

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

## Lincoln at Two Hundred

WALTER BERNS

*On the two hundredth anniversary of Lincoln's birth, scholar and author Walter Berns (1919–2015) gave these remarks in Washington, DC as part of the Bradley Lecture Series hosted by the American Enterprise Institute. This speech was the culmination of decades of scholarship on Lincoln by Berns, a fellow Illinoisan who in his youth had watched Civil War veterans parade down Chicago's streets.*

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*How was Lincoln extraordinary, according to Berns? What situation did he confront as president? Why did he decide to go to war, and why did he continue the war? How did Lincoln "correct" the Declaration of Independence in the Gettysburg Address? How does he reattach the hearts and minds of his listeners (and readers) to this "statement of fundamental principles"? Why, according to Berns, is Lincoln's way with words so important?*

*Watch Leon Kass and Walter Berns discuss Lincoln here:*

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=xiOW7QKbNIQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xiOW7QKbNIQ).

More has been written about Abraham Lincoln than of any other president or, for that matter, any other American; the amount is prodigious: no fewer than 16,000 books and goodness knows how many journal articles. I cannot claim to have read more than a portion of this vast literature, and I very much doubt that I can say anything about Lincoln that has not already been said by someone, somewhere, sometime. Yet I am obliged to say something.

What accounts for the extraordinary interest in him? Well, he was an extraordinary man; he did things ordinary men don't do. For example, his law partner reports how, while on circuit the other lawyers, and sometimes even the circuit judge, were asleep in the room, Lincoln would lie on the floor, with a lamp, studying Euclid's *Elements*, the geometry book which begins with definitions (e.g., a point is that which has no parts); followed by postulates and axioms (e.g., things which are equal to the same thing are equal to each other); leading to the propositions, two sorts of propositions, problems and theorems (e.g., describe an equilateral triangle on a given finite straight line, and in any right-angled triangle, the square which is described on the side subtending the right angle is equal to the squares described on the sides which contain the right angle). These

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propositions have then to be demonstrated, which is done diagrammatically, showing, in the one case, that the problem is solved, and, in the second, that the theorem is true.

All very interesting, and in some respects, or for some purposes, very important. The *Elements* is one of the books in the Great Books curriculum; indeed, for almost two thousand years (until Descartes) Euclid was geometry—but what has it to do with the practice of law in the Illinois of the 1840s?

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My point is, only an unusual intellectual curiosity could have led a backwoods lawyer to pick it up and proceed to master it. Lincoln was different, and he had to know it.

Imagine, if you will, what it was like for this man to live in a place like New Salem, Illinois, in the 1830s, a town without books, without civilization, without anyone like himself with whom he might want to talk. The Springfield he moved to in 1837 was not much better. Yet, in both places, something drove him to get his hands on books, not only Euclid's geometry but history books, grammar books, Shakespeare's books, and books of poetry.

He was an avid reader of poetry, beginning with the poems of Scotland's Robert Burns and continuing with those of England's George Gordon, Lord Byron. He started this reading in New Salem and Springfield, and continued it in the White House, where he could get books from the Library of Congress. But what has "My Heart's In the Highlands" to do with the relief or provisioning of Fort Sumter? And what has Byron's "Don Juan," pronounced here (for scanning purposes) "Don Ju-an," what has it to do with emancipating slaves? Especially what is perhaps its best known passage: "A little still she strove, and much repented, and whispering 'I will never consent,' consented. . . ." What has this to do with any of the problems that crossed his White House desk? Nothing at all, of course. I mention it only because it tells us something about the sort of man he was. He also read the Bible, and seems to have been familiar with it. Burns, Byron, Bible; no one going to school with them is likely to have a tin ear. This was surely true of Lincoln. Their influence on him is evident, not in what he said, but in how he said it, in the rhythm or music of his speech. I'll have more to say about this in due course.

He was, of course, president in an extraordinary time; but so were Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt. He was assassinated while in office; but so were James Garfield, William McKinley, and John F. Kennedy. Admittedly, there is something unusual or special about his assassination; there was something profoundly political



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about it, and he may have foreseen it; he surely had forebodings of it. For example, he had the habit of quoting these words of Shakespeare's *Richard II*: "For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings . . . all murdered." (From act III, scene 2.) What does one make of this?

