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## "Public Sentiment Is Everything": Abraham Lincoln and the Power of Public Opinion

Allen C. Guelzo  
*Gettysburg College*

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# "Public Sentiment Is Everything": Abraham Lincoln and the Power of Public Opinion

## **Abstract**

**Book Summary:** Since Abraham Lincoln's death, generations of Americans have studied his life, presidency, and leadership, often remaking him into a figure suited to the needs and interests of their own time. This illuminating volume takes a different approach to his political thought and practice. Here, a distinguished group of contributors argue that Lincoln's relevance today is best expressed by rendering an accurate portrait of him in his own era. They seek to understand Lincoln as he understood himself and as he attempted to make his ideas clear to his contemporaries. What emerges is a portrait of a prudent leader who is driven to return the country to its original principles in order to conserve it.

Chapter Summary: "Our government rests in public opinion," Abraham Lincoln said in 1856. And how could it be otherwise (he explained in 1859), since "in a Government of the people, where the voice of all the men of the country, enter substantially into the execution, - or administration, rather - of the Government - in such a Government, what lies at the bottom of it all, is public opinion." "Public sentiment is everything," he replied to Stephen A. Douglas in 1858. "Whoever can change public opinion can change the government." [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Abraham Lincoln, Civil War, Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln-Douglas Debate, President, Federal Government, Public Opinion

## **Disciplines**

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# “Public Sentiment Is Everything”

## Abraham Lincoln and the Power of Public Opinion

*Allen C. Guelzo*

“Our government rests in public opinion,” Abraham Lincoln said in 1856. And how could it be otherwise (he explained in 1859), since “in a Government of the people, where the voice of all the men of the country, enter substantially into the execution,—or administration, rather—of the Government—in such a Government, what lies at the bottom of it all, is public opinion.” “Public sentiment is everything,” he replied to Stephen A. Douglas in 1858. “Whoever can change public opinion can change the government.” It is “public opinion” that “settles every question here,” he added in 1860, and in order for “any policy to be permanent,” it “must have public opinion at the bottom.” It was in homage to public opinion, Lincoln told Charles Halpine in 1862, that he committed large portions of his presidential schedule to the wearisome and taxing labor of interviews with any and all members of the public who had the patience to stand in a line in his outer office waiting to see him. “The office of the president is essentially a civil one,” Lincoln said, and no matter that “many of the matters” in these interviews were “utterly frivolous,” nevertheless “all serve to renew in me a clearer and more vivid image of that great popular assemblage, out of which I sprang, and which at the end of two years I must return.” These “promiscuous receptions” served as his “public-opinion baths,” and as much as they “may not be pleasant in all their particulars,” they served to connect him to popular feeling, like some political Antaeus reconnecting with the earth that gave him strength. “The effect as a whole,” Lincoln insisted, “is renovating and invigorating to my perceptions of responsibility and duty.”<sup>1</sup>

John Hay wrote years later that Lincoln “disliked anything that kept people from him,” and he was certain that “nobody ever wanted to see the President who did not. . . . There was never a man so accessible to all sorts of proper and improper persons.” Although Sen. Henry Wilson warned him that “these swarms of visitors” would end up sapping his strength rather than “invigorating” it, Lincoln only replied, “They don’t want much; they get but little, and I must see them.” The Sacramento journalist Noah Brooks reported in the spring of 1863 that Lincoln was a man who looked past the machinations of “mere politicians to find his best friends . . . in the mass of the people,” and a year later he still believed that Lincoln, in some mystical way, “always feels for his clients—the people.” The prominent jurist George Curtis told the Philadelphian Sidney George Fisher in 1864 that whereas others in the Lincoln administration whom he knew had “lost faith in the intelligence of the people” and “the success of democracy,” Lincoln “has faith in the vitality of the nation and the ability of the people to meet and dispose of all difficult questions as they arise.” It is as much from this, as from any other feature of Lincoln’s political life, that his reputation as “the Man of the People” springs, since it manifests a humble deference (rather than personal arrogance or overweening self-righteousness) to the ideas of ordinary citizens. “All the people came to him as to a father,” Isaac Arnold wrote in 1866. “He believed in the people, and had faith in their good impulses” and “always treated the people in such a way, that they knew that he respected them, believed them honest, capable of judging correctly and disposed to do right.” At the same time, he agonized over the impact of Union defeats on public opinion, groaning in distress over the disaster at Chancellorsville as he said, “My God! my God! What will the country say! What will the country say!”<sup>2</sup>

