

Abraham Lincoln and Jacksonian Democracy

by Sean Wilentz



“Stump Speaking,” hand-colored engraving by George C. Bingham, 1856.

Abraham Lincoln was, for most of his political career, a highly partisan Whig. As long as the Whig Party existed, he never supported the candidate of another party. Until the late 1850s, his chief political heroes were Whigs, above all Henry Clay, whom he said he “loved and revered as a teacher and leader.” Even after the Whigs disintegrated, Lincoln bragged that he “had stood by the party as long as it had a being.”[1]

Yet we care about Lincoln not because he was a Whig but because he became a Republican—

which marks him as a particular kind of Whig. Unlike the more conservative of the Whigs, he was affected by democratic ideas and practices that shaped the mainstream of both of the major parties of the 1830s and 1840s. And with his conversion to the Republicans, he declared himself an inveterate foe of the Slave Power, at odds with the minority of northern Whigs and the majority of southern Whigs who chose a very different political course in the 1850s.[2]

After 1854, Lincoln also mingled, as he had not previously, with dissident, anti-slavery, former Jacksonian Democrats. In this milieu, where fragments of old party ideologies recombined to form a new Republican whole, Lincoln found himself attracted, as never before, to Thomas Jefferson’s egalitarian pronouncements—but also, curiously, to some of the words, ideas, and actions of Andrew Jackson.

II.

Having come of age in the 1820s, Lincoln, a paragon of the self-made man, upheld certain democratic precepts that distinguished his generation from that of the Founders, and that Whigs of his more liberal persuasion shared with the Jacksonians. One historian has described these precepts as a cultural as well as political fact—a “fraternal democracy,” rooted in the male worlds of government and the law, which emphasized comradeship,

equality, and expressiveness, including expressiveness on the political stump. “Lincoln seemed to put himself at once on an equality with everybody,” one of his law partners said.[3]

Lincoln linked his democratic sensibilities directly to matters of political organization and policy. Mistrust of professional political organization, which persisted among the Whigs into the 1850s, made little sense to Lincoln in the face of the changed democratic realities of the 1830s and 1840s. Lincoln repudiated the nativism and anti-Catholicism that gripped the Whig Party far more than it did the Democrats. In 1855, he famously denounced the Know-Nothings, telling Joshua Speed that, should the nation as a whole ever descend to their level, he “should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty—to Russia, for example, where despotism can be taken pure and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.”[4]

Lincoln recognized the depth of his differences with conservative pro-slavery Whigs. He acidulously denounced one of these conservative ex-Whigs, Rufus Choate, when Choate described the Declaration of Independence’s opening lines as mere “glittering generalities”—remarks, Lincoln claimed, aimed at replacing free government with the principles of “classification, caste, and legitimacy,” favored by “crowned heads, plotting against the people.”[5]

Indeed, Lincoln sensed that a substantial number of ex-Jacksonians were friendlier to his anti-slavery candidacy for the US Senate against Stephen A. Douglas in 1858 than some of his former fellow Whigs were. “As a general rule,” he wrote to his physician and close friend Anson G. Henry, “much of the plain old democracy is with us, while nearly all of the old exclusive silk-stocking whiggery is against us.” Lincoln did not mean that most of the old Whigs opposed the Republicans, just “nearly all of the nice exclusive sort.” The “exclusive” Whig conservatives’ position, Lincoln observed, made perfect sense: “There has been nothing in politics since the Revolution so congenial to their nature, as the present position of the [slaveholder-dominated] great democratic party.”[6]

III.

After the enactment of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill and the repeal of the Missouri Compromise in 1854, Whig principles were no longer sufficient to address the burning issues surrounding slavery and slavery’s expansion. Lincoln and his fellow anti-slavery Whigs had to find fresh political bearings. Although, for a time, he may have hoped, like other liberal Whigs, that the northern remnants of the Whig Party could become the vehicle for national anti-slavery politics, those hopes were dashed amid the political firestorm of 1854. Only the newly emerging fusion of political abolitionists, free soilers, anti-slavery

Whigs, and defecting, so-called Independent Democrats—“every true democrat,” according to one of their number, “that was too intelligent to be cheated by a name”—contained the numbers as well as the principles required to beat back the Southern-dominated Democratic Party and its Northern doughface allies.[7]

Once he joined the Republicans, Lincoln began speaking and writing about politics and natural rights in new ways. Before 1854, for example, he hardly ever referred, in public or private, to the political wisdom of Thomas Jefferson, widely regarded as a forerunner of the Jacksonian Democratic Party. Thereafter, though, Lincoln, like many other Republicans, continually cited Jefferson on equality and the territorial questions, so much so that at one point, near decade’s end, Jefferson seemed to have joined Clay as Lincoln’s beau ideal of an American statesman. (“All honor to Jefferson,” he wrote in 1859, the figure who had pronounced “the definitions and axioms of free society” and whose Declaration of Independence would forever stand as “a rebuke and a stumbling block to . . . re-appearing tyranny and oppression.”) Lincoln, also like other Republicans, equated his new party with Jefferson’s original Democratic Republicans, and likened the slaveholder-dominated “so-called democracy of today” with the Federalist Party of John Adams. And by the late 1850s, Lincoln was forthright about how his belief in democracy underpinned his anti-slavery views. “As I would not be a *slave*, so I would not be a *master*,” he wrote. “This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy.”[8]

IV.

