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# Lincoln Speeches

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## **Roles**

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Guelzo, Allen C. *Lincoln Speeches*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2012).

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# Lincoln Speeches

## Description

As president, Abraham Lincoln endowed the American language with a vigor and moral energy that have all but disappeared from today's public rhetoric. His words are testaments of our history, windows into his enigmatic personality, and resonant examples of the writer's art. Renowned Lincoln and Civil War scholar Allen C. Guelzo brings together this volume of *Lincoln Speeches* that span the classic and obscure, the lyrical and historical, the inspirational and intellectual. The book contains everything from classic speeches that any citizen would recognize—the first debate with Stephen Douglas, the “House Divided” Speech, the Gettysburg Address, the Second Inaugural Address—to the less known ones that professed Lincoln fans will come to enjoy and intellectuals and critics praise. These orations show the contours of the civic dilemmas Lincoln, and America itself, encountered: the slavery issue, state v. federal power, citizens and their duty, death and destruction, the coming of freedom, the meaning of the Constitution, and what it means to progress. [From the publisher]

## Keywords

Abraham Lincoln, Civil War, rhetoric, emancipation, inaugural, Stephen Douglas, House Divided, Lincoln-Douglas Debates, Gettysburg Address, Emancipation Proclamation

## Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Military History | Political History | Rhetoric and Composition | Social History | Social Influence and Political Communication | Speech and Rhetorical Studies | United States History

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## Comments

Attached is the introduction of Dr. Allen C. Guelzo's book, *Lincoln's Speeches*.

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**INTRODUCTION**  
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Abraham Lincoln was not a naturally gifted speaker. His law partner of fourteen years, William Henry Herndon, remembered that "Lincoln's voice was, when he first began speaking, shrill, squeaking, piping, unpleasant." He had no formal education as a speaker—or much education at all, for that matter—and was wary of speaking off-the-cuff lest his rough-hewn mannerisms wear through the thin professional patina he had poured over them. On the night before his most famous speech, he declined a call for him "to make a speech" because "in my position it is somewhat important that I should not say any foolish things."<sup>1</sup>

And yet, no one in American political history stands taller as a maker of speeches than Abraham Lincoln. He was not the most attractive speaker, to judge by the first impressions he made on listeners. But he understood that, in the civic framework of a democracy, the art of speaking was a necessary component of popular government. "Our government rests in public opinion," Lincoln said in 1856. And how could it be otherwise (he explained in 1859), because "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 Govern-

ment, what lies at the bottom of it all, is public opinion.” Within that framework, no one in American public life gave clearer voice to the beauties of democracy, to the supremacy of natural rights over social status, to the moral foundations of politics, and to the practice of humility, perspective, and resilience as the hallmarks of democratic leadership. And whatever Lincoln lacked in grace and style as a speaker, he more than compensated for it by his deployment of logic, commonly acknowledged authority, wit, and clarity, along with a natural literary flair. Illinois judge David Davis (who presided over the Eighth Judicial Circuit, where Lincoln practiced as a lawyer) rated Lincoln as “the best stump speaker in the State.” Even though Lincoln suffered from “the want of an early education,” he “has great powers as a speaker,” and another legal associate of many years, Leonard Swett, warned that “any man who took Abe Lincoln for a simple-minded man would soon wake up with his back in a ditch.”<sup>2</sup>

Lincoln’s long suit as a speaker was not drama, but persuasion. Mary Cunningham Logan, who heard Lincoln in his series of debates with Stephen A. Douglas in 1858, thought that Douglas “won your personal support by the magnetism of his personality,” but Lincoln “seemed able to brush away all irrelevant matters of discussion, and to be earnestly and simply logical.” Give them each five minutes, and Douglas “would make the greater impression.” Give them an hour, “and the contrary would be true.” For Lincoln, the key to this persuasion was clarity. He cultivated what the philologist George Perkins Marsh called, in 1859, “the Saxon element”—an “archaic” simplicity (similar to the King James Bible and Shakespeare’s plays), along with repeti-

tion and reformulation, parallelism and antithesis, and the use of proverbial formulas. "Lincoln always struggled to see the thing or the idea exactly and to express that idea in such language as to convey that idea precisely," Herndon recalled. He was, as John Todd Stuart (his first law partner) described him, "philosophical—logical—mathematical."<sup>3</sup>

What little training Lincoln could be said to have had in speaking came from five sources: his strongly Calvinistic family's memorization and recitation of the Bible, an early fascination with Shakespeare, the texts of political speeches printed in small-circulation newspapers and read aloud in community gatherings, the "readers" and "preceptors" that formed the bulk of schoolroom textbooks in America in the early nineteenth century, and the raw necessity of convincing juries. He had some practical preparation through participation in a "debating club" when he moved to New Salem, Illinois, in "1832 or 1833," and it was in 1832 that he gave what was probably his first political speech, as a candidate for the Illinois state legislature at "a sale of goods" in the now-defunct village of Papsville, Illinois:

