

THE MORAL MEANING OF AMERICA

*Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point:
Getting Right with the Declaration of Independence*
by Lewis E. Lehrman (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008)

What is Abraham Lincoln's greatest speech? An obvious case can be made for the Gettysburg Address, which distills the essence of the American creed and has come to represent the catechism of our civil religion, "of the people, by the people, for the people." Others claim that the honor belongs to the Second Inaugural Address. In that national sermon, Lincoln pondered the meaning of the Civil War in view of God's providence. The speech culminates in a magnanimous call to righteousness and reconciliation: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds." Still others argue that the Cooper Union Address was Lincoln's greatest since it was "the speech that made him president": "Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it."

Notwithstanding these others, if one were placed in the unenviable position of having to choose Lincoln's greatest, I would cast my vote for the Peoria Address of October 16, 1854. At Peoria, Lincoln cogently articulated the core antislavery convictions that would guide his statesmanship for the rest of his life. This articulation involved a corresponding vindication of self-government and the Union.

In a word, the Peoria Address constituted the most mature and vivid expression of Lincoln's political faith or ultimate moral justification of American public life based upon the principles of the Declaration. Indeed, Lincoln's subsequent speeches and writings drew upon the comprehensive and foundational antislavery teachings he expounded at Peoria.

It is therefore surprising that in the voluminous Lincoln literature there has been no full-length, single-volume treatment of this critical speech. Though it was recognized by Lincoln's contemporaries as a *tour de force*, it has since been eclipsed by attention given to his other major speeches. In *Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point*, Lewis Lehrman remedies this omission by persuasively showing us why the Peoria Address deserves its rightful place as one of Lincoln's greatest statements. Lehrman's meticulously researched and elegantly written book makes a significant contribution towards enhancing our understanding of the moral dimensions of Lincoln's political

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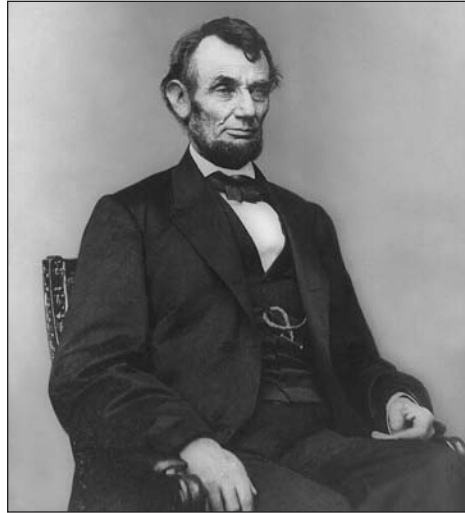
thought and statesmanship. It is highly recommended for students and scholars alike.

Lehrman's outstanding study integrates and builds upon insights from the fields of history, political science, and political philosophy. He begins by tracing the historical and political context of the Peoria Address as a response to the infamous Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 that repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820. This latter measure had maintained a fragile sectional peace for more than thirty years by drawing a line through the remaining territories of the Louisiana Purchase: slavery was banned north of 36°30' but tolerated south of it. The repeal of the Missouri Compromise stirred Lincoln to reenter politics in response to a new militancy of the proslavery forces that threatened both the moral and territorial integrity of the Union. "I was losing interest in politics," he declared, "when the Missouri Compromise aroused me again."

The Peoria Address can be seen as a prelude to the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858. It was at Peoria in 1854 where the two titans first crossed swords over slavery and popular sovereignty. At Peoria, in response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Lincoln offered his first comprehensive indictment of slavery and defense of America's free institutions. After Peoria, he would emerge as the standard-bearer of the antislavery Republican Party in Illinois and ultimately the president of the United States in 1860. "The three-hour Peoria speech was a magisterial tour of antislavery principles, their constitutional and legislative history, and the antislavery policies of the federal government from the Founding through the Kansas-Nebraska Act," Lehrman writes. "At this turning point in American history, Lincoln queried whether America was destined to become a free-soil republic or a slaveholding nation.

Throughout his remarks, he celebrated the intent of the Founders to put slavery in the course of ultimate extinction."

Lehrman tells the story of this turning point in an engaging narrative that brings to life the cast of characters of the



President Lincoln

Civil War era: Lincoln, Douglas, Chase, Seward, Stevens, Davis. Though much has been made of Lincoln's ambition or melancholy as a spur to his greatness, Lehrman reminds us that more principled motives were at work as well. Those who would deny the sincerity and depth of Lincoln's hatred of slavery and his corresponding patriotic devotion to the American experiment are confronted in Lehrman's superb book with a mountain of evidence to the contrary, as when Lincoln exclaimed:

This declared indifference [of popular sovereignty to the evil of slavery], but as I must think, covert real zeal for the spread of slavery, I can not but hate. I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of itself. I hate it 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.

Lehrman's character portrait of Stephen Douglas, the architect of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, arouses both sympathy and repugnance. As Lincoln himself acknowledged, Douglas was a formidable opponent and a tireless warrior. Douglas' policy for dealing with slavery was to remove any moral consideration of it from public debate and to place it out of the reach of federal interference, thereby leaving territorial settlers free to choose it or not, depending upon their particular interests, tastes, and circumstances. Lincoln characterized this ploy as "a false statesmanship that undertakes to build up a system of policy upon the basis of caring nothing about the very thing that every body does care the most about." Thus, notes Lehrman, "did Lincoln impeach the proclaimed indifference toward slavery of Senator Douglas." As Harry V. Jaffa has shown, Douglas, in effect, provided a nineteenth-century version of moral relativism that is so resonant with contemporary claims to moral neutrality in public life.

