

LINCOLN LORE

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"JUSTICE TO ALL"

No characteristic of Abraham Lincoln more truly portrays his philosophy of life than his desire for justice to prevail. His abiding passion of "Justice for all" was the guiding urge that eventually caused him to lead all the people into a fuller appreciation of the democratic form of government.

No finer expression of Lincoln's attitude toward men and issues could be found than James G. Blaine's testimonial: "He loved the truth for the truth's sake. He would not argue from a false premise, or be deceived himself, or deceive others, by a false conclusion. He did not seek to say merely the thing which was best for that day's debate, but the thing which would stand the test of time and square with eternal justice."

George Eliot spoke of justice in this way: "Who shall put his finger on the work of justice and say, 'It is there'? Justice is like the Kingdom of God: It is not without us as a fact; it is within us as a great yearning."

A brief editorial by John Carlyle is to the point: "Lincoln had a simple, clear-functioning sense of justice. That does not mean that he merely appreciated justice as an abstract good, that he detected its place in life and recognized it freely in the lives and habits of others. It means that he had the passion for justice within himself."

Social Justice

Abraham Lincoln as a very small child was deeply moved by the slavery agitation of the day. This fact may be confirmed by a letter to Mr. Hodges of Lexington, Kentucky, in 1864. Lincoln wrote: "I am naturally anti-slavery. If slavery is not wrong nothing is wrong. I do not remember when I did not so think and feel."

There are those who have claimed that Abraham Lincoln was moved to attack slavery for political expediency, but in 1854 he said at Peoria, "I hate it because of the monstrous injustice." Slavery was pre-eminently a moral issue with Lincoln, as we may conclude from words spoken at Columbus, Ohio, in 1859. He remarked that "he supposed there was a question of God's eternal justice wrapped up in enslaving any race of men."

Possibly Lincoln's melancholy spirit may be traced in some degree to his keen sense of social justice. One who wants to see the right prevail in a world full of so much injustice is not likely to find happiness everywhere. Lincoln wrote an interesting letter to his friend Joshua Speed in 1855, fourteen years after they had made a trip on a steamboat where they witnessed "slaves shackled together with irons." Lincoln reminded Speed of this scene in these words: "That sight was a continual torment to me, and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio or any other slave border. It is not fair for you to assume that I have no interest in a thing which has, and continually exercises the power of making me miserable."

His attitude toward social justice might be summed up in these words spoken at Urbana, Illinois, on October 24, 1854: "Slavery is founded on the selfishness of man's nature—opposition to it, in his love of justice."

Justice in the Courts

Possibly Abraham Lincoln's success as a lawyer was primarily due to the fact that his own personal attitude

toward justice was in harmony with the supreme objective of the courts.

Judge Davis who was on the bench part of the time Lincoln was practicing law on the circuit made this comment: "He hated wrong and oppression everywhere, and many a man whose fraudulent conduct was undergoing review in a court of justice has writhed under his terrible indignation and rebukes."

Another testimonial by Judge Drummond who knew him well gives further light on his legal practice. The judge said Lincoln "never intentionally misrepresented the evidence of a witness, nor the argument of an opponent. He met both squarely, and, if he could not explain the one or answer the other, substantially admitted it. He never misstated the law, according to his own intelligent view of it."

There were some situations that Lincoln faced after assuming the Presidency which show his veneration for justice in the courts. This advice to Secretary Usher on a troublesome question is illustrative of his attitude: "My view of the case is not changed. I believe the law is with the State; and yet I think it is ungracious to be pressing the claim at this time of national trouble. Nevertheless I have to ask that you will determine what is your duty according to the law, and then do it."

Another difficulty arose where there seemed to be a legal clash between state and national authorities, and Lincoln commented: "I still hope advantage from the law; and being a law, it must be treated as such by all of us."

Justice in Politics

It is difficult for one to be blind to social justice, and justice in the courts is to be expected, but justice in the field of politics is another matter. Lincoln found this out soon after his election to the Presidency, if he had not already experienced it.

There was a justice in patronage which Lincoln tried to recognize, and he soon found himself confronted by Thurlow Weed who was claiming to distribute patronage by the President's authority. Lincoln wrote to him about the matter and said, "I do not believe that you have so claimed; but still so some men say. On that subject you know all I have said to you is 'Justice to all', and I have said nothing more particular to anyone."

Another ambitious politician who wanted to see some of his friends favored and took occasion to warn Lincoln about unjust appointments, received this reply: "I will myself take care of the question of 'corrupt jobs' and see that justice is done to all our friends of whom you wrote as well as others."

Still another political friend from Illinois approached him about patronage and Lincoln wrote to him: "It cannot have failed to strike you that these men ask for just the same thing—fairness and fairness only. This so far as in my power they and all others shall have."

Men may look in vain through Lincoln's career for any acts committed which might reflect on his passion for justice in social groups, legal contests, and political maneuvers.