral vote. The Union was politically if not physically divided. Probably he did not say to himself when he went to his Springfield home the night of November 6, 1860 after receiving the returns that he was the President of a divided United States, but it must have soon begun to torment his thoughts. And what was he going to do about it?

What he did about it in the four months that were to follow before he was allowed to touch the problem which had now been put up to him will be the subject of our next chapter.