ProminentAbolitionists on Abraham Lincoln

By Max Skidmore*

Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Wendell Phillips stand out among the ranks of abolitionists. Each articulated a position so forcefully as to become leader of what can almost be considered a “school” of abolitionist thought that had—along, of course, with substantial agreements—some sharp differences with the others. Phillips and Garrison disagreed regarding Garrison’s pacifism. More to the point, they also disagreed in their assessments of Lincoln. Nevertheless, they shared a common beginning point. Each proceeded from a firm convention that it would be impossible to end slavery within the existing constitutional system.

Frederick Douglass, in stark contrast to Garrison and Phillips, had faith in the political process. He was equally outspoken and he set forth his positions no less powerfully than they, but he recognized the problem as political. He therefore advocated a political solution and remained consistent in his approach, if not entirely so in his opinion of Lincoln.

Phillips took positions regarding Lincoln that at times appear to have no justification whatever. At the beginning of Lincoln’s presidency he even contradicted himself. As time passed, however, there was no more inconsistency. He became the president’s implacable foe until Lincoln’s death. Then, he came to reflect a strange ambivalence. In May of 1860 he referred to Lincoln as a “huckster in politics.” In June he published an article in the Liberator entitled, “Slave-Hound of Illinois.” Garrison printed it reluctantly, and then only after it was signed and declared to be purely personal opinion. The article accused Lincoln of attempting to extend provisions of the Fugitive Slave Law to the District of Columbia, where it did not apply. In making the charge, Phillips lifted facts out of context. Lincoln did in fact advocate extending coverage of the law to the District of Columbia that he might secure passage of legislation abolishing slavery there. Upon being challenged on this point by Joshua Giddings and others, Phillips admitted the true nature of Lincoln’s proposal.

His personal views of Lincoln notwithstanding, Phillips was jubilant at the results of the 1860 election: for the first time in history the slave has chosen a President of the United States. We have passed the Rubicon, for Mr. Lincoln rules today as much as he will after the fourth of March. It is the moral effect of this victory, not anything which his administration can or will probably do, that gives value to this success. Not an Abolitionist, hardly an antislavery man, Mr. Lincoln consents to represent an antislavery idea. A pawn on the political chessboard, his value is in his position; with fair effort, we may soon change him for knight, bishop, or queen, and sweep the board.

Phillips gave as the reason for his glee that Lincoln was only in Place, Garrison was in Power.

In a message, “Disunion,” on January 20, 1861, Phillips said that the motto of the Republicans, “led by the Tribune . . . is: the Chicago platform, every inch of it; not a hair’s breadth of the territories shall be surrendered to slavery. But they too, claim the cannon’s mouth to protect forts, defend the flag, and save the Union. At the head of this section, we have every reason to believe, stands Mr. Abraham Lincoln.” In the same speech he rejoiced that William Seward had returned to Washington, and was disappointed to find that Lincoln sturdily insisted that his honor was pledged to keep every promise made in the platform. Phillips then faulted Lincoln for keeping Seward in the cabinet, as a man who had made “A declaration of war against the avowed policy of the incoming President. If Lincoln were an Andrew Jackson, as his friends aver,” he said, “he would dismiss Mr. Seward from the Cabinet.”

Phillips had said many times that he was a disunionist because he considered the Union a failure. By the end of 1861, however, he had changed. He spoke in December on “The War for the Union,” saying that although he had been a disunionist for twenty years, he had finally discovered that the Union was equivalent to justice. “To break up that Union now is to defraud us of mutual advantages relating to peace, trade, national security, which cannot survive disunion. The right of revolution is not a matter of caprice.” This was a further extension of some of the sentiments he had expressed in an address, “Under the Flag,” of April 21, 1861:

