

Lincoln's fears for the fate of the Declaration

By Lewis E. Lehrman

July 4, 2014
Stamford Advocate

Young Robert Todd Lincoln was a practical young man. At boarding school in May 1860, the 16-year-old was informed that his father had won the Republican presidential nomination. Robert reportedly replied "Good! I will write home for a check before he spends all of his money in the campaign."

Six weeks later, Robert himself was drawn into the presidential campaign when he was asked to read the Declaration of Independence to the assembled residents of Stratham Hill, N.H. Robert, then a month shy of his 17th birthday, supposedly requested permission from his father, who replied: "Tell Bob to read that immortal document every chance he has, and the bigger the crowd, the louder he must holler."

The elder Lincoln had long worried about the fate of the Declaration of Independence. "The fourth of July has not quite dwindled away, it is still a great day -- for burning fire-crackers," wrote Abraham Lincoln. The Declaration of Independence was never far from Abraham Lincoln's focus.

"On the question of liberty, as a principle, we are not what we have been," Lincoln lamented in August 1855. "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 evident truth; 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.'"

Lincoln scholar Harry Jaffa commented on "the indissoluble unity of Lincoln's three permanent and unchanging goals: preserving the right of free elections, preserving the Union, and placing slavery in the course of ultimate extinction. These three ends were distinguishable in Lincoln's mind only as different aspects of one sovereign purpose, represented by the principles of the Declaration of Independence."

Again in 1857, Lincoln had complained that America's reverence for the Founding had deteriorated: "In those days, our Declaration was held sacred by all, and thought to include all; but now, to aid in making the bondage of the negro universal and eternal, it is assailed, and sneered at, and construed, and hawked at, and torn, till, if its framers could rise from their graves, they could not at all recognize it."

For Lincoln, this was unacceptable. The Declaration of Independence was not only sacred to Americans; it was vital to lovers of freedom around the world.

In 1842, Lincoln had declared: "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 of the nations of the earth. In it the world has found a solution of that 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."

Lincoln's faith in the American people was evident during the Civil War when in 1864 the president told the Philadelphia Sanitary Fair that the nation was not to be deterred either by adversary or adversity in pursuit of Union and freedom: "(F)or the American people so far as my knowledge enables me to speak, I say we are going through on this line (of attack) if it takes three years more."

President Lincoln sounded the trumpet that there would be no retreat in the fight for liberty.

Lewis E. Lehrman is co-founder of the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History. He is author of "Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point" (Stackpole Books, 2008) and "Lincoln `by littles' " (TLI Books, 2013).