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The Right to Rise

Abraham Lincoln and the Pursuit of Happiness

Speech by [Brian Flanagan](#), associate director of the Hauenstein Center

Two days before relinquishing the presidency in 1809, a reflective Thomas Jefferson sat down to write an old friend. “Within a few days,” he said,

I retire to my family, my books and farms; and having gained the harbor myself, I shall look on my friends still buffeting the storm, with anxiety indeed, but not with envy. Never did a prisoner, released from his chains, feel such relief as I shall on shaking off the shackles of power.[1]

The Sage of Monticello was retiring to his personal pursuit of happiness, outside the realm of public life. Little did he know that one-month earlier and five hundred miles to the west, a boy was born in the backwoods of Kentucky who would have a thing or two to say about shaking off shackles. That boy – Abraham Lincoln – would be forever linked with Jefferson’s most famous words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”[2] Jefferson would never hear the name of Abraham Lincoln, and yet he would be forever married to him in our history books and atop Mount Rushmore.

Lincoln would hark back to Jefferson’s words again and again throughout his coming political career. “Let us readopt the Declaration of Independence, and ... the practices and policy which harmonize with it,” Lincoln said in 1854.[3] “Let us revere the Declaration,” he said two years later.[4] “All honor to Jefferson,” Lincoln wrote in 1859,

to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that today, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression. [5]

On his way to take the presidential oath of office in 1861, President-elect Lincoln stopped at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, where the Continental Congress had adopted the Declaration 85-years earlier. “All the political sentiments I entertain,” he said there,

have been drawn ... from the sentiments which originated, and were given to the world, from this hall.... I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence.... It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of men, and that all should have an equal chance.[6]

Of course, as we shall see, Lincoln returned to the Declaration again when he visited the battlefield and cemetery at Gettysburg, to give new meaning to three years of blood shed between brothers.

Lincoln is most often associated with two of Jefferson’s self-evident truths: (1) that all men are created equal, and (2) that they are endowed with an unalienable right to liberty. After all, these are the clauses that Lincoln himself most referenced. Lincoln’s House Divided and Cooper Union speeches, the Lincoln-Douglas debates over Kansas-Nebraska and the moral view of slavery, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Gettysburg Address – all of these further connect Lincoln in the American imagination with equality and liberty. But there is yet another self-evident truth that permeates Lincoln’s life and career but receives considerably less attention: the pursuit of happiness. Lincoln struggled in his personal life to find happiness, and he struggled in his political life to create the conditions for public happiness. His most enduring legacy, of course, is that in the fiery trial of the Civil War, he brought forth what some historians have called a Second American revolution, overthrowing the slave power and giving a whole race of people their fair claim to Jefferson’s declaration, and the liberty – if not yet the equality and wherewithal – to pursue their happiness. These three pursuits – personal happiness, public happiness, and future happiness for the slave – are what I would like to talk to you about today.

Lincoln’s Personal Pursuit

Lincoln was born into a tough life 200 years ago. Growing up in the woods of Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, Lincoln’s family lived the independent, frontier life that Jefferson had envisioned as the life-blood of the young nation, as the ever-abundant fountain of youth. Yet for Lincoln, the West took life as quickly as it gave it. His only brother died in infancy in Kentucky. In 1818, an infectious disease spread near Abraham’s home in southern Indiana. First it infected and killed his uncle and aunt, Thomas and Elizabeth Sparrow. Then, in October, it took from him his mother, thirty-four year old Nancy Lincoln. When Abraham was seventeen, his sister married and moved out of their father’s home – a devastating development for Abraham, who was very much attached to his older sister. Less than two years later she died in childbirth, and the child – Abraham’s nephew – was stillborn. A neighbor later recalled Lincoln’s reaction to news of his sister: “He sat down in the door of the smoke house and buried his face in his hands,” the neighbor remembered. “The tears slowly trickled from between his bony fingers and his gaunt frame shook with sobs.”[7]

