

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN STRESSES EQUALITY

The coronation ceremonies have provided a colorful background for a study of Lincoln's emphasis on what he called "the fundamental principle" in the Declaration of Independence. The anniversary day of "that immortal emblem of humanity" seems to have slipped by with very little attention paid to it, while throughout the nation for several weeks the preliminaries and final rites of the coronation were spread before readers of the daily press and periodicals. Radio and television contributed much to the general interest of the coronation exercises.

The old English law of primogeniture established as early as the twelfth century which gives preference to the first born son, found expression in the coronation by the first born daughter Elizabeth being eligible for the crown instead of her younger sister Margaret. It was this same English law of superiority that moved the state of Virginia to rescind it as early as 1785. The statute did not square with the statement in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal." Aside from its influence in the general repudiation of the English law of descent the equality clause was given little attention until stressed by Abraham Lincoln. One hundred and one years ago today he pronounced a eulogy on Henry Clay who had passed away on June 29, 1852. In this address he presented Clay's views opposing slavery and then made this interesting comment: "An increasing number of men . . . are beginning to assail . . . the declaration that 'all men are created free and equal.'" The leader of this group was Stephen A. Douglas, who two years later was able to engineer the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. It was this action that brought Lincoln back into politics and made him a thorn in the flesh of the Little Giant thereafter.

Douglas in the debate with Lincoln at Ottawa stated, "I am opposed to negro citizenship in any and every form. I believe this government was made on the white basis. I believe it was made by white men for the benefit of white men and their posterity for ever, and I am in favor of confining citizenship to white men, men of European birth and descent, instead of conferring it upon negroes, Indians, and other inferior races."

Over against this interpretation by Douglas of the equality clause in the Declaration we find this viewpoint expressed by Lincoln:

"I think the authors of that noble instrument intended to include all men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal in all respects. They did not mean to say they were equal in color, size, intellect, moral development, social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness in what respect they did consider all men equal—equal in 'certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'."

Speaking at Peoria on October 16, 1854, with reference to the compromise and its purposes Mr. Lincoln said, "My ancient faith teaches me that 'all men are created equal'" and this axiom might well be called the slogan on Lincoln's political banner until he became President. Then it was changed to "The Union must be

preserved." In fact from 1854 until his death the objectives announced by these two phrases guided all his political efforts. During a speech in Chicago on December 10, 1856 Lincoln stressed the importance of the equality term in the declaration with this observance, "Public opinion on any subject, always has a 'central idea' from which all its minor thoughts radiate. The 'central idea' in our public opinion at the beginning was, and until recently has continued to be, 'the equality of men'."

Lincoln further contended that the declaration was something more than the publication of a grievance setting us apart from the mother country. He thought that it "contemplated the progressive improvement in the condition of all men everywhere." He also felt that it presented an all time challenge to humanity which he put in these words:

"They meant to set up a standard maxim for a free society, which should be familiar to all and revered by all; constantly looked up to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere."

Eleven years after, almost to the day, that Lincoln made his preliminary statement about equality in the eulogy to Henry Clay he addressed the people of Washington, and in his introductory words inquired, "How long ago is it?—eighty odd years—since on the Fourth of July for the first time in the history of the world a nation by its representatives assembled and declared as a self-evident truth that 'all men are created equal.'" Although this was considered a very brief speech, three different times he used the equality expression.

On another July day in 1858 Lincoln recalling the birthday of the nation directs attention to the "German, Irish, French and Scandinavian—men that have come from Europe themselves, or whose ancestors have come hither and settled here, finding themselves our equals in all things." He continued with the emphasis that "all men are created equal" and states that the expression "is the father of all moral principles in them" as well as "the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of liberty loving men together."

When Abraham Lincoln was in Independence Hall in Philadelphia on February 22, 1861, he stated, "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embraced in the Declaration of Independence." Further in the address he stresses this conception of the equality of men.

"I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the motherland, but that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty not only to the people of this country but hope to the world, for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights would be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and then all should have an equal chance."