Reading Lincoln’s Mail

Robert G. Gunderson*

On the evening of February 6, 1861, the “political elite” of Illinois and the “beauty and fashion” of Sangamon County crowded into the plain frame house at the northeast corner of Eighth and Jackson streets in Springfield. Horace Greeley’s New York Tribune called the gathering “a brilliant affair,” though perhaps it used the term elite a bit loosely. Several hundred neighbors crossed the black walnut threshold that night to say good-by to Abraham Lincoln.1 According to one account, “it took twenty minutes to get in the hall door. . . .”2 Robert Todd Lincoln, an eighteen-year-old Harvard student, facetiously titled the “Prince of Rails,” functioned as an usher, but had little success in hurrying friends past his father who insisted upon responding to each handshake with an anecdote. Next morning, the Lincoln family moved to the Chenery House, Springfield’s leading hotel, and four days later they set out for Washington.3

Before leaving, however, Lincoln and his secretary, John Nicolay, collected the accumulated papers of the Prairie Years. They stuffed lectures and literary essays into an old carpetbag and turned it over to Cousin Elizabeth Todd Grimsley for safekeeping. Legal papers were left with William H. Herndon, Lincoln’s partner, in their second floor office at 109 North Fifth Street. Political correspondence was bundled up and put abroad the train for Washington, where it would be needed in the troublesome months to come.4 Henry Villard, a reporter for the hostile New York Herald, complained of its volume. “‘Baskets full of petitions and recommendations’” arrived with each mail, and neither Mr. Lincoln nor his secretary was “‘equal to the task’” of “‘answering a hundred or so letters every day.’” With obvious

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1 New York Tribune, February 7, 1861.
3 New York Times, February 9 and 12, 1861.
4 Mearns, Lincoln Papers, I, 28-29, 37.
sarcasm, Villard advised office-seekers to "'get their papers ready and station themselves at some convenient point'" on Lincoln's route to Washington. A box for the "deposit of such communications," he thought, might properly be "attached to the presidential train."

When the Lincoln party had successfully negotiated its circuitous route to Washington, temporary offices were set up in Parlor Six at Willard's Hotel. For ten days, office-seekers and well-wishers all but prevented the disposition of any but the most urgent correspondence. With the inauguration, Nicolay and his assistant secretary, John Hay, moved into more spacious quarters in the White House. In an "'historic cavern'" across from their second floor bedroom in the northeast corner, they presided at what William O. Stoddard, another assistant secretary, described rather tritely as the "'nerve center'" of the Republic.6 Lacking an IBM filing system, they arranged the presidential mail in a small pigeonhole cabinet. Sections were marked alphabetically, each cabinet member having a pigeonhole of his own. There was also one for Horace Greeley, editor of the crusading New York Tribune, "'a man much given to reading and cold-water baths'—to say nothing of impertinent advice."

President Lincoln received from two to three hundred letters each day, and Stoddard testified that some of them went into the two huge wicker wastebaskets which flanked the sorting table. A later assistant, Noah Brooks, however, recalled "'a Chinese reverence for . . . written paper. . . .'

Hay guessed that Lincoln read only one letter in fifty; Nicolay estimated only one in a hundred. In answering his mail, the harried President rarely dictated, but instead made short endorsements suggesting appropriate replies. Important letters he answered himself in longhand, often doggedly spelling out the copy as well as the original.7 Since the White House office was unscreened, bugs swarmed in on hot summer nights, and their embalmed bodies remain congealed on some of the most important documents of the war years.

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6 Ibid., I, 36-37.
7 Ibid., I, 40.
10 Mearns, Lincoln Papers, I, 38-41.
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Today this correspondence is deposited at the Library of Congress in the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection. Eight trunks were once needed to hold the 18,350 items, which are now arranged chronologically and bound in 194 volumes of gilt-lettered buckram. Before binding, specialists at the library “cleaned, repaired, and reinforced” each manuscript, in addition to preparing 4,000 cross reference cards and a catalogue description for every item. A microfilm edition of 50,000 exposures, available in 21 major American libraries, safeguards for posterity the contents of the original documents and provides scholars convenient access to this significant research material.¹⁰ Not counting endorsements, some 900 papers are in the Rail Splitter’s distinctive hand and include copies of his letters to others, drafts of speeches, proclamations, and official messages. The great bulk of the collection, however, consists of Lincoln’s mail—letters written to him. A mere sampling has been published in a two-volume edition by David C. Mearns, chief of the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress, with several introductory chapters telling the story of the collection.

