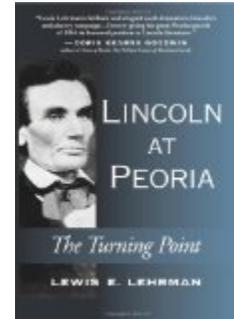


Lewis E. Lehrman. *Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point*. Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2008. xix + 412 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8117-0361-1.

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Of Turning Points and Milestones

As one who struggles to be pithy, I can only admire Lewis E. Lehrman's knack for summing up his entire 412-page book, *Lincoln at Peoria*, in the title of chapter 7: "Peoria Characterizes the Lincoln Presidency." While Lehrman, along with Richard Gilder, has long been influential in the U.S. history field, *Lincoln at Peoria* represents his first book. Part exhaustive survey of Abraham Lincoln scholarship, part close reading of an underappreciated Lincoln speech, part lively recreation of Illinois's antebellum political climate, and part brief for reinstating Lincoln as Great Emancipator, *Lincoln at Peoria* argues that the principles and skills that would equip Lincoln to end slavery in the United States came together in the fall of 1854, when he delivered a speech so powerful that it set the country on the road to emancipation and unification. In clear, businesslike prose, Lehrman persuasively establishes that the main ideas that would animate Lincoln from 1854 to his inauguration as president were in place by the time he delivered a three-hour speech against the Kansas-Nebraska Act at Peoria, Illinois, on October 16, 1854. Yet the book raises at least two important questions: First, did the Lincoln who came intellectually of age at Peoria actually *cause* all of the events that followed? Second, if the Lincoln who took office in March 1861 was intellectually in place by October 1854, is it certain that the Lincoln of 1862-65 was, or did the Civil War occasion further changes in Lincoln's thinking?

The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in May 1854 rekindled Lincoln's smoldering political ambitions and career. Since 1820, the Missouri Compromise had

barred slavery from territories (other than Missouri itself) carved out of the Louisiana Purchase and located above the 36°30' line of latitude. Sponsored by Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas, the Kansas-Nebraska Act organized territories above the 36°30' line according to the principle of popular sovereignty, which would allow slavery to spread if territorial voters opted for it. As Douglas and his supporters saw it, the Kansas-Nebraska Act would speed construction of a railroad to the Pacific by removing the slavery proscription in territories whose organization was necessary for railroad construction, but which southern members of Congress would not allow to be organized because of the slavery ban. As opponents of the bill (including Lincoln) saw it, the chief effect of the Kansas-Nebraska Act was to throw out the Missouri Compromise and open thousands of square miles to slavery. One lackluster congressional term and some electoral disappointments in Illinois had seemed to close the lid on Lincoln's political ambitions prior to the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, but, as Lehrman writes, "the Kansas-Nebraska Act of May 1854 had opened up the possibility that slavery could be extended" and, in so doing, "drew Lincoln from private life into the incendiary struggle over the future of slavery in America" (p. xix). That summer, Lincoln haunted the library at the Illinois State Capitol to prepare a thorough refutation of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and popular sovereignty. By early autumn, he was ready to launch what Lehrman perceptively describes as the "less famous [than 1858] Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1854" about the future of slavery (p. xix).