If the deaths of three of the most important women in his childhood caused Lincoln considerable grief, he gained little comfort from his father or the other men in his life. Thomas Lincoln, who was barely literate, never understood his son’s literary bent. Lincoln would often wander away from his chores to read a book under the shade of a tree. He would get up early in the morning to read; steal away throughout the day to read; and read well into the evening by the fireside. To his father, stepbrother, and cousins – who expected to live and die laboring on a farm – this seemed beyond indulgent; it was wasteful, lazy, contemptible. His father, not generally harsh or abusive, would often beat his son for this behavior. “Lincoln was lazy – a very lazy man,” his cousin concluded.[8] Neighbors agreed: he was “awful lazy”; “he was no hand to pitch in at work like killing snakes.”[9] Lincoln, for his part, rejected their way of life and their worldview. Such a distance came between Abraham and his father that, years later, despite pleas from his father’s bedside where he lay dying, Lincoln elected not to return home. He stayed away, too, during his father’s funeral.

If Lincoln’s childhood and adolescence were trying, his *terrible* love life brought little relief. First, there was Ann Rutledge. It’s debated among historians – as it was among contemporaries – whether or not Abraham and Ann were engaged to marry, after Lincoln left his father’s home and established himself independently in New Salem. But many believe that Ann was the love of Abraham’s life. Rutledge was “a very pretty girl,” according to historian David Herbert Donald, “with fair skin, blue eyes, and auburn hair.”[10] A neighbor remembered that she was “as pure and kind a heart as an angel, full of love – kindness – sympathy.”[11] Herndon later claimed that Ann was the only woman Lincoln ever loved.[12] In the fall of 1835, however, Abraham was once again devastated by death. He lost Ann to typhoid. It was at this time, as we shall see in a moment, that Lincoln had his first of two very public and prolonged emotional collapses.

Next, there was Mary Owens, with whom Lincoln had a love affair when he was twenty-seven. Abraham and Mary had an informal understanding that they would eventually wed. However, Mary went away for some months to return to her parents’ home, and upon her return Lincoln began having second thoughts. Biographer David Herbert Donald recounts Lincoln’s response to Mary’s eagerness to wed:

He feared “that her coming so readily showed that she was a trifle too willing.” He began finding defects in her appearance. From her first visit [to New Salem] he remembered that she was pleasingly stout – weighing between 150 and 180 pounds, according to



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contemporaries – but now she appeared [in Lincoln's words] "a fair match for Falstaff.[13]

Lincoln later recalled the transformation this way:

Now, when I beheld her, I could not for my life avoid thinking of my mother; and this, not from withered features, for her skin was too full of fat, to permit its contracting in to wrinkles, but from her want of teeth, weather-beaten appearance in general, and from a kind notion that ran in my head, that nothing could have commenced at the size of infancy, and reached her present bulk in less than thirty five or forty years.[14]

The two were separated by geography again, for some months, when Lincoln moved from New Salem, Illinois, to Springfield. Lincoln took advantage of the opportunity to engage in a six-month campaign to convince Mary, in writing, that *she* should break off their engagement. Out of a sense of honor, you see, Lincoln could not break the engagement himself. He told Mary that she would be unhappy, uncomfortable, and poor, if she came to Springfield to marry him. She would not fit in. Their match would cause her much physical and emotional distress. "You have not been accustomed to hardship," he told her, "and it may be more severe than you now imagine." [15] He ended his final letter to Mary, saying "I am willing, and even anxious to bind you faster, if I can be convinced that it will, in any considerable degree, add to your happiness." [16] Mary rejected Abraham's offer, and to Lincoln's surprise he was devastated. The rejection led him to believe that he might have been in love with her after all.

Next, there was Mary Todd, the cousin of Lincoln's neighbor Elizabeth Edwards. Lincoln spent much of his time at the Edwards home seeing Mary, and the two eventually entered an engagement. Ever indecisive in love, Lincoln came to believe that he and Mary Todd were a poor match and he soon became infatuated with another member of the household – 18-year-old Matilda Edwards. Lincoln broke off the engagement with Mary Todd, was rejected by Matilda, and had a second prolonged emotional collapse that we will explore later. While he was separated from Mary Todd, he proposed to yet another woman – sixteen-year-old Sarah Rickard – who rejected his offer, in her words, because "his peculiar manner and his General deportment would not be likely to fascinate a young girl just entering the society world." [17] As we know, Lincoln eventually returned to Mary Todd, but the two did not live happily ever after. If death and tempestuous love affairs were roadblocks in Lincoln's pursuit of happiness before marriage, they would continue to be afterward – as two of his four children died, and as Mary famously exorcized her demons. But there is more to the story of Lincoln's unhappiness than a series of unfortunate events.

