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Reed Smoot

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN—STATESMAN

SPEECH OF HON. REED SMOOT

OF UTAH

IN THE

SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 1927



To my friend George P. Lambright
with best wishes

Yours truly
Reed Smoot

UNITED STATES
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SPEECH
OF
HON. REED SMOOT

Mr. SMOOT. Mr. President, 80 years ago next December, Abraham Lincoln took his seat in the lower House of Congress, in what is now Statuary Hall in the National Capitol. He was elected as a Whig and a follower of Henry Clay. He entered the National Legislature at a momentous period. For a decade the Nation had been absorbed in industrial pursuits. Business and internal development were uppermost. Patriotism slumbered, national impulses seemed dormant.

A wild passion for war revived the spirit of Bunker Hill and New Orleans. The soldier supplanted the accountant; deed eclipsed the dollar. Few stopped to discuss the righteousness of war, to what end it might lead or its effect on the status of slavery.

Mr. Lincoln did not willingly enter into this military atmosphere. Albeit a patriot and as a Congressman elect, admonishing those who hastened to the front to "stand by the flag till peace came with honor," nevertheless he was one of thousands of sober, thoughtful, yet loyal, citizens, who looked far beyond a war of annexation to the addition of another slave State. Mr. Lincoln's background was an absorbing hostility to what he sincerely felt was a national peril.

While a man of peace and opposed to war with Mexico, Mr. Lincoln never failed to vote for any bill or resolution that had for its object the sending of supplies to our troops ordered to the seat of war. Once in the war he supported its prosecution.

With courage and faultless logic he challenged the President's justification of war and the shedding of the blood of American citizens on foreign soil.

Let him (the President) remember—

He said—

he sits where Washington sat; and so remembering, let him answer as Washington would answer * * * and if, so answering, he can show that the soil was ours where the first blood of the war was shed * * * then I am with him for his justification.

This, his first great speech in yonder hall, should have won him a high place, were it not for the shifting standard of public opinion that confounds the thing of the moment with the ultimate principle.

In reply to sharp criticism from his Whig constituents, he sent a letter revealing his sincerity of purpose, his soberness of thought, and his adherence to the purposes of the Republic. He insisted that the important function of the Constitution in leaving the declaration of war with Congress, precluded the right of any one man to bring the oppression of war upon the people. Mr. Lincoln was not so elated with patriotism that he lost his standard of righteousness. This rare ability he displayed in later years.

From the beginning of his public career Mr. Lincoln possessed a national mind. The logic of the preservation of the Union led straight to the protection of American industry and labor. He sounded the depths of discussion by his quaint and original method.

He had profound sympathy for the toiler. He voted for a resolution instructing the Committee on Ways and Means to inquire into the expediency of reporting a bill increasing the duties on foreign luxuries of all kinds and "on such foreign manufactures as are now coming into ruinous competition with American labor."

He was in advance of the thought of his day in the matter of internal improvements. He attacked the opinions of those who maintained that the burden of improvements would be general while the benefits would be local, thus involving a pernicious inequality. Mr. Lincoln's reply displayed his political wisdom. He argued that if every good thing was to be discarded which might be inseparably connected with a degree of inequality in its application, then all government would have to be discarded.

One of the outstanding elements of Mr. Lincoln's character and mental process was his knowledge of human nature and his belief that no righteous cause can be consummated until public opinion is ripe for it. His attitude toward his one consuming thought, hostility to slavery, was that of deliberation and caution until he felt that the time to strike had come. In this can be found the key to his final triumph. He never hurried, never plunged thoughtlessly and recklessly; but when he reached a conclusion and struck a blow, he reasoned that the hour had come for radical action.

Mr. Lincoln's waiting policy is well illustrated when, after his failures to be elected United States Senator, he was offered the nomination of Governor of Illinois, but declined and was presented as a candidate for Vice President, against his wishes. For several years he practiced his profession and bided his time.