Lincoln’s sudden turn to Jefferson and Jeffersonian democratic rhetoric was striking, and marked off one phase of his political career from another. More startling were Lincoln’s approving remarks about some of the ideas and actions of Andrew Jackson. The crises over the Kansas-Nebraska Act and Bleeding Kansas shifted Lincoln’s perspective on Jackson’s presidency. Instead of re-fighting the old issues about banking, internal improvements, and executive power, Lincoln focused on what he considered Jackson’s commendable handling of sectional extremism. Jackson’s record made him a more fitting symbol of defiant nationalism, standing up to the southern slaveholders, than Lincoln’s Whig hero, the Great Conciliator Clay. Lincoln seemed to admire Jackson’s steeliness as well as his patriotism. To a cheering rally of Illinois Republicans on July 4, 1856, Lincoln noted how, for many years after the Missouri Compromise, “the people had lived in comparative peace and quiet,” with one notable exception: “During Gen. Jackson’s administration, the Calhoun Nullifying doctrine sprang up, but Gen. Jackson, with that decision of character that ever characterized him, put an end to it.”[9]

Lincoln found Jackson's precedent particularly compelling in the aftermath of the *Dred Scott* decision of 1857—not over slavery or sectionalism *per se*, but over the Supreme Court's supposed supremacy in deciding constitutional interpretation. Pro-slavery southerners hailed Chief Justice Roger B. Taney's ruling in *Dred Scott* as a sacrosanct vindication of slavery and the Constitution, which repudiated the entire basis of what they called "Black Republican" organization. But Lincoln charged that Taney's ruling was exceptional, plainly founded on error, at variance with all precedents, and not at all settled. "We know that the court that made it," he declared, in his first public response to the ruling, "has often over-ruled its own decisions, and we shall do what we can to have it to over-rule this." And in defense of this peaceful resistance, Lincoln turned to the example of Andrew Jackson and the Bank War. He quoted at length from Jackson's bank veto message of 1832, emphasizing those passages where Jackson dismissed objections that the Supreme Court had already proclaimed the Bank constitutional. The judicial and legislative precedents concerning a national bank, Jackson said, were divided. Even then, he charged, "mere precedent is a dangerous source of authority, and should not be regarded as deciding questions of constitutional power, except where the acquiescence of the people and the States can be considered well settled." In any event, Lincoln noted, Jackson insisted in his bank veto message "that each public functionary must support the Constitution, 'as he understands it.'" [10]

Lincoln returned to Jackson and the Bank veto during his campaign debates with Douglas in the late summer and autumn of 1858. "[A] decision of the court is to him a '*Thus saith the Lord*,'" he said of Douglas in Ottawa. "It is nothing that I point out to him that his great prototype, Gen. Jackson, did not believe in the binding force of decisions." Later, at Galesburg, Douglas replied to Lincoln's gibes by noting that Jackson had acceded to the Court's rulings on the bank until a re-chartering of the bank was proposed; by contrast, he charged, Lincoln was advocating disobeying the Court. Lincoln's retort, delivered at Quincy, emphasized that, as an equal coordinate branch of the government, the executive (like the legislature) had to interpret the Constitution as it saw fit. "I will tell you here that General Jackson once said each man was bound to support the Constitution 'as he understood it.' Now, Judge Douglas understands the Constitution according to the *Dred Scott* decision, and he is bound to support it as he understands it. [Cheers.] I understand it another way, and therefore I am bound to support it in the way in which I understand it. [Prolonged applause.]" [11] Honest Abe, for once, sounded like Old Hickory.

VI.

Less than three years later, as the secession crisis played itself out in Charleston harbor, reviving memories of the nullification crisis, Lincoln would have even more reason to turn to Jackson's example. "[P]ut Andrew Jackson's 'union' speech in your inaugural address,"

the Kentuckian Cassius Clay advised him, even before the 1860 campaign had ended. “But it may be necessary to put the foot down firmly,” Lincoln told the New Jersey General Assembly on his way to Washington for the inauguration, dramatically stamping the stage to enthusiastic cheers. Although, in his efforts to appear conciliatory, the new president omitted any explicit mention of Jackson in his inaugural address, Jackson’s proclamation on nullification was one of the few sources he consulted (along with Webster’s famous second reply to Hayne and Henry Clay’s speech amid the sectional crisis of 1850); and thereafter, Jackson’s precedent was very much on his mind. After the fall of Sumter, when a committee in Baltimore bid him to cease hostilities, Lincoln replied sternly that he would not violate his oath and surrender the government without a blow: “There is no Washington in that – no Jackson in that – no manhood nor honor in that.”[12]

