

# Lincoln's Cooper Union address—an appeal to reason

Shannon Jones  
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Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech That Made Abraham Lincoln President, by Harold Holzer, Simon & Schuster (2004) ISBN 0-7432-2466-3

It is often the case that contemporary political struggles find their reflection in battles over history. This is only natural. It is only through an examination of the lessons of the past that a more or less adequate understanding of the present and probable future developments can be obtained.

Each bold social advance seeks support in the past progressive accomplishments of mankind. At the same time, representatives of reaction vilify and falsify these historical precedents, hoping to spread pessimism and fatalism among opponents of the existing social order.

It is an encouraging sign that interest in Abraham Lincoln, who presided over the revolutionary upheaval of the American Civil War, remains high, at least judged by the number of books on his life that are published each year. This does not reflect only academic interest. There is a broad feeling that the social struggles and conflicts that produced the Civil War have continued and even heightened relevance today.

In the United States the fight over Lincoln continues. The Bush administration and its supporters seek to enlist the legacy of the 16th president of the United States in support of policies of aggressive militarism, as highlighted by Bush's remarks at the opening of the new Lincoln museum in Springfield, Illinois. (In a speech April 19 marking the opening of the museum, Bush sought to draw an analogy between the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and Lincoln's emancipation of the slaves.)

No less absurd and reactionary are attempts by historians such as Lerone Bennett and others to denigrate the democratic content of the American Civil War by casting the author of the Emancipation Proclamation as little more than a white racist.

However, many serious and objective books on Lincoln continue to be published and find a readership. Whatever their limitations, these works take as their premise the indisputable fact that the American Civil War was a watershed event with enormous progressive social content.

One such work is *Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech That Made Abraham Lincoln President*, by Harold Holzer. The author is an administrator employed by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. He is also a co-chairman of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission.

The address delivered by Lincoln at Cooper Union in New York City on February 27, 1860 set the attorney from Illinois, then little known outside his home state, on course to win the Republican presidential nomination and ultimately the presidency.

In the fall of 1859 few people thought Lincoln a likely presidential nominee. His only experience in politics at the federal level had been a single term in the US Congress. True, he had gained a degree of national recognition in his campaign for the US Senate from Illinois in 1858, when he had debated the celebrated Democratic incumbent Stephen Douglas.

He went on to lose the election, however, despite winning the popular vote.

Then, in mid-October 1859, he received a telegram from New York inviting him to speak at the church of the abolitionist Reverend Henry Ward Beecher in Brooklyn. The offer had been made at the behest of New York Republicans seeking an alternative to the then front-runner, Senator William Seward of New York, whom they viewed as unelectable.

They felt that only a politician capable of drawing votes in the Midwestern states could beat Douglas, the likely Democratic candidate. Ohio Governor Salmon P. Chase was their preferred alternative. The invitation to Lincoln was to be part of an effort to indirectly bolster Chase by encouraging eastern Republicans to consider an array of possible Seward alternatives, including such figures as the antislavery newspaper publisher Cassius Clay of Kentucky and former Republican congressman Francis Blair of Missouri.

Just as Lincoln received the telegram inviting him to speak in the east, the abolitionist John Brown led a raid on the arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, hoping to incite a slave revolt. Even though the attempt failed and Brown was captured and executed, the act inflamed the South. Republicans were accused of instigating the attack and talk of a breakup of the union mounted.

Under these circumstances the election of 1860 seemed set to take place under conditions like no other in the history of the United States.

Lincoln, needing more time to prepare and aware that the projected speech could put him in consideration for the Republican presidential nomination, proposed that the date be moved ahead from November to late February, closer to the party convention. Meanwhile, unknown to Lincoln, and for reasons that are unclear, his hosts decided to change the venue from Beecher's church in Brooklyn to the Great Hall at Cooper Union in New York.

