

DIFFER

WE

MUST

HOW LINCOLN SUCCEEDED
IN A DIVIDED AMERICA

STEVE

INSKEEP

ALSO BY STEVE INSKEEP

Imperfect Union:

How Jessie and John Frémont Mapped the West, Invented Celebrity, and Helped Cause the Civil War

Jacksonland:

President Andrew Jackson, Cherokee Chief John Ross, and a Great American Land Grab

Instant City:

Life and Death in Karachi

Differ We Must

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STEVE INSKEEP

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*To Carolee, my first reader and critic; and to Ava, Ana, and Molly, who
saw this book finished during the final year we lived under one roof*

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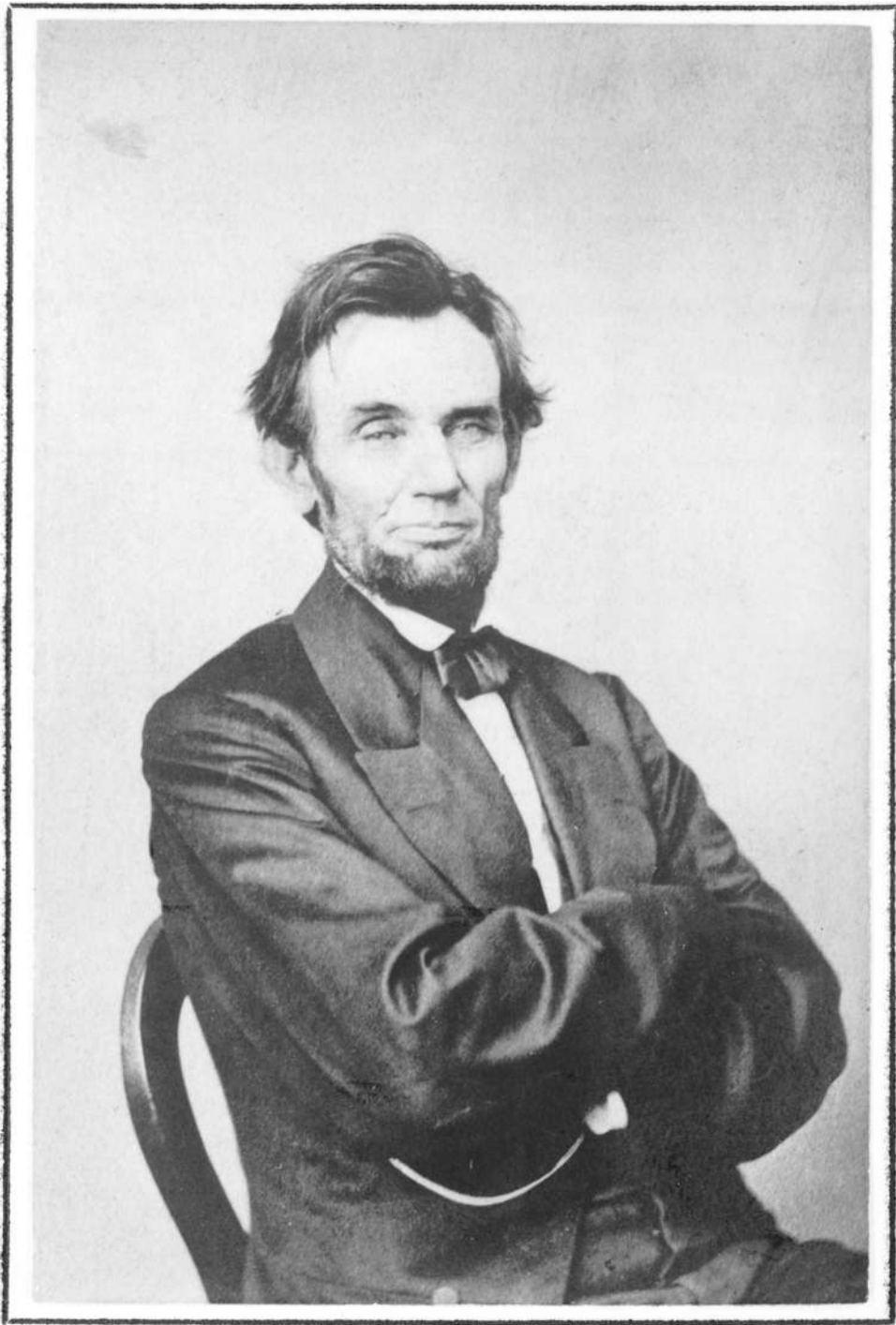
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LINCOLN, 1863.

