Before Cooper Union: Abraham Lincoln’s 1859 Cincinnati Speech and Its Impact on His Nomination

GARY ECELBARGER

“Brady and the Cooper Institute made me President,” reportedly claimed Abraham Lincoln, referring to Mathew Brady’s masterful photograph and the Cooper Union speech, both made on February 27, 1860, in New York City. Accepted at its word by a vast array of Lincoln scholars of yesteryear and today, Lincoln’s Cooper Union speech is hailed as the landmark event that placed him in the public eye and mind of an eastern audience and thus expanded his appeal throughout the North as an attractive alternative to Senator William H. Seward for the Republican nomination for the presidency in 1860.

It must be noted that Lincoln linked his assertion about the importance of the Cooper Union speech with the Brady image taken a few hours before the evening address. Most important to note is that Lincoln made the claims while meeting Brady in the White House a year later, ostensibly as a means to connect with his visitor. While this does not diminish the importance of the Cooper Union address, it should open the door to consider the importance of other speeches crafted and delivered outside of Illinois to enhance Lincoln’s presidential prospects, particularly any one of the thirty addresses he delivered in eight states and one territory (Kansas) between his official U.S. Senate defeat in January 1859 and his presidential nomination on May 18, 1860.

Of the alternatives, one speech stands alone for its originality, quality, and impact on Lincoln’s future—the Cincinnati speech of September 17, 1859. It was the last of five speeches that Lincoln delivered in a two-day Ohio trip, a tour that began with two speeches in Columbus, a stop in Dayton, and then a brief whistle-stop in Hamilton as he rode the rails from Dayton to Cincinnati for the final event.

Lincoln’s standing as a national public figure bears evaluation on the eve of the Cincinnati address. The Ohio trip was conducted one year after the 1858 debates with Senator Stephen A. Douglas. That those debates provided Lincoln national attention is undisputable, but it should be noted that they were conducted in an active election year with nearly half of the states in the country occupied with a U.S. Senate election. Lincoln and Douglas did indeed garner newspaper attention in states across the North and South (more than any other Senate race in history up to that time), but outside of Illinois the degree of coverage diminished considerably. After Lincoln officially was defeated in the Twenty-first Illinois General Assembly on January 5, 1859, he resumed his law practice and essentially dropped out of the public eye.

Lincoln’s return to the courts was necessitated by his drained finances in the wake of the protracted but failed campaign, but it did not signal an end to his political ambitions. In an informal gathering of Illinois Republicans on January 6, 1859—the day after the state legislature put an end to his U.S. Senate hopes—Lincoln declared his desire to run for president in 1860. Three months later a more formal meeting between Lincoln and members of the Illinois Republican State Central Committee produced a unique strategy to put Lincoln in the White House. No meeting minutes have survived, but peripheral and subsequent accounts indicate a three-part plan for the remainder of 1859: 1) Lincoln would increase his exposure outside of Illinois by speaking in other states, 2) no public commitment would be made to Lincoln by the committee in 1859 in an effort to allow him to run as an undetected candidate to avoid the withering scrutiny of Republican presidential hopefuls, and 3) Lincoln would quell the efforts of Republican newspaper editors attempting to synchronize a mass endorsement of Lincoln for president in the spring of 1859—a decision made to prevent a premature boom and to keep his ambitions under wraps.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1859, Lincoln coyly and constantly brushed away suggestions by Republicans to run for president, declaring, “I must say I do not think myself fit for the Presidency.”


The declaration proved disingenuous. He crafted a new speech about the principles of the Republican Party with a focus on the immorality of slavery and the imperative need to prevent its extension into the territories. He planned to deliver the speech at a huge Republican convention in Kansas in May but was forced to bow out because of his attorney commitments. Lincoln delivered the crux of this address in speeches delivered in Chicago in March, and in Council Bluffs, Iowa, in August. Unfortunately for Lincoln, those speeches garnered little attention in the press. By the end of August, Lincoln had been out of sight and out of mind; his heightened status from the year-old debates essentially had disintegrated.4

Making matters worse for Lincoln was the persistence of the negative spin applied by the Democratic press to his famous 1858 “House Divided” speech. Lincoln’s words were misinterpreted as a threat of civil war, the same conclusion applied to front-running candidate William Seward’s “Irrepressible Conflict” speech made in October 1858. “To adopt Seward and Lincoln’s principles that there must be an eternal war between the free and slave States, [the Republicans] would not yet have the courage,” claimed an upstate New York Democratic newspaper in August, “and on that issue they dare not go even before their own fanatical followers.”5 Lincoln’s path to the presidency was blocked by these characterizations of him as an extremist of the Republican Party.

