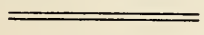


ABRAHAM LINCOLN
POLITICIAN and PATRIOT

An Address
By
Hon. Nathaniel C. Sears



Union League Club, Chicago
February 12, 1920

For Prof Albert H Griffith
with compliments to

Nathaniel C. Sears

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN—Politician and Patriot

An Address

Given by

THE HON. NATHANIEL C. SEARS

(Formerly Justice of the Appellate Court
of Illinois)

*At a Banquet at the Union League Club, Chicago, in Com-
memoration of ABRAHAM LINCOLN, Thursday Evening,
February 12, 1920.*

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen: The life of Abraham Lincoln presents a theme to stir the heart of an orator—and upon it the most gifted word-painters of a nation have spent their powers. His humble origin, his marvelous career, defying birth and circumstance as elements in achievement, and his tragic death, all unite to inspire eloquence—and our literature is full of it.

It would be idle for me to try to add anything to those many splendid tributes; for I could bring you nothing new. Neither shall I attempt to analyze the personality and character of Abraham Lincoln. They defy analysis. One who tries it is lead into such a maze of apparent contradiction that he soon abandons the attempt as futile.

For example, you are told that Lincoln was of ungainly form, awkward, and ill-favored, and then one day you stand in the great playground which bears his name, in Lincoln Park, before the statue in heroic bronze, done by Saint Gaudens, and, if you stop to study it, you say, "Yes, awkward, perhaps ungainly, and yet, either the hand of the sculptor was false to its task or here was a man, a form, of dignity, of majesty, having the beauty of strength."

You are aware of the abundant, quaint humor of Lincoln, sparkling throughout every day of his public and private life; and then you learn that he was a man of sorrow, upon whose sad, patient face was written the story of suffering.

You are inclined to regard him as a master of statecraft; and so he was. For in the assemblage of his war cabinet, as brilliant a group of statesmen as ever surrounded any president, he was easily the leader, the master-spirit of them all. Then you find that prior to that time his only experience, outside of state and county, his only experience in national politics was as a country postmaster without a post-office, carrying the letters in his hat, and one term in Congress, where he did not shine.

You are inclined to look upon him as a military genius. And he was. For it is no disparagement to the memory of Grant or Sherman to say that from that first day at Sumter

until the last day at Appomattox his was the mind which moved the armies and navies of the Union. Then you find that his only schooling in the art of warfare was as captain of a volunteer company in the Blackhawk Indian war, where he not only was never engaged with the enemy but, as a matter of fact, never saw an Indian.

You have heard read here tonight the speech which fell from his lips on the battlefield of Gettysburg, a classic, recognized by the world as one of the notable creations in a century of literature. And then his biographer tells you that he was not a man of letters!

You know that he hated slavery; that he uttered the proclamation which made the Negro free, and you hear him called the Great Emancipator; and then history tells you that in the beginning of the struggle he was no abolitionist; that while Wendell Phillips and Charles Sumner were thundering denunciation of slavery and demand for its abolition, from every platform of New England, Abraham Lincoln, himself the product of a slave state, as representative of his adopted state of Illinois, was voting in the National Congress upon a measure to extend the fugitive slave law to the District of Columbia, and that he voted "aye."

You are told that he was a man of no well defined religious convictions, of no church, of no creed. And then you find that he held steadfast belief in a Divine Providence shaping the affairs of men, that he turned to the Holy Bible for daily guidance; and you know that in his great heart there was somewhat of the Christ passion for saving men. And then, and then, you give it up and admit that analysis is baffled.

So, without any attempt at tribute of eloquence or critical analysis, I will simply try, if I can, to find in the life of Abraham Lincoln a truth, a lesson which may be of use to us in our day.

It seems to me that the one supreme lesson to be found in the life of Abraham Lincoln by him who reads it aright is that the loyal love of a great heart, whether for individual or for native land, whether in the affairs of men or in the story of nations, is the greatest thing in all the world; for before it pride and ambition and lust for power and greed of gain and all the lesser passions which move men, vanish; and if you should try to put in one single word the antithesis which the life of Abraham Lincoln presents to that of Benedict Arnold, you could do it through none other than the one little word which, since the day of the divine tragedy, has become the very greatest word in all the languages of men.

