

*“... measuring him by the sentiment of his country,  
a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult,  
[Lincoln] was swift, zealous, radical, and determined.”*

— FREDERICK DOUGLASS, APRIL 14, 1876

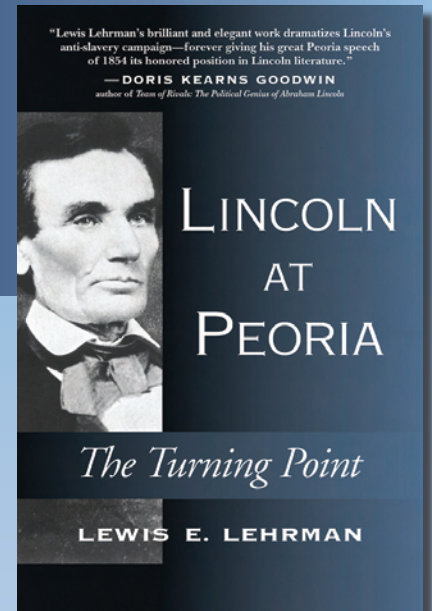
# LINCOLN AT PEORIA

## *The Turning Point*

by Lewis E. Lehrman

*Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point* explains how Lincoln’s speech at Peoria on October 16, 1854 was the turning point in the development of his antislavery campaign and his political career and thought. Here, Lincoln detailed his opposition to slavery’s extension and his determination to defend America’s Founding document from those who denied that the Declaration of Independence applied to black Americans.

Students of Abraham Lincoln know the canon of his major speeches — from his Lyceum Speech of 1838 to his “Final Remarks” delivered from a White House window, days before he was murdered in 1865. Less well-known are the two extraordinary speeches given at Springfield and Peoria two weeks apart in 1854. They marked Mr. Lincoln’s reentry into the politics of Illinois and, as he could not know, his preparation for the Presidency in 1861. These Lincoln addresses catapulted him into the debates over slavery which dominated Illinois and national politics for the rest of the decade. Lincoln delivered the substance of these arguments several times — certainly in Springfield on October 4, 1854, for which there are only press reports. A longer version came twelve days later in Peoria. To understand President Abraham Lincoln, one must understand the Peoria speech of October 16, 1854. It forms the foundation of his politics and principles, in the 1850s and in his Presidency.



### **Book Information**

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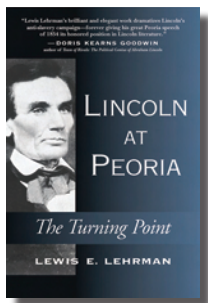
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### Excerpt from Introduction (pages xiii-xvii)

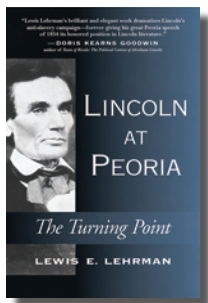
*Lincoln at Peoria* tells the tale of a hardworking lawyer in Springfield, Illinois, at a political turning point in 1854. Admitted to the Illinois Bar in 1836, having served four terms in the state legislature and a single term in Congress (1847–1849), Abraham Lincoln had substantially withdrawn from politics between 1849 and 1854. During these five years, his Springfield law practice prospered. Traveling often by horse and buggy, he became a well-respected litigator on the Eighth Judicial Circuit of Illinois. Then in 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, one of the most explosive congressional statutes of American history, burst upon the Illinois prairie. This congressional statute repealed the 1820 prohibition of slavery in the Kansas-Nebraska territory. The repeal inaugurated a new stage in the slavery debates of the early American Republic. In response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Lincoln launched his antislavery campaign with crucial speeches at Springfield and Peoria, Illinois, in October. These speeches and their consequences are the subjects of this book.

In 1854 Lincoln was little known. Now a vast library records the words and actions of Lincoln's life. More has been written of the sixteenth president, perhaps, than any historical figure but Jesus of Nazareth. The narrative of this Lincoln volume has only a limited scope, taking its place in the vast world of Lincoln scholarship. Thus, there is no claim here to consider more of the Lincoln story than the period suggested by the title of this book. The crucial issue of black slavery in America is considered primarily as it bears on Lincoln at the turning point in 1854. There is little space to note the remarkable extent to which black Americans, living here as slaves ten generations before the Civil War, resisted slavery and created their own freedom—even before emancipation. Mr. Lincoln believed black Americans were entitled to the inalienable right to liberty, and to the fruit of their own labor. He also came to believe they would fight for their freedom. Of this he was confident, earnestly believing that “all men are created equal” and wished to be free. And Lincoln was right. That stalwart African Americans joined the Civil War armies to free themselves might not have surprised the Lincoln who appeared in Peoria to give his speech on October 16, 1854—seven years before the Civil War.

Students of Abraham Lincoln know the canon of his major speeches—from his Lyceum Speech of 1838 to his “Final Remarks” delivered from a White House window, days before he was assassinated in 1865. The Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural are brief and timeless. Some works are nostalgic such as the eulogy for Henry Clay in 1852. Before them in the 1830s and 1840s, there are speeches of the younger Lincoln on the high road and some on the low road. Later came monumental masterpieces, such as the “House Divided” speech of 1858 and the Cooper Union address of 1860. There are the extraordinary debates of 1858 with Senator Stephen A. Douglas. In contrast, there are the short, impromptu speeches of modest substance given on his way to Washington in 1861. The president's public letters in mid-1863 to James C. Conkling and Erastus Corning read like well-crafted speeches. The First and Second Inaugurals spell out President Lincoln's interpretations of the causes and consequences of the Civil War.

Less well-known are the speeches given at Springfield and Peoria two weeks apart in 1854. They mark Lincoln's reentry into the politics of Illinois and, as he could not know, his preparation for the presidency in 1861. Historians and biographers have noted their importance, but they have not received the full study they merit. These Lincoln addresses catapulted him into the debates over slavery which dominated Illinois and national politics for the rest of the decade. Lincoln delivered the substance of these arguments several times—certainly in Springfield on October 4, 1854, for which there are only press reports. A longer version came twelve days later in Peoria. The Springfield remarks did not survive, but by preparing them meticulously for publication, Lincoln made sure the text from Peoria endured.

By his research and editorial care Lincoln made clear his respect for the historian's record. I, too, respect the historian's record. Scholars and teachers have taught me what I know of the American saga. I am deeply in debt to them. Still, I am not a scholar. My full-time vocation has allowed me irregular hours to research, study, and write, but I have tried to adhere to the traditional standards of historical scholarship. Thus, this book—a labor of love, in the works for more than two decades—has taken needed inspiration from dedicated teachers of our history. In this study I try to let the exact words of Lincoln himself, of his



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### Excerpt from Introduction (continued)

contemporaries, and of six generations of scholars tell the tale. They speak very well for themselves. The admonition of my graduate school teacher still rings in my ears—let readers make up their own minds from the evidence on the record, and from different interpretations presented by witnesses and scholars. I have tried to apply this principle, especially in the straightforward historical narrative of chapters I through III. My own judgements of the momentous issues at stake, of the rival ideas and leaders of the 1850s—are more transparent in chapters IV through IX.

