



“That Presidential Grub”

by Michael Burlingame

<http://housedivided.dickinson.edu/sites/journal/2010/08/19/that-presidential-grub/>

“No man knows, when that Presidential grub gets to gnawing at him, just how deep in it will get until he has tried it,” Lincoln remarked in 1863. That grub began seriously gnawing at him after the 1858 campaign. His astute friend Joseph Gillespie believed that the debates with Douglas “first inspired him with the idea that he was above the average of mankind.” That was probably true, though Lincoln pooh-poohed any talk of the presidency, telling a journalist during the canvass with the Little Giant: “Mary insists . . . that I am going to be Senator and President of the United States, too.” Then, “shaking all over with mirth at his wife’s ambition,” he exclaimed: “Just think of such a sucker as me as President!” In December, when his friend and ally Jesse W. Fell urged him to seek the Republican presidential nomination, he replied: “Oh, Fell, what’s the use of talking of me for the presidency, whilst we have such men as Seward, Chase and others, who are so much better known to the people, and whose names are so intimately associated with the principles of the Republican party.”

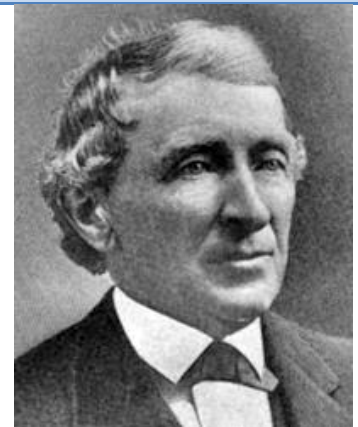


“Presidential Footrace”
Cartoon, 1860

“That Presidential Grub”

p. 2

When Fell persisted, arguing that Lincoln was more electable than Seward, Chase, and the other potential candidates being discussed, Lincoln agreed: “I admit the force of much of what you say, and admit that I am ambitious, and would like to be President. I am not insensible to the compliment you pay me . . . *but there is no such good luck in store of me as the presidency.*” The following spring, when Republican editors planned to endorse him for president, he balked. “I must, in candor, say I do not think myself fit for the Presidency,” he said. “I certainly am flattered, and gratified, that some partial friends think of me in that connection; but I really think it best for our cause that no concerted effort . . . should be made.”



Jesse W. Fell

When William W. Dannehower told Lincoln that his name was being seriously considered by Republican leaders for the presidency, he laughingly replied: “Why, Danenhower, this shows how political parties are degenerating, you and I can remember when we thought no one was fit for the Presidency but ‘Young Harry of the West,’ [i.e., Henry Clay] and now you seem to be seriously considering me for that position. It’s absurd.”



“That Presidential Grub”

p. 3

But it was not absurd, for the race for the nomination was wide open. Seward seemed to be the front runner, but many thought him as unelectable as Chase. Other names being tossed about – John McLean, Nathaniel P. Banks, Edward Bates, Lyman Trumbull, Jacob Collamer, Benjamin F. Wade, Henry Wilson – were all long shots at best. As Schuyler Colfax noted in December 1858, “there is no serious talk of any one.” Despite his modesty, Lincoln between August 1859 and March 1860 positioned himself for a presidential run by giving speeches and corresponding with party leaders in several states, among them Iowa, Ohio, Wisconsin, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Kansas. At the same time, he labored to keep Republicans true to their principles by having them steer a middle course between the Scylla of Douglas’s popular sovereignty and the Charybdis of radical abolitionism. Only thus could he and his party capture the White House. And only thus could a lesser-known Moderate like himself lead the ticket.



Google Map Tour Lincoln’s Campaign for the 1860 Nomination

“That Presidential Grub”

p. 4

Lincoln took encouragement from the ever-widening rift in the Democratic party over such issues as a federal slave code for the territories and the reopening of the African slave trade. To Herndon and others he said, in substance: “an explosion must come in the near future. Douglas is a great man in his way and has quite unlimited power over the great mass of his party, especially in the North. If he goes to the Charleston Convention [of the national Democratic party in 1860], which he will do, he, in a kind of spirit of revenge, will split the Convention wide open and give it the devil; & right here is our future success or rather the glad hope of it.” Herndon recalled that Lincoln “prayed for this state of affairs,” for “he saw in it his opportunity and wisely played his line.”



Charleston, South Carolina
circa 1855



Further Reading

Baringer, William Eldon. "Campaign Technique in Illinois – 1860." *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society* 32 (1932).

Eyland, Seth. *The Evolution of a Life*. New York: S. W. Green's Son, 1884.

Fehrenbacher, Don Edward. *Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850's*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962.

Rice, Allen Thorndike, ed. *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time*. New York: North American, 1886.

Wilson, James Harrison. "Reminiscences of General Grant." *Century Magazine* 30 (October 1885): 947-955.



Document 1– Recollection of Jesse W. Fell
Conversation with Abraham Lincoln in early 1859
<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/34129>

Source Citation –

Statement by Jesse W. Fell, Normal, Illinois, 1882, in Osborn H. Oldroyd, ed., *The Lincoln Memorial: Album Immortelles* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1882), 473-476.

