

# Reading Karl Marx with Abraham Lincoln

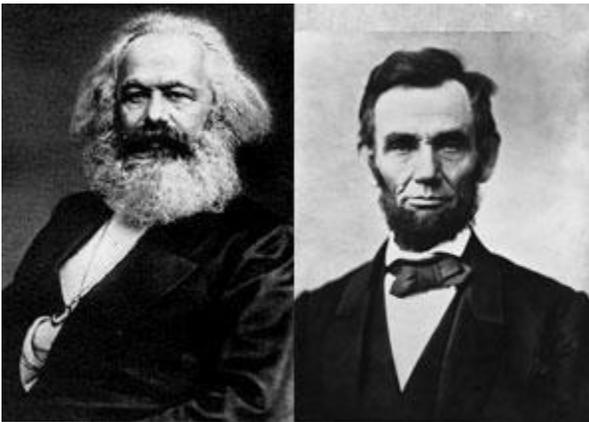
Utopian socialists, German communists, and other republicans

By [John Nichols](#)

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*These capitalists generally act harmoniously and in concert, to fleece the people.*

—Abraham Lincoln, from his first speech as an Illinois state legislator, 1837

*Everyone now is more or less a Socialist.*

—Charles Dana, managing editor of the *New York Tribune*, and Lincoln’s assistant secretary of war, 1848

*The workingmen of Europe feel sure that, as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American Antislavery War will do for the working classes. They consider it an earnest of the epoch to come that it fell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class, to lead his country through the matchless struggle for the rescue of an enchained race and the reconstruction of a social world.*

—Karl Marx and the First International Workingmen’s Association to Lincoln, 1864

ON DECEMBER 3, 1861, a former one-term congressman, who had spent most of the past dozen years studying dissident economic theories, mounting challenges to the existing political order and proposing ever more radical responses to the American crisis, delivered his first State of the Union address as the sixteenth president of the United States.

Since assuming office eight months earlier, this new president had struggled, without success, first to restore the severed bonds of the Union and then to avert a wrenching civil war. Now, eleven southern slave states were in open and violent rebellion against the government he led.

His inaugural address of the previous spring had closed with a poignant reflection on the prospect of eventual peace, imagining a day when the Union might again be touched “by the better angels of our nature.” But, now, in the last month of what Walt Whitman would recall as America’s “sad, distracted year”—“Year that suddenly sang by the mouths of the round-lipp’d cannons”—the better angels seemed to have deserted the continent. Every effort to restore the republic had been thwarted. There was no room for accommodation with the Confederate States of America. Fort Sumter had been fired upon and the flag of southern rebellion now flew above Charleston Harbor. Virginia, the cradle of presidents, the state of Washington, Jefferson and Madison, had joined the revolt and assembled a capital of the Confederacy less than 100 miles from Washington. Hundreds of Union and Confederate soldiers had died, with thousands more wounded at the First Battle of Bull Run. Armies had been reorganized and generals replaced with the recognition that this was no skirmish. This was a protracted war that would eventually force all Americans to “[throw] off the costumes of peace with [an] indifferent hand.”

In the presence of the remaining congressmen and senators who filled only a portion of the seats in the Capitol chamber on that December day, the new president knew that he needed to address the circumstance of a nation that was no longer in any sense united. He did so as an agitated, angered American who spoke no more of angels and instead bemoaned “the disloyal citizens of the United States who have offered the ruin of our country.” He warned, ominously, of how “A nation which endures factious domestic division is exposed to disrespect abroad, and...is sure sooner or later to invoke foreign intervention.” He fretted about a strained federal budget, expressing hope “that the expenditures made necessary by the rebellion are not beyond the resources of the loyal people.” He noted that three vacancies would need to be filled on a suddenly abandoned Supreme Court and observed that “one of the unavoidable consequences of the present insurrection is the entire suppression in many places of all the ordinary means of administering civil justice by the officers and in the forms of existing law.”

This was a wartime State of the Union address delivered not so much by a president as a commander in chief. Its purpose was to rally what remained of the House and Senate—after the exodus of the southern Solons who had joined a mutiny against the elected government—and to portray the struggle as not merely one for the preservation of a system of governance but for democracy itself. “It continues to develop that the insurrection is largely, if not exclusively, a war upon the first principle of popular government—the rights of the people,” declared the solemn speaker. “Conclusive evidence of this is found in the most grave and maturely considered public documents, as well as in the general tone of the insurgents. In those documents we find the abridgment of the existing right of suffrage and the denial to the people of all right to participate in the selection of public officers except the legislative boldly advocated, with labored arguments to prove that large control of the people in government is the source of all political evil. Monarchy itself is sometimes hinted at as a possible refuge from the power of the people.”

These were the words that might have ended the address, had the president not begged the pardon of his listeners to add: “In my present position, I could scarcely be justified were I to omit raising a warning voice against this approach of returning despotism.”

There was something more that Lincoln wanted to say to America. He needed to speak of another division, another struggle. The man who so carefully chose his words did not relinquish the podium before devoting “brief attention” to his fears regarding “the effort to place capital on an equal footing with, if not above, labor in the structure of government.”

Amid all the turbulence of a burgeoning Civil War, Abraham Lincoln wanted it to be known that he was unsettled by the rising assumption “that labor is available only in connection with capital; that nobody labors

unless somebody else, owning capital, somehow by the use of it induces him to labor. This assumed, it is next considered whether it is best that capital shall hire laborers, and thus induce them to work by their own consent, or buy them and drive them to it without their consent. Having proceeded so far, it is naturally concluded that all laborers are either hired laborers or what we call slaves. And further, it is assumed that whoever is once a hired laborer is fixed in that condition for life.”

That false construct could not be allowed to take hold in a free country, argued the president. It must be understood, he concluded: “Labor is prior to and independent of capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration.”

To be sure, Lincoln related this observation to the wrenching questions posed by the Civil War. “A few men own capital, and that few avoid labor themselves, and with their capital hire or buy another few to labor for them. A large majority belong to neither class—neither work for others nor have others working for them. In most of the Southern States a majority of the whole people of all colors are neither slaves nor masters, while in the Northern a large majority are neither hirers nor hired.”

But Lincoln was speaking now of a broader concern: his fear that the few who were possessed of capital might, in a time of turbulence, seek to bend the rule of law—diminishing the historic respect for the rights of man outlined by Lincoln’s hero Tom Paine in order to favor their interests above those of the great many Americans who toiled for wages, or the fees paid farmers. “No men living are more worthy to be trusted than those who toil up from poverty; none less inclined to take or touch aught which they have not honestly earned,” the president warned. “Let them beware of surrendering a political power which they already possess, and which if surrendered will surely be used to close the door of advancement against such as they, and to fix new disabilities and burdens upon them till all of liberty shall be lost.”

Lincoln’s insistence that labor guard against the surrender of political power to capital—a point he began to outline before his presidency and would repeat throughout his tenure—is rarely afforded the attention paid to his rhetoric regarding the state of “a house divided against itself,” “the proposition that all men are created equal” or the faint hope that: “Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the Earth.”

Yet, how can we neglect the words that this most instructive of presidents chose to insert in so critical a commentary as his first State of the Union address?

How can we fail to recognize the echoes of a language which scholars of economic, social and political rhetoric might associate less with the sixteenth president than with one of his contemporaries: a Prussian-born son of the Enlightenment, who was causing a stir on both sides of the Atlantic at precisely the moment when Lincoln was casting about for a language to describe the economic forces that were carrying America from its agrarian roots to its industrial future?

Didn’t Karl Marx take an interest in the relation of labor and capital? Was it not the coauthor of *Das Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* who observed that: “the essential condition of capital is wage-labor”? And that: “Capitalist production, therefore, develops technology, and the combining together of various processes into a social whole, only by sapping the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the laborer”?

Well, there can surely be no connection, no tangible link between Abraham Lincoln, the log cabin-born, rail-splitting, archetypal nineteenth-century American and founding Republican, and Karl Marx, the bearded, brooding, archetypal “European” and proud socialist plotter.

Unless, of course, we bother to examine the tattered copies of the American outlet for Marx’s revolutionary preachments during the period when Lincoln was preparing to leave the political wilderness and make his

march to the presidency. That journal, the *New York Tribune*, was the most consistently influential of nineteenth-century American newspapers. Indeed, this was the newspaper that engineered the unexpected and in many ways counterintuitive delivery of the Republican nomination for president, in that most critical year of 1860, to an Illinoisan who just two years earlier had lost the competition for a home-state U.S. Senate seat. The *Tribune* is remembered, correctly, as the great Republican paper of the day. It argued against slavery in the south. But it argued as well, with words parallel to Lincoln's in that first address to the Congress, that "our idea is that Labor needs not to combat but to command Capital."

