



Lincoln Lore

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JAMES SPEED, A PERSONALITY INDEED

James Speed, Lincoln's second Attorney General and the brother of his good friend Joshua, is one of the more shadowy figures in Lincoln's official family. Historians often write his appointment to the cabinet off as cronyism, his tenure in office was brief, and no biographer has ever taken up Speed's cause. His grandson, also named James Speed, did publish a volume entitled *James Speed: A Personality* (Louisville: Press of John P. Morton, 1914), which stitched together excerpts from his grandfather's correspondence, but it is adequate only to whet the appetite. Speed was an independent and intelligent man, more astute politically and closer to Lincoln's Republican principles than his brother Joshua. Joshua was a gentleman farmer and a real estate broker; James was a lawyer and a politician, though for most of his life a politician without a constituency.

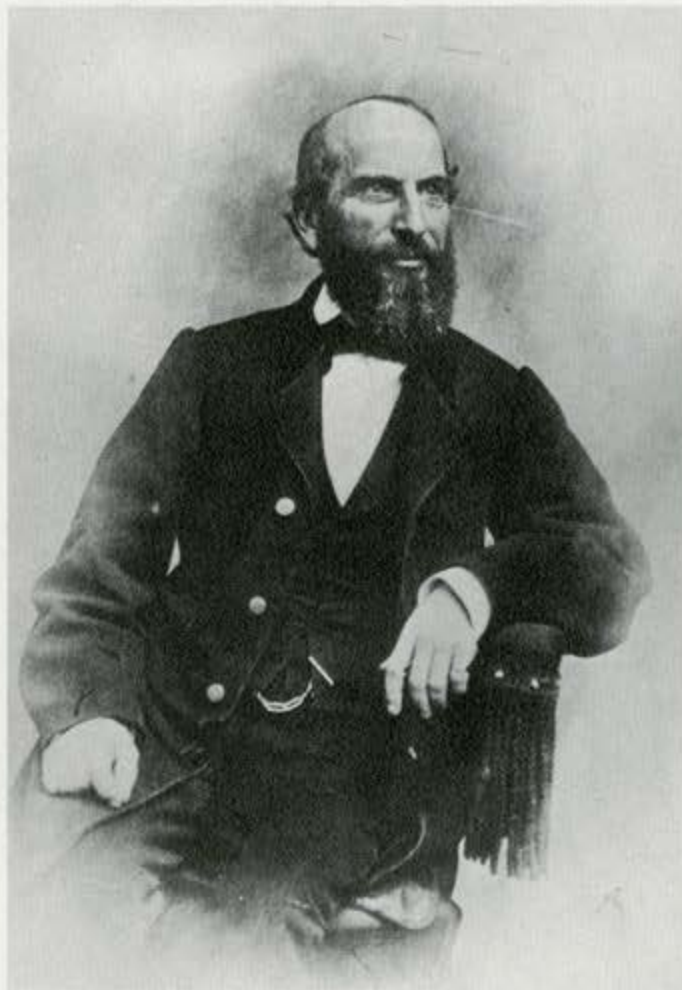
As early as 1859, when James Speed, like most Southerners, had been driven into the Democratic party for want of any other place to go, he was independent and shrewd enough to realize that Abraham Lincoln posed no real threat to Southern constitutional rights. Lincoln had engaged in a wrangle with Joshua over Republican policies and "Bleeding Kansas" in 1855, but James could write Lincoln four years later and say, "that tho a democrat, I would not have sorrowed at your election to the U.S. Senate — I feel that our rights and institutions would not have been in jeopardy in your hands." By contrast, Joshua, even when he congratulated Lincoln on his nomination for the Presidency in 1860, reminded him that he was "a warm personal friend" but "a political opponent."

James Speed had served one term in the Kentucky Legislature over a decade before the Civil War, but he became so identified with opposition to slavery that he never had a Kentucky constituency again until the war. When he wrote Lincoln in 1859, it was to send him a pamphlet by Louisville's Judge S.S. Nicholas which embodied a bizarre proposal to eliminate the role of political parties in selecting the President. The plan would have

given each state one Presidential elector per million of population. These electors, once chosen, would be divided into six classes and each class would nominate a person. Of these six, two names would be drawn by lot, and the electors would choose which of the two would be President. The other would be Vice-President.

