

### Your Friend, as Ever, A. Lincoln: How the Unlikely Friendship of Gustav Koerner and Abraham Lincoln Changed America

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## Review

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**Allendorf, Donald** *Your Friend, As Ever, A. Lincoln: How the Unlikely Friendship of Gustav Koerner and Abraham Lincoln Changed America*. Pelican Publishing, \$26.95 ISBN 9781455618835

### German Americans, Abraham Lincoln, and the Republican Party

As a retired marketing executive, Donald Allendorf must appreciate the power of an ambitious title. *Your Friend, As Ever, A. Lincoln: How the Unlikely Friendship of Gustav Koerner and Abraham Lincoln Changed America* promises intimate revelations and a reinterpretation of United States history. Readers should be skeptical.

Yet the relationship between Koerner and Lincoln does merit serious consideration. Koerner, a significant Illinois politician and prominent German American, helped Lincoln win the Republican nomination for the presidency in 1860. As Allendorf narrates, Koerner and Lincoln were both born in 1809, but they were raised under quite different circumstances. While Lincoln was struggling in frontier Kentucky and Indiana, Koerner's family was running a successful publishing and bookselling operation in Frankfurt am Main. German nationalism and democratic politics were mainstays in the Koerner household, so it was no surprise that Gustav participated in radical student organizations when he went off to university. After graduating, he went on to lead a minor revolt. The Frankfurt Attentat was designed to precipitate a general uprising against the autocratic regimes of the divided German states. Like other such efforts in 1833, it was quickly suppressed, and Koerner, expecting arrest, fled.

The exile settled in southern Illinois a few years after Lincoln moved to the state in 1831. Arriving so early gave Koerner considerably more time than the so-called Forty-Eighters—refugees of the German Revolutions of 1848—to establish himself before the Civil War. He bought a home in Belleville, not far from St. Louis, which remained his base as he practiced law, wrote for German-American newspapers, and served as a Illinois state legislator from

1842 to 1843, a justice on the state supreme court from 1844 to 1848, and lieutenant governor from 1853 to 1857.

Koerner's work as a Democrat and a judge brought him in contact with Lincoln, a Whig and a lawyer. Koerner saw Lincoln make a stump speech in Belleville as early as 1840, and according to Allendorf, Lincoln argued seven cases before Koerner in court, but it was not until both men joined the antislavery Republican Party in the mid-1850s that they began their real association.

The nature of the friendship, Allendorf concedes, was not intimate. Lincoln may have taken to signing his letters "your friend, as ever," but the German American remarked in his memoirs that Lincoln was not "really capable of what might be called a warm-hearted friendship" (243). The two men enjoyed a cordial professional relationship based on shared political goals. Koerner was a pallbearer when Lincoln's body was finally interred in Springfield, and Allendorf opens with this scene, but the immigrant politician was just one of twelve of Lincoln's Illinois friends who were so honored. *Your Friend, As Ever* is less revelatory and less personal than the title suggests.

Indeed, most of Allendorf's book focuses on the period before Koerner and Lincoln met. Each of these men led fascinating lives, but readers who seek to understand them can consult more engaging and accurate sources. Lincoln biographies are legion, and Koerner's own memoirs, on which Allendorf rather uncritically depends, are available digitally online. The book under review follows a meandering path. It suffers from typographical errors and odd renderings of the German words. More significantly, it is riddled with factual inaccuracies and misrepresentations. There are too many to enumerate individually, but a few examples serve to make the point. On page 280, Allendorf writes, "[T]he Wilmot Proviso... after successive Senate defeats... ultimately won Congressional approval to prohibit slavery in all new federal territories." In fact, opposition in the Senate prevented the passage of the 1846 measure, which would have applied only to territory taken from Mexico. Allendorf also presents the pro-immigrant plank in the 1860 Republican platform as novel, when it had been the Democratic position all along.

The book's central contention does basically stand. Koerner was a vital ally because he vouched for Lincoln to German Americans. Scholars widely accept that Republicans believed that they could not win the presidency without

garnering a substantial portion of the "German vote" in the Midwest. It followed that any nominee must be palatable to immigrants. Palatability in this case boiled down to repudiating any policies that would roll back the rights of European immigrants. As a leading Lincoln supporter, Koerner worked the German-American angle hard, making an important speech before the Indiana delegation at the Republican national convention of 1860. Koerner told Republicans from Indiana that one of Lincoln's competitors, Missourian Edward Bates, had no chance of winning German Americans votes because of his involvement in anti-immigrant politics. "It was a blow from which Bates would never recover," Allendorf claims on page 286.

Koerner's role was important, but it is hard to say that he changed the course of history as billed. He prepared the way for German-American Republicans to swing in behind Lincoln after it appeared that the Anglo-Americans who dominated the Republican national convention would support him. Koerner did not really need to tell immigrants to distrust a politician who had a record of opposing them. He cannot take much credit for the fact that once the business of immigrant rights was settled, German Americans were prepared to go along with the will of the convention.

Overall, *Your Friend, As Ever* suggests that German immigrants were "idealistic revolutionaries" who have never received their due for Lincoln's election and the subsequent abolition of slavery (13). This is Allendorf's most problematic act of overselling. The tone of ethnic self-righteousness and grievance is not scholarly. It takes the specific efforts of certain German-American Republicans and portrays them as the essential characteristics of an ethnic group. German-born politicians did lobby effectively for retaining the rights of European immigrants, and some German-American Republicans also strongly supported African-American citizenship. Koerner himself was a moderate who focused on stemming the extension of slavery westward. He never had much interest in black rights beyond emancipation, and he returned to the Democratic Party before the end of Reconstruction. Crucially, about half of German-born voters never left the party that solidly supported foreign-born whites—but not native-born blacks—in the first place. Giving these details the emphasis they deserve does complicate things, but it need not detract from the idea that immigrants were powerful actors in the Civil War era.

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Civil War Era (Cambridge University Press, 2013). She has essays forthcoming in the *Journal of the Civil War Era* and in an Oxford University Press volume on the Gettysburg Address. Her longer-term projects include a piece on an 1872 arms scandal and a book on immigration and suicide.