Lincoln himself was suspicious of biography and history, according to William Herndon, his law partner of sixteen years. Herndon reported that Lincoln, perusing a biography of Edmund Burke, observed: “Biographies as generally written are not only misleading, but false.” Lincoln pondered a while and added: “Billy, I’ve wondered why book-publishers and merchants don’t have blank biographies on their shelves, always ready for an emergency; so that, if a man happens to die, his heirs or his friends, if they wish to perpetuate his memory, can purchase one already written, but with blanks. These blanks they can at their pleasure fill up with rosy sentences full of high-sounding praise.”<sup>1</sup> Though difficult to uphold, I try in this book to follow Mr. Lincoln’s admonition and to introduce a balanced view, not only of Lincoln at the turning point, but of his chief adversary, Stephen A. Douglas. Both were ambitious, both patriots, both endowed with great talent. Neither needs hagiography, nor has either earned demonization. In matters of character, principle, and policy, I do make comparisons, but I try to avoid invidious distinctions.

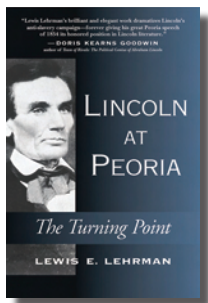
Of Lincoln I do not shirk my own judgments. I confess that I have little doubt that the mature Lincoln at Peoria in 1854 is of a piece with the man who would be recognized as a great American statesman. There is, I believe, an unmistakable wholeness of character, genius, and enterprise to his public life from 1854 to 1865. But in 1854, the future President could not know what awaited him and his countrymen. Given the benefit of hindsight, every historian must be careful to avoid presumption. Historical interpretation should acknowledge how little of the future can be foreseen by men and women of affairs; how intractable are the circumstances facing political leaders; how unpredictable are historical outcomes; how varied are the motives that drive each contingent human decision; how, nonetheless, leadership can influence what might otherwise be improbable outcomes. Lincoln’s antislavery campaign was an exercise in leadership.

To understand President Abraham Lincoln, one must understand the Peoria speech of October 16, 1854. It forms the foundation of his politics and principles, in the 1850s and in his presidency. The Peoria speech, delivered in three hours and ten minutes and composed of more than 17,000 words, is reprinted in full in an appendix. It is a rhetorical and literary masterpiece. This speech is the primary statement by Abraham Lincoln about the nature of early American history and its “peculiar institution” of slavery. Lincoln’s arguments at Peoria were a comprehensive repudiation of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of May 1854. Sponsored by Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas, this legislation voided the congressional prohibition on slavery in that section of the Louisiana Territory north of the 36° 30’ parallel, a restriction on the spread of slavery agreed to in the Missouri Compromise of 1820. Lincoln was appalled by this reversal of three decades of settled policy. He was opposed to any further spread of slavery in the American republic, founded as it was upon the Declaration of Independence. That “all men are created equal,” with the “inalienable right to liberty,” was, for Lincoln, a universal principle that Americans must not ignore.

With research and study conducted in the State Capitol, the forty-five year-old attorney carefully prepared a counterattack on the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Years of studying Sir William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, preparing for jury trials, litigating in the courts of Illinois, and researching American political history had prepared Lincoln’s mind and speech to argue the issues raised by the new legislation. To his natural aptitude for learning Lincoln now joined a mature intellect, a driving instinct for political organization, and a masterful grasp of the facts and logic of the case against Kansas-Nebraska.

#### Reference

1. William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon’s Life of Lincoln*, 264-65.



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### Early Reviews

**Doris Kearns Goodwin** author of *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*.

“Lewis E. Lehrman does a brilliant job of dramatizing a critical moment in Lincoln’s life that has never before been given the careful attention it deserves. In his book, *Lincoln at Peoria*, he has forever given the Peoria speech of 1854 its rightful place in Lincoln’s story. As a result this elegant study provides fresh insight into both the growth of Abraham Lincoln as a masterful leader and the tumultuous decade of the 1850s. It is a book that deserves an honored place in the literature of our 16th President.”

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**James M. McPherson** Pulitzer Prize winning author of *Battle Cry of Freedom*.

“Abraham Lincoln’s speech at Peoria, Illinois in October 1854 climaxed his return to the political stage, in response to Stephen A. Douglas’s Kansas-Nebraska Act passed that year. This famous speech outlined Lincoln’s political faith and marked the first of several titanic contests with Douglas that carried through the founding of the Republican party, the debates in 1858, and the presidential election of 1860. Lewis Lehrman’s detailed study of the context, rhetoric, and consequences of this speech offers new insights on Lincoln’s rise to greatness. *Lincoln at Peoria* takes its place among the important Lincoln books in this bicentennial season.”

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**Michael Burlingame** author of *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln*.

“Lewis E. Lehrman’s eloquent, thorough study of Lincoln’s first oratorical masterpiece makes a major new contribution to Lincoln studies. We have had studies of the Gettysburg Address, the Second Inaugural, and the Cooper Union Speech, but until now no study of the magnificent 1854 Peoria Speech, in which Lincoln made his debut as a spokesman for the antislavery cause. The speech deserves to be far better known than it is. Lehrman’s book, *Lincoln At Peoria* will achieve this purpose. As an early biographer of the sixteenth president put it, the speech was “really a great one” which ought to be carefully read by every one who desires to know Mr. Lincoln’s power as a debater, after his intellect was matured and ripened by years of hard experience. Those who do know the Peoria speech will gain a fuller appreciation of its context and significance from this beautifully written, well-documented study.”

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**Douglas L. Wilson** award-winning author of *Honor’s Voice*.

“Lewis E. Lehrman’s *Lincoln at Peoria* is nothing less than a landmark contribution to Lincoln studies. Abraham Lincoln’s 1854 Peoria speech has long been recognized as a valuable sourcebook of his seminal ideas and arguments, but it has never received this kind of thorough and illuminating treatment.”

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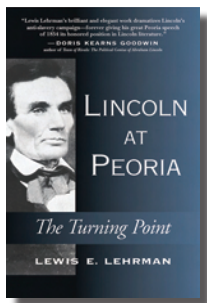
**David Brion Davis** Pulitzer Prize winner, author of *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*.

“Lewis E. Lehrman’s new book provides an indispensable analysis of Abraham Lincoln’s approach to the central issue of slavery. Fully attuned to the vast historiography on the subject, Lehrman focuses on Lincoln’s magnificent speech in Peoria in October 1854 to demonstrate how Lincoln’s fusion of firm moral principle with a comprehensive grasp of history and the pragmatics of American politics created a road to the future.”

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**James Oliver Horton** co-author of *Slavery and the Making of America*.

“This is a fascinating study of Abraham Lincoln as revealed through his words, ideas and evolving philosophy. With impressive research and writing that grips the reader, Lewis Lehrman’s meticulous analysis of one of Lincoln’s little known speeches in the turbulent decade of the 1850s contributes to our understanding of one of America’s greatest leaders during the most critical period in the nation’s history. This is a must read for anyone seeking to understand Lincoln and his time, a pivotal time that laid the foundation for our own.”



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### About the Author

Lewis Lehrman is dedicated to reviving the teaching of American history in its schools and colleges. He has studied, written and lectured widely on American history, economics and Lincoln for three decades. He also writes for the Lincoln Institute, which has created award-winning websites on the 16th President. With Richard Gilder, Mr. Lehrman co-founded the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History and built the Gilder Lehrman Collection of original historical manuscripts and documents to teach American history from primary sources, now on deposit for public access at the New-York Historical Society. He was presented the National Humanities Medal at the White House in 2005 for his work in American history, and is a member of the Advisory Committee of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission and the Lincoln Forum.