Seven years before he and Lincoln served together in the Congress (during each man's sole term in the U.S. House) Horace Greeley—or "Friend Greeley," as Lincoln referred to the editor in their correspondence—began the *Tribune* with a stated purpose: "to serve the republic with an honest and fearless criticism." He succeeded, more wholly than any American editor before or after his transit of the mid-nineteenth century, in creating a newspaper that was not merely a newspaper. Greeley's nationally circulated *Tribune* was, as Clarence Darrow aptly remembered it, "the political and social Bible" of every reforming, radical and Republican household. The *Tribune* was surely that for Lincoln, whose engagement with the paper would last the better part of a quarter century and eventually extend to wrangling with Greeley about the proper moment at which to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln's involvement was not just with Greeley but with his sub-editors and writers, so much so that the first Republican president appointed one of Greeley's most radical lieutenants—the Fourier- and Proudhon-inspired socialist and longtime editor of Marx's European correspondence, Charles Dana—as his assistant secretary of war.

Greeley's newspaper was the tribune of the agitation that spawned the Republican Party and its successful presidential campaign of 1860. Lincoln would say of the editor: "every one of his words seems to weigh about a ton."

This was as Greeley, an epic figure of American journalism, a political and social reformer who reveled in his ability not merely to report upon but to bend the arc of history, intended it.

After learning the printer's trade at the *Northern Star* in tiny Poultney, Vermont, Greeley arrived in New York in 1831, during the period when Fanny Wright and her allies were forging explicitly socialist political parties and movements in the city. Greeley came both to make his fortune—and that he did—and to steer the political progress of a young nation. William Seward, the radical Republican whose presidential ambitions were thwarted when Greeley switched his allegiance to Lincoln, celebrated the young newspaper editor as a Whitmanesque figure: "rather unmindful of social usages, yet singularly clear, original, and decided, in his political views and theories."

Greeley was what the British refer to as a "campaigning editor." He started newspapers as platforms to promote ideas—for example, the *Jeffersonian* was established to advance Seward's successful Whig Party challenge to conservative Democratic governor William Marcy, a hack of the highest order who preached the patronage gospel of "to the victor belong the spoils." Two years later Greeley would edit a national newspaper, the *Log Cabin*, as the campaign journal of another Whig, William Henry Harrison, who would win and briefly hold the presidency.

With the *Tribune*, however, Greeley would no longer crusade for candidates—although he certainly had his favorites—but for a set of ideals that would come to define the Whig Party, to which he and Lincoln remained in many senses true loyalists. When the Whigs failed to effectively confront issues of slavery, urbanization and economic transition, however, the *Tribune* became the prime proponent of a new and more radical political constellation that took as its name the word used to describe proponents of the "constructive treason" that began with a rejection of "the divine right of kings" and with it of the favored position of the propertied classes: "Republican."

“It has been urged as an objection to the *Tribune* that it proposed to ‘give hospitality to every new thought.’ To that profession we shall be constant, at whatever sacrifice,” Greeley wrote when the paper’s radicalism began to shake some political foundations in the mid-1840s. “Full of error and suffering as the world yet is, we cannot afford to reject unexamined any idea which proposes to improve the moral, intellectual, or social condition of mankind.”

Greeley practiced an advocacy journalism that was not cautious about taking sides in the great debates of his day. His first editorial duty, he explained, was to keep “an ear open to the complaints of the wronged and suffering, though they can never repay advocacy, and those who mainly support newspapers will be annoyed and often exposed by it; a heart as sensitive to oppression and degradation in the next street as if they were practiced in Brazil or Japan; a pen as ready to expose and reprove the crimes whereby wealth is amassed and luxury enjoyed in our own country as if they had only been committed by Turks or Pagans in Asia some centuries ago.”

That final reference to reproofing “the crimes whereby wealth is amassed and luxury enjoyed” might not meet with the applause of the trickle-down economists and laissez-faire fabulists who today guide the policies of what has become of Greeley’s Republican Party. But Greeley would never have recognized today’s so-called Republicans as heirs to the party he and his comrades forged.

Greeley welcomed the disapproval of those who championed free markets over the interests of the working class, a class he recognized as including both the oppressed slaves of the south and the degraded industrial laborers of the north. In a memorial column that the *Tribune* published after his death in 1872—at the close of the editor’s quixotic “Liberal Republican” presidential campaign—it was recalled of Greeley:

If there was any special class of whom this plain man was the champion, for whom he used all his skill, and his zeal, and influence, it was the class of the poor and the oppressed and the forsaken, of those who were abused and outraged by their fellow men.... [The] sober verdict of history will be that no single man did so much for the overthrow of human bondage in this land as the editor of the *New York Tribune*. If he did not lay his ax so unsparingly to the root of the tree as some other of the reformers, he destroyed it quite as effectually by steadily hacking away its limbs and tendrils, and ruining so its inner life. That he wished and longed for its destruction, who ever dared to doubt? That he was the enemy of every form of social wrong and iniquity, who ever doubted?

You cannot imagine this man palliating or tolerating any custom or traffic which degrades or imbrutes or depraves men. Not to one, but to many, moral reforms his time and heart were given. To education, thorough and universal; to sobriety, in eating not less than in drinking; to cleanliness, with him very near to godliness; to humanity, for beasts not less than for men; to free homes for emigrants; to cordial welcome of exiles from other lands, seeking refuge on these shores; to the liberation of all oppressed and struggling peoples. When was his word of cheer and sympathy wanting? With the weak against the strong, with the abandoned ones, his heart went, and he would give to these more than justice. This made him the friend of Hungarians and Poles and Irishmen, and the defender even of the Pagans against Christians. When the weak and the needy called, he did not stop to ask whether these shared his political or his religious creed, or what his race or his party would gain in befriending them. He obeyed the Divine call, and not seldom was made half a martyr in obedience to his instinct of compassion. His fame for wisdom suffered in the promptness of his sympathetic zeal.

Greeley’s sympathetic zeal was that of a distinct breed of nineteenth-century social reformer, who was not satisfied merely with the repair of the breach created when the founders of the American experiment failed to keep faith with their initial recognition of the self-evident truth “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” He was profoundly concerned, as was Lincoln, with the question of how to maintain a measure of economic equality in a time of unprecedented and overwhelming accumulation of wealth—not merely by southern planters but by northern bankers and businessmen. These concerns led him to embrace the teachings of Charles Fourier, the French utopian socialist who complained: “Once upon a time people talked about the

infallibility of the pope; today it is that of the merchant which they wish to establish.” In Fourier’s view, the promise of equality was an idle one unless it was coupled with economic protections for the great mass of working men and women. The French socialist held:

Equality of rights is another chimera, praiseworthy when considered in the abstract and ridiculous from the standpoint of the means employed to introduce it in civilization. The first right of men is the right to work and the right to a minimum [income]. This is precisely what has gone unrecognized in all the constitutions. Their primary concern is with favored individuals who are not in need of work.

Fourier’s writing was popularized in the United States by Albert Brisbane, an American who traveled to France in the 1820s, studied with the philosopher and then returned to the United States to spread the socialist gospel. He found a comrade in Greeley, who referred to Fourier’s views in the *Log Cabin* and championed them in the *Tribune*. Greeley made Brisbane a columnist for the paper and, when the new journal was attacked for spreading such radical views, the editor wrote: “Do not stand there quarreling with those who have devised or adopted a scheme which you consider absurd or impracticable, but take hold and devise something better. For, be assured, friend! that this generation will not, must not pass without the discovery and adoption of some method whereby the Right to Labor and to receive and enjoy the honest reward of such labor, shall be secured to the poorest and least fortunate of our people.”

In the mid-1840s, explains historian Roy Marvin Robbins, “Greeley preached a new order of society with Brisbane’s socialistic ideas as its basis.” Even as the utopian ideals of Fourierism proved difficult to realize in practical form—despite the best efforts of social reformers such as Brisbane and his compatriot Bronson Alcott—Greeley evolved his own advocacy and that of the *Tribune* to champion land reforms that combined elements of Fourier’s socialism and the pioneering ideal. Greeley’s famous line “Go west, young man” was the practical expression of a broader vision of distributing open and unsettled land to the poor—even if, at the same time, it shamefully disregarded the Native Americans of the western lands, who both the editor and Lincoln failed to ever fully or even adequately respect or protect.

Attacked by a rival newspaperman in James Watson Webb’s *Courier and Express*—which journalist and historian Francis Brown describes as “a Wall Street paper” that “catered to mercantile interests, to finance, and to shipping, and editorially...voiced the conservative views of the merchant class”—on grounds that he was a “Fourierist, an Agrarian, and an Infidel,” Greeley replied:

We admit and insist on the legal right of the owner of wild lands to keep them uninhabited forever, but we do not consider it morally right that he should do so when land becomes scarce and subsistence for the landless scanty and precarious...yes...something will be done, in spite of any stupid clamor that can be raised about “Infidelity” and “Agrarianism,” to secure future generations against the faithful evils of Monopoly of Land by the few.

