



Lincoln Lore

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Some Curiosities of a Congressional Career

Abraham Lincoln's brief career as a member of Congress remains a poorly understood chapter of his life. The fundamental problem is one of documentation. Lincoln apparently did not save his papers from his stay in Congress. Other than fragments and drafts for speeches, most of the letters and documents for this two-year period are in institutional collections other than the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection at the Library of Congress or still in private hands of collectors or of lucky descendants of recipients of letters from Congressman Lincoln. The record is therefore sketchy and imperfect, and the student lacks any feel for the kind of mail Lincoln got from his friends, advisors, and constituents. Even less is known about his Washington life, where there was less necessity for exchanging letters and conversation sufficed to get business done.

Donald W. Riddle wrote a solid monograph on the subject twenty years ago (*Congressman Abraham Lincoln* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1957]). However, Professor Riddle was preoccupied with the notion that Lincoln's career in Congress nearly ruined him politically because of his opposition to the Mexican War. He concluded, therefore, that Lincoln was as yet only a follower and not a leader, and that Lincoln achieved greatness only after 1854. Coupled with William Herndon's earlier assertions along the same lines, Riddle's book helped kill interest in this part of Lincoln's life. No writer could see room for another full-scale book on the subject, and there seemed to be little to learn about Lincoln's later career from this rather sour and lackluster episode.

Opposition to the war in Viet Nam revived interest in Lincoln's opposition to the Mexican War. Early mani-

festations of this (like the play, *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*) were superficial and tended to be mostly cases of special pleading for modern political causes. But G. S. Boritt's, "A Question of Political Suicide: Lincoln's Opposition to the Mexican War" (*Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, LXVII [February, 1974], 79-100), served to reopen serious debate over the success of Lincoln's term in Congress. It also suggested that in political "pragmatism" and "the politics of morality," there were clear links with the later statesman's career.

Scholars are not as sure that they clearly understand the story of Lincoln's term in the House of Representatives as they used to be, and incidents in that career once again look interesting and seem to demand new explanations. The following are three curious events which have not been explained by the existing literature and which seem to call for more exploration by Lincoln students.

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I. Lincoln Discredits a Candidate for Opposing War

In 1840, Lincoln actively supported William Henry Harrison's bid for the Presidency against Martin Van Buren. Lincoln was serving his last term in the Illinois House, and his law partner John T. Stuart was in Washington, serving a term in the House of Representatives. On January 20, Lincoln wrote Stuart asking that he "send . . . every thing you think will be a good 'war-club.'" He asked specifically for "as many copies of the life of Harrison" as Stuart could spare. He added: "Be very sure to procure and send me the Senate Journal of New York of September 1814. I have a newspaper article which



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

FIGURE 1. Martin Van Buren (1782-1862) lived long enough to witness Lincoln's Presidency. Among the surviving former Presidents (Van Buren, Pierce, and Buchanan), he had the highest regard for Lincoln.

says that that document proves that Van Buren voted against raisin[g] troops in the last war." He was still hunting for the right evidence in April, when he wrote Richard F. Barrett, absent from Illinois on business in New York, "I would be glad if you could . . . procure the Journal of the New York Senate for the fall session of 1812." A newspaper report of a political speech Lincoln gave in May indicates that he had found what he desired and was using it to good effect: "He then reviewed the political course of Mr. Van Buren, and especially . . . his Janus-faced policy in relation to the war. In this part of his speech Mr. Lincoln was particularly felicitous, and the frequent and spontaneous bursts of applause from the People, gave evidence that their hearts were with him."

Although Lincoln was seeking "war-clubs," at least two things are notable about his search. First, he searched diligently enough to enable us to call his enterprise "research." He found a reference in a newspaper, but he apparently did not use it without verifying it. For reasons which will be explained shortly, that reference certainly proved to be erroneous, and Lincoln then sought another reference which might suggest the same issue. He went to some trouble to procure the references, which were not available in book-starved Illinois (even the capital of Illinois failed to hold copies of the records of the debates in the New York Legislature and the New York constitutional convention, held less than twenty years previously!). Second, he not only worked carefully and hard, but he was also careful to keep his "war-clubs" within the bounds of truth. Lincoln began by thinking Van Buren had voted against raising troops for the War of 1812. In the end, he apparently accused Van Buren only of a "Janus-faced policy in relation to the war."

