

Lincoln on Slavery in the Territories: Assessing His Speech at Peoria

By: Paul Ashdown
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Peoria has a peculiar niche in political culture due to its vaudeville-era reputation, later enhanced by the Nixon administration, as the epicenter of a mythical American heartland. If something “plays in Peoria” it supposedly plays anywhere. In 1854, the city on the Illinois River had yet to see its first train, but it had seen Abraham Lincoln, who first arrived in 1832 on his way home from the Black Hawk War to purchase a canoe. He subsequently visited the community often to attend to legal and political matters.

What prompted his return on October 16, 1854, was Stephen A. Douglas’s scheduled defense of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which had become law on May 30, but remained a divisive issue in Illinois. Lincoln’s ostensible purpose was, at the behest of a committee of Whigs, to back the reelection of anti-Nebraska Whig congressman Richard Yates, and to drum up support for Illinois legislators who might oppose the Democratic senator. Both Lincoln and Douglas had in mind larger purposes and ambitions, which played out in their more famous debates during the Senate campaign of 1858.

Lincoln had given earlier speeches on the issue in Winchester, Bloomington, and Springfield, although it was Peoria that “played,” first in Illinois, and then on a larger national stage. Lincoln’s three-hour speech followed a similar lengthy address by Douglas, who had roused, and wearied, an afternoon crowd that had gathered in a large square in front of the courthouse to hear their bantam solon and the pre-mythic, 45-year-old Springfield lawyer, who, it was said, could give a good account of himself, although not yet in the senator’s league. Lincoln wisely sent the crowd home for dinner before resuming the debate about seven o’clock. The later hour attracted a larger audience that heard an inspired Lincoln speak in the lambent autumnal evening glow of candles and lanterns. By prearrangement, Douglas was given the opportunity to respond. The night air and fatigue had rendered him hoarse and cranky, however, and his rebuttal was brief.

Lincoln’s speech came to define his opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which extended slavery as far north as the Canadian border. He argued that slavery in essence was a national crisis that could not be redressed by the “popular sovereignty” prescribed by Douglas or by any means short of honoring the principles inherent in the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln opposed the nationalization of slavery, in other words, by nationalizing morality, denying that it could ever be merely a sectional matter.

Although substantially the same as his earlier Springfield speech, which had received limited press coverage, the Peoria speech, in edited form, was published in the Illinois State Journal in seven installments, and widely distributed. Lincoln the orator leveraged the rhetorical force of his argument by polishing his prose in the press.

The complete text of the speech, running 39 pages, is included at the end of the book. Readers can gauge for themselves the impact of Lincoln's soaring phrases and meticulous arguments, and might benefit by reading the speech prior to wading into Lehrman's explication. We hear Lincoln battering Douglas, who had complained that opponents were hardly united in their opposition to the bill, by reminding him that "he took us by surprise – astounded us – by this measure. We were thunderstruck and stunned; and we reeled and fell in utter confusion. But we rose each fighting, grasping whatever he could first reach – a scythe – a pitchfork – chopping axe, or a butcher's cleaver. We struck in the direction of the sound; and we are rapidly closing in upon him" (327).

Lincoln struck hard by claiming that, to The Little Giant, "the question of whether a new country shall be slave or free, is a matter of utter indifference, as it is whether his neighbor shall plant his farm with tobacco, or stock it with horned cattle. Now, whether this view is right or wrong, it is very certain that the great mass of mankind take a totally different view."

Lehrman adds a fine chapter summarizing how journalists and historians have interpreted the Peoria speech. The "turning point" of the subtitle distills Lehrman's argument that the speech was a turning point in Lincoln's political life as well as the nation's slavery crisis and anticipated the Emancipation Proclamation. Not all have viewed the speech as quite the turning point that Lehrman suggests. He gives all a fair and courteous hearing, while appending his own interpretations and conclusions.

The Peoria speech, which arguably failed to achieve its immediate objectives while succeeding brilliantly in the long term, has not been neglected by Lincoln scholars, but Lehrman gives it the attention that previously has been reserved for the Gettysburg Address, the 1858 debates with Douglas, the inaugurals, and the Cooper Union speech.

Lehrman is judicious in his judgments about the meaning of the speech for the 21st century, and makes some wise and unexpected observations. "The conventional wisdom of American politics suggests that elections should not turn on moral issues and that single-issue candidates cannot prevail in presidential contests," he writes. "Lincoln thought otherwise" (265).

Lehrman, a much respected public intellectual and advocate for the teaching of history, is co-chairman of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History in New York. Deep immersion in Lincoln studies has done his own pen no harm, and his final sentence is as deft a tribute to the inscrutable 16th president as has been written: "Like a luminous comet, he had for a twinkling thrust himself before our eyes, the eyes of the world, there to vanish into the deep whence he came."

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