There's a now famous story about Leo Tolstoy discussing Lincoln with a Muslim chief high in the Caucasus Mountains between Asia and Europe. According to Tolstoy, Lincoln's fame and reputation had spread all the way to that isolated corner of the world, the chief reputedly saying of Lincoln, "He spoke with a voice of thunder, he laughed like the sunrise, and his deeds were as strong as the rock." [18] The chief's mood changed, however, when Tolstoy gave him a picture of Lincoln's face to study. "He gazed [at it] for several minutes silently," Tolstoy later said,

like one in a reverent prayer; his eyes filled with tears. He was deeply touched and I asked him why he became so sad. After pondering my question for a few moments he replied ... "Don't you find, judging from his picture, that his eyes are full of tears and that his lips are sad with a secret sorrow?" [19]

That sorrow the chief saw in Lincoln's face – that melancholy, as his friends and colleagues referred to it – can be partially explained by the tragedies and the struggles that we just recalled. But there was something deeper, some quality inside of Lincoln that challenged him throughout his entire life. Biographer Joshua Wolfe Shenk recently explored the evidence and concluded that "the deep, pervasive sadness of [Lincoln's] mother, the strange spells of his father, and the striking presence of mental illness in the family of his uncle and cousins ... suggest the likelihood of a biological predisposition toward depression." [20]

Lincoln's two emotional collapses – one in the fall of 1835 (after the death of Ann Rutledge) and one in January 1841 (after his separation from Mary Todd) – give us a glimpse into this profound depression. They will give us a better sense of why his law partner William Herndon would later write, "His melancholy dripped from him as he walked." [21] In both instances, friends feared that Lincoln had lost his mind forever, and that he might commit suicide. Several later recalled hiding his razor blades and knives for this reason, and, in fact, a poem glorifying suicide appeared in a local paper and is widely attributed to Lincoln today. In both instances, Lincoln required considerable help from friends – and even from medical doctors – before he could recover. According to historian Michael Burlingame, Lincoln likely underwent many of the "customary procedures" of that time, including a "painful regimen of bleeding, leeching, the application of heated cups to the temples, mustard rubs, foul-tasting medicines, and cold-water baths." [22] He made a public spectacle of himself, breaking down, crying, and talking of suicide. "For not giving you a general summary of news you *must* pardon me," Lincoln wrote to his law partner in the midst of his second collapse,

it is not in my power to do so. I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth. Whether I shall ever be better I can not tell; I awfully forbode I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible; I must die or be better... [23]

Lincoln wrote this letter a month before his thirty-second birthday, twenty years before he took the oath of office as president.

How then do we explain Lincoln's rise? How do we explain his ability – through death, horrible love affairs, and profound depression – to even approximate happiness in his private life? How do the answers are three qualities we often remember Lincoln for today: his love of education, his sense of humor, and his abounding ambition. First, education: Although he received but eighteen months of formal education in his life, Lincoln was an avid reader from an early age. According to his family members, he was "a Constant ... Stubborn reader," who would "read all the books he could lay his hands on." [24] "He read diligently – studied in the day time ... went to bed Early – got up Early and then read." [25] He read the Bible, *Aesop's Fables*, Shakespeare, Bunyan, Burns, Defoe, Byron, Poe, and books about spelling, grammar, mathematics, and history. According to his stepmother,

when he came across a passage that Struck him he would write it down on boards if he had no paper & keep it there till he did get paper – then he would re-write – look at it repeat it.... He ciphered on boards when he had no paper or no slate and when the board would get too black he would shave it off with a drawing knife and go on again... [26]

He continued with great discipline into his adult life. After he moved to New Salem, Illinois, he was known as a bookworm, and he read for pleasure and for self-improvement. "After studying hard for two or three hours in the evening," writes Burlingame, "[Lincoln] would relax with a volume of his poems." [27]

The result was that Lincoln became a man with extraordinary literary skill. No less than Ralph Waldo Emerson would later say:

The weight and penetration of many passages of [Lincoln's] letters, messages, and speeches ... are destined to wide fame. What pregnant definitions, what unerring commonsense, what foresight, and on great occasions what lofty, and more than national, what human tone! [28]

Transcendent praise from the nation's great Transcendentalist. Lincoln's studies, according to Burlingame, helped "liberate [him] from his backwoods environment." [29] Self-education was often where Lincoln found happiness.

