

Review Essay

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Harold Holzer. *Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech that Made Abraham Lincoln President*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004. Pp. 338.

In this book about Abraham Lincoln's Cooper Union address, Harold Holzer claims, "Never before or since in American history has a single speech so dramatically catapulted a candidate toward the White House" (235). While historians have long agreed that the February 27, 1860, speech somehow accounted for Lincoln's rise from obscurity outside Illinois to the presidency of the United States, no one has really explained how or why. Now, with meticulous attention to the political, social, and technological context of New York and the nation in 1860, Holzer fills that gap. Arguing that "Cooper Union proved a unique confluence of political culture, rhetorical opportunity, technological innovation, and human genius," Holzer deftly re-creates the world that enabled Lincoln's rapid rise, while also emphasizing Lincoln's deliberate role in his own trajectory (232). In short, Holzer explains precisely why and how the Cooper Union speech mattered.

Holzer beautifully narrates Lincoln's path to Cooper Union. On Saturday, October 15, 1859, after spending the week out of Springfield on legal business, Lincoln returned home to a swarm of political admirers and a pile of mail. One day earlier, voters in key states (including Ohio, where Lincoln had been stumping in the early fall) had elected Republican candidates to state and local offices. On October 16, John Brown and a small band of zealots seized an armory in Harper's Ferry, Virginia. Into this charged political climate, Abraham Lincoln was about to enter as a presidential candidate. After rousing debates and a bitter loss to Democrat Stephen Douglas in the 1858 Illinois Senate contest, Lincoln saw the 1859 Republican victories as evidence that his young party could do well in the 1860 presidential race. Moreover, he saw the possibility that he could be the Republican nominee. First, he would need to transform from a local party operative to a national

candidate. In the mail awaiting him on October 15, Lincoln recognized his ticket of entry into the race: an invitation to speak in New York.

If the stakes were high in New York, so was the risk. Success in the nation's largest metropolis would make news nationwide, but so would failure, and what was more, New York was home to William Seward, front-runner for the Republican nomination. Even the party leaders behind the invitation favored Salmon Chase of Ohio. Lincoln was one of a series of western Republicans (including Francis Blair of Missouri and Cassius Clay of Kentucky) intended to help Chase by dimming enthusiasm for Seward. Exercising instinctive political timing, Lincoln delayed the speech from its proposed date in November 1859 until early 1860, closer to the Republican's national convention scheduled for May. He also went to work on the most meticulously prepared speech he had ever written, spending hours at the Illinois State House's library, just across the street from his law office. Between court appearances, Lincoln pored over the Constitution, the Northwest Ordinance, and weighty volumes such as Jonathan Elliott's *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution as Recommended by the General Convention at Philadelphia, in 1787*. His goal, Holzer explains, was to "prove historically what he had long argued politically: that the extension of slavery was wrong" and that it contradicted the intentions of the nation's founders (31). The months of diligent labor would, Lincoln hoped, help to establish him as a serious contender for national office. But even after the gangly Lincoln purchased a new suit for his trip east, his law partner William Herndon worried about the impression a rough-hewn westerner would make on a metropolitan audience.

The four-day, three-night, five-train journey did little to improve Lincoln's rumpled appearance, new suit notwithstanding, and upon arrival in New York just two days before delivering the most important speech of his life, Lincoln learned of another wrinkle. The venue for his speech had changed from its initial location—Henry Beecher's church in Brooklyn—to Cooper Union in Manhattan. Settling in at the Astor House, Lincoln began accommodating his remarks to the larger and slightly different audience likely to gather at Cooper Union under the auspices of the Young Men's Republican Union. He also played host to a parade of local callers. On Sunday, Lincoln heard Beecher preach at his church in Brooklyn before rushing back to the Astor House to continue revising his speech.

By the time Lincoln awoke on February 27, 1860, the date on which he would deliver his address at Cooper Union, he was not the only one who had been making preparations. Earlier that month, Illinois

Republican newspapers in Springfield and Chicago had endorsed Lincoln for president. In New York, Richard McCormick, a member of the Young Men's Republican Union, had generated admirable publicity. Mason Brayman, a Democrat from Springfield who knew Lincoln from his own earlier days as a lawyer for the Illinois Central Railroad, called on Lincoln, and agreed to stand in the back of the hall for the speech and signal if Lincoln's voice could not be heard. With all these details in place, Lincoln finally did some sight-seeing. His most important stop was Mathew Brady's photographic studio, where Lincoln sat for a photograph that would turn out to be, Holzer argues, nearly as pivotal as the Cooper Union speech. Between Lincoln's pressed lips, which gave his image a firm, determined appearance, and Brady's skillful developing techniques, which corrected the roving eye and harsh facial lines that plagued earlier portraits of Lincoln, the resulting image conveyed an air of gravity and statesmanship. What was more, new photographic technology enabled easy reproduction of inexpensive prints that could be distributed throughout the campaign season. Finally, that evening, Lincoln took his place on the Cooper Union stage alongside more than twenty organizers.