### The Author's Other Initiatives

**The Lincoln Institute** researches and promotes the study of the life of America's 16th President and the impact he had on the preservation of the Union, the emancipation of black slaves, and the development of democratic principles which have found worldwide application. It maintains six websites: Mr. Lincoln's White House, Mr. Lincoln and Freedom, Mr. Lincoln and the Founders, Mr. Lincoln and Friends, Mr. Lincoln and New York, and Abraham Lincoln's Classroom. [www.abrahamlincoln.org](http://www.abrahamlincoln.org)

**The Lehrman Institute**, founded in 1972, is dedicated to public policy, educational and historical research and the improvement of education at the elementary, secondary and college levels. The Institute has sponsored research and discussion in the fields of economics, historical research, foreign policy and urban policy. [www.lehrmaninstitute.org](http://www.lehrmaninstitute.org)

**Lincoln and Soldiers Institute and the Annual Lincoln Prize** encourages the study of Abraham Lincoln, the American Civil War soldier and subjects relating to their era of American history, which helped shape the United States and the world. [www.gilderlehrman.org/historians/fellowship2.html](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/historians/fellowship2.html)

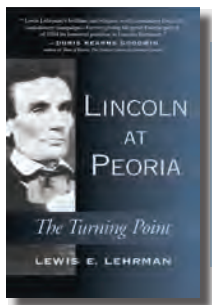
**The Gilder Lehrman Collection**, exceeding 60,000 items, documents the political and social history of the United States. Consisting of letters and diaries, maps, pamphlets, sketchbooks, printed books, photographs and other materials, the collection is particularly rich in the revolutionary, early national, antebellum and Civil War periods. [www.gilderlehrman.org/collection](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/collection)

**The Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance and Abolition**, a part of the Yale Center for International and Area Studies, is dedicated to the investigation and dissemination of information concerning all aspects of the Atlantic slave system and its destruction. [www.yale.edu/glc](http://www.yale.edu/glc)

**Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History** promotes the study and love of American history to target audiences ranging from students and scholars to the general public. The Institute creates history-centered schools and academic research centers; organizes seminars and enrichment programs for educators; produces print and electronic publications and traveling exhibitions; and sponsors lectures by eminent historians. [www.gilderlehrman.org/institute/index.html](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/institute/index.html)

**The Fredrick Douglass Book Prize**, presented each year by the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition is a \$25,000 award for the most outstanding nonfiction book published in English on the subject of slavery and/or abolition and antislavery movements. [www.gilderlehrman.org/historians/fellowship2.html](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/historians/fellowship2.html)

**The George Washington Book Prize** is co-sponsored by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, Washington College and George Washington's Mount Vernon. It recognizes the year's best books about the nation's founding era. The \$50,000 award is one of the largest literary prizes of any kind. [www.gilderlehrman.org/historians/fellowship2.html](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/historians/fellowship2.html)



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### BOOKS

## Abe's Return to Political Battle

By CHRISTOPHER LEVENICK

July 26, 2008; Page W9

### 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.



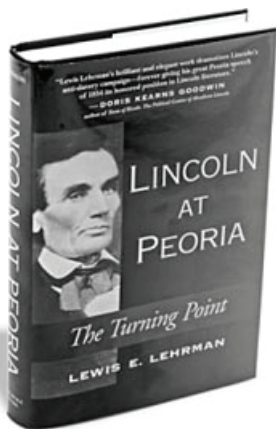
The Granger Collection

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.



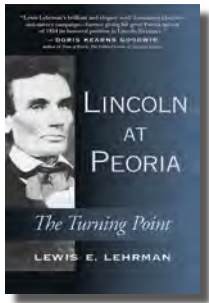
The author vividly sets the scene for the speech outside the Peoria courthouse. Douglas spoke first, carrying on for three hours in the afternoon; when Lincoln's turn came, he wisely suggested, before beginning his own three-hour oration, that the crowd adjourn for supper and return at 7 p.m. A cheer 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.

Mr. Levenick is a writer in Alexandria, Va.

URL for this article: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121702699285086269.html>



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## GREENWICH POST

### Exploring Lincoln

*Local author focuses on President's 1854 speech*

*Ken Borsuk; Staff Reporter*

July 24, 2008, **Section:** News **Page:** 15A

When people think of the great speeches by Abraham Lincoln, they tend to focus on the Gettysburg Address or the "House divided against itself cannot stand" remarks. But Greenwich resident Lewis Lehrman contends that the roots of the drive of the man who became the Great Emancipator can be traced to years before then. In his new book, *Lincoln at Peoria*, Mr. Lehrman focuses on a speech Mr. Lincoln gave on Oct. 16, 1854, in Peoria, Ill., one that might be obscure to non-historians, given that it was made when Mr. Lincoln was an attorney and a private citizen, and before he re-entered politics. But Mr. Lehrman contends that in the more than three-hour monologue, which consisted of more than 17,000 words, the then-future President showed the strength of character and moral resolve that made him what people say was one of the country's greatest leaders.

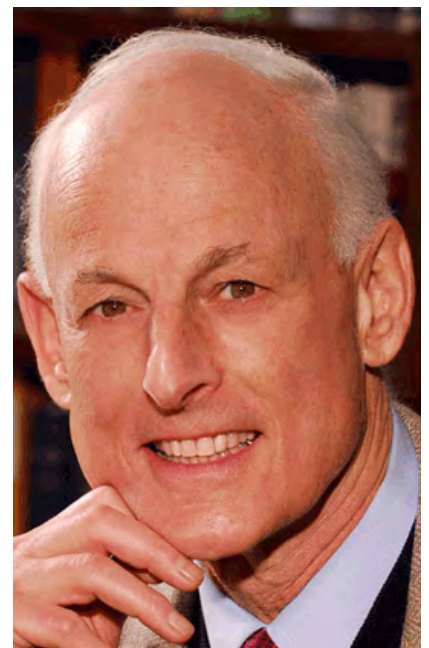
"This was a very decisive speech," Mr. Lehrman told the Post. "The speech contains most of the great ideas we associate with Lincoln. While it's not as well known as the Gettysburg Address, the second inaugural speech or others, you can see the themes in those speeches here when he was still a private citizen. You see the same themes and arguments and logic that came to be associated with President Lincoln. He links slavery here with the Declaration of Independence and the ideal that all men are created equal."

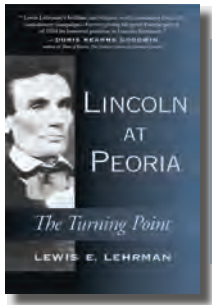
Mr. Lincoln's speech was given as a response to a speech given by Illinois Sen. Steven Douglas about the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which repealed a prohibition on slavery in the Kansas-Nebraska territory. The act, which Mr. Douglas sponsored, permitted the settlers in the territory, following the repeal, to choose whether they wanted slavery or not.

The prohibition of slavery was a key component of 1820's Missouri Compromise.

An opponent of the spread of slavery, Mr. Lincoln spoke out in Peoria on the same day as Mr. Douglas's speech praising the act, out of concern the act set the precedent to move slavery into all American territories, perhaps even into the "free states."