A controversy still continues over how many of the documents may have been destroyed by Robert Lincoln before he deposited them in the library,¹¹ but at least these documents fared better than those turned over to Cousin Lizzie Grimsley. A careless maid, it seems, mistook the contents of Old Abe’s carpetbag for trash—and burned his literary efforts of the Prairie Years.¹²

Of course not all the Lincoln correspondence is in the Library of Congress collection. At the Lincoln National Life Foundation in Fort Wayne, Indiana, for example, there are 186 letters which somehow escaped from the presidential files;¹³ another 135 are at the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino, California.¹⁴ The letters which Lincoln wrote

¹⁰ Catalogue description, Robert Todd Lincoln Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.
¹¹ Mearns, Lincoln Papers, I, 120-134.
¹² Ibid., I, 28.
¹⁴ Norma Cuthbert, Department of Manuscripts, Henry E. Huntington Library, to the author, July 3, 1957.
to others are more widely scattered than those he received. When Roy P. Basler compiled the recent nine-volume edition of all Lincoln's extant writing, including public utterances, he found it necessary to give credit to 101 public collections and innumerable private ones. Over 1,200 manuscripts in Lincoln's handwriting are available at the Illinois State Historical Society Library in Springfield; there are 865 at Brown University; 226 at Huntington; 50 at Fort Wayne; and 5 at the William L. Clements Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Important manuscript materials about Lincoln are located in the papers of William H. Herndon and Jesse Weik at the Library of Congress, in those of Ida M. Tarbell at Allegheny College, and in the papers of William E. Barton at the University of Chicago. Indiana University has 4,600 Lincoln books and pamphlets, a microfilm edition of the Herndon-Weik Papers, 15 autographed letters, and the J. B. Oakleaf Collection, especially valuable for its campaign materials on the elections of 1860 and 1864.

In reading Lincoln's mail—or what is left of it—one finds, as Henry Villard observed in 1860, "a most abundant source of knowledge [offered] to the student of human nature." Of the 186 letters to Old Abe at the Lincoln National Life Foundation, every one contains a request. All but seven sought government jobs—the remainder asked for pardons, furloughs, releases from the army. A poorly paid professor of Greek wanted any office in Lincoln's "power to bestow." An "ornamental gardener" from Rockford, Illinois, applied for the honor of taking care of the White

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18 Mrs. Alex Kacen, Special Collections, John Hay Library, Brown University, Providence, R.I., to the author, October 14, 1959.
20 Lincoln Lore, No. 1414 (May 14, 1956); The Lincoln National Life Foundation (Fort Wayne, Ind., n.d.), 6.
22 For a description, see Cecil K. Byrd, "The Indiana-Oakleaf Collection," The Abraham Lincoln Quarterly, II (December, 1942), 186-191.
23 Quoted in Mearns, Lincoln Papers, I, 35.
House grounds; a chef in St. Louis wanted work as the White House cook; a twenty-year-old orphan girl from New Jersey, whose brother voted a straight Republican ticket, asked to be governess to Lincoln's children. A self-described "party wheelhorse for the past seventeen years" at last wanted something in return because of the "shattered Situation" of his health. Since he was too sick to do anything else, this loyal partisan hoped to be United States Marshal for western Illinois. A distant Indiana relative announced she was visiting at the White House "with or without an invitation." In urging her husband for the United States Supreme Court, Mrs. O. H. Browning described Indiana as "that horse leech State" whose politicians were "always crying, Give! Give!"

Some correspondents unashamedly asked the President for money. An Italian countess begged him to take up a twelve-hundred-dollar mortgage on her Rahway, New Jersey, villa. A devoted but unduly belligerent partisan expected him to pay a fifty-dollar fine levied for damages in a brawl which developed over his defense of Lincoln's ancestry.