Lincoln thus molded his accusations in accordance with the historical record. Martin Van Buren had been a first-term state senator in New York in 1812. That was not only a Presidential election year but also the year a war started, and in that combination there lay trouble for young Van Buren. In politics, he was a Jeffersonian Republican, and the War of 1812 was a Republican war, opposed principally by members of the Federalist party. In New York, however, the Republicans were badly split into two factions, one of which was led by DeWitt Clinton and the other, by local followers of the Republican President, James Madison. Madison ran for reelection in 1812. Clinton was an aspirant to the Presidency in 1812, also, and he became, therefore, an opponent of Madison's war.

In New York, Presidential electors were still chosen by the state legislature rather than by direct vote of the people. Van Buren, who was at this time a member of the Clinton faction, faced as his first legislative duty a special session to choose New York's electors. And he faced a miserable choice between his local party leader (in a vote that would be called a repudiation of the President's declaration of war on Britain) and his national party head, who was the bitter personal rival of the local party head. Van Buren immediately assumed a leadership role and engineered an electoral delegation pledged completely to Clinton. When he wrote his autobiography many years later, he admitted that it was a mistake. It gave him a reputation as an opponent of the war, a reputation which he fought ever after.

The reputation was, apparently, unmerited. As soon as Van Buren broke with Clinton in February, 1813, he wrote a scorching defense of the war, calling its opponents "puny politicians" who thought the voters "accessible" through their "fears . . . and pockets." He compared them to Tories.

What has all this to do with Lincoln's term in Congress? The Democrats in 1848 would do just what the Republicans did in 1813; Whigs became Tories, traitors, and "blue-light Federalists" (so named for the lights along the coast that shone from Federalist homes to direct the British fleet ashore). It is often assumed that Lincoln was somehow *naive* in his opposition to the war, that he had no idea what kind of trouble he could be getting into as he docilely followed the lead of the Eastern Whigs. Surely this cannot be so. Lincoln went into the fray with his eyes wide open, as the expression goes; he knew exactly how dangerous any kind of opposition to a country's wars could be to any political career. He knew that politicians would scan his record for votes against the soldiers of the fatherland. Whatever the merit of his stand and whatever the

consequences, Lincoln's opposition to the Mexican War was not entirely the awkward first steps of a neophyte.

II. Veteran Whigs Who Were Also "Mexican" Whigs

Democrats called the Whigs "Mexican" Whigs for giving "aid and comfort" to the enemy (President Polk himself used that language suggestive of the Constitution's definition of treason; his followers often simply call Whigs "traitors"). Lincoln explained the Whig party's stand to his puzzled law partner, William Herndon, this way:

The locos are untiring in their effort to make the impression that all who vote supplies, or take part in the war, do, of necessity, approve the Presidents conduct in the beginning of it; but the whigs have, from the beginning, made and kept the distinction between the two. In the very first act, nearly all the whigs voted *against* the preamble declaring that war existed by the act of Mexico, and yet nearly all of them voted *for* the supplies. As to the whig men who have participated in the war, so far as they have spoken to my hearing, they do not hesitate to denounce, as unjust, the Presidents conduct in the beginning of the war. They do not suppose that such denunciation, is dictated by undying hatred to them . . . There are two such whigs on this floor, Col. Haskell, and Major Gaines. The former, fought as a Col. by the side of Col. Baker at Cerro Gordo, and stands side by side with me, in the vote [on the Ashmun amendment, declaring the war "unconstitutional and unnecessary"], that you seem to be dissatisfied with. The latter, the history of whose capture with Cassius Clay, you well know, had not arrived here when that vote was given; but as I understand, he stands ready to give just such a vote, whenever an occasion shall present. Baker too, who is now here, says the truth is undoubtedly that way, and whenever he shall speak out, he will say so. Col. Donaphin [*sic*] too, the favourite whig of Missouri, and who over ran all Northern Mexico, on his return home in a public speech at St. Louis, condemned the administration in relation to the war as I remember. G. T. M. Davis, who has been through almost the whole war, declares in favour of Mr. Clay, from which I infer that he adopts the sentiments of Mr. Clay, generally at least. On the other hand, I have heard of but one whig, who has been to the war, attempting to justify the President's conduct. That one is Capt. Bishop, editor of the Charleston Courier, and a very clever fellow.