The boldness of Greeley’s stances won him a good deal of personal popularity among the radical Whigs of New York and the champions of the nascent “Free Soil” movement, which Greeley urged to “secure to each and all...a really Free Soil!—especially free from the hated speculators.” In an 1848 special election, he was sent to Congress as a representative from New York. Greeley served for only a few months, but he used his time in the House to propose and promote an early version of the Homestead Act. Challenged by a western conservative to explain why an urban member was so interested in freeing up rural land for settlement, Greeley countered that he “represented more landless men than any other member” of the Congress. A good line, but unlikely to please a chamber that did not share the editor’s radicalism. One of his few allies was the young first-term Whig congressman from Illinois, who Greeley recalled as a comrade with whom he “agreed on the slavery issue as one which must be answered permanently in the course of a few years.” The two men spoke on a daily basis during their joint tenure in the nation’s capital and formed a bond that would last until Lincoln’s assassination seventeen years later.

It was not mere personal acquaintance that linked Greeley and Lincoln, however. By 1848, Greeley's *Tribune* was already a journalistic and political phenomenon. "Acknowledged the most influential Whig editor in 1844, [Greeley] had by 1850 become the most influential anti-slavery editor—the spokesman not of Whigs merely but of a great class of Northerners who were thoroughly antagonistic to slavery," recalls Frank W. Scott in his study of nineteenth-century American newspapers. As the slavery issue came to a head, the *Tribune*'s influence grew so that it became not just a popular newspaper in New York City but a widely circulated national journal of opinion, distinguished by what Scott characterizes as "some of the most vigorous and trenchant editorial writing America has ever known." In the early 1850s, the circulation of the *Tribune*'s weekly national edition nearly tripled to more than 110,000 copies as it became what another historian, James Ford Rhodes, described as "pre-eminently the journal of the rural districts, [where] one copy did service for many readers. To the people in the Adirondack wilderness it was a political bible, and the well-known scarcity of Democrats there was attributed to it. Yet it was as freely read by the intelligent people living on the Western Reserve of Ohio"—not to mention in Abraham Lincoln's Illinois.

By the late 1850s, the weekly *Tribune*'s Illinois circulation was close to 20,000, making the New York-based journal one of the midwestern state's most widely circulated newspapers. There is no debate that Lincoln was among the most avid of the *Tribune*'s Illinois readers. His correspondence with Greeley confirms this passionate relationship with the paper, as does his more extensive correspondence with his third and last law partner, William Herndon, in which Lincoln would sometimes complain that Greeley's newspaper was not being supportive enough of his political ambitions. It was in one of these fretful notes that Lincoln first expressed the view that "every one of [Greeley's] words seems to weigh about a ton."

Lincoln did not merely consume Greeley's words, however. He devoured the whole of his weekly *Tribune*, as he did every other newspaper he could get his hands on. "What Lincoln really liked to read were newspapers, reading them, a friend said, 'more than books,'" writes Lincoln biographer John C. Waugh. "Another friend said he 'never saw a man better pleased' than when Lincoln was appointed postmaster, because he could read [newspapers from around the country] before delivering them to their subscribers."

In his period of deepest inquiry, the five years after his 1848 departure from Congress as a disappointed Whig and before his return to the political hustings as a champion of what would become the Republican Party, Lincoln devoted himself to examining, debating and ruminating on the reports in the national newspapers that were delivered to his Springfield law office—especially Greeley's *Tribune*. Keenly aware of the rising tide of liberal, radical and socialist reform movements in Europe, a tide that would peak—at least for a time—in the "revolutionary wave" of 1848 and its aftermath, the young congressman joined other American Whigs in following the development of that year's "Springtime of the Peoples," which saw uprisings against monarchy and entrenched economic, social and political power in Germany, France, Hungary, Denmark and other European nations. For Lincoln, however, this was not a new interest.

Long before 1848, German radicals had begun to arrive in Illinois, where they quickly entered into the legal and political circles in which Lincoln traveled. One of them, Gustav Korner, was a student revolutionary at the University of Munich who had been imprisoned by German authorities in the early 1830s for organizing illegal demonstrations. After his release, Korner returned to his hometown of Frankfurt am Main where, according to historian Raymond Lohne, "he was one of about fifty conspirators involved in an attack upon the two main city guardhouses and the arsenal at the police facility and jail. This admixture of students and soldiers had planned to seize cannon, muskets, and ammunition; free political prisoners accused of breaking press-censorship laws, and begin ringing the great *Sturmglöcke* (storm bell) of the Dom, the signal for the people to come in from the countryside. At that point, the democratic revolution would be announced.... Unfortunately, they were walking into a trap.... Betrayed by both a spy in their midst, and the reluctance of the common people to rise, nine students were killed, twenty-four were seriously wounded, and by August 3, 1833, Gustav Körner found himself riding into downtown Belleville, Illinois."

Within a decade, Korner would pass the Illinois bar, win election to the legislature and be appointed to the state Supreme Court. Korner and Lincoln formed an alliance that would become so close that the student revolutionary from Frankfurt would eventually be one of seven personal delegates-at-large named by Lincoln to serve at the critical Republican State Convention in May 1860, which propelled the Springfield lawyer into that year's presidential race. Through Korner, Lincoln met and befriended many of the German radicals who, after the failure of the 1848 revolution, fled to Illinois and neighboring Wisconsin. Along with Korner on Lincoln's list of personal delegates-at-large to the 1860 convention was Friedrich Karl Franz Hecker, a lawyer from Mannheim who had served as a liberal legislator in the lower chamber of the Baden State Assembly before leading an April 1848 uprising in the region—an uprising cheered on by the newspaper Marx briefly edited during that turbulent period, *Neue Rheinische Zeitung—Organ der Demokratie*.

Thwarted by military forces loyal to the old order, Hecker fled first to Switzerland and then to Illinois, where he would join Lincoln in forging the new Republican Party and become a key speaker on his American ally's behalf in the 1858 Senate race that is remembered for the Lincoln-Douglas debates. With a commission from Lincoln, Hecker served as a brigade commander in the Union Army during the Civil War, as did a number of other '48ers.

The failure of the 1848 revolts, and the brutal crackdowns that followed, led many leading European radicals to take refuge in the United States, and Lincoln's circle of supporters would eventually include some of Karl Marx's closest associates and intellectual sparring partners, including Joseph Weydemeyer and August Willich. Weydemeyer, who maintained a regular correspondence with Marx and Engels, soon formed a national network of *Kommunisten Klubs* to promote what the *New York Times* decried as "Red Republicanism." Weydemeyer then allied with the new Republican Party and the presidential campaign of Abraham Lincoln, who would at the start of the Civil War appoint the former Prussian military officer as a technical aide on the staff of General John C. Fremont—the 1856 Republican presidential nominee who became the commander of the army's Department of the West. Later, Lincoln issued Weydemeyer a commission as a colonel of the Forty-First Infantry Missouri Volunteers, charging the German Marxist with the defense of St. Louis. Willich, known as "the Reddest of the Reds," was a leader of the left faction of the German Communist League, which decried Marx's relative caution when it came to revolutionary agitation. As a key commander of the radical Free Corps in the Baden-Palatinate uprising of 1849, Willich chose as his aide-de-camp a young Friedrich Engels. Forced to flee to the United States after the defeat of the uprising, Willich decamped to Cincinnati, where he became editor of the socialist *Republikaner* newspaper and backed the candidacies of Fremont in 1856 and Lincoln in 1860. At the outset of the Civil War, Willich recruited a regiment of German immigrants and became its first lieutenant, quickly rising to the rank of brigadier general and making a name for himself by having military bands play revolutionary songs such as the "Arbiter [Workers'] Marseillaise"—"A reveille for the new revolution! The new revolution!"

Lincoln did not merely invite the '48ers to join his campaigns, he became highly engaged with their causes. As Lohne notes, "Lincoln was paying attention to these revolutionaries." In his hometown of Springfield, the former congressman rallied support for revolutionary movements in Europe, particularly the Hungarian revolt of Lajos Kossuth. Lincoln's name led the list of signatories on calls for public meetings to discuss the Hungarian revolt that appeared in the *Illinois State Register* and the *Illinois Journal* in January 1852. A week later, Lincoln helped to pen a resolution declaring that "we, the American people, cannot remain silent" about "the right of any people, sufficiently numerous for national independence, to throw off, to revolutionize, their existing form of government, and to establish such other in its stead as they may choose."

Lincoln's resolution argued:

That the sympathies of this country, and the benefits of its position, should be exerted in favor of the people of every nation struggling to be free; and whilst we meet to do honor to Kossuth and Hungary, we should not fail to pour out the tribute of our praise and approbation to the patriotic efforts of the Irish, the Germans and the French, who have unsuccessfully fought to establish in their several governments the supremacy of the people.

The proclamation even took a shot at the British Empire, resolving:

That there is nothing in the past history of the British government, or in its present expressed policy, to encourage the belief that she will aid, in any manner, in the delivery of continental Europe from the yoke of despotism; and that her treatment of Ireland, of O'Brien, Mitchell, and other worthy patriots, forces the conclusion that she will join her efforts to the despots of Europe in suppressing every effort of the people to establish free governments, based upon the principles of true religious and civil liberty.

