

GEORGE BANCROFT

MEMORIAL ADDRESS ON
THE LIFE AND
CHARACTER OF
ABRAHAM LINCOLN

George Bancroft

**Memorial Address on the Life and
Character of Abraham Lincoln**

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Memorial Address on the Life and Character of Abraham Lincoln / Delivered at the request of both Houses of Congress of America

ORATION

SENATORS,
REPRESENTATIVES OF AMERICA:

That God rules in the affairs of men is as certain as any truth of physical science. On the great moving power which is from the beginning hangs the world of the senses and the world of thought and action. Eternal wisdom marshals the great procession of the nations, working in patient continuity through the ages, never halting and never abrupt, encompassing all events in its oversight, and ever effecting its will, though mortals may slumber in apathy or oppose with madness. Kings are lifted up or thrown down, nations come and go, republics flourish and wither, dynasties pass away like a tale that is told; but nothing is by chance, though men, in their ignorance of causes, may think so. The deeds of time are governed, as well as judged, by the decrees of eternity. The caprice of fleeting existences bends to the immovable omnipotence, which plants its foot on all the centuries and has neither change of purpose nor repose. Sometimes, like a messenger through the thick darkness of night, it steps along mysterious ways; but when the hour strikes for a people, or for mankind, to pass into a new form of being, unseen hands draw the bolts from the gates of futurity; an all-subduing influence prepares the minds of men for the coming revolution; those who plan resistance find themselves in conflict with the will of Providence rather than with human devices; and all hearts and all understandings, most of all the opinions and influences of the unwilling, are wonderfully attracted and compelled to bear forward the change, which becomes more an obedience to the law of universal nature than submission to the arbitrament of man.

In the fulness of time a republic rose up in the wilderness of America. Thousands of years had passed away before this child of the ages could be born. From whatever there was of good in the systems of former centuries she drew her nourishment; the wrecks of the past were her warnings. With the deepest sentiment of faith fixed in her inmost nature, she disenthralled religion from bondage to temporal power, that her worship might be worship only in spirit and in truth. The wisdom which had passed from India through Greece, with what Greece had added of her own; the jurisprudence of Rome; the mediaeval municipalities; the Teutonic method of representation; the political experience of England; the benignant wisdom of the expositors of the law of nature and of nations in France and Holland, all shed on her their selectest influence. She washed the gold of political wisdom from the sands wherever it was found; she cleft it from the rocks; she gleaned it among ruins. Out of all the discoveries of statesmen and sages, out of all the experience of past human life, she compiled a perennial political philosophy, the primordial principles of national ethics. The wise men of Europe sought the best government in a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy; America went behind these names to extract from them the vital elements of social forms, and blend them harmoniously in the free commonwealth, which comes nearest to the illustration of the natural equality of all men. She intrusted the guardianship of established rights to law, the movements of reform to the spirit of the people, and drew her force from the happy reconciliation of both.

Republics had heretofore been limited to small cantons, or cities and their dependencies; America, doing that of which the like had not before been known upon the earth, or believed by kings and statesmen to be possible, extended her republic across a continent. Under her auspices the vine of liberty took deep root and filled the land; the hills were covered with its shadow, its boughs were like the goodly cedars, and reached unto both oceans. The fame of this only daughter of freedom went out into all the lands of the earth; from her the human race drew hope.

