

LINCOLN LORE

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

Number 625

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

March 31, 1941

DEMOCRACY PERSONIFIED

Woodrow Wilson contributed to *The Forum* magazine in 1894 an article under the caption "A Calendar of Great Americans." After reviewing the accomplishments of many of our outstanding citizens, he came to a consideration of Lincoln whom he called "the supreme American of our history." In further commenting upon him Wilson said, "As he stands there in his complete manhood, at the most perilous helm in Christendom, what a marvelous composite figure he is! The whole country is summed up in him." It was Wilson's idea, as he clearly states, that the North, the South, the East, and the West all found expression in Lincoln, which made him Democracy Personified.

Liberty

No word is more often associated with Democracy than Liberty, and Lincoln, in a fragment prepared in 1860, seems to interpret the very spirit which fosters it. He said, "Even these (the Constitution and Union) are not the primary cause of our great prosperity. There is something back of these, entwining itself more closely about the human heart. That something is the principle of 'Liberty to all'—the principle that clears the path for all—gives hope to all—and, by consequence, enterprise and industry to all."

Individualism

There can be no question but what Lincoln looked upon the individual as the supreme unit in a democracy. He stated, "I am for each individual doing just as he chooses in all matters which concern nobody else."

Fraternity

As early as 1842 Abraham Lincoln had a conception of our type of government that was all-inclusive. He said, "True democracy makes no inquiry about the color of the skin, of place, of nativity, or any other similar circumstances of condition."

Opportunity

Lincoln thought of democracy as "that form and substance of government whose leading object is to elevate the condition of men—to lift artificial weights from all shoulders; to clear the path of laudable pursuit for all; to afford all an unfettered start, and a fair chance in the race of life."

Perfection

Speaking in Chicago in 1858 Lincoln had occasion to refer to the scriptural quotation about perfection as the Christian objective. He felt there was a valuable parallel in the democratic ideal of equality. "So I say in relation to the principle that all men are created equal, let it be as nearly reached as we can. If we cannot give freedom to every creature, let us do nothing that will impose slavery upon any other creature."

Equality

Equality was another expression which Lincoln used which stood for democratic idealism. He scribbled on a piece of paper in 1858 this interesting notation, "I believe the declaration that 'all men are created equal' is the great fundamental principle upon which our free institutions rest."

Self-government

Another synonym for democracy from Lincoln's viewpoint was self-government. During a speech in Chicago he said, "No man believes more than I do in the principle of self-government; it lies at the bottom of all my ideas of just government from beginning to end." This idea he expressed in a negative form at Urbana in 1854, "No man is good enough to govern another man without that other's consent."

Free Institutions

Lincoln felt that an economic description of a democracy might be visualized by the term free institutions and stated that "It may be affirmed without extravagance that the free institutions we enjoy have developed the powers and improved the condition of our whole people beyond any example in the world."

Majority in Restraint

Lincoln did not look upon majority rule as a democratic principle but according to his view it was "a majority held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitations." This authority he called "The only true sovereign of a free people."

Weakness

Sometimes Lincoln wondered whether or not democracy could survive as is indicated by these questions which he propounded to Congress on July 4, 1861: "Is there in all republics, this inherent and fatal weakness? Must a government, of necessity, be too strong for the liberties of its own people, or too weak to maintain its own existence?"

Hope

On Washington's birthday 1861 Lincoln was deeply moved by standing in Independence Hall, but he was able to look beyond any selfish interpretation of freedom and to visualize a universal gift. He saw in the Declaration that sentiment "which gave liberty not alone to the people of this country, but hope to all the world, for all future time."

Immortality

Lincoln was under the impression that the principle of democracy was immortal. He said, "Men will pass away—die, die politically and naturally; but the principle will live, and live forever."

AS I WOULD NOT BE A SLAVE,
SO I WOULD NOT BE A MASTER.
THIS EXPRESSES MY IDEA OF
DEMOCRACY.
WHATEVER DIFFERS FROM THIS,
TO THE EXTENT OF THE DIFFERENCE,
IS NO DEMOCRACY.

A. LINCOLN