

Transitional Lincoln

The speech that put a frontier lawyer-politician on the road to the White House.

by Yuval Levin

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Lincoln at Peoria

The Turning Point

by Lewis E. Lehrman

Stackpole, 350 pp., \$29.95

Our world has many problems, but a shortage of books about Abraham Lincoln is not generally thought to be one of them. Lincoln is easily the most chronicled and examined figure in American history, and these days, academic historians often struggle to squeeze into any possible remaining gap in his story, or grasp for clever or controversial theories that might get their work noticed amidst the swarm of Lincoln scholarship. It takes a very special book to offer fresh wisdom on our 16th president and stand out from the pack without distorting its subject. Lewis Lehrman has written such a book.

As a philanthropist and patron of historical scholarship, Lehrman has long been associated with the study of Lincoln, although this is his first book on the subject. It is, as he tells us, a labor of love, several decades in the making. And *Lincoln at Peoria* does suffer from some of the failings of such labors of love: It is, in places, overargued and overwritten, cramming in every possible quotation and citation, every imaginable scholarly reference to support even the smallest points, yielding needless repetition. But more often it benefits from the devoted attention it has clearly received from its author, and from Lehrman's command of the immense range of scholarship on Lincoln.

He begins from the mystery of Lincoln's political reemergence in 1854. In his early political exertions, culminating in his single term in the House of Representatives (1847-49), Lincoln was a fairly run-of-the-mill northern Whig. His top priorities were economic development and improvements to what we now call infrastructure, and he was known for his folksy sense of humor and talent for telling entertaining stories on the stump.

With his reelection prospects grim, Lincoln declined to run for a second term and returned to his legal practice, and while he was still tangentially involved in Illinois Whig machinations, he was, by the mid-1850s, a successful, comfortable, and on the whole, unremarkable Springfield attorney. He had made a few statements and speeches in opposition to slavery, Lehrman notes, but no more than would be expected of any Illinois

Whig, and the subject never seemed to preoccupy him.

All of that changed with the emergence of what must stand as the single most disastrous piece of legislation in American history: the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. The act, championed by Illinois senator Stephen Douglas, overturned the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which had sought to avert sectional conflict by dividing the territories of the Louisiana Purchase into slave and free states and so preserving an uneasy balance on the slavery question in Congress.

Together with the Compromise of 1850, which did the same for territory gained in the Mexican War, the arrangement had largely kept the peace between north and south. Douglas's bill sought, instead, to allow each state to determine the status of slavery in its territory by popular vote, thus making slavery again a live political issue.

The prospect of overturning the Missouri Compromise shocked Abraham Lincoln into action. Lehrman argues persuasively that this awakening offers an example of Lincoln's essentially conservative political temperament. He quotes Lincoln's fellow Illinois lawyer Samuel C. Parks, noting that Lincoln was disturbed not only by the direction but by the sharpness and abruptness of Douglas's effort: "The occasion of his becoming a great anti-slavery leader was the agitation of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise," Parks wrote.

Lincoln's opening moves in this new chapter of his political life aimed to defend the complex and layered arrangement of slavery compromises reached in the previous half century, particularly the Missouri Compromise and the aim of the gradual elimination of slavery Lincoln believed was implicit in its logic.

Douglas's ill-considered bill, as Lehrman demonstrates, linked Lincoln's type of essentially conservative anti-slavery feeling with both more radical abolitionism and more conservative unionism in the north, while support for it became a litmus test for southern politicians of all parties. It therefore elevated sectional divisions above partisan ones, and exposed the American political system to powerful stresses long kept in check.

Yet the new northern coalition had a less powerful regional identity than its southern counterpart, and needed a theory--a case for itself--before it could rise to the challenge of the moment. Just then, Lincoln emerged, offering this nascent coalition a vocabulary of idealism mixed with moderation, and Americanism joined to universal values.

"In the turmoil occasioned by the repeal of the Missouri Compromise," Lehrman writes, "Lincoln's historical and moral imagination fastened upon the principles of the Declaration of Independence, the policies of the American founding, and the history of slavery" to offer a profound yet practical case for opposition to Douglas's gambit.

Lincoln had come to his arguments through laborious historical research, a keen judgment of the moment, and a deep moral sense of the injustice of slavery. He championed a radical truth in a conservative way, and this made him a force to reckon

with, and quickly catapulted him to the leadership of the burgeoning Republican coalition, and from the Illinois legal circuit to the White House.

Lincoln's first and, perhaps, most profound explication of his new case was a speech offered in response to remarks by Senator Douglas in Peoria on October 16, 1854. That speech, Lehrman writes, formed "the foundations of [Lincoln's] politics and principles" from then until his assassination 11 years later. In it we find a new Lincoln, more serious and sober, no longer the folksy storyteller, now a man of vision, patience, determination, and purpose. *Lincoln at Peoria*, therefore, treats the speech as the crucial episode in Lincoln's story, "the turning point," as the subtitle puts it. The speech exemplifies Lincoln's new purpose and method, and it introduces all the key ideas that would define the man we meet in the history books.

And yet, by grounding the book insistently in the Peoria speech, Lehrman unduly limits himself and undersells his insights and accomplishments. The focus on Peoria, for instance, causes him to lay out the political history of the period out of order, first bringing us through the 1854 speech and only then describing the context of the Missouri Compromise and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Lehrman's discussion of the rearrangement of American party loyalties, and the chaotic reshuffling of national politics in the wake of Douglas's bill, is among the book's strongest points, and must be among the most clear and accessible histories of the period yet written, but it is undermined by being cast as mere background for the Peoria speech.

The momentous events that came after the speech--the Lincoln-Douglas Senate race, the *Dred Scott* decision, and Lincoln's entire presidency--are presented with uncommon insight and care, but these, too, are forced into the box of the Peoria speech to suit the larger conceit of the book. (Lehrman entitles his chapter on Lincoln's White House years "Peoria Characterizes the Lincoln Presidency.")

In fact, this exceptional book is about much more than *Lincoln at Peoria*. It stands out for the way it combines the study of Lincoln's arguments with the study of Lincoln's character, and so not only avoids the cynicism of historians who seek to ignore the substance of Lincoln's profound and powerful rhetoric but also offers a compelling corrective to the opposite inclination (all too common among some conservative fans of Lincoln) to note *only* his arguments, and not his subtle, prudent politics.

Lehrman offers by way of example a strong remedy to what might be called the great transitive error of the Lincoln mythology: the implicit idea that because Lincoln made the best public arguments against slavery *and* ended slavery, his arguments ended slavery.

No one simply believes this, of course. We all know there was a war in which 700,000 Americans died, and that slavery was ended by force. But too often in looking to Lincoln for a model of statesmanship we look to the public arguments he made more than to the leadership he offered when those arguments failed.

Lincoln had sought mightily to avoid the war, and he recognized that its coming was, in key respects, a failure of statesmanship, including his own prewar statesmanship. But having come to that point, Lincoln also understood better than most the absolute need for determined leadership in wartime, and for victory. And he understood how the case he had made to the American people before the war could now help him to strengthen and lead them in the darkest hours of the struggle. The greatest mark of Lincoln's statesmanship is that he grasped this and acted on it.

We do not find the case for that kind of statesmanship in Lincoln's Peoria speech, but we do find the character and the capacity for it in the Abraham Lincoln that Lewis Lehrman describes in this fine book. That is why, as Lehrman understands, a study of Lincoln's character is as important as a study of his arguments, and why this book, which offers an exceptional example of both and which explains the connection between them, deserves to be noticed amidst the throng of Lincoln books.

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