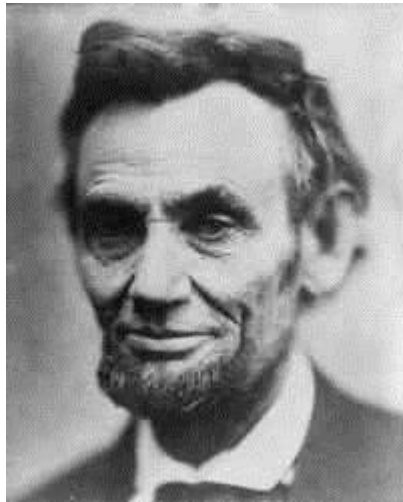


Lincoln: The Trajectory of a Politician

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Abraham Lincoln

"I hold it to be the paramount duty of us in the free states, due to the union of the states, and perhaps to liberty itself (though paradox it may seem) to let the slavery of other states alone." -Abraham Lincoln, 1845.

"It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." - Abraham Lincoln, 1863

Abraham Lincoln, the man, always abhorred slavery. Abraham Lincoln, the politician, believed for many years that if slavery was prevented from spreading, it would eventually die out. Lincoln took his political views on the issue from Henry Clay. Lincoln remarked that "I can express all my views on the slavery question with quotations from Henry Clay." And it was from Clay that Lincoln adopted his view that while slavery was a terrible moral blot on the Nation, it could not be eradicated in one fell swoop, but only through limiting its spread.

History teaches of course that Lincoln would belong to the ages, as Edwin Stanton remarked at Lincoln's deathbed, as the Great Emancipator. How did this trajectory occur? This article attempts to understand the trajectory of Abraham Lincoln, the politician, on the issue of his time, slavery.

Abraham Lincoln joined the **Whig Party** in the 1830s. The Whig Party coalesced around the issue of opposition—not to slavery, but to Andrew Jackson. Since Jackson was president, the Whig Party argued for Congressional supremacy in policy-making. It also stood for protective tariffs and economic modernism. It is true that these policies were, by their nature, in opposition to slavery, but Whig support for these policies was not designed as part of an anti-slavery policy. Instead, through Clay's leadership, the Whig Party sought to sideline the slavery question. The Whig idea was that if the spread of slavery was limited, then it would die a natural death.

Lincoln occasionally ventured into discussion of slavery (most notably in his **1838 Lyceum Address** on mob violence emanating from the slavery dispute), but it was not a focal point.

When the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison formed the Liberty Party in 1840, the slavery question became more prominent politically. In 1844, the Whigs ran Clay for president against the Democrat James K. Polk. Polk's victory posed a threat to the Clay design from Polk's policy of Manifest Destiny and his subsequent instigation of the Mexican War.

At this point in time, while Lincoln stood against Polk and his policy of annexation of Texas, Lincoln still held to a view of leaving slavery be in the South. Lincoln wrote to an Illinois Liberty Party leader that "I hold it to be the paramount duty of us in the free states, due to the union of the states, and perhaps to liberty itself (though paradox it may seem) to let the slavery of other states alone."

Lincoln was elected to Congress in 1846. From that position, he was deeply critical of the Mexican War and a perpetual supporter of the **Wilmot Proviso**, which called for the prohibition of slavery from any territory acquired as a result of the Mexican War.

Yet despite this, Lincoln still aligned himself with that portion of the Whig Party that would sublimate the slavery question. Lincoln was a supporter of Zachary Taylor for the Whig presidential nomination in 1848, and for a campaign that marginalized the slavery question. This approach offended many anti-slavery Whigs who formed the **Free Soil Party** and ran Martin Van Buren and Charles Francis Adams in the 1848 Presidential campaign. Running Taylor, the hero of the Mexican War, seemed incongruous, considering the Whig opposition to the war, but the gambit worked in terms of electoral politics, as **Taylor won the 1848 election**. But the Whig waffle on the slavery question was still fracturing the party. Lincoln remained a timid Whig Party apparatchik, seeking to insulate the party from taking a stand on slavery.

After departing Congress in 1849, Lincoln disappears from the political conversation, only to reemerge after an event that shook to the core his faith in Clay's vision of compromise. The event was the **Kansas-Nebraska Act**, Stephen Douglas' signature undoing of **The Missouri Compromise of 1820**, that also fractured Henry Clay's last Grand Bargain, **The Compromise of 1850**.

Eric Foner places Lincoln's transformation at Lincoln's eulogy to Clay in Springfield, after Clay passed away in 1852. Foner writes in **The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery** that "Lincoln's speech appears as a eulogy not only for Clay but also for the kind of anti-slavery politics Clay represented. Surely Lincoln recognized that Clay's half century of advocacy of gradual emancipation had accomplished nothing."

