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Why Abraham Lincoln Was a Whig

DANIEL WALKER HOWE

Abraham Lincoln's Whig party loyalty is not part of the popular legend of this great president. That legend took shape in the years after the Civil War and was fostered by the Republican party, whose interest it served. Republican spokesmen were concerned to define their cause as the party of the victorious Union, not merely as the successor to the Whigs. The Grand Old Party had no reason to want to share the mantle of the Great Emancipator with the defunct Whigs. Later, during the twentieth century, those attracted to the Lincoln legend were often D/democrats—with both a capital and lower-case *D*—to whom Lincoln's Whig identity seemed an anomaly, even an embarrassment, something to be minimized or explained away. If only he had been a Jacksonian, one feels, such admirers could have understood him so much better.¹

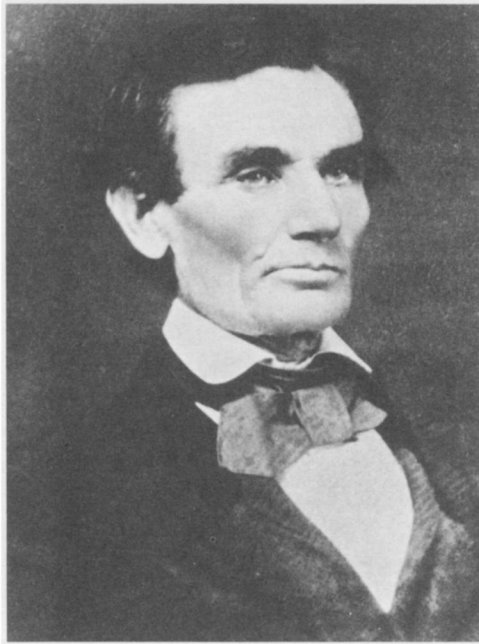
But in stubborn historical reality, Lincoln was a Whig for more years than he was a Republican, and a loyal Whig too. He joined the party as a young man, as soon as it was formed, and became one of a faithful band of Whig members in the Illinois state legislature from 1834 to 1841. He campaigned hard for Harrison in 1840, headed the Illinois campaigns of Henry Clay in 1844 and Zachary Taylor in 1848, and would have been a presidential elector in 1852 had Winfield Scott carried Illinois.² In the light of Lincoln's later career, it is particularly noteworthy that in 1848, faced with the challenge of the Free Soil party, Lincoln went on a campaign tour of Massachusetts, working hard to keep New England's antislavery Whigs from defecting to the ticket of Martin Van Buren and Charles Francis Adams.³

How does one explain the attraction that the Whig party had for Lincoln? In the first place, of course, the policies of the party, particularly its support for government aid to internal improvements,

1. For a perfect example, see James G. Randall, *Lincoln the Liberal Statesman* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1947), 175–206.

2. See Joel H. Silbey, "'Always a Whig in Politics': The Partisan Life of Abraham Lincoln," *Papers of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 8 (1986): 21–42.

3. See Sheldon H. Harris, "Abraham Lincoln Stumps a Yankee Audience," *New England Quarterly* 38 (1965): 227–33.

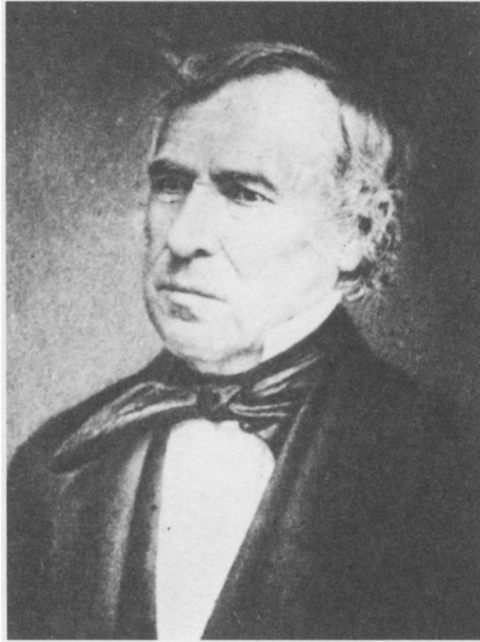


Photograph of Abraham Lincoln, April 25,
1858, taken by Samuel G. Alschuler
in Urbana, Illinois

commended themselves to him. They seemed to him to hold out hope for the economic development of the West. Yet the Whig economic program does not, in itself, provide a completely sufficient answer to the question of why Lincoln was a Whig. After all, most of his fellow citizens of Illinois were not persuaded by the Whig platforms. The area around Springfield, whose voters returned the Whig Lincoln to the state legislature and (once) to Congress, was an exception to the rule that Illinois was a predominantly Democratic state. Why was Lincoln's political response different from that of a majority of Illinoisans?

