

Garden of Thoughts

You can fool some of the people all the time and all the people some of the time; but you can't fool all the people all the time.

—Attributed to Lincoln

Actually, we don't know when he said it, or even if he said it at all. The above attributions were offered nearly a half century after the fact, and are generally considered unreliable. (Thomas Schwartz, former historian of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum, called the claims “tenuous,” and Don and Virginia Fehrenbacher, authors of *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln*, gave the claims a grade of “D.”) -<http://hnn.us/article/161924>

“You Can Fool All of the People” Lincoln Never Said That

By Thomas E Schwartz

Undoubtedly the most famous utterance ever attributed to Lincoln is, “You can fool all the people some of the time and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time.” Early recollections place the saying in an 1858 speech Lincoln delivered in Clinton, Illinois. The first appeared in 1904 by E.E. Pierson, who remembered Lewis Campbell, a respected citizen of DeWitt County; telling him of the 1858 speeches that Lincoln and Douglas delivered in Clinton. According to Campbell, Lincoln said, “Judge Douglas cannot fool the people: you may fool people for a time; you can fool a part of the people all the time; but you can't fool all the people all the time.” The following year, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Brooklyn Eagle* undertook investigations in an attempt to solve the mystery. Many remembered Lincoln speaking in Clinton but fewer remember his exact words with only a handful indicating that Lincoln uttered something about fooling people. The findings of these newspaper investigations became part of a 1905 revised and expanded edition of Lincoln's writings originally edited and compiled by John Nicolay and John Hay. A footnote for the Clinton speech entry reads: “The question has been widely discussed and still remains unsettled as to whether Lincoln originated the memorable epigram: ‘You can fool all the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time.’ In 1905 the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Brooklyn Eagle* combined efforts in an endeavor to solve the enigma for all time. After investigation several witnesses were found, notably Lewis Campbell of DeWitt County, Ill.; J.J. Robinson of Lincoln, Ill.; and J. L. Hill of Fletcher, O., who agreed that Lincoln had expressed the sentiment, if not the exact words generally quoted. It is supposed that he used the phrase in the above speech while addressing the people of Clinton, though the ‘*Pantagraph*’ fails to cite it. Naturally, the newspaper reports in those days were never complete, and the editor on this particular occasion even apologizes for his lack of space to give the entire report of this speech.” Nicolay and Hay remained suspicious of recollected words. Since Nicolay died in 1901 and Hay on July 1, 1905, the inclusion of the note was undertaken by the editor of the revised edition, nor Nicolay and Hay. The editor also assigned the incorrect date of September 8, 1858, to the speech.

The Reverend William Eleazer Barton, a prolific author of many books on Lincoln and his family, published regularly in the *Dearborn Independent* on Lincoln topics. His sleuthing uncovered the Pierson recollection and other accounts of the quote by Lincoln's contemporaries. Barton points out the problems with the recollected testimony but concludes: “The evidence is far from conclusive

but it is not lacking in probability. It sounds like Lincoln.”

Paul Angle, the young executive secretary for the Lincoln Centennial Association, quickly realized the public's interest in the mysterious Lincoln quote. Among his many responsibilities was to answer research queries about Lincoln utterances. At the top of the list was whether Lincoln uttered the famous words at Clinton. Angle wrote a memorandum outlining his evaluation of the evidence: “This epigram is almost universally believed to have been coined by Lincoln in a speech at Clinton, Illinois, on September 2, 1858 (usually dated Sept.8), and many qualified students accept it as indubitably genuine. While it is not printed in the text of the Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln, the editors (or editor?) give it a qualified certification in a footnote to the report of Lincoln's Clinton speech, and reproduce it without qualification in the anthology which accompanies that compilation. It should be remembered, nevertheless, that there is no contemporary authority for the apothegm. Our only source of information regarding what Lincoln said at Clinton is a summary, avowedly incomplete, which was printed in the Bloomington Pantagraph for September 9, 1858. Not until 1905—years after the remark had won a secure place in American folklore—did several men who had heard Lincoln speak at Clinton come forward to assert that on that occasion he had used these words. The recollections of these men, however, differ not only from each other in important particulars, but also vary materially from established facts. Naturally, implicit confidence cannot be placed in their statements. Moreover, several who were present at the Clinton meeting have no recollection of Lincoln's use of the epigram. Dr. William E. Barton has pointed out (Dearborn Independent, Sept. 11, 1926) that if Lincoln actually struck upon such a felicitous expression at Clinton, it is strange that he did not repeat it in any of the five remaining debates, all of which were reported verbatim. The words are Lincolnian in character, to be sure, but that fact is hardly a sufficient reason for believing implicitly that Lincoln actually spoke them.”