There can be no doubt that the politician who emerged after Clay's death was different than what had been seen before. In 1854, Lincoln delivered his **Peoria speech**, a deep condemnation of Douglas' then-proposed Kansas-Nebraska bill.

The themes of reneging on the vision of the Founders of limitations to slavery's reach and the treachery of Douglas in particular, were to permeate Lincoln's political discourse until he won the Presidential election of 1860.

From that point it became Lincoln's object to place upon his political opponents the extremist label, to make them the breaker of bargains on the slavery question, and to stamp them as betrayers of the Founders. Unlike before, Lincoln did not seek to avoid the question, he sought to press the question and to present it to his and his party's (soon to be the Republican Party, of which Lincoln became a founding member) political advantage. Lincoln abandoned his old Whig Party—who Lincoln urged avoid the slavery question and helped found the Republican Party—a political party whose reason for existence was to fight on the slavery issue. What happened to cause this sea change? I'll discuss below the fold.

To a great degree, Lincoln's transformation can be explained by the change in his political opponents. His charges against Douglas rang true. Douglas abandoned his commitment to the Missouri Compromise. Lincoln could not deny what he was seeing.

But Lincoln's transformation was also driven by the change in the political landscape. The North was simply more anti-slavery than it had been before. And like any good politician, Lincoln adjusted to these changes. After Lincoln adapted to this changed political landscape and embraced a new fighting role, his political trajectory seems now almost inevitable.

The **Dred Scott decision** in 1857 fired Lincoln as it did all Republicans. His withering attacks on the infamous opinion became a staple of his speeches, including his **famous Cooper Union Address** delivered in early 1860.

This speech in particular, where Lincoln was positioning not only his party for the upcoming presidential election, but himself as its standard bearer, is a masterpiece of political oratory—a classic example of the politician casting for himself the role of the moderate centrist while castigating his opponents as extremists:

Let all who believe that "our fathers, who framed the Government under which we live, understood this question just as well, and even better, than we do now," speak as they spoke, and act as they acted upon it. This is all Republicans ask - all Republicans desire - in relation to slavery. As those fathers marked it, so let it be again marked, as an evil not to be extended, but to be tolerated and protected only because of and so far as its actual presence among us makes that toleration and protection a necessity. Let all the guarantees those fathers gave it, be, not grudgingly, but fully and fairly, maintained. For this Republicans contend, and with this, so far as I know or believe, they will be content.

And now, if they would listen - as I suppose they will not - I would address a few words to the Southern people. I would say to them: - You consider yourselves a reasonable and a just people; and I consider that in the general qualities of reason and justice you are not inferior to any other people. Still, when you speak of us Republicans, you do so only to denounce us a reptiles, or, at the best, as no better than outlaws. You will grant a hearing to pirates or murderers, but nothing like it to "Black Republicans." In all your contentions with one another, each of you deems an unconditional condemnation of "Black Republicanism" as the first thing to be attended to. Indeed, such condemnation of us seems to be an indispensable prerequisite - license, so to speak - among you to be admitted or permitted to speak at all. Now, can you, or not, be prevailed upon to pause and to consider whether this is quite just to us, or even to yourselves? Bring forward your charges and specifications, and then be patient long enough to hear us deny or justify.

You say we are sectional. We deny it. That makes an issue; and the burden of proof is upon you. You produce your proof; and what is it? Why, that our party has no existence in your section - gets no votes in your section. The fact is substantially true; but does it prove the issue? If it does, then in case we should, without change of principle, begin to get votes in your section, we should thereby cease to be sectional. You cannot escape this conclusion; and yet, are you willing to abide by it? If you are, you will probably soon find that we have ceased to be sectional, for we shall get votes in your section this very year. You will then begin to discover, as the truth plainly is, that your proof does not touch the issue. The fact that we get no votes in your section, is a fact of your making, and not of ours. And if there be fault in that fact, that fault is primarily yours, and remains until you show that we repel you by some wrong principle or practice. If we do repel you by any wrong principle or practice, the fault is ours; but this brings you to where you ought to have started - to a discussion of the right or wrong of our principle. If our principle, put in practice, would wrong your section for the benefit of ours, or for any other object, then our principle, and we with it, are sectional, and are justly opposed and denounced as such. Meet us, then, on the question of whether our principle, put in practice, would wrong your section; and so meet it as if it were possible that something may be said on our side. Do you accept the challenge? No! Then you really believe that the principle which "our fathers who framed the Government under which we live" thought so clearly right as to adopt it, and indorse it again and again, upon their official oaths, is in fact so clearly wrong as to demand your condemnation without a moment's consideration.

