Bicentennial Edition: Lincoln's Turning Point

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Lewis E. Lehrman, Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008), 350 pp.

Over the past decade or so, books focusing on a single speech or historic event have become commonplace. Ever since Garry Wills published *Lincoln at Gettysburg* to critical acclaim and best-seller status, folks have been trying to replicate his achievement. Lincoln's Cooper Institute Address of 1860, his debates with Stephen A. Douglas in 1858, and his magisterial Second Inaugural Address of 1865 all have attracted more than one book-length treatment in recent years. But if one speech contained the essence of Lincoln's political thought and practice, Lewis E. Lehrman makes a persuasive case that Lincoln's 1854 address at Peoria, Illinois, fits the bill.

It helps that the Peoria Address ran about three hours long. Compared with the two and half minutes Lincoln took to deliver his "few appropriate remarks" at Gettysburg, he had the luxury at Peoria of spelling out in detail what was wrong with the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and what the American citizenry ought to do about it. His long-time rival, Senator Stephen Douglas, had spoken earlier that day for over three hours, and they had arranged for Lincoln to respond in turn. In *Lincoln at Peoria,* Lehrman not only provides an analysis of key features of Lincoln's address, but also the political prelude and postlude that situates the Peoria Address as "the turning point" for Lincoln's political ambitions and rhetoric.

Lincoln at Peoria follows a chronological scheme, beginning with commentary on political figures and speeches that set the stage for the full flowering of Lincoln's oratory at Peoria. The book's concluding chapters demonstrate how Lincoln's 1854 speech foreshadowed his approach to the 1857 *Dred Scott* opinion of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, his debates with Stephen Douglas in 1858, and his presidential policies regarding secession and emancipation. Despite his own clear command of Lincoln's speeches and writings, Lehrman painstakingly gives credit where credit is due, citing modern scholars as well as Lincoln's contemporaries to support his argument or to consider debates about Lincoln's politics by historians of note. At bottom, this reader is convinced that the Peoria Address serves as the springboard for Lincoln's later greatness as a statesman and the nation's greatest interpreter of the legacy of the American Founders.

In a campaign autobiography of June 1860, Lincoln himself marked 1854 as a pivotal moment in his career: "In 1854, his profession had almost superseded the thought of politics in his mind, when the repeal of the Missouri compromise aroused him as he had never been before." The repeal would permit slavery to enter territory that had previously not been open to slavery, part of the famous Compromise of 1820 that would bring Missouri into the Union as a slave state but that "in all that territory ceded by France to the United States, under the name of Louisiana, which lies north of thirty-six degrees and thirty minutes north latitude, not included within the limits of [Missouri] . . . slavery and involuntary servitude . . . shall be, and is hereby, forever prohibited." So much for "forever." Congress thus officially removed itself from dictating the future of slavery in the territories, and in Lincoln's mind preparing the nation "to make slavery national." Three years later, the *Dred Scott* opinion would confirm his worst fears.

The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, enshrining Douglas's "popular sovereignty" doctrine in federal law, brought Lincoln back into the political fray from an interregnum that had lasted since he left Congress in 1849. Though he failed to get appointed to the U.S. Senate as a result of the 1854 campaign

and his more famous Senate campaign four years later, the events of 1854 launched Lincoln into a political orbit that resulted in his occupying the White House at the nation's most trying hour. The Peoria Address, as Lehrman demonstrates, lays out the principles and priorities that would guide his outlook as president just six years later.

Lincoln at Peoria identifies three key elements of Lincoln's argument against the Kansas-Nebraska Act in the Peoria Address: "the principles of the Declaration of Independence, the policies of the American Founding, and the history of slavery." Although Lincoln mentioned the Declaration of Independence as early as his 1838 Lyceum Address, "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions," he did not highlight its equality principle until he re-entered the political arena in 1854. Criticizing its repeal of the Missouri Compromise ban against slavery in the Nebraska Territory, Lincoln argued that the "spirit of seventy-six and the spirit of Nebraska are utter antagonisms," and observed that "the former is being rapidly displaced by the latter." From 1854 until his death, Lincoln tied his political fortunes to reversing this trend, and trusted that in so doing, the American people "shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have so saved it, as to make, and to keep it, forever worthy of the saving."

