

LINCOLN

&

THE RACE PROBLEM

Speech at The Republican Club – New York City
February 13, 1905

In his second inaugural, in a speech which I will be read as long as the memory of this Nation endures, Abraham Lincoln closed by saying:

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations."

Immediately after his re-election he had already spoken thus:

"The strife of the election is but human nature practically applied to the facts of the case. What has occurred in this case must ever recur in similar cases. Human nature will not change. In any future great National trial, compared with the men of this, we shall have as weak and as strong, as silly and as wise, as bad and as good. Let us, therefore, study the incidents of this as philosophy to learn wisdom from, and none of them as wrongs to be revenged...May not all having a common interest reunite in a common effort to (serve) our common country? For my own part, I have striven and shall strive to avoid placing any obstacle in the way. So long as I have been here I have not willingly planted a thorn in any man's bosom. While I am deeply sensible to the high compliment of a re-election, and duly grateful, as I trust, to Almighty God for having directed my countrymen to a right conclusion, as I think, for their own good, it adds nothing to my satisfaction that any other man may be disappointed or pained by the result.

May I ask those who have not differed with me to join with me in this same spirit toward those who have?"

This is the spirit in which mighty Lincoln sought to bind up the Nation's wounds when its soul was yet seething with fierce hatreds, with wrath, with rancor, with all the evil and dreadful passions provoked by civil war. Surely this is the spirit which all Americans should show now, when there is so little excuse for malice or rancor or hatred, when there is so little of vital consequence to divide brother from brother.

Lincoln, himself a man of Southern birth, did not hesitate to appeal to the sword when he became satisfied that in no other way could the Union be saved, for high though he put peace he put righteousness still higher. He warred for the Union; he warred to free the slave and when he warred he warred in earnest, for it is a sign of weakness to be half-hearted when blows must be struck. But he felt only love, a love as deep as the tenderness of his great and sad heart, for all his countrymen alike in the North and in the South, and he longed above everything for the day when they should once more be knit together in the unbreakable bonds of eternal friendship.

We of to-day, in dealing with all our fellow-citizens, white or colored, North or South should strive to show just the qualities that Lincoln showed - his steadfastness in striving after the right and his infinite patience and forbearance with those who saw that right less clearly than he did; his earnest endeavor to do what was best, and yet his readiness to accept the best that was practicable when the ideal best was unattainable; his unceasing effort to cure what was evil, coupled with his refusal to make a bad situation worse by any ill-judged or ill-timed effort to make it better.

The great Civil War, in which Lincoln towered as the loftiest figure, left us not only a reunited country, but a country which has the proud right to claim as its own the glory won alike by those who wore the blue and by those who wore the gray, by those who followed Grant and by those who followed Lee; for both fought with equal bravery and with equal sincerity of conviction, each striving for the light as it was given him to see the light; though it is now clear to all that the triumph of the cause of freedom and of the Union was essential to the welfare of mankind. We are now one people, a people with failings which we must not blink, but a people with great qualities in which we have the right to feel just pride.

All good Americans who dwell in the North must, because they are good Americans, feel the most earnest friendship for their fellow-countrymen who dwell in the South, a friendship all the greater because it is in the South that we find in its most acute phase one of the gravest problems before our people: the problem of so dealing with the man of one color as to secure him the rights that no one would grudge him if he were of another color. To solve this problem it is, of course, necessary to educate him to perform the duties, a failure to perform which will render him a curse to himself and to all around him.

Most certainly all clear-sighted and generous men in the North appreciate the difficulty and perplexity of this problem, sympathize with the South in the embarrassment of conditions for which she is not alone responsible, feel an honest wish to help her where help is practicable, and have the heartiest respect for those brave and earnest men of the South who, in the face of fearful difficulties, are doing all that men can do for the betterment alike of white and of black. The attitude of the North toward the negro is far from what it should be, and there is need that the North also should act in good faith upon the principle of giving to each man what is justly due him, of treating him on his worth as a man, granting him no special favors, but denying him no proper opportunity for labor and the reward of labor. But the peculiar circumstances of the South render the problem there far greater and far more acute.

