



## “Lincoln and Know Nothings”

by Michael Burlingame

<http://housedivided.dickinson.edu/sites/journal/2010/10/01/lincoln-know-nothings/>

The [1860] election hinged on the Fillmore voters of 1856, especially in Indiana and Pennsylvania, where gubernatorial contests were to be held in October, and also in New York. Lincoln realized that he must win over men like “the great high priest of Knownothingism,” James O. Putnam, the postmaster at Buffalo and a close friend of Millard Fillmore. Putnam, said Lincoln, resembled Weed: “these men ask for just, the same thing – fairness, and fairness only.” In time Putnam came to admire Lincoln vastly, calling him “one of the most remarkable speakers of English, living.” As for [John] Bell, Putnam acknowledged that the Tennessean “has the respect and confidence of every man of American antecedents, but of what earthly service can 20,000 or 30,000 votes be to him in New York?” Putnam deserted the Bell forces because “he saw no chance for them to carry the Northern States, and his only hope in defeating the Democratic party, and thereby promoting the interests of the country, was in a union with the Republicans upon the Chicago platform and nominees.” (As president, Lincoln was to name Putnam consul at Le Havre.)

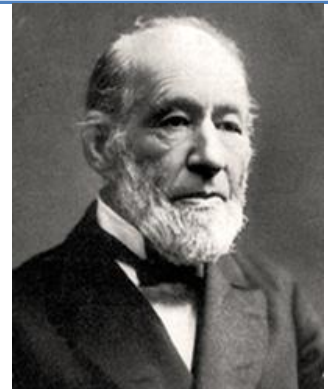


“The Grand National Fight”  
cartoon, 1856

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In Putnam’s hometown of Buffalo, the leading American party newspaper praised Lincoln for qualities lacking in the corrupt Republican legislature at Albany. “Mr. Lincoln’s nomination . . . guarantees executive honesty. It assures us that no bargains have been made, no greedy disposition of the spoils already accomplished. His principles are our principles. We only differ from Republicans in the relative importance attached to the Slavery issue and in having perhaps a larger faith in the final triumph of the right. Thus holding, thus satisfied of the honesty of the party with which we act, we are unreserved in our support of Lincoln and Hamlin.” Commenting on this endorsement, Washington Hunt, a leading conservative, said that the editor’s view of Lincoln, “unsound and fallacious as it is, operates upon many persons who are disposed to follow the current and take refuge in what they consider a strong and prosperous party.” Other American party members shared the belief that voting for Bell would be futile, while electing Lincoln would rebuke the hated Democrats. The Know Nothings were “so jubilant over the defeat of Seward that all go in for the ticket,” noted another Buffalo Republican.



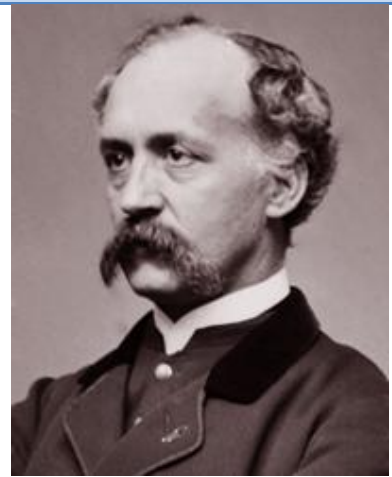
James Osborne Putnam  
circa 1900



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Lincoln was disappointed by the opposition of John J. Crittenden, who warned that although the Republican nominee was “an honest, worthy and patriotic man,” nevertheless as “the Republicans’ President” he “would be at least a terror to the South.” A former congressman (and future senator) from the Blue Grass State, Garrett Davis, called Lincoln “an honest man of fair ability” but found him unacceptable because “for some years past he has been possessed of but one idea – hostility to slavery.” Another American party leader who needed to be cultivated was David Davis’s cousin, Congressman Henry Winter Davis of Maryland, who was so influential that the committee of twelve at the Chicago Convention had asked him to run for vice president. He declined lest his candidacy ruin the ticket in the Northwest. Like many other Know Nothings, he objected to the Republican platform’s “supremely foolish” plank denouncing “any change in our naturalization laws or any state legislation by which the rights of citizenship hitherto accorded to immigrants from foreign lands shall be abridged or impaired” and favoring “a full and efficient protection to the rights of all classes of citizens.”

