

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Lincoln Centennial Address

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

The centennial celebration of Lincoln's birth—February 12, 1909—was recognized and observed across the country with parades, concerts, school programs, and oratory. Gun salutes were fired at New York Harbor and National Guard batteries. At public schools, students read aloud the Gettysburg Address. In Boston, Julia Ward Howe (1819–1910), author of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” presented a new poem, “A Vision,” to a joint session of the Massachusetts House and Senate.

Page | 1

In Hodgenville, Kentucky, Lincoln's birthplace, President Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919) delivered the keynote remarks and later applied the first trowel of mortar on the cornerstone of the temple John Russell Pope would build to shelter the tiny log cabin. Why does Roosevelt hold up Lincoln, along with George Washington, as one of the “greatest of our public men”? What virtues does he ascribe to Lincoln? What is his “supreme vision”? Do you agree with Roosevelt's claim that Lincoln saw the same “high qualities” in both the North and the South? Should we today feel “an equal pride” in those who fought, regardless of the side they fought for?

We have met here to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the birth of one of the two greatest Americans; of one of the two or three greatest men of the nineteenth century; of one of the greatest men in the world's history. This rail splitter, this boy who passed his ungainly youth in the dire poverty of the poorest of the frontier folk, whose rise was by weary and painful labor, lived to lead his people through the burning flames of a struggle from which the nation emerged, purified as by fire, born anew to a loftier life. After long years of iron effort and of failure that came more often than victory, he at last rose to the leadership of the Republic at the moment when that leadership had become the stupendous world task of the time. He grew to know greatness, but never ease. Success came to him, but never happiness, save that which springs from doing well a painful and a vital task. Power was his, but not pleasure. The furrows deepened on his brow, but his eyes were undimmed by either hate or fear. His gaunt shoulders were bowed, but his steel thews never faltered as he bore for a burden the destinies of his people. His great and tender heart shrank from giving pain, and the task allotted him was to pour out like water the lifeblood of the young men and to feel in his every fiber the sorrow of the women. Disaster saddened but never dismayed him. Triumph was his at the last, and barely had

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he tasted it before murder found him, and the kindly, patient, fearless eyes were closed forever.

As a people we are indeed beyond measure fortunate in the characters of the two greatest of our public men, Washington and Lincoln. They were alike in essentials—they were alike in the great qualities which rendered each able to render service to his nation and to all mankind such as no other man of his generation could or did render. There have been other men as great and other men as good, but in all the history of mankind there are no other two great men as good as these, no other two good men as great. Widely though the problems of today differ from the problems set for solution to Washington when he founded this nation, to Lincoln when he saved it and freed the slave, yet the qualities they showed in meeting these problems are exactly the same as those we should show in doing our work today.

Page | 2

Lincoln saw into the future with the prophetic imagination usually vouchsafed only to the poet and the seer. He had in him all the lift toward greatness of the visionary, without any of the visionary's fanaticism or egotism, without any of the visionary's narrow jealousy of the practical man and inability to strive in practical fashion for the realization of an ideal. No more practical man ever lived than this homely backwoods idealist, but he had nothing in common with those practical men whose consciences are warped until they fail to distinguish between good and evil, fail to understand that strength, ability, shrewdness, whether in the world of business or of politics, only serve to make their possessor a more noxious, a more evil member of the community, if they are not guided and controlled by a fine and high moral sense.

We of this day must try to solve many social and industrial problems requiring to an especial degree the combination of indomitable resolution with cool headed sanity. We can profit by the way in which Lincoln used both these traits as he strove for reform. We can learn much of value from the very attacks which following that course brought upon his head, attacks alike by the extremists of revolution and by the extremists of reaction. He never wavered in devotion to his principles, in his love for the Union and in his abhorrence of slavery. Timid and lukewarm people were always denouncing him because he was too extreme; but, as a matter of fact, he never went to extremes.

Yet perhaps the most wonderful thing of all, and, from the standpoint of the America of today and of the future, the most vitally important, was the extraordinary way in which Lincoln could fight valiantly against what he deemed wrong and yet preserve

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undiminished his love and respect for the brother from whom he differed. In the hour of a triumph that would have turned any weaker man's head, in the heat of a struggle which spurred many a good man to dreadful vindictiveness, he said truthfully that so long as he had been in his office he had never willingly planted a thorn in any man's bosom and besought his supporters to study the incidents of the trial through which they were passing as philosophy from which to learn wisdom and not as wrongs to be avenged, ending with the solemn exhortation that, as the strife was over, all should reunite in a common effort to save their common country.

Page | 3

He lived in days that were great and terrible, when brother fought against brother for what each sincerely deemed to be the right, in a contest so grim the strong men who alone can carry it through are rarely able to do justice to the deep convictions of those with whom they grapple in mortal strife. At such times men see through a glass darkly. To only the rarest and loftiest spirits is vouchsafed that clear vision which gradually comes to all, even to the lesser, as the struggle fades into distance and wounds are forgotten and peace creeps back to the hearts that were hurt. But to Lincoln was given this supreme vision. He did not hate the man from whom he differed. Weakness was as foreign as wickedness to his strong, gentle nature. But his courage was of a quality so high that it needed no bolstering of dark passion. He saw clearly that the same high qualities, the same courage and willingness for self sacrifice and devotion to the right as it was given them to see the right, belonged both to the men of the north and to the men of the south. As the years roll by, and as all of us, wherever we dwell, grow to feel an equal pride in the valor and self devotion, alike of the men who wore the blue and the men who wore the gray, so this whole nation will grow to feel a peculiar sense of pride in the mightiest of the mighty men who mastered the mighty days, the lover of his country and of all mankind, the man whose blood was shed for the union of his people and for the freedom of a race, Abraham Lincoln.