Neither hereditary monarchy nor hereditary aristocracy planted itself on our soil; the only hereditary condition that fastened itself upon us was servitude. Nature works in sincerity, and is ever true to its law. The bee hives honey; the viper distils poison; the vine stores its juices, and so do the poppy and the upas. In like manner every thought and every action ripens its seed, each according to its kind. In the individual man, and still more in a nation, a just idea gives life, and progress, and glory; a false conception portends disaster, shame, and death. A hundred and twenty years ago a West Jersey Quaker wrote: "This trade of importing slaves is dark gloominess hanging over the land; the consequences will be grievous to posterity." At the north the growth of slavery was arrested by natural causes; in the region nearest the tropics it thrived rankly, and worked itself into the organism of the rising States. Virginia stood between the two, with soil, and climate, and resources demanding free labor, yet capable of the profitable employment of the slave. She was the land of great statesmen, and they saw the danger of her being whelmed under the rising flood in time to struggle against the delusions of avarice and pride. Ninety-four years ago the legislature of Virginia addressed the British king, saying that the trade in slaves was "of great inhumanity," was opposed to the "security and happiness" of their constituents, "would in time have the most destructive influence," and "endanger their very existence." And the king answered them that, "upon pain of his highest displeasure, the importation of slaves should not be in any respect obstructed." "Pharisaical Britain," wrote Franklin in behalf of Virginia, "to pride thyself in setting free a single slave that happened to land on thy coasts, while thy laws continue a traffic whereby so many hundreds of thousands are dragged into a slavery that is entailed on their posterity." "A serious view of this subject," said Patrick Henry in 1773, "gives a gloomy prospect to future times." In the same year George Mason wrote to the legislature of Virginia: "The laws of impartial Providence may avenge our injustice upon our posterity." Conforming his conduct to his convictions, Jefferson, in Virginia, and in the Continental Congress, with the approval of Edmund Pendleton, branded the slave-trade as piracy; and he fixed in the Declaration of Independence, as the corner-stone of America: "All men are created equal, with an unalienable right to liberty." On the first organization of temporary governments for the continental domain, Jefferson, but for the default of New Jersey, would, in 1784, have consecrated every part of that territory to freedom. In the formation of the national Constitution, Virginia, opposed by a part of New England, vainly struggled to abolish the slave-trade at once and forever; and when the ordinance of 1787 was introduced by Nathan Dane without the clause prohibiting slavery, it was through the favorable disposition of Virginia and the South that the clause of Jefferson was restored, and the whole northwestern territory – all the territory that then belonged to the nation – was reserved for the labor of freemen.

The hope prevailed in Virginia that the abolition of the slave-trade would bring with it the gradual abolition of slavery; but the expectation was doomed to disappointment. In supporting incipient measures for emancipation, Jefferson encountered difficulties greater than he could overcome, and, after vain wrestlings, the words that broke from him, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that His justice cannot sleep forever," were words of despair. It was the desire of Washington's heart that Virginia should remove slavery by a public act; and as the prospects of a general emancipation grew more and more dim, he, in utter hopelessness of the action of the State, did all that he could by bequeathing freedom to his own slaves. Good and true men had, from the days of 1776, suggested the colonizing of the negro in the home of his ancestors; but the idea of colonization was thought to increase the difficulty of emancipation, and, in spite of strong support,

while it accomplished much good for Africa, it proved impracticable as a remedy at home. Madison, who in early life disliked slavery so much that he wished "to depend as little as possible on the labor of slaves;" Madison, who held that where slavery exists "the republican theory becomes fallacious;" Madison, who in the last years of his life would not consent to the annexation of Texas, lest his countrymen should fill it with slaves; Madison, who said, "slavery is the greatest evil under which the nation labors – a portentous evil – an evil, moral, political, and economical – a sad blot on our free country" – went mournfully into old age with the cheerless words: "No satisfactory plan has yet been devised for taking out the stain."

The men of the Revolution passed away; a new generation sprang up, impatient that an institution to which they clung should be condemned as inhuman, unwise, and unjust. In the throes of discontent at the self-reproach of their fathers, and blinded by the lustre of wealth to be acquired by the culture of a new staple, they devised the theory that slavery, which they would not abolish, was not evil, but good. They turned on the friends of colonization, and confidently demanded: "Why take black men from a civilized and Christian country, where their labor is a source of immense gain, and a power to control the markets of the world, and send them to a land of ignorance, idolatry, and indolence, which was the home of their forefathers, but not theirs? Slavery is a blessing. Were they not in their ancestral land naked, scarcely lifted above brutes, ignorant of the course of the sun, controlled by nature? And in their new abode have they not been taught to know the difference of the seasons, to plough, and plant, and reap, to drive oxen, to tame the horse, to exchange their scanty dialect for the richest of all the languages among men, and the stupid adoration of follies for the purest religion? And since slavery is good for the blacks, it is good for their masters, bringing opulence and the opportunity of educating a race. The slavery of the black is good in itself; he shall serve the white man forever." And nature, which better understood the quality of fleeting interest and passion, laughed as it caught the echo, "man" and "forever!"

A regular development of pretensions followed the new declaration with logical consistency. Under the old declaration every one of the States had retained, each for itself, the right of manumitting all slaves by an ordinary act of legislation; now the power of the people over servitude through their legislatures was curtailed, and the privileged class was swift in imposing legal and constitutional obstructions on the people themselves. The power of emancipation was narrowed or taken away. The slave might not be disquieted by education. There remained an unconfessed consciousness that the system of bondage was wrong, and a restless memory that it was at variance with the true American tradition; its safety was therefore to be secured by political organization. The generation that made the Constitution took care for the predominance of freedom in Congress by the ordinance of Jefferson; the new school aspired to secure for slavery an equality of votes in the Senate, and, while it hinted at an organic act that should concede to the collective South a veto power on national legislation, it assumed that each State separately had the right to revise and nullify laws of the United States, according to the discretion of its judgment.