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Introduction

A BRAHAM LINCOLN WAS A POLITICIAN. PEOPLE LIKE TO IDENTIFY HIM in ways that sound more noble—lawyer, statesman, husband, father. Contemporaries considered him a Christlike figure who suffered and died that his nation might live. Tolstoy called him “a saint of humanity” who realized “the greatest human achievement is love.” But this revered American’s vocation is not revered at all, seen as the province of money, power, cynicism, and lies.

Some writers suggest he was *only* a politician, who revived a stalled career by seizing on the slavery issue and who wasn’t even advanced in his views. Lincoln himself modestly said he was only an “accidental instrument” of a “great cause”—but this book holds something different. Lincoln preserved the country and took part in a social revolution *because* he engaged in politics. He did the work others found dirty or beneath them. He always considered slavery wrong, but felt immediate abolition was beyond the federal government’s constitutional power and against the wishes of too many voters. So he tried to contain slavery. He helped to build a democratic coalition supporting that position and held to it even when threatened with disunion and civil war. He moved forward when circumstances changed. “I shall adopt new views so fast as they appear to be true views,” he said shortly before issuing the Emancipation Proclamation.”

Just as athletes are best seen in motion on the field, Lincoln is best seen in action with other people. This biography views him in sixteen such encounters before and during his presidency, each one a face-to-face meeting with a person who differed with him—in background, experience, or opinion. In each meeting one or both people wanted something. These interactions show a master politician’s practical and moral choices, along with his sometimes mysterious character.

Together the meetings make a book of arguments, as Lincoln matches wits with allies and adversaries alike. Their differences lead to this book's main insight: Lincoln learned, adapted, and sought advantage while interacting with people who disagreed with him. Senator Stephen A. Douglas said Lincoln misunderstood the nation's founders, and General George McClellan considered Lincoln "an idiot." Jessie Benton Frémont felt Lincoln was misled by advisers; George H. Pendleton that Lincoln was trampling the Constitution. Frederick Douglass excoriated Lincoln, saying he had a "passion for making himself seem silly and ridiculous," that his statements were "characteristically foggy, remarkably illogical and untimely," that he had shown "canting hypocrisy," and that he represented "American prejudice and Negro hatred." Even when Douglass celebrated the Emancipation Proclamation he said Lincoln had taken this "obvious" course only after "slothful deliberation." Lincoln had read some of this criticism before Douglass appeared in his crowded anteroom—but he met Douglass anyway, and you may judge who gained from it.

This book's title comes from an 1855 letter Lincoln sent to his best friend Joshua Speed, who came from a slaveholding family: "If for this you and I must differ, differ we must." He chided Speed for admitting the "abstract wrong" of slavery but failing to act accordingly: "Slave-holders *talk* that way" but "never *vote* that way." Yet he didn't abandon Speed, signing off as "your friend forever." He rarely wrote people off, because he knew they had the power of the vote. It's not that Lincoln greatly changed his critics' beliefs—some went to war against him—nor that they greatly changed his. Rather, he learned how to make his beliefs actionable. He started his career in the minority party and set out to make a majority. He perceived a social problem so vast it seemed impossible to address, and he slowly found ways to address it. Had he failed to engage with people who differed, he would not have become the Lincoln we know; and history would little note nor long remember him.