While Emerson wrote about Lincoln's "lofty words" at "great moments," they weren't always so lofty. Historian Paul Boller has written about the September 21, 1862 meeting at which Lincoln surprised his cabinet with the Emancipation Proclamation – a great moment, indeed:

"The President was reading a book and hardly noticed me as I came in," Secretary of War Stanton wrote later. "Finally he turned to us and said: 'Gentleman, did you ever read anything of Artemus Ward? Let me read a chapter that is very funny.'" Lincoln then read aloud something by the humorist Ward entitled, "A High Handed Outrage at Utica." Furious at what he regarded as "buffoonery" on Lincoln's part, Stanton almost got up and left. But Lincoln read on until the end of the piece and then laughed heartily. Everyone else was silent. "Gentleman," said Lincoln disappointedly, "why don't you laugh? With the fearful strain that is upon me night and day, if I did not laugh I should die, and you need this medicine as much as I do." Then he reached into his tall hat on the table, took out a paper, and said: "I have called you here on very important business." [30]

Lincoln proceeded to read the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Laughter, like learning, was a medicine that helped Lincoln overcome his depression. From childhood until the end of his life, Lincoln collected jokes and anecdotes that could raise spirits, entertain on the Illinois circuit, and illustrate the points he wanted to make. "His well of stories never ran dry," writes Joshua Shenk, "because he was always refilling it. He gathered materials from other people and from books."^[31]

Shenk calls humor a protection from Lincoln's "mental storms."^[32] Lincoln himself called jokes, "the vents of my moods & gloom."^[33] and humor, "an emollient [that] saves me much friction and distress."^[34] "I laugh," President Lincoln told a friend in the depths of the Civil War, "because I must not cry...."^[35] He found humor in everything. Once, staring out a window at his office in Springfield, Lincoln observed a woman in a "many plumed hat" walking across the muddy street. She slipped and fell. "She reminds me of a duck," Lincoln told an associate. "Why is that?" "Feathers on her head and down on her behind," replied Lincoln.^[36] Another time, in court, a lawyer embarrassedly argued a case with a large split in the rear of his pants. One of Lincoln's amused colleagues passed around a subscription paper for other lawyers to pledge donations for a new pair of pants. Beside his name on the sheet, Lincoln scribbled, "I can contribute nothing to the end in view."^[37]

Hidden behind Lincoln's jokes and stories, though, was enormous ambition. In his deepest depression, in 1841, Lincoln declared to his friend, Joshua Speed, that he "would be more than willing to die," but "I have an irrepressible desire to live till I can be assured that the world is a little better for my having lived in it."^[38] He wanted to connect himself with the great "events transpiring in his generation," according to Speed, and to "so impress himself upon them as to link his name with something that would redound to the interest of his fellow man."^[39] At first, Lincoln's ambition lacked focus. In the course of ten years, writes David Herbert Donald, Lincoln "tried nearly every ... kind of work the frontier offered: carpenter, riverboat man, store clerk, soldier, merchant, postmaster, blacksmith, surveyor, lawyer, politician."^[40] His greatest ambitions were as a lawyer and politician, and he applied himself to perfecting both as intensely as he had applied himself to his earlier studies.

We can all relate to Lincoln's best efforts to evade the troubling aspects of his life by channeling his energy into his passion (education), his hobby (storytelling), and his career. But in Lincoln's case, his love of learning, his search for humor, and his overweening ambition probably saved him from his otherwise insurmountable depression. And as the remainder of our discussion here will make plain, we are all better off for it.

