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# A Vast Future

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## A Vast Future

### Abraham Lincoln and the Struggle for the Fate of Free Government

By James McPherson

On his way to Washington in February 1861, to take up the burdens of the presidency and a nation that seemed to be falling apart, Abraham Lincoln spoke to the legislature of New Jersey in Trenton -- near the spot where George Washington's ragged troops won a victory the day after Christmas 1776 and saved the American Revolution from collapse. "There must have been something more common that these men struggled for," Lincoln declared, "something even more than national independence, something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world for all time to come."

"That something," he said, "was the affirmation of the Declaration of Independence, that all men had an equal right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Lincoln was, as he put it in Trenton, "Exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made."

The next day, which was Washington's birthday, February 22, Lincoln spoke at Independence Hall in Philadelphia:

*I have often inquired of myself what great principal 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 motherland; but that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence 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 weight would be lifted from the shoulders of all men.*

That was the ideal that Lincoln thought was threatened by the break-up of the United States.

After the attack on Fort Sumter, Lincoln declared:

*The central idea pervading this struggle is the necessity of proving that popular government is not an absurdity. We must settle this question now; whether in a free government the minority have the right to break up the government whenever they choose. If we fail it will go far to prove that the incapability of the people to govern themselves.*

Nor was the struggle "altogether for today," Lincoln told Congress in 1861. "It is for a vast future also, it embraces more than the fate of these United States. It presents to the whole family of man the question of whether a constitutional republic or a democracy... can, or cannot maintain its territorial integrity."

The sense of mission that Lincoln invoked is deeply rooted in American culture. From the beginning, settlers in the new world felt they had a mission to show people in the old world the path to greater liberty, democracy, prosperity. "We shall be a city upon a hill," said John Winthrop to his fellow Puritans as their ship approached Massachusetts Bay in 1630. "The eyes of all people are upon us." Thomas Jefferson addressed the Declaration of Independence to the "opinions of mankind." In 1783, George Washington congratulated his compatriots on the achievement of independence but warned them, "The eyes of the whole world are turned upon you." As Lincoln did four score years later, Washington declared the impact of the American Revolution would not be confined "to the present age alone, with our fate will be the destiny of unborn millions be involved."

On the 85th anniversary of American independence, July 4, 1861, when the Civil War was three months old, Lincoln acknowledged that:

*Our popular government has often been called an experiment. Two points in it our people have already settled -- the successful establishing and the successful administering of it. One still remains -- its successful maintenance against a formidable internal attempt to overthrow it.*

If that attempt succeeded, if the Confederacy broke the country in two, the forces of reaction in Europe would smile in smug satisfaction that this proof of their contention that the upstart republic, launched in 1776, could never last and would be swept into the dustbin of history.

The United States stood alone in the mid 19th century as a democratic republic in a world bestrode by kings, queens, princes, emperors, czars, petty dictators, and theories of aristocracy. Some Americans still alive in 1860 had seen two French republics rise and fall. The hopes of 1848 for the triumph of popular government in Europe had been shattered by the counterrevolutions that had brought a conservative reaction in the old world. Perhaps the United States was, as Lincoln said, "The last best hope of earth for the success of government of, by, and for the people."

Many in the North shared Lincoln's conviction that democracy was on trial in this war. As an Indianapolis newspaper put it two weeks after the beginning of the war,

*War is self preservation, if our form of Government is worth preserving. If monarchy would be better, it might be wise to quit fighting, admit that a republic is too weak to take care of itself, and invite some deposed Duke or Prince of Europe to come over here and rule us. But otherwise we must fight.*

The war brought hundreds of thousands of men to recruiting offices in both the North and the South. Some in the North expressed a similar sort of democratic mission as a motive for fighting. In 1863, on the second anniversary of his enlistment, an Ohio private wrote in his diary that he had not expected the war to last so long, but no matter how long it took it must be carried on, "for the great principles of liberty and self government are at stake, for should we fail, the onward march of Liberty in the Old World will be retarded at least a century, and Monarchs, Kings and Aristocrats will be more powerful against their subjects than ever."

Some foreign-born soldiers appreciated the international impact of the war more than native born men who took their political rights for granted. In 1864, a British-born corporal in an Ohio regiment wrote to his wife on why he decided to reenlist for a second three-year hitch:

*If I get hurt, I want you to realize that it is not only for my country and my children but for liberty all over the world that I risk my life, for*



Abraham Lincoln was born 198-years ago this week.

#### Gettysburg Address

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

*if liberty should be crushed here, what hope would there be for the cause of human progress anywhere else?*

An Irish born private in the 28<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Infantry, the famous Irish Brigade, rebuked both his wife in Boston and his father-in-law back in Ireland for questioning his judgment in risking his life for the Union: "This is the first test of a modern free government in the act of sustaining itself against internal enemies," he wrote, almost as if in echo of Lincoln.

*If it fails then the hopes of millions fall and the designs and wishes of all tyrants will succeed. The old cry will be set forth from all the aristocrats of Europe that such is the common lot of all republics.*

It may be worth noting that this Irish-born private and the British-born corporal were both killed in action in 1864.

Lincoln had said that the struggle for the Union involved not only "the fate of these United States, but also the whole family of man." It was a struggle not altogether for today but "for a vast future also." We are living in that vast future. Lincoln's words resonate in the twenty-first century with as much relevance as they did seven score years ago.

Lincoln, would have applauded the sentiments of a seventeen year old girl from Texas, who was a finalist in an essay contest on Lincoln's legacy, a few years ago. This girl, whose ancestors had immigrated to this country from India wrote, "If the United States was not in existence today, I would not have a chance to excel in life and education. The Union was preserved not only for the people of yesterday, but also for the lives of today." One could only speculate about the fate of this young woman if the United States was not in existence today.

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*This passage was excerpted from a speech James McPherson delivered at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum. It was part of the Lincoln Lecture Series co-sponsored by Grand Valley State University's Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies, the Gerald R. Ford Foundation, and the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum..*