Some of you delight to flaunt in our faces the warning against sectional parties given by Washington in his Farewell Address. Less than eight years before Washington gave that warning, he had, as President of the United States, approved and signed an act of Congress, enforcing the prohibition of slavery in the Northwestern Territory, which act embodied the policy of the Government upon that subject up to and at the very moment he penned that warning; and about one year after he penned it, he wrote LaFayette that he considered that prohibition a wise measure, expressing in the same connection his hope that we should at some time have a confederacy of free States.

Bearing this in mind, and seeing that sectionalism has since arisen upon this same subject, is that warning a weapon in your hands against us, or in our hands against you? Could Washington himself speak, would he cast the blame of that sectionalism upon us, who sustain his policy, or upon you who repudiate it? We respect that warning of Washington, and we commend it to you, together with his example pointing to the right application of it.

But you say you are conservative - eminently conservative - while we are revolutionary, destructive, or something of the sort. What is conservatism? Is it not adherence to the old and tried, against the new and

untried? We stick to, contend for, the identical old policy on the point in controversy which was adopted by "our fathers who framed the Government under which we live;" while you with one accord reject, and scout, and spit upon that old policy, and insist upon substituting something new. True, you disagree among yourselves as to what that substitute shall be. You are divided on new propositions and plans, but you are unanimous in rejecting and denouncing the old policy of the fathers. Some of you are for reviving the foreign slave trade; some for a Congressional Slave-Code for the Territories; some for Congress forbidding the Territories to prohibit Slavery within their limits; some for maintaining Slavery in the Territories through the judiciary; some for the "gur-reat pur-rinciple" that "if one man would enslave another, no third man should object," fantastically called "Popular Sovereignty;" but never a man among you is in favor of federal prohibition of slavery in federal territories, according to the practice of "our fathers who framed the Government under which we live." Not one of all your various plans can show a precedent or an advocate in the century within which our Government originated. Consider, then, whether your claim of conservatism for yourselves, and your charge or destructiveness against us, are based on the most clear and stable foundations.

Again, you say we have made the slavery question more prominent than it formerly was. We deny it. We admit that it is more prominent, but we deny that we made it so. It was not we, but you, who discarded the old policy of the fathers. We resisted, and still resist, your innovation; and thence comes the greater prominence of the question. Would you have that question reduced to its former proportions? Go back to that old policy. What has been will be again, under the same conditions. If you would have the peace of the old times, readopt the precepts and policy of the old times.

[...] But you will break up the Union rather than submit to a denial of your Constitutional rights.

That has a somewhat reckless sound; but it would be palliated, if not fully justified, were we proposing, by the mere force of numbers, to deprive you of some right, plainly written down in the Constitution. But we are proposing no such thing.

When you make these declarations, you have a specific and well-understood allusion to an assumed Constitutional right of yours, to take slaves into the federal territories, and to hold them there as property. But no such right is specifically written in the Constitution. That instrument is literally silent about any such right. We, on the contrary, deny that such a right has any existence in the Constitution, even by implication.

Your purpose, then, plainly stated, is that you will destroy the Government, unless you be allowed to construe and enforce the Constitution as you please, on all points in dispute between you and us. You will rule or ruin in all events. This, plainly stated, is your language.

[...] A few words now to Republicans. It is exceedingly desirable that all parts of this great Confederacy shall be at peace, and in harmony, one with another. Let us Republicans do our part to have it so. Even though much provoked, let us do nothing through passion and ill temper. Even though the southern people will not so much as listen to us, let us calmly consider their demands, and yield to them if, in our deliberate view of our duty, we possibly can. Judging by all they say and do, and by the subject and nature of their controversy with us, let us determine, if we can, what will satisfy them.

Will they be satisfied if the Territories be unconditionally surrendered to them? We know they will not. In all their present complaints against us, the Territories are scarcely mentioned. Invasions and insurrections are the rage now. Will it satisfy them, if, in the future, we have nothing to do with invasions and insurrections? We know it will not. We so know, because we know we never had anything to do with invasions and insurrections; and yet this total abstaining does not exempt us from the charge and the denunciation.

The question recurs, what will satisfy them? Simply this: We must not only let them alone, but we must somehow, convince them that we do let them alone. This, we know by experience, is no easy task. We have been so trying to convince them from the very beginning of our organization, but with no success. In all our platforms and speeches we have constantly protested our purpose to let them alone; but this has had no tendency to convince them. Alike unavailing to convince them, is the fact that they have never detected a man of us in any attempt to disturb them.