The nationalist themes in Lincoln’s attacks on secession were common to mainstream proto-Whigs as well as to Jackson’s proclamation against the nullifiers. In this respect, Lincoln seized on the piece of Jackson’s legacy most in line with those of Jackson’s opponents (and which many of Jackson’s supporters, including Martin Van Buren, opposed.) But Jackson also based his attack on the democratic, majoritarian grounds he had expressed in his first message to Congress, ridiculing the effort of a single state—indeed, “a bare majority of the voters in any one state”—to repudiate laws approved by the Congress and the president, the people’s representatives. So Lincoln based the Union effort, in 1861, on fundamentally democratic grounds, proclaiming in his first inaugural that the slavery issue, and with it the divination of God’s will, had to be left to “the judgment of this great tribunal, the American people,” which had just elected him president.[13]

VII.

The significance of Lincoln’s convergence with certain anti-slavery elements of Jacksonian Democracy, and then with certain of Jackson’s political precedents, should not be exaggerated. Yet neither should the convergence be ignored. As the politics of American democracy altered in the 1840s and 1850s, to confront the long-suppressed crisis over slavery, so the terms of democratic politics broke apart and recombined in ways that defy any neat ideological or political genealogy. Just as the Republican Party of the 1850s absorbed certain elements of Jacksonianism, so Lincoln, whose Whiggery had always been more egalitarian than that of other Whigs, found himself absorbing some of them as well. And some of the Jacksonian spirit resided inside the Lincoln White House.

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- [1] Abraham Lincoln, Speech on the Sub-Treasury, December [26], 1839, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953–1955), 1:162 and 178.
- [2] For a strong statement of some of these themes, see Stephen B. Oates, “Abraham Lincoln: *Republican* in the White House,” in John L. Thomas, ed., *Abraham Lincoln and the American Political Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 98–110.
- [3] Robert H. Wiebe, “Lincoln’s Fraternal Democracy,” in Thomas, ed., *Abraham Lincoln*, 11–30, quotations on 16.
- [4] Lincoln to Joshua Speed, Aug. 24, 1855, *CW*, 2:323.
- [5] Rufus Choate, “Letter to the Whigs of Maine,” August 9, 1856, in Samuel G Brown, ed., *Works of Rufus Choate with a Memoir of His Life* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1862); Lincoln to Henry L. Pierce and Others, April 6, 1859, *CW* 3:375.
- [6] Lincoln to A.G. Henry, Nov. 19, 1858, *CW* 3:339.
- [7] Frederick Robinson, *Address to the Voters of the Fifth Congressional District* (n.p., [1862]), 11.
- [8] Lincoln to Henry L. Pierce and Others, April 6, 1859, *CW* 3:374–376; Lincoln, “Definition of Democracy,” [Aug. 1, 1858?], *CW* 2:532.
- [9] Lincoln, Speech at Princeton, Illinois, July 4, 1856, *CW* 2:346.
- [10] Lincoln, Speech at Springfield, Illinois, June 26, 1857, *CW* 2:401.
- [11] First Debate with Stephen A Douglas at Ottawa, Illinois, Aug. 21, 1858,” *CW* 3:28; Fifth Debate with Stephen A. Douglas at Galesburg, Illinois, Oct. 7, 1858, *CW* 3:243; Sixth Debate with Stephen A. Douglas at Quincy, Illinois, Oct. 13, 1858, *CW* 3:278.
- [12] Lincoln to Cassius M. Clay, *CW* 4:92–93, n1; Lincoln, “Address to the New Jersey General Assembly at Trenton, New Jersey,” Feb. 21, 1861, *CW* 4:237; William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon’s Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life*, 1889, 3:478; Lincoln, “Reply to Baltimore Committee,” April 22, 1861, *CW* 4:341. The connections between Lincoln and Jackson were not lost on ordinary supporters. “Withal, I am an *uncompromising Union Man*. I despised *Nullification* in 1832, as I do the Rebellion now. I stand by the Administration in their noble efforts to save the Union,” a native South Carolinian, relocated to New Jersey, wrote the President in 1864, to show his pro-administration bona fides. “I approved of Andrew Jackson’s course in 1832, and, I approve of Abraham Lincoln’s course now. I prepared the article ‘And. Jackson on States Rights’ to strengthen your administration in the judgement of people in this section of the country.” Paul T. Jones to Abraham Lincoln, April 11, 1864, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.
- [13] James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Papers and Messages of the Presidents* (1897; Washington DC: 1910), 2:1209. *CW*, IV.