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Thirst for Distinction? Abraham Lincoln's Political Ambition and the Emancipation Proclamation

by Jasmine Thorne

(U.S. History 256)

The Assignment: The essay examines a prophesy Abraham Lincoln gave in his address to the Young Men's Lyceum (1832) through historical context and other primary resources.

The Atmosphere of 1838

Lincoln's Address to the Young Men's Lyceum provides an account of his cry for social justice and of his foresight for what was to come. Since the signing of the Declaration of Independence the moral and legal aspects of slavery had been scrutinized. Over time the intensity of the debates aroused by this issue continued to escalate. Illinois was not exempt from the raging slavery debate. Even though Illinois entered the Union as a free state, the abolitionist movement was very unpopular. Just a few months prior to the address, Elijah Lovejoy, an Illinoisan abolitionist publisher, was murdered. And ten months prior to Lovejoy's death, the Illinois House of Representatives adopted a resolution that established the right to hold slaves, disapproved abolition societies, and declared the government unable to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia.¹ Southern states denounced the mob action against Lovejoy while Illinois papers and politicians remained silent. Lincoln was the only state office-holder who addressed, indirectly, the recent incident. Perhaps the possible political ramifications were perceived too great to risk any direct statements concerning the affair.² Nonetheless, every man who heard Lincoln's speech would have recognized this incident as an example of mob rule. Lincoln's cry for justice was loud and clear.

This address was also prophetic. Lincoln forewarned the young men of the growing instability of the Union. It is not coincidental that Lincoln used slavery as the point over which a new empire was to be created. Debates about slavery clouded every political move. If it wasn't about the admittance of new states, it was about how slavery affected the economy. Even state governments had to address the issue of slavery. How were fugitive slaves to be treated? Should abolitionist publications be allowed? As states began to attack other states' rulings in regards to slavery, the nation began to divide. Lincoln knew the strength of the Union would be tested, perhaps by bloodshed. The Civil War proved his predictions to be right.

Address to the Young Men's Lyceum

On January 27, 1838 Abraham Lincoln spoke to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois. Lincoln was twenty-eight years old and a member of the Illinois State Legislature. He was

¹ The resolution passed 77-6. Lincoln was one of six men who voted against the resolution. (<http://www.lib.niu.edu/ipo/ihta9724.html>)

² Cyrus Edwards, a future Whig candidate for the Governor of Illinois, and the Attorney General of Illinois Usher Linder held a conference just prior to Lovejoy's death requesting the cessation of his publications or his removal from the state. Lovejoy refused and four days later he was killed.

invited to speak at the Young Men's Lyceum, which he helped found two years earlier.³ In his speech, Lincoln warned the young men against the imminent danger rising from within the nation. Although no outside force could defeat America, the lost zeal of the Founding Fathers to unite the states endangered the liberty they had inherited. If the young men did not struggle for freedom and fight for the country's unity, then America would fall. Lincoln condemned the entire country for breaking the laws and allowing outraged mobs to rule.⁴ The North and the South had reports of both white and black men being lynched. No man was safe. Without the maintenance of judicial order, anarchy would ensue, causing the government to collapse. Lincoln exhorted the young men, and "every lover of liberty," to not tolerate any violation of a law. Although there may be bad laws, he believed that they should be obeyed until they could be properly repealed. At whatever cost, mob law should not be allowed to prevail.⁵

Lincoln proceeded to address whether there was a need for such concern in America. Was there really a danger of the government, which had already endured fifty years, of collapsing? Lincoln declared that it would only take one ambitious man with the right talents to rise up to pursue the gratification of his ruling passion. And he would do so at the cost of the Union, for he would not settle to simply lead what had already been established.