These natural, and apparently adequate means all failing, what will convince them? This, and this only: cease to call slavery wrong, and join them in calling it right. And this must be done thoroughly - done in acts as well as in words. Silence will not be tolerated - we must place ourselves avowedly with them. Senator Douglas' new sedition law must be enacted and enforced, suppressing all declarations that slavery is wrong, whether made in politics, in presses, in pulpits, or in private. We must arrest and return their fugitive slaves with greedy pleasure. We must pull down our Free State constitutions. The whole atmosphere must be disinfected from all taint of opposition to slavery, before they will cease to believe that all their troubles proceed from us.

I am quite aware they do not state their case precisely in this way. Most of them would probably say to us, "Let us alone, do nothing to us, and say what you please about slavery." But we do let them alone - have never disturbed them - so that, after all, it is what we say, which dissatisfies them. They will continue to accuse us of doing, until we cease saying.

I am also aware they have not, as yet, in terms, demanded the overthrow of our Free-State Constitutions. Yet those Constitutions declare the wrong of slavery, with more solemn emphasis, than do all other sayings against it; and when all these other sayings shall have been silenced, the overthrow of these Constitutions will be demanded, and nothing be left to resist the demand. It is nothing to the contrary, that they do not demand the whole of this just now. Demanding what they do, and for the reason they do, they can voluntarily stop nowhere short of this consummation. Holding, as they do, that slavery is morally right, and socially elevating, they cannot cease to demand a full national recognition of it, as a legal right, and a social blessing.

Nor can we justifiably withhold this, on any ground save our conviction that slavery is wrong. If slavery is right, all words, acts, laws, and constitutions against it, are themselves wrong, and should be silenced, and swept away. If it is right, we cannot justly object to its nationality - its universality; if it is wrong, they cannot justly insist upon its extension - its enlargement. All they ask, we could readily grant, if we thought slavery right; all we ask, they could as readily grant, if they thought it wrong. Their thinking it right, and our thinking it wrong, is the precise fact upon which depends the whole controversy. Thinking it right, as they do, they are not to blame for desiring its full recognition, as being right; but, thinking it wrong, as we do, can we yield to them? Can we cast our votes with their view, and against our own? In view of our moral, social, and political responsibilities, can we do this?

Wrong as we think slavery is, we can yet afford to let it alone where it is, because that much is due to the necessity arising from its actual presence in the nation; but can we, while our votes will prevent it, allow it to spread into the National Territories, and to overrun us here in these Free States? If our sense of duty forbids this, then let us stand by our duty, fearlessly and effectively. Let us be diverted by none of those sophistical contrivances wherewith we are so industriously plied and belabored - contrivances such as groping for some middle ground between the right and the wrong, vain as the search for a man who should be neither a living man nor a dead man - such as a policy of "don't care" on a question about which all true men do care - such as Union appeals beseeching true Union men to yield to Disunionists, reversing the divine rule, and calling, not the sinners, but the righteous to repentance - such as invocations to Washington, imploring men to unsay what Washington said, and undo what Washington did.

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.

Lincoln of course went on to win the Republican nomination and the presidency, and the South seceded because of it. The Civil War was fought and the president, acting then as both politician and statesman, issued the Emancipation Proclamation and **later called for adoption** of the Thirteenth Amendment, prohibiting slavery:

At the last session of Congress a proposed amendment of the Constitution abolishing slavery throughout the United States passed the Senate, but failed for lack of the requisite two-thirds vote in the House of Representatives. Although the present is the same Congress and nearly the same members, and without questioning the wisdom or patriotism of those who stood in opposition, I venture to recommend the reconsideration and passage of the measure at the present session. Of course the abstract question is not

changed; but in intervening election shows almost certainly that the next Congress will pass the measure if this does not. Hence there is only a question of time as to when the proposed amendment will go to the States for their action. And as it is to so go at all events, may we not agree that the sooner the better? It is not claimed that the election has imposed a duty on members to change their views or their votes any further than, as an additional element to be considered, their judgment may be affected by it. It is the voice of the people now for the first time heard upon the question. In a great national crisis like ours unanimity of action among those seeking a common end is very desirable--almost indispensable. And yet no approach to such unanimity is attainable unless some deference shall be paid to the will of the majority simply because it is the will of the majority. In this case the common end is the maintenance of the Union, and among the means to secure that end such will, through the election, is most dearly declared in favor of such constitutional amendment.

Lincoln lived to see the 13th Amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery ratified. On the slavery issue, his trajectory was complete.