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# Abraham Lincoln

A selection of passages from his  
SPEECHES AND LETTERS  
with brief comments



Published on the occasion of the celebration in the  
public schools of the Philippine Islands of the hun-  
dredth anniversary of his birth, February 12, 1809

Manila  
Bureau of Printing  
1909

80109

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## EXTRACTS FROM SPEECHES AND LETTERS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

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The selections from Abraham Lincoln's speeches and letters herein given, with the exception of a single brief passage, are taken from the period following his election as President of the United States, when the days of his career as a great public debater were over. After his election to the presidency Mr. Lincoln made no argumentative speeches, although almost every public utterance is a heartfelt plea for the ends for which he was struggling. To appreciate his power and adroitness as a controversialist one must go back to the period preceding his nomination—the years of his active work in the West as an opponent of the extension of slavery. It is difficult to make extracts from these speeches for the reason that every part is closely bound together by logical arrangement, and the speeches to be appreciated must be studied in the light of the questions with which they deal. They are therefore omitted in preference for selections from his words when he was actually bearing the nation's burden in the midst of the stupendous Civil War.

Lincoln's national prominence dates from 1854. At that time he came prominently before the country as an uncompromising opponent of the further extension of slavery to Territories of the United States, particularly the region known as the Nebraska and Kansas Territories. Lincoln was at that time a man of 45; a successful lawyer with a reputation throughout the bounds of his State, Illinois; but for the past five years he had taken no part in political life. In 1820 the famous agreement made in Congress, known as the Missouri Compromise, bound both parties to agree that slavery should not extend northward of the parallel of 36° 30'. Under this agreement the slavery question was held in abeyance for thirty years, but in 1850 it became the central political issue of America and continued so until the Civil War. The issue that

NOTE.—The complete works of Abraham Lincoln have been published by Nicolay and Hay, two volumes. There are several small compilations, among them Chittenden's Abraham Lincoln's Speeches, and Speeches and Letters of Abraham Lincoln in Everyman's Library, a recent publication to which Ambassador Bryce has contributed an introduction.

particularly aroused the opponents of the extension of slavery was the determination on the part of the slave States to carry the institution into the Kansas-Nebraska Territory, a region unorganized and under the power of Congress and expressly devoted by the terms of the Missouri Compromise to freedom. It was the proposal of Senator Douglas of Illinois, one of the most prominent and influential statesmen of his day, to allow the question to be reopened and to admit Kansas and Nebraska either slave or free as the populations of those regions should determine. Lincoln's opposition to Douglas began in 1854 and continued until the issue of Civil War brought them together, Douglas then loyally supporting the Union. In 1858 Lincoln challenged Senator Douglas to appear before the people of Illinois in a series of debates on the question at issue. The challenge was somewhat reluctantly accepted by Douglas but was finally arranged, and debates were held in seven different sections of the State, representing all. It was the most famous series of political discussions ever held in the United States; crowds that for that day were enormous attended each speaking, and the utmost efforts of both of these men were put forth in these weeks of discussion. By successfully opposing one of the foremost statesmen of his day Lincoln established his reputation as a thinker of great ability and sincerity, and as a man who had a policy and dared defend it. From this time on he became a thoroughly national figure and in the West the leader of the Republican party, which organized at this time to prevent the further extension of slavery. Lincoln's policy was, that inasmuch as the Constitution guaranteed slavery in States where it was already established, its abolition was legally impossible without the consent of the people of those States, but that extended it should not be and that the utmost efforts of the freedom-loving population of the country should be devoted to keeping it within the limits where it was then known. In 1858 Lincoln went further and in what is perhaps the most important speech he ever made, delivered at Springfield, Illinois, on his nomination to the Senate of the United States, he declared his conviction that upon this matter the country could not remain divided but that it must become either all slave or all free. This brief but cogent and eloquent oration can not be condensed or abbreviated; it must be read as a whole in order to be appreciated. The opening paragraph, however, which gives it its name, is as follows:

THE "DIVIDED HOUSE" SPEECH.

JUNE 17, 1858.