Gentlemen and Fellow-Citizens: I presume you all know who I am. I am humble Abraham Lincoln. I have been solicited by many friends to become a candidate for the legislature. My politics are short and sweet like the old woman's dance. I am in favor of a national bank. I am in favor of the internal improvement system and a high protective tariff. These are my sentiments and political principles. If elected, I shall be thankful; if not it will be all the same.<sup>4</sup>

But the most potent influence on Lincoln as a speaker was the political culture of the Whig Party, whose policies favoring a “national bank,” the “internal improvement system,” and “a high protective tariff” were Lincoln’s banner all through his political career. The Whigs, organized in the 1830s by Henry Clay (whom Lincoln considered as his “beau ideal of a statesman”), were the party of middle-class entrepreneurs, as severely rational in their politics and speech as they were in economic calculation. It was the badge of Clay’s Whigs to appeal, not to “the feelings and passions of our Countrymen,” but “to their reasons and their judgment.” This stood in rhetorical (as well as economic and political) contrast to the Democratic Party, whose figurehead in Lincoln’s youth was the formidable Andrew Jackson. “Old Hickory” was unapologetic for his violence and coarseness of speech. Lincoln, in his search for precision, emotional restraint, and persuasive logic, would labor to act an entirely different political part. Even after the death of the Whig Party in the 1850s, and Lincoln’s alignment with the new Republican Party, he continued to speak like “an old-line Henry Clay Whig.”<sup>5</sup>

Lincoln never wrote a book. He dabbled in poetry and journalism, but almost all of what composes the standard collections of Lincoln’s writings are either letters or speeches. But the boundary between his *writings* and *speeches* was a porous one. In many cases before his election to the presidency in 1860, the speeches are only transcripts taken down in a more or less haphazard fashion by newspaper reporters and editors who heard him speak, as they did in the campaign speech he delivered in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1848, or his Lewis-

town, Illinois, speech on the Declaration of Independence. The great debates with Stephen A. Douglas in 1858 that made Lincoln nationally famous were unrehearsed and unscripted, but they were taken down with unusual precision in shorthand and published word for word in the Chicago newspapers within forty-eight hours.

But a number of what we regard as Lincoln's "speeches" were never actually spoken by him. His annual messages to Congress (what are now known as presidential "State of the Union" speeches) were not delivered before Congress, or anywhere else; they were sent in written form to the Senate and House of Representatives to be read by a clerk, and then printed by vote of Congress. On the other hand, some of what are characterized as Lincoln's writings were intended for delivery as speeches. The "public letter" he wrote to James Cook Conkling in 1863 was Lincoln's response to an invitation by Conkling (an old political friend and fellow lawyer in Springfield) to address a pro-administration "mass meeting" in Springfield. Nevertheless, he expected it to be read aloud to the rally, and instructed Conkling in exactly how he wanted it read. "You are one of the best public readers. I have but one suggestion. Read it very slowly." In fact, Conkling arranged to have it performed as a sort of political tableau, with another lawyer reading it aloud to Conkling, on the platform, with the rally's attendees as the audience.<sup>6</sup>

There are also several important statements of Lincoln's that may have been both written *and* spoken material. The 1837 protest against slavery, which he and Daniel Stone presented to the Illinois legislature, may have been read aloud and then submitted in writing, or simply the latter. His lengthy interview with John W. Crisfield on emancipation was certainly delivered orally to Crisfield alone, but with the expectation

that Crisfield would, in turn, re-present those comments in approximately the same form to Congress (which Crisfield did) and then in print. Lincoln's "address" on colonization to a delegation of African American church pastors from the District of Columbia was evidently well rehearsed, but our only record of it is a lengthy newspaper summary—and yet, a summary that Lincoln was clearly expecting the newspapers to disseminate widely. His letter to Kentucky newspaper editor Albert Hodges in 1864 is actually Lincoln's own rehearsal of comments he delivered orally to Hodges and two others. Yet, Lincoln obviously intended that his letter should be circulated by Hodges in print as if it *had* been a speech—as in some senses it was.

Always wary of misstatement, Lincoln only infrequently spoke without notes, although one example of this seems to be the comments he made at Independence Hall on Washington's birthday in 1861. He had already made a set speech that morning, and the words he uttered outside at a flag-raising ceremony were probably spontaneous and unprepared. The responses Lincoln gave to "serenades" from groups of political well-wishers on the White House grounds also have the feel of being impromptu utterances. And yet it is hard to believe that, given their content, Lincoln had given no thought to them beforehand, so we have to assume that behind the utterance was something worked out on paper.