In the first days of September Lincoln’s old nemesis, Senator Stephen A. Douglas, spurred him to action. In the September issue of Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, Douglas published a lengthy article in which he made the brazen claim that allowing or disallowing slavery to extend into the territories based on the vote of its citizens—the tenets of popular sovereignty—was a concept that matched the intent of the Founding Fathers. Douglas’s article was long and tedious, but it also was a savvy mode of political propaganda to launch his presidential bid for the Democratic Party and to present him as a politician planted firmly between the extremist views regarding slavery. It also forced Lincoln to craft a new speech to counter the updated claims of Douglas in Harper’s.6

During the first two days of September Lincoln was invited to speak in Ohio by Republican committees in Columbus and Cincinnati who

wanted Lincoln to counter Senator Douglas as he swept the Buckeye State with a series of speeches delivered to aid Democrats for upcoming elections within the state. Lincoln had turned down several offers throughout 1859 to speak out of state due to his court duties, but he accepted the Ohio invitation. It provided him a chance to reappear on the national scene with a speech delivered outside of Illinois in an off-year election. It also allowed the best possible setting to counter Douglas by appearing in the same town where the “Little Giant” had performed days before. In essence, this became the sequel to the Lincoln-Douglas debates, only the focus would be entirely on Lincoln, who would not be sharing the platform with the counter-punching senator.

Not to be disregarded were Lincoln’s presidential ambitions and his understanding of the press. Cincinnati was the seventh largest city in the nation and was represented by ten newspapers. Dayton and Columbus, with multiple daily and weekly newspapers, ranked among the fifty largest cities in the United States. Lincoln could expect his performance to not only receive strong support from the Republican organs in Ohio but also to be excerpted in newspapers in several states. To boost attention, Lincoln was accompanied by Robert Hitt, the shorthand reporter for the Chicago Press and Tribune who would reproduce Lincoln’s speeches for circulation in Illinois. The Ohio trip afforded Lincoln the opportunity to appear as a statesman for the Republican Party while he simultaneously launched his bid for the White House.

Lincoln delivered two speeches in Columbus on Friday, September 16. Both events were poorly attended, as the county fair competed with the Republican events. Hitt submitted a transcript of the Columbus speech to his editors at the Chicago Press and Tribune, while the Columbus newspapers published their own versions of the address. For reasons never explained, Hitt did not continue with Lincoln to Dayton or Cincinnati, apparently returning to Illinois at the time Lincoln trained to Dayton on Saturday, September 17.

Lincoln’s afternoon address in Dayton was also a sparsely attended event, with only a few hundred gathered in front of the courthouse facing the street where Lincoln stood. He delivered a prelude of the larger

7. William T. Bascom to Lincoln, September 1, 1859, and Peter Zinn to Lincoln, September 2, 1859, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

message he intended to present in Cincinnati that evening. Based on the documented response, the preview bode well for Lincoln. “His speech was a perfect surprise to everyone—,” claimed a Dayton attorney in his diary; “a close, logical argument without anecdote or illustration and yet so clear and so intensely interesting that although the audience stood upon the Courthouse steps and the pavement, not one person left until he closed.”9 Four hours and sixty miles later—interrupted by a short whistle-stop speech in Hamilton—Abraham Lincoln’s train entered Cincinnati.

Of the five addresses delivered in two days in Ohio, the Cincinnati speech stands out as an original and modified argument to the slavery issue which had accentuated most of the 160 speeches Lincoln had delivered over the previous five years.10 The devices he employed in Cincinnati would be too similar to ones used in the Cooper Union speech to be considered a mere coincidence. And when it was over Lincoln and his supporters would learn over the next two months that the circulation and attention given to one evening’s utterances exceeded that of any thirty days of the U.S. Senate campaign against Douglas in Illinois.