What set Lincoln and his compatriots off? There's no mystery. The Illinois agitators had merely to open their weekly editions of Greeley's *Tribune*, which was declaring at the time that "of the many popular leaders who were upheaved by the great convulsions of 1848...the world has already definitely assigned the first rank to Louis Kossuth, advocate, deputy, finance minister, and finally governor of Hungary." The great historian of the *Tribune*'s ideological and political battles, Adam Tuchinsky, notes: "Louis Kossuth and the Central European national liberation movements remained familiar subjects in the pages of the paper"—so much so that conservative critics of the gazette objected to its "Kossuthism, Socialism, Abolitionism and forty other isms."

Greeley believed that 1848's European revolts and their aftermath revealed "boundless vistas" along with the outlines of the "uprising which must come." Predictably, his paper covered the revolutionary ferment of Europe with an intensity that made it virtually a local story for radicals in places like Springfield, Illinois. They pored over their copies of the *Tribune* for the latest from the front in what the paper's editor portrayed as a global struggle for "the larger liberty" of "the Rights and Interests of Labor, the Reorganization of Industry, the Elevation of the Working-Men, the Reconstruction of the Social Fabric."

The *Tribune* did not urge a "to-the-barricades" moment for the United States. Greeley and most of his editors still believed in the prospect of reform, although their frustration with the spread of the evil they referred to as "the slave power" would at times cause the paper's proprietor to ponder whether "revolution is the only resource left." Ultimately, however, what most excited Greeley and his readers about the stirrings of 1848 were the new and radical ideas that had emerged, and the mingling of those ideas with action that might lead to their implementation.

The *Tribune*'s European correspondent in the early stages of the period of uprisings, Henry Bornstein, admitted in his columns that he was "giddy" at the developments in France, Germany and other countries. "Every day comes fresh news, each thing more astonishing than the next," wrote Bornstein, who spiced his correspondence with exclamations such as: "Hurrah! How gaily it burns!" The *Tribune* was not just publishing news, Greeley announced, it wanted analysis, "to increase the aggregate of information afforded by our columns." Bornstein agreed, arguing: "Correspondents now have to talk about other topics besides political events because these topics are outdated. Now they have to provide the 'big picture' about what is going on in Europe. Explain the reason for events to supplement the dry telegraph reports."

Correspondent Bornstein, notes Tuchinsky, was "the paper's link to Karl Marx and a more class-conscious radicalism" that would emerge in Europe during the 1848 revolutions and in their aftermath."

But Bornstein's "big picture" reporting style—which he would eventually bring to the United States as an astute observer of the Civil War—was only the start of the *Tribune*'s emergence as the primary source of detailed reporting on international events and ideas that would reshape the way American radicals and reformers thought about their own struggles, against slavery in particular and economic and social injustice in general. No longer satisfied with the pastoral reforms of Fourier and the romantic French communalists, the *Tribune* now considered more radical responses.

"Ultimately, 1848 would unearth an immense variety of French and European radical discourse; as a result, the *Tribune* diversified its coverage of socialist ideas," explains Tuchinsky. "But more than that, socialism itself became not simply a mode of reform but also, significantly, of explanation, a way to interpret events.

Fourierism was a sectarian movement, and it failed, but along with the revolution it cleared the way for a new language and a new political mentality through which **American progressive intellectuals perceived and critiqued their social and political world.**"

To understand and interpret that new language, Greeley dispatched a recent hire, Charles Dana, to Paris. An idealistic polymath, Dana had for several years in the mid-1840s been a central player in the Brook Farm Association for Industry and Education in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. **A utopian experiment in communal living that sought to implement Fourier's ideals**, Brook Farm counted among its residents, investors, supporters and allies Greeley, Nathaniel Hawthorne, the Alcotts and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote of the prospect that residents might be "Fourierized or Christianized or humanized," with the observation that "in a day of small, sour, and fierce schemes, one is admonished and cheered by a project of such friendly aims, and of such bold and generous proportion; there is an intellectual courage and strength in it, which is superior and commanding: it certifies the presence of so much truth in the theory, and in so far is destined to be fact."

Dana sought to spread the "build-heaven-on-earth" gospel in the *Harbinger*, a journal edited by Brook Farm founder (and future *Tribune* literary editor) George Ripley, where the younger man's writing skills came to Greeley's attention. Impressed with the twenty-nine-year-old wordsmith's intellect and style—and also, perhaps, by the fact that the *Harbinger* hailed the "indomitable *Tribune*" as the nation's great newspaper—Greeley began grooming Dana to be the *Tribune*'s managing editor. **But the protégé had grander goals.** "Dana longed to travel to Europe. More than that, like most members of the *Tribune*'s socialist circle, Dana viewed the European revolutions as a historical turning point and he was anxious to witness them firsthand," observes Tuchinsky. In particular, he was looking for new notions that might propel the socialist discourse beyond the romantic "associationist" thinking of Fourier's followers. Along with Greeley, Dana had just a few years earlier hailed Fourier's ideas as the "last hope of Divine Providence" on earth; now, however, he was anticipating the moment when reformers and radicals would "yield to necessity" and recognize that the "harmonious" agrarian ideal must give way to the barn-burner battle cry of "Free soil, free labor, free speech, free men."

Leaving New York in June 1848, Dana arrived in France just in time to race into the thick of the Parisian turmoil. He penned an immediate report that declared he was witnessing "a glorious chance to do something immortal." While the calculus of how the immortal leap might be made remained indefinite, the ideological impulse was, to Dana's view, certain. "Socialism is thus not conquered nor obscured in France by [the turmoil] but strengthened. It is no longer Fourierism, nor Communism, nor this nor that particular system which occupies the public mind of France, but it is the general idea of Social Rights and Social Reorganization. **Everyone now is more or less a Socialist.**"

Dana's small-"c" catholic approach to the ideological divisions on the ground in Europe allowed him to sample freely from the different streams, to consult broadly and to keep American readers abreast of what seemed to the young writer to be a continent-wide struggle to throw off "the royalty of money...the aristocracy of capital." Still clinging to at least some of his Fourierist ideals, Dana inclined toward the **libertarian socialist preachments of the French philosopher and parliamentarian Pierre-Joseph Proudhon**, who argued for **the establishment of workingmen's associations around a "revolutionary program" of "No more governments, no more conquests, no more international police, no more commercial privileges, no more colonial exclusions, no more control of one people by another, one State by another, no more strategic lines, no more fortresses...."** In particular, Dana was inspired to turn the *Tribune*, which had traditionally been **friendly toward trade unionism**, into an even more explicit advocate for organized labor, arguing editorially that: "we see no other mode in which Labor can protect itself against the overwhelming power of Capital than by this very method of Combination." **Lincoln, the voracious *Tribune* reader, would frequently express such sympathies, not merely in debates and State of the Union addresses but in direct communications to labor groups.** To the New York Workingmen's Association, the sitting president would in 1864 observe: "The strongest bond of human sympathy, outside of the family relation, should be one uniting all working people, of all nations, and tongues, and kindreds."

But even as he was busy popularizing Proudhonist cures for the ailments of capital—especially the project of creating a popular bank (“*banque du peuple*”) with the purpose of freeing up credit for workers and farmers—Dana was searching for new correspondents for Greeley’s paper. In particular, he wanted to identify radical thinkers who could interpret for American readers not just the transitory developments in Germany, France, Holland or Hungary but also the social, economic and political currents that might resolve the great challenge that the *Tribune* outlined in an editorial of the era: “[While] no theorist has yet truly solved the great problem of the harmonious and beneficent combination of Labor, Skill and Capital, it is none the less palpable that the problem must be solved, and that Society fearfully suffers while awaiting the solution.”

In this search for “alternative strains of socialist thought,” Dana made his way to the city of Cologne, where a friend of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the poet Ferdinand Freiligrath, was working with a radical paper that intrigued the American visitor. The editor of the paper had recently coauthored a much-circulated German-language pamphlet, *Das Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, which argued: “The essential condition for the existence and rule of the bourgeois class is the accumulation of wealth in private hands, the formation and increase of capital; the essential condition of capital is wage-labor. Wage-labor rests entirely on the competition among the workers.” To upset that condition, the writers had declared in February of 1848 for a “Communitic revolution” with the words: “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Workers of the world, unite!”

The pamphlet would be translated two years later into English as *The Communist Manifesto*. The editor in question was, of course, Karl Marx, with whom Dana spent a midsummer day in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung—Organ der Demokratie* office. Neither Dana nor Marx recorded the details of the meeting, although we are afforded a sense of the man the American writer encountered from a mutual acquaintance, Carl Schurz, the German editor and revolutionary who would flee to Wisconsin, help to form the Republican Party and return to Europe in 1861 as Abraham Lincoln’s ambassador to Spain. Visiting Marx during the same long, hot summer of 1848, Schurz observed “the recognized head of the advanced socialistic school. The somewhat thickset man, with his broad forehead, his very black hair and beard and his dark sparkling eyes. I have never seen a man whose bearing was so provoking and intolerable. To no opinion which differed from his, he accorded the honor of even a condescending consideration. Everyone who contradicted him he treated with abject contempt; every argument that he did not like he answered either with biting scorn at the unfathomable ignorance that had prompted it, or with opprobrious aspersions upon the motives of him who had advanced it. I remember most distinctly the cutting disdain with which he pronounced the word ‘bourgeois.’” Somehow, Dana and Marx connected. Indeed, they hit it off so famously that Dana would, according to Marx’s biographer Francis Wheen, provide the philosopher with “the closest thing he ever had to a steady job.”

