LINCOLN'S "LOST" SPEECH OF MAY 29, 1856 AT BLOOMINGTON, ILLINOIS

(Statement prepared at the request of Senator Everett M. Dirksen)

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Following is the only known contemporary account of the so-called "lost speech" of Abraham Lincoln delivered at the Bloomington Convention of the Republican Party on May 29, 1856 (the first Republican Convention in Illinois):

"Abraham Lincoln, of Sangamon, came upon the platform amid deafening applause. He enumerated the pressing reasons of the present movement. He was here ready to fuse with anyone who would unite with him to oppose slave power; spoke of the bugbear disunion which was so vaguely threatened. It was to be remembered that the Union must be preserved in the purity of its principles as well as in the integrity of its territorial parts. It must be "Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable." The sentiment in favor of white slavery now prevailed in all the slave state papers, except those of Kentucky, Tennessee and Missouri and Maryland. Such was the progress of the National Democracy. Douglas once claimed against him that Democracy favored more than his principles, the individual rights of men. Was it not strange that he must stand there now to defend those rights against their former eulogist? The Black Democracy were endeavoring to cite Henry Clay to reconcile old Whigs to their doctrine, and repaid them with the very cheap compliment of National Whigs." (Alton Weekly Courier, June 5, 1856. Lincoln, Col-

In context, Lincoln's speech was an attempt to rally anti-Nebraska Democrats, Whigs, and Free Soilers into one united political party. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, sponsored by Senator Stephen A. Douglas, had repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, under which a line dividing the Louisiana Purchase area of 1803 into slave and free areas had been drawn. The Kansas-Nebraska Act had substituted for this line the concept of "popular sovereignty" — the right of the people of a territory to choose for themselves whether the area, upon organization as a state, should be slave or free. Passage of this act, which (with the Dred Scott decision of 1857) was widely regarded as part of a Southern conspiracy to extend slavery over the whole of the United States, caused a popular revulsion throughout the North and West. These movements rapidly coalesced, and to show their Jeffersonian ancestry, they adopted the name "Republican," the original name of the Jeffersonian Party, which had been discarded by Jackson's followers in favor of the designation "Democratic." Jefferson's influence was the reputed cause of the passage of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which had forever banished slavery from the western territory north of the Ohio River. This principle of the nonextension of slavery became the main platform of the new Republican Party (Dictionary of American History, Volume 4, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951, p. 454).

"Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable" is a famous quotation from Daniel Webster's debate with Senator Robert Y. Hayne of South Carolina (January, 1830), in which Webster attempted to
show the fallacy of twenty-four separate states interpreting the Constitution, and maintained that the Constitution was the work of the people (Ibid., Volume 5, p. 432).

"From 1854," states James G. Randall (Dictionary of American Biography, Volume 11, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933, p. 247), "there appeared a new tone in his speeches, a notable earnestness combined with adroitness in narrowing the contest to one phase of the slavery question, thus making it a suitable party issue." Though events were drawing Lincoln toward the new Republican Party, he was as late as 1855 a candidate before the state legislature for the senatorship as a Whig. After successive ballots in the legislature indicated his dwindling strength, he aided the cause of the anti-Nebraska fusionists against the Democrats by throwing his support to the anti-Nebraska Democrat Lyman Trumbull, who was elected (February 8, 1855).

In 1856, Lincoln became definitely identified with the Republican Party; and at the Republican State Convention at Bloomington he delivered what some have called his greatest speech. This was the so-called "lost" speech.

The "lost" speech was reconstructed in 1896 by William C. Whitney from notes which he supposedly took at the time. (Reproduced in Lincoln, Writings, edited by Arthur B. Lapsley, Volume 2, New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1905, p. 247-275. E.457.91.1906). Dr. Basler, editor of the most recent edition of Lincoln's works, regards this reconstruction as being largely the product of Whitney's imagination (conversation with Dr. Basler, Associate Director, Reference Department, Library of Congress).

Nicolay and Hay, Lincoln's Presidential secretaries and official
biographers, state that "it has been almost unanimously agreed upon by reporters and others attending that convention that the magnificent oratory held them so spell-bound it was impossible to take notes." (John G. Nicolay and John Hay, editors, Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln, Volume 2, New York, Francis D. Tandy Co., 1894, p. 309. E457.91.1905A Nicolay and Hay likewise refuse to accept Whitney's reconstruction as accurate.)

"The Republican Party came into existence in Illinois as a party at Bloomington, May 29, 1856," state William H. Herndon, Lincoln's former law partner, and Jesse W. Weik (Herndon's Life of Lincoln, New York, Albert and Charles Boni, 1930, p. 312.) "The State convention of all opponents of Anti-Nebraska legislation. . . had been set for that day. . . . The firm of Lincoln and Herndon was represented by both members in person . . . . The convention adopted a platform ringing with strong Anti-Nebraska sentiments, and then and there gave the Republican party its official christening. The business of the convention being over, Mr. Lincoln, in response to repeated calls, came forward and delivered a speech of such earnestness and power that no one who heard it will ever forget the effect it produced." Herndon then states "I have heard or read all of Mr. Lincoln's great speeches, and I give it as my opinion that the Bloomington speech was the grand effort of his life. Heretofore he had simply argued the slavery question on grounds of policy, - the statesman's grounds, - never reaching the question of the radical and the eternal right. Now he was newly baptized and freshly born; he had the fervor of a new convert; the smothered flame broke out; enthusiasm unusual to him blazed up; his eyes were aglow with an inspiration; he felt justice; his
heart was alive to the right; his sympathies, remarkably deep for him, burst forth, and he stood before the throne of the eternal Right. His speech was full of fire and energy and force; it was logic; it was pathos; it was enthusiasm; it was justice, equity, truth, and right set ablaze by the divine force of a soul maddened by the wrong; it was hard, heavy, knotty, gnarly, backed with wrath. If Mr. Lincoln was six feet, four inches high usually, at Bloomington that day he was seven feet, and inspired at that. From that day to the day of his death he stood firm in the right. He felt his great cross, had his great idea, nursed it, kept it, taught it to others, in his fidelity bore witness of it to his death, and finally sealed it with his precious blood."

According to the Chicago Democratic Press, Lincoln "held the assemblage spell-bound by the power of his argument, the intense irony of his invective, and the deep earnestness and fervid brilliancy of his eloquence. When he concluded, the audience sprang to their feet, and cheer after cheer told how deeply their hearts had been touched, and their souls warmed up to a generous enthusiasm." (Herndon-Weik, p. 314). "Lincoln knew what was needed," states Benjamin P. Thomas (Abraham Lincoln, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1952, p. 165-66), "— a speech that would weld the discordant factions into a vigorous party. . . . At the end the hall rocked with applause. The Republican Party was reborn in Illinois, even though, because of its radical origin, Lincoln and most of the other delegates still avoided the use of that name."