Most surprising about the Cincinnati speech is its lack of regard among “Lincolnists.” Authors of Lincoln’s pre-presidential life and career who describe the Ohio trip within a broader narrative either choose not to separate any of the speeches delivered on the trip or tend to excerpt the Columbus speech as representative of Lincoln’s two days of performances. The notion is that the speeches in Columbus and Cincinnati were essentially the same address. In Lincoln’s Rise to Power, William Baringer did differentiate the Columbus and Cincinnati speeches, denigrating Lincoln’s performance in Cincinnati as “long, heavy, highly factual and humorless,” and “not very entertaining to a crowd.”11

A close inspection of what Baringer read to make his claim indicates an incredible misinterpretation of what transpired that Saturday night. Few Lincoln-only appearances were greeted with as much fanfare and enthusiasm as was Lincoln in Cincinnati. He was treated as a dignitary from the moment his train approached the depot. He was paraded down the streets of the city to his hotel, and again to the site

10. The number of speeches is derived from James M. McPherson, This Mighty Scourge: Perspectives on the Civil War (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 198. This source claims 175 speeches up to the Cooper Union address.
of his speech at the Fifth Street Market. Lincoln benefited from perfect weather conditions—a clear night of 70 degree weather. Pyrotechnics dominated the evening event—one illuminated by bonfires, torches, fireworks, and a booming cannon. Oddly, the Democratic press embellished the crowd size to “six or eight thousand people” while one of the Republican newspapers more reasonably placed it to half that size. Assuming a crowd size of 3,500, all but one Lincoln-Douglas debate had bigger audiences, as did large political events in Illinois where Lincoln was one of several advertised speakers. However, this night was Lincoln’s alone, ranking it as one of the best-attended events in Lincoln’s career before he became president.

The most revealing source material gauging Lincoln’s performance is the Democratic press of Cincinnati. Two of the city’s Democratic newspapers covering the event acknowledged that “Mr. Lincoln’s reception at the meeting was quite enthusiastic,” and “The speech of Abraham Lincoln was well received,” and “he made a much more favorable impression upon his bearers than Senator Douglas did. . . .” Although both papers were critical of the content of Lincoln’s speech, their cumulative admission of the strength of Lincoln’s performance discredits Baringer’s claim of a lackluster evening.

Lincoln spoke for two and a half hours that night, incorporating most of the speech he delivered in Dayton that afternoon into the Cincinnati speech. Much of the Columbus address of the day before, however, was not repeated in Cincinnati. Whether he knew or not that the Columbus speech would be published in the Cincinnati Gazette that Saturday morning (indeed, it was), Lincoln’s decision to deliver a different speech in Cincinnati was a fortuitous one. Had he repeated the same address, it would be hard to imagine the Cincinnati Gazette reproducing it a second time in consecutive issues (there was no Sunday edition). The newspaper explained why it chose to publish the Cincinnati speech on Monday morning: “The speech is entirely different from that delivered at Columbus on Friday, of which we published a report on Saturday.” That September 19 issue of the Gazette would carry farther across the country than Lincoln could have ever imagined.

Lincoln began the Cincinnati speech that night by tackling Douglas’s criticism of his House Divided speech as a mischaracterization of Lincoln’s support of abolition. After repeating the controversial

sentences of that 1858 speech, Lincoln explained, “I declared then, and I now re-declare, that I have as little inclination to so interfere with the institution of slavery where it now exists . . . as I believe we have no power to do so.” Acknowledging to his audience that Douglas had succeeded in painting him with the same clashing colors applied to Senator Seward’s Irrepressible Conflict speech, Lincoln wrested the brush from Douglas and assailed the Little Giant’s immoral position of claiming no position on slavery. “There is not a public man in the United States, I believe, with the exception of Senator Douglas, who has not at some time of his life, declared his opinion whether the thing is right or wrong,” declared Lincoln.15

At this point Lincoln employed a tactic tailor-made for Cincinnati. With the nearby Ohio River coursing across the border of the city and separating North from South, Lincoln informed his audience that he would model his remarks as if he were addressing Kentuckians across the river. By pretending to speak to an all-Kentucky crowd, Lincoln could highlight Douglas’s hypocrisy to his Northern audience while at the same time present a congenial case as if he was addressing all the residents of slaveholding states.