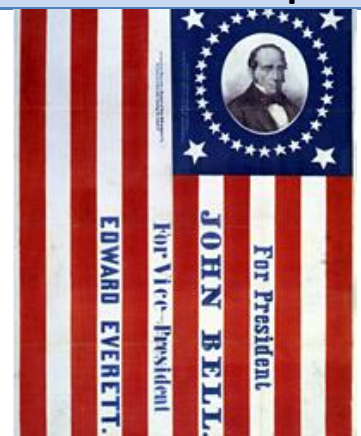


Henry Winter Davis

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Since the term “Republican” was poison in Maryland, Davis said he would support Bell there but hinted that he might be willing to stump for Lincoln in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. He thought “the Chicago nomination a wise one,” for the candidate was “long headed.” Davis’s only fear was that Seward would be named secretary of state and act as “a weight on the administration.” Though he disliked Bell’s pro-slavery public letter, he believed a Bell administration “would be the same as Lincoln[’]s or Mr. [Henry] Clay[’]s.” Lincoln urged Richard W. Thompson, his friend from their days together in Congress and a leader of Indiana’s Constitutional Union party, to “converse freely” with Davis. Thompson did so. He also told Lincoln while he himself might not vote Republican, he would work to block a Bell ticket in Indiana. (In 1856, Thompson had badly damaged Republicans’ chances in the Hoosier state by thwarting their attempts to fuse with the Americans; in return he received a rich reward from the Democrats.)



Constitutional Union  
Campaign Banner, 1860



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Thompson, whose influence with the Midwestern Know Nothings was considerable, assured them that Lincoln could not "be led into ultraism by radical men" and that his administration "will be national." In choosing the Illinoisan over Seward, the delegates at Chicago "demonstrated to the country that the great body of the Republicans are conservative." Lincoln's "strength consists in his conservatism. His own principles are conservative." Thompson asked Lincoln if it would be advisable to cite his 1849 vote against the Gott resolution in order to allay the fears of conservatives; the candidate hesitated to give permission, lest he alienate antislavery radicals. Lincoln replied: "If my record would hurt any, there is no hope that it will be over-looked; so that if friends can help any with it, they may as well do so. Of course, due caution and circumspection, will be used." A week later, Horace Greeley pointed to Lincoln's vote on the Gott resolution as proof of his conservatism.



"Republican Party Going to the Right House"  
Cartoon, 1860

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In July, when Thompson expressed a wish to meet with Lincoln, the candidate hesitated. Because Democratic papers had been accusing him of nativist proclivities (even alleging that he had attended a Know Nothing lodge), he wished to do nothing that might lend credence to those false charges. So rather than invite Thompson to Springfield, he dispatched Nicolay to Indiana with instructions to ask what his old friend wanted to discuss and to assure him that his motto was "Fairness to all," but to make no commitments. In mid-July Nicolay carried out this mission, finding that Thompson "only sought to be assured of the general 'fairness' to all elements giving Mr Lincoln their support, and that he did not even hint at any exaction or promise as being necessary to secure the 'Know Nothing' vote for the Republican ticket." Fearing the influence of Know Nothings in northern Illinois, Lincoln asked Thompson to write to John Wilson, an American party leader in Chicago who had been a delegate to the Constitutional Union party's convention. Thompson complied, and Wilson abandoned the Bell movement after its Illinois leaders tried to merge with the Douglasites.



"Know Nothing Quick Step,"  
1854



# House Divided



## Further Reading

Burlingame, Michael, ed. *An Oral History of Abraham Lincoln: John G. Nicolay's Interviews and Essays*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996

Carwardine, Richard J. *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

Johannsen, Robert Walter. *Stephen A. Douglas*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Roll, Charles. *Colonel Dick Thompson: The Persistent Whig*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1948.

Summers, Mark W. *The Plundering Generation: Corruption and Crisis of the Union, 1849-1861*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.



## Document 1– Schuyler Colfax to Abraham Lincoln, May 30, 1860

<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/34361>

### Source Citation –

Schuyler Colfax to Abraham Lincoln, May 30, 1860, Washington, DC, Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/alhtml/malhome.html>.

### Transcribed Text –

Washn. City, May 30. 1860.

My dear sir,

It is too bad to write you three letters in a week; we having received your note this morning, & having had a long interview with R. W. Thompson this morning, thought it best to write you the result. I did not of course mention any thing of your having written to him; but told him that he held the fate of Inda. in his hands & possibly with it the Prest. Election & I was anxious to know what he had decided on. He replied, (I give you the purport of the whole conversation,) that he did not desire to commit himself positively till after that Baltimore Convention, but that his opinion was as follows. The Chicago platform contained some things with which he did not agree: but knowing you, & having confidence in you, both from personal knowledge & from having read your discussions with Douglas, he had the highest possible confidence in you, and the most assured conviction that you could do right. That Indiana must not be carried by the Democracy; and that he expected to oppose the formation of any Bell Electoral ticket in that State, so that it might be carried for you, as, in the event, it would certainly be.

