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1809—The Lincoln Centenary—1909

Lincoln as Legislator

Not a "Political Failure." The Common People Voted For Him—Lifelong Contest With Douglas

By James A. Edgerton

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WHEN Lincoln was nominated for the presidency his foes objected that he was almost without official experience, that he had served only a few terms in the Illinois legislature and one term in congress and that he was practically a failure in politics, his course in congress having driven him into private life for many years and his radical sentiments in the debate with Douglas having defeated him for the senatorship. They also urged against him the fact that he had been beaten for senator on a previous occasion, making two defeats for one office. Many other things did they allege which seemed like very large obstacles then and look like very small ones now.

As for the charge that he was a political failure, a close examination reveals the fact that it was Lincoln's honesty alone which caused his reverses. In congress he was too honest to approve all the administration's policy regarding the Mexican war. When he ran for senator the first time he lacked a few votes of having enough to elect him and magnanimously threw his strength to Lyman Trumbull in order that a man at least part way right might be elected. When running against Douglas, Lincoln had the bravery to declare "the nation could not endure half slave and half free." This and other bold utterances lost him the senatorship, but gained him the presidency. Indeed,

The common people believed in Lincoln.

investigation reveals the unusual fact that each of Mr. Lincoln's defeats left him stronger, not weaker. He was building his political house on the rock of principle, not on the sands of temporary success.

For this reason the charge of official inexperience did not hurt him. It is all right to hold office if one at the same time can hold his self respect, but when he has to barter the one for the other he is not apt to go higher. Long fealty to a cause is a greater recommendation to the people than long tenure of place.

Lincoln was twenty-three when he first ran for the legislature and twenty-five when he was first elected. That initial defeat, he often said afterward, was the only one he ever suffered in a direct appeal to the people. So much for the charge that he was "a political failure."

The common people believed in Lincoln. They voted for him at every opportunity. In this first race he got practically all the votes in New Salem, where he lived, although it was Democratic, while he was a Whig.

Lincoln was only beaten that time by people who did not know him. Never again was he defeated by popular vote. The only thing that enabled Douglas to win in the contest for the senatorship was a gerrymander in the legislature. Had direct election of senators then obtained Abraham Lincoln would have been United States senator from Illinois and not Stephen A. Douglas, for Lincoln beat Douglas about 4,000.

When Lincoln was in the legislature, however, the senatorial contest was nearly a quarter of a century away. He served in the body eight years. A supreme mark of his greatness is that he retained his honesty all that time. A man who can go through eight years of an average legislature and keep honest is worthy of higher things. Another remarkable thing about Lincoln's legislative career is that he introduced few bills. The business of the average legislator is to introduce a whole grist of bills he knows cannot pass, just as the business of the average legislature is to enact a grist of laws that cannot be enforced. The fact that Lincoln kept free from the creation of surplus rubbage of this sort is another mark of his unusual quality.

Outside of keeping his character and rising above the deadly bill introducing habit Lincoln's most conspicuous service in the legislature was in getting the capital removed to Springfield. When he entered the body it met at Vandalia. The removal struggle came a few years later, and Lincoln led the Springfield forces. Any one who has ever been through a county seat fight can arrive at some idea of a state capital war by multiplying one county by all the counties in the state. Nearly every city and budding hamlet in Illinois wanted that plum, and it took hard work and generalship to land it. Springfield then consisted of a few houses and a large number of ambitions. For such a town to ask for the state capital exhibited gall of a high quality, but to capture it away from all the other competitors took executive ability and sleepless endeavor. The credit for the achievement was chiefly given to Lincoln.

One of the places in the race was Jacksonville, with the redoubtable Stephen A. Douglas as its champion. Poor Douglas! He was unquestionably an adroit politician and a man of unusual ability. Among the ordinary run of horse trading politicians he would have been pre-eminent. The only trouble with him was that he was pitted against a man. His was the fate of the imitation when it meets the real thing. Lincoln beat Douglas in the race for a wife, in the contest for the state capital, in the campaign for the presidency and really in the canvas for the senatorship, for, while Douglas received the empty honor, Lincoln had the glory and the popular vote. The "Little Giant" had the shell of the cocoanut, but the big giant had the meat and the milk.

