

## Lincoln’s Republican Party

Throughout the course we will be describing Lincoln as a Republican, and referring to the party as the political home of key figures such as William Seward (Lincoln’s Secretary of State), General and later President Ulysses S. Grant, and Thaddeus Stevens, the spokesman of the “Radical” anti-slavery block in Congress. Hence, it seems like a good idea to clearly define the early Republican Party’s platform, goals, and strategies. Today’s G.O.P. still promotes itself as “The Party of Lincoln,” but that is at best a half-truth which obscures more than it illuminates. The party came into existence in 1854 following the collapse of its predecessor, the Whig Party (named after the anti-royalist forces in England. Whigs believed their nemesis—Andrew Jackson—tried to run the country as a de facto monarch.) In its original incarnation, the Republicans were primarily a free-labor political movement, dedicated to the prevention of the spread of slavery to the western territories. Some of the party’s more extreme members were unabashed abolitionists, calling for the immediate end of “the peculiar institution” and even the incorporation of the freedmen into the national body politic. Most Republicans, however, cautiously regarded total abolition of slavery to be “a bridge too far” and settled instead for its quarantining to its current base in the South. On the so-called “right” of slaveholders to take their “property” into the territories—Kansas and Nebraska—Republicans were adamant: we must permit no extension of this morally depraved and economically backward practice into the West. That, in a nutshell, was Lincoln’s stand on slavery from 1854-60.

The Republican Party also backed a number of modernist economic principles which they felt would enhance our national development and ensure greater opportunities for the average man (usually thought of as the average white man) to rise in the world. Certainly that was Lincoln’s hope. Noted historian Heather Cox Richardson has written that Republicans regarded Unionism and a vibrant capitalist economy as going hand in hand. Hence, secession was anathema to Republicans on legal, moral, *and* economic grounds. Republicans, in direct opposition to their Democratic Party rivals for power, envisaged a strong role for

the federal government in the development of the nation. Modernizing the economy required an efficient transportation system. Consequently Lincoln and his colleagues advocated a dramatic expansion of the nation's infrastructure: roads, canals, bridges, had to be built quickly; rivers needed to be dredged to facilitate efficient steamboat travel, harbors and lighthouses constructed. Such undertakings were, of course, very expensive, and therefore government had to step in and make the modernizing investments that were beyond the reach of private citizens. (Democrats in the Civil War era were devoted to Laissez Faire, non-interference principles, and they hotly resisted such calls for government support of these measures.)

Lincoln, and many other Republicans, looked to Whigs like Henry Clay and John Quincy Adams as role models for their concept of an activist federal government working in tandem with the business/financial community to bring America into the modern world. Lincoln always called Clay "my beau ideal of a statesman." Clay's "American system" called for government support of domestic manufacturing and high tariffs to protect our as yet immature homegrown industries. Adams went even further, calling for a national university (Republicans were big supporters of education; many of what became our finest public colleges got their start during the Lincoln years) astronomical observatories, **and ???**

It is important to emphasize that Lincoln's Republicans were not yet simply the party of big business—that comes only after the war. Originally, the G.O.P. was primarily the political wing of the national anti-slavery movement. And their call for economic growth was not to fill the pockets of business tycoons like Vanderbilt and Jim Fiske. Rather, the Republicans of Lincoln's day wanted to help hard working farmers, "mechanics," and small manufacturers to prosper. They saw the future of America in its prospering middle class, and not the uber-wealthy which, sadly, came to dominate the party during Reconstruction.