But deference of this sort, while it may be some evidence of humility, may not necessarily be a *willing* deference, and it is not clear, even from Lincoln’s own statements, whether he regarded public opinion as a cause to be served or a beast to be appeased and tamed. He told Emil Preetorius, the St. Louis German-language newspaper editor, that he “would rather be a follower than a leader of public opinion,” but John Nicolay thought that it was Lincoln who did the leading and that “the Archimedean lever whereby he moved the world was public opinion.” He might, as William Henry Herndon wrote years later, insist that he was a fatalist and that yielding to public opinion was simply another application of that fatalism, but Herndon saw that he

actually "believed firmly in the power of human effort to modify the environments which surround us" and "made efforts at all times to modify and change public opinion." Lincoln was, as Henry Clay Whitney remembered, "very sensitive to public opinion," but this was not because he worshipped at democracy's altar with the proletarian zeal of Walt Whitman but instead because he was personally thin-skinned "and dreaded the censure of the newspapers and politicians." Or perhaps it was that Lincoln neither led nor followed public opinion but instead manipulated it. George Boutwell was convinced that Lincoln's "opinions were in advance usually, of his acts as a public man," but he "possessed the faculty of foreseeing the course of public opinion" and positioned himself to meet it and thus control it.<sup>3</sup>

In some measure, any uncertainty about Lincoln's reverence toward public opinion grows out of the uncertainty that the nineteenth century itself manifested toward public opinion—something that extended even to how the term should be defined. "Public Opinion is the one omnipotent ruling principle" in the American democracy, declared the *Democratic Review* in 1838, and the venerable Robert Winthrop of Massachusetts simply described "that mighty current of Public Opinion" as "nothing less than Law in its first reading." And on the eve of civil war, it was James Buchanan's plea that "our Union rests upon public opinion and can never be cemented by the blood of its citizens shed in civil war," which persuaded him not to brandish the sword in response to Southern threats of secession. But what, exactly, was *public opinion*? Was it the sum of the opinions of the entire American democracy? But what guarantees that these opinions are exactly the same or are filled with informed content or amount to more than mere irritated responses? How was it to be measured, in an age that lacked the means to undertake more than the most limited and crude of polling samples? What was available to measure it—the numbers who turned out for political rallies? The sum of newspaper editorial commentary? The educated guesses of friendly advisers in key places? And did the context of war—and especially civil war—change the standing of public opinion? Did civil war make public opinion *more* important, as a necessary prop for waging fratricidal conflict, or *less*, since it was liable to tire easily in such a struggle? Still, in a representative democracy, who could deny that public opinion held the political whip handle or that it could snap back on unwary candidates who so much as uttered an incautious word? "No eye hath seen it," smirked another contributor to the *Democratic Review* in 1845. "No hand hath grasped it. It

hath no shape, nor color, nor ponderable bulk. And yet, in thoughts, alike of the day and night, it passeth before the faces of men, and the hair of their flesh standeth up and fear cometh on them and trembling, which maketh all their bones to shake.”<sup>4</sup>

Of course, it has become no easier over time to identify the meaning of “public opinion,” even in an era of mass polling, focus groups, and town halls. “Public opinion deals with indirect, unseen, and puzzling facts,” admitted Walter Lippmann in 1922, and Lippmann’s best attempt at pinning this elusive quantity to the wall was to say that public opinion was an amalgam of “the pictures inside the heads of human beings . . . of their needs, purposes, and relationships . . . which are acted upon by groups of people, or by individuals acting in the name of groups,” without much regard for logic, consistency, or even accuracy. A. Lawrence Lowell, writing in the same decade as Lippmann, tried to grasp how “public opinion” managed to bind even those who dissented from its explicit beliefs. “In order that it may be public,” Lowell believed, “a majority is not enough. . . . The opinion must be such that while the minority may not share it, they feel bound, by conviction, not by fear, to accept it.” More recently, Jürgen Habermas’s history of the development of a “public sphere” (*Öffentlichkeit*) in which uncoerced dialogue over the political order supplanted the top-down, single voice of power and aristocracy has pictured “public opinion” as the product of public-minded rational consensus (a consensus that, it has to be said, Habermas feared that the capitalist mass culture and state bureaucracies have succeeded in shutting down once again). This “public sphere” became the nursery of public opinion, as “a forum in which the private people come together to form a public” and ready “themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion.” But the most ambitious attempt to isolate a precise notion of “public opinion” in the American context was James Bryce’s *The American Commonwealth* in 1908: “Government by public opinion exists where the wishes and views of the people prevail, even before they have been conveyed through the regular law-appointed organs.” It was in the nature of “free government,” Bryce wrote, to assume the form of either small-scale democratic assemblies or large-scale representative republics; public opinion afforded a middle way by which small-scale democracy could meet large-scale representation and “apply the principle of primary assemblies to large countries.” Public opinion, by acting “directly and constantly upon its executive and legislative agents,” ensured that those agents never dared

