

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S VISION FOR AMERICA

One usually thinks of a nation as an enduring and permanent society which survives indefinitely. The events of the last year or two have made us wonder just how much dependence can be put on this viewpoint.

Certain nations have lived nobly enough to make telling marks on civilization, and many of the earlier groups, although now weak and disorganized, have been our greatest benefactors. If the Hebrews had done nothing else but given the world an indispensable moral code and a character who was the supreme exemplification of superior living, these contributions alone should have made all peoples forever indebted to them. The same might be said about the Greeks with their enduring interpretations in the field of art.

For what will America—now an adolescent nation—be remembered if she ever lives through her "playboy" days and takes seriously her responsibility in a changing world groping for a consummate social order. It might be concluded from her exhaustive compilation of statistical data, displaying her economic supremacy in such commodities as automobiles, telephones, air-conditioned homes, and the like, that her major contribution to civilization will be measured by her achievements in the field of technology.

Who might be eligible to speak with some degree of accuracy as to the special field in which the United States would be best qualified to excel and to make a telling contribution to men of all the coming days? It would appear as if Abraham Lincoln, the American who has best interpreted by his own personal life and works the very spirit of her people, should be heard with some degree of interest.

Abraham Lincoln was born in Kentucky when it was the frontier state of the nation. As a small lad he moved with the migration westward to the territory of Indiana and still later to Illinois whose western boundary is the Mississippi. Here he felt the very pulse of national expansion and witnessed the indomitable courage of both men and women who settled the prairie lands.

A large percentage of these early courageous pioneers brought with them to the west the very spirit of heroic builders in a new nation, having themselves helped to plan the foundation in the years following 1776. In the large they were not soldiers, Indian fighters, hunters, adventurers, and explorers but home-seekers. Fertility of soil, good water, climate, marketing facilities, and health conditions were more important than wild game or gold mines.

They built their homes in the open country where liberty abounded and where hard work was the order of the day. Here in the midst of these people Lincoln observed the foundation laid for our experience as a new civilization.

While Lincoln could not be blind to the economic progress that was being made in the country, he was far more interested in political trends which were to determine the character of this new people. On one occasion in referring to the Declaration of Independence, he called it "That immortal emblem of humanity."

Even as a young man in his twenties he had a vision of the durability of the new venture, and he came to the conclusion that "as a nation of free men we must live for all time or die by suicide." It was truly a land of unequalled possibilities, and after stating that "the work of the Plymouth emigrants was the glory of their age" he continued, "Let us not forget how vastly greater is our opportunity."

His faith in the immortality of the nation and its world mission was never shaken. In the midst of our internal difficulties he remarked: "Our common country is in great peril, demanding the loftiest views and boldest action to bring it speedy relief. Once relieved, its form of government is saved to the world, its beloved history and cherished memories are vindicated, and its happy future fully assured and rendered inconceivably grand."

If one were to try and discover the earliest conceptions of patriotism which were entertained by Lincoln, he would find Weems' *Life of Washington* a most fruitful source. No one may question Lincoln's admiration for Washington, and his familiarity with the words and works of the father of the country are well known. This appreciation in a large measure was created and stimulated by Lincoln's reading of Weems' dramatic story of the nation's birth.

It is in a reference made to the founding fathers as portrayed by Weems that we discover Lincoln's remarkable vision for America. On his way to the inauguration in 1861 he had been invited to speak before the senate of New Jersey at Trenton, and found himself greatly moved by the atmosphere of the historic city. He remarked that as a youth when he first began to read, he learned about the Revolutionary contests there and was deeply impressed by the struggles of the fathers. Then followed a remarkable conclusion which might well be called "Lincoln's Vision for America." Referring to his reminiscences of early boyhood he said:

"I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that these men struggled for. I am exceedingly anxious that that thing—that something even more than national independence; that something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come—I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made, and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be a humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle."

Lincoln had no vision of enforcing democracy on other nations by military superiority; he had no thought of any testing of military strength in a world conflict against other forms of social order; he did have this great hope for America—that she would preserve a heritage of freedom which would be the envy of the whole world, and that her real contribution to civilization would be social rather than economic. This thought is embodied in Lincoln's famous statement, "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."