"Lincoln gave a magnificent history of the origins and development of slavery in the United States," Mr. Lehrman said. "He argued about the intentions of our founding fathers in creating the Declaration of Independence and contended that they wanted slavery put in the course of ultimate extinction."





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A lifelong student of history, Mr. Lehrman said he believes this speech is critical to understanding Mr. Lincoln. This is the first speech he gave specifically linking the need to end slavery with the words of the Declaration of Independence, an argument later used to argue for emancipation. Historians have noted the importance of the speech, but outside of that circle, there isn't much awareness.

"This is so important in Mr. Lincoln's campaign against slavery that I felt it deserved a full treatment," Mr. Lehrman said. "Studying this speech is crucial to understanding the last decade of his life and how the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery came to be."

Lincoln at Peoria has been 20 years in the making for Mr. Lehrman, who used evenings and weekends to work on it. The book not only details the speech, but also explores the events leading up to it and the impact that resulted from it. The detailed research Mr. Lehrman did wasn't easy, but he said it meant a lot to do it because of the importance of Mr. Lincoln and what he accomplished.

Mr. Lehrman dedicates the book to his wife, children, grandchildren and generations to come, and asks that Mr. Lincoln be a "trusted guide" for them. He told the Post he would urge anyone to read one of the better Lincoln biographies and be "edified and inspired by his life."

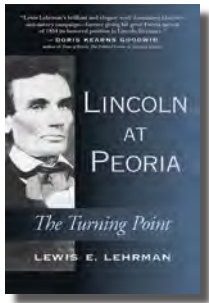
"He was a virtually self-taught man who proved himself a great scholar and constitutional interpreter," Mr. Lehrman said of Mr. Lincoln, who had less than 12 months' formal education. "He was a true genius and the moral conduct he exhibited under the most difficult of circumstances should be part of the American dream for anyone who aspires to be the best they can be as an American."

Already the author of a book on economic and monetary history, this is Mr. Lehrman's first book about American history, a longtime passion. Mr. Lehrman is chairman of the private investment firm L.E. Lehrman and Co. but was once a history teacher, serving as both a Carnegie Teaching Fellow at Yale University and a Woodrow Wilson Fellow at Harvard University. As managing partner of the Gilder Lehrman Collection, he and his partner have the largest collection of privately owned American historical documents, including letters written by George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Mr. Lincoln. Mr. Lehrman and Richard Gilder also oversee the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

Mr. Lehrman credits the teachers he had growing up in Pennsylvania near the Gettysburg battlefield with inspiring his interest in history. While he said he doesn't consider himself a scholar, his book is receiving positive reviews from noted historians such as Doris Kearns Goodwin and James McPherson.

"It's very fulfilling to see others appreciate the book, especially scholars who have spent a lifetime studying the subject," Mr. Lehrman said.





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## History Unfiltered

*Humanities*, July/August 2008

Volume 29, Number 4

A conversation with Lewis Lehrman

Arriving by train in Washington, D.C., Lewis Lehrman wore a soft old brown hat and carried one piece of luggage, a canvas duffel bag that he's owned for so long that several times his wife has sent it back to the manufacturer to have the handles replaced. For lunch he wanted to go somewhere simple, for a sandwich, though several of the District's finest restaurants were but a few steps away. He does not talk much about Rite Aid, Morgan Stanley, or his current investment business, but lights up at the mention of Abraham Lincoln, about whom he has just written a book, *Lincoln at Peoria*. "You can tell a patriot by how he refers to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Washington preferred to be called General Washington and Lincoln, Mr. Lincoln. Even Mrs. Lincoln called him that, but also sometimes simply Lincoln. But never, ever Abe."

**NEH Chairman Bruce Cole:** You've led a varied and exciting life as a successful businessman, a noted political candidate, and as one-half of the team of collectors and education advocates behind the [Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History](http://www.gilderlehrman.org). Now we learn you are also a historian. Why don't you start by telling me about some of the people who influenced you growing up?

**Lewis Lehrman:** My grandfather Louis was a primary influence. He was a hardworking Central Pennsylvania grocer who'd pulled himself up by the bootstraps. And my mother thought I should be an educated man. My father insisted upon excellence. Neither my mother nor my father had gone to college, so some of their aspirations for a full education were handed down to me.

In the early school years, I had a terrific set of teachers. In fifth and sixth grade, Elsie B. Diven was my key teacher. She had gone to Columbia, and she trained me rigorously, teaching me a disciplined attention to the details of the English language.



Lewis Lehrman

**COLE:** She was an English teacher?

**LEHRMAN:** Yes.

**COLE:** And where was this?

**LEHRMAN:** In Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where I was born and raised, not far from the school to which I went. And, in addition to Mrs. Diven, there was another great teacher, by the name of Duncan Campbell, who was a military historian. For our level, he was an extremely sophisticated teacher.

—Dona Bagley

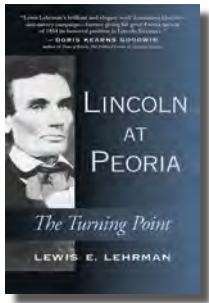
He took us to the Gettysburg battlefield, which is near the farm where Louise, my wife, and I started with our marriage. We are still building the farm. And I got to know Gettysburg as an 11- and 12-year-old, at a time when you could still find Indian arrowheads and bullets from the battle. If you were lucky, you could find some kind of military tool, such as a bayonet.



Bruce Cole

—Maria Biernik

There Duncan Campbell regaled us with stories about the Blue and the Gray, and about the heroic aspects of American wartime statesmanship. For a young man, that kind of exercise can make a big impression. You imagine coming down the rocks, at full speed, with Colonel Chamberlain, in his great charge at Little Round Top.



# LINCOLN AT PEORIA

## *The Turning Point*

by Lewis E. Lehrman

[www.LincolnatPeoria.com](http://www.LincolnatPeoria.com)

At that time Lincoln's birthday was still a national holiday. Much attention at school was paid to great moments of American history: the Emancipation Proclamation; the Thirteenth Amendment; the Declaration of Independence; and, of course, General Washington's birthday was also a holiday.

There was a natural, unselfconscious, unapologetic patriotism inculcated in young men and women, characteristic, I think, of the nation as a whole.

**COLE:** Then you went off to college, at Yale?

**LEHRMAN:** I did, and there I ran into a group of marvelous teachers. I majored in history, since I wanted to be a history teacher. And I won the Carnegie Teaching Fellowship and an immediate appointment to the Yale faculty as an assistant instructor.

So I began teaching, and then I tried for a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to Harvard, won that, and went to Harvard. But that was the second, and last, year of my teaching. I went into the army, and then I went to work, but I never left the study of American history behind.

Everywhere I traveled, I would take recent works of scholarship on American history with me, because I spent a lot of days and evenings on the road, in hotels. My continued study of history ultimately led to the decision to do this book on Lincoln at Peoria.

Like so many other people, I was fascinated by this man who was, I think, a unique literary genius, as well as a unique statesman. So the book has been in the oven, so to speak, for more than twenty years.