The War President's legendary generosity toward soldiers in trouble is confirmed by his correspondence. A tearful young lady of Washington County, Pennsylvania, begged him to furlough an amorous private in the First Division of the Second Army Corps. "We very foolishly indulged too freely in matrimonial affairs," the forthright belle confided to her sweetheart's commander-in-chief. A cryptic note in the Emancipator's painstaking hand directed the secretary of war to "'send him to her by all means.'" A War Department endorsement read, "'Furlough granted.'"

Since citizens apparently felt free to divulge their most intimate thoughts to the President, it is not surprising to find them equally free in contributing advice. Dr. Henry P. Tappan, president of the University of Michigan, once penned fifteen pages of gratuitous instruction, dispatching it in the care of Judge David Davis to make certain of its delivery. Davis' somewhat condescending endorsement explained that the letter was "'an elaborate one,'" but the Judge hoped Lincoln would read it because of "'the Christian character

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23 Requests in the Robert Todd Lincoln Papers.
24 Ibid.
of the author." Upon its receipt, the President asked Nicolay to "'please run over this & tell me what is in it.'" 88

Crank and crackpots freely communicated their hallucinations. A self-proclaimed prophet in Cairo, Illinois, "calculated Lincoln's nativity" and predicted "a most serious disaster." A spiritualist in Cleveland warned of poison, advising "hot milk in large quantaes" on the slightest indisposition. A dissatisfied housewife from Logan County, Kentucky, implored: "Dear Sir, give us women some assurance that you will protect us, for we are the greatest slaves in the South." 89

Although Alexander H. Stephens replied quite graciously in December, 1860, to Lincoln's request for his famous speech in behalf of the Union, most mail postmarked south of the Ohio contained threats and indignities. A Bell-Everett elector from Virginia urged the President-elect to gain immortality by going to Charleston in disguise. There, he should resign in a dramatic gesture for peace. Letters from Lebanon, Tennessee; Lynchburg, Virginia; and Marion, Alabama, warned to resign or be shot! "A Jackson Democrat from the South" phrased it less bluntly. "Beware," he wrote in a letter full of misspelling, "Beware the Ides of March." 90

With the threatening letters came others promising protection. The adjutant-general of Michigan placed a regiment at Lincoln's disposal even before the inauguration. When Sumter was fired upon, Michigan's indefatigable Henry Tappan offered to march to Washington at the head of his entire male student body. 91

Not all alarmists were mere cranks. Army officers wrote of disloyalty in the service; a New York banker gave personal evidence to indicate that Major Robert Anderson's "heart was not in his duty" at Fort Sumter; an Illinois congressman told of hiring "two of the most accomplished New York detectives" to trail those who plotted against the government; the secretary of the Illinois Republican State Central Committee reported the widely-publicized rumor which placed $40,000 on Lincoln's head. On New Year's Eve of 1861, the editor of the Chicago Tribune began what perhaps has become

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28 Thomas, Abraham Lincoln, 465-466.
29 Letters in the Robert Todd Lincoln Papers.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
a tradition when he proclaimed himself “a volunteer sentinel on the walls” of Washington.\textsuperscript{22}

Lincoln’s mail is thus obviously an abundant source of amazement and amusement—if not always of enlightenment—to the student of human nature. His papers likewise can be used to illustrate his career as a speaker. Ward Hill Lamon, an intimate of Lincoln’s circuit-riding days and later his bodyguard and biographer, said Abe’s “taste for public speaking appeared to be natural and irresistible.”\textsuperscript{23} The first manuscript item in the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection is a deposition by Dr. John Allen, a New Salem neighbor, who recalled that young Abe “used to walk 6 miles” to “practice polemics” before a Sangamon County debating society. The “polemics,” explained the doctor, sometimes equaled “the best farces played in the theatre.”

