THE MAN FROM ILLINOIS

One hundred years ago today the Man From Illinois came here to speak. He sought to make clear that the men who brought forth this new nation were familiar with the problem of the extension of slavery. He came to prove that in all their later actions and conduct they did not directly or otherwise take the position that the Federal Government had the power to deal with this institution and its control in the territories. He came to accent the moral issue involved by pointing out that the fact that the South thought slavery right and the North thought it wrong was the precise fact at the bottom of the controversy. To all of his countrymen he addressed the appeal that we not lightly set aside what the founding fathers had wrought and that he and his associates were not unreasonable or sectional in their position. To those of his own political faith he urged that nothing be done in passion or ill temper. And, finally, he uttered his own supreme conviction that right makes might, and to that end he asked all that they do their duty.

How cruel and mistaken contemporary judgments can be! When he left Springfield, Illinois, to come to New York for this address, the Springfield Register made this cryptic comment: "Subject not known, consideration two hundred dollars and expenses; object,
presidential capital; effect, disappointment." Thus are men blinded to the inexorable sweeps of Destiny. Ninety days after he spoke here he was nominated for the Presidency on the Republican ticket. Eight months after his appearance here, he was catapulted into the Presidency even as the fevers of the nation quickened and the ominous rumble of the irresistible conflict grew louder and louder. The Man From Illinois was to become the Grand Captain in a vast and bloody conflict.

We must go back beyond the address delivered here one hundred years ago tonight to note the emergence of the Man From Illinois as the incomparable crusader in a moral cause, the magnificent missionary whose real armor in a day of fiery ordeal was his incandescent conviction, his unflinching zeal, his invincible logic, and his unfailing sense of right and wrong. We must indeed go back to the very prairies of Illinois, which he hallowed and where his brooding spirit still lives.

It was in May of 1856 that one might have noted the emergence of the inner spirit which was to be his shield and buckler.

Two years before that date, the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and also the new and hateful doctrine of popular sovereignty was beginning to breed a strong revulsion in the land.

Before that, the issue of slavery was regarded in many quarters as a matter of policy rather than a transcendent moral issue. Among many of that day, it seemed to be little more than an intellectual exercise.
At the meeting in Bloomington, Illinois, on May 29, 1856, the Man From Illinois was summoned to speak at the party convention. This was the occasion when he uttered the celebrated "Lost Speech". The form and text may have in large measure been lost, but the spirit and effect were imperishable.

His law partner, Mr. Herndon, was present on that occasion. He referred to that speech as the greatest in the life of the Man From Illinois. Until then, according to Herndon, the slavery issue had, in fact, been argued and discussed on grounds of policy and not from the eternal standpoint of what was right and wrong. But on that day, the Man From Illinois was baptized in a new and unshakable cause. "From that day," wrote Herndon, "to the day of his death, he stood firm in the right."

The smothered flame had broken forth. A new and almost savage sense of justice fired his energies. The soul of the crusader was now seasoned. A new sense of mission was lighting the way. The Man From Illinois had found his cross. There on the rolling prairies of Illinois where he had been a storekeeper and postmaster, lawyer and surveyor, state legislator and Congressman, the magnificent missionary had suddenly emerged to become mankind's greatest crusader in a human cause.

In that day and time there were many other events which aided Destiny in making the Man From Illinois ready for the role he was to play. In the year 1856, James Buchanan was elected President.
In the territory of Kansas the recurring clashes over the slavery issue were being referred to as war. The unrestrained spirit of John Brown burst forth in murderous action like that of some horseman out of the Apocalypse, crying for death and vengeance. In that time also came the decision of the United States Supreme Court under the leadership of Chief Justice Taney in the Dred Scott case, a decision which was to make history and to shake history as well.

Came also in that day a most extraordinary document, then known as the Lecompton Constitution, under which one group believed and expected that the Territory of Kansas might come into the Union.