He was invited to the city of Boston to participate in anti-slavery exercises in that abode of radical sentiment. Although stirred by the eloquence of Seward and Sumner, and fired by the spirit of New England, he husbanded his anger and planned with wisdom what he knew were the most effective ways. He realized that progress is a slow and labored process, and that haste is often the companion of reaction.

Mr. Lincoln left a respectable but not eminent record of two years in Congress. He had lost the support of many of the Whigs. To not a few his political career had come to an inglorious end. Though zealous for action, he appeared to others to be resigned to his fate. But some unseen power gave him faith in himself and his cause. Like Washington, he marked out his own path. Behind his exterior melancholy was a sublime faith that his time would come.

The same year that Mr. Lincoln took his seat in the National House of Representatives Stephen A. Douglas took his seat in the United States Senate, which then occupied what is now the Supreme Court chamber. From the day that Mr. Douglas moved to Illinois from Vermont, in 1833, to the untimely death

of Mr. Lincoln the lives of these two men were intertwined in a miraculous manner. No picture can exaggerate the contrast between these two intellectual giants. Mr. Lincoln felt this contrast keenly. He was an ex-Member of Congress, a defeated candidate for Senator—a failure—while Mr. Douglas was a Senator, a leader in his party—a success.

Mr. Douglas had few superiors in a finished political debate. Mr. Lincoln's speech was quaint, rough, and at times raw. Mr. Douglas was bold, belligerent, dominating, and magnetic. Mr. Lincoln was modest, retiring, and thoughtful. Mr. Douglas was immaculate in dress and appearance. Mr. Lincoln was careless in dress, long and lank of body.

The five years following Mr. Lincoln's congressional experience reveal a strong man struggling with a giant problem against what appeared to be insurmountable obstacles. He was a lonely soul fighting a sublime battle in which the destiny of a Nation was to be settled. These were splendid years of preparation. Mr. Lincoln the politician was slowly emerging into Mr. Lincoln the statesman. He was ready when he met Mr. Douglas in the first public discussion between the two giants. It was in October, 1854. The speech of Mr. Douglas was a national event. He was fighting for reelection to the Senate and was forced to defend his votes on the repeal of the Missouri compromise and the Kansas-Nebraska bill.

Mr. Lincoln's reply surpassed all expectations. A new and dauntless advocate appeared to contest the aggressive championship of Senator Douglas. Mr. Lincoln felt in his soul the truths he uttered, crushing with his logic and holding up to scorn the defender of iniquitous propositions.

In this first great encounter with Judge Douglas Mr. Lincoln displayed the shrewdness and statesmanship that characterized his whole career. He recognized the fact that a moral prophet is seldom the political leader of his time. There must be intelligent recognition of the times and conditions to accomplish results. He made no false step. He was scrupulously fair to his antagonist. He added to the strength of his logic and reasoning a compelling sympathy from his hostile listeners by avoiding personal abuse. His keen analysis exposed the sophistry of popular sovereignty. Thus he passed from the sordidness and turmoil of the court room and petty politics to the championship of an impelling principle. His historic utterance, "A house divided against itself can not stand," was the battle cry of a people pledged to freedom. Their leader was Abraham Lincoln.

Senator Douglas accepted Mr. Lincoln's challenge to a series of joint debates in Illinois to test the Senator's plausible arguments and to bring popular sentiment in that State to decide whether Senator Douglas or Mr. Lincoln was legally and morally right. It is recorded that Mr. Douglas accepted not without misgivings, for he alone realized the mental strength and power of his antagonist, and his mastery of logic.

I shall have my hands full—

Remarked Mr. Douglas—

He is the strong man of his party. He is as honest as he is shrewd, and if I beat him, my victory will be hardly won.

No one realized to what heights Mr. Douglas had climbed more clearly than Mr. Lincoln. Speaking of his handicaps, Mr. Lincoln said:

With me the race of ambition has been a failure—a flat failure; with him it has been one of splendid success. We have to fight this battle upon principles.