When war broke out, James and Joshua became leaders of pro-Union sentiment and activity in Kentucky. James gained election to the Kentucky Senate. Though he mildly protested General John C. Frémont's emancipation proclamation in Missouri in 1861, James Speed soon introduced a measure in the Kentucky Legislature for confiscation of the estates of rebels. The bill was doomed in part because James introduced it. "I am regarded as ultra," he told Lincoln, "almost an abolitionist, and of course any thing from me on the subject of slavery is regarded with suspicion." When his bill did not provide for the state to sell confiscated slaves with the rest of confiscated property, legislators asked why. The "state never should sell a human being by my vote," Speed explained. This remark produced "much excitement." "This I have told you," Speed wrote Lincoln, "that you may form some idea of how sensitive our people are upon this subject." Then, characteristically, Speed drew back, telling Lincoln, "You must not infer from what I have said that the pro-slavery feeling in this state is all controlling." There was "a growing hatred of the southern traitors in Kentucky," and this hatred "must soon embrace the institutions" of the Southern traitors.

Joshua Speed was so agitated by Frémont's proclamation that he was "unable to eat or sleep." Though he "and a few others" would be left alone to fight for the Union, the proclamation would essentially "crush out every vestige of a union party in the state." He reminded Lincoln that all "who live in Slave states," whether Unionist or not in sentiment, "have great fear of insurrection." To allow "negroes to be emancipated & remain among us" would have the same ef-



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FIGURE 1. James Speed.

fect, he warned, as attacking the freedom of worship or the right to teach children to read in the North. James Speed's protest against the proclamation was much less hysterical and his feelings about slavery more philosophical than Joshua's. By December of 1861, when he wrote Lincoln about his confiscation bill in the Kentucky Senate, James knew that the war was the beginning of the end of slavery. The "great laws of economy" would dictate its abolition by the masters themselves. "The emancipation feeling in Ky," he told Lincoln, "rises & falls with the rise & fall in the price of slaves." The war would "affect, if not destroy their value."

Though not a popular or especially successful politician, James Speed had a good deal of political savvy. Commenting on Simon Cameron's controversial proposal to arm the slaves as soldiers for the Union, Speed noted that Cameron "exhibited the common weakness of talking in advance of action." "Many who condemn what he said," Speed told Lincoln, "would approve the conduct he invites when the case [?] arises for it."

When Lincoln proposed bold antislavery action of his own, Speed was hesitant to recognize the wisdom of his own political knowledge. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation would be a bold stroke, and it would come without elaborate previous discussion. Lincoln apparently read his proposed proclamation to James in July of 1862, at about the same time that his cabinet (and no one else) learned of it. Speed "pondered over the proclamation," but he decided "that it will do no good; most probably much harm." Still trusting the slow workings of economic laws, the Kentuckian argued that the "negro can not be emancipated by proclamation." If the Negro were no party to his own liberation, "he would sink into slavery again" as soon as the external liberating force were removed. In a statement strangely at odds with Joshua's fear of servile insurrection, James said, "If he has not the spirit to strike for freedom, he has not the pride of character to make him keep it when given to him." A sweeping proclamation "would but delude the poor negro, and shock most violently the prejudices of many in the north & nearly all in the south."

Once again, however, James Speed showed his detached view of Southern racial mores. He admitted to Lincoln that "the loyal men of Ky will not be moved by any thing that may be done with the negro." Loyalty would thus survive such a proclamation. He concluded with a remark which, though not encouraging Lincoln to issue the proclamation, seemed almost an invitation to servile insurrection: "If the negro is to be free he must strike for it himself." Once Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Speed quickly adjusted to it and noted the adjustment of other Kentuckians. "The negro-phobia is nothing like as bad as it was at first," he told Joshua on January 19, 1863. Time was "working wonders."