Lincoln left no doubt that this speech was all about Douglas. He tossed out his name fifty-eight times during the course of the speech, essentially treating it as one of the 1858 debates. Douglas had spoken in Cincinnati on September 9, but Lincoln used the magazine article as the text for his counterclaims (He apparently did not have a copy of Douglas’s Cincinnati speech to prepare his remarks). Lincoln’s labors against Douglas also followed a strategy to marginalize the Little Giant to Northern Democrats. At the same time, Lincoln had been concerned that Douglas would appeal to Republicans for his break with President Buchanan over the Lecompton Constitution, the acceptance over his views of popular sovereignty, and the potential that he would be forced out of the Democratic Party if the national convention imposed him to endorse the slave code as part of the party platform. Thus, Cincinnati proved the staging ground to expose the folly of Douglas’s positions.16

In the guise of speaking to “Kentuckians,” Lincoln continued to denigrate Douglas’s immorality regarding slavery. Lincoln claimed that Douglas wanted Northerners to adopt his detached opinion to allow another Dred Scott-like decision to permit slavery to permeate into the current slave-free states of the North. Lincoln stressed that

“whenever your minds are brought to adopt his argument, as surely you will have reached the conclusion that although slavery is not profitable in Ohio, if any man wants it, it is wrong to him not to let him have it.”

Perhaps the most stirring moment of the speech was marked not by soaring rhetoric by Lincoln but by an unexpected change-of-pace that astounded his audience. Continuing his tactic of addressing Kentuckians, Lincoln said that they were stuck with Douglas as their candidate, for they would be beaten if they did not take him, and the same result would occur if they did nominate him. “We, the Republicans and others forming the opposition of the country, intend to ‘stand by our guns,’ to be patient and firm, and in the long run to beat you whether you take him or not,” warned Lincoln as he turned to a partisan stump speaker. In less than a minute, he declared his intent to “beat you” five times, followed by asking his audience what the opposition would do to the Kentuckians after they defeated them. “We mean to treat you, as near as we possibly can, like Washington, Jefferson, and Madison treated you. We mean to leave you alone. . . .”

The crowd did not expect this abrupt switch from a partisan to a statesman, and it erupted in cheers as Lincoln completely reverted back to the middle-ground message he had consistently been advocating, not only throughout the evening but since the mid 1850s—preserving slavery where it constitutionally was allotted. He told the Kentuckians that aligning with Douglas had turned them into “degenerated men,” but the principles of the Founders and the Compromisers allowed them their constitutional rights—including the right to keep slaves. “We mean to remember that you are as good as we,” Lincoln preached in his most conciliatory tone; “that there is no difference between us other than the difference of circumstances. We mean to recognize and bear in mind that always that you have as good hearts in your bosoms as other people, or as we claim to have, and treat you accordingly.”

Cincinnati also was a rare moment for Lincoln to discuss the possibility of secession and civil warfare in America. “I often hear it intimated that you mean to divide the Union whenever a Republican, or anything like it, is elected President of the United States,” declared Lincoln. “Well, then, I want to know what you are going to do with your half of it?” He reminded the Kentuckians that removing themselves from the constraints of the Constitution negated the need for Northerners to adhere to the Fugitive Slave Law. Then Lincoln went

18. Ibid., 453.
on to forecast other possibilities. “Will you make war upon us and kill us all?” Lincoln asked, reminding the Southerners that it all came down to a numbers game because “man for man, you are not better than we are and there are not so many of you as there are of us.”

The tactic of addressing the South in the form of Kentuckians had suited Lincoln well in Cincinnati and earned praise in the Republican press. Lincoln attempted this again in New York five months later at Cooper Union: “And now, if they would listen—as I suppose they will not—I would address a few words to the Southern people. I would say to them...” This was a clumsier segue at Cooper Union considering that hundreds of miles separated Lincoln from the South in February 1860 rather than hundreds of yards in September 1859. Again, in the mode of addressing Southerners, Lincoln chastised them at Cooper Union, as he did in Cincinnati, for threatening disunion. But the extended discussion about the possible outcome of armed conflict was dropped from the New York speech. Lincoln apparently discussed civil warfare only once in the thirty addresses delivered between August 1859 and March 1860—at Cincinnati.