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Senator Charles Sumner reports—and so does the French diplomat, the Marquis de Chambrun—that, on returning from Richmond and a visit with General Grant the day before Lee's surrender at Appomattox, knowing that the war was effectively over, Lincoln had twice recited the following lines from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*:

Duncan is in his grave;  
After life's fitful fever, he sleeps well;  
Treason has done his worst; nor steel, nor poison,  
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing  
Can touch him further. (Act III, scene 2.)

Apparently, he saw himself as Duncan. Sumner thought so. If not, why does he quote the passage, not once but twice, and at this time? (*Macbeth* was his favorite play. As he said to a well-known Shakespearean actor, "nothing equals *Macbeth*, it is wonderful.")

Of course, Lincoln did great things; greater than anything done by Wilson or Roosevelt, or Garfield, McKinley, and Kennedy; he freed the slaves and saved the Union, and because he saved the Union he was able free the slaves. Beyond this, however, it seems to me that our extraordinary interest in him, and esteem for him, has to do with what he said, and how he said it. And much of this had to do with the Union: what it was and why it was worth the saving.

He saved it by fighting and winning the war, of course; but his initial step in this was the decision to go to war in the first place. Not a popular decision, and certainly not an easy one. His predecessor, the incompetent fool James Buchanan, believed that the states had no right to secede from the Union, but that there was nothing he could do about it if they did. Or as Senator William Seward put it—"he was commenting on Buchanan's last Message to Congress, of December 3, 1860,—'the states had no right to secede, unless they wanted to, and the president had the duty to enforce the law, unless someone opposed him.'" Thus, by the time Lincoln took office, seven southern states had seceded, and nothing had been done about it, specifically, nothing about their seizure of federal property, the forts, arsenals, and naval facilities. Six of those states had formed a new

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government, with a constitution, a congress and president; it was, as we say, “in business.” Led by South Carolina, they claimed to be doing only what they and the other colonies had done in 1776, and, on the whole, Buchanan agreed with them. Besides, to oppose them might bring on the war, and Buchanan had no stomach for this. Yet he was the president, and had sworn an oath to “preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States,” and to this end he was given the powers of commander in chief. But he was the last man to use them.

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It was otherwise with Lincoln. He knew very well that the time had come when the only way to save the Union was to go to war. But he hesitated publicly to say so. Could he say it and retain the support of the people who had voted for him? The abolitionists, for example. For them, slavery was a sin, and the slave-holders sinners. But their leading spokesman, William Lloyd Garrison, was no friend of the Union. He said the Constitution was “a covenant with death and an agreement with hell,” and once set fire to a copy of it, uttering the evangelist battle-cry, “And let the people say, amen.” He and his friends were of no help to Lincoln. He said—this was during the Fort Sumter crisis—“all Union saving efforts are simply idiotic.”

Nor could Lincoln expect any help from his home-state newspaper, the *Chicago Tribune*. If South Carolina wanted to secede, the *Tribune* said in an editorial, “let her go.” The country’s leading antislavery editor, Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune*, said much the same thing. As he put it, “if the Cotton States shall become satisfied they can do better out of the Union than in it, we insist on letting them go.” But suppose we had let them go. With them would have gone almost all the slaves, gone to what claimed to be another country, a foreign country. How, then, would he free them, except by going to war with that country? The self-righteous journalist did not say—perhaps he would have had us enter into “real” negotiations with the Confederates—but it was his desire to avoid war that led him to say what he said.

Another problem facing Lincoln was this: The people of the North, especially the Republicans, were almost all of them antislavery, but they were also, almost all of them, anti-Negro. This prejudice was reflected in the laws adopted by some of the northern states, among them Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa, laws forbidding Negroes—free Negroes to enter or remain in the state. These Yankees, as they were soon to be known, obviously did not want Negroes in their neighborhoods, something their politicians could not afford to ignore.



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Then,—I'm speaking here of the situation Lincoln faced before taking office—then there was the question of those slave states that had not, or not yet, seceded, specifically the border states Virginia, Maryland, Missouri, Kentucky. What would they do if he used force against the others? Later on, he was to say that he hoped God was on the side of the Union, but that he had to have Kentucky. Without it, there would be no chance of winning the civil war. (Look at a map.)

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And, finally, there was the effort, a desperate or last-chance effort, to avoid the war by way of compromise. This deserves to be treated in detail. On January 16, 1861, a mere six weeks before Lincoln's inauguration, the Kentuckian John Crittenden, on behalf of a Senate committee that included the Democrats Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois and Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, as well as Republicans Benjamin Wade of Ohio and William Seward of New York, proposed a set of six constitutional amendments, that—I mention only the major provisions—(1) guaranteed slavery in the states where it existed against future interference by the federal government, (2) denied Congress any power to interfere with the interstate slave trade, and (3)—and here is what proved to be the sticking point—prohibited slavery in the territories north of the Missouri Compromise line, but protected it south of the line “in all territories now held, or hereafter acquired.”

