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## Wind-powered Log Cabins and Democratic Hope

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# AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills

## *Jim Read on “Wind-powered Log Cabins and Democratic Hope”*

JUNE 21, 2017

Jim Read

When people ask me what I’m doing this summer I reply, “I’m writing a book about Abraham Lincoln, and trying to remove the Creeping Charlie from my yard.” My next door neighbor replied, “The Lincoln book will be easier.”

However, the most common response is, “What can you possibly say about Lincoln that hasn’t already been said?” It is frequently asserted that more books have been written about Lincoln than about any historical figure except Jesus.

I am tempted to reply, “But no one has ever written a book about Abraham Lincoln’s support for wind power.” That is not what my book is about, but someone could write at least an article on the subject. One of Lincoln’s intriguing side projects was a series of public lectures in 1858 on the history of discoveries and inventions. (He also ran for U.S. Senate that year and participated in the famous Lincoln-Douglas Debates. I think he needed a break from politics.)

At the close of his First Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions, Lincoln speculated about areas in which future inventors might profitably try their hand. “Of all the forces of nature, I should think the wind contains the largest amount of motive power – that is, power to move things...As yet, no very successful mode of controlling, and directing the wind, has been discovered...The wind is an untamed, and unharnessed force; and quite possibly one of the greatest discoveries hereafter to be made, will be the taming, and harnessing of the wind.”

Wind-powered log cabins, anyone?

But the actual theme of my book is Lincoln’s defense of majority rule; and in particular, how Lincoln hoped to build an enduring national antislavery majority that would abolish slavery peacefully, democratically, gradually, and constitutionally. This was central to his life and thought in a way that wind energy was not. Yet despite the mountains of books and articles written on Lincoln, I have yet to find one specifically devoted to his defense of majority rule.

It is essential here to explain the context. The slave states of the lower South – South Carolina, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas – seceded from the Union before Lincoln even took office as president on March 4, 1861. So no one could claim at that point that Lincoln had committed any despotic act justifying dissolution of the Union. It was Lincoln’s election itself that those states regarded as just cause for secession.

Even though Lincoln had been elected freely and fairly according to the constitutional rules, the seceding states claimed that Lincoln was an inherently illegitimate president because of his stance on slavery, and because he had not received a single electoral vote from a slave state. If the South’s favored candidate, John Breckinridge, had won the election, the slave states would have remained in the Union.

They seceded, in short, because they did not like the results of a free election. They feared that Lincoln’s (and the Republican party’s) plan of abolishing slavery gradually through a long, slow, majority-supported territorial squeeze stood a realistic chance of success, and they did not want to give him the opportunity to begin.

In his First Inaugural Address (which came before Fort Sumter, when he still hoped for a peaceful resolution of the crisis), Lincoln argued that for members of a powerful, well-armed minority to resort to violence because they do not like the results of a free election threatens democracy at its core. “A majority, held in restraint by constitutional checks, and limitations, and always changing easily, with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments, is the only true sovereign of a free people...Unanimity is impossible; the rule of a minority, as a permanent arrangement, is wholly inadmissible; so that, rejecting the majority principle, anarchy, or despotism in some form, is all that is left.”

Lincoln did not claim that the majority was always wise or just. But in every form of government the final power of decision, the right of sovereignty, had to be placed somewhere. In a democracy, that final power, in his view, had to lie with a deliberate, constitutionally-checked majority – not with a wealthy, powerful slave-owning minority. A deliberate, constitutionally-checked majority was “the only true sovereign of a free people.”

Lincoln hoped to use his election victory as a first step toward building a committed, enduring national majority that would first halt the expansion of slavery to new territories, then eventually abolish it gradually and peacefully, with compensation paid to owners.

That is not of course how it happened. Secession forced Lincoln to choose between going to war, or acquiescing in the creation of a powerful new nation on its borders dedicated to perpetuating the institution of slavery, both on American soil and internationally. He chose war. In the course of that horrific war, slavery was abolished by military force, not by peaceful democratic means.

I suspect this is the reason Lincoln's defense of majority rule has received so little attention: events took a different course, and appeared to render his peaceful democratic hopes irrelevant. Many people argue that a peaceful end to slavery was impossible in the United States.

They may be right. But I still believe it is worth reconstructing the democratic road not taken. Lincoln had as much reason as anyone to be frustrated with democracy. Yet he believed that democracy, operating through the institution of majority rule, was capable of peacefully resolving even the most difficult problems – like abolishing slavery. In our own age of deeply dysfunctional democracy, I find solace in Lincoln's unshaken democratic faith.

These are my thoughts this summer, as I creep along, weeding my yard, and listening to the rustle of Minnesota's unharnessed summer breeze.