The sub-subtitle (visible inside the front cover) of Lehrman's book is "Getting Right with the Declaration of Independence." If Lincoln could be said to have had only one political *raison d'être,* it would be to persuade the American people to "re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it." As he put it in his Peoria Address, "Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust. Let us re-purify it. Let us turn and wash it white, in the spirit, if not the blood, of the Revolution." This would require the nation to reject in principle the "moral right" to slavery and permit its continuance only upon argument of "necessity"—the argument of the American founders—which Lincoln believed would lead to its eventual demise.

However, the white enslavement of blacks had become so much a part of the warp and woof of southern life by the time Lincoln reached the Illinois State House in the mid-1830s that the Spirit of '76 became not an angel to be followed but a demon to be exorcised by southern shapers of opinion. Beginning most notably in 1837 with South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun, and continuing through the 1850s and '60s with Senators James Henry Hammond of South Carolina, Alexander Stephens of Georgia, and Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, these politicians argued that black slavery was "a positive good," "his natural and normal condition," and "e*stablished by decree of Almighty God."*

Against the view that Lincoln was a man who grew or evolved in his thinking on the subject of race or slavery, Lehrman sees him as possessing "an unmistakable wholeness of character, genius, and enterprise." If his policies, strategies, or rhetoric seemed to change in the last decade of his life, this owes more to Lincoln's tacking with the political winds, especially the progress of northern public opinion on the status of slavery in the American regime. Viewing Lincoln's "antislavery campaign" as "an exercise in leadership," Lehrman interprets these years as a time when Lincoln helped return the nation back to its political lodestar, the Declaration of Independence. The Peoria Address, delivered as part of Lincoln's 1854 campaign to get anti-Nebraska politicians in office, was the key to this strategy.

Lehrman also shows how the political momentum against slavery owed much to "'practical politicians' like Lincoln." He writes that Lincoln "embraced the necessity in a democracy to persuade public opinion." In contrast with the easy and strident moralizing of social reformers like William Lloyd Garrison—who called the U.S. Constitution "a covenant with death and an agreement with hell"—Lincoln's antislavery rhetoric and coalition building took seriously the requirement that the political protection of rights be achieved by the consent of the governed. Moreover, if that consent was less informed than one would like, it was not enough to declare the truth as one understood it and let the chips fall where they may. Responsible political action, sensible reform of public policy, necessitated a more congenial conversation with one's fellow citizens than the fiery denunciations and moral grandstanding of the more infamous abolitionists. As Lincoln explained in his 1842 Temperance Address: "When the conduct of men is designed to be influenced, *persuasion,* kind, unassuming persuasion, should ever be adopted."

Early in the book, Lehrman observes that for Lincoln the ballot, "in his creed, was the instrument by which a citizen registered his protest." Whether protest or affirmation of a particular government decision or policy,

this exercise of civic responsibility was one that Lincoln took seriously, for it represented the culmination of vigorous public debate. The vote was emblematic of what Lincoln called in his Peoria Address “the sheet anchor of American republicanism.” As such, for both principled and practical reasons, Lincoln strove to inform public opinion so its expression of consent on election day would reflect not merely self-interest but moral right and justice. To be sure, public sentiment is shaped by passion as well as reason. But reasoned debate, therefore, was all the more necessary to cultivate a political rhetoric that sought to “refine and enlarge the public views” (to borrow from *Federalist* No. 10) in the face of the demagoguery of race, legal positivism, and mere self-interest.

Does the book promise too much in its claim that all of Lincoln’s major speeches were presaged by the Peoria Address? One is tempted to say that surely the Gettysburg and Second Inaugural Addresses were *sui generis* in their expression of political wisdom and purpose at their respective moments during the Civil War. But a moment’s reflection would show that both of these presidential speeches, in their own unique way, addressed slavery’s relationship to the future of liberty and self-government in America—nay, the world—, and for that one could submit Lincoln’s Peoria Address as the seminal speech that prepared the way.

Lincoln once wrote that in politics, every policy has a “central idea” from which all the others derive. Lehrman makes a convincing case that the salient ideas of Lincoln’s political career emanate from his address delivered at Peoria, Illinois, on October 16, 1854—ideas that we Americans still struggle to put into political practice. Lincoln’s efforts at Peoria helped turn this country back to what he called “our ancient faith,” and his rejection of political indifference towards the rights of man still remains the standard for political leadership the world over.

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