

Declaration of Independence by Lewis Lehrman

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“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,” President Abraham Lincoln declared at Gettysburg on November 1863.¹

As a 33-year-old state legislator two decades earlier, Lincoln had said: “Of our political revolution of ‘76, we all are justly proud. It has given us a degree of political freedom, far exceeding that of any other nation of the earth. In it the world has found a solution of the long mooted problem, as to the capability of man to govern himself. In it was the germ which has vegetated, and still is to grow and expand into the universal liberty of mankind.”² Almost twenty years later, as President-elect, Lincoln said: “I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence.”³

During the 1850s, while opposing the expansion of slavery, Lincoln was disturbed by the movement to expand slavery. Liberty became a recurring theme in Lincoln’s public pronouncements. “Most governments have been based, practically, on the denial of equal rights of men...ours began, by affirming those rights. They said, some men are too ignorant, and vicious, to share in government,” Lincoln wrote in 1854. “Possibly so, said we; and, by your system, you would always keep them ignorant, and vicious. We proposed to give all a chance; and we expected the weak to grow stronger, the ignorant wiser; and all better, and happier together.”⁴ Four years later, Lincoln declared that “the love of liberty...God has planted in our bosoms.”⁵

Americans, Lincoln worried, were losing their dedication to freedom. “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-evidence truth,” Lincoln wrote in 1855, “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.’”⁶ Still, Lincoln insisted the Declaration was “[a] stumbling block to those who in aftertimes might seek to turn a free people back into the hateful paths of despotism.”⁷

In his 1858 campaign against Senator Stephen A. Douglas, candidate Lincoln spoke of July 4: “We hold this annual celebration to remind ourselves of all the good done in this process of time, of how it was done and who did it, and how we are historically connected with it; and we go from these meetings in better humor with ourselves, we feel more attached the one to the other, and more firmly bound to the country we inhabit. In every way we are better men in the age, and race, and country in which we live, for these celebrations.”

Lincoln noted that the promise of the Declaration of Independence had not yet been

¹ CWAL, p. Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863.

² Temperance Address at Springfield, February 22, 1842.

³ Speech at Philadelphia, February 22, 1861.

⁴ Fragment on slavery, circa July 1854.

⁵ CWAL, Volume III, p. 95 (Speech at Edwardsville, September 11, 1858).

⁶ Letter to George Robertson, August 15, 1855.

⁷ CWAL, Volume II, p. 407 (Springfield Illinois, speech, June 26, 1857)

fulfilled: “There is something else connected with it. We have...among us, perhaps half our people, who are not descendants at all of these men[of the Revolution]; they are men who have come from Europe...If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those [revolutionary] days by blood, they find they have none, they cannot carry themselves back into that glorious epoch and make themselves feel that they are part of us, but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence, they find that those old men say that ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh, of the men who wrote that Declaration; and so they are.’”⁸

Lincoln never forgot that it was the Declaration of Independence upon which the nation was founded. Furthermore, it set the standard for its continued existence. “I leave you, hoping that the lamp of liberty will burn in your bosoms until there shall no longer be a doubt that all men are created free and equal,” he told a Chicago audience in July, 1858.⁹ “The Union is much older than the Constitution,” Lincoln declared in his First Inaugural Address on March 4, 1861. “It was formed in fact, by the Articles of Association in 1774. It was matured and continued by the Declaration of Independence in 1776.”¹⁰

Lincoln embraced liberty for all, telling a Cincinnati audience in September 1859: “I saw that there is room enough for us all to be free, and that it not only does not wrong the white man that the negro should be free, but it positively wrongs the mass of the white men that the negro should be enslaved; that the mass of white men are really injured by the effects of slave-labor in the vicinity of the fields of their own labor.”¹¹

Liberty was so fundamental for the President that he would carefully explain it in April 1864: “We all declare for liberty; but in using the same word we do not all mean the same thing,” he told visitors to the Sanitary Fair, Baltimore, Maryland, April 18, 1864. “With some the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself, and the product of his labor; while with others, the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men's labor. Here are two, not only different, but incompatible things, called by the same name -- liberty. And it follows that each of the things is, by the respective parties, called by two different and incompatible names -- liberty and tyranny.”¹²

Lincoln understood that the maintenance of independence, and the embrace of liberty entailed hard work. The world was watching the American experiment to see whether it would succeed. Lincoln believed the Declaration of Independence represented the moral core of the American union and that it set a global standard. “A fair examination of history,” the President wrote the Workingmen of Manchester, England, in January 1863, “has seemed to authorize a belief that the past action and influences of the United States were generally regarded as having been beneficent towards mankind.”¹³ In August 1864, speaking of the present and of the future, Lincoln returned to the same theme when he told soldiers in an Ohio regiment passing through Washington: “Nowhere in the world is presented a government of so much liberty and equality.

⁸ Speech at Chicago, Illinois, July 10, 1858

⁹ Speech at Chicago, July 10, 1858

¹⁰ CWAL, p. First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861.

¹¹ Speech at Cincinnati, September 17, 1859.

¹² Address at Sanitary Fair, Baltimore, Maryland, April 18, 1864

¹³ CWAL, p. Letter to the Workingmen of Manchester, England, January 19, 1863

To the humblest and poorest amongst us are held out the highest privileges and positions.”¹⁴

Lincoln understood that Americans were divided about the legacy of the nation’s founding document. Soon after his November 1860 election as president, Lincoln declared: “Let us at all times remember that all American citizens are brothers of a common country, and should dwell together in the bonds of fraternal feeling.”¹⁵

Lincoln believed that the work to protect and preserve liberty remained unfinished. His master work would come in the 272 words of the Gettysburg Address:- “It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that the government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”¹⁶

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¹⁴ CWAL, p. Speech to 148th Ohio Regiment, August 31, 1864.

¹⁵ Remarks at Springfield, November 20, 1860

¹⁶ Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863.