

LINCOLN LORE

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MEDITATIONS FOR INDEPENDENCE DAY

Evidently recalling the events of a Fourth of July just past, Lincoln wrote to his friend, George Robertson, in 1855: "The Fourth of July has not quite dwindled away; it is still a great day—for burning fire-crackers."

Possibly there is something for us to do on this coming Independence Day that would be more appropriate than "burning fire-crackers" or anticipating the rumbling of the big guns of the nation.

It will be remembered that Lincoln chose Independence Day, July 4, 1861, on which to deliver his message to the special session of Congress then convened. He was a very time-conscious individual and the anniversary day meant much to him.

Perhaps on this anniversary day we could meditate to great advantage on the contributions our nation might even yet make through peaceful channels to the betterment of a world order.

Abraham Lincoln states that when he first began to read, say at about twelve years of age, he secured Weems' *Life of Washington*, and was greatly stirred by the dramatic story of the gaining of independence and the subsequent administration of our first President.

The Founders

Possibly the earliest sentiment which Lincoln experienced while reading the book was a deep veneration for the fathers—for their bravery and their wisdom. They became almost as a fetish with him, and he referred to them as "pillars of the temple of liberty" and then lamented, "now that they have crumbled away that temple must fall unless we, their descendants, supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason."

The founders were to him as a forest of giant oaks, but he concluded, "the all-restless hurricane has swept over them, and left only here and there a lonely trunk, despoiled of its verdure, shorn of its foliage, unshading and unshaded, to murmur in a few more gentle breezes, and to combat with its mutilated limbs a few more ruder storms, then to sink and be no more."

The foregoing outbursts of appreciation for the founders was made when he was but twenty-eight years old. Just a few weeks before his death Lincoln had occasion to pay a tribute to the Pilgrims. He said, "The work of the Plymouth emigrants was the glory of their age. While we reverence their memory, let us not forget how vastly greater is our opportunity."

The Constitution

Next to a keen appreciation for what the fathers were, he was also deeply moved by what they did, especially the gift they gave to the nation, of certain writings in the form of a Declaration and a Constitution.

When one studies Lincoln's attitude toward these early documents of the fathers, he is vividly impressed with the deep reverence Lincoln had for that most sacred instrument, the Constitution of the United States of America.

As early as 1848 Lincoln made a speech in the United States House of Representatives in which he touched upon the suggestion that the Constitution might be amended. He said:

"I wish now to submit a few remarks on the general proposition of amending the Constitution. As a general

rule, I think we would much better let it alone. No slight occasion should tempt us to touch it. Better not take the first step, which may lead to a habit of altering it. Better, rather, habituate ourselves to think of it as unalterable. It can scarcely be made better than it is. New provisions would introduce new difficulties, and thus create and increase appetite for further change. No, sir; let it stand as it is. New hands have never touched it. The men who made it have done their work, and have passed away. Who shall improve on what they did?"

Lincoln's famous Cooper Union speech in New York, delivered in 1860 before his nomination for the Presidency, allows us to appreciate that in 1860 he was still under the impression the Constitution should not be revised unless there was a preponderance of evidence demanding its amendment. He remarked:

"It is surely safe to assume that the thirty-nine framers of the original Constitution, and the seventy-six members of the Congress which framed the amendments thereto, taken together, do certainly include those who may be fairly called 'our fathers who framed the government under which we live' . . . I do not mean to say we are bound to follow implicitly in whatever our fathers did. To do so would be to discard all the lights of current experience—to reject all progress, all improvement. What I do say is that if we would supplant the opinions and policy of our fathers in any case, we should do so upon evidence so conclusive, and argument so clear, that even their great authority, fairly considered and weighed, cannot stand."

Declaration of Independence

Lincoln's appreciation of the founders was due in a measure to the fact that he lived while many of them survived, and there was what we might call a personal satisfaction in their achievements. His interest in the Constitution was more or less provincial as it had to do solely with our own country. It was the Declaration of Independence, however, which gave him the broader view as he observed it as a far-reaching principle which if properly demonstrated here might become a great world influence.

In speaking of his appreciation for the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, he said in an address in Independence Hall at Philadelphia on February 22, 1861: "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."

It will be observed by this quotation that Lincoln felt these papers were of international importance, and he observed it was "the 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." This was the same expression he had used at Trenton, New Jersey, the day before in speaking to the Legislature assembled when he said, upon referring to his reading Weems' *Washington*: "I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that those men struggled for . . . something even more than national independence; something that held out a great promise to all the people of all the world for all the time to come."

Is it possible that on this July the Fourth, 1940, the Declaration of Independence holds out no great hope to mankind? Has our demonstration of Independence failed to sell the world on the idea of personal liberty? Was Abraham Lincoln's vision as a boy a fantastic dream?