stray too far from popular control, and Bryce believed that "government by public opinion" was the end "toward which the extension of the suffrage, the more rapid diffusion of news, and the practice of self-government" would inevitably and "necessarily lead free nations."<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, it was precisely this unbounded potential of public opinion for control that drove Alexis de Tocqueville to wonder whether public opinion might become the worst enemy of democracy. "Democratic republics put the spirit of a court within reach of the many and let it penetrate all classes at once," with the result that an offender against public opinion "is the butt of mortifications of all kinds and persecutions every day" until "he finally bends under the effort of each day and returns to silence as if he felt remorse for having spoken the truth." John Stuart Mill (whose *Principles of Political Economy* Lincoln greatly admired) thought the principal weakness of liberal democracy was "the absolute dependence of each on all, and surveillance of each by all" imposed by public opinion. In that case, it was a serious question "whether public opinion would not be a tyrannical yoke." On the other hand, it was that same powerful potential that dazzled Charles Sumner into hailing "that invincible Public Opinion" as the means by which law, "without violence or noise, gently as the operations of nature," is made and unmade. In fact, public opinion alone was what held out the only hope of reforming what the laws could not touch. Gambling, for instance, was a vicious and immoral practice, but the Jacksonian editor William Leggett balked at the notion that "government" should make itself into a reform agency: "For gambling, public opinion is the great and only salutary corrective. If it cannot be suppressed by the force of the moral sense of the community, it cannot be suppressed by statutes and edicts." Even slavery, added Leggett, "cannot always exist against the constant attrition of public opinion."<sup>6</sup>

It is tempting to sort out these alternations of fear and praise for public opinion along party and ideological lines in Lincoln's America, especially since Sumner (at least until 1850) and Leggett were so closely identified with the genius of Jacksonian democracy, while the Whigs labored under the opprobrium of being the party of the silk-stockinged elite. And to a certain extent, political ideology did condition the value set on public opinion. Even before the Whig Party assumed formal organization in 1834, John Quincy Adams had already put the stamp of elitism on it by urging Congress not to be "palsied by the will of our constituents" into refusing to fund internal improvements. The Missourian Edward Bates (who would serve as Lincoln's

attorney general) scorned the assumption that “the people” are “always WISE and VIRTUOUS” and hence their opinions always right and true. The truth was that “very few men have the information necessary to form distinct opinions upon political questions as they arise,” and so the direction of political life was best left in the hands of the educated and talented. “This is,” he admitted, “PUBLICLY, a very unpopular belief, but, PRIVATELY, it has the hearty concurrence of 99 in every 100 intelligent men.” What was currently called “PUBLIC OPINION,” snarled Bates in his diary, “is never spontaneous with the people” but instead is “a MANUFACTURED ARTICLE, made by parties, to suit their occasions.” Henry Clay and John Minor Botts were hailed by their Whig brethren precisely because they refused to court “the shifting gales of popularity,” while those politicians who did were adopting “the schemes, the arts, and the seductions of the demagogue.” The “accredited organs and exponents” of these demagogues were “a host of paltry newspapers, which, like the army of locusts, darken the land, and threaten to destroy and devour every bud, shoot and germ of civilization amongst us,” and “the unceasing efforts” of “the orator” to promote “political agitation.” The true statesman, like the noble Roman, “does not watch for public opinion,” and “in the face of the multitude he forms his opinions fearlessly.” He speaks with authority, not as “restless and unprincipled men,” and “must enter the lists as champion of social purity and uncorrupt republicanism.” Why truckle to public opinion, argued the *American Whig Review* in 1846, when public opinion is merely “the average opinion of the mass” and “authority is the opinion of the more enlightened few”? On those terms, “we hesitate not to prefer authority to public opinion.”<sup>7</sup>