The encounters in this book showcase his political techniques. He's known for his speeches, of course—the Gettysburg Address, the Second Inaugural—but he used more personal methods, beginning with his skill in conversation. He was a storyteller. He told offbeat tales of growing up in Indiana. He repeated jokes he'd heard, mimicked dialects, and guffawed at

his own punch lines. He used sarcasm. When Senator Douglas accused a rival of inconsistency, Lincoln said it was unfair: “Has Douglas the *exclusive right*, in this country, of being *on all sides of all questions*? Is nobody allowed that high privilege but himself?” He made fun of self-important clerics and his own ungainly face. Nothing was off-limits; he told a poop joke in the White House, recounting the day in his boyhood when he tried to relieve himself into a friend’s upturned hat. (The friend foiled him by switching their hats.) Such self-deprecating banter helped him relate to people—and helped him hide. A storyteller could use his story as a mask, controlling the conversation and choosing what to say or withhold.

An ally considered Honest Abe evasive: “Beneath a smooth surface of candor,” he “told enough only, of his plans and purposes, to induce the belief that he had communicated all; yet he reserved enough, in fact, to have communicated nothing.” When he did give opinions, he sometimes urged people not to repeat them. “Let this be strictly confidential,” he ended one letter, “not that there is anything wrong in it; but that I have some highly valued friends who would not like me any better for writing it.” He was curating slightly different versions of himself for different people. Though history remembers him for what he said, he left many things unsaid. His campaigns addressed only issues he considered decisive, staying silent on all else. During his presidential campaign in 1860 an important politician questioned him on tariff policy, and he answered by forwarding a thirteen-year-old memorandum on the subject, not saying a single word that was new. Pressured to act against slavery in 1862, he wrote a famous public letter that gave his thinking without revealing his plans. In the last speech of his life, on April 11, 1865, he said he wouldn’t answer a question in the news because it was “good for nothing at all—a merely pernicious abstraction.”

Together, his reticence and his eloquence reflected something deeper than rhetorical style. It showed that he prioritized. He knew his limitations and those of the democratic system. He didn’t try to win all arguments, nor to crush all opponents, nor to solve all problems. He concentrated his power on fights he had to win to keep from losing everything, which was harder to do than to say. Some of the most painful parts of this story are

times when Lincoln left an injustice unaddressed, at least for the moment, to focus on goals he considered paramount. He often used the word *forbear*, as in “What I forbear, I forbear because I do *not* believe it would help to save the Union.” This called on another of his character traits: exceptional patience.