Overview –

Jesse W. Fell was a legendary Illinois businessman who had known Abraham Lincoln for over 25 years before he determined to help make his friend president. This recollection from nearly twenty years after Lincoln's death, offered Fell's self-serving account of how he tutored Lincoln in the politics of the presidential race. He described Lincoln as being open with him about his ambition but reluctant to put himself forward, reportedly claiming, "It won't pay". (By Matthew Pinsker)

Transcribed Text –

... FELL. " We must bear in mind, Lincoln, that we are yet in a minority; we are struggling against fearful odds for supremacy. We were defeated on this same issue in 1856, and will be again in 1860, unless we get a great many new votes from what may be called the old conservative parties. These will be repelled by the radical utterances and votes of such men as Seward and Chase. What the Republican party wants, to insure success, in 1860, is a man of popular origin, of acknowledged ability, committed against slavery aggressions, who has no record to defend and no radicalism of an offensive character to repel votes from parties hitherto adverse. Your discussion with Judge Douglas has demonstrated your ability and your devotion to freedom ; you have no embarrassing record ; you have sprung from the humble walks of life, sharing in its toils and trials; and if we can only get these facts sufficiently before the people, depend upon it, there is some chance for you.... I know your public life, and can furnish items that your modesty would forbid, but I don't know much about your private history: when you were born, and where, the names and origin of your parents, what you did in early life, what your opportunities for education, etc., and I want you to give me these. Won't you do it?"

LINCOLN. "Fell, I admit the force of much that you say, and admit that I am ambitious, and would like to be President. I am not insensible to the compliment you pay me, and the interest you manifest in the matter; *but there is no such good luck in store for me as the presidency of these United States*; besides, there is nothing in my early history that would interest you or anybody else; and, as Judge Davis says, '*It wont pay.*' Good night." ...



Document 2—Abraham Lincoln to Thomas J. Pickett, April 16, 1859

<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/25227>

Source Citation –

Abraham Lincoln to Thomas J. Pickett, April 16, 1859, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (8 vols., New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 3: 377, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/>.

Overview –

Rock Island *Weekly Register* editor Thomas Pickett had written Abraham Lincoln on April 13 asking about "the policy of announcing your name for the Presidency." Lincoln's cautious response three days later illustrated his concern about appearing over-eager as a potential candidate. Lincoln did take several steps to promote himself in 1859 and early 1860, but here at least he claimed that he did not consider himself "fit for the Presidency." (By Matthew Pinsker)

Transcribed Text –

T.J. Pickett, Esq Springfield,
My dear Sir. April 16. 1859.

Yours of the 13th. is just received. My engagements are such that I can not, at any very early day, visit Rock-Island, to deliver a lecture, or for any other object.

As to the other matter you kindly mention, I must, in candor, say I do not think myself fit for the Presidency. I certainly am flattered, and gratified, that some partial friends think of me in that connection; but I really think it best for our cause that no concerted effort, such as you suggest, should be made.

Let this be considered confidential. Yours very truly

A. LINCOLN---



Document 3—Abraham Lincoln to Samuel Galloway, July 28, 1859
<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/34009>

Source Citation –

Abraham Lincoln to Samuel Galloway, July 28, 1859, Springfield, IL, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (8 vols., New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 3: 394-395, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/>.

Overview –

Samuel Galloway was a former Republican congressman from Ohio who had written Abraham Lincoln on July 23, 1859 explaining why he was uncomfortable with the policies of Senator Salmon P. Chase and other anti-slavery men in his state representing "ultra ideas." In his response, Lincoln agreed that he also "regretted" the "repudiation" of Chief Justice Joseph Swan because of his defense of the fugitive slave law in the Oberlin Rescue Case but deflected (for the time being) Galloway's interest in him as a presidential candidate. (By Matthew Pinsker)

Transcribed Text –

... Two things done by the Ohio Republican convention---the repudiation of Judge Swan, and the ``plank" for a repeal of the Fugitive Slave law---I very much regretted. These two things are of a piece; and they are viewed by many good men, sincerely opposed to slavery, as a struggle against, and in disregard of, the constitution itself. And it is the very thing that will greatly endanger our cause, if it be not kept out of our national convention. There is another thing our friends are doing which gives me some uneasiness. It is their leaning towards ``popular sovereignty." There are three substantial objections to this. First, no party can command respect which sustains this year, what it opposed last. Secondly, Douglas, (who is the most dangerous enemy of liberty, because the most insidious one) would have little support in the North, and by consequence, no capital to trade on in the South, if it were not for our friends thus magnifying him and his humbug. But lastly, and chiefly, Douglas' popular sovereignty, accepted by the public mind, as a just principle, nationalizes slavery, and revives the African Slave-trade, inevitably. Taking slaves into new territories, and buying slaves in Africa, are identical things---identical *rights* or identical *wrongs*---and the argument which establishes one will establish the other. Try a thousand years for a sound reason why congress shall not hinder the people of Kansas from having slaves, and when you have found it, it will be an equally good one why congress should not hinder the people of Georgia from importing slaves from Africa.

As to Gov. Chase, I have a kind side for him. He was one of the few distinguished men of the nation who gave us, in Illinois, their sympathy last year. I never saw him, suppose him to be able, and right-minded; but still he may not be the most suitable as a candidate for the Presidency.

I must say I do not think myself fit for the Presidency. As you propose a correspondence with me, I shall look for your letters anxiously.

I have not met Dr. Reynolds since receiving your letter; but when I shall, I will present your respects, as requested. Yours very truly A. LINCOLN