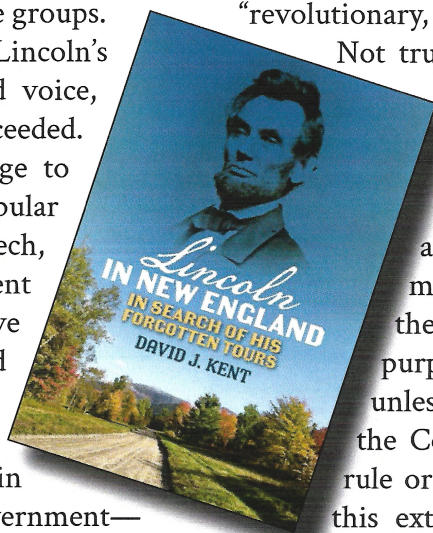


Cooper Union: Lincoln's 3 Challenges

By David J. Kent

On February 27, 1860, a lanky lawyer from Illinois gave a speech in New York City's Cooper Union. The speech and his ensuing tour through New England would help make Abraham Lincoln president. The speech itself is well known. Less known is that the three distinct sections of the ninety-minute speech reflect Lincoln's direct challenge to each of three discrete groups.

The crowd was initially put off by Lincoln's ungainly appearance and high-pitched voice, but it became enthralled as he proceeded. His first section was a direct challenge to Stephen A. Douglas and his idea of Popular Sovereignty. In his House Divided speech, Lincoln said, "I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free." But Douglas had argued that the Framers of the Constitution had intended the nation to be just that. They had understood that the people in the territories—not the federal government—would decide whether each of the territories would allow slavery. Lincoln disputed this. Through meticulous documentation of the Framers' votes and statements, he demonstrated their disapproval of slavery and their understanding that the federal government had the authority to limit the spread of slavery into the territories.



In the second section, Lincoln refuted the South's charge that the Republican Party was intent to incite slave insurrections. The South had cited John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry as proof, but Lincoln responded, "John Brown was no Republican; and you have failed to implicate a single Republican in his Harper's Ferry enterprise." He challenged the South's claim that they were conservative and the Republicans were "revolutionary, destructive, or something of the sort."

Not true, argued Lincoln. If conservatism was "adherence to the old and tried, against the new and untried," then Republicans were the ones in compliance with the Founders' beliefs that slavery was wrong and inconsistent with a nation where "all men are created equal." Lincoln challenged the South to admit that their plainly stated purpose was "to destroy the Government, unless you be allowed to construe and enforce the Constitution as you please. . . . You will rule or ruin in all events." Nothing could stop this extortion other than the North agreeing that slavery was somehow right. That was a capitulation Lincoln could not make.

Cooper Union's third section returns Lincoln's focus to his Republican Party. He challenged Republicans never

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Day ceremonies at the Soldiers' National Cemetery. He helped create the Gilder Lehrman Institute and introduced the Lincoln Prize. That is a gigantic set of accomplishments.

Remember, in his day Gabor also endured prejudice, dislocation, loss, and in his last decade, health challenges that would have felled a lesser man far earlier. He was one tough fellow!

It was a privilege to know, work with, and debate with (occasionally, and only over our work projects) my friend Gabor. He was unique—a scholar, a public historian, a gifted writer, and a cherished friend.

And he was the only friend who inspired his own fan club—the F.O.G. Society (for "Friends of Gabor").

I intended to close by saying Gabor was inimitable—but, in fact, he long inspired impersonators who competed with each other re-creating his Hungarian accent and baritone voice. Only the great ones, the unique ones, receive such loving acknowledgments. And only those with modesty and self-deprecatory wit appreciate the attention as much as Gabor did.

Brilliant, inspiring, funny, and loving, he will be much missed—but will surely live on through his great books and the warm memories he leaves behind. Especially in Gettysburg, where he helped The Lincoln Forum plant roots.






The Lincoln Group of the District of Columbia members at the 2025 Lincoln Forum Symposium

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rumors about Jackson's being at Gordonsville with a large force, & being about to make a demonstration on Washington. It would not be surprising if they did.

My little dove, do you want to see me? I hope you will have me next Sunday. What will you do? Don't get excited & get into mischief. I will try to write again. Yours with everlasting love. — D. W. Cheever

William Griffing retired from a career as Director of Environment, Safety and Health at Fermilab in Batavia, Illinois, in 2009 and began a second career saving U.S. history. His transcriptions of Civil War-era letters and diaries can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/sparedshared>, or by following him at <https://www.facebook.com/Griff.CWLetters/> 



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to relinquish their guiding principle that slavery was wrong. He ended with words that have become almost as famous as his later Gettysburg Address, complete with his own all-caps emphasis:

“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.”

Lincoln's three challenges defined the Republican position that the Framers of “the Government under which we live” understood the federal government to have the authority, and the moral obligation, to keep slavery from spreading into the territories and to put the “peculiar institution” on a path to its ultimate extinction. This was the argument that he took to Cooper Union and then to the New England states. Two months later he became the Republican nominee.

*David J. Kent is the author of nine books on Abraham Lincoln, Nikola Tesla, and Thomas Edison. His newest book, *Lincoln in New England: In Search of His Forgotten Tours*, was published in March 2026.* 