A month and a half later, he used the same argument on Usher F. Linder.

Again, one must be impressed by the Congressman's diligent research. This is an imposing list of Whig veterans, one which cannot be found even in the most recent literature on the subject. Yet again, there is a matter of factual accuracy involved — were these men truly as critical of the war (a war of conquest entered upon to gain votes was Lincoln's description of it) as Congressman Lincoln? Acquaintance with the newspapers of the period will certainly prompt this question, for many Democratic papers claimed that Whig Alexander W. Doniphan had come home from his campaign and criticized the Whig party for stabbing his enterprise in the back.

Unfortunately, most of the books and articles which discuss Colonel Doniphan's dazzling campaign in New Mexico focus on the military exploits and ignore the Colonel's political views altogether. Doniphan was a Whig; he was nominated by a Missouri Whig convention for Governor in 1852, but declined to run. In 1855, he was a member of a pro-slavery convention that met in Lexington, Missouri, to condemn the "abolitionizing" of neighboring Kansas. Therefore, one can assume that he did not oppose the Mexican War on the grounds that it was a conspiracy to expand the empire of the Slave Power. Where did he stand?

The truth is elusive, and more pursuit of it is called for. The only readily available source which discusses what was said at the triumphal reception of Doniphan in St. Louis in the summer of 1847 is William Nisbet Chamber's *Old Bullion Benton: Senator from the New West* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1956). Senator Thomas Hart Benton was politicking as usual and gave the main welcoming address to the returning war heroes. Doniphan responded that "if the honorable senator's plans

had been adopted, the war would have terminated long ago."

From his response, one may reasonably conclude that Colonel Doniphan's views on the war were similar to Thomas Hart Benton's. Benton was a Democrat, but this does not by any means imply that Lincoln was wrong about Doniphan's views of the war. For Benton was a Democrat with a difference, a strongly idiosyncratic personality with a will of his own.

Thomas Hart Benton, like most Democrats, was an expansionist. He wanted to acquire upper California (especially the Bay of San Francisco) and New Mexico — by purchase. President Polk noted the Missouri Senator's "decided aversion to a war with Mexico if it could be avoided consistently with the honor of the country." In a private meeting with Polk a few hours before his declaration of war, Benton said that he would "vote men and money for defence of our territory" but was "not prepared to make aggressive war on Mexico," that he "disapproved the marching of the army from Corpus Christi to the left bank of the [Rio Grande] Del Norte," and that he "did not think the territory of the U. S. extended" beyond the Nueces. Benton kept an active interest in various proposals for peace, but he also cooperated with the war effort until Polk had Benton's son-in-law John C. Frémont court-martialed in 1848. Before Winfield Scott's invasion of Vera Cruz, Benton advocated an invasion of central Mexico as the only way to end the war quickly (characteristically, he proposed not only a strategy but also a commander to instrument it, "Lieutenant General" Thomas Hart Benton). Polk later adopted the strategy, in part, but not the commander.

Benton thus meant different things to different people. For some, he was a critic of the origins of the war who held *more* extreme views than Abraham Lincoln himself, who argued only that the Texas boundary lay between the Nueces and the Rio Grande. He was a man who sought compromise peace proposals. For others, he was an advocate of an even more efficient military prosecution of the war. When Colonel Doniphan said that Benton's plan would have ended the war sooner, it is not clear what he meant, for he was both a Whig and an efficient and aggressive soldier.

III. Why Did Lincoln Frank a Democratic Speech?

On May 3, 1848, Congressman Lincoln wrote a Washington printer, John T. Towers, to ask him to "send to the folding room . . . three hundred copies" of "the speech of Mr. Wick, of Indiana." Lincoln was not yet working for the national party's Taylor campaign committee, as he would after Congress adjourned in August, and it must be assumed that he intended the speech for consumption by his own constituents in Illinois.