Approximately ninety minutes into the Cincinnati speech, Lincoln left the Kentuckians and directed his remarks to the Ohioans; i.e., Northerners. The change of tactic was necessary for Lincoln to destroy another provocative postulate of Douglas in the *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* article: that Ohio and the other five states (including the eastern portion of Minnesota) carved out of the Northwest Territory were created as slave-free entities not because of the Ordinance of 1787, which restricted slavery in the original territory from where the states were formed, but because of popular sovereignty, which empowered the citizens of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota to vote out slavery when their respective states were formed from the territory. Douglas’s evidence for this claim included the fact that slavery had been permitted in Illinois, both as a territory and in its early history of statehood, and that its citizens were responsible for eliminating it as they were in Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, and the portion of Minnesota that formed the original territory. Popular sovereignty made these states slave free, concluded Douglas, “and that the Ordinance of 1787 was not entitled in any degree to divide the honor with them.”

Lincoln had used the Ordinance of 1787 as his trump card against Douglas throughout the 1858 debates, but the Harper’s article had forced Lincoln to formulate a new strategy to address the issue. He had talked about it in Columbus, but Cincinnati provided Lincoln with a perfect logical case to counter Douglas’s claim in regards to the state of Ohio. “I have no doubt the people of the State of Ohio did make her free according to their own will and judgment,” declared Lincoln that night, “but let the facts be remembered.”

Lincoln then presented those facts. He told the Ohioans that their state constitution in 1802 included a clause prohibiting slavery, a clause made easy to enforce because no slaves existed within Ohio’s borders at the commencement of statehood. “Pray what was it that made you free?” he asked, and then answered using the advantage of location not available to him in his previous four speeches in Ohio. Lincoln reiterated that differences in climate and soil between North and South had been Douglas’s argument for the reason that slavery had been rejected by the citizens of Ohio upon statehood. Pointing out that the lands of Kentucky across the river were not part of the original ordinance, Lincoln reminded his Cincinnati audience that a small portion of eastern Kentucky was geographically north of where they currently stood, a result of the bulging and winding course of the Ohio River boundary in this sector. (In fact, most Ohio’s entire Southern tier stood south of the bulging region of Kentucky opposite the river from Cincinnati.)

So why was Ohio entirely slave free while Kentucky was inundated with slavery—including the lands north of Ohio’s river towns? Understanding that he was in the ideal locale to vanquish Douglas’s assertion, Lincoln pressed this case more thoroughly in Cincinnati than he ever had before or ever would again: “What made that difference? Was it climate? No! A portion of Kentucky was further north than this portion of Ohio. Was it soil? No! There is nothing in the soil of the [state] more favorable to slave labor than the other. It was not climate or soil that caused one side of the line to be entirely covered with slavery and the other side free of it. What was it? Study over it. Tell us, if you can, in all the range of conjecture, if there is anything you can conceive of that made that difference, other than that there was no law of any sort keeping it out of Kentucky while the Ordinance of ’87 kept it out of Ohio. If there is any other reason than this, I confess that it is wholly beyond my power to conceive of it. This, then, I offer to combat the idea that that ordinance has never made any State free.”

After explaining Ohio to the Ohioans, Lincoln discussed Indiana.

22. Ibid., 455
and Illinois, the other two Northwest Territory states that bordered the South. Lincoln acknowledged Douglas’s claim that Illinois’s first state constitution allowed slaves to remain in the French settlements where they already existed for more than one hundred years. Although this fact perhaps justified Douglas’s assertion that Illinois came into the Union as a slave state, Lincoln scoffed at Douglas’s contention that it was a free state in 1859 because popular sovereignty extinguished the institution. Lincoln painstakingly contrasted Illinois with Missouri, using the same geographical argument that he did for Kentucky and Ohio. Why then was Illinois a free state while Missouri was inundated with slaves? Because, as Lincoln argued, the limited slaves allowed in Illinois in the early years of its statehood was constitutionally legalized with the spirit of the Ordinance of 1787 in mind to let the institution die with the finite number of elderly slaves in the French settlements. Slavery declined in Illinois to near-negligible numbers by 1830, while Missouri’s slave population, not subject to the Ordinance restrictions, grew to 10,000—a tremendous contrast considering both states entered the Union close to the same time with equally few slaves in their French settlements. By running through the history of the states formed from the Old Northwest Territory, Lincoln haughtily concluded that it was “a fallacy” for Douglas to insist that slavery restriction in the Ordinance of 1787 was trumped by popular sovereignty in those states.23