During Lincoln's legislative service Illinois was on the boom. The internal improvement mania was in full force. There was little or no money in sight, but the legislature capitalized the great expectations of the future and appropriated millions. The world has never seen such exuberant financiers as the legislators of a new state. Ordinarily they have not enough real money among them to start a small country newspaper, yet the large and generous way they mortgage the future and give away the people's substance makes Wall street look small and conservative in comparison.

It must be admitted that Lincoln was about the leader of this sort of boom legislation in Illinois. He wanted to be known as the De Witt Clinton of the new commonwealth. Some unkind critics have said that he came nearer to being its John Law, but that is not fair. True, that early extravagance did almost bankrupt the state. But who could have foreseen the panic of 1837? The people demanded these internal improvements, elected their representatives on that sort of platform, and in the legislature itself there was practical unanimity in pushing these bills. The purpose was good. It grew out of the right spirit—that of optimism and construction. The only trouble was that the Illinois legislators of that early day were not high financiers and had not learned how to water stock. Lincoln never did know anything about finance, either public or private. But he always belonged to the constructive side and placed the nation above self, and that is more than most financial experts can boast.

In his last two legislatures Lincoln was the Whig candidate for speaker, which made him the minority leader of the house. He was on important committees and was regarded not only as one of the most convincing debaters of the body, but, better still, as one of its most effective working members.

His service in congress did not begin till 1847, six years after he left the legislature. That it was so long delayed was not his fault. He tried to get in earlier, but there were too many other able and ambitious men in his district. As a result three or four of them had to take "turn about," and Lincoln's turn came last.

If Abraham Lincoln had remained in congress more than one term he would have become a leader, just as he had been in the legislature. It requires long service to gain prominence in either house in Washington. Mr. Lincoln was much more to the front than the average new member. He gained fame as a debater and a wit, his speeches were made campaign documents, he was soon known as the best story teller in congress, and he was winning his way in more solid and substantial things. Like most of the conscientious Whigs of his day, however, he was not in full accord with the Mexican war. Several great and good American statesmen have committed political harakiri by opposing some of Uncle Sam's wars. In this very struggle Thomas Corwin, one of the greatest stump orators in American history, prepared the oven for his political cremation. Nor was he the only one. Lincoln himself was forced out of public life for practically ten years. That he survived and was able to re-enter at all showed his hold on the people of Illinois. His district, which had been Whig, was changed permanently to Democratic. We preach and practice free speech in this country—except in wartime. This is one reason why the sooner war is ended forever the better. Anything that prevents liberty of thought and expression is a false thing.

Lincoln's chief sin against the genius of the Mexican war was in the introduction of what were known as the "spot" resolutions. The reason he could not be forgiven for them was that they could not be answered. They put the administration in a hole, a situation in which no administration likes to be. The Mexican war is a period in our national history concerning which most patriotic students do not care to be too inquisitive. I generally try to skip it myself—not the fighting, I mean, but the causes that led up to it. The fighting was rather one sided, but was glorious from our viewpoint. But as for the things that produced it—well, why not talk about something else?

One of Lincoln's most famous speeches in congress was that in which he exploited General Cass as a military hero. It belonged to the order of campaign stump speeches, but was good of its kind. The relation of campaign speeches to real oratory is about the same as that of campaign songs to real poetry. In fact, the average campaign as it has been conducted is a peculiar combination of mendacity, pettifogging and barroom wit. This is its public aspect. The inside part of it would usually put somebody into the penitentiary if it were public. Cheap adulation of our candidate and cheap abuse of the other have been the rule. Fortunately we are beginning to escape from the crassest features of the thing. In Lincoln's day they were at their height. That was not his fault. The tool of campaign oratory he took as he found it and used it effectually.

In this particular General Cass speech Lincoln recounted his own exploits in the Black Hawk war. His manner of handling the subject showed a great and redeeming virtue—he did not take himself too seriously.

To understand Mr. Lincoln both in this earlier part of his career and at a later period it must be borne in mind that in the best sense of the term he was a politician. This was true of him as a Whig and later as a Republican.