**COLE:** But the idea was seeded while you were in elementary school, right?

**LEHRMAN:** In a way, yes.

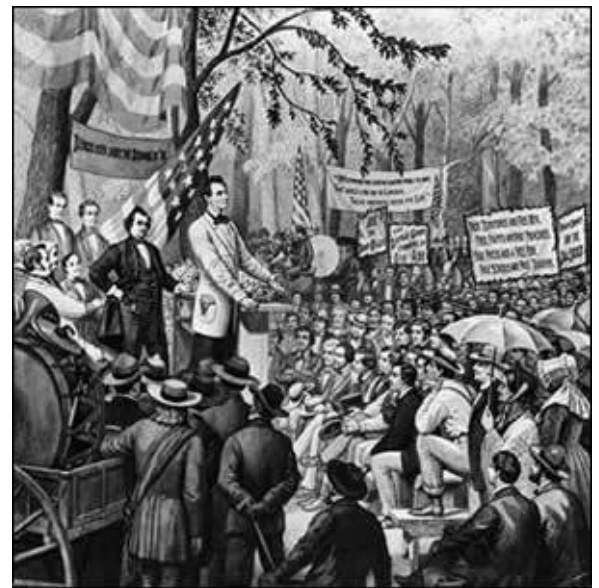
**COLE:** What were some other key moments in the making of your book?

**LEHRMAN:** Well, in 1953, Roy Basler published *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. There were, at first, eight volumes and an index, and then two supplements.

I read these volumes all the way through in my twenties, which is, I think, the best way to read—in his own hand—the autobiography of Mr. Lincoln. And there was, in Volume II, this speech of October 16th, 1854, that he gave at Peoria, when he comes out of a near political retirement. The speech at Peoria suffused my consciousness. Completely.

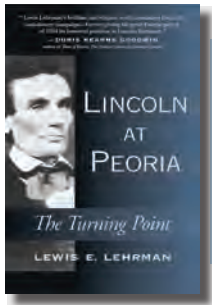
**COLE:** Even then?

**LEHRMAN:** At that exact moment. And, in a sense, my book, *Lincoln at Peoria*, is a transfer of that moment of concentration, which stayed with me.



**Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas debate the slavery question in 1858.**

—*Art Resource, New York*



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**COLE:** That's fantastic.

**LEHRMAN:** But I started making notes, writing, and speaking on certain parts of it, in the early 1980s.

**COLE:** Tell me about your background.

**LEHRMAN:** My grandfather and my father were grocers in Central Pennsylvania. And they had a small wholesale grocery business. It emerged from one retail grocery store that my grandfather had.

Rite Aid, of which I was president from 1968 to 1977, became a public company in 1968. By then I had undergone a total immersion in Main Street America, visiting the first group of hundreds of towns in my little Plymouth Valiant. Great car. No push buttons.

**COLE:** With your books, right?

**LEHRMAN:** Yes, with my American history books in the back seat. I had to stay overnight in hotels like the Mark Twain Motor Inn in Elmira, New York. And, in the evenings, I would spend one hour having dinner, and then had hours in which to read, then off to work again in the morning.

In the meantime, I had gotten married. Louise and I had, ultimately, five children. Without Louise, I cannot imagine my life. And I moved to New York City, because my business took me to New York; also, Louise was from New York City and wanted to live there. My next business exercise was at Morgan Stanley, where I was involved in investment management. In 1990, I set up my own investment business and have been at that ever since.

**COLE:** And soon after that you established the Gilder Lehrman Collection, right?

**LEHRMAN:** Right.

**COLE:** And that's been an important development in the study of American history. But why did you take up that work?

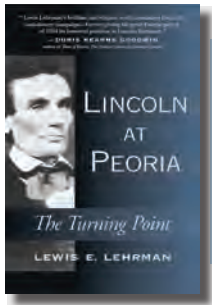
**LEHRMAN:** It was an outgrowth of my ideas about what kind of institutions we need to teach both public policy as well as the traditional subjects of the humanities and social sciences.

In 1972, I set up the Lehrman Institute, to study economic and foreign policy from an historical perspective. Very close to that time, I also joined the American Enterprise Institute, when it was a tiny, little place, and The Heritage Foundation, when it was nothing but a very small hope and a prayer to revive a certain way of thinking about public policy.

It was my view that the universities were no longer sufficient to serve as the kind of open-ended, liberal vehicle for the teaching of the social sciences and the humanities. So, one needed independent, innovative institutions.

**COLE:** These associations were precursors, right?

**LEHRMAN:** Yes. The Lehrman Institute came in 1972, before I began to focus with Dick Gilder on the teaching and study of American history in the Gilder Lehrman Collection and the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.



# LINCOLN AT PEORIA

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When I left Morgan Stanley, I set up my own investment business. Around the same time, my good friend Dick Gilder, whom I had known since the late sixties, and I formed a partnership to build a collection of American historical manuscripts and documents for the purpose of gathering them out of the private places in which they'd been assembled and getting them into public hands, where scholars and teachers and students could use them.

**COLE:** These documents—primary, historical documents—are necessary for the study and dissemination of history.

**LEHRMAN:** Yes, that's right. My own study and teaching had been centered on the documents, which is how I was taught at Yale and at Harvard. And my total immersion in Lincoln's writings showed me how completely one can be absorbed by the original documents themselves, as opposed to the customary textbook treatments or even the finer monographs on American history.

**COLE:** In such books, you see history through somebody else's filter.

**LEHRMAN:** Yes. You get a short quotation here and a short quotation there. So, I determined that whenever I wrote my book on Lincoln, I was going to allow the principals, and especially Lincoln and his contemporaries, even later historians, to tell the story in their own words, with not quite as much paraphrase as is customary in American histories.

**COLE:** We have kind of a parallel to the Gilder Lehrman Institute, our *We the People* initiative, which is designed to improve the teaching and understanding of American history, and I think that's been very successful because teachers are glad to have the opportunity to get closer to their subjects. And it's important that this be encouraged. In a democracy, we really need to know who we are and where we've come from, and how the past informs the present, so we can have some bearings for the future.

**LEHRMAN:** Yes, *We the People* and the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History are embarked on the very same mission. At GLI, we have strong leadership in James Basker and Lesley Herrmann. Our goal is to enable people from all walks of life, or at least that part of the American public still interested in history, to see the original documents themselves. To study them, and also to make available curricula for the study of American history, whether one is in high school, or college . . .

**COLE:** . . . or one is a lifelong student?

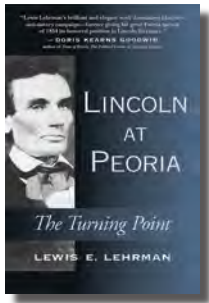
**LEHRMAN:** Yes, or just carrying on, taking an interest in history as a collateral activity of one's vocation.

**COLE:** COLE: Your goal is to reach not only the academy, but outside of the academy, right? Because, really, history is way too important to just be studied within the academy.

**LEHRMAN:** Yes, we want history to be a public thing. Which is why Dick and I, working with Gabor Boritt, established the Lincoln Prize for the very best work on the era of Mr. Lincoln and the Civil War and, with David Davis, the Frederick Douglass Book Prize for the very best work on abolition, resistance, and slavery. We want to help attract the interest of the general public. And scholars and teachers should be honored for the immense effort they make to write and to study and to teach American history.

We also established the George Washington Book Prize, with Mount Vernon and Washington College, to attract attention to the study of the American founding and the Constitution, especially, in my opinion, the Constitution as amended by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments.

