

Abraham Lincoln: Vegetarian and Animal Rights Advocate?—A Review of the Evidence

Mike Hudak, September 30, 2009

Since the mid 1980s many have claimed that Abraham Lincoln, 16th President of the United States, savior of the Union, emancipator of the enslaved, was an animal rights advocate. By contemporary definition, such an advocate believes that animals should not be treated as property and, unless a threat, should be left to live their lives without interference—a view analogous to that held by 19th century abolitionists in regard to human slavery. Given Lincoln's antipathy toward slavery and the high regard in which he is widely held today, it should not be surprising that the claim that he harbored similar sentiments toward animals would be not only believed, but enthusiastically embraced by many advocates of animal rights.

In addition to the statement Lincoln allegedly made in favor of animal rights, many websites claim that he practiced vegetarianism throughout his adult life. There is even the assertion that he abstained from all hunting beyond his early childhood.

An examination of such website claims led to a single quotation, the earliest source of which I've found is a book by Jon Wynne-Tyson, British publisher and author of books on vegetarianism and animal rights. He claims that Lincoln said or wrote (unclear which): "I am in favour of animal rights as well as human rights. That is the way of a whole human being."¹ Wynne-Tyson cites as the source for the quote, "*Complete Works*," which presumably refers to the *Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln*.² But he provides neither volume nor page number for verification.

Had the printing of Lincoln's alleged quotation been confined to Wynne-Tyson's book and to a few succeeding ones targeting audiences of animal rights activists and vegetarians, I would have felt less compelled to write this essay. But with the expansion of the World Wide Web during the first decade of the 21st century, Lincoln's alleged quotation has proliferated at an astounding rate. Performing a Google search on the terms "Abraham Lincoln" and "I am in favor of animal rights" returns (as of 8 September 2009) more than 19,000 websites. Inspecting the first few dozen of these reveals that the vast majority of them accept the validity of the quotation.

I became intrigued at how such an unorthodox attitude (certainly for the 19th century) could have been held by Abraham Lincoln, and yet had come to light only within the past twenty-some years. My interest led me to Wynne-Tyson's alleged source of Lincoln's quotation, *Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln*, first published in 1894, and reprinted with additional material in 1905. It was the latter edition that I found at the library of Binghamton University. As this work has not yet been digitized in a form that permits the text to be searched by computer, I was compelled, over two months, to read its entire 12 volumes—4,637 pages in all. Nowhere in those pages could I find any statement by Lincoln either for or against the concept of animal rights. In fact, the very phrase "animal rights" does not appear in the work.

1. Jon Wynne-Tyson, *The Extended Circle: A Dictionary of Humane Thought* (Fontwell, Sussex: Centaur Press Limited, 1985), 179.
2. John G. Nicolay and John Hay, eds., *Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln* (12 volumes) (New York: Francis D. Tandy Company, 1905).

Yet whenever this alleged Lincoln quote has appeared on dozens of websites I've inspected, the citation (if given at all) is *Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln*. I conclude, therefore, that this alleged Lincoln quotation is, in all likelihood, a fabrication.

Nevertheless, Lincoln's alleged utterance regarding animal rights has provided the basis for the further claim that he was a vegetarian. A Google search on the terms "Abraham Lincoln" and "vegetarian" yields (as of 8 September 2009) more than 83,000 websites. Again, inspecting the first few dozen such sites reveals that most accept the validity of the claim.

Of course, a fabricated Lincoln quote does not rule out his having been an animal rights advocate or a vegetarian, but one must examine other evidence to decide.

One source indicating that Lincoln's behavior was consistent with the philosophy of animal rights is found in Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals*, where she writes of Lincoln: "He refused to hunt animals, which ran counter to frontier mores."³

Team of Rivals's endnotes show that Goodwin came to her conclusion about Lincoln's alleged refusal to hunt based on statements found in William Lee Miller's *Lincoln's Virtues*. There, Miller writes:

But his son Abraham would not be classified with the Hunters of Kentucky, or of Indiana, or of Illinois either. He [Abraham Lincoln] himself recalled, in the autobiography that he would write, in the third person, for John L. Scripps and other editors in June of 1860: "A few days before the completion of his eighth year, in the absence of his father, a flock of wild turkeys approached the new log-cabin, and A[braham], with a rifle gun, standing inside, shot through a crack, and killed one of them. He has never since pulled a trigger on any larger game."