William W. Wick was a Democratic Congressman from Indianapolis. It is always somewhat tricky to explain the uses of printed copies of speeches made by the opposition party. During the Mexican War, Whigs frequently circulated the speeches of Democrats John C. Calhoun and Thomas Hart Benton as proof that even some Democrats disapproved of the origin, purpose, and conduct of the Mexican War. At times, parties circulate opposition speeches which they think are so outrageous in content that they will turn voters away from the opposition. The most famous instance of this practice was the circulation of Andrew Jackson's message accompanying his veto of the bill to recharter the Second Bank of the United States. Nicholas Biddle, the President of the Bank, thought Jackson's sentiments so inflammatory that they would turn the public against him. However, the message had the opposite effect, increased Jackson's popularity, and caused Henry Clay to advise Biddle to cease helping the opposition by circulating their literature.

Wick's speech does not clearly fit either use, and it will take more work to prove precisely what Lincoln saw of merit in the speech. Wick's remarks were prompted by a sensational event in Washington, D.C., an abolitionist attempt to kidnap 78 slaves. On the morning of April 17, 1848, Captain Daniel Drayton, a sea captain of the *Pearl* and an abolitionist, weighed anchor and went to sea with slaves aboard stolen from the Washington community (including slaves from Dolly Madison's house). It was becalmed and overtaken by a

navy ship which brought the *Pearl* back. Drayton and his mate were arrested for kidnaping, and the slaves were eventually sold further south where escape was more difficult. Gamaliel Bailey had recently established an antislavery newspaper in Washington, the *National Era*, and mobs soon formed which threatened to hang Drayton and his mate and destroy the presses of Bailey's newspaper. Joshua Giddings, the antislavery Congressman from Ohio's Western Reserve district, defied the mob and went to the jail (along with Hannibal Hamlin, a young antislavery man from Maine) to offer his legal services to the prisoners. On April 20, John P. Hale and John G. Palfrey introduced resolutions in the Senate and House, respectively, to investigate police protection from mobs in the District of Columbia and to denounce threats made against Giddings, who had received several assassination notes under the door of his boarding house, and against Bailey. Five days of acrimonious debate followed.

On April 24, Wick gave his speech. It was humorous and moderate in tone, but it offered little solace to antislavery men in general or to Joshua Giddings in particular. He claimed that Giddings's "forced popularity at home, hot-housed into a long continuance by a former expulsion from this Hall, as just as it was impolitic," was waning, and "he must have a new inventory of martyrdoms to lay before his most respectable, though somewhat peculiar constituency." Wick opposed the resolution because the American interpretation of government privilege extended only to "menaces . . . aimed at, or caused by, any specific words spoken in discussion here" or at or by "any act of official duty." "If a member of Congress gets into a personal scrape when cruising on his own hook about the purlieus of Washington, and beyond the precincts of the Capitol," Wick said, "he must rely on the judiciary of the District." Lincoln was no special fan of Giddings, who was not supporting Zachary Taylor for President, but one doubts that his district needed an attack on Giddings as a conscious seeker of martyrdom to persuade it to go for Taylor.

The rest of Wick's speech was a careful "synopsis of the opinions of myself, and of all (except about thirty)" of the Democrats in the House on slavery. Much condensed, this is a summary of what he said:

1. It was wrong to steal Africans for slavery and to purchase them as slaves.
2. Holding slaves by descent may or may not be wrong. Slave-holding is not in itself a sin.
3. Slavery, though introduced in violation of God's law, will be guided by Him to the "good to his creature man."
4. Congress cannot either authorize or prohibit slavery in any state or territory. Congress should regulate abuses in slavery in the District of Columbia.
5. There is no such thing as national sin, and the Western Reserve has no duty to repent of the sins of Southern slaveholders.
6. The South should gradually emancipate their slaves in such a way "as not to inundate us with their emancipates." State legislation to prevent the growth of "a numerous colored population among us" is ineffective.
7. A slave-dealer is "an unmitigated brute beast."
8. An increase in the area of slavery will not necessarily increase the number of slaves. Huddling the slave population together will accelerate the desire to emancipate but the kind of emancipation it would cause would "bring upon us in Indiana an avalanche of colored population."
9. Abolition would not decrease the competition of slave with free northern labor. "The poor fellow must be exterminated, to release the white laborer from the competition complained of."
10. Virtue and vice are equally distributed in the North and South.
11. Northern Democrats "of the Wilmot proviso and self-called anti-extension-of-the-area-of-slavery stamp" cannot convert Southern Democrats or even Western Democrats. They use the issue in their own districts to get elected, but it is harmful at the national level. You "are aggressors." Use the issue at home, if you must, but, if you must, it will be as well for you to join the abolitionists, though "we will not 'read you out' of the party."