"If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do, and how to do it. We are now far into the fifth year since a policy was initiated with the avowed object and confident promise of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only not ceased, but has constantly augmented. In my opinion it will not cease until a crisis shall have been reached and passed. 'A house divided against itself can not stand.' I believe this Government can not endure permanently, half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved,—I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward till it shall become alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new, North as well as South."

TO THE CITIZENS OF SPRINGFIELD, ON HIS DEPARTURE  
FOR WASHINGTON.

The remaining extracts begin with the brief but affecting words with which he bade farewell to the people of his home town, who gathered at the station for their last view of him as he left for Washington. They were spoken from the rear platform of the train.

FEBRUARY 11, 1861.

"MY FRIENDS: No one, not in my position, can appreciate the sadness I feel at this parting. To this people I owe all that I am. Here I have lived more than a quarter of a century; here my children were born, and here one of them lies buried. I know not how soon I shall see you again. A duty devolves upon me which is, perhaps, greater than that which has devolved upon any other man since the days of Washington. He never would have succeeded except by the aid of Divine Providence, upon which he at all times relied. I feel that I can not succeed without the same Divine aid which sustained him, and on the same Almighty Being I place my reliance for support; and I hope you, my

friends, will all pray that I may receive that Divine assistance, without which I can not succeed, but with which success is certain. Again I bid you an affectionate farewell."

**FROM THE FIRST INAUGURAL ADDRESS.**

Only a portion of the First Inaugural Address is given, but this fragment embraces his appeal for a peaceful settlement of the troubles that had brought the North and South to the verge of war. His determination to defend the Union and the property of the Federal Government is not so clearly apparent in this selection. His most decisive paragraph was omitted by the advice of Mr. Seward, who became his Secretary of State. To Mr. Seward also is due the thought and the figure in the concluding paragraph, but in rewriting it, Mr. Lincoln, with his unerring taste for literary style, greatly improved and simplified the language.

MARCH 4, 1861.

"\* \* \* I take the official oath to-day with no mental reservations, and with no purpose to construe the Constitution or the laws by any hypercritical rules.

"It is seventy-two years since the first inauguration of a President under our National Constitution. During that period fifteen different and greatly distinguished citizens have, in succession, administered the Executive branch of the Government. They have conducted it through many perils, and generally with great success. Yet, with all this scope of precedent, I now enter upon the same great task for the brief constitutional term of four years, under great and peculiar difficulty. A disruption of the Federal Union, heretofore only menaced, is now formidably attempted.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Physically speaking, we can not separate. We can not remove our respective sections from each other nor build an impassable wall between them. A husband and wife may be divorced, and go out of the presence and beyond the reach of each other; but the different parts of our country can not do this. They can not but remain face to face; and intercourse, either amicable or hostile, must continue between them. Is it possible, then,

to make that intercourse more advantageous or more satisfactory after separation than before? Can aliens make treaties easier than friends can make laws? Can treaties be more faithfully enforced between aliens than laws among friends? Suppose you go to war, you can not fight always; and when, after much loss on both sides and no gain on either, you cease fighting, the identical old questions as to terms of intercourse are again upon you \* \* \*.

“The Chief Magistrate derives all his authority from the people, and they have conferred none upon him to fix terms for the separation of the States. The people themselves can do this also, if they choose; but the Executive, as such, has nothing to do with it. His duty is to administer the present Government as it came to his hands, and to transmit it, unimpaired by him, to his successor.

“Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better or equal hope in the world? In our present differences, is either party without faith of being in the right? If the Almighty Ruler of Nations with His eternal truth and justice be on your side of the North, or on yours of the South, that truth and that justice will surely prevail, by the judgment of this great tribunal of the American people.

“\* \* \* My countrymen, one and all, think calmly and well upon this whole subject. Nothing valuable can be lost by taking time. If there be an object to hurry any of you in hot haste to a step which you would never take deliberately, that object will be frustrated by taking time; but no good object can be frustrated by it. Such of you as are now dissatisfied, still have the old Constitution, unimpaired, and on the sensitive point the laws of your own framing under it; while the new Administration will have no immediate power, if it would, to change either. If it were admitted that you who are dissatisfied hold the right side in the dispute, there still is no single good reason for precipitate action. Intelligence, patriotism, Christianity, and a firm reliance on Him who has never yet forsaken this favored land are still competent to adjust in the best way all our present difficulty.