The motive of Lincoln's life was love of the Union. It was the keystone of all his conduct. Any attempt to measure his acts without applying to them that yardstick fails. Upon the

altar of his love for the Union he laid pride and ambition.

When Mr. Lincoln appointed his first cabinet, the war cabinet, he might have been expected to choose his faithful friends, his loyal followers, men who would be devoted to his political fortunes. So other presidents have done before and since. He might even have chosen inferior men who, by lack of genius, would serve as a foil to his greater powers. Instances have not been lacking where it has been sought to hold down and humiliate men greater than themselves through fear of rivalry. Abraham Lincoln chose for his official family, as the men to be pushed into national prominence, his political rivals. They were men of brilliant parts, learned scholars, profound statesmen, eloquent orators. Lincoln must have thought it certain that this coterie of brilliant men would far outshine the plain country lawyer, the man of homespun. And they were his rivals; they had been his rivals before and they had it in their hearts to be his rivals still. They regarded his nomination and election as a political blunder, and they did not propose to see it repeated—and Lincoln knew it. Why then did he choose them? Was it lack of pride or ambition? No. Lincoln was proud, with the honest pride of achievement. More than once when that pride had been touched and wounded he had driven Stephen A. Douglas, the little giant of the West, from the platform of joint debate, smarting with humiliation.

Lincoln was ambitious. No man could climb from the valley to the heights and tire so soon of its exaltation. No president ever desired a second term more keenly than did Lincoln. Why then did he choose his rivals for his cabinet? Because he knew that their hostility to him could be made an asset for his country in its hour of need; because he knew that these strong men, leaders of divergent factions, could unite all factions for the saving of the Union, and because he loved that Union more than he loved Abraham Lincoln. So, too, in his attitude toward slavery, Lincoln was a stickler for the Constitution. The Constitution meant more to the men of his day than it does to us. I am aware that it is studied in our schools, but I sometimes think that it is studied a good deal as are the canals on Mars—as something an uncommonly long way off. In Lincoln's day it was newer and the people valued it, treasured it, mentally fondled it as a new possession and as the charter of their liberties.

The great Chief Justice John Marshall from the Supreme Bench and Daniel Webster at the bar of that court and on the floor of the Senate had expounded it, and they had for their pupils not a few astute lawyers but a nation. The great newspapers of that day, Horace Greeley's New York Tribune and Samuel Bowles' Springfield Republican, our own Chi-

cago Tribune and other papers carried these lessons from the lips of the expounders to the people, and the people of that day were editorial readers.

The Civil War is frequently spoken of and looked upon as a war for and against slavery. It was that, but it was more. It was the conflict of two distinct civilizations. It was more than that—it was a battle for and against national unity. The gentlemen who, sitting at Charleston, undertook to vote a state out of the Union were not the first to cherish like plans. Others had dreamed dreams of principalities and confederacies to be carved out of the domain of the republic. It was the maggot in the brain of the brilliant grandson of Jonathan Edwards, but neither Aaron Burr nor any other had brought it to so sharp an issue as was now presented. Different men in the North looking at the war from the standpoint of their different sentiments drew different conclusions. Abraham Lincoln from the very outset, with a clearer vision, which outran the wisdom of statesmen, saw beyond the question of Negro slavery, beyond the clash of Southern pride and Northern conscience, behind it all looming up the spectre of disunion. He saw that in the impending conflict would be settled for his day and for many a day to come, if not for all time, the question of national unity or national disruption. He saw at the end of that struggle either a republic, battered into fragments, its name a by-word in the mouths of monarchs across the sea, its fall the death knell to the cause of freedom everywhere; or else a republic coming from its baptism of fire and blood, stronger, grander, more invincible than ever! (Applause.)

Just as long as Abraham Lincoln believed that forcible emancipation violated constitutional rights, and therefore was ill-advised; just as long as he believed that while we were whipping the South back under the Constitution was a bad time to trifle with it in the North; just as long as he thought that forcible emancipation would hinder the cause of the Union, he was against it; and when he found he had been in error, that forcible emancipation would help the saving of the Union, he issued the historic proclamation. Abraham Lincoln could be firm, firm as adamant, but he never allowed firmness to degenerate into obstinacy, and he never let pride of opinion weigh against the welfare of the nation. (Applause.)