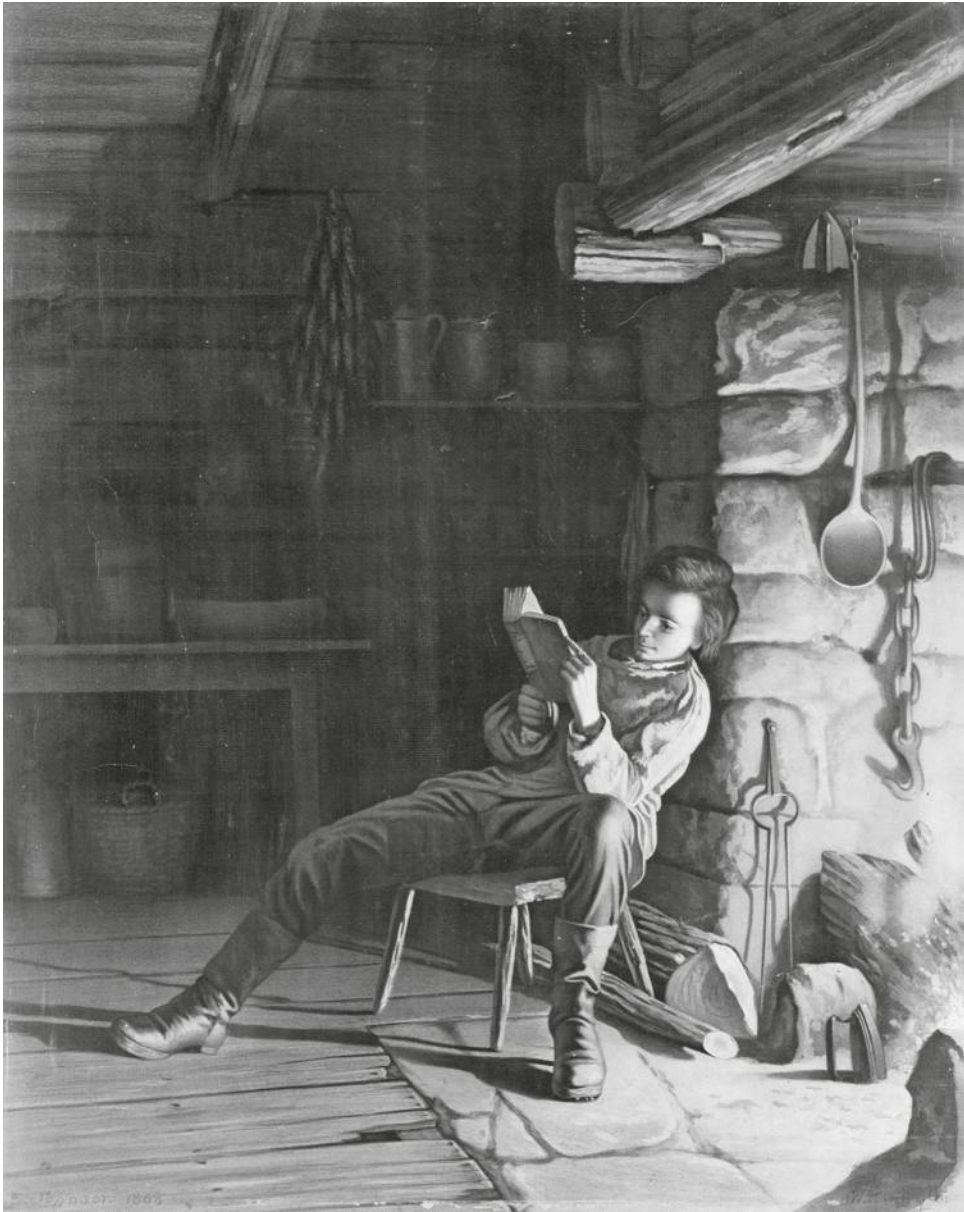
In all that he said and did, he considered his audience, making calculations based on a straightforward understanding of human nature. He told his friend and law partner William Herndon that people acted entirely out of self-interest—that even their most loving, patriotic, or altruistic deeds were meant to bring them some benefit or pleasure. As president he said all people “look to their self-interest. . . . Unless among those deficient of intellect, everybody you trade with makes something.” So he talked with them about it. In letters and speeches, he used the word *interest* far more often than *liberty*, *freedom*, or *moral*, and referred often to people’s *motive*, by which he meant their self-interest. He embraced the spoils system, in which election winners distributed government jobs to political supporters. He appealed to the white electorate’s self-interest against slavery: Workers in free states must resist it, or it would expand into their states and harm them. He spent little time urging charity or benevolence for enslaved people. Instead he said Black workers were denied their equal right to be paid for their labor—which white voters could relate to because they wanted fair pay for theirs. When white men questioned emancipation during the Civil War, Lincoln responded by invoking self-interest twice. He said Black men were fighting for the Union, which was in the national interest, and they had to be promised freedom, because they wouldn’t fight unless there was something in it for them.

It still mattered to him *how* people pursued their interests. He said they could act out of “moral sense and self-interest,” aligning their interests with a higher purpose, and this book is the story of his effort to do that. He navigated between rocks of political reality while trying not to lose sight of his moral compass.