Many times this winter, here and elsewhere, I have counseled peace—urged, as well as I knew how, the expedience of acknowledging a Southern Confederacy, and the peaceful separation of these thirty-four States. One of the journals announces to you that I come here this morning to retract those opinions. No not one of them . . . I rejoice
before God today for every word that I have spoken counseling peace; but I rejoice also with an especially profound gratitude, that now, the first time in my antislavery life, I speak under the stars and stripes, and welcome the tread of Massachusetts men marshaled for war. No matter what the past has been or said: to-day the slave asks God for a sight of this banner, and counts it the pledge of his redemption. Hitherto it may have meant what you thought, or what I did; to-day it represents sovereignty and justice. The only mistake that I have made, was in supposing Massachusetts wholly choked with cotton-dust and cankered with gold. . . . I have always believed in the sincerity of Abraham Lincoln [emphasis added]. You have heard me express my confidence in it every time I have spoken from this desk. I only doubted sometimes whether he were really the head of the government. To-day he is at any rate Commander-in-chief.9

Not even the most tortuous interpretation can reconcile these views with a belief that Lincoln was a “Slave Hound from Illinois.” He proceeded to say that delay in action had been necessary and was, in addition, good policy in that it gave public opinion a chance to catch up with the government.

Phillips presented additional justifications for Lincoln’s policies and offered a cogent argument in opposition to the Southern claims regarding secession. The South was well aware, he said, that Lincoln was sworn to uphold the Constitution and the laws, and was therefore bound to die, if necessary, to protect Fort Sumter. Their call upon the administration to acknowledge the Confederate Commissioners to negotiate the surrender of the fort was a “delusion and a swindle.” Under the Constitution the right of a state to secede is an absurdity. Revolutionary right is undeniable, but the government is bound to prevent it if possible. No government can provide for its own overthrow. Therefore, Lincoln was perfectly right in his call for troops.10 The argument Phillips presented is especially interesting when contrasted with that presented by some Southern spokesmen.

According to Phillips: “The [Northern states] waited. They begged...”

Slightly more than a year after this speech, Phillips, on August 1, 1862, exactly reversed his position on Lincoln. In his oration, “The Cabinet,” he said he believed Lincoln to be con-
Mark Plummer to Speak on Governor Oglesby and Lincoln’s Death

Mark A. Plummer, Professor Emeritus of History at Illinois State University, will be the banquet speaker on February 12, 2005. A prolific scholar of the Civil War period, Plummer’s most recent biography of Lincoln’s friend Richard Oglesby will provide the basis for his banquet talk. Plummer will discuss Oglesby and the events surrounding Lincoln’s death at the Peterson House. Oglesby was at Lincoln’s deathbed and at the Springfield funeral, which allowed him to observe and document interesting accounts of these events.


Ronald C. White Jr. will be in attendance at the book signings in advance of the symposium. His new book on The Elloquent President: A Portrait of Lincoln Through His Words will be available for sale.

Member News

Judge Richard H. Mills published “Court’s class of Dec. 3, 1839, a great one for Illinois,” in the one-hundred-and-fiftieth-anniversary issue of the Law Bulletin Publishing Company. The article details the lawyers who signed the roll of attorneys for admission to practice in the federal courts. Among the signers were Stephen A. Douglas, Samuel Tread, David Davis, and Abraham Lincoln.


The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library officially opened its doors on Thursday, October 14. Among the dignitaries at the ceremony were Governor Rod R. Blagojevich, Senator Richard J. Durbin, Congressman Ray LaHood, and Illinois Comptroller Dan Hynes. Director Richard Norton Smith presided over the brief ceremonies, which were followed by public tours of the building. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is the new home for the collections of the former Illinois State Historical Library. The museum is scheduled to open Tuesday, April 19, 2005.