James Speed's appointment to Lincoln's cabinet late in 1864 was probably more than cronyism on Lincoln's part. Lincoln had discussed slavery with the Kentuckian on several occasions. He knew James Speed's flexibility, philosophical detachment, and independence of judgment. He probably even recognized evidence of greater statesmanship in James than in his old friend Joshua. After Lincoln's death, James quickly became identified with radical Republicanism, and most historians have shown surprise at this turn in the political feelings of a Kentuckian. Lincoln might not have been surprised himself. He knew of James Speed's independence and of his unemotional view of the South's peculiar institution. Even before Lincoln's assassination, James Speed knew very well what would be the sentiments that would govern reconstruction of the South. He told his mother on March 28, 1865, that "many difficulties remain to be settled, and unless the people of the South act wisely and act promptly, great suffering is still in store for them. If they will frankly and fully acknowledge the freedom of the black man and give to him the chance for improvement and elevation, their burden will be greatly lessened." When Abraham Lincoln selected him for his cabinet, he must have known that James Speed was a personality indeed.

LINCOLN AUTOGRAPHED DEBATES: ABRAHAM JONAS COPY

This, the fifth article in a series on presentation copies of the *Political Debates Between Hon. Abraham Lincoln and Hon. Stephen A. Douglas in the Celebrated Campaign of 1858*, in

Illinois, focuses on one of the best-known copies, the one given to Abraham Jonas. The Illinois State Historical Library in Springfield has owned the book, their only presentation copy of the *Debates*, for many years. Frederick Wells of Minneapolis, the grandson of Jonas, gave the book to that library.

That Lincoln gave Abraham Jonas a copy of his book is a great symbol of the wide range of Lincoln's associations. Jonas was an English Jew. After thirteen years' residence in Kentucky, he moved to Quincy, Illinois, in 1838; there he practiced law and continued his activities as a Mason and a Whig. Doubtless party activities and a mutual friendship with Orville Hickman Browning brought Lincoln and Jonas together at an earlier date, but the first documentary proof of their association is Jonas's letter to Lincoln inviting him to speak in Quincy. Stephen Douglas was coming to help the local candidate in what Jonas figured would be "the warmest contest for Congress that we have ever had in the district." The "Douglasites," Jonas said, "would as soon see old Nick here as yourself." Jonas's first loyalties were to Browning and another local Whig, but he supported Lincoln for the Senate in 1855. When Jonas again requested of Lincoln "one of your *sledge hammer speeches*" in 1858, Lincoln obliged, speaking in Augusta, Illinois, just two days before the famous Freeport debate with Douglas.

Jonas's considerable political abilities (he served as a state representative in both Kentucky and Illinois) were a function of his own speaking abilities. He does not appear to be a great party tactician in his correspondence with Lincoln. In fact, in 1860 he nearly lured Lincoln, unwittingly, into a political trap. On July 20, 1860, he told Lincoln that a Quincy Democratic leader was obtaining affidavits from Irishmen "that they saw you in Quincy come out of a Know Nothing Lodge." Lincoln replied, explaining that he had never been in such a lodge. Lincoln suggested relying on affidavits from local men of prominence to disprove the charge and added "a word of caution": "Our adversaries think they can gain a point, if they could force me to openly deny this charge, by which some degree of offence would be given to the Americans [i.e., Know Nothings]. For this reason, it must not publicly appear that I am paying any attention to the charge."

An interesting aspect of the same exchange of letters is the handling of the delicate question of ethnic prejudice in them. Jonas's letter to Lincoln stated, "I do not know if there is truth in the matter, neither do I care, but thought it best you should know about it." An Englishman by birth and a Jew, Jonas made it clear that his support of Lincoln did not hinge on knowledge that the Railsplitter had never participated in the nativist Know-Nothing movement. Lincoln's reply made it equally clear that he had no qualms about associating with former nativists: "I suppose as good, or even better, men than I may have been in American, or Know-Nothing lodges; but in point of fact, I never was in one, at Quincy, or elsewhere."

When Lincoln was President-elect, Jonas wrote him one of those alarming letters about the possibility of assassination. Jonas had "a very large family connection in the South," including six children in New Orleans. From one of his Southern relations, he had learned of a "perfect organization" of "desperate characters" to prevent Lincoln's inauguration, even "by using violence on the person of Lincoln." He recommended that free-state governors and Lincoln's friends take precautions because "no protection can be expected from the damned old traitor at the head of the Government [James Buchanan] or his subordinates." If Lincoln replied to this letter, it has not been found.