Lincoln's Public Pursuit

In the midst of the Civil War, an old woman visited Lincoln at the executive mansion to beg that her husband be released from the army to support her family. When Lincoln granted her request, she left with tears of joy in her eyes. "It is more than many can often say," Lincoln wrote in a letter to his friend Joshua Speed, "that in doing right one has made two people happy in one day. Speed, die when I may, I want it said of me by those who know me best, that I have always plucked a thistle and planted a flower when I thought a flower would grow."^[41] When Lincoln entered the world of politics, he did so with numerous ideas about how government could intervene to ease the burden on individual Americans, and reduce obstacles in their pursuit of happiness – to plant thistles wherever possible. His political philosophy owed much to his forebears. Forty years before Lincoln received his political education, two visions for promoting public happiness in the United States were born in competition. They can be traced to debates in George Washington's cabinet between Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton. They crystallized in the first party system, and they survived into the new century. Two visions – Jefferson's America and Hamilton's America – persisted in Lincoln's day in debates over presidential power, territorial expansion, internal improvements, banks, tariffs, and states' rights. As we shall see, Lincoln was born into one, but in many respects he adopted the other; *his* vision would ultimately be an amalgamation of the two. Let's take a closer look.

Thomas Jefferson, on the one hand, wanted to author a new declaration of independence for individual Americans. He wanted to free the people from the whims of government, from the contrivances of profiteers, from creditors – this, an important point for Jefferson, who inherited and accumulated significant debt in his lifetime – and from all forms of dependence, foreign and domestic. "Dependence," wrote Jefferson, "begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition."^[42] Jefferson's vision required "vacant lands" to liberate the coming generations of Americans from "corrupt cities."^[43] It is not surprising, then, that Jefferson contemplated, as governor of Virginia, the forcible acquisition of Detroit and Lake Erie from the British, in order to add that "extensive and fertile Country," in his words, to the "Empire of liberty."^[44] Or that, as president, he took an interest in the territory west of the Mississippi River, commissioned the Lewis and Clark expedition to explore lands all the way to the Pacific, and purchased the Louisiana Territory from France after threatening to fight a war for it. Jefferson's vision also required a program for educating what he called the "common people," in order to secure and preserve for them "a due degree of liberty."^[45] Jefferson, of course, promoted colleges for "teaching the languages, geography, surveying, and other useful things," as well as universities for the sciences.^[46] After retiring from public life, in fact, he founded and governed the University of Virginia.

On the other hand, Jefferson wanted to constrain Americans in certain ways. He had an ideal in mind – an ideal that he believed would preserve the virtues of the people and lead to the nation's greatest possible happiness. "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people," wrote Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. In their breasts,

he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example.^[47]

"While there is land to labour," wrote Jefferson,

let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff. Carpenters, masons, smiths, are wanting in husbandry; but, for the general operations of manufacture, let our work-shops remain in Europe.... The loss by transportation of commodities across the Atlantic [the loss of exports] will be made up in happiness and permanence of government.^[48]

Jefferson disdained banks, which banished "precious metals," and substituted "a more fluctuating and unsafe medium."^[49] According to Jefferson, banking institutions had "withdrawn capital from useful improvements and employments to nourish idleness...."^[50] He disdained commerce and manufacturing, writing that "for the emolument of a small proportion of our society who prefer these demoralizing pursuits to labors useful to the whole, the peace of the whole is endangered and all our present difficulties produced...."^[51] Jefferson's America was a nation of independent citizens, spread widely on abundant lands, engaged in useful – primarily agricultural – works, and free of the "demoralizing pursuits" of banking, manufacturing, and commerce.

This vision was anathema to Hamilton, who unlike Jefferson was born without the benefits of land and wealth. Hamilton, poor and orphaned, first demonstrated his boyhood talents as a clerk for an import-export firm in the British West Indies. His worldview, in other words, developed in the midst of a thriving commercial and trade center. If Jefferson was conservative in his economics – rejecting the rising industrial and financial world in favor of a more traditional, agricultural economy – then Hamilton was undoubtedly the leading economic progressive of the founding generation. In the words of biographer Ron Chernow, "Hamilton ... was the clear-eyed apostle of America's economic future, setting forth a vision that many found enthralling, others unsettling, but that would ultimately prevail."^[52] Hamilton looked to the urban elite, to "the merchants, bankers, and business leaders" – not to yeoman farmers – to lead the new nation's economy.^[53] He supported government activism in economic affairs, and as treasury secretary he set about creating the conditions for a flourishing market economy, with banks, credit, uniform currency, liquid capital, enforceable contracts, respect for private property, patents, and import duties.^[54]