Lincoln continued to dissect Douglas with rhetorical logic. After mocking Douglas’s version of popular sovereignty, Lincoln redefined it: “that each man shall do precisely as he pleases with himself and with all those things which exclusively concern him.” He transferred the same definition to federal and local governments, replacing “man” and its pronouns with those institutions in each definition. Lincoln carried the discussion of slavery within the context of capital and labor. Lincoln argued that the most successful American system of labor exists when a hired laborer works under the pretense that he has the ability to garner his wages. He accomplishes this by a “sober” and “industrious” approach to his labor, accumulates enough capital to either spend it as he pleases or hires his own laborers and thus becomes the type of employer he originally worked under.24

Two-and-a-half-hours after his introduction, Lincoln entered the conclusion of his speech. He stressed that Republicans must recognize the immorality of slavery to counter Douglas and popular sovereignty. Lincoln declared that although slavery was wrong, it must be accepted

23. Ibid., 455–57.
in the South where it was constitutionally protected. Likewise, Republicans must not interfere with enforcing the fugitive slave law “because the Constitution requires us, as I understand it, not to withhold such a law.” Lincoln considered it imperative to discuss this, for a radical sector of Ohio’s Republican Party—led by Salmon P. Chase—intended to fight to add a plank to the National Republican Convention to repeal the Fugitive Slave Law. Lincoln was convinced that if Chase succeeded, the national convention would be thrown into chaos and the election would be thrown to the Democrats.25

Lincoln assured his Cincinnati audience that acceptance of the constitutional protection of slavery did not sacrifice the movement to prevent its spread into the territories. This could only be accomplished by preventing the reopening of the African slave trade and wiping out any attempt to establish a territorial slave code. “The people of these United States are the rightful masters of both congresses and courts,” Lincoln exhorted to his cheering crowd. He told them not to overthrow the U.S. Constitution “but to overthrow the men who pervert that Constitution.” He advocated nominating a presidential candidate that the opposition (Republicans, Know Nothings, and all other factions opposed to Democrats) could rally around, one who adhered to the principles he had advocated throughout his speech. Lincoln insisted that it mattered not where this candidate originated; even a slaveholding state could yield a principled man he could support. “It would do my soul good to do that thing. It would enable us to teach [the South] that, inasmuch as we select one of their own number to carry out our principles, we are free from the charge that we mean more than we say.” Lincoln thanked his listeners for their attention and patience, admitting that he “detained you much longer than I expected to do.” And with that he closed his Cincinnati speech, gratified by thunderous cheers and applause.26

A recent analysis of Lincoln’s Cooper Union speech determined that 170,000 copies were circulated in four New York newspapers the following day. The same source also reveals that the speech did not circulate in the South.27 Lincoln’s Cincinnati speech was printed on Monday morning, September 19, 1859, by the Cincinnati Gazette, a paper that circulated fewer than 15,000 copies. Notwithstanding the disparity of prints between the Cincinnati speech and the Coop-

25. Lincoln to Chase, June 9 and 20, 1859, Collected Works, 3:384, 386; Chase to Lincoln, June 13, 1859, Lincoln Papers.
27. Holzer, Lincoln at Cooper Union, 149–50.
per Union address, the Ohio address received remarkable attention throughout the country. (Again, the Gazette decided to publish the speech on Monday only after they determined that it was different from the Columbus address they had published two days earlier.)

Although it is impossible to quantify the number of people who had the opportunity to read at least an excerpt of Lincoln’s Cincinnati speech, the extent of its circulation suggests that it was the most widely read speech of his pre-presidency, exceeding Cooper Union in the extent of its national circulation. As expected, dozens of papers in Ohio excerpted the Cincinnati Gazette version of the speech and reproduced it in their weekly organs. In Illinois, the Illinois State Journal and the Chicago Press and Tribune published the entire Cincinnati Gazette version of the speech. The Chicago Journal had a correspondent in Cincinnati that night who gave Lincoln glowing reviews. Five days after he delivered the speech, its impact was apparent in Washington, D.C., when the National Intelligencer reproduced the entire address—again from the original Cincinnati Daily Gazette. That newspaper account eventually reached the West Coast where papers like the Oregon Argus published the speech—exactly three months after Lincoln delivered it. In addition to the newspapers, Lincoln’s words were expanded in pamphlet when the Ohio State Central Republican Committee ordered 10,000 copies of the speech to be printed and distributed.28