To review the historic Lincoln-Douglas debates would be far beyond the limits of this brief address. The genius of Mr. Douglas was rebuked by the plain, homely Mr. Lincoln. The elaborate oratory of the Senate never confused the Senator from Illinois. For the first time in his career the national Democratic leader was worried and perplexed.

Beyond the crowds that listened before those rude platforms in the Illinois clearings Mr. Lincoln saw, what Mr. Douglas did not see—a listening Nation. To this larger forum Mr. Lincoln addressed himself. He was eager for the office at stake; but of more importance than ambition was the hope of overcoming his rival in the eyes of the whole country.

Mr. Douglas may be Senator—

Said a friend.

Perhaps—

Rejoined Mr. Lincoln—

but I am after larger game. The battle of 1860 is worth a hundred of this.

Mr. Lincoln's defeat in the senatorial election was actually a victory for him. While the Senator had merely maintained his great prestige already established, his opponent had leaped at one bound into a national reputation.

In the two years intervening between these historic debates and the Republican National Convention in 1860, the tide of events was sweeping Mr. Lincoln on with tragic swiftmess. The convention passed over Seward, Chase, and other recognized leaders and nominated Mr. Lincoln. The same tide of events swept Mr. Douglas into the leadership of one wing of his party in the national convention. The debates with Mr. Lincoln compelled a division of Mr. Douglas's party and compassed Mr. Douglas's defeat, as Mr. Lincoln predicted. While the choice of Mr. Lincoln had back of it a consistent and uplifting righteous cause, the choice of Mr. Douglas meant a certain split. Be it said to the honor of Mr. Douglas, when the crisis came he turned from the consequences of his own sophistry and supported Mr. Lincoln and the Union.

It is a task far beyond the scope of this short address to analyze Mr. Lincoln's public addresses from the first in 1858 when he was nominated for United States Senator to his last inaugural in 1865. Through them all runs the grandeur of his cause, the sincerity of his purpose, the tenderness of his heart, and the divinity of his soul.

His first inaugural stands alone among American orations. It is as true to Lincoln as the reply to Hayne was to Webster. It is one of the most momentous messages in American history. It put in clear speech the question agitating the common mind. In his loneliness of soul he resolved that the hour for speech and action had come, that the time for compromise was over.

In judging keenly of the drift of events he was wiser than the pure politicians. Mingled with his political sagacity was a sublime communion with constitutional liberty and eternal justice. To a critic he replied:

If I had to draw a pen across and erase my whole political life from existence, and had one poor gift or choice left as to what would save me from the wreck, I would choose that speech and leave it to the world un erased.

The closing words of his first inaugural address are a tender appeal and a vision of the Union.

The mystic cords of memory, stretching from every battle field and patriot grave to every 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.

Judge Douglas sat on the platform on the east portico of the Capitol with President Lincoln's hat in his lap when these words were uttered. Who can tell what thoughts were in his mind as he listened intently?

Mr. Lincoln's Gettysburg address has gone into the archives of classic literature. As some one has said, it is like a sacred poem. No American President had ever spoken words like these to the American people. America never had a President who found such words in the depths of his heart.

The closing words of his last inaugural address, March 4, 1865, are no less sublime. They reveal Mr. Lincoln as the Nation's redeemer and compassionate savior.

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive 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 lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

Mr. Lincoln's political philosophy is worthy the study of every citizen, patriot and reformer, man or woman, who believes in the dawn of better days. No man in history longed more earnestly for the triumph of justice than Abraham Lincoln. He hated evil in all its forms; still his purpose was the preservation of the principles of the Republic. Such battles require leadership of the highest order. To husband strength, to bide the time and await the solemn moment for attack is political generalship, as essential in the Senate as on the battle field.

Mr. Lincoln gave due regard to the weight and potency of public opinion. He would not aid in the passage of a law not intended to be enforced or incapable of being substantially enforced. His one great principle behind self-government was law and order and observance of the law.