Hamilton also supported a system of internal improvements. In his famous 1791 *Report on Manufactures*, Hamilton credited the improvement of roads and the opening of canals for the success of manufactures in Great Britain. He included in his report,

Good roads, canals, and navigable rivers, by diminishing the expense of carriage, put the remote parts of a country more nearly upon a level with those in the neighborhood of the town. They are upon that account the greatest of all improvements.... Though they introduce some rival commodities into the old market, they open many new markets to its produce.

Uncharacteristically, even Jefferson – perhaps swayed by his secretary of the Treasury, Albert Gallatin – proposed in his 1806 message to Congress to use federal surpluses to fund "public education, roads, rivers, canals, and such other objects of public improvement as it may be

thought proper to add to the constitutional enumeration of Federal powers.”[55] “By these operations,” wrote Jefferson, “new channels of communications will be opened between the States, the lines of separation will disappear, their interests will be identified, and their union cemented by new and indissoluble ties.”[56] The difference, of course, is Hamilton’s focus on the *economic* benefits of internal improvements for manufacturing and Jefferson’s focus on the *social* benefits for the people. Hamilton’s America was a vibrant, forward looking nation, with bustling urban centers engaged in global trade, and *featuring* the “demoralizing pursuits” of banking, manufacturing, and commerce.

Two hundred years ago this week, Abraham Lincoln was born into Jefferson’s America. His father was an independent farmer, who moved his family from Kentucky to Indiana to Illinois in pursuit of more fruitful lands. In fact, one can literally say that Lincoln lived in Jefferson’s America when his father moved the family into the old Northwest Territory – Indiana and Illinois – to benefit from the township system, standardized surveying processes, and saleable lots that Jefferson himself had designed in the 1780s. Even Lincoln’s eventual home state’s name, Illinois, approximates the name Jefferson initially suggested for it: Illinoia. However, Lincoln found his father’s way of life distasteful – he disliked farm work and much of the physical labor the frontier had to offer. When he was president, Lincoln recalled a turning point in his adolescence. He was hired by two men on the Ohio River to row them out to a larger boat. He expected “a few bits” payment in return, but when they arrived at their destination the men paid him with two silver half dollars. “I could scarcely believe my eyes,” Lincoln later recalled. “Gentleman,

you may think it was a very little thing ... but it was a most important incident in my life. I could scarcely credit that I, a poor boy, had earned a dollar in less than a day.... The world seemed wider and fairer before me.[57]

At the age of seventeen, Lincoln had gotten his first glimpses of Hamilton’s America when he began selling firewood to steamers on the Ohio River, working as a riverboat man, and even driving flatboats to New Orleans – for a local store owner – stocked with meat, corn, and flour for sale. After he left his father’s home, Lincoln became a store clerk and then a storeowner for a short while in New Salem, Illinois.

Ultimately, Lincoln didn’t make a career of commerce, but these early experiences shaped his thinking about the nation and its economy. “I am not ashamed to confess,” Lincoln said in a speech in March 1860,

that twenty five years ago I was a hired laborer, mauling rails, at work on a flat-boat – just what might happen to any poor man’s son! I want every man to have the chance ... in which he can better his condition – when he may look forward and hope to be a hired laborer this year and the next, work for himself afterward, and finally to hire men to work for him![58]

“That,” said Lincoln, “is the true system.”[59] Lincoln wanted to free Americans to exercise their “right to rise,” through the medium of a vibrant and growing economy. That, of course, was Hamilton’s America. “On the side of Union,” Lincoln said in the depths of the Civil War,

it is a struggle for maintaining in the world, that form, and substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men – to lift artificial weights from all shoulders; to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all; to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life.[60]

Lincoln, like Hamilton, envisioned an activist government in economic affairs, focused on creating the conditions in which Americans could advance themselves and prosper. He wanted citizens to be able to choose – as he had – their own path in the pursuit of happiness rather than being locked by a stagnant economy into the paths of their fathers and grandfathers.

