

Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech that Help Make Lincoln President

Frank J. Williams

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Review

Williams, Frank J.

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Stump speech

A defining moment

The time is February, the year, 1860, a Presidential year. The country is dividing, North and South, over the issue of slavery. People are migrating westward into the territories on the Great Plains, and the burning question is whether some are to be held as property in the new land.

In Illinois, then the West, Abraham Lincoln, 51, a private citizen who holds no public office, is watching political developments closely. The record which he placed in the Congressional Directory of 1847 as a representative almost suffices to describe him: Born February 12, 1809, in Hardin County, Kentucky. Education defective. Profession a lawyer. Have been a captain of volunteers in the Black Hawk War. Postmaster in a very small office. Four times a member of the Illinois legislature and a member of the lower house of Congress.

But by 1860 that modest record is deceptive. Although defeated by Senator Stephen A. Douglas in the Illinois senatorial contest in 1858, Lincoln has emerged from the great debates as a Republican spokesman in the West. He is on record as against the extension of slavery into the territories, and although not an abolitionist, has condemned the institution itself. He has boldly said that a house divided against itself cannot stand, and that the United States cannot long endure half-slave and half-free.

In the last half of February, 1860, a small news item appears in the *Illinois State Register*, the Democratic newspaper in Springfield. It reads: SIGNIFICANT — The Hon. Abraham Lincoln departs today for Brooklyn under an engagement to deliver a lecture before the Young Men's Association in that

city in Beecher's church. Subject: Not known. Consideration: \$200 and expenses. Object: Presidential capital. Effect: Disappointment.

The invitation came several months earlier from Plymouth Church, whose Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, an abolitionist, is holding a lecture series. Lincoln has accepted, if the church will accept a political speech.

Lincoln at Cooper Union is the story of that speech. It is the most exhaustive and authoritative account of the event that, at least, would insure his nomination for president and, at most, his election to the presidency.

He has good reason for wanting to show himself as a political man in the East. It is there that the real powers of the Republican Party reside. And, as Lincoln writes in confidence to his friend Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois, during the politically delicate period when the nominating lines are being drawn for the Presidential convention, The taste is in my mouth a little.

Harold Holzer describes Lincoln's intense research efforts in Springfield, and then in early February, Lincoln prepares his talk carefully — not as a stump speech but as a lecture. He had immersed himself in the six volumes of Eliott's *Debates on the Federal Constitution*, while consulting his own scrapbook of newspaper clippings which he labeled, *Illinois Political Campaign of 1858*.

Holzer narrates and explains the difficulties of Lincoln's exhaustive railroad trip across the county. On the train ride to New York, Lincoln also ponders his other reason for going east. His oldest son, Robert, is doing poorly in school; he must visit the boy at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, to find out what's wrong. The father who never went to college — education defective — hopes his son can pass Harvard's entrance examination.

When Lincoln arrives in New York on Saturday, February 25, two days before his scheduled lecture, he buys the newspapers and discovers that he is not speaking in Plymouth Church as originally planned but instead is now scheduled at the new Great Hall of Cooper Institute. The unexpected switch was made by the Young Men's Central Republican Union which, learning that Lincoln was to speak in Brooklyn, maneuvered to get him into the more important national forum in Manhattan. Holzer traces these exciting developments in the city. He does not limit himself to the presentation of the speech itself but unlocks all of the rich details leading up to and surrounding it.

In his room at the Astor House, Lincoln reads Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* and William Bryant's *Evening Post*. That day, the *Tribune* calls him a man of the people, a champion of free labor, of diversified and prosperous industry. The *Post*, taking special notice of his arrival in the city, predicts he will make a powerful assault upon the policy and principles of the pro-slavery party, and an able vindication of the Republican creed. Holzer documents his narrative with generous use of newspaper sources.

On Monday, February 27, 1860, the Republican committee on arrangements calls on Lincoln at Astor House in the morning and takes their frontier guest for a ride up Broadway. At Bleecker Street, they stop at a photographic studio. For the first time, Lincoln faces the camera of Mathew B. Brady. Holzer, one of the nation's best known experts on the iconography of the 19th century, describes this historic visit to the celebrated photographer. Brady's handsome three-quarter length photo of the beardless Lincoln would contribute to making him president almost as much as the speech itself.

