



# Lincoln Lore

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## LINCOLN'S THEORY OF REPRESENTATION: A SIGNIFICANT NEW LINCOLN DOCUMENT

*Editor's Note:* I am indebted to Mr. James T. Hickey, Curator of the Lincoln Collection at the Illinois State Historical Library in Springfield, for calling the text discussed below to my attention and for allowing *Lincoln Lore* to reproduce it. It represents a small part of the greatest new Lincoln collection made available in years, the private papers of Lincoln's son, Robert Todd Lincoln. These papers are now deposited at the Illinois State Historical Library. M.E.N., Jr.

"Please do me the favor to inform me whether the enclosed document headed 'Abraham Lincoln's Views', is in your father's handwriting." Richard Yates asked in a letter to Robert Todd Lincoln on December 16, 1909. Yates's father, also named Richard, had been the Governor of Illinois during the Civil War and a political associate of Abraham Lincoln. The elder Yates had preserved the document "for many years in an envelope containing certain letters" from Robert Todd Lincoln's father to him, and, the younger Yates added, "I have kept it since my father's death thirty-six years ago, on the supposition that it was in President Lincoln's handwriting."

Robert Todd Lincoln replied:

I am very much interested in the autograph manuscript of my father which you sent me in your letter of the 16th instant, and which I return to you.

To answer your question as to whether it is in my father's handwriting, specifically, I can answer that it undoubtedly is. While it is not dated, it is apparent that it was written when he was a candidate for election to

his one term in Congress, and it is to me exceedingly interesting as showing that even then he was filled with the thoughts of the identical questions which were the basis of his debate with Senator Douglas. There is no copy of the document among his papers, and I have taken the liberty of having a copy made for my own files; but with no intention of publishing it.

The original document owned by Yates has never been found, and Robert Todd Lincoln's typed copy remains the only version of the document available to Lincoln students. If we may trust Robert's judgment in the matter of his father's handwriting, then the text represents a previously unpublished Lincoln document of considerable significance. And surely Robert was a reliable expert on his father's handwriting. Not only did he receive letters from his father, but Robert was also for many years the "curator" of his father's Presidential papers. For four years he had been lugging seven trunks full of papers back and forth between Washington, D. C., and his summer home. He had on numerous occasions scoured them in searching for particular items that people like Richard Yates asked him about (note that he could say that there was "no copy of the document" among his father's papers).

The typed copy of the document reads thus:

A. Lincoln's view of the Right Position

In relation to the slavery question — Wilmot Proviso — Mr. Clay's compromise, and so on, I think there



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**FIGURE 1.** Richard Yates (1815-1873) was Governor of Illinois during the Civil War. He met Abraham Lincoln in the 1830s, when both men were Henry Clay Whigs. He served three terms in the Illinois legislature and two in the United States House of Representatives before becoming Governor of Illinois.

is good reason for hoping that the whole will be settled before my service will commence, should I be elected.

But if elected, and, on taking my seat, this question shall still be open, and the wish of my district upon it shall be known to me, that wish shall govern me.

If, however, that wish shall not be known to me, and I shall be left to the exercise of my own judgment upon the question, I shall be governed by the then existing state of things, which may then be as different from what it now is, as it now is from what it was a year and a half or two years ago.

There are, however, some things upon which I feel that I am, and shall remain, inflexible — One of them is my opposition to the extension of slavery into territories now free — In accordance with this, I have been for the Wilmot Proviso; and I should adhere to it in Congress, so long as I should suppose such adherence, the best mode of preventing such extension of slavery; and, at the same time as not endangering, any dearer object — In this I mean to say I can conceive a case in which a dogged adherence to the Proviso by a few, might aid the extension of slavery, — that is, might fail in its direct object, defeat other restraining measures, and allow slavery to be pushed wherever nature would allow — and in such a case, should I believe it to exist, I would at once abandon the Proviso — Again, of all political objects the preservation of the Union stands number one with me; and whenever I should believe my adherence to the Proviso tended to endanger the Union, I would at once abandon it.

I have now distinctly stated the principles upon which I shall act, in relation to this question, if elected.

While on this subject I will say, I have not at any time supposed the Union to be in so much danger as some others have — I have doubted, and still doubt, whether a majority of the voters, in any Congressional District in the nation are in favor of dissolution in any event — slavery restricted, or slavery extended.