The new theory hung as a bias on the foreign relations of the country; there could be no recognition of Hayti, nor even of the American colony of Liberia; and the world was given to understand that the establishment of free labor in Cuba would be a reason for wresting that island from Spain. Territories were annexed – Louisiana, Florida, Texas, half of Mexico; slavery must have its share in them all, and it accepted for a time a dividing line between the unquestioned domain of free labor and that in which involuntary labor was to be tolerated. A few years passed away, and the new school, strong and arrogant, demanded and received an apology for applying the Jefferson proviso to Oregon.

The application of that proviso was interrupted for three administrations, but justice moved steadily onward. In the news that the men of California had chosen freedom, Calhoun heard the knell of parting slavery, and on his death-bed he counselled secession. Washington, and Jefferson, and Madison had died despairing of the abolition of slavery; Calhoun died in despair at the growth of

freedom. His system rushed irresistibly to its natural development. The death-struggle for California was followed by a short truce; but the new school of politicians, who said that slavery was not evil, but good, soon sought to recover the ground they had lost, and, confident of securing Kansas, they demanded that the established line in the Territories between freedom and slavery should be blotted out. The country, believing in the strength and enterprise and expansive energy of freedom, made answer, though reluctantly: "Be it so; let there be no strife between brethren; let freedom and slavery compete for the Territories on equal terms, in a fair field, under an impartial administration;" and on this theory, if on any, the contest might have been left to the decision of time.

The South started back in appalment from its victory, for it knew that a fair competition foreboded its defeat. But where could it now find an ally to save it from its own mistake? What I have next to say is spoken with no emotion but regret. Our meeting to-day is, as it were, at the grave, in the presence of eternity, and the truth must be uttered in soberness and sincerity. In a great republic, as was observed more than two thousand years ago, any attempt to overturn the state owes its strength to aid from some branch of the government. The Chief Justice of the United States, without any necessity or occasion, volunteered to come to the rescue of the theory of slavery; and from his court there lay no appeal but to the bar of humanity and history. Against the Constitution, against the memory of the nation, against a previous decision, against a series of enactments, he decided that the slave is property; that slave property is entitled to no less protection than any other property; that the Constitution upholds it in every Territory against any act of a local legislature, and even against Congress itself; or, as the President for that term tersely promulgated the saying, "Kansas is as much a slave State as South Carolina or Georgia; slavery, by virtue of the Constitution, exists in every Territory." The municipal character of slavery being thus taken away, and slave property decreed to be "sacred," the authority of the courts was invoked to introduce it by the comity of law into States where slavery had been abolished, and in one of the courts of the United States a judge pronounced the African slave-trade legitimate, and numerous and powerful advocates demanded its restoration.

Moreover, the Chief Justice, in his elaborate opinion, announced what had never been heard from any magistrate of Greece or Rome; what was unknown to civil law, and canon law, and feudal law, and common law, and constitutional law; unknown to Jay, to Rutledge, Ellsworth, and Marshall – that there are "slave races." The spirit of evil is intensely logical. Having the authority of this decision, five States swiftly followed the earlier example of a sixth, and opened the way for reducing the free negro to bondage; the migrating free negro became a slave if he but entered within the jurisdiction of a seventh; and an eighth, from its extent, and soil, and mineral resources, destined to incalculable greatness, closed its eyes on its coming, prosperity, and enacted, as by Taney's dictum it had the right to do, that every free black man who would live within its limits must accept the condition of slavery for himself and his posterity.

Only one step more remained to be taken. Jefferson and the leading statesmen of his day held fast to the idea that the enslavement of the African was socially, morally, and politically wrong. The new school was founded exactly upon the opposite idea; and they resolved, first, to distract the democratic party, for which the Supreme Court had now furnished the means, and then to establish a new government, with negro slavery for its corner-stone, as socially, morally, and politically right.

As the Presidential election drew on, one of the great traditional parties did not make its appearance; the other reeled as it sought to preserve its old position, and the candidate who most nearly represented its best opinion, driven by patriotic zeal, roamed the country from end to end to speak for union, eager, at least, to confront its enemies, yet not having hope that it would find its deliverance through him. The storm rose to a whirlwind; who should allay its wrath? The most experienced statesmen of the country had failed; there was no hope from those who were great after the flesh: could relief come from one whose wisdom was like the wisdom of little children?

