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Lincoln v. Douglas

Ambition & Humor on the Illinois Campaign Trail

By Richard Norton Smith

When Stephen A. Douglas, accosted Abraham Lincoln on the stump and accused him of being "two faced" Lincoln neatly turned the tables. "If I really had two faces," he asked, "Do you think I'd hide behind this one?"

Lincoln's intense struggle with Douglas contained elements of jealousy as well as high-minded principle. In a private memorandum composed in 1856, two years before the epic contest in which both candidates rehearsed arguments that would recur in the next presidential campaign, Lincoln could not help but contrast the glittering achievements of his Democratic rival with his own far more modest reputation. "With me," he wrote bitterly, "the race of ambition has been a failure—a flat failure. With him, it has been one of splendid success." Nevermind Lincoln's three terms in state legislature, the confidence of his colleagues and his preeminent standing in the newly organized Republican Party of Illinois. Neither courtroom eminence, newfound prosperity, nor a growing family were sufficient to quench Lincoln's thirst for distinction.



Lincoln and Douglas engaged in the first of their seven debates, leading up to the senatorial election, 149-years ago this week.

In the course of the famed debates of 1858, Douglas thought he had scored a point when he recalled his first meeting with Lincoln at a time when Lincoln was a storekeeper in New Salem selling whiskey and cigars. "Mr. Lincoln was a very good bartender," said Douglas. Lincoln replied,

What Mr. Douglas has said is true enough. I did keep a grocery and I did sell cotton, candles and cigars and sometimes whiskey. I remember in those days that Mr. Douglas was one of my best customers. Many a time have I stood on one side of the counter and sold Mr. Douglas whiskey on the other side. But, the difference between us now is this: I have left my side of the counter. But, Mr. Douglas still sticks to his as tenaciously as ever.

Small wonder that Douglas should complain that every one of Lincoln's jokes "seems like a whack upon my back."

While Lincoln may have enjoyed a laugh at his rival's expense, he was, for most of his career, unable to defeat Douglas at the polls. For Lincoln, this was no laughing matter. Much else was. For the politician, humor is both sword and shield, a weapon to turn on one's opponent and a defense against those who might otherwise come too close or probe too deeply. Certainly a healthy sense of the ridiculous lends perspective even as it offsets the solemn self-regard with which all too many public figures approach their duties. Abraham Lincoln was not only a tower of jokes; he was a subject of jokes as well. One of his own favorites concerned two Quaker-ladies riding the railroad and overhearing the probable outcome of the Civil War. "I think," said the first, "that Jefferson Davis will succeed."

"Why does thee think so?" asked her companion.

"Because, Jefferson Davis is a praying man."

"And so is Abraham a praying man," the other objected.

"Yes," replied the first, "But I fear the lord will think Abraham is joking."

Lincoln did not presume to know God's agenda. Still less did he arrogate to himself the role of national theologian. "It's been my experience," he once mused, "that folks who have no vices generally have few virtues." He also employed humor blessedly to deflate pretense. When one of his most persistent callers came to the White House with the news that the chief of customs had just died and asked whether he could possibly take his place, Lincoln was ready with an answer. "It's fine with me if the undertaker doesn't mind," said the President.

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"There are no accidents in my philosophy," Lincoln once explained to a friend. "The past is the cause of the present, and the present will be the cause of the future. All these are links in the endless chain stretching from finite to the infinite."

Occasionally even the infinite required a little strategic planning to disgorge its secrets. Lincoln's 1858 loss to Douglas left him temporarily dispirited, but the fires of ambition were far from banked. By now an old hand at covering his tracks, he publicly downgraded his chances for the White House. To various associates, he expressed hopes for another shot at the Senate or an appointment as attorney general in a Republican administration. He portrayed himself as strictly a favorite son candidate around whom fractious Illinois Republicans might coalesce, even as he raised his profile by making speeches in six Midwestern states. In February 1860, he journeyed to New York to deliver his rousing Cooper Union address that would introduce the dark horse from Illinois to skeptical eastern audiences.

In many ways, the man who took oath of office before the West Front of the Capitol in March 1861 was scarcely recognizable to his political cronies back home. Standing at last atop the summit of American politics, a divided soul confronting a disintegrating nation, Lincoln had a transcendent cause to ennoble his gainsmanship. Even before his election, his yearning for advancement had been elevated, if not altogether purified, through a growing involvement with the antislavery movement. Logic told him it was hypocritical for a nation that professed its love of liberty to keep millions of human beings in chains. The compelling logic of the battlefield would bring him around to the view that a war over states' rights must ultimately become a war for human rights.

This essay was adapted from a lecture Richard Norton Smith delivered at the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies in 2006.