1,500 people, the pick and flower of New York, payed 25 cents each to hear the Westerner. David Dudley Field, the distinguished New York lawyer, escorts Lincoln to the platform in the Great Hall in the basement of the Cooper Institute where Horace Greeley; G.P. Putnam, the book publisher; and Theodore Tilton, editor of *The Independent*, are already gathered.

After William Cullen Bryant, the gray-bearded poet and editor, is nominated chairman of the evening, he steps forward to prolonged applause. The great West, my friends, is a potent auxiliary in the battle we are fighting, for freedom against slavery, he says. I have only, my friends, to pronounce the name of Abraham Lincoln of Illinois [cheers] — I have only to pronounce his name to secure your profoundest attention.

Lincoln unwinds his frame and slowly, seemingly painfully, walks to the speaker's lectern above the banked audience. He is wearing a new black suit; it is ill-fitting and shows the creases made while it was packed in his valise.

Holzer clarifies Lincoln's ability to define the national issue: Mr. Chairman and fellow citizens of New York, Lincoln begins, after the applause has died down. The facts with which I shall deal this evening are mainly old and familiar; nor is there anything new in the general use I shall make of them. If there shall

be any novelty, it will be in the mode of presenting the facts, and the inferences and observations following that presentation.

It is a lawyer's slow, cautious opening. Lincoln peers toward the last rows in the vast auditorium. By pre-arranged signal with Mason Brayman, a Springfield friend, if Lincoln's voice does not carry, Brayman is to raise his hat on a cane.

He forms his argument by quoting from a speech, as reported in *The New York Times*, by Senator Douglas: Our fathers, when they framed the government under which we live, understood this question just as well, and even better, than we do now.' I fully endorse this, and I adopt it as a text for this discourse. And Lincoln asks, What is the frame of government under which we live? The answer must be, The Constitution of the United States.'

He begins to move to the high constitutional grounds against the extension of slavery that he has reasoned out during long argument on the Illinois prairie. I defy any man to show that any one of them [the thirty-nine framers of the original Constitution and the seventy-six members of the Congress which framed the Bill of Rights] ever, in his whole life, declared that, in his understanding, any proper division of local from Federal authority, or any part of the Constitution, forbade the Federal government to control as to slavery in the Federal Territories. * * * This is all Republicans ask — all Republicans desire — in relation to slavery.

Lincoln's citations for these opinions are firmly rooted. Rather than an emotional speech, it is a legal brief, as if addressed to the Supreme Court. Holzer demonstrates Lincoln's rational response by returning to the intentions of the Founders.

After speaking for almost an hour and a half, he draws to a close. The moral tone and cadences of his Second Inaugural are foreshadowed as Lincoln concludes with these words: Neither let us be slandered from our duty by false accusations against us, nor frightened from it by menaces of destruction to the government, nor of dungeons to ourselves. 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.

There are three rousing cheers. And the meeting ends, oddly, with three cheers for William Seward, New York's Republican favorite son — and Lincoln's main rival for the nomination. But there is no doubt that Lincoln has

more than met the expectations of the Young Republicans. Holzer portrays Lincoln as a westerner capable of sophisticated argument who has sewn presidential capital in his address.

After supper at the Athenum Club with some of his hosts, Charles C. Nott of the Young Republican Executive Committee (Holzer includes his rendition of the speech as an Appendix), begins to walk with Lincoln back to Astor House. He notices his limping. Are you lame, Mr. Lincoln? No, Lincoln says, it's just that his new boots hurt his feet. So they board a horsecar, and after Nott is dropped off, Lincoln returns alone to the hotel.

Later that evening, at the invitation of Mr. Greeley, Lincoln goes to *The New York Tribune* office to correct the proofs of his speech, which are then passed around to the other newspapers in the city. The original manuscript of his speech is left lying on a table; a *Tribune* proofreader tosses it into a wastebasket, and it is lost to history forever.

Four newspapers, with a combined circulation of more than 170,000, reprinted the entire Cooper Union address the next day. In an age in which newspapers represented the principal source of news, and politics constituted the overwhelming focus of the press, the coverage was gigantic. Despite the flattering next-day coverage, Lincoln could easily have become yesterday's news if not for the brilliant public relations campaign that followed, according to Holzer.