The choice of America fell on a man born west of the Alleghanies, in the cabin of poor people of Hardin county, Kentucky – ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

His mother could read, but not write; his father could do neither; but his parents sent him, with an old spelling-book, to school, and he learned in his childhood to do both.

When eight years old he floated down the Ohio with his father on a raft, which bore the family and all their possessions to the shore of Indiana; and, child as he was, he gave help as they toiled through dense forests to the interior of Spencer county. There, in the land of free labor, he grew up in a log-cabin, with the solemn solitude for his teacher in his meditative hours. Of Asiatic literature he knew only the Bible; of Greek, Latin, and mediaeval, no more than the translation of Aesop's Fables; of English, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. The traditions of George Fox and William Penn passed to him dimly along the lines of two centuries through his ancestors, who were Quakers.

Otherwise his education was altogether American. The Declaration of Independence was his compendium of political wisdom, the Life of Washington his constant study, and something of Jefferson and Madison reached him through Henry Clay, whom he honored from boyhood. For the rest, from day to day, he lived the life of the American people, walked in its light, reasoned with its reason, thought with its power of thought, felt the beatings of its mighty heart, and so was in every way a child of nature, a child of the West, a child of America.

At nineteen, feeling impulses of ambition to get on in the world, he engaged himself to go down the Mississippi in a flatboat, receiving ten dollars a month for his wages, and afterwards he made the trip once more. At twenty-one he drove his father's cattle, as the family migrated to Illinois, and split rails to fence in the new homestead in the wild. At twenty-three he was a captain of volunteers in the Black Hawk war. He kept a store. He learned something of surveying, but of English literature he added to Bunyan nothing but Shakspeare's plays. At twenty-five he was elected to the legislature of Illinois, where he served eight years. At twenty-seven he was admitted to the bar. In 1837 he chose his home at Springfield, the beautiful centre of the richest land in the State. In 1847 he was a member of the national Congress, where he voted about forty times in favor of the principle of the Jefferson proviso. In 1849 he sought, eagerly but unsuccessfully, the place of Commissioner of the Land Office, and he refused an appointment that would have transferred his residence to Oregon. In 1854 he gave his influence to elect from Illinois, to the American Senate, a Democrat, who would certainly do justice to Kansas. In 1858, as the rival of Douglas, he went before the people of the mighty Prairie State, saying, "This Union cannot permanently endure half slave and half free; the Union will not be dissolved, but the house will cease to be divided;" and now, in 1861, with no experience whatever as an executive officer, while States were madly flying from their orbit, and wise men knew not where to find counsel, this descendant of Quakers, this pupil of Bunyan, this offspring of the great West, was elected President of America.

He measured the difficulty of the duty that devolved upon him, and was resolved to fulfil it. As on the eleventh of February, 1861, he left Springfield, which for a quarter of a century had been his happy home, to the crowd of his friends and neighbors, whom he was never more to meet, he spoke a solemn farewell: "I know not how soon I shall see you again. A duty has devolved upon me, greater than that which has devolved upon any other man since Washington. He never would have succeeded, except for the aid of Divine Providence, upon which he at all times relied. On the same Almighty Being I place my reliance. Pray that I may receive that Divine assistance, without which I cannot succeed, but with which success is certain." To the men of Indiana he said: "I am but an accidental, temporary instrument; it is your business to rise up and preserve the Union and liberty." At the capital of Ohio he said: "Without a name, without a reason why I should have a name, there has fallen upon me a task such as did not rest even upon the Father of his country." At various places in New York, especially at Albany, before the legislature, which tendered him the united support of the great Empire State, he said: "While I hold myself the humblest of all the individuals who have ever been elevated to the Presidency, I have a more difficult task to perform than any of them. I bring a true heart to the work. I must rely upon the people of the whole country for support, and with their sustaining aid even I, humble as I am, cannot fail to carry the ship of state safely through the storm."

To the assembly of New Jersey, at Trenton, he explained: "I shall take the ground I deem most just to the North, the East, the West, the South, and the whole country, in good temper, certainly with no malice to any section. I am devoted to peace, but it may be necessary to put the foot down firmly." In the old Independence Hall, of Philadelphia, he said: "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence, which gave liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but to the world in all future time. If the country cannot be saved without giving up that principle, I would rather be assassinated on the spot than surrender it. I have said nothing but what I am willing to live and die by."

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