Holzer characterizes Lincoln's Cooper Union address as the "best known of Lincoln's speeches that no one seems to quote or cite; the most important of his addresses that no one can quite explain." (p. 2). This is probably due in part to the fact that the great strength of this speech lay in its content rather than its form.

The question of slavery overshadowed the election. For decades the free states of the North and the slave-owning states of the South had coexisted on the basis of a series of uneasy compromises. This had been shattered in 1854 by the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This law, authored by Douglas, had revoked the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which barred the extension of slavery into the central and upper Great Plains. In its place it had substituted the principle of so-called popular sovereignty, leaving the question of slavery up to the settlers of each territory.

This resulted almost immediately in the outbreak of violence in Kansas, as proslavery settlers moved into the territory and attempted to drive out antislavery settlers by force. It dealt a fatal blow to the old Whig Party, which had been based on an alliance of Northern capitalists with a "moderate" section of the Southern slave-owning elite. In its place rose

the Republican Party, founded by antislavery forces on a platform barring any expansion of slavery into the territories.

Lincoln, who had left Congress in 1850 after one term to return to his law practice, was politically reactivated by the passage of Kansas-Nebraska. He denounced Douglas's popular sovereignty doctrine as an affront to constitutional principles, calling it a "sophistry" and the "grossest violation yet" of the "sacred right of self-government" (p. 29).

Lincoln took part in the formation of the Republican Party and his name was raised by the delegates from Illinois as a possible vice-presidential candidate for the party's 1856 presidential ticket, headed by John Fremont.

Political tensions were further inflamed by the Dred Scott decision handed down by the US Supreme Court in 1857, which declared that slaves had no constitutional rights and further, that Congress had no authority to restrict the spread of slavery.

In 1858 Lincoln accepted the Republican Party's nomination to run for the Illinois Senate seat held by Douglas. Lincoln engaged in a series of nationally publicized debates with Douglas, which centered on the slavery issue, in particular the so-called doctrine of popular sovereignty and the Dred Scott case.

Now, at Cooper Union, Lincoln sought to renew this discussion, but on a different level.

By a review of the history of the founding of the United States, Lincoln sought to attack both the Dred Scott ruling and the doctrine of popular sovereignty by demonstrating, based on his own painstaking historical research, that the majority of the original signers of the US Constitution believed that the federal government had the right to regulate slavery and to limit its extension.

He found that of the 39 original signers of the constitution, 23 had expressed an opinion on the question of prohibiting the extension of slavery into the territories, and all but two had indicated their belief that Congress could prohibit its expansion. One of the major pieces of evidence Lincoln cited was the Ordinance of 1787, which barred slavery in the newly organized Northwest Territory. The act was supported by 16 of the signers and was enacted into law under the signature of George Washington.

The address that Lincoln gave was the longest of his political career, over one hour and a half. Holzer writes, "never in his life did Lincoln labor over an address so diligently, over such an extended period of time, and in the face of such wrenching distractions" (p. 54).

Lincoln began by recalling a recent speech given by his rival Douglas in Columbus, Ohio. "Senator Douglas said, '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 adopt it as a text for this discourse."

By the reference to "frame of government" Lincoln said he assumed Douglas meant the US Constitution and the framers, the original 39 signers, "their names being familiar to nearly all."

He continued, "What is the question which, according to the text, those fathers who framed the government understood 'just as well, and even better than we do now'?"

"It is this: does the proper division of local from federal authority, or anything in the Constitution, forbid our Federal Government to control as to slavery in our Federal Territories?"

By all accounts Lincoln kept his audience enthralled for the next hour and a half. The impact of the speech was heightened by the contrast between the speaker's rather ungainly appearance and the power of his oratory.

According to Holzer, Lincoln's speech accomplished several major tasks. First, he had to demonstrate his "historical and legal acumen" to buttress his opposition to slavery expansion and show he was a "thoughtful statesman."