The next morning, Lincoln is off to New England on his paternal visit to his son, while continuing his political trip to aid Republican Party campaigners in 11 cities in three states, before his return trip to Springfield.

The New York Republicans were so impressed by the Cooper Union speech that they wanted to adapt and circulate it throughout the East. It is the real platform in the Eastern states and must carry the conservative element in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, Mr. Nott wrote to Springfield.

Lincoln, now an avowed candidate, gave his permission to circulate the speech: I would not object to, but would be pleased, rather, with a more perfect edition of the speech. So far as it is intended merely to improve in grammar and elegance of composition, I am quite agreed; but I do not wish the sense changed, or modified, to a hair's breadth.

The photograph by Brady is also circulated across the country. The picture has captured a presidential pose of strength and dignity befitting a candidate. Many periodicals publish it. The two illustrated weeklies, *Harper's* and *Frank Leslie's*, make engravings of the photograph.

In its time and place, the Cooper Union speech was decidedly important. Holzer's in-depth analysis of the speech challenges the long-held view that the Cooper Union address was only an appeal to conservatives. Instead, he shows it as a masterly example of scholarship that served as a legal brief for equal opportunity and democracy, and a political rallying cry to the country and the Republican Party. The speech is framed as a continuation of Lincoln's famous debates on slavery with his archrival, Democrat Stephen A. Douglas. While the Cooper Union address is not as poetic as Lincoln's later presidential speeches, Holzer demonstrates that the foundation had been set.

Certainly Lincoln had talked more boldly before, as in his famous lost speech to Illinois Republicans in 1856: Slavery debauches even our greatest men. . . . Monstrous crimes are committed in its name. . . . Is it not even alarming to see its steady advance in a land dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal?'

Nevertheless, at Cooper Union, Lincoln made a major speech that demonstrated his competence and political instincts. And in its peroration, that right makes might, it soared to greatness.

Lincoln at Cooper Union evokes the era of mass-participation politics, before sound bites and campaign commercials replaced serious debate and stemwinder speeches — and when candidates like Lincoln were expected to master complex issues and write their own orations.

Through meticulous study of historical sources, Holzer portrays a vivid picture of Lincoln's triumph at Cooper Union. He conveys the enormity of what Lincoln had at stake, and how he prepared for the night that ultimately changed forever the course of his life and the nation. When Lincoln took the stage February 27, 1860, he faced the most critical audience of his career. He was invited east to showcase himself as an alternative to New York Senator William Henry Seward, the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination. Some of the Republicans in attendance no doubt supported Seward and were

waiting for the poorly dressed Westerner to fail.

The pressure was immense, but Lincoln was well aware of what he stood to gain. No one in Springfield appreciated the significance of Lincoln's journey, or its risk, more than Lincoln himself . . . Lincoln knew the stakes, the public expectations from his admirers, and recognized that they were getting higher. If he could present himself as a compromise candidate, New York Republicans seeking a western presidential candidate who could draw votes from both sides of the country would throw their support behind him.

According to eyewitness accounts, Lincoln triumphed with both his painstakingly researched speech and his passionate delivery. When he spoke, he was transformed before us. His eye kindled, his voice rang, his face shone and seemed to light up the whole assembly as by electric flash. For an hour and more he held his audience in the hollow of his hand.

Among the approximately 16,000 books and pamphlets written about Abraham Lincoln, **Lincoln at Cooper Union** is destined to rank among the top 100. Lincoln's speech delivered at the Cooper Institute and tour through the New England States galvanized support for his presidential nomination. Harold Holzer eloquently describes the story behind Lincoln's well-prepared oration which contained the best legal, historical, political, and moral arguments against the extension of slavery. A delightful book to read, the fact that it appears during a presidential election year makes it even more significant to the challenges Lincoln's democracy faces today at home and abroad.

Frank J. Williams is founding Chair of The Lincoln Forum and Chief Justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court. He writes about and lectures often on Abraham Lincoln. His latest book, Judging Lincoln, has been published by Southern Illinois University Press.