That job was as one of the most frequently published correspondents for the *New York Tribune*, with which Dana served a dozen years as managing editor. After Dana returned to New York to take up his new duties, he contacted Marx in London, where he had been forced to flee after German authorities shuttered the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, with an invitation to begin writing for the *Tribune*. And write Marx did. As Wheen notes, “The *Tribune* was by far the largest publisher of Marx’s (and to a lesser extent, Engels’s) work...

The *Tribune* articles take up nearly seven volumes of the fifty-volume collected works of Marx and Engels—more than *Capital*, more than any work published by Marx, alive or posthumously, in book form.” The “singular collaboration” between Greeley’s paper and Marx continued from the early 1850s until the time of Dana’s departure to join Lincoln’s White House staff. “During this period,” according to historian William Harlan Hale’s masterly examination of the relationship, “Europe’s extremest radical, proscribed by the Prussian police and watched over by its agents abroad as a potential assassin of kings, sent in well over 500 separate contributions to the great New York family newspaper dedicated to the support of Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, temperance, dietary reform, Going West, and, ultimately, Abraham Lincoln.” The official count of articles published by the *Tribune* under Marx’s byline was 350, while Engels wrote 125 and the duo produced 12 together. But, as the philosopher himself noted, many more articles ended up running as the official line of the *Tribune*. “Of late, the *Tribune* has again been appropriating all my articles as leaders [unsigned editorials],” Marx complained in 1854.

Even if Marx did not always get the credit he thought he deserved (and what ink-stained wretch does?), Dana was unstinting in his praise. “It may perhaps give you pleasure to know that [the articles] are read with satisfaction by a considerable number of persons and are widely reproduced,” the editor wrote Marx, describing the correspondent as “not only one of the most highly valued, but one of the best-paid contributors attached to the newspaper.”

Greeley and Dana were so excited about Marx’s contributions, in fact, that they showcased the German’s first article in the paper’s newly expanded Saturday edition on October 25, 1851. An editorial announced that among the “articles from...foreign contributors that are especially worthy of attention [was a rumination] upon Germany by one of the clearest and most vigorous writers that country has produced—no matter what may be the judgment of the critical upon his public opinions in the sphere of political and social philosophy.”

The “worthy” article, “Revolution and Counter-Revolution,” appeared over the byline “Karl Marx” (even though it was actually a collaboration written largely by Engels). The language was, well, Marxist:

The first act of the revolutionary drama on the continent of Europe has closed. The “powers that were” before the hurricane of 1848 are again the “powers that be,” and the more or less popular rulers of a day, provisional governors, triumvirs, dictators with their tail of representatives, civil commissioners, military commissioners, prefects, judges, generals, officers, and soldiers, are thrown upon foreign shores, and “transported beyond the seas” to England or America, there to form new governments *in partibus infidelium*, European committees, central committees, national committees, and to announce their advent with proclamations quite as solemn as those of any less imaginary potentates.

A more signal defeat than that undergone by the continental revolutionary party—or rather parties—upon all points of the line of battle, cannot be imagined. But what of that? Has not the struggle of the British middle classes for their social and political supremacy embraced forty-eight, that of the French middle classes forty years of unexampled struggles? And was their triumph ever nearer than at the very moment when restored monarchy thought itself more firmly settled than ever? The times of that superstition which attributed revolutions to the ill-will of a few agitators have long passed away. **Everyone knows nowadays that wherever there is a revolutionary convulsion, there must be some social want in the background, which is prevented, by outworn institutions, from satisfying itself.** The want may not yet be felt as strongly, as generally, as might ensure immediate success; but every attempt at forcible repression will only bring it forth stronger and stronger, until it bursts its fetters. If, then, we have been beaten, we have nothing else to do but to begin again from the beginning. And, fortunately, the probably very short interval of rest which is allowed us between the close of the first and the beginning of the second act of the movement, gives us time for a very necessary piece of work: the study of the causes that necessitated both the late outbreak and its defeat; causes that are not to be sought for in the accidental efforts, talents, faults, errors, or treacheries of some of the leaders, but in the general social state and conditions of existence of each of the convulsed nations.

It happened that Marx’s article appeared at a time of “beginning again from the beginning” for a great many American radicals. **The Whig Party, with which Greeley, Lincoln and compatriots of like mind had aligned themselves, was collapsing under the weight of its internal divisions between those who believed in aggressively confronting the spread of the “slave power” and more cautious reformers.** Lincoln, who with Greeley had left the Congress in 1849, was practicing law in Springfield and on “the circuit” of county courthouses in Illinois. But he had not left politics behind. William Herndon observed years later that his law partner was in the early years of the 1850s “like a sleeping lion...waiting for the people to call.” Biographer John Waugh writes of **a future president** who “with this tightly disciplined, deeply honed mind he **read what he really considered important—newspapers.** Now, on the circuit, out of politics, he was reading newspapers more than anything else, reading them aloud, carefully following the rise and **drift of political sentiment over the divisive issue of slavery**—reading them more closely, [fellow lawyer] Henry Whitney thought, than anybody he knew.”

Slavery was an omnipresent issue, but surely not the only issue for Lincoln, whose circle of close compatriots now included a number of the radical '48ers who had turned Wisconsin, Illinois and Missouri into new hubs of agitation. Lincoln watched international developments with frustration following the setbacks of the late 1840s and early 1850s, bemoaning in a letter to Herndon his sense that “the world is dead to hope, deaf to its own death struggle made known by a universal cry. What is to be done? Is anything to be done? Who can do anything and how can it be done? Did you ever think on these things?”

While studies of Lincoln place appropriate focus on his domestic engagements, there has been far too little attention paid to his global interests, especially during the period “in the wilderness” between the end of his congressional term and his return to the political stage. Yet, there can be no doubt that the future president was conscious of and highly engaged with developments in foreign lands—thanks no doubt to his close reading of the *Tribune* and its most prominent European correspondent—or that the future president made connections between what he read of distant divisions and what he thought about developments at home. Eulogizing his political hero Henry Clay in 1852, Lincoln would make frequent reference to Clay’s international interests and involvements, declaring: “Mr. Clay’s efforts in behalf of the South Americans, and afterwards, in behalf of the Greeks, in the times of their respective struggles for civil liberty are among the finest on record, upon the noblest of all themes; and bear ample corroboration of what I have said was his ruling passion—a love of liberty and right, unselfishly, and for their own sakes.” Lincoln invoked the struggles of the European revolutionaries and denounced “oppression of any of its forms...crowned-kings, money-kings, and land-kings.” He dismissed the rhetoric of his arch-rival, Illinois senator Stephen Douglas, finding it “as bombastic and hollow as Napoleon’s bulletins sent back from his campaign in Russia.” And when Douglas compromised on the issue of allowing the spread of slavery to new territories, he declared: “Equality in society alike beats inequality, whether the latter be of the British aristocratic sort or of the domestic slavery sort.”

Lincoln was arguably at his most radical when he penned those words in 1854. The man whose law partner described him as “always calculating, and always planning” would grow more circumspect as he proceeded from the political backwater of Springfield to the podium at New York’s Cooper Union and the prospect of the presidency. In the immediate aftermath of Douglas’s betrayal, however, Lincoln’s language bore the distinct accent of Greeley’s *Tribune* and its most radical writers.

When Lincoln emerged in 1854 from his self-imposed political exile, it was with the intention of doing electoral battle not just with slavery but with those who stood in the way of the free soil and free labor movements the *Tribune* had popularized. “Free labor has the inspiration of hope; pure slavery has no hope,” declared the future president in one of his frequent linkages of ideological mantras. As he returned to politics, initially as a campaigner for old Whigs and new Republicans, and then as a contender in his own right for the Senate, Lincoln echoed the ideals and language of the era’s fresh and determined radicalism. This is not to say that he embraced all the views of the *Tribune*’s European correspondent; he was never so bold as to argue, in the way that Marx would in *Capital*—a book that borrowed liberally from his writings for the *Tribune*—that “in the United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded.”