Membership Renewals

Membership renewals for 2005 are mailed during the month of October. When you send in your renewal check, a thank you postal card will be sent indicating that you are a member in good standing for 2005. Reminder letters are sent the end of January and February.
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be said of Mr. Lincoln [as of General George McClellan]—that if he had been a traitor, he could not have worked better to strengthen one side and hazard the success of the other. There is more danger to-day that Washington will be taken than Richmond. 14 As he warmed to his task, Phillips said that Washington should be taken. That would lead to an awakening of the Northern conscience, and if Lincoln survived, and Hannibal Hamlin had not become president, “which,” he said, “I wish he were,” then he could immediately proclaim emancipation. 15

At this point in his talk, Phillips began to deprecate qualities in Lincoln that he previously had praised:

The President . . . has no mind whatev- er . . . He may be honest—nobody cares whether the tortoise is honest or not; he has neither insight, nor prevision, nor decision. . . . I never did believe in the capacity of Abraham Lincoln. . . . Lincoln is a first-rate second rate man. I asked the lawyers of Illinois, who had practiced law with Mr. Lincoln for twenty years, ‘Is he a man of decision, is he a man who can say no?’ they all said: ‘If you had gone to the Illinois bar, and selected the man least capable of saying no, it would have been Abraham Lincoln. He has no stiffness in him.’ 16

This, of course, contradicts much of what we know of Lincoln, and is inconsistent with his extraordinary effectiveness as a lawyer. It even contradicts Phillips’s own statements at Lincoln’s election. Regardless, Phillips seems to have adopted this as his genuine view. He did not change it again, at least not during Lincoln’s lifetime.

Phillips severely criticized Garrison for having endorsed Lincoln’s renomination. His criticism reflected his usual vitriolic style, saying that Lincoln had done twice as much to break the Union as had Jefferson Davis, and that Lincoln was “a timid and ignorant President [and was] all the more injuri-

ous because honest.” 17 His tone did not soften until after the assassination. Then, in an address on April 23, 1865, at Tremont Temple, he again castigated what he called Lincoln’s slowness and indecision. However, he praised Lincoln’s personal qualities as if the martyred president had been tender-hearted, merciful, and just to a fault. He ended his speech with a tribute that Lincoln himself surely would have appreciated: “Recollect that he was human, and that he welcomed light more than most men, was more honest than his fellows, and with a truth to his own convictions such as few politicians achieve. With all his shortcomings, we point proudly to him as the natural growth of democratic institutions.” 18

In view of the venomous attacks Phillips directed Lincoln’s way before the president’s death, and in consideration of his startling reversal-note that he not only pointed to Lincoln as the natural product of democracy, but said that he pointed this out proudly, one would be justified in asking whether the Lincoln myth, however mildly, may have begun to have some effect even on Phillips.

Garrison began in agreement with Phillips, but later their views sharply diverged. They were personal friends and their friendship survived their differences over Lincoln’s personality and policies. In his younger days, Garrison had been the personification of the incendiary, fire-breathing, abolitionist, but he seems to have mellowed with age. His views of Lincoln appeared to have objectivity foreign to Phillips.

Garrison wrote in the Liberator in February of 1861: “It is much to the Credit of Mr. Lincoln that he has maintained his dignity and self-respect intact, and gives no countenance to any of the compromises that have yet been proposed.” 19 In the same manner, his response to Lincoln’s call for troops after the firing on Fort Sumter was similar to Phillips’s. Speaking of the Confederate leaders, Garrison said: “On the issue raised by the secessionists, they are wholly and fearfully in the wrong, while President Lincoln is indisputably in the right. On his side all the elements of freedom will coalesce, sympathetically and approvingly, as against their thoroughly infernal spirit and purposes, and a thousand times over wish him success in the struggle. At the same time, as pertaining to a continued union with the South, God grant that the North may speedily see the folly, danger, and iniquity of trying it any longer.” 20 Phillips, at least during his disunionist phase, would have agreed heartily.

