

Lincoln's Decisive Switch

By Jason Emerson from the April 2009 issue

Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point

By Lewis E. Lehrman

(Stackpole Books, 412 pages, \$29.95)

The first Lincoln-Douglas debates. The turning point. The political catalyst. The Peoria speech. These are some of the terms used to describe Abraham Lincoln's return to politics in 1854 after a five-year hiatus. It was a seminal turning point in American history, centered on, not surprisingly, slavery, and whether or not the future of the country would be ruled by the Slave Power. It was in this year that U.S. Senator Stephen A. Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Act repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and opened the western United States to the institution of human bondage. It was a moral outrage to Springfield lawyer and former Congressman Abraham Lincoln, and one that "aroused him as he had never been before." Lincoln's opposition to the Act and to the spread—even the government sanctioning—of slavery in the U.S. territories ultimately transformed him from a provincial, regional party politician to a national statesman. It is this transformation that Lewis E. Lehrman examines and explains in his book, *Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point*, a work that, like its subject, will become indispensable to any study of Abraham Lincoln.

"To understand President Abraham Lincoln, one must understand the Peoria speech of October 16, 1854," Lehrman writes. "It forms the foundation of his politics and principles, in the 1850s and in his presidency."

The speech was, in fact, an extended, encore performance of a speech two weeks earlier in Springfield, made as a response to Sen. Douglas's promulgation of "popular sovereignty" in the Kansas and Nebraska Territories. It was the beginning of a series of debates between Lincoln and Douglas—a prelude to their great 1858 debates—that ranged over the state of Illinois and ended, like the later debates, with Lincoln's loss of the Illinois senatorship. *Lincoln at Peoria* is the first detailed examination of Lincoln's Peoria speech: its context, its rhetoric, and its consequences, and how it began Lincoln's preparation for the presidency.

Lincoln was against slavery, but he was not an abolitionist. He did not believe in the complete extirpation of slavery from America—either as a political or even a practical action. He believed the Constitution protected slavery in the states where it already existed, but that the Founders intended its containment in those states as a course to its ultimate extinction. In his Peoria speech, Lincoln outlined with the thoroughness and exactness of a trained historian the history of debate over the slavery issue, and exactly how and when the country's Founders showed themselves averse to slavery's expansion and even its existence. For Douglas to institute the "popular sovereignty" doctrine and to say it did not matter to him—and should not matter to anyone—how each state decided its own laws regarding slavery, was to Lincoln a dangerous and deceitful political ploy.

"This *declared* indifference, but as I must think, covert *real zeal* for the spread of slavery, I can not but hate," Lincoln said. "I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world—enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites—causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity, and especially because it forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty criticizing

the Declaration of Independence, and insisting that there is no right principle of action but *self-interest*."

To open up the country to slavery was not only directly against the historical evidence of the Founders' beliefs and intentions, Lincoln believed, but would eventually destroy the Union itself.

LINCOLN'S POLITICAL LIFE up until 1854 had been typical, and provincial. He voted and fought along party lines, and focused his time and energies on local and regional issues. "The Springfield-Peoria speeches marked Lincoln's decisive shift from the issue of economic growth—free markets, property rights, and nationalist economics— to the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the struggle for a republican Constitution," Lehrman states. The repeal of the Missouri Compromise put Lincoln on a moral crusade to prevent the expansion of slavery. It was not just morally wrong to the African slaves, but it also was offensive and hypocritical of a country based on freedom to utilize and support human bondage. "Our Republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it," Lincoln said at Peoria. "Let us turn and wash it white, in the spirit, if not the blood, of the Revolution." Lincoln's speech is a refutation of Douglas's assertions of slaves as property, of popular sovereignty as legitimate, and of the general moral equivocation by politicians.

As Lehrman deftly explains, the Peoria speech made Lincoln the central anti-Nebraska political figure in Illinois. It enhanced his reputation and focused his mind and philosophy on the great moral issue of the day, which he saw as a direct threat to American democracy and freedom. It also was the foundation of later moments in his political ascendancy such as the Lincoln-Douglas Debates in 1858, the Cooper Union Speech in 1860, and many of Lincoln's ideas and policies regarding slavery as president. Lincoln's 1854 rise not only propelled him upward, but also knocked Stephen Douglas backward and off balance on his meteoric ascension to what everyone assumed was his eventual presidency. "On these two occasions [in Springfield and Peoria], perhaps more than any other in his life...Douglas [was] disconcerted by the vigor and power of the reply to him," wrote Lincoln's friend and eventual biographer Isaac Arnold. "It was perfectly clear that Mr. Lincoln spoke from the most deep and earnest conviction of right, and his manner indicated this."

Lehrman's examination of Lincoln's Peoria speech and the events surrounding it is a missing piece in the vast puzzle of Lincoln scholarship. Scholars and historians have noted the importance of this speech, but have never given it the full attention or study it deserves. Lehrman, a businessman and co-founder of the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History, spent twenty years on this book, and it shows. He explains the speech without being pedantic; he steeps the reader in its context without being repetitive or soporific. What he offers is a thought-provoking analysis of Lincoln as political phoenix, rising anew from the ashes of his near political surrender. *Lincoln at Peoria* also includes the full text of the speech, significant milestones in the lives of Lincoln and Douglas, and even a chapter on "The Peoria Speech and the Historians' Record," showing what has and has not previously been said about it.

Lincoln at Peoria is an indispensable study on Lincoln's rise to greatness. It is fascinating and revelatory, and imbued with the care of a historian with a deep respect and reverence for—and adherence to—the historical record. One cannot imagine this book being improved upon.