**COLE:** All this I see leading to your book, the seeds of which were planted way, way back.



# LINCOLN AT PEORIA

## *The Turning Point*

by Lewis E. Lehrman

[www.LincolnatPeoria.com](http://www.LincolnatPeoria.com)

**LEHRMAN:** The idea of writing this book was hatched around 1983. Still, I didn't much talk about it for the next 15 years, because I was never sure I would complete it. And I did not want to be that man you know who's working on the great American novel, or working on a book, that never gets published.

**COLE:** Have you been able to work on the book full time?

**LEHRMAN:** No, just weekends and evenings. In the past few years, every holiday I would take, even when I went to India with Louise, my devoted and forbearing wife, I would take the manuscript with me, and work on it while we were on the bus or on the plane or on the train.

There was also a lot of reading and research to do. Over the years innumerable books have been written on Mr. Lincoln, his presidency, and there are even excellent books on speeches.

**COLE:** First Inaugural, Second Inaugural, Cooper Union...

**LEHRMAN:** Gettysburg Address.

**COLE:** So why Peoria? Why is it so important?

**LEHRMAN:** Mr. Lincoln had served only four terms as a state legislator, and a single term in Congress.

In 1849, he returned to Springfield, Illinois, from Washington. It was not a successful two-year term in Congress. And he then goes very hard to the practice of law.

**COLE:** He gives up politics.

**LEHRMAN:** Yes, but he kept his eye on the ball. But he concentrated on building his law practice, becoming a successful lawyer and more or less financially independent. Then, in 1854, Congress passes the Kansas-Nebraska Act, I'd say the most incendiary piece of Congressional legislation ever.

**COLE:** And the person responsible is his rival, right?

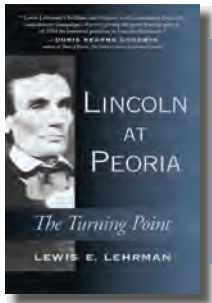
**LEHRMAN:** Yes, Stephen Douglas, the senior senator from Illinois, who led and managed the bill through the Senate and the House. Lincoln emerges from the privacy of his law practice in 1854 and inaugurates his antislavery campaign to reverse the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the primary monument of which is his speech at Peoria. The speech at Peoria was about three hours and ten minutes long in its delivery. It was 17,300 words, approximately.

**COLE:** Where exactly was it delivered?



A broadside from 1854 advertises a mass meeting of anti-slavery settlers to discuss the impact of Kansas-Nebraska Act.

—The Granger Collection, New York



# LINCOLN AT PEORIA

## *The Turning Point*

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**LEHRMAN:** From the portico of the Peoria Courthouse, the Old Peoria Courthouse. Actually it was the second one built. Thousands of people assembled for this speech, and it followed upon a speech by Senator Stephen Douglas on popular sovereignty, Kansas-Nebraska, and the repeal of the prohibition against slavery north of the 36th degree, 30 minute parallel of the Louisiana Purchase. The prohibition had become law as part of the Missouri Compromise of 1820.

Then for the next six years following the speech at Peoria, Lincoln, as a private citizen, with two failed tries at the U.S. Senate, maintained his antislavery campaign. Much of the argument, the themes, most of the rhetoric, which comes later in the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 and other important speeches, can be traced from the Peoria speech, which Lincoln himself, as editor, saw to the printing of.

**COLE:** Oh, really? So, we have an authorized version?

**LEHRMAN:** Yes, Lincoln edited and published the speech in the *Illinois State Journal*. The Peoria speech and its themes are followed up by Lincoln for the next six years before he becomes president. He did adapt to certain new facts and circumstances, for example, in 1857, the proslavery *Dred Scott* decision, by the Supreme Court; and, in 1858, he adapted to “Bleeding Kansas” in the House Divided speech; and, of course, in the Lincoln-Douglas debates, for which the Douglas-Lincoln debate of 1854 was a major rehearsal.

In my book, I try to trace not only the actual historical facts and circumstances of the Kansas-Nebraska Act which led Mr. Lincoln to give the speech at Peoria, but I try to trace, in his letters, speeches, and papers, throughout the next eleven years, from 1854 until 1865, the influence of his mature thoughts as codified in the speech he gave at Peoria in 1854.

**COLE:** So, this speech marks Lincoln’s reentry into politics, right?

**LEHRMAN:** Yes, but don’t forget that he stands for the U.S. Senate twice. In 1854, he opposes the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which opened the Kansas-Nebraska territory to slavery. Then, upon the success of the anti-Nebraska coalition, not a little due to his leadership, he decides to stand for the U.S. Senate in February 1855, and, of course, U.S. senators were then elected by state legislatures. But he loses by a slim margin.

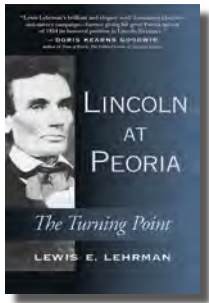
The more famous senatorial election is when Lincoln debates Stephen Douglas for Senator Douglas’s own seat in 1858. In 1854, Lincoln challenged Senator James Shields, who was a colleague of Senator Douglas and a Democrat like Senator Douglas.

**COLE:** Is the speech presaged in any of Lincoln’s earlier thought? Or is it new thinking created by new circumstances and his deep opposition to slavery?

**LEHRMAN:** It’s a new departure in Lincoln’s rhetoric, but it does have very strong antecedents in his previous political history. He had, with only one other state legislator, proposed a resolution in the state legislature of Illinois calling slavery an injustice, as well as bad policy.

He was a free-soil Whig. He had voted for the Wilmot Proviso, which was a proposal by a Pennsylvania representative to prohibit the extension of slavery into the new territories of the United States. The Wilmot Proviso came after the Mexican War, when we acquired this enormous territory from Mexico, and Lincoln was in Congress.

But, from 1854 on, after the repeal of the 1820 restriction on slavery, he focused on his antislavery campaign, through the very day of his election to the presidency, and through to the day of his assassination.



# LINCOLN AT PEORIA

## *The Turning Point*

by Lewis E. Lehrman

[www.LincolnatPeoria.com](http://www.LincolnatPeoria.com)

When you look at *Basler's Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, you find that he was preoccupied by economic policy. His political involvement really began in 1832—his first campaign for election to the state legislature, where he's unsuccessful—when he's a mere 23 years of age. He then focused on economic policy right up until his first term in Congress, which ends in 1849: issues such as the national banking question, the tariff question, the public lands question.

Then there's this big switch—though scholars have debated it—from economics to slavery. And the hinge of this change is the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, under the leadership of Senator Douglas, who was really the preeminent national Democrat. But there is a tight link between free labor economics and opposition to slavery.

**COLE:** But why the shift?

**LEHRMAN:** The Kansas-Nebraska Act shifts the political ground, because, Lincoln argues, it breaks with the established tradition of the Founders, from the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 all the way through the Missouri Compromise of 1820, both of which prohibited the extension of slavery into certain U.S. territories.

**COLE:** The Founders meant to contain slavery.



An 1860 cartoon lampoons the presidential race between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas. The axe Lincoln holds symbolizes his youthful occupation as a fence-rail splitter, while a feather in Douglas's cap displays his affinity for Kansas.

—*The Granger Collection, New York*

**LEHRMAN:** Yes. And Lincoln takes the position, as his research had proved to him, that most of the Founders had accepted slavery at the Constitutional Convention in 1787, in order to get the Union. They did not have the power to eliminate slavery at that time. But the Founders had the intention, Lincoln argued, to put slavery on a course to ultimate extinction.