Lincoln's Whiggery does not lend itself readily to an ethnoreligious interpretation.⁴ Lincoln came from a poor southern farming family, one that we might expect would yield followers of Andrew Jackson. He did not belong to any religious denomination. And when eth-

4. Also noticed by Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 19.



Zachary Taylor, elected president on the Whig ticket in 1848

noreligious politics became explicit in the nativist movement, Lincoln emphatically repudiated it.

Recently, in order to understand the second party system, historians have applied the anthropological concept of the interaction between culture and personality. This can be a fruitful line of inquiry into Lincoln's party affiliation. Robert Kelley, for example, connects Lincoln's Whiggery with his rejection of the frontier rural environment and his quest for a better life: "In a hard-drinking frontier society, [Lincoln] avoided alcohol and counseled temperance. Surrounded by cigars and spittoons, he did not smoke or chew. In a violent society obsessed with guns, he would not even use them to hunt. Believing that only those who paid taxes should vote, he opposed universal manhood suffrage. In an aggressively male society, he advocated votes for women. Abraham Lincoln was a Whig, one must conclude, because he preferred what Whigs believed to be a more civilized way of life."⁵

5. Robert Kelley, "Ideology and Political Culture from Jefferson to Nixon," *American Historical Review* 82 (June 1977): 545.

In this view, Lincoln's choice of a political party was connected with his pursuit of a new personal identity. It was related to his ambition to "make something of himself" as he would have put it—a program that impelled him to distance himself from his origins.

It was other people, and not Lincoln himself, who celebrated the great man's humble background. "It is a great piece of folly to attempt to make anything out of my early life," Lincoln is reported to have told a campaign biographer who approached him for information. "It can all be condensed into a single sentence and that sentence you will find in Gray's *Elegy*—'The short and simple annals of the poor.'"⁶ Although Abraham Lincoln fondly recalled his stepmother, Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln, he had remarkably little to say about his natural mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, who died when he was nine. He seems to have felt ashamed of her, not only because he believed her illegitimate, but also because he feared (wrongly) that she was not legally married to his father.⁷ The little that has come to light about Abraham's relationship with his father, Thomas Lincoln, does not indicate that it was a close one. (When Thomas lay dying in 1851, Abraham refused to visit him and did not attend the funeral, either.)⁸ What distanced Abraham from his parents was probably his ambition for education. Thomas, Nancy, and Sarah were all functional illiterates, and Abraham complained that they had offered their children "absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education."⁹

For Lincoln, education was not merely a matter of acquiring marketable skills; it was a process of self-realization. The historian Gabor S. Boritt has pointed out that Lincoln's support for the economic program of the Whig party dovetailed nicely with his desire to encourage upward social mobility. The Whigs tried to promote economic development and diversification, which Lincoln believed would open new opportunities for individual economic advancement.¹⁰ But the creation of economic opportunities was only one facet of Lincoln's program for personal development.

6. Quoted in William H. Herndon and Jesse Weik, *Abraham Lincoln* (1892; repr. New York: D. Appleton, 1917), 2.

7. William E. Barton, *The Lineage of Lincoln* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1929), established that Lincoln's parents were legally married.

8. Roy P. Basler, ed., Marion Dolores Pratt and Lloyd A. Dunlap, asst. eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953–55), 2:96f (hereafter cited as *Collected Works*).

9. *Collected Works*, 3:511.

10. Gabor S. Boritt, "The Right to Rise," in *The Public and the Private Lincoln*, ed. Cullom Davis et al. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), 57–70.



Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln was one of many people of his era who devoted their attention to the conscious construction of the self. To many in the twentieth century, the language of their time—the celebration of the “self-made man,” the triumph of purpose over weakness or adversity—has become trite, a set of irritating platitudes.¹¹ For Lincoln’s generation, however, it provided a vocabulary to discuss the meaning of life. Abraham Lincoln was a Whig because he aspired to recast himself in a certain mold. As the historian Louise Stevenson has described that mold, “Whiggery stood for the triumph of the cosmopolitan and national over the provincial and local, of rational order over irrational spontaneity, of school-based learning over traditional folkways and customs, and of self-control over self-expression.”¹² Lacking the institutional help of formal schooling, Lincoln substituted willpower and pursued his education on his own.

11. See Richard Hofstadter’s sardonic essay, “Abraham Lincoln and the Self-Made Myth,” in his *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 93–136.