Still it is arrogant — silly perhaps — to entirely disregard the opinions of the very many great and good men who think there is real danger — With great distrust of my own ability, and reasonable deference to the opinions of the author of the late compromise bill, I somewhat regretted the defeat of that measure; and had it passed the Senate, and I been a member of the lower House I think I should have voted for it, unless my district had otherwise directed me.

The document is a good deal more difficult to interpret than Robert thought. It could not have been "written when he was a candidate for election to his one term in Congress." David Wilmot introduced his famous Proviso on the afternoon of August 8, 1846. Lincoln won election to Congress on August 3, 1846. He could not have taken a position on an issue which did not exist while he was running for Congress. Moreover, Lincoln speaks in the document of the defeat of Henry Clay's "late compromise bill." This defeat did not occur until August of 1850.

By 1850, Congressional elections in Illinois were held in November, and Lincoln's statement might very well have been written in the midst of the contest between Whig Richard Yates and Democrat Thomas L. Harris for the local district's seat in the United States House of Representatives. Harris had won Lincoln's seat in 1848, in a contest against Stephen T. Logan, a miserable campaigner. Yates reclaimed the district for the Whigs in 1850.

Lincoln's statement clearly touches on the major issues in the 1850 contest. The Democratic organ, the *Illinois State Register*, sought to embarrass the local Whigs for inconsistent stances on national issues. Yates had been a member of the Illinois General Assembly from 1848 to 1850, when the Whig members voted to instruct the United States Senators from Illinois to insist on the Wilmot Proviso, which would have barred slavery from any territory acquired as a result of the Mexican War. In the electoral contest in 1850, however, Yates apparently supported Henry Clay's compromise proposal, which would have allowed some territories gained from the Mexican War to organize as states with or without slavery, as the people in the territories should themselves determine. Democrats also accused Yates of trying to dodge the issue, it being unclear how Yates reconciled slavery's exclusion with Clay's compromise measures. Democrats accused Yates of voting for instructing Illinois's United States Senators to vote for abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia, something which Clay's compromise measures conspicuously did not urge.

The substance and tone of Lincoln's remarks certainly fit this delicate political situation. "I have been for the Wilmot

Proviso," Lincoln said, but he would "adhere to it in Congress" only as long as it did not endanger "any dearer object." He added pointedly that "of all political objects the preservation of the Union stands number one with me; and whenever I should believe my adherence to the Proviso tended to endanger the Union, I would at once abandon it." Yates could very well assume Lincoln's position on these points. Yates had been for the Wilmot Proviso, but he might change his position if a "dogged adherence" to it would endanger the Union. In light of Democratic charges that Yates was dodging, Lincoln's statement that he had "now distinctly stated the principles upon which I shall act" seems very much to the point. It is notable, too, that Lincoln did not say, as he would later in his life, that he had voted for the Wilmot Proviso many times while he served in the United States House of Representatives. Thus there is nothing in the statement which could not as well have been used by Yates as by Lincoln.

Although it is generally assumed that Lincoln's political ambitions slumbered after 1849, there is a possibility that the statement was an attempt to address the issues of 1850 in his own behalf. The reference to his personal feeling that he had "not at any time supposed the Union to be in so much danger as some others have" was characteristic of Lincoln's attitude around 1850. There is a letter marked "Confidential" in the Yates Papers which indicates that some people among Yates's supporters feared that Lincoln wanted to run for Congress:

[Joseph O.] King has been absent for ten days, I learn he has been sent to the upper part of the district by the Lincoln faction for the purpose of preparing the minds of the people against our wishes in this end of the district.

Look out or you will be defeated by pretended friends before the convention assembles.

You have grate confidence in [John Todd] Stuart; he may be your friend in some things, but he is for Lincoln for Congress.

Yours truly  
Butler

Stuart's preference may not have been Lincoln's, however, and the fact remains that Lincoln supported Yates when he ran for Congress in 1850.



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FIGURE 2. Robert Todd Lincoln

The statement is titled "A. Lincoln's view of the Right Position" rather than "Lincoln's Position." Just two years before, Lincoln had written a similar statement for Zachary Taylor, putting words in that Presidential candidate's mouth in a similar way: "The question of a national bank is at rest; were I President I should not urge it's reiteration upon Congress." It seems likely that this later statement, too, was meant for another's use.