Towering genius disdains a beaten path. It seeks regions hitherto unexplored. It sees *no distinction* in adding story to story, upon the monuments of fame, erected to the memory of others. It *denies* that it is glory enough to serve under any chief. It *scorns* to tread in the footsteps of *any* predecessor, however illustrious. It thirsts and burns for distinction; and, if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves, or enslaving freemen...And when such a one does, it will require the people to be united with each other, attached to the government and laws, and generally intelligent, to successfully frustrate his designs.⁶

Lincoln appealed to the young men to remember the cost of the Revolution. He urged them to embrace the passions of the Founding Fathers that motivated and strengthened them to fight for and to guard their independence at any cost.

William Herndon, Lincoln's law partner, stated that the publication of this address in the *Sangamon Journal* "created for the young orator a reputation which soon extended beyond the limits of the locality in which he lived."⁷ How much or how quickly the publication in the *Sangamon Journal* aided in the spread of his reputation is unclear, but Lincoln rose to a myth-like status and arguably the greatest American president. And yet it is ironic that Lincoln cautioned about the ambitions of a man rising up to create a new nation "at the expense of emancipating slaves or enslaving freemen" when he would eventually be the one to sign the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. How would Lincoln view his own role? Did Lincoln have anyone in particular in mind as the potential threat? Would the audience have had any specific leader in mind? Could they stop such an ambitious leader? The answers to these questions would depend on who was being asked. Northerners and southerners would have very different responses.

³ http://douglassarchives.org/linc_a69.htm

⁴ "The Address to the Young Men's Lyceum," in *The Portable Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 20. In his speech, Lincoln referred to the incident at Vicksburg where a group of white gamblers were murdered, which led through a series of events to the lynching of several slaves and those accused of helping them to escape. Lincoln also referred to the burning of a recently freed slave in St. Louis.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18-23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷ <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/lyceum.htm>

A Northern Response

The North saw itself as the preserver of the Union while the South threatened to break or weaken the Union through secession or the nullification of laws. If the North had to pick a person who represented a potential threat it may have been John C. Calhoun of South Carolina. Calhoun had once been a strong nationalist after the War of 1812, but during John Quincy Adams' presidency he shifted to a states' rights position. After Lincoln's address some listeners may have interpreted this shift as a personal means to gain influence and power, especially since he attained the vice presidency under Andrew Jackson. They may also have chosen to interpret his resignation from that office as a tantrum for not being able to secure party support for a future presidential election.

Most of all the North would remember the immediate and residual effects of Calhoun's The South Carolina Exposition and Protest, which was published in 1828. The exposition heated political debates concerning the authority of the federal government. Did individual states have the constitutional right to secede or nullify laws that were found to be unfavorable? The Jackson Administration found itself in the midst of the Nullification Crisis brought upon by South Carolina over the Tariff Laws of 1828 and 1832. The tariffs South Carolina nullified were passed constitutionally. Therefore, Jackson considered South Carolina's nullification treasonous, for it defied the authority of the Constitution and their obligation to abide by it. Although the crisis ended with only the threat of force, a question hung in the air: who had greater authority, the federal or state governments?

When arguments continued to intensify over the slavery issue, the South used Calhoun's exposition as an argument for their right to secede from the Union unless their interests were protected. In other words, slavery had to be protected in not only existing states but also in new states. The North believed that the South did not have the constitutional right to secede regardless of the fate of the slave institution. Congress, following the Constitution's established lawmaking rules, would determine what was to be done with slavery. The South must submit to the tariffs; the thought of secession was intolerable. Later in his First Inaugural Address, Lincoln would clearly state the North's argument that the Constitution did not provide a means to withdraw from the Union, for the Constitution was meant to be enduring and perpetual. When the states ratified the Constitution they agreed to submit to it and to the future laws passed as prescribed by the Constitution.⁸ Although the North held various views concerning the economy and slavery, it united over the unconstitutionality of a state to nullify laws or secede from the Union.

Calhoun's thirst for distinction would be blamed for the erosion and looming destruction of the Union as Lincoln forewarned. Northerners would imagine themselves as the defenders of the Union, fighting in unity to preserve the liberty entrusted to them by the Founding Fathers. Although Calhoun aspired to help the South become a new nation, the North would try to assume the mantle of the Founding Fathers as the "pillars of the temple of liberty."

