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Foreword to "How We Elected Lincoln: Personal Recollections"

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Foreword

KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON

Just after the election of 1856, the Supreme Court, in the *Dred Scott* case, stepped into an ongoing Congressional debate to rule that Congress could not bar slavery in the territories. Nor, said the decision, could the legislatures in the territories themselves. The year before the election of 1860, John Brown's attempt to inspire a slave rebellion led to his execution.

In 1860 there were four major candidates for president: Abraham Lincoln, heading the Republican ticket; Stephen A. Douglas, the champion of the popular sovereignty Democrats; John Bell, of the Constitutional Party; and John C. Breckinridge, the nominee of the Southern Democrats.

Breckinridge favored protecting slavery in the territories. The contest came down to Lincoln versus Breckinridge, South versus North and West. Indeed, Lincoln and his running mate Hannibal Hamlin did not even appear on ballots in the South.

After a bitter election Abraham Lincoln won the Electoral College decisively by carrying the states of the West and North. But, taken together, the three other contenders garnered a larger popular vote than did “the Rail Splitter” from Illinois. The composition of the vote forecast the future. Here was a nation divided by region. Eighteen slave-free states supported Lincoln; eleven slave states backed Breckinridge. Douglas, who memorably had debated Lincoln over slavery and union in their earlier contest for the Senate, received only 12 electoral votes. In December 1860, after the ballots had been cast but before Lincoln had been officially notified of his election, South Carolina seceded from the union. The *Charleston Mercury*’s headline declared on December 20 of that year, “The Union Is Dissolved.”¹ Other states followed.

On February 26, 1861, Abraham Lincoln replied to the Committee of Congress reporting the Electoral Count by writing “with deep gratitude to my countrymen for this mark of their confidence; with a distrust of my own ability to perform the

required duty under the most favorable circumstances, now rendered doubly difficult by existing national perils; yet with a firm reliance on the strength of our free government, and the ultimate loyalty of the people to the just principles upon which it is founded, and above all an unshaken trust in the Supreme Ruler of the nations, I accept this trust.”²

In his March 4, 1861, inaugural address Lincoln declared, “In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. . . . You have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the Government, while I shall have the most solemn one to ‘PRESERVE, PROTECT, AND DEFEND IT.’” Fortunately for Lincoln, the mass audience was far more likely to read his words than hear them. Until the advent of radio more than a half century later, political speech created its impact when it was read by the public in newspapers. Of the first inaugural, one observer noted, “Mr. Lincoln was pale and very nervous, and did not read his address very well. His spectacles troubled him, his position was crowded and uncomfortable, and, in short, nothing has been done to render the performance of this great duty either dignified in effect or, physically speaking, easy for the President. The great crowd in the grounds behaved very well, but mani-

fested little or no enthusiasm.”³ Then, as now, impressions of politics are shaped by partisan predispositions. In *How We Elected Lincoln*, Lincoln enthusiast Abram Dittenhoefer recalls instead, “The President impressed me as being serious in manner. His voice sounded shrill, but he was talking at high pitch in order that he might be heard by as many as possible of the immense crowd. Little by little his auditors warmed toward him, until finally the applause became overwhelming, spontaneous, and enthusiastic. Then, for the first time, it dawned on me that Lincoln . . . [was] one of the few great men of all times; and I may say safely that my conviction was shared by all within hearing of his voice” (pp. 49–50). Little more than a month later, on April 12, 1861, the Confederates fired the first rocket on the Union’s Fort Sumter. Barely four years later, on April 14, 1865, Lincoln was shot.

Abram J. Dittenhoefer’s *How We Elected Lincoln* is a first-hand account of the campaigns that twice secured the presidency for Lincoln. Known as a “Southerner with Northern principles” (p. 1), Dittenhoefer’s account testifies to the importance of rhetoric in the country’s conflict over slavery. “My convictions were irrevocably changed,” he writes, “by reading of [Ohio Senator Benjamin F.] Wade’s speech” (pp. 4–5).

Although more a testament to Lincoln's greatness than a dispassionate account, the book provides a window on the process of electing and reelecting a president a century and a half ago. "Fraudulent voting prevailed to a large extent" (p. 4). Marching clubs, known as "Wide Awakes," paraded through towns. Candidates' biographies were reduced to identifying labels. "The appellation of Pathfinder was given to [Gen. John C.] Fremont because in earlier years he had explored the then hardly known Western territory, with the aid of scouts and pioneers, and had indicated passes and routes through the mountains" (p. 6). Slogans abounded. "'Free Speech, Free Soil, Free Men, and Fremont!' These words were shouted at all public meetings and in all public processions." Then, as now, slogans digested the central message of a campaign. "Indeed the [Fremont] cry was a stump speech in itself" (p. 7). The link between electioneering and entertainment was strong, with barbecues being "the usual accompaniment of a political campaign" (p. 7). Money mattered as well. "It is doubtful if the National Committee had more than \$100,000 to spend, and most of this went for printing and postage. . . . Had it been necessary for Mr. Lincoln or his managers to raise a half-million dollars, or go down to defeat, Lincoln would have lost out" (p. 39).

Change the names, update the language, and Dittenhoefer's complaints about attacks by the other side and by the partisan press sound remarkably current. "Denunciation of Lincoln by Democratic spellbinders was of the bitterest character. Newspapers affiliated with the antiwar party criticized every act of the administration and belittled the conduct of the war by Federal generals in the field" (p. 92). So, too, do accusations of pandering. "The great Daniel Webster had ruined his political career some years previously by trying to be 'all things to all men' politically" (p. 19).

Then, as now, candidates offered subtle and obvious allusions to their religious faith. "Lincoln was fond of quoting from the Bible without mentioning the fact, whereas Douglas was often caught differing with the Scriptures. Naturally Lincoln took advantage of his political opponent's lack of Biblical knowledge" (p. 11).

The corruption of the system that concerns us has parallels in the past as well. So, for example, Dittenhoefer decries the presence of "commercial grafters and alleged statesmen, every one of whom was in politics for personal profit" (p. 69).

In sum, this admiring account of the political campaigns and presidency of Abraham Lincoln is a useful window on a consequential time in the nation's history and a helpful confirmation of how

the process by which we elect a president has changed and how it has remained the same.

Notes

1. Oliver Gramling, *AP: The Story of News* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1940), p. 37.

2. Reprinted in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 4, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), p. 246.

3. Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, 4 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1939), 1, p. 123.