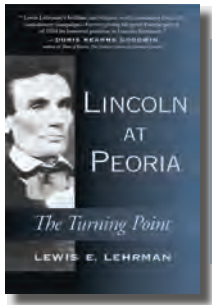
They demonstrated this intention by passing the Northwest Ordinance, which prohibited slavery in the old Northwest Territory, and with the Compromise of 1820, prohibiting the extension of slavery into the northern portion of the Louisiana Purchase. They abolished the external slave trade in 1808—the first opportunity they could under the Constitution.

Lincoln revives the idea of slavery's ultimate extinction just as the attitudes of Americans in the South had changed toward making slavery a permanent part of the republic. Lincoln believed such a backward shift would be a revolutionary, a radical departure.

**COLE:** Lincoln was incredibly ambitious, wasn't he?

**LEHRMAN:** William Herndon, his law partner, said his ambition was a little engine that knew no rest. But in Lincoln we find it constantly linked to principles: principles of economics, for example, free labor; or to the idea that America was meant to be a free republic; and that the anchor of the American Republic, as he called it, was the equality principle of the Declaration of Independence.

**COLE:** He is taking a certain view of history. But he's right.



# LINCOLN AT PEORIA

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**LEHRMAN:** General Washington, when answering criticisms about Alexander Hamilton, said something like, “His was a laudable ambition, aimed at excellence.” That’s a paraphrase. Of Lincoln, much the same thing can be said: His was a laudable ambition, aimed at excellence, but also at the fulfillment of the promise of the Declaration of Independence. And that, of course, is the theme of the book: Lincoln himself getting right with the Declaration of Independence, and through persuasion, and an 11-year campaign, as a private citizen and then as president, getting the American people right with the Declaration of Independence.

**COLE:** What was the reaction to this speech? Did people realize this was sort of a hinge speech?

**LEHRMAN:** Yes, many did. But many disagreed. The people of Central Illinois had a considerable period of time, months even, to hear and read Lincoln’s arguments of 1854, his rendition of American history, and his logic in repudiating Senator Douglas’s Kansas-Nebraska Act and the more general doctrine of popular sovereignty, which could open all of the territories of the United States to slavery.

Lincoln gave a speech similar to Peoria at Winchester, and another at Bloomington, both mentioned briefly in press reports. On October 4, 1854, he gives almost the same full speech in Springfield, in the state capitol, again, directly in response to Senator Douglas’s speech the previous day in defense of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. But this Springfield speech is not printed in full—only brief excerpts appeared in the press.

**COLE:** So, one could see Lincoln’s new cause taking shape?

**LEHRMAN:** Yes. In the full span of history, it was the blink of an eye, but for those who were living at the moment, there was time to see Mr. Lincoln trade in his litigator hat for that of the antislavery campaigner.

**COLE:** Did the Peoria speech get much national coverage?

**LEHRMAN:** It got some national coverage. Colleagues and friends write to him, saying the political elites have taken notice of this obscure lawyer and his Peoria speech.

**COLE:** What about the abolitionists?

**LEHRMAN:** The abolitionists notice him too. Lincoln becomes a second-tier member of the national antislavery coalition in 1854. He emerges only as a major national figure in the second series of slavery debates with Senator Douglas in 1858. And then, of course, he becomes more prominent as a dark-horse candidate for the presidency, and then he breaks through at the Wigwam in Chicago in 1860.

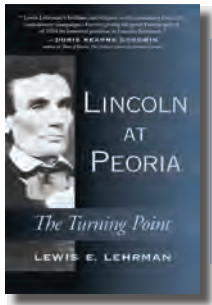
**COLE:** Did Douglas have a rejoinder to this speech?

**LEHRMAN:** Yes, Lincoln and Douglas were answering each other, or provoking one another, with their different points of view in major speeches.

**COLE:** All across the state, right?

**LEHRMAN:** From 1854 through 1860, they reacted to one another. The rivalry between them begins in the 1830s. Douglas moves to Jacksonville, Illinois, as a young man, in 1833. He was about four years younger than Lincoln.





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They meet in 1834, in Vandalia, which was the first capital—before Springfield—of Illinois. Douglas is a Jacksonian Democrat, mostly indifferent to slavery, though some scholars argue that he was, sort of, quietly proslavery. His Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 was certainly considered by many to be proslavery, and, of course, Lincoln himself is a free-soil Whig. The Whig, Lincoln, and the Jacksonian Democrat, Douglas, compete from their earliest years for a central position in the politics of Illinois.

**COLE:** Was Douglas's sponsorship of the Kansas-Nebraska Act aimed at a presidential run?

**LEHRMAN:** Yes, Senator Douglas aspired to be president. He was a dark-horse candidate in 1852. He was 39 years old at the time, very young, extremely capable, and every bit as, or even more ambitious than, Lincoln—in the naked sense, that is, less discrete.

There was also the issue of a transcontinental railroad. In order to get a northern route, you had to go through the Kansas-Nebraska Territory. The territory had to be organized, which requires Congressional approval. That is what Senator Douglas wanted to do. He wanted to organize the Kansas-Nebraska Territory, in part to run the transcontinental railroad on the northern route, instead of through a southern route as Jefferson Davis and others of the slaveholding South wanted.

**COLE:** I see.

**LEHRMAN:** Douglas, the senior senator from Illinois, had a profound local interest in winning the northern route.

Organizing the Kansas-Nebraska Territory also aided his presidential ambition. With the success of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, repealing the 1820 restriction on slavery, Douglas would be patronizing the slaveholders, who wanted to add slaveholding territory in order to maintain the balance of power in the Senate and hopefully the House, where it was more difficult.

Basically, slave power tended to dominate the federal government from the beginning of the republic all the way until the election of President Lincoln in 1860.

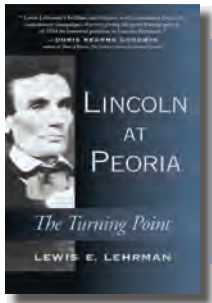
So, Douglas had many motives, some of them reasonable, and some self-interested and morally indifferent, for organizing the Kansas-Nebraska Territory on the basis of popular sovereignty.

Mr. Lincoln having opposed the extension of slavery into the territories as a congressman, voting—as he did—for the Wilmot Proviso, sees, suddenly, the specter of slavery being raised over all the territories of the United States, and perhaps the institution being extended into free states, where it had been prohibited after the Revolution. After the Founding era, every state north of the Ohio River and north of the Mason-Dixon Line had prohibited slavery.

So, there's Lincoln, confronted by the slavery extension issue, and he puts aside all of his great campaigning for economic growth and economic prosperity, and he becomes a single-issue antislavery campaigner, confounding all of the conventional wisdom of American politics, that Americans will not focus on single-issue politics.

**COLE:** What do you think would have happened had Douglas won?

**LEHRMAN:** Given the scale and power of the Democratic party—it was, in many ways, a national party—I do think it plausible that today we could be living in a slaveholding republic, not least because of Chief Justice Taney's opinion in *Dred Scott*, with the majority of the Supreme Court, ruling that the Fifth Amendment, the property clause, protected the institution of slavery in the territories.



