

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Address on Lincoln's 200th Birthday

BARACK OBAMA

On the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birthday—February 12, 2009—President Barack Obama (b. 1961), newly inaugurated, made these remarks at Lincoln's resting place of Springfield, Illinois. Why does President Obama emphasize "Lincoln the man" in his remarks? What lesson(s) does Lincoln as a man have to teach us? Note the theme of "union" in the speech. What is "union," and how can it be achieved? Do you find President Obama's discussion of union persuasive? Why or why not?

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It is wonderful to be back in Springfield, the city where I got my start in elected office, where I served for nearly a decade, and where I launched my candidacy for President two years ago, this week—on the steps of the Old State Capitol where Abraham Lincoln served and prepared for the presidency.

It was here, nearly one hundred and fifty years ago, that the man whose life we are celebrating today bid farewell to this city he had come to call his own. On a platform at a train station not far from where we're gathered, Lincoln turned to the crowd that had come to see him off, and said, "To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe everything." Being here tonight, surrounded by all of you, I share his sentiments.

But looking out at this room, full of so many who did so much for me, I'm also reminded of what Lincoln once said to a favor-seeker who claimed it was his efforts that made the difference in the election. Lincoln asked him, "So you think you made me President?" "Yes," the man replied, "under Providence, I think I did." "Well," said Lincoln, "it's a pretty mess you've got me into. But I forgive you."

It is a humbling task, marking the bicentennial of our 16th President's birth—humbling for me in particular, I think, for the presidency of this singular figure in so many ways made my own story possible.

Here in Springfield, it is easier, perhaps, to reflect on Lincoln the man rather than the marble giant, before Gettysburg and Antietam, Fredericksburg and Bull Run, before emancipation was proclaimed and the captives were set free. In 1854, Lincoln was simply a Springfield lawyer, who'd served just a single term in Congress. Possibly in his law office, his feet on a cluttered desk, his sons playing around him, his clothes a bit too small

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to fit his uncommon frame, he put some thoughts on paper for what purpose we do not know:

“The legitimate object of government,” he wrote, “is to do for the people what needs to be done, but which they can not, by individual effort, do at all, or do so well, by themselves.” Page | 2

To do for the people what needs to be done but which they cannot do on their own. It is a simple statement. But it answers a central question of Abraham Lincoln’s life. Why did he land on the side of union? What was it that made him so unrelenting in pursuit of victory that he was willing to test the Constitution he ultimately preserved? What was it that led this man to give his last full measure of devotion so that our nation might endure?

These are not easy questions to answer, and I cannot know if I am right. But I suspect that his devotion to union came not from a belief that government always had the answer. It came not from a failure to understand our individual rights and responsibilities. This rugged rail-splitter, born in a log cabin of pioneer stock; who cleared a path through the woods as a boy; who lost a mother and a sister to the rigors of frontier life; who taught himself all he knew—this man, our first Republican President, knew, better than anyone, what it meant to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. He understood that strain of personal liberty and self-reliance at the heart of the American experience.

But he also understood something else. He recognized that while each of us must do our part, work as hard as we can, and be as responsible as we can—in the end, there are certain things we cannot do on our own. There are certain things we can only do together. There are certain things only a union can do.

Only a union could harness the courage of our pioneers to settle the American west, which is why he passed a Homestead Act giving a tract of land to anyone seeking a stake in our growing economy.

Only a union could foster the ingenuity of our farmers, which is why he set up land-grant colleges that taught them how to make the most of their land while giving their children an education that let them dream the American dream.

Only a union could speed our expansion and connect our coasts with a transcontinental railroad, and so, even in the midst of civil war, he built one. He fueled new enterprises

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with a national currency, spurred innovation, and ignited America's imagination with a national academy of sciences, believing we must, as he put it, add "the fuel of interest to the fire of genius in the discovery . . . of new and useful things." And on this day, that is also the bicentennial of Charles Darwin's birth, let us renew that commitment to science and innovation once more.

