

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

LINCOLN AND THE GOVERNORSHIP OF OREGON

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Albert J. Beveridge's *Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858*, appeared in 1928, and since that time it has held a place as one of the leading biographies of Lincoln. In his treatment of the Taylor administration and the governorship of Oregon, Beveridge asserts that the governorship of Oregon was never offered to Lincoln.¹ The fact is that the position was offered to Lincoln and he took it under advisement.

On March 4, 1849, Lincoln's single term in Congress came to an end. That day marked the inaugural of Zachary Taylor as the second Whig President. Of the Whigs who had been in the Harrison Cabinet of 1841 only Thomas Ewing, the secretary of the treasury, appeared in the Taylor Cabinet, and to him was assigned the task of organizing the newly created Department of the Interior. On March 11 Lincoln and Edward D. Baker, newly elected Whig Congressman from Illinois, called on Secretary Ewing to talk over patronage matters. They followed the interview with a letter² renewing "our earnest request that no appointments of citizens of Illinois . . . be made . . . without the consultation with us which you were kind enough to say you thought proper."³ One of the most desirable plums to be given to Illinois by the interior department was the position of commissioner of the land office. Lincoln had urged a certain Cyrus Edwards for the place, but Lincoln had added that if Edwards were not acceptable to the administration he would accept the office for himself.

But there were other branches of the Whig party to be pla-

¹ Albert J. Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858* (Boston, 1928), I, 493.

² According to Beveridge, Lincoln wrote a similar letter to the secretary of the treasury and probably to other cabinet members. *Ibid.*, 488, n. 4.

³ "Letterbook of Letters Received, 1849-1850," Ewing MSS. (in the Library of Congress), no. 46.

cated. Henry Clay, against whose nomination Lincoln had used his influence before the meeting of the Whig National Convention of 1848,⁴ had been a lifelong friend of Secretary Ewing. Clay urged another Illinoisian, Justin Butterfield, for the office. At this point Lincoln entered the race in earnest. The party machine supported Lincoln, but many individual Whigs opposed him.⁵ Lincoln failed to get the appointment, but he was not forgotten by the Whig administration.

One of the positions which Secretary Ewing had at his disposal was the governorship of Oregon Territory. The governor under President Polk's administration, a Democrat named Joseph Lane, had been especially obnoxious to the Whigs. Lane was removed and the position offered to Lincoln, who took the offer under advisement and finally decided not to accept. He apparently reached the decision while he was away from home. He wrote to his brother-in-law in Springfield telling him of his decision, and the latter notified the chairman of the State Whig Executive Committee, A. G. Henry.⁶ Henry wrote to Secretary Ewing at once (September 24, 1849): Lincoln "has declined the office of Governor of Oregon and for reasons I presume entirely personal to himself and *certain friends* whose claims he Early pressed upon Genl. Taylor for appointment to office. I know Mr. Lincoln is disposed to yield the administration his most cordial support notwithstanding his refusal to take office for *himself*, so long as his friends are unprovided for."⁷

Before receiving this letter the administration was becoming restless at Lincoln's delay in announcing his decision. On September 25 Ewing sent the following telegram to Springfield: "Is Mr. Lincoln in Springfield? The President wishes to hear from him immediately."⁸

Lincoln had written to Ewing on the twenty-third informing him that he was that day sending a dispatch to a friend at

⁴ Lincoln to Archibald Williams, April 30, 1848, John G. Nicolay and John Hay (eds.), *Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1905), II, 17.

⁵ Beveridge, *Lincoln*, 488 ff. gives a good account of the race.

⁶ Beveridge has the name N. J. Henry, a mistake. Beveridge, *Lincoln*, I, 491.

⁷ "Letterbook of Letters Received, 1849-1850," Ewing MSS.

⁸ Letterbook, Miscellaneous (in Department of the Interior), no. 1, p. 12. The memorandum does not state to whom it was sent, possibly to the telegraph office.

