



# The Cooper Union Address: The History of the Speech that Helped Abraham Lincoln Win the Presidency

*Charles River Editors*

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“It is surely safe to assume that the thirty-nine framers of the original Constitution, and the seventy-six members of the Congress which framed the amendments thereto, taken together, do certainly include those who may be fairly called "our fathers who framed the Government under which we live." And so assuming, I defy any man to show that any one of them ever, in his whole life, declared that, in his understanding, any proper division of local from federal authority, or any part of the Constitution, forbade the Federal Government to control as to slavery in the federal territories.” – Abraham Lincoln “[O]ne of the most happiest and most convincing political arguments ever made in this City ... No man ever made such an impression on his first appeal to a New-York audience.” – Horace Greeley

After the Lincoln-Douglas debates made Lincoln a nationally recognized politician, Illinois papers began to mention Lincoln as a Republican candidate for President throughout 1859. Lincoln was humbled, though a bit dumbfounded. He thought himself more suited for the Senate, where he could orate and discuss ideas, and moreover there were Republicans of much greater national prominence on the East coast, particularly William Seward. Lacking any administrative experience, he wasn't sure he would enjoy being President, but even being considered was a great honor, and he quietly thought the idea over. In fact, Lincoln was still not considered a real option for the nomination until he delivered a speech at New York City's Cooper Union in February 1860, just a few months before the Republicans' convention in May. Lincoln had gained a bit of a national profile by debating Stephen Douglas during an Illinois Senate Race in 1858, and though he lost that election, Lincoln continued discussing the same themes, most notably slavery and Dred Scott in his Cooper Union speech. In the hard-hitting speech, Lincoln both deflected Southern criticisms and attacked them, chiding would-be secessionists, “Your purpose, then, plainly stated, is that you will destroy the Government, unless you be allowed to construe and enforce the Constitution as you please, on all points in dispute between you and us. You will rule or ruin in all events.” Although just 7,000 words long, the Cooper Union Address was almost universally praised in the North, and biographer Harold Holzer credited it for leading Lincoln to the presidency: “Had Abraham Lincoln failed at his do-or-die debut in New York, he would never have won his party's presidential nomination three months later, not to mention election to the White House that November. Such was the impact of a triumph in the nation's media capital. Had he stumbled, none of the challenges that roiled his presidency would ever have tested his iron will... He had arrived at Cooper Union a politician with more defeats than victories, but he departed politically reborn.” This book chronicles the history of the speech from its origins to its legacy. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about the Cooper Union Address like never before.

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