



House Divided



"Honest Abe"

by Michael Burlingame

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Shortly after the 1860 Chicago Convention, Joshua Giddings assured Lincoln that "your selection was made upon two grounds," first that "you are an honest man," and second that "you are not in the hands of corrupt or dishonest men." Seward suffered by contrast, and some of the senator's backers acknowledged that they "must not blame the people of the United States for being afraid that the election of a leading New York politician to the Presidency would only displace the existing corruption at Washington by a new importation of venality and political knavery from Albany." A New York delegate acknowledged that all the forces working against Seward would have been insufficient to defeat him "had not his opponents strengthened their arguments by allusion to the corruptions practiced at Albany during the past winter. No man entertained the idea that Mr Seward was connected with them, but it was charged that his friends were." Hostility to corruption not only led to Lincoln's nomination, it also helped assure his victory in one of the most crucial elections in American history. The public was fed up with steamship lobbies, land-grant bribery, hiring journalists,



"Honest Abe Taking Them on the Half Shell" cartoon, 1860

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the spoils system, rigged political conventions, and cost overruns on government projects. At a New York ratification meeting, Horace Greeley introduced a resolution proclaiming that there were two irrepressible conflicts, one pitting freedom against "aggressive, all-grasping Slavery propagandism" and the other, "not less vital," between "frugal government and honest administration" on the one hand and "wholesale executive corruption, and speculative jobbery" on the other. Samuel Bowles of the Springfield, Massachusetts, *Republican* accurately prophesied that on "an issue likely to rival, if not to overshadow, that of the irrepressible negro – that of honesty, simplicity and economy in public affairs," Lincoln would run well, for he "is a man of the most incorruptible integrity" whose forte is honesty." Along with several other newspapers, the Cincinnati *Commercial* lauded the candidate as a "straight- out and decided Republican" whose "administration of the government would be honest, economical and capable." William Cullen Bryant pledged that his New York *Evening Post* would "do all it could" to "turn out the present most corrupt of administrations, and install an honest administration in its stead."



"Beauties of the Franking Privilege" Cartoon, March 1860



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New Englanders stressed the corruption issue. The Concord *New Hampshire Statesman* argued that Lincoln's lack of national political experience was "an element of strength," for it meant that he had not succumbed "to the gross corruptions so prevalent in Washington." The nation "is suffering for want of an incorruptible Chief Magistrate... A change cannot be for the worse, and may be for the better; then let us have a change." In Connecticut, the *Hartford Courant* declared that "[o]ne of the strongest arguments in favor of the election of Lincoln to the Presidency is his HONESTY" and "old-fashioned integrity and firmness." The people "all want the government administrated with integrity and economy. We have tried two dishonest Administrations of the Democratic party. Let us try them no longer, but place the government in the hands of uncorrupted and uncorruptible men." After winning the presidency, Lincoln told a visitor: "All through the campaign my friends have been calling me 'Honest Old Abe,' and I have been elected mainly on that cry." His reputation as an honest man was as important as his reputation as a foe of slavery.



"Honest Abe on the Stump"
Cartoon, 1860



Further Reading

Brown, Charles H. *William Cullen Bryant: A Biography*. New York: Scribner, 1971.

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Document 1– Joshua Reed Giddings to Abraham Lincoln, May 19, 1860

<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/25560>

Source Citation –

Joshua Reed Giddings to Abraham Lincoln, May 19, 1860, Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress.

Transcribed Text –

Chicago May 19 1860

Dear Lincoln

I well know the manner in which you will be approached and the efforts of gentlemen to Lay you under obligation: I therefore say that in regard to your nomination I have done nothing but that which positive duty demanded.

Having said this I proceed to remark that to my certain knowledge your selection was made upon two grounds 1 That you are an honest man. 2nd That you are not in the hands of Corrupt or dishonest men.

To the Correctness of these assertions my own veracity and honor are pledged. You will be elected, and if you will permit no designing men to Lay you under apparent obligations, but keep yourself and the office pure and sepreate from the corrupting influences which have beset our public men, and exert its Constitutional powers from to the purposes of truth justice, and the elevation of our race, you will Confer the only favor which your friend and servant solicits.

Verry truly

J R Giddings



Document 2– Chicago (IL) Press and Tribune, "The Convention Week in Chicago," May 17, 1860

<http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/33854>

Source Citation –

James Kennedy Moorhead, interview with John G. Nicolay, Washington, DC, May 12 and 13, 1880, in Michael Burlingame, ed., *An Oral History of Abraham Lincoln: John G. Nicolay's Interviews and Essays* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 41.

Transcribed Text –

Conversation with Hon J. K. Morehead At Washington May 12th & 13th 1880

I asked Mr. M. whether he remembered his visit to Springfield in January 1861 at Cameron's instance or in his behalf, or the circumstances or conversation relating to his bringing back with him a letter from Mr. L to C. being simply a line inviting C. to visit him again at Springfield.)

I remember the visit very well. Mr. Alex. Cummings went with me. We went at Cameron's instance to induce Mr. L. to appoint him into the Cabinet. We had letters of introduction. When we arrived at Springfield we met Judge Davis. This relieved us of much difficulty in formally opening our errand.

He came and reported to us that he had talked with Lincoln—and that Lincoln was not favorable to Cameron's appointment.

We finally had an interview with Lincoln ourselves. He was very much opposed to appointing Cameron, and expressed himself very emphatically in that direction.

Said he: "All through the campaign my friends have been calling me 'Honest Old Abe,' and I have been elected mainly on that cry. What will be thought now if the first thing I do is to appoint C., whose very name stinks in the nostrils of the people for his corruption?"

We came away without any very strong expectations of success. We were satisfied a good deal would have to be done after Mr. L. came here to Washington if it was accomplished. I don't remember about the letter. I have an indistinct recollection that L. wished perhaps to see C. and have a plain talk with him about the objections which were urged against him &c.