In 1840 the one-time Rail Splitter dressed in blue jeans to stump Illinois for William Henry Harrison in the log-cabin and hard-cider canvass. His high-pitched voice was not uncharacteristic of westerners, and it had the merit of extraordinary intensity. Nor did his awkward manner preclude him from mimicking his opponents in such a manner that delighted crowds “cheered and yelled for more.”\textsuperscript{24} William H. Herndon testified that Lincoln “read less and thought more than any man in America.”\textsuperscript{25} Certainly his speeches of this period rely but little on book learning. In an appearance at Belleville, Abe “‘predicated his whole speech’” upon an inconsequential incident. “‘How very fortunate for the Whigs,’” taunted the local Democratic editor, “‘that Mr. Lincoln saw the sale of . . . [a] one-eyed horse that day!’”\textsuperscript{26}

The rough-and-tumble politics of the forties occasionally led to physical as well as verbal combat. Among Lincoln’s papers are his instructions for the celebrated duel proposed

\textsuperscript{22}ibid.


\textsuperscript{25}Benjamin P. Thomas, Portrait for Posterity: Lincoln and His Biographers (New Brunswick, N.J., 1947), 12.

\textsuperscript{26}Advocate (Belleville, Ill.), April 18, 1840, quoted in George W. Smith, When Lincoln Came to Egypt (Herrin, Ill., 1940), 53.
by his political adversary, James Shields. With typical frontier hyperbole, the Rail Splitter suggested "cavalry broad swords of the largest size precisely equal in all respects." Perhaps because of Abe's bloody choice of weapons, the encounter never materialized. But from this time on, Lincoln was always somewhat more circumspect and considerate in his public and private utterances.⁷⁷

Although seldom if ever did anyone write a public document for Lincoln, his papers make it clear that he sometimes served as a ghost for others, including the editor of the Sangamo Journal, Governor W. H. Bissell of Illinois, Senator Lyman Trumbull, and his cabinet members.⁸⁸ Among his early papers is the copy of a speech on "What Gen. [Zachary] Taylor ought to say" in the presidential canvass of 1848—a contest in which Lincoln took particular interest.⁹⁹

Lincoln's vivid style and rustic imagery is evident in letters of this period. In urging Herndon to organize a Rough & Ready Club for Old Zach, he suggested that each member should have a function—that some speak, others sing, and that all holler.⁴⁰ In supporting a "Taylor delegate" to the national Whig convention, he identified his congressional colleague, E. D. Baker, as "a good hand to raise a breeze."⁴¹ When the Democrats tried to make Taylor's opponent, Michigan's Lewis Cass, into a military man, Lincoln compared them to "so many mischievous boys tying a dog to a bladder of beans."⁴²

Lincoln's manuscript copy of his speech on Cass in the House of Representatives in 1848, complete with its deletions and additions, provides a good example of his humor, to say nothing of the vigorous party spirit of that day. After a long

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account of the corpulent general's forays into the public treasury, the Illinois Congressman continued with devastating sarcasm:

I have introduced Gen. Cass' accounts here chiefly to show the wonderful physical capacities of the man. . . . From October 1821 to May 1822, he ate [sic] ten rations a day in Michigan, ten rations a day here in Washington, and near five dollars worth a day on the road between the two places! . . .

Mr. Speaker, we have all heard of the animal standing in doubt between two stacks of hay, and starving to death—The like of that would never happen to Gen. Cass; place the stacks a thousand miles apart, he would stand stock still midway between them, and eat . . . both at once.43

On the basis of such evidence, Benjamin Thomas concludes that "for lucidity of statement and ability to clarify by means of homely analogies . . . [Abe] had no equal."44

Upon hearing that Lincoln had been selected as his opponent in 1858, Senator Stephen A. Douglas acknowledged him "'the strong man of his party—full of wit, facts, dates—and the best stump speaker . . . in the West.'" with "'droll ways and dry jokes.'"45 Charles H. Ray of the Chicago Tribune wrote the Republican nominee to emphasize the significance of the impending contest: "You have a chance which comes to but few men of each generation," he observed. "You are like Byron, who woke up one morning and found himself famous."46

With fame came political and rhetorical advice from throughout the nation. Horace Greeley warned against apology and retreat. He liked the "House Divided" speech, but thought the reply to Douglas on July 10 in Chicago bad.47 Radicals everywhere applauded Lincoln's use of biblical analogy and urged an aggressive spirit. "Pitch into [Douglas'] . . . motives," advised one stalwart partisan. "You are justified now in unsheathing the sword & throwing the scabbard away." Henry Clay Whitney, one of Lincoln's cir-

42 Robert Todd Lincoln Papers, items 145-163.
43 Thomas, Abraham Lincoln, 99.
44 Ibid., 182.
45 Charles H. Ray to Abraham Lincoln, July 27, 1858, Robert Todd Lincoln Papers.
46 [Horace Greeley] to "My Friend" [J. Medill], July 24, 1858, ibid.
cuit-riding cronies, warned that the Little Giant would try intimidation. "You have got to treat him severely," he wrote, "and the sooner you commence the better & easier." Fearing that this militant counsel might be misinterpreted, Whitney appended an amusing afterthought: "I don't of course mean you ought to call him a liar or anything of that sort."