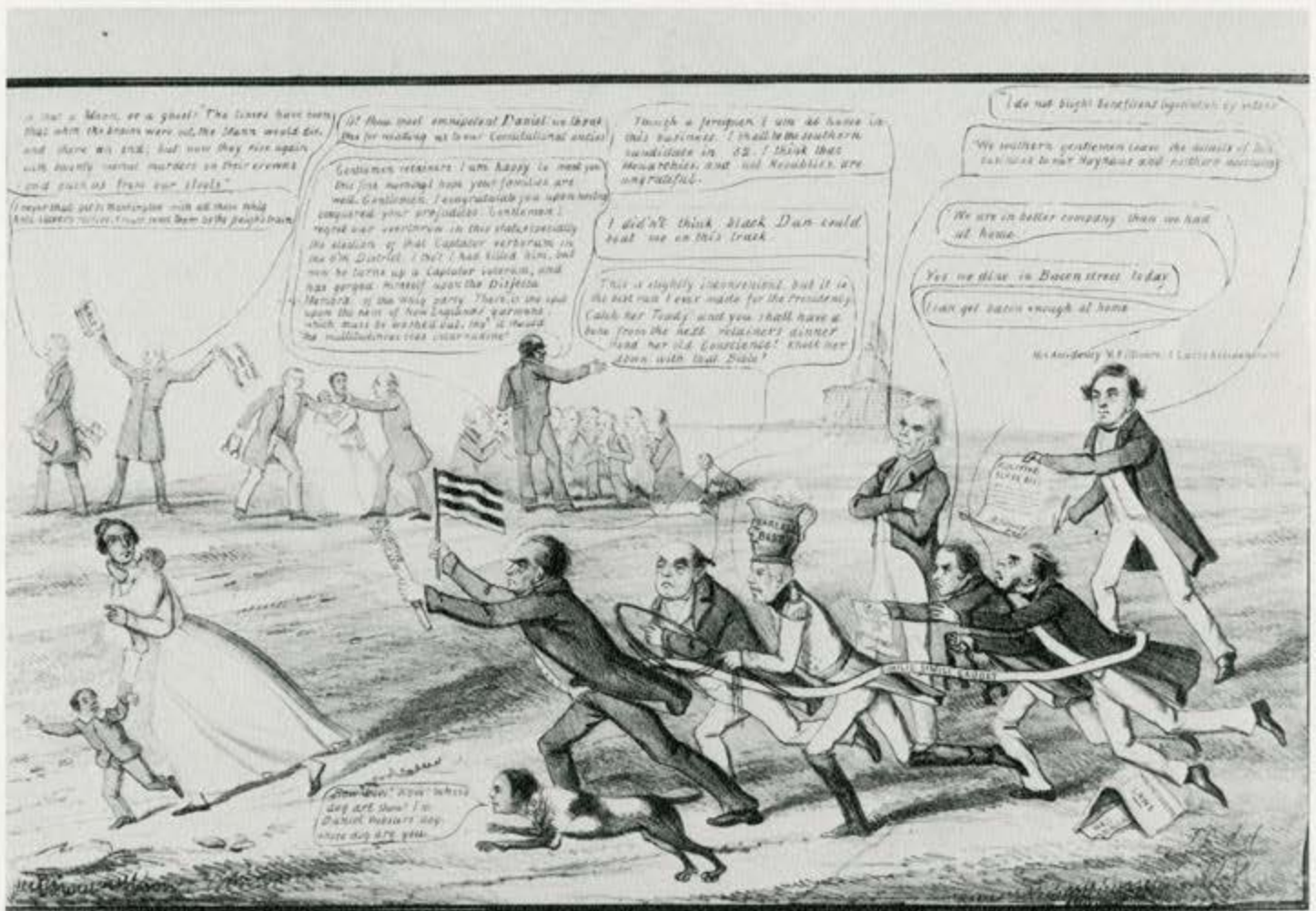
The views were, nevertheless, Lincoln's views. Some of them are of interest. For example, he speaks of slavery's being "pushed wherever nature would allow." This remark suggests the idea that climate could determine the ability of slavery to expand, an idea which Lincoln would quarrel with later in his career.