While this is strictly a story of the past, it offers perspective on our disorderly present. Lincoln operated within the basic constitutional structure we know, with the Bill of Rights, separation of powers, and

clashes between state and federal authority. It was a time of disorienting technological change. Railroads, the telegraph, and daily newspapers sped communications, bringing distant people together and forcing them to confront their differences with an intensity they'd never known. Rival camps offered contradictory, overlapping, and incoherent visions of the country. America was a beacon of freedom that was also an empire, a nation of immigrants that was suspicious of immigrants, a country of faith that was all about the money, and a land of equality that made people unequal in the eyes of the law.

After an opening chapter on Lincoln's early life and political education, this book is divided into three movements. "Coalition" follows his role in assembling disparate people to oppose slavery. "Separation" tracks the period of secession, when he encountered differences that could not be compromised. The longest section, "Union," follows his efforts to bring people of different views behind the Union cause in the Civil War. Together these chapters form a narrative of Lincoln's life as seen through his encounters.



YOUNG LINCOLN IN LEGEND.

Chapter 1

PROTAGONIST: ABRAHAM LINCOLN

1809–1846

LINCOLN WAS BORN IN KENTUCKY AND WAS SEVEN WHEN HE SUFFERED the first of several great disruptions. His father lost his farm in a dispute over the title, put his family on a wagon, and started for a new life in Indiana. A glance at a map doesn't convey how hard their journey was in 1816; they moved fewer than one hundred miles from their old home, but it took about five days, ending with a ferry across the Ohio and a trek through roadless woods. The travel time was longer than a modern journey from Kentucky to Afghanistan—and their destination was wilderness, the newest state of the Union, only recently cleared of most of the Indians after whom it was named.

Thomas Lincoln claimed land for a new farm, handed his son an axe, and told him to help clear the trees. He was not quite eight when he began this ceaseless labor and not even ten when his mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, died of a mysterious sickness. The year after that, Thomas returned to Kentucky to find a new wife, leaving Abraham and his sister Sarah behind. When Thomas reappeared many days later he brought a whole new family, having married a widowed mother of three. Abraham never detailed how he felt about these experiences, but an observation he made as an adult was revealing: “In this sad world of ours, sorrow comes to all; and to the young, it comes with bitterest agony, because it takes them unawares.”

How did he escape obscurity on that farm? It's common to credit his reading. Though his schooling totaled less than a year, he learned to write by scratching letters on wood, and if he had to walk for miles to borrow a book he'd do it. His self-education is among the most inspiring stories

about him, passed on in children's books to this day. But this story is incomplete. His reading was neither wide nor deep, limited to books within reach, and he once described his youth in two words: "Education defective." He needed a different form of learning, for which resources were more available: his study of his fellow human beings.

His stepmother, Sarah Bush Lincoln, said when grown-ups visited their cabin the boy listened, "never speaking or asking questions till they were gone and then he must understand everything—even to the smallest thing." He questioned his parents and repeated the answers "again and again" to remember. Thanks to his clear handwriting, he took dictation for settlers who were illiterate and said his "perceptions were sharpened" as he "learned to see other people's thoughts and feelings and ideas by writing their friendly confidential letters." By his twenties an acquaintance found his mind was "a great storehouse" of facts, "acquired by reading but principally by observation, and intercourse with men, women, and children, in their social and business relations; learning and weighing the motives that prompt each act in life." Not every book he found was worth finishing, but for a future democratic leader almost anybody was worth knowing.

The good listener became a good talker. Once after attending church he said he could repeat the sermon, and when friends challenged him he climbed on a log and did it. On other occasions, a friend said, "the boys would gather & cluster around him" to hear him tell jokes and stories. While there's no reliable record of his stand-up routine, it likely resembled things he said later, even while president, that brought out his inner twelve-year-old. He told of a lizard that crawled inside the pant leg of a preacher, who continued his sermon while desperately removing his clothes. To a man of Dutch ancestry, Lincoln once asked, What's the difference between an Amsterdam Dutchman and any other damn Dutchman? He told of an Irishman who went to the post office to ask for his mail. The postmaster said: Your name? And the man replied indignantly, It says my name on the letter! When Lincoln walked into Gentryville, a village near his home, he spent hours with other people "running rigs"—meaning "to tease, banter, or ridicule," apparently the sort

of back-and-forth insults that in another context would be called “the dozens.”