Political friends provided help and encouragement. Send documents to Sarah Stevenson, suggested one loyal supporter: "This lady will make you more votes than ½ the men." "Your Bloomington speech is admirable," wrote another. "Homely illustrations . . . and striking comparisons are what the people want."*

When election day came, Lincoln's legislative candidates polled four thousand more popular votes than those of Douglas; but because of the system of apportionment, Abe found himself five votes short of victory in the legislature.** "Irrepressible" supporters minimized the bitterness of defeat with hopes for "a chance upon a wider field." "Your popular majority in the State will give us the privilege of naming our man on the national ticket in 1860," Horace White confidently predicted. "Then . . . Abe Lincoln shall be an honored name before the American people."61 The state librarian of Michigan shared White's optimism. Would the Honorable Abraham Lincoln "have the kindness" to send a "Daguerreotype" for the library's "picture Gallery"?63

In February, 1860, Lincoln received letters promising $200 and "a right cordial welcome" for a speech at Cooper Union. Although the astute presidential hopeful may have looked upon this as a chance to gain political advantage, there is evidence to indicate that he accepted in order to visit his oldest son, Robert, at Exeter. Whatever his motivation, the Cooper Union address enhanced his chances for the nomination two and one-half months later. "Enclosed please find

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48 K. M. Knapp to Abraham Lincoln, July 24, [1858], ibid.; H. C. Whitney to Lincoln, August 26, 1858, ibid.
49 David E. Edgar to Abraham Lincoln, August 30, 1858, ibid.; Charles H. Ray to Lincoln, July 27, 1858, ibid.
50 Albert J. Beveridge, Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858 (2 vols., Boston, 1928), II, 695-697; Thomas, Abraham Lincoln, 192.
51 Horace White to Abraham Lincoln, November 5, 1858, Robert Todd Lincoln Papers.
52 J. E. Tenney to Abraham Lincoln, April 21, 1859, ibid.
'check' for $200," wrote a member of the arrangements committee. "I would that it were $200,000 for you are worthy of it." Your speech "was so inlaid and linked with truth, that it convinced men." Even the irascible Greeley was impressed. In turning down a request to speak in Ohio that same week, the Republican editor admitted: "Abraham Lincoln will not only make a more effective speech than I could, but draw a larger audience." "Think of that," he concluded—amazed no doubt at the surprising turn of events, as well as at his own modesty.

Most communications from the Chicago convention that May came by telegraph. "Am very hopeful dont [sic] be excited nearly dead with fatigue," wired Judge Davis, Lincoln's manager, on the eve of the balloting. Immediately after the vote was announced next day N. M. Knapp telegraphed, "We did it glory to God." The split in the Democratic party gave Republican leaders ample reason for confidence, and to Lincoln the campaign must have been something of an anticlimax. "It will do you no harm . . . to consider what shall be the quality and cut of your inaugural suit," wrote Charles Ray from the Tribune offices in Chicago. "It does not seem to me that you have anything else to do in the campaign." When a group in Springfield, Massachusetts, urged Lincoln to speak, George Fogg of the Republican National Committee advised him not to imitate Douglas, "the stump candidate for the Presidency." "The election is ours now." All that remained, Fogg assured him, was to "receive, count, and assort the votes." On November 6, voters confirmed this prediction.