Jonas's Southern connections made his family one of those divided by the Civil War. Four of his sons fought for the Confederacy. When he was on his deathbed in 1864, Browning influenced Lincoln to allow one of Jonas's sons, then a prisoner in Union hands, to be released temporarily to pay a last visit to his father. Lincoln had been solicitous of Jonas's desires all along, appointing him — again because of a suggestion from Browning — postmaster in Quincy. When Jonas died, Lincoln made his widow postmistress there.

The Abraham Jonas copy of the *Debates* is an important relic of this interesting friendship. Lincoln students owe Jonas a debt for another reason. When Lincoln replied to Jonas's letter requesting a copy of the book, he stated that the publisher had not yet printed them but that Jonas would receive one of the one hundred copies the publisher promised Lincoln personally. This letter is our way of knowing that Lincoln had a hundred copies to give away.

Editor's Note: The Jonas letters to Lincoln are in the

Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress. I have quoted from the following: Jonas to Lincoln, September 16, 1854; July 30, 1858; July 20, 1860; and December 30, 1860.

Further information on Jonas is available in Bertram W. Korn, *American Jewry and the Civil War* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1951).

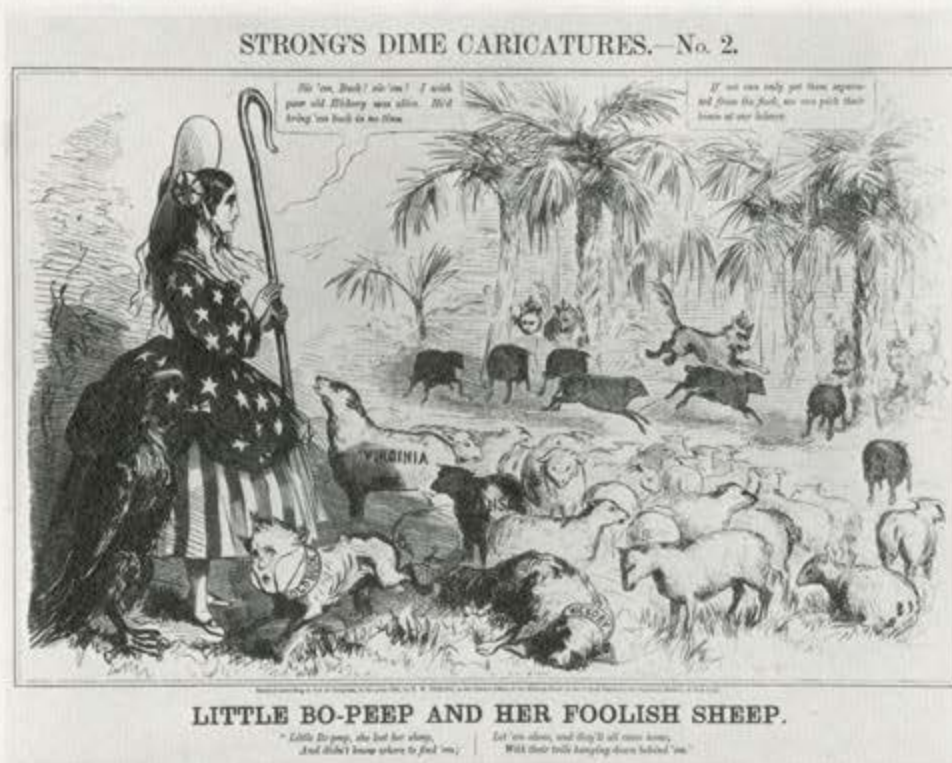
RECENT ACQUISITIONS: "STRONG'S DIME CARICATURES"

FIGURES 2-5 (below). The Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum recently purchased a series of four poster cartoons published by Thomas W. Strong of New York in 1861. Strong was a prolific producer of prints, noted especially for being the first employer of Louis Maurer, the genius behind the early political cartoons of Currier &

Ives. Harry T. Peters in *America on Stone* noted a strain of originality in the work of Strong's firm, and the series of four "Dime Caricatures" pictured here certainly reveal a taste for good workmanship and for variety in political cartooning. The caricatures must have been printed about March, 1861. All deal with the secession crisis. The Lincoln cartoon has been pictured in Rufus Rockwell Wilson's *Lincoln in Caricature*, but Wilson did not note that the cartoon was part of a series or publish the others in the series.