But, now “primed” by what his biographer Waugh describes as “all of his newspaper reading...all of his study and thinking and analyzing for all those five cheerless politically deprived years,” Lincoln recognized that the most radical promise of America’s founding—that “all men are created equal”—was being destroyed in a manner that would thwart progress not merely for Black slaves, but for white workers and farmers who sought their own freedoms. In his remarkable letter of August 15, 1855, to former Kentucky congressman George Robertson, a compatriot of Henry Clay and champion of the old-school Whig hope that slavery would gradually be abandoned, the forty-six-year-old Illinoisan would bemoan the dying of the Founders’ faith. Recalling an address delivered decades earlier by Robertson, Lincoln wrote:

You are not a friend of slavery in the abstract. In that speech you spoke of “the peaceful extinction of slavery” and used other expressions indicating your belief that the thing was, at some time, to have an end[.] Since then we have had thirty-six years of experience; and this experience has demonstrated, I think, that there is no peaceful extinction of slavery in prospect for us. The signal failure of Henry Clay, and other good and great men, in 1849, to effect any thing in favor of gradual emancipation in Kentucky, together with a thousand other signs, extinguishes that hope utterly. On the question of liberty, as a principle, we are not what we have been. When we were the political slaves of King George, and wanted to be free, we called the maxim that “all men are created equal” a self-evident truth; but now when we have grown fat, and have lost all dread of being slaves ourselves, we have become so greedy to be masters that we call the same maxim “a self-evident lie.” The fourth of July has not quite dwindled away; it is still a great day—for burning fire-crackers!!!

That spirit which desired the peaceful extinction of slavery, has itself become extinct, with the occasion, and the men of the Revolution. Under the impulse of that occasion, nearly half the states adopted systems of emancipation at once; and it is a significant fact, that not a single state has done the like since. So far as peaceful, voluntary emancipation is concerned, the condition of the negro slave in America, scarcely less terrible to the contemplation of a free mind, is now as fixed, and hopeless of change for the better, as that of the lost souls of the finally impenitent. The Autocrat of all the Russias will resign his crown, and proclaim his subjects free republicans sooner than will our American masters voluntarily give up their slaves.

The letter to Robertson was composed during a period in which Lincoln was arguing to his law partner, William Herndon, that “the day of compromise has passed. These two great ideas (slavery and freedom) have been kept apart only by artful means. They are like two wild beasts in sight of each other, but chained and apart. Some day these deadly antagonists will one of the other break their bonds, and then the question will be settled.” What did Lincoln mean when he spoke of freedom as a great idea that stood in conflict with slavery? Was he merely addressing the condition of those physically enslaved by the southern plantation owners—and the political and legal structures that supported them? Or was he speaking of a broader freedom? The answer is found in the records of Lincoln’s public addresses from the time.

While much is made of the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas first contended in a series of dialogues prior to the election of 1854, which saw Lincoln return to the campaign trail with an energy and earnestness not seen since he made his House race eight years earlier. In the months after Douglas reopened the slavery question with his advocacy of the hated Kansas-Nebraska Act, the sitting senator and Lincoln, the former congressman who suddenly wanted very much to be a senator, clashed rhetorically in cities up and down Illinois. The speeches that Lincoln delivered that fall—several lasting more than three hours—wrestled mightily with the meaning of words such as “equality,” “liberty” and “freedom.” At Peoria, he tossed his jacket aside on an uncommonly hot October day and delivered an address that Lincoln historian Lewis Lehrman would describe as “a rhetorical and literary masterpiece” that “dramatically altered the political career of the speaker and, as a result, the history of America.”

A young journalist who covered the session in Peoria recalled both the words and the remarkable passion with which they were uttered. “Progressing with his theme, his words began to come faster and his face to light up with the rays of genius and his body to move in unison with his thoughts,” wrote Horace White, the city editor of the *Chicago Daily Journal*. “His gestures were made with his body and head rather than with his arms. His speaking went to the heart because it came from the heart. I have heard celebrated orators who could start thunders of applause without changing any man’s opinion. Mr. Lincoln’s eloquence was of the higher type, which produced conviction in others because of the conviction of the speaker himself. His listeners felt that he believed every word he said, and that, like Martin Luther, he would go to the stake rather than abate one jot or tittle of it. In such transfigured moments as these he was the type of the ancient Hebrew prophet as I learned that character at Sunday-school in my childhood.”

While Lincoln on that day may have been of “the type of the ancient Hebrew prophet,” the “biblical” text to which he turned was not the *Old Testament*, nor the New. He was relying instead on Euclid’s *Elements*, the

philosophical study the former congressman had read and reread during his wilderness years, honing the logical constructs that would less than a decade later prepare him to deliver his best remembered address on a blood-soaked battlefield where the Army of the Potomac and the army of Northern Virginia had over the course of three days sacrificed a combined 7,500 soldiers. As he would in those “few appropriate remarks” at Gettysburg about a country “dedicated to the proposition that ‘all men are created equal,’” Lincoln at Peoria summoned ancient algorithms—and more contemporary rhetorical flourishes—to identify the greatest common divisor of a young republic. It was in Jefferson’s promise of a great equality that the debater of 1854 and the president of 1863 would find his moral grounding.

Little by little, but steadily as man’s march to the grave, we have been giving up the OLD for the NEW faith. Near eighty years ago we began by declaring that all men are created equal; but now from that beginning we have run down to the other declaration, that for SOME men to enslave OTHERS is a “sacred right of self-government.” These principles cannot stand together. They are as opposite as God and Mammon; and whoever holds to the one, must despise the other. When Pettit, in connection with his support of the Nebraska bill, called the Declaration of Independence “a self-evident lie” he only did what consistency and candor require all other Nebraska men to do. Of the forty-odd Nebraska Senators who sat present and heard him, no one rebuked him. Nor am I apprized that any Nebraska newspaper, or any Nebraska orator, in the whole nation, has ever yet rebuked him. If this had been said among Marion’s men, Southerners though they were, what would have become of the man who said it? If this had been said to the men who captured Andre, the man who said it, would probably have been hung sooner than Andre was. If it had been said in old Independence Hall, seventy-eight years ago, the very doorkeeper would have throttled the man, and thrust him into the street.

Let no one be deceived. The spirit of seventy-six and the spirit of Nebraska, are utter antagonisms; and the former is being rapidly displaced by the latter.

Fellow countrymen—Americans south, as well as north, shall we make no effort to arrest this? Already the liberal party throughout the world, express the apprehension “that the one retrograde institution in America, is undermining the principles of progress, and fatally violating the noblest political system the world ever saw.” This is not the taunt of enemies, but the warning of friends. Is it quite safe to disregard it—to despise it? Is there no danger to liberty itself, in discarding the earliest practice, and first precept of our ancient faith? In our greedy chase to make profit of the negro, let us beware, lest we “cancel and tear to pieces” even the white man’s charter of freedom.

Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it. Let us turn and wash it white, in the spirit, if not the blood, of the Revolution. Let us turn slavery from its claims of “moral right,” back upon its existing legal rights, and its arguments of “necessity.” Let us return it to the position our fathers gave it; and there let it rest in peace. Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it. Let north and south—let all Americans—let all lovers of liberty everywhere—join in the great and good work. If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have so saved it, as to make, and to keep it, forever worthy of the saving. We shall have so saved it, that the succeeding millions of free happy people, the world over, shall rise up, and call us blessed, to the latest generations.

While Lincoln may have recognized a need to “repurify,” he was not himself ideologically or morally pure. The man who as president would stand justifiably accused of mangling civil liberties, disregarding the aspirations and basic humanity of Native Americans and willingly sacrificing principle on the alter of political expediency had learned too well from his fellow Whig Henry Clay, “the great compromiser.” Lincoln was an imperfect foe of slavery, as even his most generous biographers now acknowledge. Yet, it is reasonable to suggest that the Lincoln of 1854 was in the process of becoming the president who would—pressured by Greeley—finally sign an Emancipation Proclamation. What he was coming to understand, intellectually and emotionally, was that slavery was an oppression of a kind with other oppressions. And he was not on the side of the oppressors. He was on the side of freedom—not merely as a moral or social construct, but as an economic one.

This was a concept that was hardwired into the Republican Party from the moment of its founding—by followers of Fourier’s utopian socialist vision, by German ’48ers and especially by the muscular veteran campaigner for radical land reform Alvan Bovay. It was an idea that Lincoln emphasized as he campaigned in 1856 for “Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men and Fremont.” Slavery was an issue that year, and Frederick Douglass was surely right when he argued that voting Republican was the best way to strike “the severest, deadliest blow upon Slavery that can be given at this particular time.” But slavery was not the only issue, as a southern Illinois newspaper, the *Belleville Weekly Advocate*, noted after Lincoln stumped across the region on behalf of the ticket of General John C. Fremont and former New Jersey senator William Dayton (who had defeated Lincoln for the new party’s vice-presidential nomination in a 253 to 110 vote at the first Republican National Convention that summer in Philadelphia). “He vindicated the cause of free labor, ‘that national capital,’ in the language of Col. FREMONT, ‘which constitutes the real wealth of this great country, and creates that intelligent power in the masses alone to be relied on as the bulwark of free institutions.’ He showed the tendency and aim of the Sham Democracy to degrade labor to subvert the true ends of Government and build up Aristocracy, Despotism and Slavery.”