Contrary to legend, it did not snow in New York on February 27. The streets were slushy after an unseasonable warm spell, but the evening itself was dry. By 8 o'clock, more than twelve hundred men and women had filed in, filling about three-quarters of the hall. After William Cullen Bryant introduced the evening's speaker as one of the "children of the West," Lincoln unfolded himself from his chair and made his way to the lectern, his vaguely unkempt appearance seeming to merit the patronizing connotations of Bryant's introduction (107). At first, Lincoln's high-pitched voice grated, yet soon he settled into his rhythm. When he finished, the house "broke out in wild and prolonged enthusiasm," according to one eyewitness, while another decided that Lincoln was the "greatest man since St. Paul" (146). Old friends and urbane New Yorkers alike marveled at the westerner's transformation from a countrified stump speaker to a dignified statesman with what Mason Brayman called the "*world* [as] his audience" (145). *New York Times* editor Henry Raymond christened Lincoln a national leader of "pre-eminent ability" and New York's second choice for the Republican nomination (148).

Triumphant though the February 27 performance was, Holzer devotes forty percent of the book to what happened after the speech, emphasizing that "Cooper Union did not mark the end of Lincoln's rise; it represented the beginning" (170). That very night, Lincoln made his way to the offices of the *New York Tribune* to correct proofs of his

speech for inclusion in the newspaper the following day. In the weeks that followed, technology and Lincoln's own energy translated one evening's success into an effective bid for national office. Besides the *Tribune*, several other newspapers reprinted and circulated the speech. Meanwhile, Lincoln combined a visit with Robert, his son studying at Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, with an eleven-speech, twelve-day New England speaking tour, which Holzer describes as a "calculated follow-up to his acclaimed eastern political debut" (179). By the spring of 1860, annotated pamphlet versions of the Cooper Union speech did a brisk circulation in the North and West, just as the Brady portrait did. The resulting momentum propelled Lincoln into strategic place as the second choice of many delegates who gathered at the Republican convention in May. When Seward failed to gain enough votes for the nomination, a sufficient number of delegates were willing to go to their second choice to make Lincoln the Republican nominee for president in 1860. Without Cooper Union, Holzer argues, that never could have happened.

The speaking tour, pamphlets, and portrait all contributed to Lincoln's nomination, but none of them would have mattered without the central source of Cooper Union's impact: the words of the speech. Accordingly, at the center of Holzer's book rests a chapter analyzing the speech. In addition, the book's appendix contains the full annotated version distributed by Lincoln's hosts, the Young Men's Republican Union of New York. In many ways, Cooper Union was both a statement of Lincoln's beliefs and a campaign speech on a tightrope. It sought to distance Republicans from John Brown's violent radicalism while distinguishing Lincoln from William Seward's dire predictions of an irrepressible conflict and Stephen Douglas's moral indifference to slavery. In the Cooper Union speech, Lincoln argued that the intentions of the nation's founders established that the federal government *could* regulate slavery in the territories, while the moral repugnance of slavery meant that the federal government *should* use that power to bar slavery from the territories as a means of eventually eliminating the institution altogether.

Lincoln divided the speech into three sections. The first section bore witness to his long hours in the law library. Responding to Stephen Douglas's claim that the nation's founders endorsed popular sovereignty (the ability of white men in a territory to vote on slavery), Lincoln conceded Douglas's statement that "our fathers, when they framed the Government under which we live, understood this question just as well, and even better, than we do now" (120). Lincoln then examined the actions of the signers of the Constitution to establish

that the “fathers” of whom Douglas spoke actually supported the duty of Congress to regulate slavery in the territories. Systematically going through votes on such measures as the Northwest Ordinance, the Missouri Compromise, and acts to organize the Mississippi and Louisiana territories. Lincoln showed that of the thirty-nine men who signed the Constitution, twenty-three had other opportunities to vote on federal authority over slavery in the territories; of the twenty-three, twenty-one voted to ban slavery from the territories. Turning to the remaining sixteen Constitution signers who did not leave later votes, Lincoln argued that fifteen of them opposed slavery and left “significant hints” that they would have voted to restrict it from the territories if given the opportunity to do so (128). In the end he announced a thirty-six to three decision from the framers that Congress could ban slavery in the territories.

The second section of the speech turned rhetorically to the South, though Lincoln admitted that it was unlikely that his words would be heeded there, and therefore mainly sought to instruct northerners on how best to cope with southern insistence on ever-increasing federal protections for slavery. In demanding active intervention on behalf of slavery, an institution that the founders by and large hoped would disappear and therefore certainly never intended to promote, southerners, not Republicans, strayed from the legacy of the framers. In threatening to break up the Union if the North did not acquiesce in its novel demands, the South, not the Republican Party, betrayed the founders. Placating the South with half-measures like popular sovereignty would abandon the intentions of the framers, Lincoln argued, and it would fail because nothing short of federal activism on behalf of slavery would satisfy southern demands. Barring slavery from the territories, therefore, emerged as an eminently reasonable, and faithful, approach.

