

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN INTERPRETS THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Abraham Lincoln was quick to sense the inspirational value of an anniversary occasion. After the Union victories on July 4, 1863, the Chief Executive was serenaded and by way of introduction said:

"How long ago is it?—eighty-odd years since, on the Fourth of July, for the first time in the history of the world, a nation, by its representatives, assembled and declared, as a self-evident truth, 'that all men are created equal'. That was the birthday of the United States of America."

All Should Have an Equal Chance

On the eve of Washington's birthday, 1861, and on the day itself, Lincoln was called upon to deliver a total of three addresses in Philadelphia. Certain phrases he used are here compiled for the purpose of showing his reaction to the papers which emanated from Independence Hall:

"I am filled with deep emotion at finding myself standing in this place where were collected together the wisdom, the patriotism, the devotion to principle, from which sprang the institutions under which we live. . . . as it were, to listen to those breathings rising within the consecrated walls wherein the Constitution of the United States, and, I will add, the Declaration of Independence, were originally framed and adopted.

I assure you and your mayor that I had hoped on this occasion, and upon all occasions during my life, that I shall do nothing inconsistent with the teachings of these holy and most sacred walls. All my political warfare has been in favor of the teachings that come forth from these sacred walls. . . . all the political sentiments I entertain have been drawn, so far as I have been able to draw them, from the sentiments which originated in and were given to the world from this hall. I have never had a feeling, politically, that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence. . . . May my right hand forget its cunning and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I ever prove false to those teachings. . . .

I have often pondered over the dangers which were incurred by the men who assembled here and framed and adopted that Declaration. I have pondered over the toils that were endured by the officers and soldiers of the army who achieved that independence. I have often inquired of myself what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of separation of the colonies from the motherland, but that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty not alone to the people of this country, but hope to all the world, for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights would be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that all should have an equal chance. This is the sentiment embodied in the Declaration of Independence."

Individual Rights of Man

On June 26, 1857, Abraham Lincoln delivered an address at Springfield, Illinois, in which he referred to a statement made by Douglas that the equality phrase in the Declaration of Independence meant equality of "British Subjects". Lincoln reacted towards this theory as follows:

"I had thought the Declaration promised something better than the condition of British subjects; but no, it only meant that we should be equal to them in their own oppressed and unequal condition. According to that, it gave no promise that, having kicked off the king and lords of Great Britain, we should not at once be saddled with a king and lords of our own.

"I had thought the Declaration contemplated the progressive improvement in the condition of all men everywhere; but no, it merely 'was adopted for the purpose of justifying the colonists in the eyes of the civilized world in withdrawing their allegiance from the British crown, and dissolving their connection with the mother country.' Why, that object having been effected some eighty years ago, the Declaration is of no practical use now—mere rubbish—old wadding left to rot on the battle-field after the victory is won.

"I understand you are preparing to celebrate the 'Fourth', tomorrow week. What for? The doings of that day had no reference to the present; and quite half of you are not even descendants of those who were referred to at that day. But I suppose you will celebrate, and will even go so far as to read the Declaration. Suppose, after you read it once in the old-fashioned way, you read it once more with Judge Douglas's version. It will then run thus: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all British subjects who were on this continent eighty-one years ago, were created equal to all British subjects born and then residing in Great Britain.'

And now I appeal to all, are you really willing that the Declaration shall thus be frittered away?—thus left no more, at most, than an interesting memorial of the dead past?—thus shorn of its vitality and practical value, and left without the germ or even the suggestion of the individual rights of man in it?"

The Electric Cord That Links Patriotic Hearts

The speech delivered by Lincoln in Springfield on June 16, 1858, had much more in it than that one political and religious parallel about the "House Divided Against Itself." It had a very definite reference to the Fourth of July and the Declaration of Independence. It follows in part:

"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. But after we have done all this, we have not yet reached the whole. There is something else connected with it. We have, besides these men—descended by blood from our ancestors—among us, perhaps half our people who are not descendants at all of these men; they are men who have come from Europe—German, Irish, French, and Scandinavian—men that have come from Europe themselves, or whose ancestors have come hither and settled here, finding themselves our equal in all things. If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those 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. That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world."