But it was by no means a given that Democrats would always be the partisans of public opinion and Whigs its enemies. Much as the *Democratic Review* was opposed to “all self-styled wholesome restraints on the free action of the popular opinion and will” and lauded a political order in which “all should be dependent with equal directness and promptness on the influence of public opinion,” any estimates of the legitimacy of popular opinion in shaping policy frequently depended on whose political ox was being gored at the time. When Democrats suspected that public opinion was being “manufactured by mad fanatics for a mad purpose and threatening to overthrow all law under the insidious disguise of love to man and his rights”—a long-winded way of describing abolitionists—the *Democratic Review* was just as horrified as the Whigs at “the tyranny of public opinion.” Henry Tuckerman



worried that the "cant of reverence applied to man in the abstract" would force his compatriots to "refer our actions, thoughts and feelings to the idolized standard of public opinion."<sup>8</sup> Elitist or democratic, Americans idolized public opinion as the last step before that ultimate democratic arbiter, the popular election, but they also strove to shape and manipulate it; they worshipped public opinion as the spirit of democracy and feared it as the coarsener of democratic culture; they invoked it as the handmaiden of the laws and despised it as the corrupter of them. And Abraham Lincoln would not differ significantly from them in any important particular.

Public opinion, Lincoln said in 1841 while still a state legislator in Illinois, is "the great moving principle of free government," and policy "uncalled for by public opinion, or public convenience" was "unjust and unwise." It was abhorrent, in his view, for "men, professing respect for public opinion" to betray their public responsibility "to make way for party interests" and aim at producing "political results favorable to their party & party friends." Public men ought to be willing to accommodate public opinion to such a degree that even their private beliefs should be subsumed to it. "I do not think I could myself, be brought to support a man for office, whom I knew to be an open enemy of, and scoffer at, religion," Lincoln declared. Even though the "eternal consequences between him and his Maker" were an affair for only those two parties to resolve, public contempt for an overwhelmingly Protestant and evangelical culture betrayed the possibility of public contempt for other, more political issues. Hence, "I . . . do not think any man has the right thus to insult the feelings, and injure the morals, of the community in which he may live." Fifteen years later, as he journeyed eastward by train for his inauguration as president, Lincoln was still promising deference and accommodation toward public opinion. "I deem it due to myself and the whole country," he said in Cincinnati, "in the present extraordinary condition of the country and of public opinion, that I should wait and see the last development of public opinion before I give my views or express myself at the time of the inauguration." And this dovetailed nicely with Lincoln's larger deterministic worldview in which he would "claim not to have controlled events but confess plainly that events have controlled [him]," like a piece of driftwood that had "drifted into the very apex of this great event."<sup>9</sup>

But determinism is often mistaken for passivity, and if there is one thing that Lincoln cannot be accused of, it is passivity. He might protest his preference to "wait and see the last development of public opinion" before

expressing his own, but that did not mean that he was waiting and seeing before actually forming it—as, in fact, he had on the issue of secession and the maintenance of federal property in the seceding states. “Universal public opinion” was the wind that powered the ship of state in a democracy, and when public opinion “not only tolerated, but recognized and adopted” a policy, the prudent politician bows to that fact and steers accordingly. But public opinion was not only changeable but liable (unlike the wind) to *being* changed, and there were tides in public affairs, running under the wind, that were just as important to reckon with and quite enough of a question about who actually constituted the “public” to give a certain selectivity to the public whose opinion one served. Despite Lincoln’s obeisances to public opinion, he did not intend to be its slave, nor did he put much faith in those who disarmingly claimed to be. There was, as Horace White, Jesse Weik, and William Herndon all discerned, “a certain degree of moral obtuseness in Abraham Lincoln” that “cared nothing for public opinion.” And the degrees that *did* care about public opinion saw it alternately as a belle to be courted, an ignoramus to be educated, and an animal whose self-interest could be attracted by the right bait. And especially in the context of the Civil War, Lincoln turned out to be notoriously reluctant to being pushed or pulled by public opinion on issues that mattered deeply to him. When John Hay asked him whether he was irritated at hostile newspaper commentary on the Emancipation Proclamation, he merely replied that “he had studied the matter so long that he knew more about it than they did.” And when Lincoln was warned that Congress “would absolutely refuse” to seat representatives elected by newly reconstructed districts in Louisiana, his comment was the very opposite of deference: “Then I am to be bullied by Congress am I? I’ll be d—d if I will.”<sup>10</sup>