While the first two sections of the speech succeed chiefly by taking coolly logical approaches to emotional subjects, the final section, which is also the shortest, appeals to moral high ground. All legalistic proof that the federal government *could* restrict the spread of slavery meant little without a *reason* to restrict the spread of slavery, Lincoln maintained. Republicans could not lose sight of the immorality of slavery, because without it, the party had no compelling reason to exist. “If slavery is right,” he urged his fellow party members to recognize that “all words, acts, laws, and constitutions” (and, he might have added, political parties), “against it are themselves wrong, and should be silenced, and swept away. . . . All they ask, we could readily grant, if we thought slavery right.” Only a platform based on the con-

viction that slavery was not right, but wrong, could justify the party's existence, let alone assure its success. Finally, Lincoln concluded the speech by imploring his fellow party members not to delude themselves into "groping for some middle ground between the right and the wrong" which did not exist, but instead to "have faith that right makes might, and in that faith . . . dare to do our duty as we understand it" (142–43).

In addition to analyzing the speech, Holzer also re-examines the conventional characterization of Cooper Union as an essentially conservative speech. Certainly, Lincoln gave listeners and historians reason to consider the speech conservative. After all, the first sentence of the speech begins, "the facts with which I shall deal this evening are mainly old and familiar," and the strategy of the first two sections of the speech consists of persuading listeners that pro-slavery southerners, not Republicans, were trying to steer the nation off the course set by the founding generation. Moreover, a policy of ending slavery by stopping its spread sounds positively staid by modern lights. Yet, Holzer argues, "there is nothing conservative about it by 1860 standards" (134). In making this claim, Holzer asks readers to consider 1860 on its own terms. At that time, abolitionism remained unpopular North and South, and the might of slavery had been steadily growing for four decades. In such a context, telling listeners that being true to their own best ideals required a turnaround in national policy toward slavery—an old and powerful institution not to mention the source of magnificent wealth—was not conservative at all. Precisely because what he was demanding of listeners was difficult and (for its time) progressive, Lincoln couched his appeal in language designed to reassure listeners that his proffered course of action returned to original intentions rather than set out for uncharted territory. As a presidential hopeful who aspired to national office, Lincoln crafted a speech, says Holzer, that was "conservative in tone, but liberal in message" (139). Holzer could strengthen that point by placing this aspect of Cooper Union in the context of Lincoln's other writings. The genius of Lincoln's speeches, most notably the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural, often rested in their ability to prod listeners toward more progressive stances while reassuring them that they had really been there all along. In this regard, treating Cooper Union as a manifestation of one of Lincoln's characteristic patterns, rather than portraying it as something wholly unique, would further strengthen Holzer's case.

In fact, Holzer's tendency to single out the Cooper Union speech stands as one of very few weak spots in a genuinely delightful book, because in insisting on the speech's singularity, Holzer runs the risk

of disembodied Cooper Union and undermining his own persuasive explanation of how the speech “made Abraham Lincoln President,” as the book’s subtitle declares. Holzer presents the speech as the beginning of Lincoln’s rise to national prominence, but the speech’s impact makes more sense if Cooper Union is seen as a link between the Republican nomination in 1860 and the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, which garnered Lincoln enough national attention to warrant the Cooper Union invitation in the first place. Holzer does note the speech’s repeated references to Douglas’s doctrine of popular sovereignty, and he also points out Lincoln’s eagerness to rebut the extended treatise Douglas published in the September 1859 edition of *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, but it might help readers to draw more explicitly the connections between the 1858 face-off between the two Illinoisans and Lincoln’s triumph in New York in 1860. Another oddity pertains to sources. The book draws impressively on newspapers and firsthand accounts of people who heard and saw Lincoln in New York and New England, but it avoids recent biographical scholarship on Lincoln, instead citing dated studies in order to deny their contentions that Lincoln undertook the Cooper Union speech and the New England tour innocent of personal ambition. Holzer is right, of course, that any such denials underestimate “Lincoln’s political ambition—and his political acumen,” but since more recent biographers (David Herbert Donald, William Gienapp) have been making that point for quite some time, it is not as new as readers are led to believe (178).

Still, quibbles pale beside the strengths of Holzer’s book. Holzer tells an engrossing story explaining exactly what the Cooper Union speech did and did not do. The speech did not make Lincoln popular among New York City voters, who overwhelmingly voted against him in the presidential election, and it did not deter New York delegates from supporting William Seward rather than Abraham Lincoln at the Republican convention in May. Yet by providing Lincoln with a stage from which to campaign nationally (without appearing to do so), allowing him to refine his position against those of Stephen Douglas and William Seward, granting him access to the New York press which ultimately meant access to the press throughout the North and West, and requiring him to universalize his appeal, Cooper Union created the necessary opportunity for Lincoln to transform himself from a regional personality into a viable national candidate—and in a city equipped with the print and photographic technology to help spread his image nationwide. Moreover, Holzer convincingly re-creates a moment when *words* genuinely made an impact, not just on a New York crowd one February night, but on a nation.