12. Louise Stevenson, *Scholarly Means to Evangelical Ends: The New Haven Scholars*

Recently, the historian Lawrence Frederick Kohl has borrowed a vocabulary from modern social science to try to characterize the personalities of the followers of the opposing parties of the so-called Jacksonian Era. He terms the Whigs “inner-directed” personality types, and the Democrats “tradition-directed.”¹³ Although there is much evidence to commend a distinction between Whigs and Democrats in terms of their personality ideals, Kohl’s categorization presents problems. Formulated by David Riesman and others in the 1950s, the concept of “inner direction” assumes that the character is guided by a mental “gyroscope” set spinning irrevocably by parental conditioning in childhood.¹⁴ Whigs like Lincoln, on the other hand, saw character-building as a challenge continuing throughout life. Frequently, as in Lincoln’s case, it involved transcending the cultural limitations of the early environment. And to call the Democrats “tradition-directed” when their party celebrated such untraditional ideals as the equality and natural rights of all white men is surely unsatisfactory.

If we are to try to sum up the characterological contrast between Whigs and Democrats, perhaps it is best to distinguish between the “artificial” and the “natural” personality. The Whigs celebrated the artificial ideal; the Democrats, the natural one. This distinction has the advantage of being a contrast that the participants themselves would have readily understood. Both traditions descended from Thomas Jefferson and proudly claimed him as patron. Jefferson had celebrated human nature in its uncorrupted purity but had also demanded its proper nurture through widespread public education. Beginning with the opposition between Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams, the two halves of Jefferson’s vision, nature and nurture, were pitted against each other in partisan rhetoric.¹⁵

The character type that Lincoln respected and pursued was artificial—the conscious, willed creation of the individual participant. Lincoln not only pursued that character type in private life, but he

and the Transformation of Higher Learning in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 5–6.

13. Lawrence Frederick Kohl, *The Politics of Individualism: Parties and the American Character in the Jacksonian Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

14. David Riesman, with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950 and subsequent editions).

15. On the “natural man” ideal of the Democratic party, see John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson, Symbol for an Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955); on the Whig personality type, see Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

also celebrated it in public. To put it another way, Lincoln preached what he practiced. Three of Lincoln's public speeches can be examined for what they reveal about his character ideal and its connection with Whig party principles: his Lyceum Address, his Temperance Address, and his eulogy for Henry Clay.

In an 1838 address to the members of the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Lincoln warned that because American democracy could never be overthrown by a foreign invader, the only enemy to be feared was one within: undisciplined passion. Pointing to several recent examples of frontier lynchings, Lincoln deplored "the increasing disregard for law which pervades the country; the growing disposition to substitute the wild and furious passions, in lieu of the sober judgment of the Courts; and the worse than savage mobs, for the executive ministers of justice."¹⁶

In the political tradition Lincoln inherited, the "passions" were both dangerous and strong; it was the task of responsible individuals, allied with political institutions, to keep them under control. The goal was the maintenance of rational balance, both in the individual personality and in the body politic. To let undisciplined passions gain dominance would be to open the door to mob rule. This was how the authors of the Federalist Papers had explained it when calling for the establishment of the Constitution in 1788; and fifty years later, Lincoln used exactly the same language in calling for the preservation of that Constitution. His 1838 address echoes their call to subordinate passion to reason.¹⁷

Lincoln warned his fellow young men that during the generations to come, ambitious demagogues would seek to prey upon the passions of the people unless these were kept under stern control. "Passion has helped us" in rallying the people to the cause of the Revolution, Lincoln acknowledged, "but can do so no more. It will in future be our enemy." He cautioned, "Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defence." Only by the control of passion could American democracy keep from degenerating into anarchy or demagoguery. When Lincoln declared that America would stand or fall by "the capability

16. *Collected Works*, 1:108–15; quotation on 109. There is a psychoanalytic interpretation of this speech in George B. Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age* (New York: Norton, 1979), chap. 2. A more comprehensive examination is provided by Major L. Wilson, "Lincoln and Van Buren in the Steps of the Fathers: Another Look at the Lyceum Address," *Civil War History* 29 (1983): 197–211.

