

Lincoln at Cooper Union

By Lewis E. Lehrman

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Abraham Lincoln loved liberty. He said he had always hated slavery.

In his Cooper Union speech of February 27, 1860, Abraham Lincoln challenged the arguments being made by Southern slaveholders in defense of the institution and in response to the Republican Party: “But you will not abide the election of a Republican president! In that supposed event, you say, you will destroy the Union; and then, you say, the great crime of having destroyed it will be upon us! That is cool. A highwayman holds a pistol to my ear, and mutters through his teeth, ‘Stand and deliver, or I shall kill you, and then you will be a murderer!’ To be sure, what the robber demanded of me—my money—was my own; and I had a clear right to keep it; but it was no more my own than my vote is my own; and the threat of death to me, to extort my money, and the threat of destruction to the Union, to extort my vote, can scarcely be distinguished in principle.”

Carefully and deliberately, Lincoln had composed a campaign position paper in the form of a speech. Lincoln was defining what was politically possible in the America of 1860 when southerners effectively controlled all three branches of government. “Let us be diverted by none of those sophistical contrivances wherewith we are so industriously plied and belabored—contrivances such as groping for some middle ground between the right and the wrong as the search of a man who should be neither a living man nor a dead man—such as a policy of ‘don’t care’ on a question about which all true men do care—such as Union appeals beseeching true Union men to yield to Disunionists reversing the divine rule, and calling, not the sinners, but the righteous to repentance—such invocation to Washington, imploring men to unsay what Washington said, and undo what Washington do.”

Six years before Cooper Union in his Peoria speech of October 1854, Lincoln drew the line between right and wrong, between slavery and opposition to slavery’s spread. Four years later in September 1858, Lincoln said at Edwardsville: “My friends, I have endeavored to show you the logical consequences of the Dred Scott decision, which holds that the people of a Territory cannot prevent the establishment of Slavery in their midst. I have stated what cannot be gainsayed—that the grounds upon which this decision is made are equally applicable to the Free States as to the Free Territories, and that the peculiar reasons put forth by Judge Douglas for endorsing this decision, commit him in advance to the next decision, and to all other decisions emanating from the same source. Now, when by all these means you have succeeded in dehumanizing the negro; when you have put him down, and made it forever impossible for him to be but as the beasts of the field; when you have extinguished his soul, and placed him where the ray of hope is blown out in darkness like that which broods over the spirits of the damned; are you quite

sure the demon which you have roused will not turn and rend you? What constitutes the bulwark of our own liberty and independence?"

Lincoln added: "It is not our frowning battlements, our bristling sea coats, the guns of our war steamers, or the strength of our gallant and disciplined army. These are not our reliance against a resumption of tyranny in our fair land. All of them may be turned against our liberties, without making us stronger or weaker for the struggle. Our reliance is in the love of liberty which God has planted in our bosoms. Our defense is in the preservation of the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands, every where."

In an October 1859 letter to Ohio Congressman Thomas Corwin, Lincoln had declared that slavery was the sole "living issue of the day." He told Corwin that the next Republican presidential candidate had to make a clear statement about the immorality of slavery: "It is idiotic to think otherwise."

Less than three months before the Republican National Convention in Chicago, Lincoln traveled to New York to make a clear statement, in his Cooper Union speech, about the future of slavery. One New York Republican recalled: "Lincoln's methods as a political leader and orator were known to one or two men on the committee, but his name was still unfamiliar to an Eastern audience. It was understood that the new leader from the West was going to talk to New York about the fight against slavery. It is probable that at least the larger part of the audience expected something 'wild and wooly.'"

Publisher George Haven Putnam observed: "As the speech progressed, however, the speaker seemed to get into control of himself; the voice gained a natural and impressive modulation, the gestures were dignified and appropriate, and the hearers came under the influence of the earnest look from the deeply-set eyes and of the absolute integrity of purpose and of devotion to principle which were behind the thought and the words of the speaker. In place of a 'wild and wooly' talk, illuminated by more or less incongruous anecdotes; in place of a high-strung exhortation of general principles or of a fierce protest against Southern arrogance, the New Yorkers had presented to them a calm but forcible series of well-reasoned considerations upon which their action as citizens was to be based."

Before he left New York City, Mr. Lincoln proofed his speech for publication in the New York Tribune. "The Speech of Abraham Lincoln at the Cooper Institute last evening was one of the happiest and most convincing political arguments ever made in the City, and was addressed to a crowded and most appreciating audience," editorialized Tribune Editor Horace Greeley. "Since the days of Clay and Webster, no man has spoken to a larger assemblage of the intellect and mental culture of our City. Mr. Lincoln is one of Nature's orators, using his rare power solely and effectively to elucidate and to convince, though their inevitable effect is to delight and electrify as well."

The New York Post also printed the speech. Its editor, William Cullen Bryant, wrote: "When we have such a speech as that of Abraham Lincoln, of Illinois, delivered at the

Cooper Institute last evening to a crowded, deeply interested and enthusiastic audience, we are tempted to wish that our columns were indefinitely elastic..... That part of it in which the speaker places the republican party on the very ground occupied by the framers of our constitution and fathers of our republic, strikes us as particularly forcible.”

Lincoln was the last of the American Founders.

Lewis E. Lehrman is cofounder of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History and author of Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point (Stackpole Books, 2008). This is the second of two commentaries from him on Lincoln; the nation remembered Lincoln's birthday on Tuesday, Feb. 12.