The fall election season of 1854 provided the context in which Lincoln's "Peoria Speech" came to be. Douglas was not up for reelection, but the term of Illinois's other senator, Democrat James Shields, was expiring, and the Illinois legislature chosen by the fall 1854 elections would select a new senator. Douglas stumped the state for Democratic candidates and defended himself against crowds hostile to the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Lincoln also took to the campaign circuit, stumping for the reelection of Illinois Congressman Richard Yates and even running for state legislature himself, but primarily disputing the Kansas-Nebraska Act. On August 26, Lincoln tried out his ideas on a smallish crowd at Winchester, Illinois; encouraged by the reception, he took his show on the road throughout central Illinois in September and October. On September 9, he debated the Kansas-Nebraska Act with a prominent Douglas Democrat, and two days later published an unsigned anti-Nebraska editorial in the *Illinois State Journal*. The following day, September 12, he delivered a ringing speech at Bloomington, Illinois, but nobody thought to write it down. Lincoln was now ready to battle Douglas himself, and two weeks later, he and Douglas both delivered speeches at Bloomington. Once again, nobody recorded Lincoln's remarks. As the state fair opened (late because of rain) in Springfield in early October, Douglas mesmerized the soggy crowd with a three-hour speech at the State Capitol on October 3. Lincoln countered the next day, but still there was no written record. On October 16, Douglas and Lincoln delivered competing speeches in Peoria, and this time, Lincoln took no chances. He personally provided the *Illinois State Journal* with a carefully edited text of his remarks, which is how the "Peoria speech" entered the historical record and got its name, which is easier to remember than the "Bloomington, Bloomington, Springfield, and Peoria speech." After Peoria, Lincoln delivered substantively the same speech at Urbana, Chicago, and Quincy. On November 7, Lincoln won election to the state legislature, but so did a comfortable majority of candidates opposed to the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, so he declined the office in order to vie for the Senate seat that would be filled by the state legislature in early 1855. He lost, but the campaign season and the sentiments and ideas recorded in the Peoria speech had launched new trajectories for his, and the nation's, political futures.

Lehrman narrates these events with verve, doing an especially nice job of bringing the Lincoln-Douglas relationship to life, and of tracing Lincoln's road from Peoria through Illinois politics. In February 1856, Lincoln was the only non-editor of a newspaper to make it through a

snowstorm to a meeting in Decatur during which attendees drafted moderate antislavery resolutions that would form the foundation of Illinois's Republican Party. In May, delegates of the new party convened in Bloomington, where Lincoln closed the proceedings with a spicier version of the Peoria speech to such good effect that his name entered into consideration for the vice presidency at the Republican national convention the following month. When Democrat James Buchanan won the presidency in 1856, Lincoln consoled Chicago Republicans with his own version of "yes, we can" in a speech that urged, "let us inaugurate the good old 'central ideas' of the Republic. We *can* do it. The human heart is with us—God is with us. We shall again be able ... to renew the broader, better declaration ... that 'all men are created equal'" (p. 184). Lincoln then began to campaign outside of Illinois. When Lehrman's analysis crosses state lines its grasp on the bigger picture loosens, but the journey to that point is a rich one.

The crux of *Lincoln at Peoria* is Lehrman's exegesis of the content and impact of the Peoria speech. The seventeen-thousand-word speech (reprinted in the appendix) is carefully analyzed in chapters 4 through 7 of the book, which draw on Lincoln's writings, contemporary newspapers, and secondary sources. That several themes of Lincoln's thought had congealed by Peoria is made clear. Lehrman shows that the speech refutes the Kansas-Nebraska Act, slavery expansion, and Douglas's indifference toward slavery by portraying them as antithetical to the founding principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence, and as fundamentally immoral. The Peoria speech further links the salvation of those principles with the preservation of the Union. In so doing, the Peoria speech laid out the case that Lincoln would consistently make all the way through his first inaugural address. In fact, Lehrman argues that Peoria's "spirit and even exact phrases can be found at the center of almost every subsequent major speech, public letter and state paper" that Lincoln delivered (p. xviii). The book compellingly illustrates echoes of Peoria in later, more famous works, such as the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, the "House Divided" speech of 1858, and the Cooper Union Address of 1860. Lehrman also shows that specific characteristics, such as Lincoln's distinctive speaking style, his habit of editing speeches for newspaper publication, his regard for public opinion, and his recognition of the global ramifications of U.S. politics, were also in place by the October 1854 Peoria speech. In sum, Lehrman makes a compelling case that "President-elect Lincoln would go to Washington, but he would take

with him the antislavery principles first defined at Peoria” (p. 215).