Born into Jefferson’s America and shaped by Hamilton’s, Lincoln’s prescription for public happiness included elements of both. On Hamilton’s side of the ledger, Lincoln supported internal improvements to promote economic development, banks (including a national bank with government deposits), and tariff protection for manufacturing firms, among other economic measures. On Jefferson’s side, Lincoln supported the creation of educational institutions to foster independence and to teach the practical and liberal arts to farmers and laborers. “For my part,” Lincoln wrote in 1832, “I desire to see the time when education, and by its means, morality, sobriety, enterprise and industry, shall become much more general than at present....”[61] Lincoln also supported western land grants for aspiring farmers. “I have to say that in so far as the Government lands can be disposed of,” Lincoln said in February 1861, “I am in favor of cutting up the wild lands into parcels, so that every poor man may have a home.”[62]

It was during Lincoln’s first term as president – with Congress firmly under the control of his fellow Republicans – that these measures finally came to fruition. Lincoln signed, in historian James McPherson’s words, an “astonishing blitz of laws” that worked to fundamentally “reshape the relation of the government to the economy.”[63] On the one hand, these laws created the conditions under which Hamilton’s America would flourish in the decades following the Civil War. Higher tariffs nurtured manufacturing; a national bank reintroduced monetary policy and provided a uniform currency; the first transcontinental railroad spurred economic development in the West, and a new array of federal taxes – including the nation’s first income tax – kept the government on firm footing. On the other hand, they created the conditions under which Jefferson’s America would flourish. The Homestead Act produced tens of thousands of prosperous, independent, family farms by distributing 160-acre plots of federal land in the West, and the Morrill Act established agricultural and mechanical colleges in all of the states – more than 70 in total – to “promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions of life.”[64] Lincoln’s America – with its support for agricultural, financial, industrial, commercial, and educational pursuits – would provide greater *opportunity* and *wherewithal* for succeeding generations of Americans to pursue their happiness.

So, to review, Lincoln struggled in his personal life through death, love affairs, and profound depression, to pursue happiness in learning, humor, and ambition. He struggled in his political life to create economic conditions that would produce *public* happiness by making possible, for a larger number of Americans, a staggering rise like his: up a path of his own choosing, from the log cabin to the White House. I would like to conclude by looking briefly at Lincoln’s greatest struggle – his hero’s journey (if you heard my talk yesterday) – which would prove to be his most enduring legacy. That struggle was to stake just claim, for a whole race of people, to the precepts of the *Declaration of Independence*: to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Emancipation

Abraham Lincoln was out of politics by the age of forty. In 1849, damaged by his exuberant opposition to President Polk’s popular Mexican War, the four-term Illinois state legislator and one-term U.S. representative retired to his law practice in Springfield. But within five years, Lincoln had heard his call to action. Since the Missouri Compromise of 1820, slavery had been outlawed north of the Mason-Dixon line in the old Louisiana Territory, leading many – including Lincoln – to believe that bounded, as it was, the nation’s peculiar institution would gradually and thankfully fade away. Henry Clay struck a compromise in 1850, and Lincoln supported it, that attempted to end the controversy over newly acquired territory from the Mexican War by bringing California in as a free state, while allowing popular sovereignty – or the will of the people – to decide whether the New Mexico and Utah Territories would be free or slave.

Lincoln now believed that the debate over extending slavery further was “settled forever,” in his words. There was a good chance that free states would be carved out of the New Mexico Territory – since its climate was not ideal for cultivating cotton or tobacco – and Utah, surrounded by free states, would likely follow suit. Now, in 1854, Stephen Douglas’s Kansas-Nebraska Act repealed the Missouri Compromise all together, and opened up all of the Louisiana Territory – including modern day Kansas and Nebraska, much of Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado, and parts of North and South Dakota – to be brought into the Union “with or without slavery,” depending upon popular sovereignty.[65] The people, according to the act, were “perfectly free to form and regulate their domestic institutions in their own way.”[66] The moral issue of slavery had become a democratic one for newly emerging states north and south of the Mason-Dixon line. Not only that, but Kansas-Nebraska – which could theoretically bolster American slavery by breathing new life into the domestic slave trade, and by adding new states to the slave power – seemed to Lincoln a dangerous step on a path toward the legalization of slavery in *any* and *all* the states. Douglas’s challenge had to be met.