Angle reflected the growing view exemplified in the academy by Professor James Garfield Randall, that to find the “real” Lincoln, evidence must be sorted and evaluated according to accepted canons of historical methodology. Without locating the phrase in a contemporary newspaper account or diary, recollected words many years after the fact were weak pegs to hang the quote upon. While historians in the Lincoln field followed Angle's admonition, popular writers continued to use the phrase. Archer Shaw places the quote in *The Lincoln Encyclopedia* (1950), citing the Nicolay and Hay reprint as the source without mentioning the qualifications. Roy P. Basler reasserts Paul Angle's position in a footnote to the September 2, 1858, speech contained in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (1953).

Citing the Bloomington Pantagraph, September 3, 1858, as the source for the entry, Basler summarizes the history of the mysterious Lincoln utterance: “Tradition has come to attribute to the Clinton speeches one of Lincoln's most famous utterances—‘You can fool all the people some of the time and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all of the time.’ In 1905 testimony was gathered by the Chicago Tribune and Brooklyn Eagle to prove that Lincoln used the epigram at Clinton. The testimony was conflicting and dubious in some particulars, but the epigram has remained a favorite in popular usage. Neither the report in the Pantagraph which provides the text of the Clinton speeches, nor any other contemporary Lincoln reference located by the present editors, make any reference to the epigram.”

Historians focused attention on the earliest claims traced back to Clinton. Another claim dating a few years later posits that Lincoln uttered the words in 1856 at Bloomington, Illinois. William Pitt Kellogg, an Illinois lawyer, politician, and contemporary of Lincoln, wrote a lengthy recollection of

Lincoln. In response to a solicitation from Lincoln Centennial Association secretary James R. B. Van Cleave, Kellogg penned his remarks on February 8, 1909. Kellogg detailed his memories from the 1856 Republican Convention held in Major’s Hall where Lincoln delivered what is known as the “Lost Speech,” Kellogg claimed: “I was so fortunate as to occupy a seat will in front, and listened to speech with close attention. When he came forward to speak of course there was much excitement. Mr. Lincoln began very slowly, holding in his left hand a card upon which he had evidently jotted down some of his leading thoughts. From time to time, as he reached some climax in his argument, he would advance to the front of the platform as he spoke, and with a peculiar gesture hurl the point, so to speak, at his audience; then as the audience rose to their feet to cheer, he would walk slowly backward, bowing and glancing at the card he held in his speech, making his points in the same manner and with like effect. I was in this speech, discussing the question of popular sovereignty, and declaring that Douglas’s position upon the question of unfriendly legislation was rank sophistry, that Lincoln used the epigram, ‘You can fool some of the people some of the time, you can fool some of the people all the time, but you can’t fool all the people all the time.’ It was here also that he made that often-quoted declaration, ‘We say to the southern disunionists, we won’t go out of the Union, and you shan’t.’” Kellogg’s view was shared by Richard Price Morgan, who worked with the Chicago & Alton Railroad from 1852 until 1857 and founded the town of Dwight, Illinois. Addressing a group in Pontiac, Illinois, on February 12, 1909, Morgan claimed: “It was in the summer of the year that I received this letter-1856-that I stood next to Mr. Lincoln and heard him say: ‘You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can’t fool all of the people all of the time.’ He was addressing an assemblage of about three or four hundred people from the raised platform of the entrance of the Pike House in Bloomington, Ill., upon the subject of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and reviewing the arguments of Douglas in support of it. His application of his epigram was so apt and so forcible that I have never forgotten it, and I believe that no verbal modification of it would be accurate. In his final peroration of that address, referring again to the arguments favoring the Kansas-Nebraska Act, he said, with wonderful energy and earnestness: ‘Surely, surely, my friends, you cannot be deceived by such sophistries.’” While not in agreement on the exact phraseology, Kellogg and Morgan both seem to think Lincoln uttered the sentiment in a different town at an earlier time. Don and Virginia Fehrenbacher, finding nothing in the record to support Kellogg and Morgan’s claims, rate the recollections with a “D” grade.

A final variation was advanced in the 1920s. Hoyt’s *New Cyclopedia of Practical Quotations*, revised by Kate Louise Roberts in 1922, attributes the quote to Phineas Taylor Barnum, the great nineteenth-century showman. An entry note in part reads “Attributed to Lincoln but denied by Spofford.” Harrier Elizabeth Prescott Spofford was a popular writer of fiction and poetry who wrote for popular magazines such as the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper’s Bazaar*. Two years following the publication of Hoyt’s, Mrs. Mida McGillicuddy, described by the *International News Service* as a “Dallas historian,” repeated the claim that the showman P.T. Barnum actually coined the phrase and Abraham Lincoln merely quoted Barnum in Clinton. If the epigram is Lincolnian in sentiment, one could equally argue that it is Barnumian: the supporting evidence in both cases is equally tenuous.

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