A Southern Response

Many southerners who heard or read Lincoln's address would immediately defend the South's right to come against any government that no longer protected its interests, its ability to survive. The South saw itself assuming the role of the Founding Fathers by preparing to fight a new War of Independence against sectional tyranny. Although the South had representatives in Congress, it felt it no longer carried any influential weight. The North continually gained all of the benefits of new legislation while the South suffered the consequences.

The Tariffs of 1828 and 1832 may have been viewed as modern Navigation Acts that only

⁸ "First Inaugural Address," in *ibid.*, 197-198.

benefited the North's industries, even the ones dependent upon the South's cotton crops. In the meantime the South's trade and sustenance were restrained and adversely affected by these tariffs. The Nullification Crisis was a means to remind the North that the Constitution was meant to serve all of the states. As it was with Great Britain, the North's means of prosperity on southern labor was intolerable. If necessary, the South would secede to gain independence from a new tyrannical rule.

As the slave debate continued to dominate politics, the South saw its means of survival threatened. Without slavery the South would not be able to yield the same crop results that were necessary to its economy. In addition, free blacks would be uncontrollable and societal menaces. If the North believed that blacks were their equals in God's eyes, then why didn't they want emancipated slaves in their states? Although the South repeatedly accepted compromises to protect the Union,⁹ the North's complete disregard for the South's welfare threatened to destroy it.

The South perceived northern abolitionists, such as New York's William Lloyd Garrison, as men seeking public attention and political power at the risk of emancipation. Garrison's *The Liberator* advocated sudden emancipation without compensation to slave owners. He did not care to consider the horrendous effects it would have on the economy or what the social implications would be. And though Lincoln was not a national leader at the time of the address, the South would soon see him as an abolitionist who threatened the Union by his persistence to keep slavery out of new territories and abhorrence for popular sovereignty. His advocacy for federal control was synonymous with northern control, which was considered corrupt and tyrannical. Lincoln's presidential campaign was not widely supported, and he would become known to the South as the president who trampled on their liberty. Many southerners believed Lincoln had successfully gained the distinction that he sought at the risk of emancipation and war.

Lincoln's View of His Role

Lincoln considered anyone who put the issue of slavery over the unity of the nation as someone to be challenged. Like other northerners, Lincoln may have considered John C. Calhoun as a potential threat to the nation. The South's push for the North to return all fugitive slaves at the risk of wrongfully returning free blacks thus, enslaving freemen, was an obstruction of justice in Lincoln's eyes. However, Lincoln also viewed anyone who preferred the emancipation of slaves at the risk of permanently dividing the nation as a threat. Like the South Lincoln may have considered Garrison. Lincoln opposed sudden emancipation, especially without compensation. He considered the North partly responsible for the dependence on slavery in the South since the northern manufacturing success required cotton from southern slave plantations. As a result, Lincoln believed the North should help pay for the cost of gradual emancipation, if it were to be done at all.

However, Lincoln repeatedly stated during his debates with Stephen A. Douglas that he never intended to force the South to end slavery where it already existed because it was not ordained by the Constitution.¹⁰ Although he would personally like to see all men free, regardless of race, he would only fight to keep slavery out of the new territories as the Founding Fathers had prevented it from the Northwest Territory. In regards to the slave issue, Lincoln believed he was walking in the footsteps of the Founding Fathers.

⁹ For example, South Carolina repealed the nullification of the Tariffs of 1828 and 1832 when they were obliged to decrease over a set time. In addition the Missouri Compromise of 1820 greatly limited the territory in which slavery could expand.

¹⁰ "Lincoln-Douglas Debate," in *ibid.*, 115.

