

REMARKS

VICE PRESIDENT HUBERT HUMPHREY

LINCOLN'S BIRTHDAY OBSERVANCE

LINCOLN MEMORIAL

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There is a singular quality about Abraham Lincoln which sets him apart from all our other Presidents.

One can not help but sense it here at this magnificent memorial: the moving statue by Daniel Chester French provides three dimensions to Lincoln, but there is something else --

-- a fourth dimension of brooding compassion, of love for humanity;

-- a love which was, if anything, strengthened and deepened by the agony that drove lesser men to the protective shelter of callous indifference.

The Lincoln papers show his infinite dedication to hard responsibility. During the war, his orders to his generals constantly dealt with soldiers convicted of desertion and sentenced to death.

The President could simply have endorsed the recommendation of the Secretary of War -- he might have treated the execution of deserters as a routine affair in wartime.

He rejected this "easy" bureaucratic solution.

Time and time again the order went out: "Suspend the sentence of execution until the Judge Advocate General shall have reported to the President." And rarely was the penalty reinstated.

Lincoln did not come to the presidency with any set of full-blown theories, but rather with a mystical dedication to the Union and an inflexible determination to preserve the integrity of the Republic.

He was the least arrogant of men, endowed with a humility which led him in 1864 to write:

"I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me. Now, at the end of three years struggle the nation's condition is not what either party, or any man devised or expected."

Lincoln was often racked by doubts. In the conduct of grave human affairs, dogmatic certainty is frequently the handmaiden of catastrophe.

But doubt can often lead to an equally disastrous paralysis.

The true quality of Lincoln emerges, I think from the fact that for four long brutal years he never permitted his anguish and doubt to deter him from acting.

He recognized that the evidence he had to go on was incomplete. Yet he made a total commitment to action.

And this commitment, while total, was never fanatical. Lincoln's mind was always open, he was always searching for new light, for a better policy.

His intelligence never rested. The consequence was that, as he forced himself to confront changing reality, he never ceased to grow.

Nothing illustrates this spiritual growth more vividly than the development of Lincoln's views on the race question.

At the onset of the Civil War, his position was one of personal abhorrence towards slavery. But his main political objective was to maintain the Union, not to eliminate slavery.

Gradually he became convinced that to restore the Union it was necessary to destroy slavery. Once this was settled in his mind, he turned to action.

In his Annual Message to Congress in December 1862, he eloquently and precisely stated his case:

"In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free -- honorable alike in what we give and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last, best hope of earth."

As soon as he had committed himself to the elimination of slavery Lincoln was brought face to face with the ultimate logical question: What status would the freed slaves have in the American community?

Would they be free and equal?

Or would they, like the free Negroes of that time, live in limbo, technically free but in fact unequal and discriminated against?

Initially, Lincoln had avoided this ominous issue -- the question that was to haunt American political thought for a century after his martyrdom.

Earlier, he had accepted the received wisdom of his time. He had advocated separate ways for the black and white "races".

In practice this meant support for the colonization of freed Negroes abroad in Africa and Central America.

But Lincoln's remorseless realism made it impossible for him to hold this view for long.

Leading Negro spokesmen of that era rejected this version of "black power" and demanded their rights as Americans.

And the project of organizing an exodus of over four million Negroes -- even if they were willing to leave -- was too fearful to contemplate.

So Lincoln began his troubled journey towards a new concept which would go beyond theories of black power or white power;

-- which would go beyond the ancient blinders of racism to the establishment of a multi-racial community;

-- a community in which a man's pride in his ethnic origins would be wholly consistent with his commitment to the common endeavor.

He died before he had the opportunity to articulate this vision.

We can never know what course history would have taken had Booth's bullet not brought down this towering political saint and stoked the fires of vengeance.

We do know that it has taken more than a century for us as a nation to assert the ideal that Lincoln had barely formulated -- and, more basically, to realize as he did that emancipating the Negro was an act of liberation for whites.

Abraham Lincoln was the "Great Emancipator" -- of black and white alike.

In a world long troubled by the curse of racism, there is a commanding clarity in Lincoln's belief that no man can truly live in creative equality when society imposes the irrational spiritual poverty of discrimination.

For untold centuries men of different skin colors, religions, castes, or ethnic backgrounds have despised each other, fought each other, enslaved and killed each other in the name of these false idols.

And at what a terrible cost in crippled souls;
-- in human creativity wasted on hate,
-- in brotherhood converted to fratricide.

In what he did to lift the baleful burden of racism from the American soul, Abraham Lincoln must stand as a teacher not just to his people -- black and white alike -- but to all humanity.

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