

Remarks at Lincoln Bicentennial

February 12, 2009

What, I have asked myself, would be Lincoln's reaction as he looks down on this celebration of his 200th birthday, and observes that an African-American, Barack Obama, was inaugurated as President of the United States only 23 days ago?

Surprise? One must assume so.

But much more than surprise, one has to believe, would be Lincoln's enormous satisfaction that the Civil War had not only saved the Union, but had set in motion the abolishment of slavery, that monstrous denial of the grand but unfulfilled promise that Thomas Jefferson had written into the Declaration of Independence -- that "all men are created equal." Surely, Lincoln would be fulfilled to see that the years and years of struggle that followed the Civil War, waged by so many, to overcome racism and prejudice had led to an election demonstrating perhaps more than any other single event in the history of our country that we not only profess that all men are created equal but are prepared to recognize this through the election of an African-American to the highest office in this great land.

We all have read books about Lincoln, probably many of them. We have all drawn values and lessons from Lincoln's life. I would cite three.

The first is his perseverance. To contemplate the setbacks in this man's life is to remind oneself never to be discouraged. Early in his life, he

started a country store and it failed. He was deeply in love with a woman who died before they could be married. He ran for the US Senate two times and lost both times. He lost two of his four sons to death before he died. Yet he never lost faith, he never lost the determination to be all he could be, he never gave up.

Second, there is Lincoln's moral integrity -- Importantly, his unswerving belief that slavery was wrong. As he said in one speech, "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong". Undeniably, for most of his life Lincoln believed that the Constitution mandated the preservation of slavery in states where it was already established. Socially, he probably did not see African-Americans as the full equals of Whites. For a long time, he favored colonization of freed slaves and early in the war even countermanded an emancipation proclamation by two of his generals. Unquestionably, in these days, Lincoln took the preservation of the Union as his highest goal, higher than the elimination of slavery.

But equally, Lincoln held to the deep moral conviction that slavery was wrong. Again and again he insisted that slavery could not, must not, be allowed to expand into new territory. And he was convinced that slavery would die and must die a natural death where it already existed.

His unwillingness to compromise on this was unwavering. Have you ever heard the commitment to do what is right expressed better than Lincoln did in his Cooper Union address in 1860, *"Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it"*.

The South recognized Lincoln's unyielding commitment to stop slavery's expansion and his conviction that it was destined to die. That

is what led to the Confederate states' secession, then the Civil War, and then the abolition of slavery.

The last quality of Lincoln which I deeply admire was his openness to continue to learn, to the evolution of his thinking, for example, on what to do about slavery where it already existed, and the extent to which this evolution seemed to be increasingly inspired in the later stages of his life by a deepening belief that God's providence demanded that the moral outrage of slavery be struck down in fulfillment of the sacrifice and suffering of the Civil War.

This conviction emerged fully and unforgettably in Lincoln's Second Inaugural which came only six weeks before his death. I know of no greater example of intellectual rigor and moral clarity. Lincoln said it plainly: slavery had caused the war. He recognized soberly how both sides had "read the same Bible and prayed to the same God." "It may seem strange," Lincoln said, "that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not, that we be not judged".

And then, expressing the profound conclusion that this Civil War would not be concluded without the abolishment of slavery, Lincoln declared: "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's 250 years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said 3,000 years ago, so still it must be said, 'the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether'".

I said earlier that I greatly admire Lincoln's ability to continue to learn. He did this not just philosophically, but personally. I find that

particularly striking in his appreciation of Frederick Douglass. In August, 1864, at a moment when most people thought he would lose the upcoming election, he called Douglas to his office to ask him to lead a party into the South to spread the word that the slaves were free.

I also love the story of how he looked to Douglass to validate his Second Inaugural address. As a group rallied around the President following the address, Lincoln exclaimed, "Here comes my friend Douglass". Taking me by the hand, Douglass recalled, Lincoln said "I am glad to see you. I saw you in the crowd today, listening to my Inaugural address; how did you like it?" To which Douglass replied: "Mr. Lincoln, I must not detain you with my poor opinion, when there are thousands waiting to shake hands with you." "No, no," Lincoln said. "You must stop a little, Douglass; there is no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours. I want to know what you think of it." To which Douglass replied "Mr. Lincoln that was a sacred effort."

I began my remarks by asking -- what might be Lincoln's reaction in observing the election of Barack Obama?"

I think part of that reaction would have captured Lincoln's sometimes ironic sense of humor. We just might hear him say: "Why not. Like me, Obama was a skinny lawyer from Illinois. We were both one-term Congressmen. We were both underdogs, longshots at the beginning of our campaign. We were ridiculed for our lack of experience; why, in my case, President John Quincy Adams' son greeted the news of my election with the caustic comment that "in the history of our government, no experiment so rash has ever been made as that of elevating to the head of affairs a man with so little previous preparation for his task as Mr. Lincoln".

I suppose Lincoln might have added that he and Obama share a gift of expressing their thoughts in ways that deeply inspire.

Without doubt, he would emphasize that our new President faces major challenges, just as he did, that call for the best in us in our time.

Yes, I believe we would hear Lincoln call on each of us to do everything in our power to meet these challenges – to support and respect one another -- to, in that empowering refrain, “do our duty as we understand it” -- so that, even more, we and every man, woman and child will have the opportunity to fulfill their full potential.

Thank you for allowing me to be part of this celebration.

JEP:pmc

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1287/125 = 10.3 mins.