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# How Lincoln and Churchill Put National Unity First

The two war-time leaders both needed to unite their own skeptical allies and across the aisle to their opponents. It was a juggling act requiring enormous political dexterity.

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In the days after the [Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter](#) in April 1861, one of the first visitors to the White House was Illinois Sen. Stephen A. Douglas. Douglas and [President Abraham Lincoln](#) had differed and debated on political and economic issues for more a quarter century, but they shared an unwavering dedication to national unity and the U.S. Constitution.

For decades, they had seen politics differently. At the Illinois State Capitol in June 1858, private citizen Lincoln had delivered his “House Divided” speech, whereby he cast his lot unequivocally with the anti-slavery Republicans: “A house divided against itself can not stand. I believe this government can not endure permanently half slave, and half free.”

That speech set up the momentous contest between Douglas, the titular leader of the national Democratic Party, and Lincoln, a one-term congressman who had become a leading spokesman against the expansion of slavery under the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

In [seven, three-hour debates](#) that summer and fall, Lincoln and Douglas had laid out their respective arguments regarding black bondage. Against the advice of allies, Lincoln played the long game and forced Douglas to acknowledge views regarding slavery that Lincoln knew would keep the him from the presidency.

Two years later, the Democratic Party split into southern and northern wings—thus dooming Douglas’ presidential ambitions. In a four-man race in 1860, Lincoln won only 40 percent of the popular vote—to Douglas’ 30 percent. Although the Republican candidate won 180 Electoral College votes to just 123 combined for his three opponents, he won far less than a majority of the popular vote.

During the early months of secession, Douglas remained a critic of Lincoln. Then on Friday, April 12, Confederate cannon began a bombardment of Union positions on Fort Sumter. Union forces commanded by Major Robert Anderson surrendered the next day.

On the evening of Sunday, April 14, Massachusetts Congressman George Ashmun went to Douglas’ Washington home with the purpose of enlisting his support for President Lincoln and the Union. The Illinois senator initially resisted, complaining that Lincoln “had dealt hardly with me in removing some of my friends from office, and I don’t know as he wants my advice or aid.” Douglas relented when his wife supported Ashmun’s entreaty.

Together, Ashmun and Douglas rode to the White House, where they found the president alone. Lincoln read to Douglas the proclamation he had drafted to mobilize the nation against the rebellion.

Douglas responded: “Mr. President, I cordially concur in every word of that document, except that instead of a call for seventy-five thousand men I would make it two hundred thousand. You do not know the dishonest purposes of those men (the Rebels) as well as I do.” Douglas went on to point out on a map “the principal strategic points which should be at once strengthened for the coming contest.”

Ashmun later observed “that no two men in the United States parted that night with a more cordial feeling of a united, friendly, and patriotic purpose than Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Douglas.” On April 25 in a speech to the Senate, Douglas declared: “Every friend of freedom—every champion and advocate of constitutional liberty throughout the land must feel that this cause is his own. There is and should be nothing disagreeable or humiliating to men who have differed, in times of peace, on every question that could divide fellow-men, to rally in concert in defence of the country and against all assailants.”

Shortly thereafter, Douglas traveled home to Illinois, rallying Union sentiment across the North as he went. On May 1, Douglas gave his last speech in the Chicago “Wigwam” where Lincoln had been nominated for president. “The present secession movement is the result of an enormous conspiracy formed more than a year ago. There are only two sides to the question. Every man must be for the United States or against it,” said Douglas. “There can be no neutrals in this war; ONLY PATRIOTS—or traitors. I express it as my conviction before God that it is the duty of every American citizen to rally round the flag of his country. Illinois has a proud position, united, firm, determined never to permit the government to be destroyed.”

Douglas wore himself out in defense of the Union and died in Chicago on June 3. He had set the model for bipartisan support of the Union war effort in the North. President Lincoln himself carefully cultivated Democratic politicians like Benjamin F. Butler of

Massachusetts and Daniel Sickles of New York, who became important Union generals. A general's commission was even found for James Shield, the Illinois Democrat with whom Lincoln had once nearly dueled. The first Republican president desperately needed all the Democratic support he could muster.