It was not that Lincoln hated slavery less than did Beecher and Garrison and Lovejoy, but he loved the Union more than he hated anything.

Abraham Lincoln was a politician. He was a statesman, but before he became a statesman, he was a politician. Let us see if he were not.

At 23 years of age he was a candidate for the Illinois Legislature, and defeated.

In the same year, his 24th year, he was a candidate for appointment as postmaster at New Salem, and he got the appointment.

In his 25th year he was a candidate for appointment as Deputy County Surveyor, and was successful.

In his 26th year he was again a candidate for the Legislature, and this time he was elected.

In his 28th year he was a third time a candidate for the Legislature, and a second time elected.

In his 30th year he was a fourth time candidate for the Legislature, and a third time elected, and in that year he was candidate for Speaker of the House, and defeated.

In his 32nd year he was a fifth time candidate for the Legislature, and a fourth time elected; and he again, for the second time, became candidate for Speaker, and was a second time defeated.

At 34 he was a candidate for Congress, and was defeated. At 35 he was a candidate for Presidential Elector, and was defeated. At 36 he was a second time a candidate for Congress, and this time he was elected.

At 39 he was elected a delegate to the National Whig Convention.

At 40 he was a candidate for appointment as Commissioner of the General Land Office, and was defeated.

At 43 he was again candidate for Presidential Elector, and was again defeated.

At 46 he was a candidate for the United States Senate, and was defeated by Senator Trumbull.

At 47 he was a candidate for nomination for the Vice Presidency on the Fremont ticket, and although he received 110 votes in the convention, he was defeated.

At 49 he was a second time candidate for the United States Senate, and a second time defeated, this time by Judge Douglas.

And at 51, a hero of defeat, he was nominated for the Presidency, and by his election became the leader of a people and the Saviour of a Nation. (Applause.)

Surely, Abraham Lincoln was a politician, a holder of office and a seeker for office. Does that fact dim the lustre of his fame? Find your answer in the observance of this day, when a commonwealth halts, stills its throbbing industries, stops the wheels of commerce, turns the key in the door of factory, office and schoolhouse, that a whole people, men, women and little children, may unite in paying homage to the memory of a man who was politician and patriot, too.

The American citizen who reads history aright thanks God that Lincoln was a politician. For had he not been, had it not been for his activity in the affairs of township and county and state, had it not been for the stump speeches in front of the little grocery store at New Salem, there would have been no joint debate with Stephen A. Douglas, and Abraham Lincoln, in the hour of his nation's agony, might have pondered that nation's problem as he rode the circuit over the lonely prairies of Illinois. You and I may well be thankful that Abraham Lincoln was a politician.

And yet, ladies and gentlemen, it is a singular fact, a fact not less sad than singular, the most remarkable fact, I think, in the history of self-government, that in less than fifty years after the close of that masterful life, while his memory was still fresh in the hearts of his countrymen, it had become unfashionable, unpopular in these United States to be a politician. The word "politician" had become almost a term of reproach. The young man was counseled by those concerned in his safety and success to have none of it; and men of affairs, men of parts, men of intellect, the prominent men of the community, made their boast that they belonged to no party and took no interest in politics.

I wonder if during the war for independence some soldier of the Revolution, some soldier of Washington's army may not have some time tried to forget the cold and hunger as he lay in his tent at Valley Forge by drawing mental pictures of what his countrymen would one day enjoy at the cost of his sacrifice; I wonder if such an one may not have had visions of an election day in the new republic that was to be in the years to come when his countrymen, freed from kingly rule, enjoying the blood-bought privilege of political freedom, would all flock from farm and factory and office and home to the polls to exercise the freeman's right of self-government. And then I wonder what such an one would say if he could come back and see a primary or election in one of our large cities in our day; could see some polling places deserted, save for a few officials; could see others manned by men of alien birth, hardly long enough in the land to have learned its language; could see the prominent citizen, the man of affairs, the descendant likely enough of Puritan New England (the birthplace of the town meeting), the gentleman who makes his boast that he belongs to no party and takes no interest in politics, could see him hurrying away in his motor car for a day in the country or to the golf links, fearful lest some over zealous captain of precinct catch him and lead him reluctantly to the polling place—the freeman's seat of self-government.

