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Lincoln on the Abolition of Slavery

Abstract
That man who thinks Lincoln calmly sat down and gathered his robes about him, waiting for the people to call him, has a very erroneous knowledge of Lincoln," wrote Abraham Lincoln's long-time law partner, William Henry Herndon. "He was always calculating, and always planning ahead. His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest." And in no other pursuit was Lincoln more ambitious than in politics. As a lawyer and Whig political organizer in Illinois, "Politics were his life and his ambition and his motive power." [excerpt]

Keywords
Abraham Lincoln, slavery, emancipation, abolition of slavery, Civil War, Whig Party, abolitionist, colonization

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Allen C. Guelzo

Hat man who thinks Lincoln calmly sat down and gathered his robes about him, waiting for the people to call him, has a very erroneous knowledge of Lincoln,” wrote Abraham Lincoln’s long-time law partner, William Henry Herndon.

“He was always calculating, and always planning ahead. His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest.” And in no other pursuit was Lincoln more ambitious than in politics. As a lawyer and Whig political organizer in Illinois, “Politics were his life and his ambition his motive power.”

But at the same time, ambition in politics was regarded with deep suspicion in Lincoln’s America. Our experiment in republican self-government was still a fragile one, and without the artificial restraints of aristocracy or class, Americans feared that ambition could easily run amok. Even Lincoln agreed that, as the example of the Founding Fathers drifted into the past, “men of sufficient talent and ambition will not be wanting to seize the opportunity, strike the blow, and overturn” the American republic. “Towering genius disdains a beaten path,” he cautioned. “Is it unreasonable then to expect, that some man possessed of the loftiest genius, coupled with ambition sufficient to push it to its utmost stretch, will at some time, spring up among us?”

“That glorious consummation, which my own poor eyes may not last to see.”

The question in Lincoln’s mind was whether ambition always needed to be so fatally self-serving. Ambition, he would write years later, “within reasonable bounds, does good rather than harm.” What he needed was a stage on which to test the quality of his ambition — and in 1858, as the national controversy over the extension of
slavery boiled to life, he found it in his challenge to Stephen A. Douglas for the U.S. Senate.

At the beginning of that campaign, Lincoln took the trouble to write out a note on the subject of ambition and its aims, the note which is reproduced here. This fragment was dated to the summer of the Lincoln-Douglas campaign by Robert Todd Lincoln, who explained when he presented the manuscript to the Duchess of St. Albans as a gift in 1892 that it was “made in preparing for one of the speeches in the joint-debate Campaign between Mr. Douglas & my father in 1858.”5

The text begins with Lincoln’s acknowledgment that “I have never professed an indifference to the honors of official station.” He had always been ambitious for political office and political success, and any attempt to make himself look otherwise would “only make myself ridiculous.” But ambition could also rise to nobler levels. “In the republican cause there is a higher aim than that of mere office.” After all, if ambition could be satisfied with “mere office,” Lincoln could have had it by less risky means than embracing the anti-slavery movement.

The proof of that argument was in the historical pudding. Pointing to the British anti-slavery movement, Lincoln noted that the “mere” office-seekers had routinely opposed emancipation. This included emancipation’s “open fire-eating opponents; it’s [sic] stealthy ‘don’t care’ opponents; it’s dollars and cent opponents; it’s inferior race opponents; it’s negro equality opponents; and it’s religion and good order opponents.” All of these, Lincoln notes wryly, “got offices, and their adversaries got none.” But thirty years after the triumph of abolition in the British empire, who was remembered? “School-boys know that Wilberforce, and Granville Sharpe”—two of Britain’s most devoted and tenacious enemies of slavery—“helped that cause forward; but who can now name a single man who labored to retard it?”

Ambition on the part of its citizens is the mark of a society willing to allow talent and ingenuity to rise. But ambition must not, as Joseph Conrad once wrote, “climb upwards on the miseries or credulities of mankind.”6 In the last speech of the 1858 campaign, Lincoln admitted that “Ambition has been ascribed to me.” That was true, and “I claim no insensibility to political honors.” But he was laboring for a greater end than “political honors.” If slavery could be restricted once and for all by electing Douglas, “on principle, I would, in consideration, gladly agree, that Judge Douglas should never be out, and I never in, an office, so long as we both or either, live.”7
I have never professed an indifference to the honor of official station; and were I to do so now, I should only make myself ridiculous. Yet I have never failed do not now fail to remember that in the Republican case there is a higher aim than that of mere office— I have not allowed myself to forget that the abolition of the slave trade by Great Britain, was agitation a hundred years before it was a final success; that the measure had its open firm believers, proponents; its steady, "don't care" opponents; its dollar and cent opponents; its infamous opponents; its Negro equality opponents; its religious and good order opponents; that all these opponents, get office, and then adenemic, got none—but I have also remembered that they burned, like tallow candles for a century, afraid they flickered in the socket, drew out, stand in the dark for a brief season, and now remember no more every single school-boy knows that Milburne burned Granville shape; here their cause forward; but who can name a single man who remained to retrieve it? Remembering the things I can not but regard it as possible that the higher objects of this contest may not be completely attained within
I have never professed an indifference to the honors of official station; and were I to do so now, I should only make myself ridiculous. Yet I have never failed — do not now fail — to remember that in the republican cause there is a higher aim than that of mere office. I have not allowed myself to forget that the abolition of the Slave-trade by Great Brittain [sic], was agitated a hundred years before it was a final success; that the measure had it’s [sic] open fire-eating opponents; it’s stealthy “don’t care” opponents; it’s dollars and cent opponents; it’s inferior race opponents; it’s negro equality opponents; and it’s religion and good order opponents; that all these opponents got offices, and their adversaries got none. But I have also remembered that [INSERTED: though] they blazed, like tallow-candles for a century, at last they flickered in the socket, died out, stank in the dark for a brief season, and were remembered no more, even by the smell. School-boys know that Wilbe[r]force, and Granville Sharpe helped that cause forward; but who can now name a single man who labored to retard it? Remembering these things I can not but regard it as possible that the higher object of this contest may not be completely attained within the term of my [INSERTED: natural] life. But I can not doubt either that it will come in due time. Even in this view, I am proud, in my passing speck of time, to contribute an humble mite to that glorious consummation, which my own poor eyes may [STRUCK: never] [INSERTED: not] last to see.
Lincoln knew how large a role ambition played in his own character, and how indispensable ambition was to the success of a nation without titled privilege or "fixed condition." But he also understood how necessary it was to the survival of popular government that ambition become the servant, not the master. "The proudest ambition he could desire was to do something for the elevation of the condition of his fellowman," he told an acquaintance, shortly before departing for Gettysburg to deliver his famous address. And few who knew Lincoln doubted the sincerity with which he said it. "He had a desire of power," wrote Charles Zane, the Springfield newspaper editor, "but it was that he might in the use of it benefit his fellow men." Ambition was Lincoln's "humble mite" as well as his "little engine," and it provided the fuel which led, against all his expectations in 1858, to "that glorious consummation" of liberty and equality for all Americans.

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NOTES
4. Ibid., 6: 78.
5. Ibid., 2: 482.
8. Ibid., 7: 13.