Unlike the Cooper Union speech, the Cincinnati address garnered complete nationwide attention when it was distributed in the South by a most unlikely source—Stephen A. Douglas. The “Little Giant” took advantage of Lincoln’s labors in the speech to demonize himself in the eyes of Northern Democrats by illustrating that he was too cozy to the Southern wing of the party. With the aid of the newly elected Illinois Democratic congressman, John “Black Jack” Logan, Douglas reportedly produced 50,000 copies of Lincoln’s Cincinnati speech under the title “Douglas an enemy to the North.” Douglas’s ploy was to expand his presidential prospects to a Southern audience that had grown increasingly hostile to his anti-Lecompton stance and to the Freeport Doctrine. The method ensured widespread circulation of Lincoln’s speech to reach those who had no access to any of the forty-four Southern newspapers that had printed a portion of Lincoln’s Cincinnati speech.29

For Lincoln, the nationwide press coverage was unexpected, particularly after the absence of reporting on Lincoln’s earlier 1859 speeches in Chicago and Council Bluffs, Iowa. Except for a widely published letter espousing Republican principles that he wrote in April, Abraham Lincoln had not been associated with a public political event since October 1858. Thus the Ohio trip, and particularly the Cincinnati speech, placed Lincoln in a position in which the messenger was as important as the message. He was treated as a hero back in Illinois after the results of the off-year elections in Ohio and four other Northern states yielded huge gains for the fledgling Republican Party. Treating the Ohio trip as a new debate season with Douglas, Republicans dubbed Lincoln “Abe the Giant Killer.”

More importantly, admirers viewed Lincoln as presidential timber. Endorsements in Illinois newspapers increased in the wake of the Ohio trip. Prominent Ohio Republicans had fretted over the diminished prospects of their native son, the radical Salmon P. Chase, prior to Lincoln’s trip, and several turned to Lincoln as a favorable alternative. “Your visit to Ohio has excited an extensive interest in your favor,” raved one of Lincoln’s Buckeye confidants. Congressman Tom Corwin, Cincinnati’s most respected and revered politician, instantly became a Lincoln man after hearing him speak in Cincinnati and discussed Lincoln’s presidential prospects with him before he returned to Illinois. Former Ohio Whig congressman Robert Schenck was equally impressed with Lincoln’s logical message conveyed in Dayton and Cincinnati, endorsing his candidacy a few weeks later.

Lincoln’s Cincinnati speech impressed eastern politicians as well, particularly those supporting such front-running candidates as Senator William H. Seward of New York and Senator Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania. Most telling was a terse, mid-October telegram wired by Thurlow Weed, New York’s political boss and Seward’s manager: “Send Abram Lincoln to Albany immediately.” Lincoln and Norman Judd—his 1858 campaign manager—apparently disregarded the message, one that may have suggested Weed’s interest in pairing Lincoln as Seward’s vice president—a desire fostered after reading

32. Thurlow Weed to Norman Judd and Judd to Lincoln, October 20, 1859, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.
about the Cincinnati speech. Cameron’s supporters sought Lincoln as the Pennsylvanian’s vice president as well. The lack of regard Lincoln was getting as a serious presidential prospect east of Ohio fit perfectly into his strategy to increase his exposure without the scrutiny normally applied to declared presidential prospects.33

The Cincinnati speech opened the doors for Lincoln to conduct extensive speaking tours in Northern states and territories. In the five years since his return to politics in the summer of 1854 Lincoln delivered only one speech outside the state of Illinois. But in the following seven months Lincoln delivered thirty speeches in eight states and Kansas Territory. The tremendous disparity between these two periods is evidence that Lincoln sought to increase his exposure outside of Illinois for a run for the presidency. The Ohio trip accelerated this clandestine campaign, a bid enhanced by the ubiquitous news over the Cincinnati speech. The invitation to speak in New York in February of 1860—what eventually became the Cooper Union speech—was the most important event that was influenced by Lincoln’s Cincinnati success. One of the event organizers explained to the editor of the Illinois State Journal, “We want to hear a speech from [Lincoln], such as one he delivered in Cincinnati would be perfectly satisfactory. . . .”34