When he was twenty-one his family moved to Illinois, where he attended a rally for political candidates in front of a store. Though he wasn't running and didn't even have the six months' residence required to vote, he gave his own speech—an early sign of his invincible confidence. By then he'd had experiences that allowed him to prove himself, such as crewing a cargo boat all the way to New Orleans, enduring treacherous currents and even driving off would-be robbers. He was physically strong—all those years swinging the axe—and developed an idea that he had special gifts thanks to his late mother. He believed she was born out of wedlock, that illegitimate children grew up hardier and smarter than others, and that she had passed on her traits to him. No evidence supported any part of this, but far into adulthood he voiced his belief to a friend. If it helped him it didn't matter if it was true. Being born out of wedlock was considered a mark of shame, yet he privately adopted this identity, and made it a strength. It placed him on the side of people society shunned.

HE STARTED A POLITICAL CAREER AS SOON AS HE WAS ABLE, IN THE FIRST place where he lived on his own: New Salem, in central Illinois, a frontier-style settlement without a single brick house or paved street. A wooden gristmill stood on stilts over the Sangamon River, and a few log cabins sat on a nearby bluff. While it wasn't an obvious destination for an ambitious young man, he got a job there in 1831, clerking for the man who ran the mill and a nearby store. He slept in that store, sharing a cot with another clerk, who said that “when one turned over the other had to do likewise.” He was six feet four, his pants came nowhere near his shoes, and he was broke. But he followed political news, reading newspapers when he could get them and eventually hoarding enough cash to subscribe to the *Louisville Daily Journal*, out of Kentucky.

The *Journal* offered news of a nation dividing between two factions. Andrew Jackson of Tennessee, a war hero, claimed the 1824 presidential election had been stolen from him and carried his grievance to a landslide win in 1828; the Jacksonian movement evolved into the Democratic Party.

Anti-Jacksonians organized as the Whig Party, led by Henry Clay of Kentucky. The *Journal* was a Clay paper, and Lincoln admired his fellow Kentuckian, an advocate of a strong federal government that promoted internal improvements—roads, bridges, and canals. He followed Clay into the opposition even though it was the minority party in Illinois. This meant that if he was going to succeed in politics, he had to build relationships with people whose politics differed.

His new neighbors included a group of Jackson men known as the Clary's Grove Boys, lawless toughs from a nearby farm community. Their leader, Jack Armstrong, had a habit of hazing newcomers and was a bully; one story involved his gang stuffing a man in a barrel and rolling it downhill. But Lincoln managed him well when Armstrong challenged him to a wrestling match. People gathered outside the store in New Salem and bet on the outcome. Lincoln's skill with words helped him as much as his greater height: he refused Armstrong's plan to wrestle with no holds barred, insisting that Armstrong agree to rules he wasn't disciplined enough to follow. Witnesses gave many versions of this encounter—Lincoln won, Lincoln lost, Lincoln was fouled—and in most versions the match dissolved into chaos. But Lincoln showed he couldn't be pushed around.

From then on the Clary's Grove Boys respected him, which allowed him to befriend their whole community: they were less a gang than part of a clan, seven families who had intermarried as they migrated out of the Appalachians. Lincoln spent long hours at the Armstrong farm outside town, where Jack's wife, Hannah, fed him. While there's no evidence that Lincoln joined Armstrong's lawless activities—at least once the Clary's Grove Boys vandalized and robbed a store in New Salem—they supported each other's ambitions. The first time Lincoln ever voted, in August 1831, he cast a ballot for Jack Armstrong, the bully, for constable.

