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The Right to Rise

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The Right to Rise: Abraham Lincoln and the Pursuit of Happiness

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."

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 forever be 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."

Jefferson wrote in 1859, "All honor to Lincoln," he said two years later. "Let us revere the Declaration," he wrote in 1854. "Let us reverence the Declaration," he said two years later. "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.

Determined to take the presidential oath in 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.

In his death certificate, the doctors wrote: "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, larcenous, 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.

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."

A neighbor remembered that she was "as pure and kind a heart as an angel, full of love – kindness – sympathy."[10] Herndon later claimed that Ann was the only woman Lincoln ever loved.[11] 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."

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 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
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 of not-reason 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 he 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 surly and given to resent all you do, 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 that they would not get along. A friend was 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 temper 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 exerted 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.

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 was influenced by medical procedures – 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-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? Among 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 were theirs 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, “At a High Handed Outrage at Utica.” Furious at how 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 didn’t 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, strolling out a window at his office in Springfield, Lincoln observed a woman in a “merry plum 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 at times believed 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, postmaster, blacksmith, store clerk, soldier, merchant,[40]” and, for Lincoln’s 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 overwhelming 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 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] Since 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 America and Hamilton’s America – persisted in Lincoln’s day in debates over presidential power, territorial expansion, internal improvements, commerce and manufacturing, writing that “for the emolument of a small proportion of our society who prefer these demoralizing pursuits to 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 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]

“He cannot let there be 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 labor 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 creditted 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 1816 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 envisioned. Illinois, the name, approximates the name Jefferson initially suggested for it: Illinois. 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 bids” 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, mailing 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 – go forward and hope to be a hired laborer this year and the next, work for himself and family, and finally to hire men to work for him.”[58]

“Gentleman,” Lincoln said, “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 unfeathered 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 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 blaze 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 age.[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 the 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. “I have to say that in so far as 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 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 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. ... is 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, everywhere.[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

[9] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Donald, Lincoln, p. 69.
[19] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Burlingame, p. 84


[25] Ibid.

[26] Burlingame, p. 34.

[27] Burlingame, p. 64.


[29] Burlingame, p. 35.


[31] Shenk, p. 115.


[33] Ibid.

[34] Boller, p. 123.

[35] Ibid.


[37] Boller, p. 130.

[38] Burlingame, p. 183.


[41] Boller, 138.


[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.


[56] Ibid.

[57] Shenk, p. 73.


[59] Ibid.


[66] Ibid.


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