One turkey, when he was eight, and that was it.⁴

Let's take Lincoln at his word that after the age of eight he never "pulled a trigger on any larger game" than a wild turkey. From this statement, though, it does not necessarily follow, as Miller suggests, and Goodwin emphatically states, that Lincoln thereafter never hunted. The strongest claim that can be validly made is that Lincoln did not subsequently hunt any animal larger than a wild turkey. But there are many animals that size or smaller that Lincoln might have still hunted, such as rabbit, squirrel, raccoon, opossum, and prairie chicken.

Is there evidence that Lincoln continued to hunt such animals? Here are three examples:

- "Nat Grigsby told Billy Herndon that Abraham Lincoln frequent went 'coon' hunting when he lived in Indiana."⁵
- "In an anecdote of a boyhood adventure with a companion who was probably his stepbrother,

3. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 104.

4. William Lee Miller, *Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 27.

5. Emanuel Hertz, ed., *The Hidden Lincoln: From the Letters and Papers of William H. Herndon* (New York: The Viking Press, 1938), 281.

John D. Johnston, Lincoln told Herndon that: he used to be very fond of coon hunting, and his father used to oppose their hunting. But he would slip out of a night after the old man had gone to bed and take a hunt. But they had a small fist [mongrel] dog that would detect them when they would return. So one night they took the fist along. They caught a coon and skinned him and then stretched it over the little dog and sewed him up and turned him loose and put the other dogs on the track, and they ran him home and caught him in the yard, and the old man jumped up and sicked the dogs on the fist, thinking it was a coon, and they killed the fist. They couldn't come up to his relief. The next morning when the old man went to examine the coon, it was the little dog. They were called up and were both thrashed, but the little dog never told on them any more when they went a-coon hunting—[J. Rowan] Herndon to [his cousin] William H. Herndon, June 21, 1865 (7:181–83) Herndon-Weik Collection.”⁶

- “While minutely examining some gunpowder at General Grant’s headquarters on June 21, 1864, the President declared, ‘Well, it’s rather larger than the powder we used to buy in my shooting days.’”⁷

Whether Lincoln continued to hunt into his adult years I cannot say for lack of evidence. But there is overwhelming evidence that the additional prevalent claim, that Lincoln practiced vegetarianism, is definitely false. His consumption of a variety of meats from his early years to virtually the end of his life is documented by numerous sources as the following examples demonstrate.

- “When the Lincolns completed their little cabin southwest of Decatur in 1830, they next erected a smoke-house and a stable.”⁸
- “John Todd Stuart and Abraham Lincoln shared an upstairs room in a large frame house at Vandalia when both of them sat in the Illinois General Assembly. Stuart recalled that they were fed a steady diet of prairie chickens and venison.”⁹ (Note: Lincoln was in the Illinois General Assembly when it was located in Vandalia between 1834 and 1839.)
- From the excavation of the old Lincoln well at Eighth and Jackson streets in Springfield, IL (which had been abandoned and filled with scraps between 1849 and 1853), we know the cuts of meat the Lincolns favored: sirloin steaks, short loin, ribs, round steak, rump, short ribs,

6. Don E. Fehrenbacher and Virginia Fehrenbacher, eds., *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* (Stanford: CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 236–37.

7. Wayne C. Temple, ed., *Campaigning with Grant* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1961), 221.

8. Wayne C. Temple, “*The Taste Is In My Mouth A Little ...*”: *Lincoln’s Victuals and Potables* (Mahomet, IL: Mayhaven Publishing, 2004), 140, citing J. G. Holland, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Springfield, MA: Gurdon Gill, 1866), 39.