Two years later, on October 15, 1858, in the last of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, the Republican candidate would frame the issues in the boldest possible terms, linking physical and economic slavery—“It is the same principle in whatever shape it develops itself”—as he addressed a crowd of 5,000 that had gathered in front of the Alton, Illinois, city hall. “That is the real issue. That is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world,” Lincoln thundered. “They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time; and will ever continue to struggle. The one is the common right of humanity and the other the divine right of kings. It is the same principle in whatever shape it develops itself. It is the same spirit that says, ‘You work and toil and earn bread, and I’ll eat it.’ No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle.”

As he prepared for the 1860 presidential race, Lincoln would align with those who “hold that labor is the superior—greatly the superior—of capital.” That line, from one of Lincoln’s most striking speeches of the period, his September 30, 1859, address to the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, was reprised with minor variations throughout the difficult campaign for the Republican nomination. It was a nomination that saw Lincoln prevail with strong support from Greeley, who argued that the Illinoisan’s determination to mingle free soil and free labor messages with his condemnations of “the Slave Power” established the right mix for a winning campaign in a country that the editor believed “will only swallow a little Anti-Slavery in a great deal of sweetening.” Whether it was Greeley’s calculus, the fact of a divided opposition, Lincoln’s oratory or Carl Schurz’s successful rallying of German-American ’48ers and their immigrant communities to fight the “slaveholding capitalists” on behalf of a “society, where by popular education and continual change of condition, the dividing lines between the ranks and classes are almost obliterated”—or, as is always the case in politics, by a proper mingling of all the messages—the Republicans won the opportunity to preside over the conflict.

“The Republicans therefore attacked the rule of the slaveholders at their root,” argued Marx in one of his many articles celebrating the rise of the new radical party in the United States—just as he decried “the connivance of the Northern Democrats” (or, as he referred to them, “Slavocrats”) with “the Southern Slavocracy.” The columnist, often displaying enthusiasms as idealistic as the Republican campaigners of Vermont or Wisconsin, argued that the party’s rapid rise offered “many palpable proofs that the North had accumulated sufficient energies to rectify the aberrations which United States history, under the slaveholders’ pressure, had undergone for half a century, and to make it return to the true principles of its development.” Lincoln’s victory was in Marx’s view a signal that the workers of the north would not “submit any longer to an oligarchy of 300,000 slaveholders.” That would not sit well with the south, and Greeley’s European correspondent explained to

readers of the *Tribune* what they well knew to be the next stage in the history of the United States: “The Republican election victory was accordingly bound to lead to open struggle between North and South.”

The Civil War defined Lincoln’s tenure in the White House. The nation’s first Republican president was more than a mere warrior, however. He sought, sincerely if not always successfully, to strike the difficult balance between the duties of a commander in chief and a domestic policy maker, a balance he recognized in that first State of the Union address. Just as there were triumphs on the battlefield, there were triumphs in the economic debates that Lincoln had outlined. Chief among these was the enactment of the Homestead Act of 1862, a soft version of the land reforms proposed by Paine-influenced agrarian socialists and social democrats of varying stripes—led by George Henry Evans, who suggested the movement be dubbed “Republican” as early as the mid-1840s, and Evans’s aide, Bovay, who would apply the name a decade later when he called the party into being at Ripon, Wisconsin. The act, which promised “land for the landless,” allowed any adult citizen (or anyone who had applied for citizenship) to claim a 160-acre parcel of land in the public domain. Greeley hailed it as “one of the most vital reforms ever attempted” and predicted it would usher in a postwar era of economic equity characterized by “Peace, Prosperity and Progress.”

Even as they agreed on homesteading, Greeley and Lincoln wrangled over the timing and scope of an emancipation proclamation. The editor joined Frederick Douglass in demanding that the president take steps to make the Civil War not merely a struggle to preserve the Union, but “an Abolition war.” Even as Greeley and Lincoln exchanged sometimes pointed letters, the *Tribune*’s longtime managing editor Charles Dana was now working for Lincoln. Officially assigned to the War Department—where he would eventually serve as assistant secretary—Dana’s real role was as an aide and adviser to the president on questions of what the former newspaperman described as the “judicious, humane, and wise uses of executive authority.” That Lincoln spent much of his presidency reading dispatches from and welcoming the counsel of Marx’s longtime editor—like the fact that he awarded military commissions to the numerous comrades of the author of *The Communist Manifesto* who had come to the United States as political refugees following the failed European revolutions of 1848—is a shard of history rarely seen in the hagiographic accounts that produce a sanitized version of the sixteenth president’s story. In the years following Lincoln’s death, his law partner and political comrade, William Herndon, complained that Lincoln’s official biographers were already attempting “to make the story with the classes as against the masses,” an approach that he suggested “will result in delineating the real Lincoln about as well as does a wax figure in the museum.”

The real Lincoln was more of a Jeffersonian, and especially a Paineite, than an orthodox Marxist. The president rejected the idea of “a law to prevent a man from getting rich” as an impractical plan that would “do more harm than good.” He expected that, while labor was “superior” to capital, there “probably always will be a relation between labor and capital.” But if he was something less than a Marxist, Lincoln was also something less than a laissez-faire capitalist—indeed, quite a bit less. Even as he accepted a relationship between capital and labor, he expounded on the “error” of “assuming that the whole labor of the world exists within that relation.”

To the extent that sides were to be taken, Lincoln was on the side of labor. He urged working men to “combine” and organize labor unions—“uniting all working people, of all nations, and tongues, and kindreds.” He wanted “free labor” to be able to make demands on capital, without apology or compromise. He proposed this, not as a young man in a “radical phase,” but as the president of the United States. And he said as much when leaders of the New York Workingmen’s Democratic-Republican Association arrived at the White House in March 1864, to inform the president that they had elected him as an honorary member of their organization. Lincoln “gratefully accepted” the membership, read the attending paperwork and then responded appreciatively to his visitors: “You comprehend, as your address shows, that the existing rebellion means more, and tends to more, than the perpetuation of African Slavery—that it is, in fact, a war upon the rights of all working people. Partly to show that this view has not escaped my attention, and partly that I cannot better express myself, I read a passage from the Message to Congress in December 1861.”

Having recalled his declarations about the superiority of labor, Lincoln spent a good deal more time with the Workingmen, despite a busy schedule that placed on his shoulders all the weight of decisions regarding the war and an impending re-election campaign. The campaign would see Lincoln's supporters distribute handbills in working-class wards of New York and other cities, **arguing that the war was a fight not just to free slaves in the south but to free workers in the north from "Slave Wages."** The most ardent abolitionists, such as Frederick Douglass, had always reasoned that: "Liberty to the slave is peace, honor, and prosperity to the country." But now this message was becoming central to the appeal of Lincoln's campaign to voters in the swing states that would decide whether the president could see the war through to "an Abolition peace" characterized by "liberty for all, chains for none." Emancipation, argued Lincoln's supporters, would allow African Americans in the south to "demand wages that would allow them to live in a decent manner, and therefore would help the poor white man to put up the price of labor instead of putting it down as [slavery does] now."

"Let the workingman think of this and go to the polls and vote for Abraham Lincoln, who is the true democratic candidate, and not the representative of the English Aristocracy, or their form of government, to be rid of which so many have left their native shores, and which form the leaders of the Rebellion are in favor of, in evidence of which we have the fact that in many of the Southern States no people can hold office but a property holder..." went one leaflet's class-based appeal, which was critical to building the majority that would allow Lincoln to carry New York and retain the presidency with a decisive national landslide.

**From afar, Marx (who corresponded with Dana and other American compatriots during and after the war) cheered on the campaign, writing to Engels in September 1864 with considerable enthusiasm: "Should Lincoln succeed this time—as is highly probable—it will be on a far more radical platform and in completely changed circumstances."**

**Marx and Engels had been busy in the fall of 1864 with the work of organizing the International Workingmen's Association—the "First International" of the communist movement and its allies on the left. At the meeting on November 19 of the International's general council in London, Marx presented a letter of congratulation to Lincoln, which the council endorsed. It read:**

Sir: We congratulate the American people upon your re-election by a large majority. If resistance to the Slave Power was the reserved watchword of your first election, the triumphant war cry of your re-election is Death to Slavery.

From the commencement of the titanic American strife the workingmen of Europe felt instinctively that the star-spangled banner carried the destiny of their class. The contest for the territories which opened the dire epopee, was it not to decide whether the virgin soil of immense tracts should be wedded to the labor of the emigrant or prostituted by the tramp of the slave driver?