Garrison, with Phillips, was joyful at the news of the Republican victory in 1860. He warned that it was no time for minute criticism of Lincoln, or of his party, since they were arming for battle with the hated “slave oligarchy.” He saw them as instruments in the hands of God, working only to carry out His desire to end slavery for all time. This is not to say that Garrison refused to criticize Lincoln or the Republican party. He observed developments carefully and was free to voice objections when he had them, as for
example in the *Liberator* of September 11, 1861. General John Frémont had issued a proclamation that freed the slaves of all disloyal masters in his military district of Missouri. Lincoln revoked the proclamation dealing with slavery, an action that outraged Garrison. He printed the letter within heavy black lines and charged that the president was “guilty of a serious dereliction of duty.” Rather than revoking the order, he should have extended the proclamation to all states in revolt.²¹

Garrison’s path and that of Phillips had yet to diverge. In January of 1862 he dropped the decades-old “Covenant with Death” from the *Liberator’s* masthead. This action was significant for many reasons and also indicated continued agreement with Phillips. Both had ceased to be disunionists. Garrison explained it as follows: “When I said I would not sustain the Constitution because it was a ‘covenant with death and an agreement with hell,’ I had no idea that I should live to see death and hell secede. Hence it is that I am now with the Government, to enable it to constitutionally stop the further ravages of death, and to extinguishing the flames of hell forever.”²²

It was in the same month, however, that the rift with Phillips had its beginning. The disagreement seemed to have emerged abruptly.

On the first day of the annual meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-slavery Society, several speeches strongly criticized the administration and Lincoln personally, including one by Phillips. At the end of the day, Garrison spoke in an optimistic vein, quite frankly to counteract these speeches. Phillips must have found Garrison’s message to be astonishing.

Garrison, the fierce publisher of the violently worded *Liberator*, summed up the difficulties facing Lincoln and his administration in an objective manner. His address was not only a concise summation of the problem, but it also illustrated how the thought of this arch-abolitionist had evolved.

He began by saying that although Lincoln might be justly criticized, “one cheering fact” overrode all else. “This is fundamentally a struggle between all the elements of freedom on the one hand, and all the elements of despotism on the other.” Garrison granted that “some margin of allowance” might be made for the administration, and said that it would be better to err on the side of magnanimity than to be wanting in justice. He then posed a penetrating question:

Supposing Mr. Lincoln could answer tonight and we should say to him: ‘Sir, with the power in your hands, slavery being the cause of the rebellion beyond all controversy, why don’t you put the trump of jubilee to your lips, and Universal freedom?—Possibly he might answer: ‘Gentlemen, I understand this matter quite as well as you do, I do not know that I differ in opinion from you: but will you insure me the support of a united North if I do as you bid me? Parties and all sects at the North so convinced and so united on this point that they will stand by the Government? If so, give me the evidence of it, and I will strike the blow. But, Gentlemen, looking over the entire North, and seeing in all your towns and cities papers representing a considerable, if not a formidable portion of the people, menacing and bullying the Government in case it dare to liberate the slaves, even as a matter of self-preservation, I do not feel that the hour has a matter of self-preservation, I do not feel that the hour has yet come that will render it safe for the Government to take that step.’

Garrison was willing to believe, he said, that this was the sort of answer Lincoln would have given. He warned that Lincoln may have been right: “there is some ground for hesitancy, as a mere matter of political expediency.” As a result, he admonished that “therefore, we should not judge the present incumbents too harshly.”²³

The fairness of this message presents a previously hidden facet of Garrison. It would be unwarranted to infer influence from a Lincoln myth at that time. Nevertheless, perhaps there was something in Lincoln’s personality that appealed to Garrison and encouraged him—in contrast to many others—to try to view the situation objectively.

The abolitionists actually had more cause to cheer than to despair at this period. Congress in its 1862 spring session had taken numerous progressive measures. In February it passed an act forbidding an Army officer from returning a fugitive slave. In April it proclaimed immediate emancipation for the District of Columbia. In June it prohibited slavery in all territories with the intention that the prohibition would be forever. It called upon the president to appoint diplomatic representatives to Haiti and Liberia. In July it freed all slaves of rebel masters either coming within Union lines or found in places vacated by Confederates. It declared laws within the District of Columbia to be equally applicable to all, regardless of color. It provided education for black children, it passed an act for more effective suppression of the African slave trade, and it made provision for the enlistment of soldiers of African descent. President Lincoln speedily signed each of these measures into law.²⁴