The first question that lay before Lincoln in dealing with public opinion was to identify what the public was whose opinion was being solicited. And nowhere does Lincoln’s tightly held Whiggery stand out more clearly. “Public opinion is formed relative to a property basis,” Lincoln said in 1860. That had two corollaries for Lincoln. The first, he expressed in his 1836 campaign announcement for the Illinois legislature. “I go for all sharing the privileges of the government, who assist in bearing its burthens,” he wrote for the *Sangamo Journal*. “Consequently I go for admitting all whites to the right of suffrage, who pay taxes or bear arms, (by no means excluding females).” This is frequently offered today as evidence of at least some

forward thinking on Lincoln's part on the subject of gender; this misses the real point he was trying to make, which was the subordination of gender to property-owning, since the only taxpayers would be those assessed for taxes on the real estate they actually owned. The real public whose opinion he was offering to serve were its property-owners, irrespective of gender (but not of race). "While acting as their representative, I shall be governed by their will, on all subjects upon which I have the means of knowing what their will is; and upon all others, I shall do what my own judgment teaches me will best advance their interests." And those interests, if anyone actually needed an explanation, were entirely commercial ones: "I go for distributing the proceeds of the sales of the public lands to the several states, to enable our state, in common with others, to dig canals and construct rail roads." What Lincoln meant twenty-five years later by hitching public opinion to "a property basis" was to argue that public opinion on slavery varied in exact proportion to how much people had invested in it. "The plainest print cannot be read through a gold eagle," he quipped. "The slaveholders battle any policy which depreciates their slaves as property," and "whatever increases the value of this property, they favor." Denouncing them for perpetuating an immoral institution might be ethically correct but politically meaningless "because they do not like to be told that are interested in an institution which is not a moral one."<sup>11</sup> Public opinion was not a mystery or an expression of some form of mass democratic sentimentality; it was an environmental response to a threat—any threat—to property.

Precisely because public opinion was not a mystery but a response, it was capable of being formed and shaped, and so, far from bowing into a doglike passivity in the face of public opinion, Lincoln believed that it could be cultivated, persuaded, shaped, and molded by an appeal to self-interest. Lincoln, said Herndon, "contended that motives moved the man to every voluntary act of his life." But precisely because human judgment was so malleable, it was vital to educate it properly, since it was just as liable to be educated wrongly, and when that occurred, its power for evil—or at least for tolerating evil—could be irresistible. What aroused him in 1854 about the Kansas-Nebraska Act was not just the freedom that the bill gave to slavery to compete equally with freedom for the allegiance of the Western territories, but the skillful way in which Stephen A. Douglas, the bill's author, had set out "to educate and mold public opinion" by wrapping "the Nebraska doctrine" in the attractive guise of "popular sovereignty." Beginning with the

apparently harmless premise that Americans in the territories had the right, as free-born citizens, to determine for themselves what—or what not—to legalize, “the miners and sappers” like Douglas were performing a “gradual and steady debauching of public opinion,” to the point where he would tell a campaign audience in Ohio in 1859 that “popular sovereignty and squatter sovereignty have already wrought a change in the public mind” and that “there is no man in this crowd who can contradict it.”<sup>12</sup>

Douglas’s “popular sovereignty” doctrine actually became Lincoln’s principal example of why public opinion was *not* the polestar of political navigation. No one, Lincoln insisted, placed a higher value on popular government than he did. “The doctrine of self government is right—absolutely and eternally right,” Lincoln said. “My faith in the proposition that each man should do precisely as he pleases with all which is exclusively his own, lies at the foundation of the sense of justice there is in me.” But the “absolute” right of self-government stopped outside the circle of one’s own self and property. The moment it was arbitrarily extended to the control of another person and over-rode *their* “absolute” right to self-government, “it has no just application.” So, simply on first principles, a decision by one part of a community to legalize the enslavement of another part of that community is not an example of self-government, but an outrage on it, no matter how thumping the majority of those who support legalization. Popular sovereignty cannot trump the natural rights every man has to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. So, Lincoln asked, “If the negro is a man, is it not to that extent, a total destruction of self government, to say that he too shall not govern himself?” Hence, “there can be no moral right in connection with one man’s making a slave of another,” no matter how much a community, in the way of exercising “popular sovereignty,” may vote for it. Genuine popular sovereignty, Lincoln countered, “would be about this: that each man shall do precisely as he pleases with himself, and with all those things which exclusively concern him.” Anything that stepped beyond that private circle or invaded what “exclusively” concerned others required the consent of those *others*, and that boundary could not be violated without that consent in anything that wanted to call itself a free government. “No man is good enough to govern another man, without that other’s consent. I say this is the leading principle—the sheet anchor of American republicanism.”<sup>13</sup>

