

Holding the president's hat

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Lewis E. Lehrman, a resident of Greenwich, is chairman of the **Lincoln** Institute and the author of "**Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point**" (2008, ...

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By Lewis E. Lehrman

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When in 1861 Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated president, a longtime rival from Illinois held his hat. For nearly a quarter century, Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas had opposed each other in politics. On three occasions -- 1839, 1854 and 1858 -- they had squared off in debates that helped define the issues of economics and slavery that faced the nation.

Lincoln generally won these debates on substance but lost the elections that followed them. In 1860, Lincoln and Douglas had faced each other again, but in this presidential election, there would be no debates. The 5'4" Douglas had coveted the presidency for most of his life and actively pursued it for a decade. The three-term senator had lobbied, legislated and compromised to win the Democratic nomination after failed attempts in 1852 and 1856. When he was finally nominated in June 1860, however, it was only by the northern half of the Democratic Party.

The 6'4" Abraham Lincoln had a lower political profile. A private citizen out of governmental office more than a decade, Lincoln nevertheless had gained acclaim as a forceful opponent of the spread of slavery into new territories. Most famously, he had delivered a speech at Cooper Union in New York in February 1860. Like Barack Obama's speech to the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston, Lincoln's speech focused on the nation's divisions. There, Lincoln refused to back away from the moral wrong of slavery. "Neither let us be slandered from our duty by false accusations against us, nor frightened from it by menaces of destruction to the Government nor of dungeons to ourselves," he concluded. "Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty, as we understand it."

Lincoln's speech was so well received that his schedule was quickly filled with invitations to speak across New England. Still, it was a surprise when Republicans in May united behind Lincoln's unlikely presidential candidacy. Like President-elect Obama, Lincoln was tall and lanky -- a natural athlete. He relaxed on the morning of his nomination by playing handball in Springfield.

Unlike Obama's long and energetic campaign for the White House, Lincoln spent the six months after his nomination saying virtually nothing and campaigning not at all. From his famous speech against slavery at Peoria in 1854 until the winter of 1860, Lincoln had laid out his positions on slavery. He wanted to be judged on his published record and made no

public statements. Because the Democratic Party had split, Lincoln knew that the political odds were stacked against the Douglas candidacy.

After eight years of weak presidents -- Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan -- Lincoln sensed the country wanted change. But the changes desired were radically different in the North and South. Lincoln's chances at victory depended on virtually sweeping all northern states while Douglas and two other candidates split the anti-Republican vote.

The breakup of the Democratic Party in the spring of 1860 presaged the secession of southern states in the following winter. In an effort to prevent the dissolution of the Union, Douglas desperately broke political precedent to campaign actively in both the North and South. Starting in his native New England, Douglas barnstormed both the North and the South -- warning of the dangers of extremism and disunion. When he learned of his defeat on the night of November 6, 1860, Douglas was in Alabama.

Over the next few months, Sen. Douglas sought a compromise to avoid secession. President-elect Lincoln listened, but opposed any compromise that would allow for the expansion of slavery. In the four months between his election and his inauguration, Lincoln was both firm and flexible.

On March 4, 1861, Lincoln rose to deliver his inaugural address. The top hat he was wearing added six inches to his height. It was cold that day, but as the new president of the United States, Lincoln knew that he could not give his inaugural speech wearing his hat. There was no room on the small table to be used as his lectern.

Seated nearby was Douglas. The defeated Democrat quickly rose, graciously took Lincoln's hat, and sat down. Turning to the man seated next to him, Douglas said: "If I can't be President, I can at least hold his hat."