Obviously, this was not much of a compromise; by giving them so much, the southern Democrats could be expected eagerly to support them. For some reason—probably to avoid the war—the amendments also had the support of some important Republicans, not only Senators Wade and Seward, but certain businessmen and Wall Street bankers. But Lincoln said no. “Let there be no compromise on the question of extending slavery,” he wrote his Republican friends in Congress. “The instant you do, they have us under again; all our labor is lost. . . . Douglas is sure to be again trying to bring in his ‘Pop. Sov.’ Have none of it. The tug has to come & better now than later.” That tug came, and with it came the war.

Question: Would he have taken so hard a line, or refused all compromise, had he anticipated the war would take the lives of—the number is appalling—some 620,000 Americans? Probably not. (Nor, I suspect, would the southern states have seceded had they anticipated the price they would pay.) Intransigent, Lincoln surely was, but before blaming him for this, consider the alternative to war, or going to war? What was at stake?

Lincoln stated the essential point time and again, and best, because succinctly, in his speech at the Cooper Institute in New York in February 1860. We Republicans, he said,

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think slavery wrong, and ought to be restricted, and they, the southerners, think it right, and ought to be extended. “Their thinking it right,” he said, “and our thinking it wrong, is the precise fact upon which depends the whole controversy.”

And by this time, it was possible to know and state with sufficient precision what the extension of slavery would involve. First, according to the Crittenden proposal, slavery was to be protected south of the Missouri line “in all territories now held, or hereafter acquired, and by this they meant territories not then, or not yet, part of the United States. And what were they? Well, Cuba, for instance—the Democrats had long had their eyes on it; in 1854 they tried to buy it (Ostend proposal); and in 1860 their party platforms, the Northern or Douglas Democrats and the Southern or Breckinridge Democrats, both called for its acquisition. And not only Cuba, but Mexico, or that part which we had not already “acquired,” and other places in Central America. But even this is not all they had in mind.

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There was a time when the southerners were satisfied with some—the southern part—of the Louisiana Purchase territory; this was in 1820, when the Missouri compromise was adopted. And later, after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act with its popular sovereignty provision, they were satisfied merely with the possibility of slavery in all the territories (How much, if any, would depend on the vote of the people living in them); this was in 1854.

But in 1857, the Supreme Court of the United States handed down the decision in the *Dred Scott* case, holding that Congress, under the Constitution, could not prohibit slavery in any of the territories, thereby opening them all to slavery, and putting an end to popular sovereignty.

But Chief Justice Roger Taney did more than that in his *Dred Scott* opinion, he opened a far fairer prospect for the southern Democrats: slavery everywhere, not only in all the territories, but in all the states, north as well as south, new as well as old, Illinois as well as Kentucky, Massachusetts as well as Mississippi. How real a prospect was this? All it needed was another Supreme Court decision, and *Dred Scott* paved the way for that. As Lincoln put it, if *Dred Scott*, why not its sequel? Or, if the chief justice could dare the one, why could he not dare the other?

As stated in *Dred Scott*, what Taney said about this, the nationalization of slavery was only dicta—words spoken in passing—not part of the holding in the case, but they were not nothing there; he must have had some reason for making the statement; there is no



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reason to believe it was inadvertent; it is too deliberate for that. This is what he said about this: “the right of property in a slave is distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution.” (Everyone, wherever he lives, has a constitutional right to hold slaves.)

Taney was the chief justice of the United States, and, therefore, his word carried (or ought to carry) some weight. Still, his saying it didn’t make it so, not yet, and it certainly was not then so. The Constitution certainly did not say, or even imply, what he said it said. The late professor Herbert Storing put this very well: “If one had to think of two adverbs that do not describe the way the Constitution acknowledged slavery, he could not do better than “distinctly and expressly.”

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Whatever else, Taney’s statement proved to be grist for Lincoln’s mill. He seized on it during the debates with Douglas in 1858, and rang the changes on it. He began with the supremacy clause of the Constitution (Article VI, clause 2), which provides (in part) that the Constitution is the supreme law of the land, and that “the judges of every state shall be bound thereby anything in the constitution or laws of any state to the contrary notwithstanding.” He then constructed the following syllogism:

Nothing in the constitution or laws of any state can destroy a right distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution of the United States.