In that respect, public opinion was exactly what Lincoln did *not* propose to serve. Instead, he trimmed around it, placating it with calm assur-

ances that he had no intention of converting the Civil War into a war for emancipation and especially treating opinion in the border states with kid gloves. He was actually incensed when public opinion soured in the wake of the Peninsula Campaign in 1862, since it seemed to him "unreasonable that a series of successes, extending through half-a-year, and clearing more than a hundred thousand square miles of country, should help us so little, while a single half-defeat should hurt us so much." When George McClellan proposed to embark the Army of the Potomac from Annapolis rather than Washington in the spring of 1862, Lincoln was at once alarmed that an "extremely sensitive and impatient public opinion" would see this as "a retreat from Washington. But his solution was to fool it: "Could not 50,000 men or even 10,000 men be moved in transports directly down the Potomac" so as to create the illusion of "a self-evident forward movement, which the public would comprehend without explanation"? He employed listening posts across the broad belt of the border and elsewhere—his old friend Joshua Speed in Lexington (Kentucky), Cuthbert Bullitt in Louisville, Frank Blair in St. Louis, John W. Schaeffer in New Orleans, Anson Henry on the West Coast, and Orville Hickman Browning in Illinois, while using Leonard Swett, Ward Hill Lamon, and his two principal White House staffers, John Nicolay and John Hay, on public-opinion missions. But he employed his remote listeners not so much for the purpose of molding his policies after public opinion, as in determining how to navigate through public opinion toward political goals that he never offered up for compromise. "He would listen to everybody; he would hear everybody, but he never asked for opinions," Leonard Swett said. "In dealing with men he was a trimmer," said Swett, "and such a trimmer the world has never seen." In the absence of polls, Lincoln "kept a kind of account book of how things were progressing for three, or four months," but his accounting only served "to show how everything on the great scale of action—the resolutions of Legislatures, the instructions of delegates, and things of that character, was going exactly—as he expected." It was folly to try "to hasten public opinion," but it was also folly to be ruled by it. Rather, he set out the motives before public opinion, and let the "great scale of action" bring "the ripening of the fruit" and thus "the ripe pear at length falls into his lap!"<sup>14</sup>

But Lincoln was not content even to take this advice at all times. Rather than waiting for public opinion to provide him with an opportune moment for issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln bolted dangerously far

ahead of it, something he justified by the sheer necessity of acting before all opportunity for emancipation had disappeared. "When I issued that proclamation," Lincoln told John McClintock, the Methodist newspaper editor and scholar, "I did not think the people had been quite educated up to it." Indeed, they hadn't. William O. Stoddard, who also served on Lincoln's White House staff beside Hay and Nicolay, remembered "how many editors and how many other penmen within these past few days rose in anger to remind Lincoln that this is a war for the Union only, and they never gave him any authority to run it as an Abolition war. . . . [T]hey tell him that the army will fight no more, and that the hosts of the Union will indignantly disband rather than be sacrificed upon the bloody altar of fanatical Abolitionism." In the White House, "dread of the army" and "fear of a revolution in the North" pervaded the administration. Six weeks after the issuance of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in the fall of 1862, congressional by-elections dumped thirty-one Republicans from their seats in the House of Representatives and sliced the Republican vote by 16 percent from 1860. "Seldom has the personnel of a House been so completely changed with a change of parties," admitted Pennsylvania congressman Albert Gallatin Riddle. "Indeed there were well grounded apprehensions that in the uncertainty of party lines in some States and districts the House might not be organized by an unquestioned Republican majority." It is at this point that Lincoln's oft-quoted estimate of the importance of public opinion takes on the appearance of an obstacle to be surmounted rather than a monument to be revered. Nevertheless, Lincoln defiantly insisted that "he would rather die than take back a word of the Proclamation of Freedom." One truculent Southern sympathizer in Washington wrote in his diary that "the Presdt is grieved at the result of the elections, but if any believe that he will change his course or policy because of the result they are woefully mistaken. He will not retreat from the Proclamation . . . or anything else because of an election, State or Congressional."<sup>15</sup> The situation posed by the environment of civil war made Lincoln even less deferential to public opinion than otherwise. When complaints erupted over military arrests of civilian dissenters, Lincoln retorted, "I insist that in such cases, they are constitutional wherever the public safety does require them." He had no sympathy for expressions of public opinion about the war when they involved "getting a father, or brother, or friend, into a public meeting, and there working upon his feelings, till he is persuaded to write the soldier boy, that he is fighting in a bad cause,

for a wicked administration of a contemptable [*sic*] government, too weak to arrest and punish him if he shall desert." In that context, neither public opinion nor the Constitution are "in all respects the same, in cases of Rebellion or invasion, involving the public Safety, as it is in times of profound peace and public security." It was as though the stress of war induced a sort of derangement in the public mind, which should not be heeded in quite the same way as it might be in times of peace and stability.<sup>16</sup>