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Only a union could serve the hopes of every citizen—to knock down the barriers to opportunity and give each and every person the chance to pursue the American dream. Lincoln understood what Washington understood when he led farmers, craftsmen, and shopkeepers to rise up against an empire. What Roosevelt understood when he lifted us from Depression, built an arsenal of democracy, and created the largest middle-class in history with the GI Bill. It's what Kennedy understood when he sent us to the moon.

All these presidents recognized that America is—and always has been—more than a band of thirteen colonies, more than a bunch of Yankees and Confederates, more than a collection of Red States and Blue States. We are the United States of America and there isn't any dream beyond our reach, any obstacle that can stand in our way, when we recognize that our individual liberty is served, not negated, by a recognition of the common good.

That is the spirit we are called to show once more. The challenges we face are very different now. Two wars, and an economic crisis unlike any we have seen in our lifetime. Jobs have been lost. Pensions are gone. Families' dreams have been endangered. Health care costs are exploding. Schools are falling short. And we have an energy crisis that is hampering our economy, threatening our planet, and enriching our adversaries.

And yet, while our challenges may be new, they did not come about overnight. Ultimately, they result from a failure to meet the test that Lincoln set. To be sure, there have been times in our history when our government has misjudged what we can do by individual effort alone, and what we can only do together; when it has done things that people can—or should—do for themselves. Our welfare system, for example, too often dampened individual initiative, discouraging people from taking responsibility for their own upward mobility. With respect to education, we have all too frequently lost sight of the role of parents, rather than government, in cultivating a thirst for knowledge and instilling those qualities of a good character—hard work, discipline, and integrity—that are so important to educational achievement and professional success.

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But in recent years, we've seen the pendulum swing too far in the opposite direction. It's a philosophy that says every problem can be solved if only government would step out of the way; that if government were just dismantled, divvied up into tax breaks, and handed out to the wealthiest among us, it would somehow benefit us all. Such knee-jerk disdain for government—this constant rejection of any common endeavor—cannot rebuild our levees or our roads or our bridges. It cannot refurbish our schools or modernize our health care system; lead to the next medical discovery or yield the research and technology that will spark a clean energy economy.

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Only a nation can do these things. Only by coming together, all of us, and expressing that sense of shared sacrifice and responsibility—for ourselves and one another—can we do the work that must be done in this country. That is the very definition of being American.

It is only by rebuilding our economy and fostering the conditions of growth that willing workers can find a job, companies can find capital, and the entrepreneurial spirit that is the key to our competitiveness can flourish. It is only by unleashing the potential of alternative fuels that we will lower our energy bills and raise our industries' sights, make our nation safer and our planet cleaner. It is only by remaking our schools for the 21st century that our children will get those good jobs so they can make of their lives what they will. It is only by coming together to do what people need done that we will, in Lincoln's words, "lift artificial weights from all shoulders [and give] all an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life."

That is what is required of us—now and in the years ahead. We will be remembered for what we choose to make of this moment. And when posterity looks back on our time, as we are looking back on Lincoln's, I do not want it said that we saw an economic crisis, but did not stem it. That we saw our schools decline and our bridges crumble, but did not rebuild them. That the world changed in the 21st century, but America did not lead it. That we were consumed with small things when we were called to do great things. Instead, let them say that this generation—our generation—of Americans rose to the moment and gave America a new birth of freedom and opportunity in our time.

These are trying days and they will grow tougher in the months to come. There will be moments when our doubts rise and our hopes recede. But let's always remember that we, as a people, have been here before. There were times when our revolution itself seemed altogether improbable, when the union was all but lost, and fascism seemed set to prevail.

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And yet, what earlier generations discovered—what we must rediscover right now—is that it is precisely when we are in the deepest valley, precisely when the climb is steepest, that Americans relearn how to take the mountaintop. Together. As one nation. As one people. That is how we will beat back our present dangers. That is how we will surpass what trials may come. And that is how we will do what Lincoln called on us to do, and “nobly save . . . the last best hope of earth.” Thank you, God Bless you, and may God Bless America.

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