This would be the great cause of Lincoln’s generation that he would impress himself upon. If he succeeded in the fight, this would be the achievement that would “redound to the interest of his fellow man” – that would realize his highest ambition. It was a challenge Lincoln was compelled to meet, because, as he would later say, “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.”[67] He began by reentering politics.

In 1858, Lincoln challenged Stephen Douglas for his Senate seat, making opposition to Kansas-Nebraska the core of his campaign. "I hate it," Lincoln said of the Kansas-Nebraska Act,

because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world ... causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity, and especially because it forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty – criticizing the Declaration of Independence, and insisting that there is no right principle of action but self interest.[68]

Stepping into the battle against the spread of slavery, Lincoln wielded the *Declaration* itself against his opponents. "[T]here is no reason in the world," Lincoln said in one of his famous debates with Douglas,

why the negro is not entitled to all the rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence – the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I hold that he is as much entitled to these as the white man. ... in the right to eat the bread without leave of anybody else which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every other man.[69]

"They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society," Lincoln said about the authors of the Declaration at another of the debates,

which should be familiar to all: constantly looked 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, every where.[70]

Liberty, equality, and happiness, then – not slavery – are what the founders intended to spread. Lincoln went back to the founding principles, to show the "base alloy of hypocrisy" in a nation founded for liberty but engaged in slavery. "Judge Douglas is going back to the era of our Revolution," Lincoln said, borrowing words from his political hero Henry Clay,

and ... muzzling the cannon which thunders its annual joyous return. When he invites any people willing to have slavery, to establish it, he is blowing out the moral lights around us. When he says, 'he cares not whether slavery is voted down or voted up,' ... he is ... penetrating the human soul and eradicating the light of reason and the love of liberty in this American people.[71]

Lincoln lost the election, but in the eyes of many of his contemporaries and nearly all historians, he won the debate, and the press coverage of the campaign raised Lincoln's profile nationally, making possible his election as president two years later.

On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation – the first unquestionably constitutional step toward the Thirteenth Amendment, which would permanently abolish slavery in the United States in 1865. Using his power as commander-in-chief of the Army and Navy, Lincoln took the one decisive action that Chief Justice Roger Taney's Supreme Court could not challenge; as a war measure he declared slaves in the *rebellious* states "thenceforward, and forever free." [72] Months after issuing the Proclamation, Lincoln delivered his address at Gettysburg. "Four score and seven years ago," Lincoln said, once again evoking Jefferson's *Declaration*, "our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." [73] In the wake of immense and violent national divisions – especially over the questions of liberty and equality – Lincoln's address was revolutionary. "By accepting the Gettysburg Address, its concept of a single people dedicated to a proposition," historian Gary Wills writes, "we have been changed. Because of it, we live in a different America." [74] We live in Lincoln's America, and following his example we forge our path.

Thank you.

End Notes

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[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 55.

[11] Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 56.

[12] Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 608.

[13] Donald, *Lincoln*, p. 68.

[14] *Ibid.*

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[20] Shenk, p. 13.

[21] *Ibid.*

- [22] Burlingame, p. 84
- [23] Abraham Lincoln to John T. Stuart, January 23, 1841, in *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: The Library of America, 1989), p. 68.
- [24] Donald, p. 67.
- [25] *Ibid.*
- [26] Burlingame, p. 34.
- [27] Burlingame, p. 64.
- [28] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Remarks at the Services Held in Concord," in *The Lincoln Anthology: Great Writers on His Life and Legacy, 1860 to Now*, ed. Harold Holzer (New York: The Library of America, 2009), p. 118.
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- [30] Paul F. Boller, *Presidential Anecdotes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 143.
- [31] Shenk, p. 115.
- [32] Shenk, p. 116.
- [33] *Ibid.*
- [34] Boller, p. 123.
- [35] *Ibid.*
- [36] Boller, p. 123.
- [37] Boller, p. 130.
- [38] Burlingame, p. 183.
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