It is also remarkable to note the degree to which Lincoln adhered to the idea that representatives could be instructed how to vote by their constituents. The idea of instructed representation was not in itself an issue in 1850, but there were numerous references to Yates's having voted to instruct Senators to do what he now would not do himself. Lincoln was a staunch believer in tying the representative closely to the will of his constituents. In 1848, Lincoln called instruction "the primary, the cardinal, the one great living principle of all Democratic representative government — the principle, that the representative is bound to carry out the known will of his constituents." He recognized, however, that instruction was essentially a Democratic dogma. In 1854, he argued that if the Illinois legislature "should instruct Douglas to vote for the repeal of the Nebraska Bill, he must do it, for 'the doctrine of instructions' was a part of his political creed." "A. Lincoln's view of the Right Position" is the only document wherein Lin-

coln reveals his personal willingness to be governed strictly by "the wish of my district" on issues as important as "the slavery question — Wilmot Proviso — Mr. Clay's compromise." He may have qualified his commitment by adding that "There are, however, some things upon which I feel that I am, and shall remain, inflexible." This contradiction followed his statement that he would be governed by the circumstances of the moment, sometime hence, when he would arrive in Congress — not his statement that he would be guided by "the wish of my district" if that wish "shall be known to me." Apparently, he took the ultra-democratic ground that instruction could overrule his personal views even on "the slavery question."

The clarity with which Lincoln announced the primacy of Union in his political beliefs is also of great significance. His willingness to "abandon" the Wilmot Proviso "at once" if it "tended to endanger the Union" is somewhat at odds with later statements in which he viewed the Union as the vehicle of liberty and made it unclear whether union or freedom could be considered of prime importance.

"A Lincoln's view of the Right Position" is a short document, but one worthy of deep study. It deals with fundamental assumptions about democratic government. It might be interpreted as a sign of the survival of Lincoln's political ambition beyond a period when such ambitions were supposed to have disappeared. It is a significant addition to the body of evidence bearing on Lincoln's views on slavery, still the most important subject for study in the Lincoln field. It is safe to predict that it will be, despite its brevity, an oft-quoted and much-interpreted document.



A grand Slave hunt, or Trial of speed for the Presidency, between the celebrated wags Black Dan, Lewis Cass, and Haynau.

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FIGURE 3. The Compromise of 1850 made and destroyed many historical reputations and posed great difficulties for most antislavery Whigs. In this cartoon Daniel Webster is depicted as a slave-catcher, chasing slave women and children with a copy of the Fugitive Slave Law in his hand. The Compromise of 1850 included a tougher Fugitive Slave Law, which antislavery Whigs found hard to swallow. Those who had supported the Wilmot Proviso a mere year or two earlier were likewise embarrassed by having to accept the possibility of slavery in some of the territory acquired from Mexico.

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by Mary Jane Hubler

Selections approved by a Bibliography Committee consisting of the following members: Dr. Kenneth A. Bernard, Belmont Arms, 51 Belmont St., Apt. C-2, South Easton, Mass.; Arnold Gates, 289 New Hyde Park Rd., Garden City, N.Y.; Carl Haverlin, 8619 Louise Avenue, Northridge, California; James T. Hickey, Illinois State Historical Library, Old State Capitol, Springfield, Illinois; E.B. (Pete) Long, 607 S. 15th St., Laramie, Wyoming; Ralph G. Newman, 175 E. Delaware Place, 5112, Chicago, Illinois; Hon. Fred Schwengel, 200 Maryland Avenue, N.E., Washington, D.C.; Dr. Wayne C. Temple, 1121 S. 4th Street Court, Springfield, Illinois. New items available for consideration may be sent to the above persons, or the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum.

1976

**(EAKINS PRESS FOUNDATION) 1976-28**

An Album Of Lincoln Photographs And Words/(Portrait of Lincoln facing left)/(Cover title)/(Copyright 1976 by the Eakins Press Foundation.)

Folder, flexible boards, 5 7/8" x 4 1/4", single sheet folded seven times, (15) pp., illus., price, \$1.95.

**WILEY, BELL I. 1976-29**

Abraham Lincoln: A Southerner's Estimate After 110 Years/Bell I. Wiley/The Andrew W. Mellon Professor/in the Humanities, Tulane University/Fall, 1975/The/Graduate School/Tulane University/New Orleans, La., 70118/[Copyright 1976 by Tulane University. All rights reserved.]

Pamphlet, flexible boards, 9" x 5 7/8", 29 (1) pp. Autographed copy by author.

1977

**BALSIGER, DAVID AND CHARLES E.****SELLIER, JR. 1977-6**

The Lincoln Conspiracy/by/David Balsiger/and/Charles E. Sellier, Jr./Device/Schick Sunn Classic Books/Los Angeles, California/©1977 Schick Sunn Classic Productions, Inc./All Rights Reserved/Printed in the United States of America/Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 77-73521/International Standard Book Number: 0-917214-03-X/

Book, paper, 7" x 4 1/8", 320 pp., illus., price, \$2.25.