9. *Taste Is In My Mouth*, 140–41, citing John G. Nicolay’s interview with John Todd Stuart at Springfield, Illinois, on June 24, 1875, MS., John Hay Papers, Brown University.

chuck.¹⁰ Goose bones have also been found in the well.¹¹ And hog bones found there indicate that the Lincolns served ham, picnic shoulder, backbones, and a few ribs.¹²

- “To celebrate C. C. Brown’s passing of the bar in 1856, Lawyer Lincoln partook of pickled pig’s feet at Chatterton’s Restaurant in Springfield, Illinois.”¹³
- At the Astor House in New York, Lincoln’s menu of February 19, 1861, included “fillet of beef, larded, with green peas,” “boned turkey with jelly,” “fillet of chicken in truffle sauce,” “roast stuffed quail,” and “roasted canvasback duck.”¹⁴
- “On February 23, 1861, when the Lincolns first arrived in Washington and checked into the Willard’s Hotel, the specialty of the house that day was steaming coffee and ‘the first run of Potomac shad.’ Nor did the happy Lincolns eat their last shad at Willard’s. After taking up residence in the Executive Mansion a few days later, the head cook there continued to prepare this same fish for their table. Shortly thereafter, the entire First Family and their house guests became deathly sick. At first, it was suspected that Southern sympathizers had treacherously poisoned them. But a local physician immediately summoned to the tense scene diagnosed their medical problem as too much Potomac shad! His medical opinion, strange as it might seem, proved to be exactly right. They had all consumed an excessive amount of this local fish.”¹⁵
- “Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln breakfasted at nine. Mr. Lincoln was a hearty eater. He never lost his taste for the things a growing farmer’s boy would like. He was particularly fond of bacon.”¹⁶
- “Lincoln casually mentioned to Peter Brown of the White House staff that he relished a good possum dinner.”¹⁷
- “A White House waiter related to Aunt Rosetta Wells that President Lincoln often put his knife and fork into a savory piece of ham when dining privately.”¹⁸

10. Floyd Mansberger, *Archeological Investigations at the Lincoln Home National Historic Site, Springfield, Illinois* (Report to USDI-National Park Service, Midwest Archeological Center, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1987), 265.

11. *Archeological Investigations*, 136.

12. *Archeological Investigations*, 268.

13. *Taste Is In My Mouth*, 140, citing C. C. Brown’s interview in *Chicago Sunday Times-Herald*, p. 25, c. 6, August 25, 1895.

14. *New York Herald*, p. 8, c. 1, February 20, 1861.

15. *Taste Is In My Mouth*, 154, citing Elizabeth Todd Grimsley, “Six Months in the White House,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (October 1926–January 1927), 19:51.

16. Margarita Spalding Gerry, ed., *Through Five Administrations: Reminiscences of Colonel William H. Crook, Body-Guard to President Lincoln* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1910), 15.

17. *Taste Is In My Mouth*, 139, citing John E. Washington, *They Knew Lincoln* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1942), 125.

18. *Taste Is In My Mouth*, 140, citing John E. Washington, *They Knew Lincoln* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1942), 118.

- “Cornelia Mitchell, the black White House chef, revealed that she cooked lobster upon occasion for President Lincoln.”¹⁹
- Aboard the *River Queen*, while sailing on the Chesapeake Bay to General Grant’s headquarters on March 24, 1865, President Lincoln “did full justice to the delicious fish when it was served” to him for breakfast, reported one of his bodyguards, William H. Crook.²⁰

The significance of Lincoln’s carnivorous diet to the topic of the present essay is that while a person may practice vegetarianism for a variety of reasons other than advocating for animal rights, an animal rights advocate by necessity must be a vegetarian (actually, vegan by today’s standards) or be guilty of hypocrisy. Hence, Lincoln’s demonstrated lack of vegetarian practice discredits any notion of his advocacy of animal rights, aside from the absence of evidence that he ever uttered a statement in its support.

Conclusion

Exhaustive examination of the *Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln*, the solely cited source of Lincoln’s alleged quote in favor of animal rights, failed to find any such statement. Lincoln’s alleged abstinence from all hunting beyond his early childhood, put forth to corroborate his alleged animal rights views, is based upon an invalid generalization by Goodwin. And claims that Lincoln practiced vegetarianism are disproved by overwhelming contrary evidence from several independent sources, thereby unequivocally invalidating the claim that Lincoln held a rights-based philosophy toward animals. Additional evidence that Lincoln expressed humane sentiments about and performed humane actions toward animals (not cited in the present essay), while admirable, are insufficient to establish that Lincoln held a rights-based animal philosophy, rather than the more prevalent and weaker humane ethic.

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19. *Taste Is In My Mouth*, 150, citing John E. Washington, *They Knew Lincoln* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1942), 119.

20. Margarita Spalding Gerry, ed., *Through Five Administrations: Reminiscences of Colonel William H. Crook, Body-Guard to President Lincoln* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1910), 40.