

Ultimate extinction

Lewis E. Lehrman

Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point.
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reviewed by William Voegeli

Lewis Lehrman begins his book with the daunting observation that the library of volumes about Abraham Lincoln is “vast”—larger, perhaps, than on any historical figure except Jesus. The acknowledgment implies a challenge: why should he write, and we read, one more Lincoln book? Can there be anything new, important, or even interesting left to say? Lehrman meets that challenge with a book that is argued, organized, and researched as deftly as it is titled. *Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point* asks what did Lincoln do at Peoria, and how was it a turning point?

Lehrman’s answers, briefly, are that on October 16, 1854 Lincoln gave a three-hour speech—more than sixty times as long as the Gettysburg Address—in front of Peoria’s courthouse in central Illinois. In it, he criticized the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which had been signed by President Franklin Pierce five months earlier. Lincoln’s chief target, however, was Stephen Douglas, the dynamic Illinois senator who had drafted the bill and guided its difficult passage through Congress. In an arrangement that prefigured the famous debates between them four years later, Douglas spoke at the Peoria courthouse earlier that day, before

listening to Lincoln’s speech, and then delivered a rebuttal. (The television remote control has, indeed, ravaged the human attention span.)

Lincoln’s Peoria speech was a turning point in several respects. Six years after serving a single congressional term, Lincoln revived his political career with a strong forensic performance against one of the nation’s most powerful politicians. The speech was a turning point in Lincoln’s political thought, as well. While serving in the state and federal legislatures in the 1830s and 1840s, Lincoln had been a conventional Whig, opposed to slavery but primarily concerned with the nation’s economic development. Throughout the ten-and-a-half years that remained to him after October 1854, however, Lincoln stressed the need to “arrest the further spread of [slavery], and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction,” as he phrased it in 1858’s “House Divided” speech. It remained the central idea from which his thoughts on all other political questions radiated. Lehrman demonstrates, meticulously and persuasively, that the basis of everything Lincoln would subsequently say and do as a rising political star, and then as president, can be located in the 17,000-word address he delivered in Peoria.

That speech, then, was not only a turning point in Lincoln’s life but also in America’s history. It marked the moment when an obscure frontier lawyer began the transformation that would make him the most important, revered, and reviled politician in his country’s history. And that transformation happened because the power and logic of Lincoln’s speech rendered untenable all the efforts to get past the issue of slavery, somehow, without resolving it.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act was the most audacious attempt to change the subject that had yet been proposed. Stephen Douglas saw it as a way to develop the American territories west of the Mississippi River without the recurring and increasingly bitter national disputes about slavery.

Washington, D.C. would relinquish the slavery debate to each individual territory, where settlers would decide on their own whether to accept or reject slave-holding while preparing for statehood.

At Peoria, Lincoln rejected this idea of “popular sovereignty” as woefully impractical. “The people [of a territory] are to decide the question of slavery for themselves,” he said, “but *when* they are to decide; or *how* they are to decide” are crucial questions to which “the law gives no answer.” Instead of defusing the national debate over slavery, the Kansas-Nebraska Act intensified it, encouraging the most zealous opponents and advocates of slavery to get into each territory the firstest with the mostest. Correctly predicting the violence about to befall “Bleeding Kansas,” Lincoln said that “bowie-knives and six-shooters are seen plainly enough; but never a glimpse of the ballot-box.”

The moral consequences of popular sovereignty were even worse than the practical ones. Lincoln insisted that the Kansas-Nebraska Act’s “declared indifference” about “the spread of slavery” forced “open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty.” Citing the Declaration of Independence, he said, “No man is good enough to govern another man, *without that other’s consent*. I say this is the leading principle—the sheet anchor of American republicanism.”

In front of the Peoria courthouse, and then over and over again for the next six years of their political rivalry, Douglas argued that Lincoln was clear about what *not* to do about slavery—allow its expansion into the territories—but vague about what *should* be done. The ultimate-course-of-extinction formula was, indeed, simultaneously hopeful and ambiguous. Its political success required Americans opposed to slavery to be satisfied that the nation was moving steadily in the direction of its extinction. At the same time, those who favored slavery could be reassured that this ultimate extinction would take place in the far distant future.

Pressed by Douglas in one of their debates in 1858, Lincoln said, “I do not suppose that in the most peaceful way ultimate extinction would occur in less than a hundred years at the least.”

By virtue of the unearned clarity we enjoy from being born in the century after Lincoln and Douglas lived and argued, we know that the ultimate extinction of slavery occurred less than seven years after their debates in Illinois through the *least* peaceful way imaginable, a civil war that Lincoln called “astounding” in his second inaugural address. Those who assign the sixteenth president some blame for that war need to fashion a plausible account of an alternative course he could have followed that would have yielded a different result. Lincoln hoped that by confining slavery to the states where it already existed, the white citizens of those states would inevitably come to regard the institution as not only peculiar but economically unsustainable and morally indefensible. The American Founders “hedged and hemmed” slavery into “the narrowest limits of necessity,” Lincoln said at Peoria, and he hoped that all Americans, northern and southern, would resume this kind of constriction once the territorial expansion of slavery was repudiated.

By the time Lincoln spoke at Peoria in 1854, however, the “better angels of our nature” had already ceased shaping the South’s views on slavery. Instead, southerners came to disparage any compromise on the slave question as indistinguishable from capitulation. Seven states regarded the election of a president who criticized slavery and opposed its expansion as an intolerable provocation in itself and seceded from the Union before Lincoln was even inaugurated. None of them reconsidered, even after Lincoln signaled in his first inaugural address that he had no objection to a constitutional amendment preventing the federal government from interfering with slavery in states where it already existed. As the historian James McPherson wrote, “It is hard to see what Republicans could have done to allay southern anxieties short

of dissolving their party and proclaiming slavery a positive good.”

Four more states seceded after Lincoln attempted to resupply Fort Sumter with food, clothing, and medicine—but not troops or weapons—in April 1861. Lehrman points out that the Confederate vice-president Alexander Stephens extinguished any hope that enlightened southerners *ever* would have put slavery in the course of ultimate extinction. The Confederacy’s “corner-stone,” Stephens said in 1861, “rests upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural and normal condition.”

Lewis Lehrman’s benefactions to several educational and research institutions have deepened his countrymen’s understanding of their history. *Lincoln at Peoria* is a different but equally valuable contribution to that cause. He closes his analysis by saying that the work begun by Lincoln meant that “racism too could be put in the course of ultimate extinction.” It’s a provocative suggestion; one hopes it will form the basis of Lehrman’s next addition to the shelves of books on Abraham Lincoln.