Review Essay

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As a whole, the books examine Lincoln’s words in specific speeches and explain how important those words were in his life and what they say about Lincoln’s understanding of his times. Many of the speeches seem obvious: the Gettysburg Address, the Second Inaugural, and even the Cooper Union speech. Lehrman’s chosen subject—Lincoln’s speech at Peoria, Illinois, on October 16, 1854—seems an unlikely companion to those great Lincoln speeches. Lehrman, however, declares that “to understand President Abraham Lincoln, one must understand the Peoria speech” (xvi). He closely examines the speech and concludes that it marked Lincoln’s reentry into politics, began his antislavery activism, evidenced a more mature political philosophy, and ignited a new respect for the Declaration of Independence. Also, says Lehrman, all of Lincoln’s subsequent speeches can trace their intellectual origins to his Peoria speech.

The book falls into three distinct sections. First, is the historical background to the speech at Peoria, with particular attention to the national debates leading up to the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Lincoln and Douglas participated in several debates on the slavery question, with the Peoria speech one of Lincoln’s responses to Douglas. Second,
is a detailed study and parsing of Lincoln’s words at Peoria. Third and finally, is an examination of Lincoln’s rhetoric after the Peoria speech and how the themes carried into his correspondence, the campaign of 1856, the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, and the presidency. Ultimately, *Lincoln at Peoria* is about the rise of Lincoln’s antislavery rhetoric that began at Peoria and continued until his death.

Lehrman clearly researched for the book well, recognizing and implementing the voluminous literature on Abraham Lincoln. He references modern scholarship as well as long-standing works on the life of Lincoln, taking care to cite his sources. In some instances, he may have relied too much on previous scholarship. Often, he simply strings together several quotations from various sources to make a statement. He would have been better making the statement himself then simply citing previous works. But this is a minor quibble, as it is a far better error to over-research and over-cite than the opposite.

The first chapter provides a general background of Lincoln’s speaking style, previous visits to Peoria (perhaps taking the title *Lincoln at Peoria* a bit too literally), and a distillation of the events leading up to Lincoln’s first speeches against the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Chapter 2 is a summary of the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1854, when Douglas gave speeches supporting his Nebraska legislation and Lincoln followed with speeches opposing it. Lehrman follows the debaters across Illinois, noting that Lincoln’s Winchester, Springfield, and Bloomington speeches were preludes to his Peoria speech. Most likely, the speeches were primarily the same, but since Peoria was the only one that Lincoln prepared for publication, it became Lincoln’s predominant argument against the Nebraska bill.

Chapter 3 tells the story of the passage of the Nebraska bill through Congress. Lehrman emphasizes Douglas’s eye on the presidency and his desire for southern support. The Kansas-Nebraska bill was the path to obtain it (73). The act passed the Senate, then went to the House, which added an amendment. After it passed the Senate again, President Franklin Pierce signed it into law in May 1854. The legislation voided the Missouri Compromise because it conflicted with the Compromise of 1850 regarding popular sovereignty in the territories of New Mexico and Utah (97). This chapter is a nice summary of the passage of the bill, though it would have been better placed earlier in the book preceding the chapter on Douglas’s and Lincoln’s speeches for and against the legislation.

Chapter 4 is the meat of the book. Lincoln’s Peoria speech, according to Lehrman, established the “principles, policies, and arguments” that led Lincoln to the presidency (101). Even though Lincoln probably gave the same speech previously in Springfield and portions of the speech throughout his speaking campaign, the Peoria speech became famous because it was the only one printed (102–03). Lehrman also emphasizes Lincoln’s newfound research ability, noting how the “Peoria speech stands out because of its exhaustive knowledge of the history of slavery legislation (111).” Actually, Lincoln had been a prolific researcher for nearly twenty years, studying law cases and treatises when a particular legal issue came before him.3 Lincoln also conducted research before his speeches to Congress during his only term (1847–49).4 Lehrman refers to Lincoln’s law practice numerous times throughout the book and particularly in this chapter, recognizing the interconnectedness of the law and politics. However, he cites only John Duff’s book on Lincoln’s law practice in his bibliography, when newer books and the massive archive the Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln are available.5

Lehrman implies that Lincoln’s antislavery behavior began in 1854. While it is true that Lincoln’s rhetoric changed—as Lehrman points out—from Whig political philosophy to antislavery activism, Lincoln was antislavery throughout his entire life, as his work in the Illinois General Assembly and, more specifically, in the U.S. Congress, demonstrated. Overall, Lehrman does an excellent job parsing Lincoln’s words, especially as he emphasizes that the Declaration of Independence became the bedrock upon which Lincoln built his philosophical and political reasoning (108). The book could have been improved by printing the text of the Peoria speech prior to this chapter rather than relegating it to an appendix.

Chapters 5 and 6 take the reader beyond Peoria and into the aftermath of the Nebraska law. Lehrman explains to readers how the important points of the Peoria speech continued to reappear in Lincoln’s

5. Newer books on Lincoln’s law practice include Steiner, An Honest Calling; Brian Dirck, Lincoln the Lawyer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Daniel W. Stowell et al., eds., The Papers of Abraham Lincoln: Legal Documents and Cases (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008). Lehrman does note the Lincoln Legal Papers in the last chapter.
criticism of the *Dred Scott* decision, in his campaign speeches of 1856, in his debates against Stephen Douglas in 1858, and in the campaign for the presidency. While reiterating much of the same literature on Lincoln’s rise in the 1850s, Lehrman looks at it differently, emphasizing the themes of the Peoria speech within other speeches and debates later in the 1850s. Slavery versus freedom was the rhetoric—beginning at Peoria—that Lincoln incorporated into most, if not all, of his public speeches.

Chapter 7 emphasizes how Lincoln’s rhetoric from Peoria found its way into the presidency. Again in great detail Lehrman examines Lincoln’s speeches and correspondence that show reverence for the Declaration of Independence, a theme that began at Peoria and concluded with the Thirteenth Amendment and the end of slavery (218, 224). Peppered with long quotations, this chapter also covers previously studied ground. While occasionally noting the Peoria speech, Lehrman is less convincing in this chapter than in the 1854 and beyond chapters as the extension of slavery was overshadowed by the dissolution of the Union.

*Lincoln at Peoria* concludes with a summary of his argument, a chapter on what historians had said about the speech, the full text of the speech, and an odd filler of a comparison of Lincoln and Douglas. Much of this appendix-like material seems unnecessary and almost as though Lehrman is deliberately overwhelming the reader to prove his point. That is the main shortcoming of the book; Lehrman makes a convincing argument, but it is lost in so much superfluous information.

Vaudeville performers once wondered “Will it play in Peoria?” recognizing the central Illinois city as the perfect test market for a show, product, or in Lincoln’s case (if I may be anachronistic), a speech. If it succeeded in Peoria, it should succeed everywhere. Of course, Lincoln did not “test” his speech in Peoria; it had been tested in Springfield, Winchester, and Bloomington, refined in Peoria, and further improved in speeches throughout 1854 and beyond. The Peoria speech stood out because it combined for the first time Lincoln’s expansive knowledge of the history of slavery legislation with his innate ability to use logic and humor to create an overwhelming argument against the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

Lehrman’s well-researched and finely annotated book will be the definitive book on this speech. But the book could have been better. The chronology meanders, making the flow disjointed. Lehrman

sometimes relies too heavily on quotations (except in the chapter dissecting the Peoria speech). Some sections unnecessarily divert the reader from the major topic. These quibbles aside, Lehrman writes well, engages the reader, and creates a fine study on an important speech that propelled Lincoln back into a life of politics.