In May Lincoln severely disappointed the abolitionists when he revoked General David Hunter’s proclamation freeing slaves in his Department of the South, which has its headquarters in South Carolina. Garrison, of course, was strongly critical of Lincoln’s action, yet again cautioned his readers to remember that one who holds office by the will of the people cannot be judged entirely as are others. He said that the gains for freedom had been so many and so rapid that many had failed to take adequate note of them.²⁵

In 1863 and the early part of 1864 came what no doubt were the darkest days of Lincoln’s life and career. This is the period in which Harriet Beecher Stowe likened him to the Man of Sorrows.²⁶ The campaigns until recently had been nothing but great losses, the North was loath to support the war effort and the Democrats had pledged to halt the war should they be elected. Indicative of the state of affairs is the comment by Richard Henry Dana during a visit to Washington in February and March of 1863. “As to the politics of Washington, the most striking thing
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is the absence of personal loyalty to the President. It does not exist.27

It may be that Stowe did not exaggerate in her account of Lincoln's awful isolation at that time. In January of 1864, at the annual meeting of the Massachusetts Antislavery Society, Phillips offered a resolution that condemned Lincoln: Resolved, “that, in our opinion, in its haste, is ready to sacrifice the interest and honor of the North to secure a sham peace.” Garrison immediately proposed an amendment to the resolution to read, “is in danger of sacrificing,” explaining:

The resolution, as offered, is an impeachment of motives, not of ability or vigilance. It commits us to the assertion that we believe the Government—meaning Mr. Lincoln in particular is ready to do a most infamous act, namely, ‘to sacrifice the interest and honor of the Union to secure a sham peace,’ whereby the President’s Emancipation Proclamation shall be rendered null and void, and the slave oligarchy restored to their original supremacy. Now sir, I do not believe a word of it, and therefore I cannot vote for it. To be ready to do a base thing for a base end implies both will and purpose; it means something more than liability: it amounts to perfidy. There was a time when I had little confidence in Abraham Lincoln, and very little respect for him: it was when, for almost eighteen months after secession had taken place, he was evidently averse to seeing that slavery had any vital connection with the rebellion, and he refused to strike a blow at its existence. . . . But the time came at last when the President, unless he was determined to be willfully and wickedly blind, was compelled to see that slavery and the rebellion were indissolubly bound up together. Then came the proclamation of unconditional and everlasting emancipation to three million three hundred thousand slaves . . . and then, all that is vile and seditious in the . . . North burst forth against him. . . . Since that event, and in view of what has followed in the enrollment of tens of thousands of colored soldiers, I have changed my opinion of Abraham Lincoln. In proportion as he has fallen in the estimation of the disloyal portion of the North, He has risen in my own.28

Phillips vehemently opposed Garrison’s amendment, and it fell to a narrow defeat. By this time, however, there was considerable opposition in the background to Phillips’s opinions. A few examples of the letters that Garrison received after this encounter may give broader insight into the feelings regarding Lincoln that were beginning to become apparent. From Samuel J. May: “I was glad to see [you] attempt to qualify the only expression that marred the excellence of what Mr. Phillips said. It does seem to me that Mr. Lincoln has shown himself anxious to be and do right.” From J. M. McKim: “Wendell’s speech and resolution not only laid him open to criticism, but demanded and made necessary criticism.” And from Owen Lovejoy: “I write you . . . to express to you my gratification at the position you have taken in reference to Mr. Lincoln. I am satisfied . . . that if he is satisfied . . . that if he is not the best conceivable President, he is the best possible . . . . I am glad to see that Mr. [George] Thompson of England speaks in friendly terms of the President.”29

Lovejoy had no patience with those abolitionists who declared that Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation only after the most severe pressure from their group, and against his own desires. He proceeded in his letter to say that he had personal assurance from Lincoln that he had written the Proclamation early in the preceding summer, and had intended to issue it then, but Seward had persuaded him of the advisability of delay.