"Second, he must perform on the platform more persuasively, more convincingly, and more dramatically than either of the two formidable westerners who had preceded him to the Cooper Union podium, Cassius Clay and Frank Blair.

"Third, he must present himself as the principal Republican alternative to New Yorker William H. Seward," that is, as an electable "moderate" on the question of slavery. Meanwhile, he had to firmly establish his antislavery credentials and reaffirm his moral abhorrence of the institution (p. 117).

The second part of Lincoln's address contained a criticism of the South, presented as an appeal to the South. He attempted to counter Southern charges of radicalism on the part of the Republican Party by asserting that it was the South, not the Republicans, that was violating the intent and practice of the signers of the US Constitution by denying the right of the federal government to bar the spread of slavery into the territories.

Lincoln dismissed charges that the Republicans through their antislavery agitation were responsible for inciting slave insurrection, insisting that Republicans did not wish to abolish slavery where it already existed, only to halt its further spread.

Then, correctly forecasting the future course of events, he predicted that the South would not accept Republican pledges not to interfere with slavery.

He concluded, "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, in all points in dispute between you and us. You will rule or ruin in all events."

He compared the threats of the Southern states to break up the union if a Republican were elected president to the demands of a "highwayman."

Addressing Republicans, he rhetorically asked the question, "What will satisfy them?"

He answered, "This and only this: 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."

Lincoln warned that the South would be content with nothing less than the banning of all opposition to slavery and its reintroduction into the Northern states.

He concluded, "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."

The speech was an instant success. It was reprinted in full the next morning in the major New York papers. Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* wrote, "No man ever before made such an impression on his first appeal to a New York audience" (p. 157).

Holzer writes, "It is fair to say that never before or since in American history has a single speech so dramatically catapulted a candidate toward the White House" (p. 235).

Further on he writes, "Abraham Lincoln not only made a spectacular debut at Cooper Union, he also introduced a new political dialectic. It was characterized by a fresh, lean style of elocution, free of bombast, metaphor, and vituperation, instead constructed out of facts and reason, supported by history and national experience, and infused with moral certainty" (p. 237).

In the days that followed, Lincoln reprised his remarks in 11 cities in three New England states before returning to Illinois. His speech was reprinted in pamphlet form and circulated with a now famous Matthew Brady photograph that Lincoln posed for while he was in New York.

As Holzer points out, it was Lincoln's first and last presidential campaign speech. In 1860, political custom still dictated that presidential candidates not make speeches or otherwise campaign. (In fact, Douglas broke with this custom, campaigning expensively on his own behalf.)

The speech set the stage for Lincoln to seize the nomination when Seward failed to obtain the required two-thirds majority on the first ballot at the Republican convention held in May in Chicago. He emerged as the favored second choice of the delegates, winning the nomination on the third vote.

When Southern Democrats rejected Douglas as too soft in his support of slavery and withdrew from the party's presidential nominating convention, nominating on their own John Breckinridge of Kentucky, the election of Lincoln became a virtual certainty.

Cooper Union itself remained a focus of antislavery agitation. The African-American abolitionist Frederick Douglas spoke there in January 1863 at a Jubilee of Freedom celebrating the Emancipation Proclamation.

The quality and character of Lincoln's Cooper Union address, contrasted with what passes for political discussion today, underscore the decay of American democracy. If Lincoln represented the apogee of American democracy, so Bush represents its horrific degeneration. This is not simply a deficiency of intellect, though that is a factor.

Lincoln's remarks could find a wide audience and evoke a genuine response because the ideas he advanced represented the general line of historical progress. Meanwhile, to quote Lincoln, "the world will little note, nor long remember" the mutterings of George W. Bush or his contemporaries.

The system they defend, based on the immense accumulation of private wealth at the expense of society as a whole, has reached a dead end. It is not possible to evoke a broad popular response for the maintenance of entrenched privilege. Just like the doomed slavocracy, today's ruling class is driven onto the road of unconstitutional and antidemocratic measures in defense of its program.



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