When an oligarchy of 300,000 slaveholders dared to inscribe, for the first time in the annals of the world, "slavery" on the banner of Armed Revolt, when on the very spots where hardly a century ago the idea of one great Democratic Republic had first sprung up, whence the first Declaration of the Rights of Man was issued, and the first impulse given to the European revolution of the eighteenth century; when on those very spots counter-revolution, with systematic thoroughness, gloried in rescinding "the ideas entertained at the time of the formation of the old constitution," and maintained slavery to be "a beneficent institution," indeed, the old solution of the great problem of "the relation of capital to labor," and cynically proclaimed property in man "the cornerstone of the new edifice"—then the working classes of Europe understood at once, even before the fanatic partisanship of the upper classes for the Confederate gentry had given its dismal warning, that the slaveholders' rebellion was to sound the tocsin for a general holy crusade of property against labor, and that for the men of labor, with their hopes for the future, even their past conquests were at stake in that tremendous conflict on the other side of the Atlantic. Everywhere they bore therefore patiently the hardships imposed upon them by the cotton crisis, opposed enthusiastically the pro-slavery intervention of their betters—and, from most parts of Europe, contributed their quota of blood to the good cause.

While the workingmen, the true political powers of the North, allowed slavery to defile their own republic, while before the Negro, mastered and sold without his concurrence, they boasted it the highest prerogative of the white-skinned laborer to sell himself and choose his own master, they were unable to attain the true freedom of labor, or to support their European brethren in their struggle for emancipation; but this barrier to progress has been swept off by the red sea of civil war.

The workingmen of Europe feel sure that, as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American Antislavery War will do for the working classes. They consider it an earnest of the epoch to come that it fell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class, to lead his country through the matchless struggle for the rescue of an enchained race and the reconstruction of a social world.

The letter was duly delivered to Charles Francis Adams, Sr., the grandson of John and son of John Quincy, who had since the beginning of the war served in the delicate capacity of Lincoln's ambassador to the Court of St. James. Adams was well acquainted with Marx. A Greeley man, who would campaign for the vice presidency in 1872 on a "Liberal Republican" ticket led by the editor, he had been the subject of glowing accounts by Marx in the *Tribune* since his arrival in London in 1861. His own son and private secretary, Henry, after attending "a democratic and socialistic meeting" organized by Marx and Engels, had reported approvingly to Washington that the speakers emphasized "that their interests and those of the American Union were one, that the success of free institutions in America was a political question of deep consequence in England and that they would not tolerate any interference unfavorable to the north." Marx, Engels and their comrades suggested the great-grandson of one American president and the grandson of another were among the best friends that Lincoln and the Union cause had in London.

The senior Adams dispatched the letter from Marx and the leaders of the First International in a packet of diplomatic correspondence that was delivered to the State Department in Washington. Secretary of State William Seward promptly replied that "these interesting papers have been submitted to the president." Seward then communicated Lincoln's response, which Adams in turn delivered to Marx and his comrades:

"I am directed to inform you that the address of the Central Council of your Association, which was duly transmitted through this Legation to the President of the United [States], has been received by him," began Adams. He went on:

So far as the sentiments expressed by it are personal, they are accepted by him with a sincere and anxious desire that he may be able to prove himself not unworthy of the confidence which has been recently extended to him by his fellow citizens and by so many of the friends of humanity and progress throughout the world.

The Government of the United States has a clear consciousness that its policy neither is nor could be reactionary, but at the same time it adheres to the course which it adopted at the beginning, of abstaining everywhere from propagandism and unlawful intervention. It strives to do equal and exact justice to all states and to all men and it relies upon the beneficial results of that effort for support at home and for respect and good will throughout the world.

Nations do not exist for themselves alone, but to promote the welfare and happiness of mankind by benevolent intercourse and example. It is in this relation that the United States regard their cause in the present conflict with slavery, maintaining insurgence as the cause of human nature, and they derive new encouragements to persevere from the testimony of the workingmen of Europe that the national attitude is favored with their enlightened approval and earnest sympathies.

Marx was thrilled by "the fact that Lincoln answered us so courteously," as he was with the rejection of "reactionary" policies and the expression of solidarity with "the friends of humanity and progress throughout the world." No fool, the philosopher recognized, as he wrote during the war, that "Lincoln's principal political

actions contain much that is aesthetically repulsive, logically inadequate, farcical in form and politically, contradictory.” He did not imagine the president as a revolutionary, let alone a likely recruit to the International. Yet he was inclined to believe, based on his many years of following and commenting upon the economic and political struggles of the United States, that the American erred to the left, and he was certain that “Lincoln’s place in the history of the United States and of mankind will, nevertheless, be next to that of Washington!” As such, the organizer in him delighted in the broad reporting of the exchange between the International and the Lincoln White House, which was featured news in the *Times of London*, along with other British and American papers. “The difference between Lincoln’s answer to us and to the bourgeoisie [anti-slavery groups that had also written the president] has created such a sensation here that the West End ‘clubs’ are shaking their heads at it,” Marx informed Engels. “You can understand how gratifying that has been for our people.”

In the decades following Lincoln’s assassination, the story of his exchange with the First International was well known and often recounted. Eugene Victor Debs would stop his 1908 presidential campaign train—“The Red Special”—in Springfield to deliver a celebratory address at Lincoln’s grave. Years later, in the midst of another presidential campaign, Debs would argue that “The Republican Party was once red. Lincoln was a revolutionary.” It is indisputable that the Republican Party had at its founding a red streak. And it is arguable that the party’s first president was a radical; his great struggle, rooted in the ideals of the founding, was for “a new birth of freedom” that would be aptly characterized by the historian Charles Beard as the “Second American Revolution, and in a strict sense, the First.” The fight, Lincoln argued at Gettysburg, was waged to give meaning to the founding promise that “all men are created equal.” This did not, as some of the more excitable revisionists of the 1930s imagined, make Lincoln a communist. The man who clung so tightly in his Gettysburg Address to the Enlightenment visions that birthed the nation kept the faith in “that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found”—as the plaque on display for more than a century near the great Lincoln statue on the University of Wisconsin campus describes it. Lincoln was not a Marxist, but the first Republican president belonged to a time when men such as he were familiar with the writings of Marx and the deeds of the revolutionary circle that spread from Europe to the United States in the aftermath of the 1848 rebellions. He sifted and winnowed the radical ideas of his day. He found truth in notions about the superiority of labor to capital, just as he found important—at times essential—allies among the radicals who shared the view that a dying southern aristocracy was mounting not merely a last desperate defense of slavery but “in fact, a war upon the rights of all working people.”

A century after Lincoln’s death, and barely five weeks before his own assassination, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., would recall the connection. King’s comment came at a celebration of the life of W.E.B. Du Bois, which had been organized by the journal *Freedomways* at Carnegie Hall. Addressing the issue of Du Bois’s radicalism, King used the address to urge a break with the “red scare” thinking that demonized everything and everyone associated with communism:

We cannot talk of Dr. Du Bois without recognizing that he was a radical all of his life. Some people would like to ignore the fact that he was a Communist in his later years. It is worth noting that Abraham Lincoln warmly welcomed the support of Karl Marx during the Civil War and corresponded with him freely. In contemporary life the English-speaking world has no difficulty with the fact that Sean O’Casey was a literary giant of the twentieth century and a Communist, or that Pablo Neruda is generally considered the greatest [living] poet, though he also served in the Chilean Senate as a Communist. It is time to cease muting the fact that Dr. Du Bois was a genius and chose to be a Communist. Our irrational obsessive anti-communism has led us into too many quagmires to be retained as if it were a mode of scientific thinking.

While King offered a corrective to the casual dismissal of socialists, communists and other radicals, and of those—including American presidents—who might have been informed by them, it was Du Bois, a half century earlier, who offered the perspective on Lincoln that remains the most useful for those seeking a sense of what distinguished the most nuanced of American presidents.

As a product of his times and of the great debates that defined them, as a student of ancient ideas and fresh ones, as an American born in the last weeks of Thomas Jefferson's presidency, when it was still perhaps possible to detect the fading glimmers of the Age of Enlightenment, Abraham Lincoln understood that the best answers to societal challenges were found in "regions hitherto unexplored." This is why he read so widely. This is why he followed the freedom struggles that played out in distant lands so closely—and so passionately. This is why he befriended radicals, many of them refugees from the great revolutions of 1848; and this is why he sampled so broadly from their proposals and platforms—even if the man Du Bois recognized as "big enough to be inconsistent" refused to embrace the whole of any one. "He did not always see the right at first," Du Bois said of Lincoln. But, the scholar noted, America's sixteenth president retained a remarkable "capacity for growth." It was that latter capacity that led Du Bois to suggest that Americans would do well to "take pattern of Lincoln" and emulate his openness to ideas generated in those regions hitherto unexplored—a newspaper office in Cologne, a Springfield meeting organized in solidarity with a Hungarian revolutionary, a Wisconsin schoolhouse filled with Fourierists and "Vote Yourself a Farm" land reformers, a workingmen's club in New York, a gathering in London of the First International. Presidents who choose to dismiss individuals, ideas and ideologies with which they do not fully agree take too many options off the table; in so doing they ill serve the republic. **There are points on every nation's arc of history where radical ideas are more than merely interesting, intriguing or perhaps unsettling;** they are the "new enlightenments" that enable and encourage the pursuit of "the welfare and happiness of mankind." Jefferson, at his best, recognized this. Paine as well. And, surely, Lincoln, when he observed in the darkest hours of his presidency: **"The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall our selves, and then we shall save our country."**