Neither I nor any other man can say that any given way of approaching that problem will present in our times even an approximately perfect solution, but we can safely say that there can never be such solution at all unless we approach it with the effort to do fair and equal justice among all men; and to demand from them in return just and fair treatment for others. Our effort should be to secure to each man, whatever his color, equality of opportunity, equality of treatment before the law. As a people striving to shape our actions in accordance with the great law of righteousness we can not afford to take part in or be indifferent to oppression or maltreatment of any man who, against crushing disadvantages, has by his own industry, energy, self-respect, and perseverance struggled upward to a position which would entitle him to the respect of his fellows, if only his skin were of a different hue.

Every generous impulse in us revolts at the thought of thrusting down instead of helping up such a man. To deny any man the fair treatment granted to others no better than he is to commit a wrong upon him - a wrong sure to react in the long run upon those guilty of such denial. The only safe principle upon which Americans can act is that of "all men up," not that of "some men down." If in any community the level of intelligence, morality, and thrift among the colored men can be raised, it is, humanly speaking, sure that the same level among the whites will be raised to an even higher degree; and it is no less sure that the debasement of the blacks will in the end carry with it an attendant debasement of the whites.

The problem is so to adjust the relations between two races of different ethnic type that the rights of neither be abridged nor jeopardized; that the backward race be trained so that it may enter into the possession of true freedom while the forward race is enabled to preserve unharmed the high civilization wrought out by its forefathers. The working out of this problem must necessarily be slow; it is not possible in offhand fashion to obtain or to confer the priceless boons of freedom, industrial efficiency, political capacity, and domestic morality. Nor is it only necessary to train the colored man; it is quite as necessary to train the white man, for on his shoulders rests a well-nigh unparalleled sociological responsibility. It is a problem demanding the best thought, the utmost patience, the most earnest effort, the broadest charity, of the statesman, the student, the philanthropist; of the leaders of thought in every department of our national life. The Church can be a most important factor in solving it aright. But above all else we need for its successful solution the sober, kindly, steadfast, unselfish performance of duty by the average plain citizen in his everyday dealings with his fellows.

I am speaking on the occasion of the celebration of the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, and to men who count it their peculiar privilege that they have the right to hold Lincoln's memory dear, and the duty to strive to work along the lines that he laid down. We can pay most fitting homage to his memory by doing the tasks allotted to us in the spirit in which he did the infinitely greater and more terrible tasks allotted to him.

Let us be steadfast for the right; but let us err on the side of generosity rather than on the side of vindictiveness toward those who differ from us as to the method of attaining the right. Let us never forget our duty to help in uplifting the lowly, to shield from wrong the humble; and let us likewise act in a spirit of the broadest and frankest generosity toward all our brothers, all our fellow-countrymen; in a spirit proceeding not from weakness but from strength; a spirit which takes no more account of locality than it does of class or of creed; a spirit which is resolutely bent on seeing that the Union which Washington founded and which Lincoln saved from destruction shall grow nobler and greater throughout the ages.

I believe in this country with all my heart and soul. I believe that our people will in the end rise level to every need, will in the end triumph over every difficulty that arises before them. I could not have such confident faith in the destiny of this mighty people if I had it merely as regards one portion of that people. Throughout our land things on the whole have grown better and not worse, and this is as true of one part of the country as it is of another. I believe in the Southerner as I believe in the Northerner. I claim the right to feel pride in his great qualities and in his great deeds exactly as I feel pride in the great qualities and deeds of every other American. For weal or for woe we are knit together, and we shall go up or go down together; and I believe that we shall go up and not down, that we shall go forward instead of halting and falling back, because I have an abiding faith in the generosity, the courage, the resolution, and the common sense of all my countrymen.

The Southern States face difficult problems; and so do the Northern States. Some of the problems are the same for the entire country. Others exist in greater intensity in one section, and yet others exist in greater intensity in another section. But in the end they will all be solved; for fundamentally our people are the same throughout this land; the same in the qualities of heart and brain and hand which have made this Republic what it is in the great today; which will make it what it is to be in the infinitely greater to-morrow. I admire and respect and believe in and have faith in the men and women of the South as I admire and respect and believe in and have faith in the men and women of the North. All of us alike, Northerners and Southerners, Easterners and Westerners, can best prove our fealty to the Nation's post by the way in which we do the Nation's work in the present; for only thus can we be sure that our children's children shall inherit Abraham Lincoln's single-hearted devotion to the great unchanging creed that "righteousness exalteth a nation."