17. Daniel W. Howe, "The Political Psychology of *The Federalist*," *William and Mary Quarterly* 44 (1987): 485–509.

of a people to govern themselves," he meant this in both a political and a psychological sense.¹⁸

A few years later, in 1842, in an address to the local temperance society called the Washingtonians, Lincoln gave his renewed endorsement to self-discipline. It was clear to him that "the world would be vastly benefitted by a total and final banishment from it of all intoxicating drinks." Once again, he drew analogies between the psychological and the political. Comparing the American Revolution with what he termed the "temperance revolution," Lincoln declared that in the latter, "We shall find a stronger bondage broken; a viler slavery, manumitted; a greater tyrant deposed." Lincoln was speaking to reformed alcoholics, people who had succeeded in re-taking control over their own lives and passions. "Even though unlearned in letters," they exemplified the virtues of self-control that society so sorely needed, and hence "for this task, none others are so well educated." For Lincoln, education meant self-realization. A whole society of such self-constructed people would be an exciting prospect. "Happy day, when, all appetites controlled, all passions subdued, all matters subjected, *mind*, all conquering *mind*, shall live and move the monarch of the world."¹⁹ This was as close as Lincoln ever got to millennial metaphor. His vision of a good society built upon disciplined control of the passions was shared by other prominent Whigs of Lincoln's generation, such as Dorothea Dix, Horace Mann, and his own idol, Henry Clay.

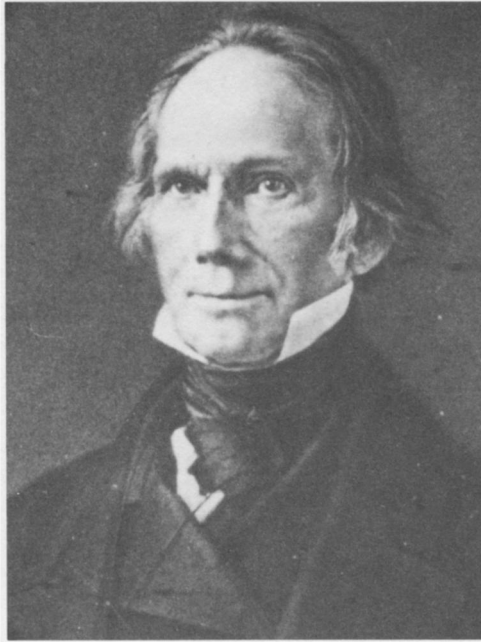
Lincoln's early Whiggery was bound up with his admiration for the Kentuckian Clay, "my beau ideal of a statesman," as Lincoln called him. Clay's integrated economic program, termed "the American System," won Lincoln's endorsement. Clay was a role model as well as a political leader for Lincoln; he, too, was a self-educated, self-made man. "During my whole political life, I have loved and revered [Clay] as a teacher and leader," Lincoln acknowledged after his election as president.²⁰ Clay was a well-known figure among Springfield Whigs, many of whom, like Lincoln himself, came originally from Kentucky.²¹ Perhaps Lincoln found in Clay a father figure more satisfactory than his real father. In 1842 Lincoln married into the Kentucky patriciate, just as Clay had done earlier. His marriage to Mary Todd strengthened Lincoln's ties to the Clay wing of the

18. *Collected Works*, 1:115, 113; italics in original.

19. *Ibid.*, 1:271-79; quotations on 276 and 279.

20. *Ibid.*, 3:29, 4:184.

21. Among them was Lincoln's first law partner, John Todd Stuart, a cousin of Lincoln's future wife Mary Todd.



Henry Clay

Whig party, for his wife's family were on good personal terms with their senator.

When Clay died in 1852, Lincoln delivered a eulogy for him, although it was the kind of speech Lincoln seldom gave. Orations at such occasions were typically flowery and replete with learned allusions; they were more congenial to scholarly Whig gentlemen such as Edward Everett and Daniel Webster than to autodidacts like Lincoln and Clay. (Lincoln noted in the course of his address that Clay himself "never delivered a Fourth of July Oration, or an eulogy on an occasion like this.") That Lincoln was willing to accept this unusual assignment was a measure of the unique regard he felt for his dead hero.²²

Mark Neely has shown how most of the many eulogies for Clay treated him in nonpartisan terms as a religious person, a nationalist, a mediator of conflict, a man who had risen from humble origins, and one who had learned to control his passions.²³ Most of the

22. *Collected Works*, 2:121–32; quotation on 126. Two years before, Lincoln had delivered a eulogy for another Whig hero, President Zachary Taylor.

23. Mark E. Neely, Jr., "American Nationalism in the Image of Henry Clay:

eulogists were Whigs, naturally enough, and these themes permitted them to affirm Whig values while remaining overtly nonpartisan. Lincoln's eulogy shares some of these characteristics but is also distinctive in other ways. As a type of the eulogy genre, it was not highly regarded by contemporaries, nor by most historians until Neely called attention to it.

