

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S LONGEST SPEECH

One hundred years ago this week Abraham Lincoln made the longest speech of his political career. It contained more than 17,000 words, twice as many as any other recorded address. The occasion was his reply to Stephen A. Douglas who for more than three hours had addressed the citizens of Peoria, Illinois on the afternoon of October 16, 1854. Judge Douglas announced that by agreement Lincoln was to answer him and then the Judge was to have one hour after Lincoln concluded for rebuttal. This was in reality the first planned debate.

Inasmuch as Douglas did not conclude until after 5:00 p.m. Lincoln proposed that he begin his speech after supper. Lincoln suggested that whereas Douglas was to follow him he felt sure the Democrats "would stay for the fun of hearing him (Douglas) skin me."

The limited space in *Lincoln Lore* will not even allow an adequate synopsis of the address, so the most satisfactory way to give it emphasis is to select a few sentences which seem to reveal Lincoln's political philosophy at this time. Lincoln stated in the introductory sentence: "The repeal of the Missouri Compromise and the propriety of its restoration, constitute the subject of what I am about to say."

THE PEORIA SPEECH

I do not propose to question the patriotism, or to assail the motives of any man, or class of men. . . .

I wish to MAKE and to KEEP the distinction between the EXISTING institution, and the EXTENSION of it, so broad, and so clear, that no honest man can misunderstand me, and no dishonest one, successfully misrepresent me. . . .

Before proceeding, let me say I think I have no prejudice against the Southern people. They are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not exist amongst them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist amongst us, we should not instantly give it up. This I believe of the masses north and south. . . .

If all earthly power were given me, I should not know what to do, as to the existing institution. My first impulse would be to free all the slaves, and send them to Liberia—to their own native land. But a moment's reflection would convince me, that whatever of high hope, (as I think there is) there may be in this, in the long run, its sudden execution is impossible. . . .

It does seem to me that systems of gradual emancipation might be adopted, but for their tardiness in this, I will not undertake to judge our brethren of the south. . . .

When they remind us of their constitutional rights, I acknowledge them, not grudgingly, but fully, and fairly. . . .

It (repeal of Missouri Compromise) is proposed, and carried, to blot out the old dividing line of thirty-four years standing, and to open the whole of that country to the introduction of slavery. Now, this, to my mind, is manifestly unjust. After an angry and dangerous controversy, the parties made friends by dividing the bone of contention. The one party first appropriates her own share, beyond all power to be disturbed in the possession of it; and then seizes the share of the other party. It is as if two starving men had divided their only loaf; the one had hastily swallowed his half, and then grabbed the other half just as he was putting it to his mouth! . . .

Equal justice to the south, it is said, requires us to consent to the extending of slavery to new countries. That is to say, inasmuch as you do not object to my taking my hog to Nebraska, therefore I must not object to you taking your slave. Now, I admit this is perfectly logical, if there is no difference between hogs and

negroes. But while you thus require me to deny the humanity of the negro, I wish to ask whether you of the south yourselves, have ever been willing to do as much? It is kindly provided that of all those who come into the world, only a small percentage are natural tyrants. . . .

The great majority, south as well as north, have human sympathies, of which they can no more divest themselves than they can of their sensibility to physical pain. These sympathies in the bosoms of the southern people, manifest in many ways, their sense of the wrong of slavery, and their consciousness that, after all, there is humanity in the negro. . . .

How comes this vast amount of property to be running about without owners? We do not see free horses or free cattle running at large. How is this? All these free blacks are the descendants of slaves, or have been slaves themselves, and they would be slaves now, but for SOMETHING which has operated on their white owners, inducing them, at vast pecuniary sacrifices, to liberate them. What is that SOMETHING? Is there any mistaking it? In all these cases it is your sense of justice, and human sympathy. . . .

I trust I understand, and truly estimate the right of self-government. My faith in the proposition that each man should do precisely as he pleases with all which is exclusively his own, lies at the foundation of the sense of justice there is in me. I extend the principles to communities of men, as well as to individuals. I so extend it, because it is politically wise, as well as naturally just. . . .

When the white man governs himself that is self-government; but when he governs himself, and also governs another man, that is more than self-government—that is despotism. . . .

No man is good enough to govern another man, *without that other's consent*. I say this is the leading principle—the sheet anchor of American republicanism. . . .

It is in the constitution; and I do not, for that cause, or any other cause, propose to destroy, or alter, or disregard the constitution. I stand to it, fairly, fully, and firmly. . . .

I insist, that whether I shall be a whole man, or only, the half of one, in comparison with others, is a question in which I am somewhat concerned; and one which no other man can have a sacred right of deciding for me. . . .

Finally, I insist, that if there is ANY THING which it is the duty of the WHOLE PEOPLE to never entrust to any hands but their own, that thing is the preservation and perpetuity, of their own liberties, and institutions. . . .

Much as I hate slavery, I would consent to the extension of it rather than see the Union dissolved, just as I would consent to any GREAT evil, to avoid a GREATER one. . . .

Slavery is founded in the selfishness of man's nature—opposition to it, is (in?) his love of justice. These principles are an eternal antagonism; and when brought into collision so fiercely, as slavery extension brings them, shocks, and throes, and convulsions must ceaselessly follow. . . .

But restore the compromise, and what then? We thereby restore the national faith, the national confidence, the national feeling of brotherhood. We thereby reinstate the spirit of concession and compromise—that spirit which has never failed us in past perils, and which may be safely trusted for all the future. The south ought to join in doing this. The peace of the nation is as dear to them as to us. In memories of the past and hopes of the future, they share as largely as we. It would be on their part, a great act—great in its spirit, and great in its effect.