“In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The Government will

not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to 'preserve, protect, and defend it.'

"I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.

"The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

#### HIS LETTER TO HORACE GREELEY.

At this date we can only slightly appreciate the violence of the criticism to which Mr. Lincoln was subjected as the war dragged on. At times he seemed to be standing quite without support from any quarter. Early in the war the opponents of slavery began urging him to declare the slaves free. Lincoln's position on the slavery question has been indicated above. He recognized that the Constitution had guaranteed slavery to the Southern States and that legally, under ordinary circumstances, it could not be annulled by the Federal Government. The only possible right by which, as President of the United States, he might decree its abolition was as a "war measure," aimed to reduce the power of the Confederacy and bring an earlier end to the conflict. Under the sanction of this right he finally acted but only after months of almost agonizing consideration. Many men in the "Border States," who had remained loyal to the Union, were slave owners; to act too soon and without their support would be to sacrifice their devotion. One of those most impatient for this action was the great journalist Horace Greeley, probably the most influential man in the United States. Finally in an open letter of the most scathing character, Greeley attacked the President for having delayed too long. Mr. Lincoln made the reply given below, which reveals his amazing self-command, and is at the same time one of the most cogent and luminous defenses of a great policy that was ever penned.



“AUGUST 22, 1862.

“I have just read yours of the 19th instant, addressed to myself through the ‘New York Tribune.’

“If there be in it any statements or assumptions of fact which I may know to be erroneous, I do not now and here controvert them.

“If there be in it any inferences which I may believe to be falsely drawn, I do not now and here argue against them.

“If there be perceptible in it an impatient and dictatorial tone, I waive it, in deference to an old friend whose heart I have always supposed to be right.

“As to the policy I ‘seem to be pursuing,’ as you say, I have not meant to leave any one in doubt. I would save the Union. I would save it in the shortest way under the Constitution.

“The sooner the national authority can be restored, the nearer the Union will be,—the Union as it was.

“If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time save slavery, I do not agree with them.

“If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time destroy slavery, I do not agree with them.

“*My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and not either to save or to destroy slavery.*

“If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that.

“What I do about slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union.

“I shall do less whenever I shall believe that what I am doing hurts the cause; and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause.

“I shall try to correct errors where shown to be errors, and I shall adopt new views as fast as they shall appear to be true views.

“I have here stated by purpose according to my views of official duty, and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed personal wish that all men everywhere could be free.”

## THE PROCLAMATION OF EMANCIPATION.

JANUARY 1, 1863.

“Whereas, on the twenty-second day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-two, a proclamation was issued by the President of the United States, containing among other things the following, to wit:

“That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves, within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward and forever, free; and the executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.

“That the Executive will, on the first day of January aforesaid, by proclamation, designate the States and parts of States, if any, in which the people thereof, respectively, shall be then in rebellion against the United States; and the fact that any State, or the people thereof, shall, on that day, be in good faith represented in the Congress of the United States, by members chosen thereto at elections wherein a majority of the qualified voters of such State shall have participated, shall, in the absence of strong countervailing testimony, be deemed conclusive evidence that such State and the people thereof, are not then in rebellion against the United States.’

“Now therefore, I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, by virtue of the power in me vested as Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, in time of actual armed rebellion against the authority and Government of the United States, and as a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing said rebellion, do, on this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and in accordance with my purpose so to do, publicly proclaimed for the full period of one hundred days from the day first above mentioned, order and designate as the States and parts of States wherein the people thereof respectively are this day in rebellion against the United States, the following, to wit:

[Here follows the enumeration.]

“And by virtue of the power and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States and parts of States are, and henceforward shall be, free; and that the executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons.

“And I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free, to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defence; and I recommend to them that in all cases when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages.

“And I further declare and make known, that such persons of suitable condition will be received into the armed service of the United States, to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.