Lincoln began by identifying the dead statesman with America itself. Speaking on July 6, Lincoln was synthesizing the eulogy with another popular art form, the Independence Day Address.²⁴ Clay's qualities and virtues were those of America, and the death of Clay by implication raised the question of America's survival as a nation. Only by perpetuating the personal and political virtues Clay had embodied would the Union be perpetuated. Scrupulously nonpartisan, Lincoln quoted at great length from a Democratic newspaper eulogy of Clay. (Not surprisingly, this newspaper praised the Compromise of 1850, which northern Democrats had generally supported, and hinted that Stephen A. Douglas, Illinois' leading Democrat, would inherit Clay's mantle as the Great Compromiser of the next generation.)²⁵

Henry Clay had had to educate himself as best he could throughout his life, Lincoln noted. "Mr. Clay's lack of a more perfect early education, however it may be regretted generally, teaches at least one profitable lesson; it teaches that in this country, one can scarcely be so poor, but that, if he *will*, he *can* acquire sufficient education to get through the world respectably."

For Lincoln, Clay illustrated the power of self-determination, the relationship between *will* and *can*. Yet Lincoln did not devalue book-learning (as many self-educated people have done): To lack formal education was in itself regrettable, even if one could partially compensate for it through willpower.

Clay's personality illustrated the virtues of balance. "He owed his preeminence to no one quality, but to a fortunate combination of several," Lincoln explained. Eloquence, sound judgment, and will-

Abraham Lincoln's Eulogy on Henry Clay in Context," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 73 (1975): 31-60.

24. As pointed out by Neely, "American Nationalism," 55. In 1852, the Fourth of July fell on a Sunday and so would have been generally observed on Monday the fifth. Tuesday the sixth was the first day available for the memorial service. Clay having died on June 29, Lincoln had only a week to prepare his address. See Benjamin P. Thomas, *Lincoln, 1847-1853: Being the Day-by-Day Activities of Abraham Lincoln* (Springfield: Abraham Lincoln Association, 1936), 288-89.

25. The newspaper is not identified in Basler's edition of *Collected Works*. It would be nice to discover its identity.

power were the three qualities Lincoln identified: "No one of them is very uncommon, but all taken together are rarely combined in a single individual." Clay put his talents at the service of the Union and balanced its components as carefully as he did his own. "In the construction of his measures he ever carefully surveyed every part of the field, and duly weighed every conflicting interest." Yet, the nation was not an end itself, any more than Clay's personal ambition was mere self-aggrandizement. "He loved his country partly because it was his own country, but mostly because it was a free country; and he burned with zeal for its advancement, prosperity, and glory, because in saw in such, the advancement, prosperity and glory, of human liberty, human right, and human nature."²⁶

Henry Clay was a good man and a heroic model, Lincoln showed, because he had devoted his life to the service of his country. But the country, for its part, was good because it served the interests of the people who lived in it. It was a free country, but even freedom was not entirely an end in itself. Freedom was good, Lincoln suggested, because it was a necessary condition for the advancement of "human nature." A free country provided people with an opportunity to pursue self-development.²⁷

Lincoln identified himself with Clay, and in this description of Clay's patriotism he had perfectly described his own. Lincoln, too, loved America mostly because it was a country dedicated to freedom. Lincoln's eulogy praises Clay as a moderate statesman who avoided the extremes of abolitionism on the one hand and proslavery militancy on the other. A practical politician himself, Lincoln characteristically defined his own positions as centrist. Even some of the specific issues that Lincoln would have to deal with in the future are prefigured in this remarkable oration. The eulogy goes on to credit Clay with taking a constructive interest in resolving the problem of American slavery. The plan Clay favored was compensated emancipation followed by the emigration of the freed people to designated overseas colonies such as Liberia. In years to come Lincoln would have occasion to entertain this proposal before abandoning it. The eulogy praises Clay's great Missouri Compromise of 1820, and before long Lincoln would be defending that very compromise against first the Kansas-Nebraska bill and then the Dred Scott decision.

26. *Ibid.*, 3:126.

27. On Lincoln's Whig ideals, see also Laura Smith Porter, "The Last, Best Hope of Earth": Abraham Lincoln's Perception of the Mission of America, 1834-1854," *Illinois Historical Journal* 78 (1985): 207-16.

Thus, Lincoln's public statements, like his private practice, demonstrate the value he placed on the consciously self-constructed character. Lincoln was "self-made" not merely in the sense of being upwardly mobile, but in the more important senses of being self-educated and self-disciplined. In his time and place, the Whig party espoused this personality ideal and was identified with it. Lincoln's endorsement of law and order against lynch mob violence, his support of the temperance movement, and his hero worship of Henry Clay are but three of many ways in which he manifested his Whig character ideals.