His greatest speeches were those for which he meticulously prepared written manuscripts beforehand. In his first "annual message" in 1861, he actually recycles substantial amounts of material from an address to the Wisconsin State Agricultural Fair in 1859. The great



Peoria speech of October 16, 1854, was a carefully structured affair, with fine attention to detail, and captures all of the themes that became salient to Lincoln's life in the 1850s and 1860s—his hatred of slavery, his fear that slavery was polluting the American commitment to democratic republicanism and the Declaration of Independence, and his conviction that the Kansas-Nebraska Act (and the doctrine of “popular sovereignty” that Stephen A. Douglas had written into it) would be the back channel by which slavery established itself in the new western territories. If everything else Lincoln wrote or said were somehow lost, the survival alone of this speech would allow us to reconstruct almost in full the shape of Lincoln's political thought: the clear commitment of the Founders to liberty, his “zeal” for protecting the example of the American democracy in an age dominated by monarchies, his determined evenhandedness, and his belief in a moral law that must undergird and surround politics.

Lincoln had, as the 1837 protest illustrates, always regarded slavery as an evil. But he had worked on the assumption that the intentions of the Founders (to which he appealed in the Cooper Union speech) and the provisions of the Missouri Compromise of 1820 (designed by Henry Clay) were both intended to secure the gradual extinction of slavery. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, as he demonstrated in the “House Divided” speech, was a rude awakening to the truth that slaveholders in the Southern states and their Democratic political allies in the North intended no such thing.

Little of Lincoln's animus against slavery was generated by any feeling of deep racial empathy for enslaved

blacks, nor was he enthused about reform movements, especially those that demanded immediate implementation of absolute moral solutions without counting their cost (something he made clear in his speech to the Washington Temperance Society, in his Worcester speech in 1848, and in his eulogy for Henry Clay in 1852). Like Clay, he believed that a system of gradual emancipation, complete with paid compensation to slave owners and followed by colonization, was the most fitting "solution" to the black "problem." What Lincoln feared most about slavery was the threat it posed to white laborers, who would find themselves increasingly reduced to near-feudalism as a system of inflexible race-based labor fostered a similarly inflexible system of class immobility. And if there was one thing that Lincoln prized above all in American democracy, it was the open-ended opportunities for self-transformation offered by liberal capitalism—virtues that he was at pains to describe in his speeches in Milwaukee in 1859 and New Haven, Connecticut, a year later. But the hard experience of the Civil War taught him that few slaveholders—even in the northernmost "border states" where slavery was at its weakest—were willing to surrender even to gradual, compensated emancipation. At that point, he turned to military force to destroy slavery, opened service in the federal armies to freed slaves, and finally committed himself, as much as the presidency would legally allow, to civil equality for black Americans.

He never accepted the notion that the American Union was a loose confederation, bound only by self-interest, or the idea that democracy could survive free-will withdrawals whenever democratic decision making became difficult. His greatest fear for the future of the American republic, as far back as his speech on "The

Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions" in 1838, was that it would self-destruct, and his two "messages" to Congress in 1861 powerfully set out the case for the Civil War as "a people's contest," which would show that democracies really could protect themselves from internal disruption as readily as from outside invasion. At the summit of his eloquence, in the brief dedication remarks at the creation of the Soldiers National Cemetery at Gettysburg in November 1863, he was adamant that the war was not some petty political squabble, but a stress test of the durability of the very idea of popular government, or any government "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." If the American republic could not hold together, then the whole democratic experiment would be called into question, just as the fall of the Berlin Wall sounded the knell for communism. The driving force behind the Gettysburg remarks, as well as so much else in Lincoln's speeches, was the peril posed to any democracy by a forgetfulness of the string of political values about equality, natural rights, and the ordinary competence of ordinary people to manage their own affairs that were the heart of a democratic order.

Yet, in the end, with victory in sight, Lincoln revealed no trace of vindictiveness. His second inaugural, delivered as the Confederate rebellion was finally expiring, was a surprisingly frank rebuke to anyone inclined to look upon the impending Northern triumph as some vindication of Yankee supremacy. Slavery was a crime for which all Americans had to answer, and the war was the penance imposed upon all. From the ashes of that purgatory, he insisted, must arise "malice toward none, charity for all." Five weeks later, he was dead from an assassin's bullet, and without his words as pillars of fire and cloud, there was an abundance of malice, and

charity for only a very few. Still, in the record that remained, Lincoln had carved democracy's tables of stone. As Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner—often his opponent, frequently his critic, occasionally his friend—said, Lincoln had “made speeches that nobody else could have made. . . . Therefore, we honor him, & Fame takes him by the hand.”<sup>7</sup>

ALLEN C. GUELZO