The final consideration of the impact of the Cincinnati speech can be seen in the nomination of Abraham Lincoln at the end of the third round of balloting in the Great Wigwam of Chicago on May 18, 1860. Lincoln’s speaking tour in Wisconsin in October 1859 had no impact on its delegation in Chicago, for it remained a solid Seward state for all three rounds of balloting. The same appears true for Kansas Territory, where Lincoln delivered several speeches in December 1859. The Kansans stayed with Seward, as did his most influential delegation, the New Yorkers, who never abandoned their native son during the three rounds, notwithstanding Lincoln’s superlative performance at Cooper Union. The delegations of New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Connecticut, where Lincoln spoke in March 1860, may have been more influenced by Lincoln’s presence on their soil, for they contributed votes to the “Rail Candidate” in all three rounds. Those delegations—particularly New Hampshire—were also heavily targeted by Lincoln’s supporters in Chicago who met with them frequently during the days leading up to the balloting. Fortunately for Lincoln’s team, the three

34. Quote in Holzer, Lincoln at Cooper Union, 16.
delegations were not bound to a native son whom they had to abandon in order to vote for Lincoln.\textsuperscript{35}

Ohio’s role in Lincoln’s nomination did not follow the same template of other states where Lincoln spoke in 1859 and 1860. Ohio boasted three natives who received nomination votes at the Wigwam: Salmon P. Chase, John McLean, and Benjamin F. Wade. Lincoln’s supporters met with the Buckeye delegation five days before the balloting and learned that Lincoln was highly regarded by them. Perhaps dissuaded by the number of Ohio candidates in contention and the dedication to Chase by the majority of the delegates, Lincoln’s team did not pursue this delegation within seventy-two hours of the balloting as vigorously as they cajoled the eastern delegations.

Ohio’s delegation demonstrated that it did not require persuasion from the Illinois delegation to reward Lincoln with its votes. In the first round, eight of the forty-six delegates voted for Lincoln; in the second round six more men came his way. The total number of Lincoln votes by the Ohioans swelled to 29 during the third round. It was fitting that at the end of the round four more Buckeyes—including the son of Thomas Corwin—changed their votes from Chase to Lincoln to officially win the nomination for him.\textsuperscript{36}

The strong Ohio support in each round was not expected by the Lincoln team, but it was appreciated and helped the Illinoisans achieve their goal of obtaining 100 votes for Lincoln in the first round (he had 102), with growing support in subsequent rounds for him to unseat Seward. Ohio’s thirty-three Lincoln votes was the most by any state save for Pennsylvania, whose delegation was most likely “bought” with the promise of a cabinet position. The Ohioans did not need this dangled carrot. Ever since Lincoln spoke in the state, and particularly after his Cincinnati speech, he was the highest regarded “outsider” by the Ohio delegation. Thus, no other speaking tour of Abraham Lincoln imparted a more direct affect upon his nomination than did his Ohio addresses upon that state’s delegation.

The Cincinnati speech of September 17, 1859, can be isolated from the other speeches Abraham Lincoln made in Ohio as the most noteworthy address delivered in the two-day trip. Lincoln’s tremendous reception in Cincinnati, the huge crowd that came out to hear him, the geography-oriented innovations that highlighted the logic-driven

\textsuperscript{35} Each round of balloting at the convention is delineated in the \textit{Aurora (Ill.) Beacon}, May 24, 1860.

speech, the positive press it received (including from Democratic or-
gans), and the nationwide circulation of Lincoln’s points of view easily
distinguished the Cincinnati address from the previous speeches at
Columbus, Dayton, and Hamilton.
For the same reasons, the Cincinnati address stands apart from any
of the nearly 190 speeches Lincoln delivered in the six years from
his return to politics in 1854 to his nomination as president of the
United States.37 It not only received widespread national attention for
Lincoln (North, South, East, and West), it immediately elevated him
in the eyes of those outside Illinois from a two-time Senate loser to
a viable candidate for president. It is likely the only one of the thirty
addresses delivered within nine months of Lincoln’s nomination that
appears to have influenced non-Illinois delegates to vote for him.
These reasons support the argument that the Cincinnati address was
not only Abraham Lincoln’s most underrated speech, it ranks as one
of the most important addresses of his pre-presidential career.

37. See footnote 10.