Far from deferring to wartime opinion, Lincoln instead took up the task of molding and shaping it himself. From his earliest days in politics, Lincoln had been a regular contributor to the *Sangamo Journal* (which later became the *Illinois State Journal* and, along with the *Chicago Tribune*, one of Lincoln's strongest advocates in Illinois politics), writing "hundreds of such Editorials" under a variety of pseudonyms. Once elected to the presidency, the conventional rule that limited a president to his executive tasks and forbade his using the presidency as a bully pulpit to influence public opinion put an end to his modest career as a journalist. But it did nothing to stop him from prompting Hay, Nicolay, and Stoddard to place anonymous editorials in prominent newspapers. Not only did Hay, writing for the St. Louis *Missouri Democrat* in 1861, send material "direct from Lincoln's office," but the pieces were "inspired by Lincoln," and more than a few believed that "Lincoln wrote some of the political correspondence which Hay sent to St. Louis." Hay also wrote material for the *Providence Journal*, the *New York World*, the *Missouri Republican*, and John W. Forney's *Washington Daily Morning Chronicle*, all of it aggressively puffing administration policy and sometimes ironically congratulating Lincoln on "his wonderful intuitive knowledge of the feeling and wish of the people." But the violent backlash against the Proclamation finally prompted Lincoln to abandon even the restraint of convention and issue a series of public letters as president that turned out to have been some of the most persuasive documents he ever wrote. Beginning with his brief but trenchant reply to Horace Greeley on emancipation in August 1862 (which Lincoln published over his own signature in the *Washington National Intelligencer*), Lincoln went on to produce four more public letters in 1863, to be published in major Northern newspapers and distributed as offset pamphlets—a brief reply to a series of resolutions passed by a workingmen's convention in Manchester, England; a response to Erastus Corning and a convention of New York Democrats on war policy and military detentions; yet another response on military arrests,

this time speaking to resolutions of the Ohio Democratic State Convention; and finally, a powerful argument in defense of emancipation for James Cook Conkling and a state-wide Union “mass meeting” in Springfield, Illinois. Whatever violation of presidential protocol these letters represented, New York politico Chauncey Depew thought that through them Lincoln had caught “the ear of the public; he commanded the front page of the press, and he defended his administration and its acts and replied to his enemies with skill, tact, and extreme moderation.”<sup>17</sup>

Newspapers, as Herndon wrote, were Lincoln’s “food,” fully as much as politics was his “life” and his “heaven.” But he did not hesitate to manipulate them to his own ends. Unlike previous presidents, he did not authorize the establishment (or adoption) of a Washington newspaper to be his administration’s “house organ.” Instead, he played off against each other the forty-odd Washington-based journalists who represented the Associated Press (Lawrence Gobright), the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (W. H. Painter), the *Cincinnati Times* (John Hickox), the *Boston Herald* (H. R. Tracy), the *New York Times* (Simon Hanscom), the *New York Herald* (A. S. Hill), the *New York Tribune* (E. F. Underhill), the *Chicago Tribune* (Horace White), and others, distributing inside scoops and inside information in proportion to the favorable press each was willing to give him. He courted newspaper editors, inviting Henry Raymond of the *New York Times* to the White House for a private interview and sending him away “full of admiration for the president, saying he had more clearly than anybody the issues of this matter in his mind”—all of which resulted in a series of what John Hay called “remarkable sensible articles which have appeared recently in the Times.” James Gordon Bennett, the editor of the *New York Herald*, was a much more difficult project, and so the offer of a diplomatic post was dangled in his path; ensuring the loyalty of Horace Greeley and the *New York Tribune* may have even involved a promise of a cabinet post. Occasionally, when favorable press did *not* appear, Lincoln could be “worried a good deal by what had been said in the newspapers,” especially “about my suspension of the writ of habeas corpus and the so-called arbitrary arrests that had followed,” and it “caused me to examine and reexamine the subject.” But it did not cause him to change his mind. To the contrary, on one occasion it cost editors their jobs. When the *New York World* and the *New York Journal of Commerce* were suckered into printing a bogus conscription proclamation in May 1864, Lincoln was so infuriated (because he really was contempt-



ing a new draft call) that he ordered the commandant of the Department of the East, John A. Dix, to arrest the owners and editors of the papers and shut down their publication.<sup>18</sup>