Springfield⁹ to be forwarded to him. But this friend, and some others, thinking that Lincoln had acted hastily, withheld the dispatch and wrote again to Lincoln. On receiving this letter Lincoln returned immediately to Springfield and sent a telegram to Ewing in which he declined the office of governor of Oregon. He followed this with a letter of explanation. The originals of both the letter and the telegram are reproduced here from the Ewing manuscript collection in the Library of Congress.¹⁰ The governorship was then given to a Kentucky legislator, John P. Gaines by name, who was satisfactory to both Clay and Crittenden.¹¹

This incident did not cause a break between Lincoln and Ewing. Nearly two months later Lincoln wrote a long letter to a Chicago paper,¹² defending Ewing's administration of the interior department. This friendship was renewed during the time of Lincoln's presidency.

Months after these incidents a congressional committee,¹³ appointed by a Democratic House, investigated the official conduct of the secretary of the interior, especially his handling of patronage matters. One of the leading phases of the investiga-

⁹ Possibly the brother-in-law of whom A. G. Henry had written.

¹⁰ Ewing MSS., *loc. cit.* The telegram is numbered 66, the letter 76. Obviously Beveridge did not see this correspondence, for though Nicolay and Hay, among others, mention the offer of the governorship to Lincoln, Beveridge denies that the offer was made. He seems to confuse this incident with an offer of the secretaryship of Oregon during the Fillmore administration. He substantiates the denial by quoting a letter from F. B. Kellogg, secretary of state, of June 2, 1925, that no record existed in the Department of State, of such an offer. Beveridge, *Lincoln*, I, 493, n. 1. According to a letter from Lincoln to John M. Clayton, secretary of state under Taylor, dated September 27, 1849, and printed in Nicolay and Hay, *Complete Works*, II, 130, Clayton had offered Lincoln the secretaryship at the same time that Ewing had offered the governorship. Nicolay and Hay also print a letter from Lincoln to John Addison, dated September 27, 1849, in which he thanks Addison for interesting himself in "having the governorship of Oregon offered to me." *Ibid.*, 129. Possibly there were three separate offers: Clayton's offer of the secretaryship in September, 1849, Ewing's offer of the governorship in the same month, and the offer of the secretaryship under Fillmore.

¹¹ Crittenden was at this time governor of Kentucky and one of the most intimate advisers of the Taylor administration.

¹² Lincoln to Chicago *Journal*, November 21, 1849, in Nicolay and Hay, *Complete Works*, II, 131 ff.

¹³ The Richardson committee. For the report of this committee, see *Congressional Globe*, 31 Cong., 1 Sess., Append., 1209 ff.

tion centered on the removal of the Democratic governor of Oregon Territory. The fact that a Whig Senate completely exonerated Secretary Ewing ¹⁴ does not change the situation that had Lincoln's name been linked with an affair to which the Richardson committee drew so much publicity his chances for a political comeback ten years later surely would have been affected.

BY BAIN'S ELECTRO-CHEMICAL TELEGRAPH

Dated Springfield Sept. 27th 1849.

Hon Thomas Ewing

I respectfully decline Governorship of Oregon; I am still anxious that, Simeon Frances shall be secretary of that Territory.

A. Lincoln

Springfield, Illinois, Sept^t 27, 1849

Hon: T. Ewing, Secretary &c.

Dear Sir:

Some discrepancy may appear between my letter of the 23rd and my Telegraphic despatch of today, to explain which I write this. As I told you in that letter I sent a despatch the same day to a friend at Springfield to be forwarded to you; but that friend and some others, supposing I had decided hastily, withheld the despatch, and wrote me again. On receiving their letter I came to Springfield, and now Telegraph you myself —

Your Obt Serv^t

A. Lincoln

¹⁴ For Ewing's defense of his appointments and of his actions in general see *Cong. Globe*, 31 Cong., 2 Sess., 38, 40, 80, 157, and 498 ff., also *Append.*, 66 ff.