Wick concluded with a long denunciation of New England



FIGURE 2. Congressman Lincoln repeatedly stressed the heroic roles played by Whig officers in the Mexican War. A typical example was the death of Henry Clay's son at Buena Vista in 1847. This N. Currier lithograph (detail) was one of many which documented that event.

Courtesy Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

hypocrisy, elaborating on the idea that New England slave ships helped start the slavery that New England now denounced. New England rum turned African chieftans into demons who sold their own people to obtain more rum. New England guns and gunpowder were the tools by which Africans waged war and gained prisoners who became slaves. New England profited at every stage of the operation, profiting later from selling the slaves in the South, from selling the tobacco taken in exchange for the slaves, and from European manufactures bought with the tobacco. They made four profits: on guns and rum, on slaves, on tobacco, and on the manufactures.

More extreme statements of the Democratic position could be found, and Lincoln would find and use them in the 1850s, being particularly watchful for statements which denigrated the Declaration of Independence for the sake of denying the natural equality of men. Although Lincoln certainly disagreed with what Wick said in points 4 and 5 and, as a Whig, was indifferent to what he said in point 11, there were large areas of agreement as well, particularly in the views that Southerners were no less moral than Northerners and that emancipation should be gradual and should include plans for colonization.

In the summer and autumn, Lincoln would campaign for Taylor primarily in areas where Free Soil sentiment seemed strong, in Massachusetts and in the northern counties of his own Seventh Congressional District. Perhaps Wick's speech, with its clear attack on Free Soilism, had some special appeal to a mind preoccupied with this problem, but it hardly seems to provide any kind of solution that would interest Lincoln. His major concern was to keep "conscience" Whigs from bolting to the Free Soilers. This speech merely discussed the common ground of agreement between Whigs of Lincoln's type and Free Soilers; namely, that the Democratic party was not pledged in any way to stop the growth of slavery.

IV. Conclusion

There are many other aspects of Lincoln's congressional career which invite further exploration and analysis because they are unsatisfactorily explained or ignored by the existing literature. In many cases, they are fine points, but in the end they may add up to a rather different picture of Congressman Lincoln.

Researchers and manuscript dealers have been slow to realize the opportunity in this area. Although I have never seen a letter that was written to Congressman Lincoln, he received, by his own account, "more than . . . three hundred" letters in the last session of Congress alone. The glamor of the Civil War and the Presidency should not blind us to the merits of study and collecting in the area of Lincoln's formative Whig years.

Autographed Debates: The Mulligan Copy

Interested readers have helped *Lincoln Lore's* continuing series of articles on the various presentation copies of the *Political Debates Between Hon. Abraham Lincoln and Hon. Stephen A. Douglas*. By writing us to describe their own copies, they have pinned down previously unlocated copies of the book.

A case in point is the Thomas Mulligan copy. When Harry Pratt wrote "Lincoln Autographed Debates" in *Manuscripts* in 1954, he had to list the present owner as unknown and was unable "to identify a Mulligan who was a friend of Lincoln in 1860."

Mr. William Robert Coleman of San Bernardino, California, has written to let us know that he owns the Mulligan copy. Moreover, he has been able to find that Thomas Mulligan was a lawyer in Monticello, Illinois, in the 1850s. He was a Republican and introduced Lincoln when he gave a three-hour speech at Monticello on September 6, 1858. He served as an alternate delegate from Piatt County to the Illinois State Republican Convention which nominated Lincoln for President in May of 1860.

The precise nature of Lincoln's relationship with Mulligan remains unknown. Monticello was a county seat on the Eighth Judicial Circuit, but Lincoln is not known to have associated with Mulligan in arguing cases in Piatt County.

There is more to be learned about the Mulligan presentation copy, as there is with other copies of the *Debates*. If the mysteries can be solved at all, the effort will certainly be advanced by cooperation and exchange of information. Lincoln collectors and students are indebted to Mr. Coleman for revealing the whereabouts of the Mulligan copy and for reminding us of that spirit of cooperation that has made the Lincoln field a joy to work in.