Lincoln loved the newspapers in more or less the same way he loved public opinion in general—pleased when it aligned itself with his ideas of right but dismissive when it didn't. "For newspaper public opinion he cared but little," William O. Stoddard recalled, and Nicolay actually thought that, apart from the Washington dailies, "the President rarely ever looks at any papers." The bulk of the newspaper attacks on his policies Lincoln dismissed as unworthy of reply, much less notice: "If the end brings me out all right, what is said against me won't amount to anything. If the end brings me out wrong, ten angels swearing I was right would make no difference." As it was, he was convinced the end would bring him out right. When John Hay would call "his attention to an article on some special subject," Lincoln would hold up his hand and say as he had said before, "I know more about that than any of them." He had his own course to steer, his own internal compass to mind. "They have never been friendly to me & don't know that this will make any special difference as to that," Lincoln once said to Hay about his critics. But "at all events, I must keep some consciousness of being somewhere near right: I must keep some standard of principle fixed within myself." This sounds nothing like deference to public opinion; it is scarcely even what can be called humility. But then again, as Hay remarked, "It is absurd to call him a modest man. No great man was ever modest. It was his intellectual arrogance and unconscious assumption of superiority that men . . . never could forgive."<sup>19</sup>

Lincoln might have been a "fatalist," but his fatalism did more to arm him against the ebb-and-flow of public opinion than it did to make him passive before it. Behind the protestations of being more the guided than the guide, Hay discovered that Lincoln could also be a "backwoods Jupiter" who "sits here and wields . . . the bolts of war and the machinery of government with a hand equally steady & equally firm. . . . He is managing this war . . . foreign relations, and planning a reconstruction of the Union, all at once. I never knew with what tyrannous authority he rules the Cabinet, til now. The most important things he decides and there is no cavil." Lot Morrill, a US senator from Maine, sensed from his encounters with Lincoln in Washington that "it was his policy to hold the nation true to the general aim" of the war, rather than the other way round and "to disregard petty deviations

and delays. . . . He moderated, guided, controlled or pushed ahead as he saw his opportunity” and “held the ship true to her course.”<sup>20</sup>

His regard for public opinion was thus ambivalent—sometimes bowing to it, sometimes disregarding it, and occasionally arguing his point with it. One thing he never imagined himself as being, however, was its oracle. Even at the outer limits of presidential authority, said Noah Brooks, Lincoln “liked to feel that he was the attorney of the people, not their ruler.” This stands in sharp contrast to post-Civil War progressivism’s recasting of the presidency as a vehicle for circumventing a leaden-footed Congress and the anointed embodiment of the general will. “Some of our Presidents have deliberately held themselves off from using the full power they might legitimately have used,” wrote Woodrow Wilson in *Constitutional Government in the United States* in 1908 (the same year James Bryce struggled to define “public opinion”). “They have held the strict literary theory of the Constitution, the Whig theory, the Newtonian theory” of checks and balances, of limited powers, of the paralysis of leadership. Wilson believed that “the President is at liberty, both in law and conscience, to be as big a man as he can,” and “if Congress be overborne by him, it will be . . . because the President has the nation behind him, and Congress has not.” Only by the forthright action of a president who saw himself as a walking plebiscite could the paralysis of federal action be cured and the true ills of the nation addressed. This may not be what the letter of the Constitution had in mind for the presidency. But “the Constitution of the United States is not a mere lawyers’ document,” Wilson argued, “it is a vehicle of life, and its spirit is always the spirit of the age.” Lincoln’s notion of the Constitution, however, was entirely that of a “lawyers’ document,” and the principles it was built upon (and articulated in the Declaration of Independence) were his responsibility to defend, even in the face of “the spirit of the age.” He expected “to maintain” the war for the Union “until successful, or till I die, or am conquered, or my term expires, or Congress or the country forsakes me”—but not to surrender it to public opinion or make himself the means of overriding it.<sup>21</sup>

The irony that stands behind this contrast, however, is that Lincoln, who was so cautious in his handling of public opinion, was apotheosized by it after his death, while Wilson, in reaching to make himself the *vox populi*, found himself decisively and savagely rejected by it. In the end, it was Lincoln’s cautious engagement with public opinion in a democracy,

not the overweening progressive confidence of Wilson that he could speak for it, that has enshrined him in the hearts—and public opinion—of people everywhere.

## Notes

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