Yet Lehrman seeks to show not simply that the Peoria speech foreshadows later events, but rather, that it helped cause them, and here the book opens the door for discussion. Tantalizing links between Peoria and subsequent events do appear; for example, Lehrman retells a delightful anecdote in which a skeptical Mary Livermore’s doubts about Lincoln’s suitability for the 1860 presidential nomination were quieted when a reporter handed her a copy of the Peoria speech. But it is not clear that the Peoria speech or its author explain everything all by themselves. Lincoln’s ideas mattered, but there were particular reasons why they got the responses that they increasingly did as the 1850s progressed, and the bright spotlight trained solely on Lincoln throughout the book relegates many of the events and ideas necessary to his rise so deeply into the shadows that it is not clear how Lincoln got onto that stage in the first place. In particular, the book gives short shrift to growing northern fears of a slave power conspiracy, going so far as to write, “Lincoln generally dismissed the intimidating threats of the slave power” (p. 214). On the contrary, had Lincoln and other Republicans not taken very seriously the possibility that elite slaveholders would and could spread slavery throughout the United States despite their small numbers, there is no way a Republican Party committed to stemming the spread of slavery could have gelled so fast. Further, the book’s attention to violence in Kansas is too scant to adequately account for the party’s growth. Lehrman notes John Brown’s massacre of proslavery settlers at Pottawatomie, but does not link it to the sack of the abolitionist town of Lawrence that prompted Brown’s murders, and that, by occurring within hours of South Carolina Congressman Preston Brooks’s caning of Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, made Republican claims of a slave power conspiracy credible and electrifying. No credible Republican Party would have meant no President Lincoln, no matter how splendid a speech he delivered at Peoria in 1854. In short, the book opens the door to fruitful discussions about the interplay between individual leaders and events.

In addition, the book opens opportunities for discussion of the Civil War’s impact on Lincoln’s thinking with its claim that “Lincoln’s essential antislavery policy can be traced from the Peoria court house in 1854 to Ford’s Theatre in 1865” (p. 140). Lehrman plainly shows that what Lincoln in 1864 called his “primary abstract judgment on the moral question of slavery” was in place by 1854, but questions remain about whether that “primary

abstract judgment” and Lincoln’s later willingness to use federal power to end slavery immediately without compensation or colonization are truly the same thing.[1] At Peoria, Lincoln expressed willingness to admit “Utah and New Mexico, even should they ask to come in as slave States,” which contrasts with his instructions to Republicans in December 1860 to “entertain no proposition for a compromise in regard to the *extension* of slavery” anywhere, which itself contrasts with the categorical abolition of slavery effected by the Thirteenth Amendment (pp. 303, 220). Further, at Peoria, Lincoln insisted that slavery was a strictly local, not national, institution, whereas by 1862, Lincoln insisted that slavery “is a part of our national life” and must be eradicated nationally, a point reiterated in the second inaugural address (p. 243). The logical question is what accounts for these changes, and the logical answer seems to be the progress of the war. Insisting on October 1854 as the date at which Lincoln emerged fully formed obscures important questions about precisely *how* the war altered Lincoln’s thinking. Certainly, one could argue that disliking slavery is disliking slavery, whether expressed by limiting slavery’s extension in the hopes that non-extension might end slavery someday, or by championing a Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution immediately abolishing slavery. But to four million people who were slaves in 1860, the difference between a “primary abstract judgment” and immediate emancipation was more than just semantics. Moreover, the important question of how the Civil War made it possible for Lincoln to get from abstract judgment to immediate emancipation goes away if we insist on seeing no difference between Lincoln’s ideas in 1854 and 1865, for in that interpretation, the war did not change anything for Lincoln, it simply provided him with a useful tool.

In sum, *Lincoln at Peoria* adroitly establishes that Lincoln’s response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 was formative for both Lincoln and the United States. Whether Lincoln’s Peoria speech is best understood as one of several important milestones or as *the* turning point remains a question that will continue to animate debate. But if the book cannot fairly be said to offer the last word, it surely can be praised for stimulating ongoing conversation, a worthy accomplishment for any book.

Note

[1]. Abraham Lincoln to Albert G. Hodges, April 4, 1864, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 7 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 281-282.

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