Nor should it be forgotten that Mr. Lincoln was a party man. He insisted on organization and on strengthening the party at every possible point. One of his reasons for opposing any alliance with Judge Douglas at the time Mr. Greeley and other influential Republicans were urging such a union was that it would disintegrate the party. In his candidacy for the senatorship and in both campaigns for the presidency he announced his fealty to the party platforms. In fact, he gave a very short letter of acceptance, pointing to the platform as a sufficient declaration of his principles. When a candidate for president he not only made his letters of acceptance short, but refrained almost wholly from speechmaking or from giving other political expressions. Thus he eliminated his personal views as far as possible from the canvass and put the party's views into the foreground.

Abraham Lincoln was a politician, one of the greatest we have seen, but he was a politician for country and not for self.

Lincoln and Other Great Souls

1809—The Lincoln Centenary—1909

By JAMES A. EDGERTON.

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LINCOLN THE LIBERATOR.

THERE is nothing more fascinating than to compare the leaders of various ages, except to compare those ages themselves. It is not correct to say that "history repeats itself." Nothing in nature or in human progress is a repetition of anything that has ever been before. Rather history seems to advance in a spiral, thus going through the same phases, but ever in a larger way. The parallels resulting are often startling, not only between times, but between men who were the chief figures of those times.

Lincoln was so peculiarly a child of our American democracy, however, that it is difficult to find his antetype.

The most obvious parallel to Lincoln is Moses. It is to be hoped that nobody will be shocked by such a comparison, and it is confidently believed that nobody but a lip server will be. There is no character in all time that will suffer any real hurt by being associated with the name of Abraham Lincoln.

The chief element in the fame of both Moses and Lincoln is that of liberator. Each led an enslaved race from bondage. The most notable thing in the character of each was his meekness. Both reached the place from which he could view the promised land, but neither was fated to enter.

There are some points of resemblance between the character of Lincoln and that of Constantine, the first Christian emperor. Both were generous, mild and pure in private life. Constantine himself was a sort of liberator, since he freed the early Christians from the bloody persecutions that had pursued them for 300 years. Not only so, but his constant cry was for union—union of the empire and union of all Christian bodies into one. Constantine, like Moses, was a great lawgiver. He was an intrepid warrior, a strong executive and for the larger part of his life exercised clemency and mercy. Unfortunately two crimes stain his last years. His marriage was unhappy, and his wife poisoned his mind against his son by another wife. As a consequence this son was put to death. Then, in a fit of profound remorse, Constantine ordered the death of his wife as a retribution. In many aspects, however, he was the greatest and best emperor of Rome. His memory was not fairly treated by the pagan writers.

This line of comparison could be carried forward indefinitely, but will not be pursued further for the reason that it may not be as interesting to the reader as it is to the writer. Measuring one great soul by another helps us to gain a juster estimate of both. It also increases our love for their common humanity. It shows us that no age and no character are remote, but may be interpreted in the terms and types of today. It illustrates one character by another, re-enforces by resemblance and brings into clearer relief by contrasts. It shows us that all humanity is one humanity, that all the past is included in the present and that the things we love about great men are immortal, for they are the same in those of 1,000 or 3,000 years ago and in those of our own time.

The man who first sees a lofty mountain does not realize its majesty nor proportions. It is only after he studies it from every angle, climbs over it, lives with it and compares it to other mountains that he gains a just estimate. It is even so with studying great souls, who are the mountain peaks of history. We must see them without and within, view them from every angle, live with them, dream of them and compare them with others who have blessed or advanced the race before we can come to appreciate their true size.

It is only genuine greatness that can stand this process of intimate study and comparison with the highest standards of the ages. Abraham Lincoln does not suffer by this method of investigation. Indeed, it but enhances his fine, strong, simple and high qualities. It is this which makes it certain beyond question that he is a man for all time. His fame will wear. He spoke often of the slavery contest being a "durable struggle." Likewise was he made of durable stuff. He is universal enough to measure to all men. He is as lowly as the most lowly and tall enough of soul to stand up with the tallest. He has nothing to fear from comparison with Cæsars or saints, with prophets or sages. There was nothing false about him, and all real manhood can hold up its head unabashed in the presence of all other real manhood. Lincoln himself was a prophet of democracy, a saint of mercy and a Caesar who used his great power only to extend the freedom of man.

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