**BASLER, ROY P. 1977-7**

Roy P. Basler/President Lincoln Helps His Old Friends/(Caption title)/[Published by the Abraham Lincoln Association, Springfield, Illinois.]

Pamphlet, flexible boards, 8 15/16" x 6 3/16", fr., fd., 16 pp.

**DYBA, THOMAS J. 1977-8**

The Story of the Only Home/Abraham Lincoln/Ever Owned/(Picture of Springfield Home)/Eighth and Jackson Streets/Springfield, Illinois/1844-1861/(Cover title)/[Copyright 1977 by Thomas J. Dyba. Published by Illinois Benedictine College, Lisle, Illinois. First edition.]

Pamphlet, flexible boards, 8 3/8" x 5 1/2", (16) pp. including illustrated clear transparent pages preceding and following the text, illus.

**GOLD, MARVIN (1977)-9**

John Frank of St. Charles/(Picture of John Frank at work)/Robert Hostkoetter/(Cover title)/

Folder, paper, 11" x 8 1/2", (4) pp., single sheet folded once, illus. Autographed copy by Lincoln sculptor, John Frank.

**IMAI, MASAO 1977-10**

(Title: Lincoln)/[Copyright 1976 by Masao Imai. Published by Bunken Publishing Company on April 1, 1977. Entire contents of book printed in Japanese language.]

Book, cloth, 8 3/4" x 6 1/4", 158(2) pp., illus., front and back covers illustrated with scenes and caricatures  
Juvenile literature.

**LINCOLN MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY 1977-11**

Lincoln Memorial University Press/(Device)/Summer 1977/Vol. 79, No. 2/Lincoln Herald/A Magazine devoted to historical/research in the field of Lincolniana and/the Civil War, and to the promotion/of Lincoln Ideals in American/Education./[Harrogate, Tenn.]

Pamphlet, flexible boards, 10 1/8" x 7 1/8", 45-92 pp., illus., price per single issue, \$2.50.

**LINCOLN MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY 1977-12**

Lincoln Memorial University Press/(Device)/Fall, 1977/Vol. 79, No. 3/Lincoln Herald/A Magazine devoted to historical/research in the field of Lincolniana and/the Civil War, and to the promotion/of Lincoln Ideals in American/Education./[Harrogate, Tenn.]

Pamphlet, flexible boards, 10 1/8" x 7 1/8", 93-140 pp., illus., price per single issue, \$2.50.

**MCGINNIS, RALPH Y. 1977-13**

Quotations/from/Abraham Lincoln/Edited by/Ralph Y. McGinnis/Nelson-Hall/Chicago/[Copyright 1977 by Ralph McGinnis. All rights reserved.]

Book, cloth, 10 1/4" x 8 1/4", fr., x pp., 134 pp., consecutive Brady portrait of Lincoln on front and back covers and inside front and back covers, illus., price, \$12.95.

**RISVOLD, FLOYD E. AND JOHN M. RUSSELL 1977-14**

Bulletin Of 33rd Annual Meeting/of/The Lincoln Fellowship of Wisconsin/held at Menomonie, Wisconsin/April 24, 1976/(Portrait of Lincoln)/Featuring remarks by/Floyd E. Risvold, Editor/of/Louis Weichmann's/A True History Of The Assassination Of/Abraham Lincoln And The Conspiracy Of 1865/and/Comments by Mr. John M. Russell concerning his play,/Black Friday, a presentation of which the Fellowship/attended in the Mabel Tainter Building at Menomonie,/Wisconsin./Historical Bulletin No. 32/1977/(Cover title)/

Pamphlet, flexible boards, 10" x 7 1/2", 16 pp., printing on inside back cover, illus., price, \$1.25. Send to Mrs. Carl Wilhelm, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 816 State Street, Madison, Wisconsin 53706.

**TEJIMA, YUSUKE 1977-15**

(Title: Lincoln)/[Copyright 1977. Published by Shufunotomo Co., Ltd. on December 1977. Entire contents of book printed in Japanese language.]

Book, hard boards, 8 1/2" x 6", 165 (3) pp., colored illustrations at front of book, printed illustrations in contents of book, front and back covers illustrated. Juvenile literature.

**TRUMP, FRED 1977-16**

Lincoln's/Little/Girl/By Fred Trump/(Scene of cabin)/Heritage Books/Salina, Kansas/[Copyright 1977 by Heritage Books. All rights reserved.]

Book, cloth, 8 3/4" x 5 1/2", 123 (5) pp., illus. Autographed copy by author.

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