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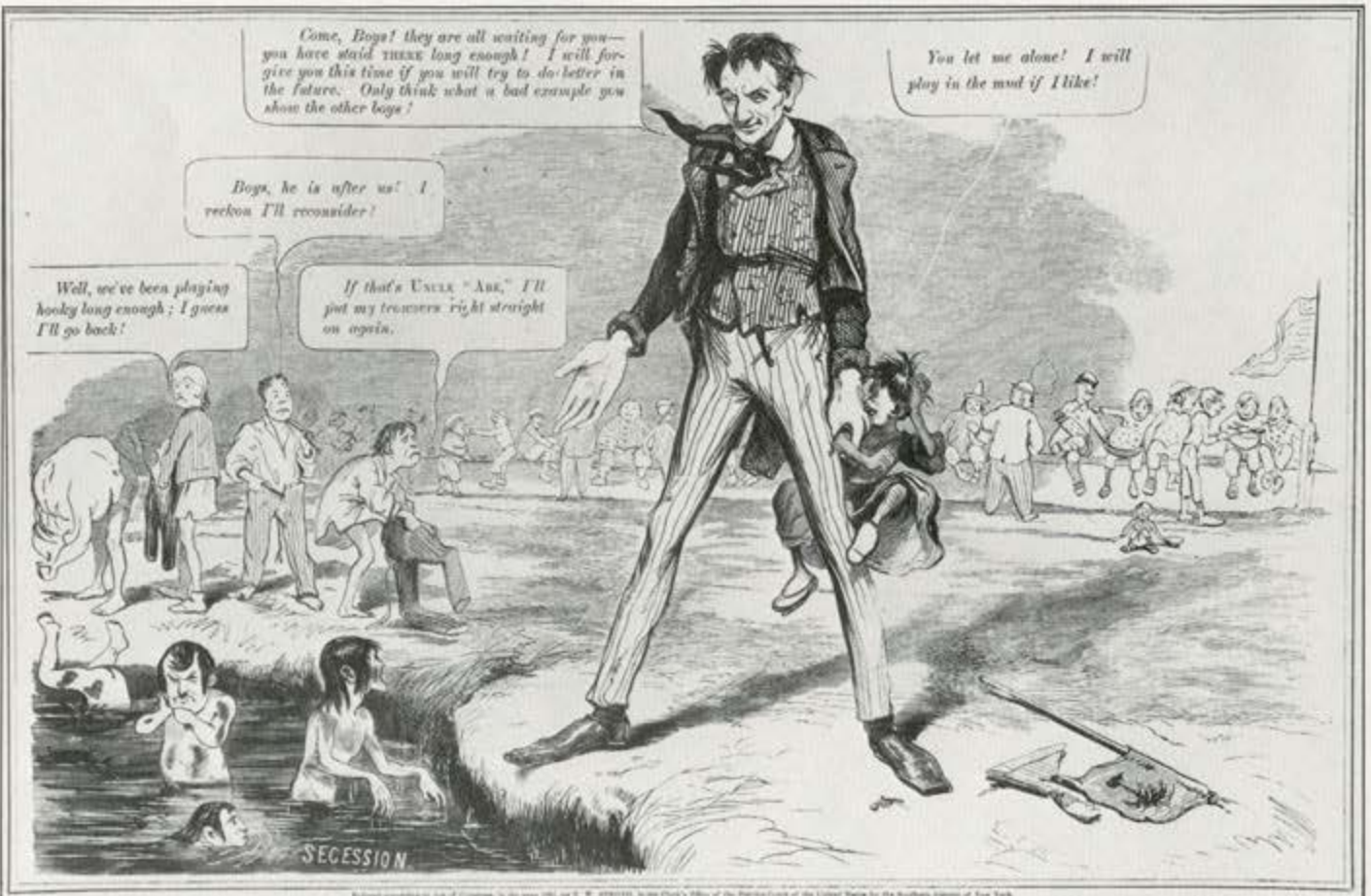


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Based according to Act of Congress, in the year 1862, by E. W. BROWN, in the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the United States for the Southern District of New York.

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