

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, of Fort Wayne, Indiana

No. 574

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

April 8, 1940

LINCOLN'S LAST WORDS ON RECONSTRUCTION

The last public address which Abraham Lincoln made was delivered seventy-five years ago, on the eleventh day of April, 1865. The theme of his message was Reconstruction and his attitude was altogether conciliatory. The occasion for these remarks was a serenade on the White House lawn, where the people had gathered to celebrate Grant's victory which seemed to be a harbinger of peace. The introductory words of the President reveal the temper of the people:

"We meet this evening not in sorrow, but in gladness of heart. The evacuation of Petersburg and Richmond, and the surrender of the principal insurgent army, give hope of a righteous and speedy peace, whose joyous expression cannot be restrained."

Three days later Lincoln was assassinated.

Within the past year civilization has observed two major nations overpower their weaker contestants and impose upon them almost unbearable terms. When Robert E. Lee surrendered to U. S. Grant after four years of unparalleled civil war, there was no evidence of ill will between the leaders, and generous and humane terms of peace were extended to the vanquished. The spirit of revenge was farthest from the view of those who would have had the power to impose it.

When Lincoln presented his Reconstruction Address, just one month and one week had passed since he had delivered his Second Inaugural. In the latter state paper he had expressed a desire "to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations." He had recognized in the address the grave responsibilities of both North and South in bringing on this struggle, but without malice and with charity he proposed to bind up the nation's wounds.

The President expressed the hope for a righteous peace and almost in the next breath seemed to call on God to bless such a procedure. He had in mind an enduring peace, or, as he had expressed it in a letter to a friend a year or more before, "Peace does not appear so distant as it did. I hope it will come soon, and come to stay; and so come as to be worth the keeping in all future time."

Lincoln did not look for a Utopia to emerge from the debris of four years carnage, and he gave no evidence of posing as a solvent for the ills which he knew would follow. He frankly admitted that the task of Reconstruction was "fraught with great difficulty," especially as there was no single spokesman who could voice the sentiment of those out of harmony with the national authority.

The desire of the President to present a practical discussion on his views about Reconstruction led him to submit a concrete illustration as to how the Louisiana situation evolving from his Annual Message of 1863, had progressed up to that time. This somewhat detailed and technical review of a specific case to a great extent obscured the humane and altogether sincere approach which he hoped to make to the whole subject of Reconstruction, but there does crop out here and there certain attitudes which are worth observing.

The very essence of a Democracy, we are told, is in keeping the people informed about government procedure. There was no undercover work in the Louisiana situation as far as Lincoln was concerned. He stated that he had done "just so much as and no more than the public knows." It is evident that in his program of Reconstruction the people were to be kept informed about each step in the process.

No one has ever questioned Lincoln's determination to support a proposition which his best thought confirmed, and on the Louisiana situation he said, "My promise is out." Yet Lincoln never took the attitude that he was infallible and said very definitely that if he made a bad promise he would break it "if it is adverse to the public interest." Lincoln's method of arriving at a conclusion, however, was a pretty good guarantee that he would not have to reverse himself. His promises were invariably something more than political stimulants.

The President had something very definite to say about questions which would be raised primarily to cause mistrust and dissention. He designated as "merely a pernicious abstraction" an attempt to discuss whether or not certain states had been outside the Union. He concluded that "finding themselves safe at home, it would be utterly immaterial whether they had ever been abroad." It is evident that there would be no quibbling about the relation of the southern states to the Union, if he were to plan the Reconstruction.

Possibly the most important fact that the President tried to impress upon his listeners during this last public address was that patience and forbearance must be practiced, and this revealed the real method which he expected to pursue. The illustration which he used to drive home this important fact could hardly be excelled:

"Concede that the new government of Louisiana is only to what it should be, as the egg is to the fowl, we shall sooner have the fowl by hatching the egg than by smashing it."

His concluding suggestion was also wise and judicious and removed any thought of regimentation with reference to the Reconstruction plans. He said:

"So great peculiarities pertain to each state, and such important and sudden changes occur in the same state, and withal so new and unprecedented is the whole case that no exclusive and inflexible plan can safely be prescribed as to details and collaterals. . . . Such exclusive and inflexible plan would surely become a new entanglement. Important principles may and must be flexible."

In the light of what Lincoln had already discussed and in the sympathetic attitude which he displayed in this last public address, it is to be sincerely regretted that the great hope which he was apparently holding out to the stricken people of the Southland was never realized. These were the last words which he uttered before the people on the problem of Reconstruction:

"It may be my duty to make some new announcement to the people of the South. I am considering, and shall not fail to act when satisfied that action is proper."

Death made impossible the new announcement and his just and righteous considerations were never expressed.