

**History 211 History of US Elections  
Discussion Transcript for September 3, 2020  
Lincoln and Jacksonian America**

**Main Readings: Gienapp, chapter 1 and First Campaign Statement (1832)**

William Gienapp titles the first chapter of his Lincoln biography as “A Son of the Frontier.” This background is important for students in an American political history class. The westward expansion of the United States changed the country’s political culture. What had once been a revolutionary nation aspiring toward republican ideals was not becoming something different. Many were embracing the openly self-interested partisanship of Jacksonian Democrats. But others aspired to manage the fast-paced national growth within a more traditional cultural framework. These figures still embraced change –namely the rise of American industries—but they worried more than the Jacksonians about its impact on American morality and culture. These figures, like Henry Clay and Abraham Lincoln, began to identify as Whigs (a name borrowed from the revolutionary era). Lincoln espoused many of these beliefs in his shrewdly packaged first campaign statement, written BEFORE he actually joined the emerging Whig Party.

The following selections come from student comments & questions.

**Growing Up Lincoln**

STUDENT COMMENT: “What I found most compelling about the Gienapp chapter was how Thomas Lincoln, Abraham's father, had a profound impact on the quality of Lincoln's childhood. From relatively early on, it was clear that their values were in opposite directions. While Thomas valued the pioneer life and spent his entire life doing the physically work that this live demanded, Lincoln hated this life, and he did not "cherish any romantic nostalgia for pioneer life, which he remembered as one of backbreaking labor and constant struggle with trees and grubs." (16) Lincoln was much more an intellectual, despite his strong and tall build suited for a pioneer (the fact that he used this body as a youth for local friendly wrestling brawls makes me laugh; this was the same man that penned the Gettysburg Address and other important historical documents). His step mother fostered a love of learning and reading in young Lincoln. This is reflected directly in his first campaign statement, as he is quoted, "Upon the subject of education... I can only say that I view it as the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in". This is in stark contrast to his father, who "never did more in the way of writing than to bunglingly sign his own name" (16).”

STUDENT COMMENT: “Abraham Lincoln's upbringing wasn't one of inspiration or enlightenment through labor, but one of intellectual exploration. He hated working, and took every opportunity to study between farmhand chores, eventually selling himself out to perform odd-jobs away from home, creating new experiences and generating a hunger for knowledge of the wider world around him. His appeal- not as a politician but as an honest man- wasn't the frontier farmer narrative. It was an identity he rejected in

its near entirety, from its semi-subsistence farming to its loyalty to Andrew Jackson and the Democrats. The Whig and eventual father of the Republican Party was borne of rebellion against that established identity, and rather than dishonestly use it to curry favor, Lincoln simply moved forward with the beliefs and values he had instilled in himself.”

### **Lincoln in Jacksonian America**

STUDENT COMMENT: “Andrew Jackson is frequently referred to as “a man of the people” or “the people’s President” despite his contradictory record on slavery, the economy, and more. Gienapp mentions several times how popular Jackson was with many people Lincoln knew. Rural White America bought into Jackson’s narrative, especially when faced with conflicts like the Black Hawk War where their communities felt threatened. However, Lincoln’s rejection of Jacksonian policies made him a true man of the people. Lincoln was anti-slavery, having learned from his father the negative effects of slave labor on freeman working populations. He supported a national bank and transportation reforms, knowing the positive effects they would have on trade and farming. Jackson’s policies had the opposite effects of what he promised to the average White population that made up his base. Lincoln ran on policies he believed would provide support to the people he knew and remedy the problems he grew up suffering from. He was humble, thoughtful, and, most importantly, honest. People viewed him as a neighbor and a friend, not just a politician, and his early campaigns reflect the genuine thoughtfulness he put into his policies.”

STUDENT COMMENT: “From the chapter of Gienapp’s *Abraham Lincoln and Civil War America* and Lincoln’s first campaign speech, it is plain to see that though he was a man of his time, he also was incredibly singular in the way that he approached politics, and life in general. He was a man who was incredibly quiet about his personal life and perhaps carried a bit of shame because of his lowly upbringing. Yet, Lincoln was confident in his own abilities and sought to use them not just to improve his station, but also to help those he represented. He won elections by simply talking to people and being known for always telling the truth. In the Illinois legislature he referred to politicians as being selfish men which showed that he viewed himself differently. Lincoln’s selflessness and sense of honor both point to him being a strong proponent of republicanism. He seemed to be almost from a different era, taking away his impoverished roots, it would not be a stretch to see him as a successful member of the House of Burgesses or early congress. Lincoln was hardworking and a man of the people who stood up for what he believed in. While in the Illinois legislature he opposed bills which would criminalize abolitionism while knowing that there was little support to be gained. Lincoln’s way of speaking which was in the vernacular of the common man helped win him elections and gain admirers. It seems to me that he won elections because of his selflessness and his charisma.”

### **Lincoln and Education**

STUDENT COMMENT: “Abraham Lincoln was and continues to be one of the most interesting figures in American politics. While most people know of him as the president during the American Civil War who was later assassinated, many do not know much

about his life pre-presidency. As we read in the book *Abraham Lincoln and Civil War America: A Biography* by William E. Gienapp, we see that not much is known about his life before he became a politician. However, from what we do know, we can clearly see that Lincoln was unlike many other politicians of his time. He grew up on the frontier and lacked any form of formal education as young boy. However, this lack of a formal education did not mean he disregarded knowledge. In fact, Lincoln was a seeker of knowledge of many subjects, including math, history, and politics. Lincoln had become a well-known figure in his community of New Salem, but he was not well known outside of the small settlement until he became more involved in local politics. Unlike many politicians of the day, took a bipartisan stance and worked with people in his community whether they were Whigs or Democrats. He saw that connecting with the common people and working alongside them helped his chances of being elected and showed that he was not as removed as other aristocratic politicians of that era.”

### **First Campaign (1832)**

STUDENT COMMENT: “On March 9, 1832, Abraham Lincoln addressed the state of Illinois with his first campaign statement; a statement that broke from the norms that came before it for a local politician to align himself with policy positions and set the precedent of structuring his candidacy aligned with a political party. Lincoln’s statement would help to begin the conversation about political parties in an age of republicanism, which in turn, would help to push politicians away from relying on their ‘honor’ to become elected officials.... Prior to the transformation that Lincoln helped set in motion, politicians would “stand” for office based on their standing in the community. Significantly, political parties - i.e. the Democratic and Whig parties - were only beginning to formulate within the United States, let alone become a reality for politicians and the people of the Sangamon County. Lincoln’s embodiment of republicanism is evident here, as he was advocating for political parties as a means of “benefitting” the people (Pinsker). This representation of republicanism can be extended even further by discussing Lincoln's desire to improve the livelihoods of the people in Sangamon County in several fashions (most notably by improving the river as a means of improving productivity), as well as his ability to appeal to supporters through his “simple” speeches (Gienapp, 17). Although Lincoln said that he has “been too familiar with disappointments” and he came in eighth at the close of this election, his approach to campaigning set up both the idea of issues-driven elections and political parties like what would many years later become Lincoln’s Republican party.”