The right of property in a slave is distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution of the United States.

Therefore, nothing in the constitution or laws of any state can destroy the right of property in a slave.

Q.E.D., *quod erat demonstrandum*. And what was it that was demonstrated? Assuming Taney spoke for them, the southerners wanted slavery nationalized, i.e., protected by the Constitution in all the states of the United States. And beyond that, assuming Senators Crittenden and Davis also spoke for them, they wanted slavery to be extended throughout the length and breadth of the Americas; the only limits being the slaveholders’ appetite (or they would say, their need) and the military power of the United States.

This, I suggest, is why Lincoln said, no to the Crittenden compromise, or so-called compromise. And who—or who now—can blame him?

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As to that, I wonder if we—we today—are not inclined to ignore or discount the very real possibility of slavery becoming lawful in all the states. Suppose the Republican Party had heeded the advice of Horace Greeley and other eastern Republicans and had supported Senator Douglas in his reelection campaign in 1858. Douglas had won their favor by his opposition to the fraudulent proslavery constitution proposed for Kansas, the so-called Lecompton constitution. Had they done so, that is, had the Republicans supported Douglas for senator in 1858, there would have been no Lincoln-Douglas debates, and, therefore, no “Freeport question” from Lincoln: “May the people of a Territory, in any lawful way, against the wish of a citizen of the United States, exclude slavery from its limits prior to the formation of a State constitution.” That was the question Lincoln asked at Freeport, and by answering it, by saying that despite the Supreme Court’s decision in the Dred Scott case, the people might exclude slavery from the territory, Douglas lost the support of the southern Democrats, which, in turn, caused the split in the party in 1860 and led to the election of Lincoln. Suppose, therefore, a Democratic administration in Washington led by a man (Douglas) who did not care whether slavery was voted up or down, and supported by a party most of whose members wanted very much that it be voted up. What would have been the consequences of that?

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And, once again employing faint-hearted Horace Greeley as a foil, suppose Lincoln had heeded his advice and had entered into peace negotiations with the Confederates in the spring or summer of 1864, without insisting, as Lincoln always did, that the Confederate states agree to abolish slavery. The Confederates would surely have jumped at the chance, and the northern people, who had grown more and more weary of the war—they had taken to singing, “When This Cruel War Is Over”; a million copies of it had been sold—and were obviously yearning for peace. They obviously had reason to think it a cruel war. In six weeks, beginning May 3, 1864—this was after Antietam, after Gettysburg, after Fredericksburg—at the Wilderness, and continuing at Spotsylvania (May 10-14), and Cold Harbor (June 1), Grant’s Army of the Potomac had lost some 65,000 men, killed, wounded, or missing in action, and 7,000 in an afternoon, at Cold Harbor. As Greeley wrote to Lincoln, “Our bleeding, bankrupt, almost dying country, yearns for peace—shudders at the prospect of fresh conscriptions, of further wholesale devastations, and of new rivers of human blood. . . . I entreat you,” he said, “entreat you to submit overtures for peace to the Southern insurgents.” But Lincoln refused to do so. By making abolition a condition for peace, Greeley said, Lincoln gave “new strength to the Democrats.” So he did. As one of them wrote, “Tens of thousands of white men must yet bite the dust to allay the Negro mania of the President.” And the Democratic party, meeting in Chicago in August ’64, adopted a peace platform in which they pledged to



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“preserve the rights of the States unimpaired” (meaning their right to hold slaves). The situation was such that Lincoln expected to be beaten (and, he said, “unless some great change takes place, badly beaten”). Even the abolitionists were against him. Wendell Phillips declared that he would “cut off both hands before doing anything to aid Lincoln’s reelection.”

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Who—besides Lincoln—was then for continuing the war, at so terrible a price? Surely not the troops, who were deserting in droves, and not many of the officers. As one general said—this was after Cold Harbor—“For thirty days it has been one funeral process past me, and it has been too much.” But Lincoln, almost alone, was intransigent, just as he had been in 1861.

But suppose he had agreed to sue for peace, a peace without conditions, a peace whereby the Union would have been as it was before the war, but with slavery more than ever safely secured in those states that wanted it, and its champions agitating for its extension. What would have been the consequences of that? We might discuss this later.

