

Abe's Return to Political Battle

By [CHRISTOPHER LEVENICK](#)

Lincoln at Peoria

By Lewis E. Lehrman

Stackpole, 412 pages, \$29.95

November 1853 was perhaps the last time that an antebellum American could think the slavery question settled. The states had their own arrangements. The Missouri Compromise governed the territories bought in the Louisiana Purchase, and the Compromise of 1850 governed the lands won in the Mexican-American War. It was an unsatisfactory but workable arrangement.



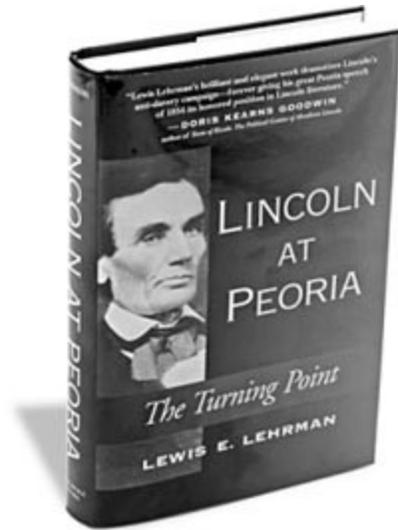
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The Nebraska and Kansas territories in 1854 were a flashpoint of the slavery debate.

Until, that is, December 1853, when legislation was introduced to organize the Kansas and Nebraska territories. Designed by Sen. Stephen A. Douglas, the acts invoked the principle of "popular sovereignty": settlers were to decide the status of slavery for themselves. With Nebraska, American land bordering Canada was for the first time open to slavery.

Many in the North were outraged -- not least among them a tall, gaunt lawyer in Springfield, Ill. By 1854, with a thriving practice and a growing family, 45-year-old former U.S. congressman Abraham Lincoln had largely retired from public life. But Kansas-Nebraska compelled him to re-enter politics. That fall, he delivered a series of speeches against the measures, including a rhetorical masterpiece in Peoria, Ill., on Oct. 16, 1854.

Lincoln's return to politics, and the speeches it occasioned, is the subject of Lewis E. Lehrman's "Lincoln at Peoria." Intimately familiar with the primary sources and armed with a sweeping command of the historiography, Mr. Lehrman convincingly argues that Peoria marks the inflection-point in Lincoln's political development, when he discovered both the essence of the cause he embraced and the most persuasive way to convey it. At Peoria, Lincoln ceased to be an unremarkable Whig politician, concerned with the usual party platforms on internal improvements and protective tariffs. He gave evidence for the first time of his scrupulous study of the American founding. That fall day was, Mr. Lehrman suggests, the moment when Lincoln became Lincoln.



The author vividly sets the scene for the speech outside the Peoria courthouse. Douglas spoke first, carrying on for three hours in the afternoon; when Lincoln's turn came, he wisely suggested, before beginning his own three-hour oration that the crowd adjourn for supper and return at 7 p.m. A cheer went up, along with dozens of hats tossed in celebration. A larger crowd than heard Douglas speak gathered on the darkened square that evening -- Peoria didn't have gas streetlights yet, the author reports, so the only light came from lanterns and from candles in windows.

Then Lincoln spoke. At that moment the country began its long, slow course correction. "According to our ancient faith," he said early in the address, "the just powers of governments are derived from the consent of the governed. Now the relation of masters and slave is . . . a total violation of this principle. The master not only governs the slave without his consent; but he governs him by a set of rules altogether different from those which he prescribes for himself. Allow ALL the governed an equal voice in the government, and that, and only that is self government."

As Mr. Lehrman notes, "Lincoln's demeanor and his vocabulary after 1854 became nearly as important as his message. His rhetoric became serious and self-confident; he used fewer stories and less sarcasm. . . . At Peoria, Lincoln had diverged not only from rival Stephen A. Douglas in style and substance, but he had also abandoned the personal attacks of his stump speeches in the 1830s and 1840s." The Lincoln who would give the Gettysburg Address was on his way.

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