“And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind and the gracious favor of Almighty God.”

#### HIS LETTER TO GENERAL HOOKER.

As Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the Nation, Mr. Lincoln's position was extremely difficult. There was no General Staff from which he could seek advice and the first generals appointed by him were unsuccessful. He was often obliged to deal directly with the field commanders. The letters to General Hooker and to General Grant are representative of a correspondence characterized by patience, firmness and complete self-control.

“JANUARY 26, 1863.

“GENERAL: I have placed you at the head of the army of the Potomac. Of course I have done this upon what appear to me to be sufficient reasons, and yet I think it best for you to know that there are some things in regard to which I am not quite satisfied with you. I believe you to be a brave and skillful soldier, which of course I like. I also believe you do not mix politics with your profession, in which you are right. You have confidence in yourself, which is a valuable if not an indispensable quality. You are ambitious, which, within reasonable bounds, does good rather than harm; but I think that during General Burnside's command of the army you have taken counsel of your ambition,

and thwarted him as much as you could,—in which you did a great wrong to the country, and to a most meritorious and honorable brother officer. I have heard, in such a way as to believe it, of your recently saying that the Army and the Government needed a dictator. Of course it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the command. Only those generals who gain successes can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship. The Government will support you to the utmost of its ability, which is neither more nor less than it has done and will do for all commanders. I much fear that the spirit which you have aided to infuse into the army, of criticising their commander and withholding confidence from him, will now turn upon you. I shall assist you as far as I can to put it down. Neither you nor Napoleon, if he were alive again, could get any good out of an army while such a spirit prevails in it. And now beware of rashness. Beware of rashness, but with energy and sleepless vigilance, go forward and give us victories.”

#### HIS LETTER TO GENERAL GRANT.

“APRIL 30, 1864.

“Not expecting to see you again before the spring campaign opens, I wish to express in this way my entire satisfaction with what you have done up to this time, so far as I understand it. The particulars of your plans I neither know nor seek to know. You are vigilant and self-reliant; and, pleased with this, I wish not to obtrude any constraints nor restraints upon you. While I am very anxious that any great disaster or capture of our men in great numbers shall be avoided, I know these points are less likely to escape your attention than they would be mine. If there is anything wanting which is within my power to give, do not fail to let me know it. And now, with a brave army and a just cause, may God sustain you.”

#### REMARKS AT THE DEDICATION OF THE NATIONAL CEMETERY AT GETTYSBURG.

The brief address at the field of Gettysburg is his most famous utterance. Probably it could not be improved by the change of a single word, yet it was written with a pencil on the back of a letter while riding in the train to the occasion. It has come to be recognized as one of the enduring pieces of English literature.

NOVEMBER 19, 1863.

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

"Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

"But in a larger sense we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us; that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

#### HIS LETTER TO MRS. BIXBY.

Words could not exceed in dignity and appropriateness the lines to Mrs. Bixby. It is an example of the heart-breaking sympathy which the President extended at all times to the bereaved of the war.

"NOVEMBER 21, 1864.

"DEAR MADAM,—I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts, that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from a loss so overwhelming. But I can not refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage

the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the Altar of Freedom.

### THE SECOND INAUGURAL ADDRESS.

MARCH 4, 1865.

"FELLOW-COUNTRYMEN: At this second appearing to take the oath of the presidential office, there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then a statement, somewhat in detail, of a course to be pursued, seemed fitting and proper. Now, at the expiration of four years, during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every point and phase of the great contest which still absorbs the attention and engrosses the energies of the nation, little that is new could be presented. The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself; and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.

"On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it; all sought to avert it. While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place, devoted altogether to saving the Union without war, insurgent agents were in the city seeking to destroy it without war,—seeking to dissolve the Union and divide effects, by negotiation. Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would accept war rather than let it perish. And the war came.

"One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union, even by war; while the Government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it.

“Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces; but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered—that of neither has been answered fully.

“The Almighty has His own purposes. ‘Woe unto the world because of offenses! for it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.’ If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the Providence of God, must needs come, but which having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—ferverently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn by the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, ‘The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’

“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 bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan; to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.”

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