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It would have been but a simple step—controversial perhaps, not justified, but simple—for the Supreme Court to have ruled subsequently that no state could prohibit slavery, it being a protected species of property under the Fifth Amendment, which provides for no deprivation of life, liberty, or property without due process of law.

I take the view that Lincoln's intervention was, if not providential, indispensable to the reforms of the 1960s. The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments prepared the way for the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King, Barack Obama, the remarkable success of both. Neither can be imagined without the election of President Lincoln.

**COLE:** And this all starts on the steps of the Peoria Courthouse?

**LEHRMAN:** In my opinion, for Mr. Lincoln, it does.

**COLE:** Is yours the first book to focus on this speech?

**LEHRMAN:** There are other books which consider the Peoria speech and Lincoln-Douglas in 1854. To the best of my knowledge, mine is the first book to be completely devoted to an analytical narrative of the history in which the Peoria speech takes place and then traces the themes of the speech through 1865. I was trying to avoid only a rhetorical and philosophical analysis of the speech itself or of 1854 alone. I try to spell out an underlying narrative and the consequences of the speech until the assassination.

**COLE:** Your book, I notice, marks a shifting consensus about the importance of the rivalry between Lincoln and Douglas and the later debates. Before Harry Jaffa wrote his book on the debates in the fifties, the episode was commonly ignored by American scholars. And this year alone we have your book and Allen Guelzo's, both about the contest between Lincoln and Douglas over slavery.

What has changed?

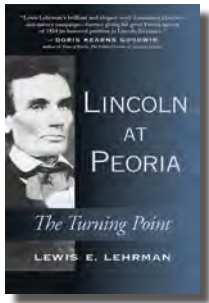
**LEHRMAN:** The Lincoln bicentennial may have something to do with the quickening of interest in the antebellum period, in general, and the Lincoln-Douglas debates themselves. Actually the 1858 debates were the third series of Lincoln-Douglas debates, the second in 1854, the first in 1839-1840 on economic policy.

The seriousness of Douglas and Lincoln has a lot to do with it, and the slowly dawning realization that these politicians were not exclusively reflecting their own self-interests. Instead, conscious reflection and rationally motivated convictions helped lead to these debates.

Another reason is the principle of the Declaration of Independence—that all men are created equal, and that America should be a color-blind society: This idea has become ever more poignant since, well, I should say the success of Martin Luther King.

**COLE:** You, of course, ran for governor of the State of New York in 1982, and lost to Mario Cuomo, in a surprisingly close race. What did that experience teach you about Lincoln the campaigner?

**LEHRMAN:** Day-to-day work in the marketplace of business or the day-to-day work in retail politics—that is to say, campaigning for a public office or trying to build a business—encourages you to focus on the day-to-day causes for a man or a woman's decisions. In saying one thing, arguing one thing, persuading another of something else, that's not simply an intellectual exercise carried out as a matter of euclidean logic.



# LINCOLN AT PEORIA

## *The Turning Point*

by Lewis E. Lehrman

[www.LincolnatPeoria.com](http://www.LincolnatPeoria.com)

Bottom-up experience makes one, in studying history, very sensitive to the changing facts and circumstances that Mr. Lincoln faced in his uphill battle against the most prominent Democrat in America, Senator Douglas. And how hard it was for Mr. Lincoln to carry an antislavery campaign in Illinois. Scholars have long considered Illinois to have been one of the most racist of the free states in the north. Lincoln navigated his antislavery campaign in the central and the southern part of Illinois, areas populated by men and women who had come from the South and were sympathetic to slavery.

Illinois prohibited free negroes from entering the state in the 1850s. When Mr. Lincoln entered upon his campaign in 1854, Illinois posed a very formidable challenge as to how an antislavery candidate could win political office there.

First of all, only white men voted. The white people of Illinois were, often, antiblack, even when they were antislavery. So, those who say that Mr. Lincoln compromised himself by not being abolitionist are not very sensitive to the fact that Lincoln's goal as a statesman, was to do as much good as he possibly could do, and get elected in the process. If Lincoln had not been elected, the issue of slavery might have been resolved differently. Frederick Douglass, the great black abolitionist, insisted that Lincoln, as a statesman, was bound to consider the racial sentiments of his country.

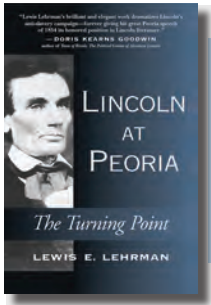
I find it an extraordinary achievement that he had the prudence and the practical wisdom to prevail in Illinois, and, ultimately to be elected president of the United States.

Even in a state as large as New York, mine were really minor challenges in a political campaign, but the experience made me very sensitive to the day-to-day achievements of Lincoln. Just think of the fact that he was able, in a slaveholding republic, to prevail with a policy embracing the Declaration of Independence. This was an amazing feat of persuasion, courage, and leadership.

**COLE:** Well, this has been excellent. Thanks very much.

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## It's time Peoria embraces Lincoln

By **Steve Tarter**  
of the **Journal Star**

Posted Jun 14, 2008 @ 09:38 PM

PEORIA — I know this is the land of Lincoln, but sometimes you might forget that fact if it weren't for all those license plates around.

Old Abe's likeness can be found at the Peoria courthouse and in Peoria Heights, plus courtrooms in Metamora and Beardstown recall his presence, but somehow it seems that the Peoria area may not be giving the state's most significant citizen his due.

It's easy to acquiesce to Springfield when it comes to Lincoln. After all, it's the capital, served as Lincoln's home and boasts a great multimedia museum. But Peoria has its own ties to the Great Emancipator.

Don't take my word for it. Here's what Lewis Lehrman, author of "Lincoln at Peoria," said: "To understand President Abraham Lincoln, one must understand the private citizen who gave the extraordinary antislavery speech at Peoria on Oct. 16, 1854. This three-hour address marked the turning point in his political pilgrimage. It dramatically altered the political career of the speaker and, as a result, the history of America."

Right here in Peoria - outside our courthouse. We do have that plaque down there commemorating the event, but perhaps we could do more in a year when the state of Illinois is re-creating the debate series between Lincoln and Stephen Douglas of 1858.

That series spans seven cities across the state and doesn't include Peoria (the two men paired off in Galesburg that year).

Here's a suggestion: Let's have a big media celebration to commemorate Lincoln's anti-slavery speech in Peoria. While there would be benefits for tourists and schoolchildren, a collaboration between TV, radio and newspapers would help call attention to a need that remains in our society after 150 years - the need to address racism.

There are lots of angles to this. If you consult B.C. Bryner's "Abraham Lincoln in Peoria, Illinois," it includes an amazing epitaph for Lincoln delivered by the nation's greatest orator, Peoria's Robert Ingersoll, a contemporary of Lincoln's.

"If you wish to know what a man really is, give him power. It is the glory of Lincoln that, having almost absolute power, he never abused it, except on the side of mercy," stated Ingersoll, whose soaring tribute would make great media material.

Lincoln will be getting plenty of attention as we get closer to 2009, the 200th anniversary of his birth. Steven Spielberg plans to cast Liam Neeson - who played Oskar Schindler in "Schindler's List" - as Lincoln in a project expected to start filming next year (after Spielberg shoots "Tintin").

Lincoln is a national treasure, but Peoria shouldn't be shy about staking its own claim.

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