

LINCOLN LORE

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

Number 1291

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

January 4, 1954

LIBERTY AND "MAN'S VAST FUTURE"

There is little evidence that Abraham Lincoln paid any attention to archaeology, but he was intensely interested in what he termed "man's vast future," especially, as it might be influenced by the principle of liberty. This season of the year extends a general invitation for everyone to look ahead for twelve months, at the least, and it might be an appropriate time to observe some of the Emancipator's conclusions about our obligations to a more far reaching prosperity.

Lincoln once recalled, "Away back in my childhood, the earliest days of my being able to read, I got a hold of a small book . . . *Weems' Life of Washington*. I remember all the accounts there given of the struggles for the liberties of the country." For instance, one must have been the Concord and Lexington episode presented by Weems in this dramatic word picture: "Never before had the bosoms of the swains experienced such a tumult of heroic passions. Then throwing aside the implements of husbandry, and leaving their teams in the half-finished furrows, they flew to their houses; snatched up their arms; and bursting from their wild shrieking wives and children, hastened to the glorious field where LIBERTY, heaven-born goddess, was to be bought for blood."

Possibly the contests with the Hessians at Trenton left a more indelible impression as preliminary to the battle Weems personifies Liberty in these words: "Pale and slowly moving along the neighboring hills was seen (by Fancy's eye) the weeping *Genius of Liberty*. Driven from the rest of the world she had fled to the wild woods of America as to an assured asylum of rest."

Reminiscences of these and other stirring pictures by Weems led Lincoln to make this remarkable testimony: "I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was that there must have been something more than common that those men struggled for . . . that something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come." He then stated that he was "exceedingly anxious" that "the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made."

While in his twenties the young Lincoln prepared a speech in which he more clearly defined "that something more than common" that had challenged the founding fathers. After reviewing their task of building "a political edifice of liberty and equal rights" he proposed that it was their descendants' obligation to transmit these principles "to the latest generation that fate will permit the world to know."

About to assume the Presidency, at the very beginning of his journey to Washington, he again stressed the necessity of perpetuating the ideals of the fathers in almost the same language he had used in his early years. In addressing the citizens of Indianapolis he proposed: "Not with politicians, not with Presidents, not with office seekers, but with you, is the question, shall the union and shall the liberties of this country be preserved to the latest generations?"

However, it was on the following day at Lawrenceville, Indiana, in a very brief speech from the platform of the train, while anticipating his elevation to the Presidency, that he combined the time element in this charge to the people, "My power is temporary. Yours as eternal as the principles of liberty."

It would be interesting to note how many of the arguments contained in the First Inaugural Address which the President elect had already written and which he had with him on the train, leaked out by littles in these extemporaneous speeches, at various stops on the way to Washington. Certainly this sentiment which we find in the address found expression in several extemporaneous speeches: "Continue to execute all the express provisions of our national constitution and the Union will endure forever."

Upon assuming the Presidency, the political structure which by oath he had promised to "preserve, protect and defend," took on, for him, a more illustrious form. In an appeal to the border state representatives, on behalf of Compensated Emancipation, he said: "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."

These words were reflected in the President's message to Congress some months later when he wrote: "The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation." Then he continued, "We can but press on, guided by the best light He gives us, trusting that in His own good time, and wise way, all will yet be well."

About midway in Lincoln's administration there seems to have been in both his personal correspondence and speeches a new note of literary excellency that superseded his former writings. A letter which he wrote to Jams C. Conkling on August 26, 1863 illustrates this new terminology in which he uses a more eloquent phrase for "the latest generations."

In one of the closing paragraphs of the letter appears this literary gem: "The signs look better. The Father of Waters again goes unvexed to the Sea. Thanks to the great north-west for it. Nor yet wholly to them. Three hundred miles up they met New England, Empire, Keystone and Jersey hewing their way right and left. . . . Thanks to all. For the great republic—for the principle it lives by, and keeps alive—for man's vast future—thanks to all."

Lincoln seemed to feel that the struggle of the nation to maintain the principle of liberty and equal rights was somehow linked with "man's vast future" and he concluded the Conkling letter with what becomes almost a benediction:

"Peace does not appear so distant as it did. I hope it will come soon, and come to stay; and so comes as to be worth the keeping in all future time."

At Gettysburg, less than three months later, again using his superb terminology he came to the grand climax of his nativity theme by resolving that the nation shall have a "new birth of freedom" so with liberty reborn and the nation rejuvenated, he asserts that popular government "shall not perish from the earth."

Addressing an Ohio Regiment on their way to their homes the President emphasized the grand objective of the struggle in which they had been engaged in these words: "Is it not merely for today, but for all time to come, that we should perpetuate for our children's children this great free government which we have enjoyed all our lives."