I earlier attributed our extraordinary interest in Lincoln, and especially our esteem for him, partly to what he said and how he said it. He was surely a great writer and speaker of words; in my judgment, the greatest. As I said on another occasion, he was (and is) our national poet. In saying this, I referred initially—because of their emotional appeal—to some of his private letters, the one to Mrs. Bixby, for instance, or my favorite, the letter of condolence to the teen-aged Fanny McCullough, whose father, a Lincoln friend from Illinois, had been killed in battle. But I know no better way to demonstrate his poetic gifts, or the awesome beauty of his words, than by quoting the closing paragraph of his First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861.

The Address was written, we know, in Springfield, before he departed for Washington. We have also been told, and have reason to believe, that every speech that carries his name was, in fact, written by him; he employed no speech writer. And we know from his law partner William Herndon that Lincoln was “inflexibly” opposed to changes in what he had written, especially on this occasion, because he was anxious to avoid any words that might “fan the flames of secession.”

The closing paragraph in the Address might be an exception, an exception that can be said to prove the rule. The idea for it, or its central metaphor, was written and given to

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Lincoln by Senator—and soon to be Secretary of State—Seward. This is what Seward suggested that he say:

I close. We are not, we must not be aliens or enemies but fellow countrymen and brethren. Although passion has strained our bonds of affection too hardly they must not, I am sure they will not be broken. The mystic chords of memory which proceeding from so many battlefields and so many patriot graves pass through all the hearts and all the hearths in this broad continent of ours will yet again harmonize in their ancient music when breathed upon by the guardian angels of the nation.

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And this is what Lincoln said:

I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

It is not by chance that his best and most celebrated speech was delivered on a battlefield, on the occasion of dedicating a cemetery filled with the graves of patriots. I speak, of course, of the Gettysburg Address.

A prefatory statement before turning to the Address: the principles of the Constitution are set down in the Declaration of Independence, a document that appeals to the “laws of Nature and of Nature’s God, a god—arguably, at least—that reveals himself not in the Bible but in the “book of nature,” the book readable in our day by astrophysicists and in those days by the Enlightenment philosophers and their students, such as Thomas Jefferson. What Lincoln did at Gettysburg was to make something else of the Declaration: a statement of fundamental principles—“our ancient faith,” as he put it—to which we were attached not only with our minds, but with our hearts.

It is brief, a mere 272 words, and could not have taken much more than five minutes to deliver. In its central passage, Lincoln says, “The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.” Well, what little do we remember?



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We remember he said that this nation was founded in 1776 with the Declaration of Independence and its principles. We remember this because of the unusual way he said it. Not eighty-seven years ago, but “four score and seven.” His Bible-reading audience assembled there (and afterwards) would surely have remembered what he said because, in what he said, they would have heard echoes of the Ninetieth Psalm, where the psalmist says, “three score and ten,” our years on this earth, and “four score” if we’re healthy. They would not have known that the principles we declared in 1776 had their wellspring not in the Bible, but in the second of John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*, and that Locke’s connection with us is confirmed by the fact that his words are—although without attribution—three times quoted in our Declaration; they would not be told this because our association-one-with-another is supposed to be something more exalted than a Lockean contract entered into by antisocial individuals seeking only to secure their private rights. (Did Lincoln not speak of us as friends?) They might instead, because of the implied association with the Bible, as well as Lincoln’s designation of the Founders as “our Fathers”—who art in heaven?—they might also have thought—as they probably were expected to think—that our founding, if not sacred, was surely not profane.

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They (his Bible-reading audience) might also have thought this because—and this, too, we remember—Lincoln goes on to say, after suggesting that the nation so founded might not long endure, that the brave men, living and dead, who struggled on this ground, this battlefield, had “consecrated” it better than he or anyone else could. Consecrated? Had made it sacred, a battlefield? As if they—presumably the Union soldiers—were fighting for the Lord? No, but their cause was great and noble.

We also remember Lincoln saying that their work was “unfinished,” and that we, the living, should highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain and that this nation, “under God, shall have a new birth of freedom,” and that government of, by, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.

What little do we remember? In a word, and despite what he said, we remember everything he said, and we remember it because he took great pains to say it beautifully, to the end that we remember it.

We also remember his Second Inaugural address, especially the concluding paragraph—the poignant beauty of it:



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With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

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Six weeks later he was murdered.

We say that a man can be known by the company he keeps. So I say that a nation, a people, can be known and be judged by its heroes, by whom it honors above all others.

We pay ourselves the greatest compliment when we say that Abraham Lincoln is that man for us.