

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Speech at Independence Hall

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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On the anniversary of George Washington's birth, February 22, 1861—after he had been elected President but before he was inaugurated (March 4), and before the Confederate firing on Fort Sumter that began the Civil War (April 12)—Abraham Lincoln (1809–65) delivered this impromptu address at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, site of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. In the speech, Lincoln credits the principles enunciated in the Declaration as the source of “all the political sentiments I entertain,” and for which he was determined to live and govern and, if necessary, to die.

What, in particular, was so important to him? What would it mean, in fact, to live by the principles in the Declaration of Independence? Why would Lincoln not accept saving the country by giving up on those principles? Why does Lincoln regard the American principle of equal liberty and opportunity as a gift of “hope to the world for all future time”?

Mr. Cuyler:

I am filled with deep emotion at finding myself standing here in the place where were collected together the wisdom, the patriotism, the devotion to principle, from which sprang the institutions under which we live. You have kindly suggested to me that in my hands is the task of restoring peace to our distracted country. I can say in return, sir, that all the political sentiments I entertain have been drawn, so far as I have been able to draw them, 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. I have often pondered over the dangers which were incurred by the men who assembled here and adopted that Declaration of Independence. I have pondered over the toils that were endured by the officers and soldiers of the army who achieved that Independence. I have often inquired of myself what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the Colonies from the mother-land, but that sentiment in the Declaration which gave liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but, I hope, to the world, for all future time. It was that which gave promise that, in due time, the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men. This is the sentiment embodied in that Declaration of

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Independence. Now, my friends, can this country be saved upon that basis? If it can, I will consider myself one of the happiest men in the world if I can help to save it. If it cannot be saved upon that principle, it will be truly awful. But if this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle, I was about to say, *I would rather be assassinated on this spot than to surrender it.*

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Now, in my view of the present aspect of affairs, there is no need of bloodshed and war. There is no necessity for it. I am not in favor of such a course, and I may say in advance, there will be no bloodshed unless it be forced upon the Government, and then it will be compelled to act in self-defense. The Government will not use force unless force is used against it.

My friends, this is wholly an unprepared speech, and I did not expect to be called upon to say a word when I came here. I supposed it was merely to do something towards raising the flag—I may, therefore, have said something indiscreet. I have said nothing but what I am willing to live by, and, if it be in the pleasure of Almighty God, die by.