With designs on the presidency, Douglas sought to open a northern transcontinental railroad through the Kansas-Nebraska Territory where slavery had been banned by the Missouri Compromise. The South would never agree to a northern route, however, unless it received some conces-

sion in return. Seeking to accommodate both sides, Douglas proposed that the issue of the extension of slavery in the territories be resolved by the principle of popular sovereignty, "That the people of each State of this Union, and each Territory, with the view to its admission into the Union, have the right and ought to be permitted to enjoy its exercise, to form and regulate their domestic institutions, and internal matters in their own way, subject only to the Constitution."

Initially, however, Douglas was reluctant explicitly to repeal the Missouri Compromise. He claimed that the principle of popular sovereignty affirmed by the more recent Compromise of 1850 superseded the older Missouri Compromise's prohibition of slavery. Southern members, however, insisted upon an explicit repeal. Thus, to further his own ambition and to fatten his wallet, Douglas capitulated to Southern demands that it be expressly declared null and void. In exchange for this acquiescence, Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, future president of the Confederacy, agreed to persuade President Pierce to support the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Yet Douglas had strong premonitions of what was to follow: "I will incorporate [the express repeal] in my bill though I know it will raise a hell of a storm."

Indeed it did. It marked a turning point in American history that fundamentally altered the political landscape of the time and the future course of the Republic. It led to the disintegration of traditional party loyalties between the Whigs and Democrats and precipitated a realignment, culminating in the formation of the new Republican Party—a coalition of northern antislavery Democrats and Whigs. In sum, the Kansas-Nebraska Act intensified sectional polarization, hurtling the country on a path towards civil war.

Through a close textual analysis, Lehrman traces the arc of Lincoln's political thought before and after Peoria. He emphasizes that the defense of free labor and the "right to rise" constitutes the common denominator between the young Whig before Peoria and the mature statesman after it. Lehrman, himself a self-made man and entrepreneur, testifies to the promise of the American Dream extolled by Lincoln:

Born poor, Abraham Lincoln was truly a self-made man, believing as he said that "work, work, work is the main thing." His economic policy was designed not only "to clear the path for all," but to spell out incentives to encourage entrepreneurs to create new jobs, new products, new wealth. He believed in what historian Gabor Boritt has called "the right to rise." Lincoln's America was, in principle, a color-blind America. "I want every man to have the chance," Lincoln announced in New Haven in March 1860, "and I believe a black man is entitled to it...when he may look forward to hope to be a hired laborer this year and the next, work for himself afterward, and finally to hire men to work for him! That is the true system."

The Declaration of Independence comes to the fore at Peoria as "the bedrock upon which Lincoln in 1854 built his philosophical and political reasoning." The second subtitle of Lehrman's book is therefore appropriately named "Getting Right with the Declaration of Independence." Lincoln, notes Lehrman, accorded the Declaration a constitutional status as a "formal congressional act of American union," which "carried the force of law."

Indeed, it "was the first section in the Statutes of Indiana that Lincoln probably studied as a youth." Preserving the Union for Lincoln thus always meant preserving the principles of the Declaration for which it stood.

In 1854 Douglas argued that slavery would eventually expire in the territories due to unsuitable climate and soil. This view stubbornly persists today, and Lehrman takes sure aim at it. First, he notes that slavery was not necessarily wedded to agriculture; slave labor could be used, and was used, in factories. To further support this claim, Lehrman cites the authority of James McPherson, one of the leading Civil War historians of our time, who writes, "On the eve of the Civil War, plantation agriculture was more profitable, slavery more entrenched, slave owners more prosperous, and the 'slave power' more dominant within the South if not in the nation at large than it had ever been." Thus does Lehrman impeach "the unnecessary war" thesis—namely, that the Civil War need not have been fought since slavery would have inevitably vanished on its own.

Lehrman deftly shows that what Lincoln and the opponents of slavery confronted in the mid-nineteenth century was not an innocent victim of "the war of northern aggression," but an aggressive and militant slave power bent upon the extension of its peculiar institution, the nationalization of slavery, and a Caribbean slave empire. Throughout the book, he never lets the reader forget that at stake was the momentous question of whether or not the United States would become a slave or a free republic. The resolution of this issue in favor of freedom was by no means inevitable. It took determined moral leadership, beginning at Peoria, and, ultimately, the Civil War to resolve it. Throughout our history there will always be the likes of Stephen A.

Douglas who seek to evade difficult moral issues through an appeal to relativism. The character of each generation may be measured in terms of whether or not we choose to confront these issues in the manner of Douglas or of Lincoln.

By including a copy of the speech in its entirety, Lehrman invites us to read the

Peoria Address for ourselves as we contemplate the moral meaning of our regime on the bicentennial in 2009 of the birth of its greatest spokesman—Abraham Lincoln. On this patriotic occasion, Lehrman provides a fitting tribute, reminding us that “The Peoria speech had set Lincoln on the road to the Emancipation Proclamation.”

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