Phillips and Garrison now were far in opposition, and the tide was turning. The audiences were beginning to support Garrison. On May 13 1864,30 he said in a letter, in “our two public meetings, at the Cooper Institute and at Dr. Cheever’s Church. . . . Phillips was brilliant and eloquent as USL contradictory in statement and decidedly opposed to the reelection of Abraham Lincoln. Of course, I briefly expressed my dissent. . . . The audiences were overwhelming in their approval of my views.” When Phillips went as Delegate from Boston to the Republican National Convention in Baltimore, he spoke against Lincoln’s renomination, “but without the slightest effect, for [the resolution] was carried by acclamation.”31

Stowe’s description of the people’s change in attitude toward Lincoln illustrates its abruptness, which she attributed to the battlefield victories: “Vicksburg and Gettysburg changed the whole face of the nation. . . .” Whereas few months before, Lincoln was universally depreciated, doubted, scoffed and scorned, now he found himself re-elected to the Presidential chair, by an overwhelming majority.”32

Garrison’s support for Lincoln increased as the assassination drew near. In June 1864 Garrison said after an interview at the Capitol: “There is no mistake about it, in regard to Mr. Lincoln’s desire to do all that he can see it right and possible for him to do to uproot slavery, and give fair-play to the emancipated.”33 In November of the same year he went to considerable lengths to answer an attack upon
Lincoln by Francis W. Newman of the University of London. Newman supported the criticism by Phillips, and especially condemned Lincoln for not having ensured Negro suffrage in the reconstructed state of Louisiana. Garrison said in reply: “According to the laws of development and progress, it is not practicable. To denounce or complain of President Lincoln for not disregarding public sentiment, and not flying in the face of these laws, is hardly just. Besides, I doubt whether he has the constitutional right to decide in this matter [since under the Constitution, each state decided the qualifications for suffrage]. I ask only a charitable judgment for Lincoln.”

In 1864 Garrison went so far as to join a group of Boston citizens to present the president with a painting commemorating the Emancipation Proclamation.

After the assassination, when he eulogized Lincoln before the Union League of Rhode Island on June 1, 1865, Garrison was describing the man, not the myth. Lincoln, he said, was a man of “absolute faith in the people, sound judgment, ready tack’ abiding cheerfulness, inflexible perseverance, large common sense, strong powers of reasoning, incorruptible integrity, and unalloyed patriotism.” He was one of the last to describe the murdered president entirely as a man, yet the myth had begun before his eulogy, and he had made his own contributions to it.

Frederick Douglass, one of the most powerful orators in the country, was tireless in his opposition to the system of slavery from which he had escaped. He had often been highly critical of Lincoln, and was no exponent of the myth. Yet he conceded after the president’s death that although he had been a white man with the attitude continued on page 8
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tudes of a white man, “preeminently the white man’s president,” Lincoln had proceeded in the only manner that could have been successful. His well-known statement is worth repeating: “Had he put the abolition of slavery before the salvation of the Union, he would have inevitably driven from him a powerful class of the American people and rendered resistance to rebellion impossible. Viewed from the genuine abolition ground, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent; but measuring him by the sentiment of his country a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult [emphasis added], he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined.”

Although Douglass was too much the realist ever to come under the influence of myth, this sober appraisal became a tribute. It could not but have added to the growing respect for Lincoln—hence to the expansion of the myth.

2Ibid., 270.
4Ibid.
6Ibid., 353–54.
7See ibid., 356, 370.
10Ibid., 402.
11Ibid., 407.
13Ibid., 449.
14Ibid., 450.
15Ibid., 453.
16Ibid., 453–60.
17Ibid., 325.
18Ibid., 336.
20Ibid., 19.
21Ibid., 32–33.
22Ibid., 40–41.
23Ibid., 43–45.
24Ibid., 49–50.
25Ibid., 51.
26Harriet Beecher Stowe, Men of Our Times; or, Leading Patriots of the Day (Hartford, Conn.: Hartford Publishing, 1868), 82–85.
27Korngold, 324.
28Ibid., 95–96.
29Ibid., 97–98.
30Ibid., 109.
31Ibid.
32Stowe, 76.
33Garrison, 117.
34Ibid., 123–24.
35Ibid., 164.

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