He Was Trustee of the American Dream

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Senator from Illinois

(Editor's Note: The following is from a talk made by Senator Dirksen at the Lincoln Memorial earlier this month.)

We come to visit with the Man from Illinois. It is a refreshing experience and he wants to speak with us. Although he is dead, he still speaks. Do you remember what the Apostle Paul said of Abel's sacrifice to gain righteousness? Paul said, "Being dead, yet speaketh." The Man from Illinois still speaks.

When he died—this humble man from Illinois—is not important. It is when life began 143 years ago in a Kentucky cabin which is important. That February day in 1809 was the beginning for a whole moral man moving toward God and immortality. The world and every human heart is his shrine. This whole indivisible Nation is his monument.

Every year a million people come to see him and to talk with him. In that composed face which you see they read the whole story of his greatness. It is a story of magic humility, of simple wisdom, of shining tolerance and of fidelity to freedom.

Look upon the north wall. There in inscription you sense the healing faith which shines through his Second Inaugural. Look upon the south wall. From it you catch the deathless echo of the words which fell from his lips at Gettysburg. These words breathe of freedom.

His countrymen who come to see him and speak with him in this very city where his soul took flight know full well that though he is away he still speaks. He is an inseparable part of the tradition which has gone before and of the hope that is to be—the hope of fulfillment of the American dream.

America is a dream—a marching dream—still unfulfilled.

That dream was in the hearts of people more than 300 years ago at Plymouth Rock. It was in the trees and brooks, in the fields and stones, it was in the hearts of soldiers at Bunker Hill and Valley Forge. It was the dream of a great, free, united land.

Dreams must have form. Men in wigs and breeches gathered in a stuffy room in Philadelphia. They put that dream on paper that a king might know how earnest they were.

A dozen years later they gave it structure. Men gathered in the same room to fashion a government dedicated to the very spirit of the American dream—the freedom of the individual.

The dream went marching in the hearts of farmers and artisans, preachers and teachers, as they moved westward. They carried it to Kentucky where he was born, to Indiana where he grew up as a boy, to Illinois where he grew to manhood. They carried the dream over plain and desert, over mountain and valley to the Pacific. They were the vehicles for freedom's song and freedom's dream.

The dream became troubled by an unsolved problem in the Constitution. It was a problem involving the freedom of another race. From the conflict of ideas came the conflict of arms. Conscience stirred, justice clamored for a remedy.

Then came this man from Illinois. The dream became a tapestry of blood and sacrifice. The dream was saved. On it this man from Illinois poured the healing of his boundless heart.

The dream was troubled in still other days by marching autocracy in 1917 and by despotism in 1941, but it marches again to new beauty. Free men continue to till the sun-drenched fields, to build new cities, to find new adventure in the valleys of trade and on the highlands of commerce.

The dream of America must be fulfilled. It must continue to march, but its brilliance and beauty will be preserved only as we in this generation bring to our trusteeship the same fidelity which marked the whole life of this man from Illinois.