If the President-elect demonstrated any elation, it was short-lived. "'I am sick of office-holding already,'" he said in his farewell to Billy Herndon, "'and I shudder when I think of the tasks that are still ahead.'" Somehow, amid

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"Horace Greeley to D. S. Pope, March 4, 1860, ibid.
"Telegram from David Davis to Abraham Lincoln, May 17, 1860, ibid.; telegram from [N. M.] Knapp to Lincoln, May 18, 1860, ibid.
"Charles H. Ray to Abraham Lincoln, June 27, [1860], ibid.
"George C. Fogg to Abraham Lincoln, August 18, 1860, ibid.
"Quoted in Herndon and Weik, Abraham Lincoln, II, 194.
all the post-election confusion, he found time to prepare his inaugural address, seeking refuge in a dingy room above the store of his brother-in-law, C. M. Smith. Herndon supplied the only documents Lincoln needed: Henry Clay's speech on the Compromise of 1850, Webster's Reply to Hayne, Andrew Jackson's Nullification Proclamation, and a copy of the Constitution. When he finished his preliminary draft, he had twenty copies printed by the *Illinois State Journal*, whose press operators were sworn to secrecy. Judge Davis read it in Springfield and approved of every word. Senator O. H. Browning examined it in Indianapolis and later urged Lincoln to soften the paragraph which explicitly advocated retaking government property in the South. Accepting this advice, Lincoln made his phrasing considerably less explicit, if not actually ambiguous. In Washington, Francis Blair endorsed the original version in its entirety. Senator William H. Seward, however, offered no less than thirty-six suggestions for improvement. Seward, in fact, contributed the idea but not the phrasing for the moving final paragraph about "the mystic chords of memory." More important, perhaps, was Seward's influence in persuading Lincoln to omit specific mention of the Republican platform adopted at Chicago. In all, Lincoln made almost one hundred modifications in the original text, copies of which are now preserved in the Library of Congress. Thurlow Weed, a Republican conservative, accurately predicted that the address "would be conciliatory in spirit but nothing more." Despite its impassioned concluding paragraph, it had an adverse effect on the stock market.

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69 *Ibid.,* II, 188.
61 O. H. Browning to Abraham Lincoln, February 17, 1861, Robert Todd Lincoln Papers.
64 Basler, *Collected Works,* IV, 249-262.
If the President had time to read his mail during the hectic days which followed, he noted that though his proclamation cost him the support of border state moderates, it nevertheless temporarily unified his party. Radical and conservative Republicans alike wrote to congratulate him on his able statement of issues. Radical leader John Andrew, governor of Massachusetts, testified to a "cordial concurrence with the . . . policy expressed." Governor E. D. Morgan of New York, a moderate, wrote: "I cannot let one day pass without expressing to you the satisfaction I have felt in reading and considering the Inaugural. . . . It cannot fail to command the confidence of the North and the respect of the South." Henry Raymond, editor of the New York Times, concluded: "If the Union cannot be saved on this basis and consistently with these principles, then it is better that it should not be saved at all."

Eighty-seven years after the letters in the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection were written, this correspondence was opened to public scrutiny at the Library of Congress, but the unveiling has hardly settled the sprightly historical controversies over the causes of the Civil War. Reading the mail with preconceived notions, students easily find what pleases them. Marxians, however, find little to fortify their contention that ogres of Wall Street fomented the struggle for personal profit. Although western land speculators and railroad builders favored an uncompromising position, it is nevertheless clear that the dominant capitalistic forces ardently sought conciliation. Those who look on the war as a great moral crusade find little to support their thesis, for pulling and hauling over political preference all but obscured slavery as an issue. While Lincoln's correspondents wrote of moral and economic matters, their motivating passions seemed to spring from a more intimate personal source: bitter political hatreds developed over a long period of intense rivalry. Radicals displayed an irrational "Will to Fight"—regardless of issues

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66 John A. Andrew to Abraham Lincoln, March 8, 1861, Robert Todd Lincoln Papers.
67 E. D. Morgan to Abraham Lincoln, March 5, 1861, ibid.
68 New York Times, March 5 and 7, 1861.
or economic advantage. There was also a fatalistic atmosphere of inevitability which perhaps hastened the inevitable—a tragic sense of "so be it," or, in the rustic metaphor of the master politician of the Sangamon: "The tug has to come & better now than later."  

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\(^{10}\) Abraham Lincoln to William Kellogg, December 11, 1860, in Basler, *Collected Works*, IV, 150.