They had sacrificed the immediate emancipation of slavery in order to unify all of the states, placing the Union above the fate of slavery. Nonetheless, Lincoln believed that they intended for the slave institution to dissolve over time.¹¹ The Constitution never mentioned slaves, which Lincoln interpreted as an indication that they had hoped slavery would cease to exist. Instead, they referred to slaves as those “bound to Service for a Term of Years”¹² in order to determine the number of representatives each state would have. The Constitution also stated that the “Migration and Importation of such Persons”¹³ would be left for the existing states to control until 1808. The Founding Fathers limited the control of slave importation to certain states and until a defined year, after which the federal government would be given complete control over all migration. In addition the Founding Fathers prevented slavery from entering the Northwest Ordinance. Not only did the very men who wrote the Constitution believe the federal government had the right to control the expansion of slavery, but they also chose not to allow it. Lincoln believed it was his responsibility to follow their intentions by keeping slavery from progressing into new territories as the Constitution enabled him.

As a war president, however, Lincoln’s official stance on slavery in existing states began to waiver. He realized the potential of sudden emancipation. The Union desperately needed new recruits to fight in the prolonged war in order to save the Union. He knew that he needed to give the slaves an incentive to fight for the Union by guaranteeing their freedom. In addition, the slave issue would be settled definitively, so the Union would be truly restored. Slavery would no longer dictate political debates or have an opportunity to divide the nation again. Lincoln defended his decision to sign the Emancipation Proclamation, for it served the Union.¹⁴ He did not intend to build a new nation at the risk of emancipation, but rather to preserve the Union through emancipation.

All along Lincoln aimed to imitate the Founding Fathers through his commitment to fight for the Union. He never considered his presidency as a self-serving office that would enable him to use power for his own gratification. “It was in the oath I took that I would, to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States. I could not take the office without taking the oath. Nor was it my view that I might take an oath to get power, and break the oath in using the power.”¹⁵ Although the North would exalt him and the South would detest him for his presidential conduct, Lincoln attempted to govern in accordance with the precedents established by the Founding Fathers.

A New Nation

The northerners may have perceived John C. Calhoun as a potential threat to national security with his influential cries for southern secession. And the southerners may have originally considered William Lloyd Garrison as the threat to unification at the time of the address. Lincoln may have agreed with both of them. In time, however, the North would rally behind Lincoln in an effort to preserve the Union, which the Founding Fathers fought to obtain and pass onto them. The South would perceive Lincoln as the very enemy to unification through his complete disregard for popular sovereignty and their right to protect their way of life. They would rise together to fight for a new independence as the Founding Fathers had to fight against British rule.

¹¹ “Lincoln’s Address to Cooper Institute (New York City),” in *ibid.*, 167-172.

¹² Article I, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution

¹³ Article I, Section 9 of the U.S. Constitution

¹⁴ “Letter to Albert G. Hodges (April 4, 1864),” in *The Portable Abraham Lincoln*, 303.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 302

Lincoln would struggle to walk in the footsteps of the Founding Fathers in order to preserve the political structure framed by the Constitution. The decision over slavery was never to be at the cost of the Union, but rather the Union was to be saved at the risk of either abolishing or preserving slavery. In January of 1863, Lincoln determined that the emancipation of slaves was necessary to preserve the nation built by the Founding Fathers. But through emancipation, despite his intentions, Lincoln did indeed create a new nation. The Emancipation Proclamation transformed millions of blacks from property to human beings who could attain citizenship. Their unalienable rights to “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” were now, in principle, recognized. Although racism prevented them from being accepted as “men created equal,” even by Lincoln, they were given the liberty to fight for that recognition. And although racism still exists, the Emancipation Proclamation recreated the nation in which we live.

Abraham Lincoln destroyed the nation paralyzed by slavery and birthed a nation founded on liberty for all men. In this respect, he fulfilled his own prophecy given in his 1838 address to the Young Men’s Lyceum in Springfield. But unlike that individual, Lincoln’s ambition was not for personal glory. Lincoln aspired to tread the path of the Founding Fathers and to preserve the nation they had established. The Constitution was preserved, but the nation was completely transformed, and Lincoln obtained lasting distinction.

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