He also added that he had recently been at his birth place in Caulpepper [Culpeper], Va, speaking there; & that at Hon Mr. Pendleton's, in company with a dozen Southern Whigs he propounded to them the question what he should do, if it was clearly ascertained that the Bell men had the balance of power, & that running a ticket in Indiana could give the State to the Democracy; & they all agreed that the State Democracy should be beaten, & the State given to you. He added that this was not for public repetition.

I cannot give you all the conversation; but there is no doubt that after the Balt. Convention, Mr. Thompson intends to come out publicly for you, as the only candidate who can carry Inda. against the Democracy, & probably suggesting that the Opposition should run Lincoln tickets in the North & Bell tickets in the South, carrying in this way every possible State agst. the Democracy. The Philadelphia demonstration was a magnificent one, & our friends say the most significant of all, was the Fillmore Rangers & German Reps. marching together in the procession. Still Pa & N. J. are to be our hardest States to carry.

In haste Yrs truly

Schuyler Colfax

Have written this while debate is going on; but trust it is coherent.



Document 2– Richard W. Thompson to Abraham Lincoln, July 6, 1860  
<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/34125>

**Source Citation –**

Richard W. Thompson to Abraham Lincoln, July 6, 1860, Terre Haute, IN, Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/alhtml/malhome.html>.

**Transcribed Text –**

Terre Haute July 6, 1860

My Dear Sir

A few days before I left Washington I recd. your last letter & had, as you suggested, a brief interview with H. W. D: -- it was, however, necessarily too brief to be very Satisfactory because neither he nor I had time to make it otherwise. It satisfied me that there was a general concurrence between his views & mine.

I reached home a week ago and found a meeting of our State Executive Committee called for 4th instant, & a strong inclination to form an Electoral Ticket & to run a State Ticket. I attended the meeting & opposed both movements, & succeeded in getting it adjourned to meet again on the 15th next month. In the mean time I think I can so manage those who advocate an organization as to prevent it. The State ticket they have already agreed to abandon, & a good many of those who were earnest for an electoral ticket have changed their views. I have to manage the matter with exceeding delicacy & could do nothing if I were to avow openly my ulterior object. This does not arise out of a want of confidence felt in you, but from the strong feelings existing in particular localities between some of our men & the Republicans. You will, therefore, infer that one of my chief arguments is that you, if elected, will not suffer yourself to be led into ultraism by Radical men; but that your administration will be national. If I could succeed in fixing their impressions upon their minds, I should have but little difficulty -- & I hope to do it. It cannot be done, however, at once. I made a strong impression upon the minds of the Committee when I told them that you & I & Geo. Dunn voted together in Congress on the Slavery question. By the by, have you forgotten that was seperated from all the other northern Whigs upon Gott's resolution? Do you think it would do you any hurt amongst the Republicans if I were to mention this as proof of your Conservatism? I have not done it & will not if you think it will hurt you -- though I suppose somebody will look it up. I should like very much to see you & have a personal interview with you. I want to talk about some things that you ought not to write about. How can we arrange an interview? If I come openly to Springfield it will get in the papers -- for I cannot travel without being known. Is any other plan practicable? Write me on this subject, & I will follow your suggestions.

Very truly yr. friend

R. W. Thompson

Send your answer in an envelope addressed to Wm R McKeen -- by Express -- for it is better for you that the P. M's should not know that you & I are corresponding at present at all events.



Document 3– Abraham Lincoln to Richard W. Thompson, July 10, 1860  
<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/34362>

**Source Citation –**

Abraham Lincoln to Richard W. Thompson, July 10, 1860, Springfield, IL, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (8 vols., New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 4: 82-83, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/>.

**Transcribed Text –**

PRIVATE

Hon. R. W. Thompson: Springfield, Ills,

Dear Sir: July 10. 1860

Yours of the 6th. is received, and for which I thank you. I write this to acknowledge the receipt of it, and to say I take time (only a little) before answering the main matter.

If my *record* would *hurt* any, there is no hope that it will be over-looked; so that if friends can *help* any with it, they may as well do so. Of course, due caution and circumspection, will be used.

With reference to the same matter, of which you write, I wish you would watch Chicago a little. They are getting up a movement for the 17th. Inst. I believe a line from you to John Wilson, late of the Genl. Land Office (I guess you know him well) would fix the matter.

When I shall have reflected a little, you will hear from me again. Yours very truly A. LINCOLN.

Burn this.