Abraham Lincoln was a politician. He did not esteem

himself either too good or too great to take an active part in the affairs of his community and his commonwealth. The young man of today says, perhaps, "No such opportunity comes to me as came to Lincoln. His were stirring times; he was the servant of destiny; no such crisis will come in my day." A crisis did come with the Great War. And who shall say that another crisis, even greater perhaps, is not now in the making? No man with open eyes who dares to look can fail to see the peril of today. It has grown at frightful pace in the last few years, partly due to the great war, partly because it has been pampered in high places. But it is not new. It is as old as the conflict between too little and too much. I believe that this peril was held in check, perhaps lessened, for a period of years, some time before the great war; and that this was so was due to the advent in public life of one man; one who, like Abraham Lincoln, was a politician, a holder of office and a seeker of office; one who, when his hour of opportunity struck, like an armed knight leaped into the arena of American politics and threw down his gauntlet against every form of oppression and wrong. I do not know what you may think of Theodore Roosevelt (great applause)—yes, I think I do know. (Laughter.) I for one believe that he did more to quell the rising tide of discontent among the poor and humble of his countrymen, more to stay the growing peril which springs from such discontent, than has been done by any fifty other statesmen in the last fifty years. (Great applause.) And he did it by showing to his countrymen that not wealth nor brute force, but law is still upon the throne. He did it because he was himself the finest exponent in practical politics of the golden rule which he called the "square deal." The man would be presumptuous who would venture to forecast any cure for the social and industrial unrest of today; but if I were forced to a suggestion, I should certainly turn to the Roosevelt prescription—a square deal and a big stick, to be taken together. (Great applause.)

No man can speak or think of Abraham Lincoln without asking the question in his mind, if not with his lips, What would he do if he were here today in these days of national crisis and national bewilderment? What would he say and do?

I am not going to speak much, perhaps not at all, upon either the Peace Treaty or the League of Nations. My time is about up, and those subjects are ones upon which there is very great divergence of opinion, and I have no desire to strike any note of discord here tonight, though I do believe that this audience in this place would be tolerant of the opinion of others, whether they agreed with them or not. I can-

not, however, forbear saying this: I am convinced, as a result of talk with many men and women at different places and in the course of travel, that much the greater part of our citizenship hope and believe that the Treaty of Peace and the covenant known as the "League of Nations," with such reservations as will forever safeguard the Monroe Doctrine and all American constitutional and inherent rights, will be speedily adopted. (Great applause.) And can you not imagine that if Abraham Lincoln were here today, confronted by the problems of today, he might say, "In that other war, which was my Gethsemane, there was heard upon the street corners and in the marts of trade the old cry, the world old cry, first uttered by Cain, which has come sounding down the centuries since, the cry of incarnate selfishness, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' And as the loyal manhood of the republic answered that cry in the '60's by setting the black man free, so, too, now should the loyal manhood of the greater republic make answer, 'Yes, where the honor of woman, the lives of children, or the liberties of man are imperiled, there we are our brothers' keepers.'"

(Great applause.) And if that answer shall commit the nation again, as in the case of Cuba and the distant Philippines, again overleaping its own boundaries, to reach out to bring peace and order and safety and law into chaotic Mexico or to carry a lifeline to dying Armenia, well, you and I know that the wrongs committed in Cuba and the Philippines never did so cry out to heaven as do the wrongs committed in Mexico and in Armenia; and if it shall commit us, too, some day, somewhere, to again uphold the arms of embattled democracy, why, call it fate, our destiny, or God's will, or call it what you may, but of this one thing be sure: The day has passed when this republic can build about itself a Chinese wall! (Applause.)

As we study the life of Abraham Lincoln, that many-sided life, in all its varying phases, its drolleries and its pathos, its smiles and its tears, its endearing weaknesses and its colossal strength; as we see him in the humble, unassuming form, with bent shoulders beneath the old grey shawl, and as we see him as the Commander in Chief of all the Armies and Navies of the proudest Republic the world has ever known; as we follow him from the mud-chinked cabin in the clearing to the White House and the grave; as we view him with reverent affection and through blinding tears, there comes back to us always the one lesson which his life teaches so well, that the loyal love of a great heart, whether for individual or for native land, is after all the very greatest thing in all the world; and as under its magic influence the soldier becomes a hero, the priest a martyr, so, too, may the politician become the patriot. (Great applause.)