In 1832 the Clary's Grove Boys voted twice for Lincoln. The first came when the state raised troops to fight Black Hawk, a chief of the Sauk people who had brought his followers into Illinois. The militia company raised around New Salem elected its own officers, choosing Lincoln as captain while Armstrong became first sergeant. Soon after their brief service, a widening circle of Democrats voted for Lincoln out of personal

friendship as he ran for the state legislature. Though he failed to win election in the countywide district, he received almost all the votes from both parties in the New Salem precinct.

Making a living wasn't easy in the village—Lincoln lost his clerk's job when the store closed, then started his own store that failed, leaving him in debt—but Democrats helped him again: He got a job as postmaster of New Salem. Though he said the part-time federal position was “too insignificant to make [my] politics an objection,” it's hard to see how he would have been appointed by President Jackson without the support of local Jacksonians. The Democratic county surveyor also hired him as a part-time deputy, and he gained more than money as he carried a compass and chain across rough countryside. People discussed their land with Lincoln, a personal matter that touched on their wealth, their identity, and the reason they had come to Illinois; and this allowed him to continue studying people. In 1834 he surveyed the farm of a Democrat named Russell Godbey and won his trust while measuring the distance in chain lengths between certain white oak trees at the corners. When Lincoln ran for the legislature again that year, Godbey said, “I voted for him . . . against my political creed and principles.” Leading Democratic politicians were also supporting Lincoln, hoping to defeat another Whig they liked less. Their plan backfired: four seats were up for election, and both Whigs won.

For his first legislative session he borrowed money from a friend to buy a new suit and began his climb into the Illinois elite. He was young and inexperienced, just twenty-five at the start, but it was a young country where life was short, the median age was eighteen, and many lawmakers were in their first terms. By his second term he counted as a veteran and was leading the Whig minority—supporting bridges and canals to open the state for development, and proposing to reform a law concerning “insolvent debtors,” a subject he knew uncomfortably well. He was still paying the creditors of his failed New Salem store, and the sheriff once auctioned his belongings.

He read law, borrowing books from a fellow legislator to study under a tree, and obtained his law license. And having supported a bill that moved the state capital to the prosperous town of Springfield, he moved there himself. He spent time with wealthy Whigs, mostly the sons and daughters

of slaveholding families who had migrated from Kentucky. One, Joshua Speed, became his roommate and best friend, while another, Mary Todd, married him. He courted her in the Springfield mansion where she was living—the home of her brother-in-law, Ninian Edwards, a Whig politico and son of a former governor, who threw parties for as many as one hundred well-connected guests at a time.

HE HAD TO DO HIS SOCIAL CLIMBING CAREFULLY, BECAUSE HE LIVED IN A culture of equality; citizens would drag down any man who acted like their better. He always stressed his modest roots. “I was born and have ever remained in the most humble walks of life,” he said in his first campaign announcement. Though he didn’t like manual labor, having had all he wanted in his youth, he appealed for the votes of farmworkers by helping them harvest grain from a field. His expressions of humility continued right through the Gettysburg Address three decades later. (“The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here.”) Always he hid his self-confidence behind a cloak of modesty.

President Jackson, who remained in office until 1837, kept equality at the center of politics by labeling Whigs aristocrats. A Jacksonian newspaper said his movement favored “natural equality, and breaking down the contrivances of the old world [that] maintain and perpetuate distinctions in society.” Jackson was a wealthy slave owner but had risen from poverty, and his party attracted the common white farmer and workingman. He destroyed the national bank, saying it supported the aristocracy. He threw veteran government servants out of office, saying their jobs weren’t hard and other people deserved a chance to do them. Illinois Democrats took a similar approach, and Lincoln sometimes faced the charge of aristocracy even though he had a negative net worth.

Lincoln himself played the politics of equality, where fact mattered less than appearance. In 1840 he campaigned for the Whig presidential candidate William Henry Harrison, an aristocrat who posed as if he wasn’t. The college-educated son of a Virginia governor, General Harrison battled some of the last Indians of Indiana while living with his family in a brick mansion. But when he ran for president, a Democratic newspaper