His guiding star was the Constitution and the law. He never believed that the Constitution and the law should be observed or not observed according to one's own liking. Often it is said that he departed from his own principle in denouncing the Dred Scott decision. Not so. He deplored the decision and waited patiently for a higher court of appeal—public opinion—to reverse it. He said:

We believe in obedience to and respect for the Judicial Department of Government. Its decisions on constitutional questions, when fully settled, should control * * * subject to be disturbed only by amendment of the Constitution as provided in that instrument itself. More than this would be revolution.

Mr. Lincoln believed in party organization and was a loyal partisan. He believed that parties are necessary in a self-governing Republic. Having no sympathy with political anarchy or with independent group activity, he gave full credit to party government.

All that Mr. Lincoln accomplished was through party organization and united effort. Mr. Lincoln blended the enthusiasm of the idealist with the wisdom of the politician. He was the wisest politician in American history; consummate in strategy, a supreme friend and champion of democracy.

What would be Mr. Lincoln's views on the perplexing problems now confronting America? We can judge only by what he said and did.

Speaking in response to a serenade at the White House in November, 1864, he said:

Gold is good in its place, but living, breathing patriotic men are better than gold.

What would Mr. Lincoln say of law enforcement? In 1837, long before he became a national and sainted character, he said:

Let reverence for the laws be breathed by every American mother to the lisping babe that prattles on her lap. Let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges. * * * Let it be preached from the pulpits, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. In short, let it become the political religion of the Nation.

Again he said:

If the time ever comes in America when a minority can frustrate the will of the majority, the result will be mobocracy upon the one hand or tyranny on the other. Freedom does not mean the right to do as one pleases.

What would Mr. Lincoln say of the modern doctrine of self-determination? In the midst of the bewildering problems of the Civil War, he said:

I am driven to my knees over and over again because I have nowhere else to go.

To Mr. Lincoln, man proposes, God disposes.

It was his faith in God that made him a guide, a prophet, and a seer.

What would Mr. Lincoln say of communism and similar creeds? He was the apostle of human rights, and as such insisted upon the right of the individual to acquire property and hold it under the protection of the law. He said:

Property is the fruit of labor; property is desirable, is a positive good in the world. That some should be rich shows that others may become rich and hence is just encouragement to industry and enterprise. Let not him who is houseless pull down the house of another,

but let him labor diligently and build one for himself, thus, by example, assuring that his own shall be safe from violence when built.

What would Mr. Lincoln say about government in the field of private business? He said:

In all that people can individually do for themselves, the Government ought not to interfere.

Mr. Lincoln believed that peace works from within out, rather than from without in. In this belief he closed his second inaugural address, and dictated the generous terms of surrender.

Mr. Lincoln's nationalism did not mean isolation but independence tempered with peace among all nations, and with commerce throughout the world.

Yonder stands the Lincoln Memorial, one of the most imposing and majestic edifices ever reared by the genius and the hand of man. Its marble columns, its classic design, its loggia wherein rests the heroic statue of Abraham Lincoln, seated as if in calm conference, is a fitting memorial of America's immortal son.

Of all the public structures in Washington, not excepting the Capitol and the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial is the most uplifting and inspiring. It breathes the tenderness and compassion of the martyred President. It tells in silent eloquence the story of a tragic life and a heroic death.

It reminds all that the spirit of Abraham Lincoln still hovers over the Capital of the Republic for which he gave the last full measure of devotion.

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Copy

Madison, Wisconsin,
August 10, 1927

Hon. Reed Smoot,
Provo,
Utah

My dear Senator Smoot:

I was very much pleased to receive, with your compliments, an autographed copy of your speech on "Abraham Lincoln - Statesman." Your selection of material for this short address is admirable. You have drawn a sweeping picture of President Lincoln from his own quotations, and with a proper setting by yourself that makes the pamphlet readable and interesting. It is a real contribution to the voluminous literature on this subject, and I am very glad to add this item to my Lincoln collection.

I again want to thank you for your courteous consideration in sending it to me, autographed by yourself.

With kind personal regards, I am

Sincerely yours,

Geo. P. Hambrecht
KC