Nearly four score years later, Winston Churchill was invited to form a national unity government by King George VI. Churchill's elevation was as improbable as Lincoln's. His leadership qualities were widely derided within his own Conservative Party. After four decades in politics, Churchill had plenty of enemies and a record splashed by unpopular positions.

But with the Nazi invasion of the Low Countries and France begun on May 10, 1940, the position of Tory Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had become untenable. A vote in the House of Commons had demonstrated his eroding support among fellow Tories. The opposition Labour Party refused to join a government headed by Chamberlain.

And thus, Churchill, always a partisan whether aligning with the Conservative or Liberal parties, became the logical choice to head a non-party government. Lord Halifax, the Conservatives' favorite, took himself out of the running to succeed Chamberlain. Churchill kept him on as Foreign Secretary—much as Lincoln had named his principal Republican rival, William H. Seward, as Secretary of State.

Lincoln and Churchill faced similar challenges—they needed to maintain unity and support within their own skeptical party even as they reached across the aisle to broaden that support. It was a delicate task that required political dexterity. Lincoln delayed calling Congress back into session until July—after some important state elections were held.

Elections would continue in the United States throughout the next four years of war. In Britain, only by-elections were held to fill vacancies in House of Commons. It was to British Parliament more than to the British people to whom Churchill was primarily

responsible during five years of war. The prime minister had to deal with shifting political sentiments among members of his coalition, but he did not have to defend his government at the polls.

Churchill would concentrate on defeating Hitler. He left post-war planning to his Labour allies, who chafed under the prime minister's disdain for their work and his indifference for change in the political mood among British citizens tired of the deprivations of war. When Germany surrendered in May 1945, Labour demanded an election, a partisan election—the first one since 1935.

Churchill, so well attuned to political conditions in Europe, fell out of touch with political sentiment in England. He launched an attack on Labour Party leaders, which they deftly deflected. When British votes were counted at the end of July 1945, Churchill, victorious in war, had been dealt a crushing defeat.

During the Civil War, Lincoln had never been able to ignore shifting political sentiments in the North—particularly after Republicans suffered a stinging setback in November 1862. War Democrats were increasingly outnumbered by Peace Democrats, who wanted to end war, reunite the country, and accept the continuation of slavery.

The Civil War had begun as a war to preserve the Union, but Lincoln increasingly saw it also as a war to destroy slavery. A national political convention was held in Baltimore in June 1864 to renominate Lincoln for president. It was, however, the nomination of the National Union Party that Lincoln received. Wisely, Lincoln understood the need for unity in the face of partisanship and secession. His running mate was a War Democrat, Tennessee Governor Andrew Johnson.

“I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution,” Lincoln had famously written New York Tribune Editor Horace Greeley in August 1862. He added cryptically: “What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it

would help to save the Union. I shall do less whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause. I shall try to correct errors when shown to be errors; and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views.”

The nature of national unity had changed during the American Civil War, but Lincoln’s devotion to it had not. Need must be based on principle. He ended his Cooper Union Speech of February 1861: “Let us be diverted by none of those sophistical contrivances wherewith we are so industriously plied and belabored—contrivances such as groping for some middle ground between the right and the wrong, vain as the search for a man who should be neither a living man nor a dead man—such as a policy of ‘don’t care’ on a question about which all true men do care—such as Union appeals beseeching true Union men to yield to Disunionists, reversing the divine rule, and calling, not the sinners, but the righteous to repentance.”

Lincoln concluded: “Neither let us be slandered from our duty by false accusations against us, nor frightened from it by menaces of destruction to the Government nor of dungeons to ourselves. ‘Let Us Have Faith That Right Makes Might, and in That Faith, Let Us, to the End, Dare to Do Our Duty as We Understand It.’”

Five years later, Lincoln’s understanding of his duty had grown. He closed his Second Inaugural Address with a new formulation of the imperative of national unity: “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”