There came in the year 1858, a campaign for the United States Senate between the Man From Illinois and a distinguished and able opponent, a campaign marked by sharp allusions and pointed personalities, as each sought victory. And in the late summer of that year, as a part of the campaign, came that celebrated series of debates which have so greatly enriched the political literature of that day and left a revealing insight for those who were to come after.

In this great continuing discussion beginning at Ottawa, Illinois, and ending in Alton, few things were left undiscussed.

The debate embraced the Missouri Compromise of 1850, which sought to limit the extension of slavery. It included the effort to repeal that Compromise through the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, which was
piloted through a committee of the United States Senate by Senator Stephen A. Douglas, who was the opponent of the Man From Illinois. It involved the Dred Scott Decision. It covered the personal life of the candidates.

But the moral issue became the overriding light and it came in the very first discussion in the first debate at Ottawa.

"I hold," said the Man From Illinois, "there is no reason in the world why the Negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence. The right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness....and the right to eat the bread without the leave of anybody else which his own hand earns. He is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas and the equal of every living man."

Here was the beginning of the moral thunder which was to roll down through conflict, through emancipation and through victory.

On they went--these two gladiators--from Ottawa to Freeport, from Freeport to Jonesboro, from Jonesboro to Charleston, from Charleston to Galesburg, from Galesburg to Quincy, and from Quincy to Alton.

By that time it was mid-October in the year 1858. It was at Alton where the final discussion took place. Slavery is wrong. It is wrong. It is wrong. The very word "wrong" came tumbling from the lips of the Man From Illinois over and over again.
And in that final discussion, the Man From Illinois said, "That is the real issue. That is the issue which will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world."

In that day, even as in this day, editors and politicians, scholars and historians could interpret the debates as they saw and felt them against the backdrop of their own generation.

It may be difficult to evaluate this great event by orienting oneself into that period and then looking backward into the past and forward into the present.

Two years before the debates the great moral missionary had emerged. Character and conviction had emerged. A notion of the ultimate course which the country was to take and the moral concepts which must be asserted had emerged. The missioner had found himself, and so on and on he went. The issue of principle was drawn. It was the age-old struggle of right and wrong.

At first it had to be tempered to reality, and the Man From Illinois was indeed a realist. He knew that he was dealing with an entrenched institution. He knew that he was dealing with a Supreme Court, with a Congress and with a Constitution. He knew that he was dealing with a divided land and with people who were sharply divided. He was dealing with friends and party associates who were deeply interested in a political victory. He was dealing with his own
senatorial candidacy. All these were realities and he kept constantly in mind the necessities of the occasion.

Moreover, he knew that the people must be conditioned for this whole dose of basic moral principle and the struggle between right and wrong.

This was not a case for a thimbleful of gospel, and as the very conditioning process went on, so the conditioning of the spirit of the Man From Illinois went on. With it all there was the slow but inevitable contagion which developed. The thousands upon thousands of people who attended the debates or who read the accounts were caught up in the fervor of the occasion. They were given a sustained chance to think and to meditate on the moral issue and to gradually separate the superficial from the genuine. They had a chance to get a sharpened sense of the real issue and to reflect week after week upon the basic principle of human equality.

And so at long last as the great issue of that day began to incubate the Man From Illinois was invited to address a meeting here in Cooper Union. He arrived on February 25, 1860.

He had accepted the invitation extended to him, together with the promised fee of two hundred dollars, partly because he wanted to come and see his son, Robert, who was then at Phillips Academy in New Hampshire and was expected to enter Harvard but had done very poorly in his entrance examination.
The weather as contemporary reports indicate was unseasonable and a heavy snow blanketed the city. This might have discouraged attendance at the meeting, and yet it is said that fifteen hundred people came to the huge basement Hall to hear him. In that audience were great men of that period who helped to fashion public opinion. It included Horace Greeley and George Palmer Putnam, William Cullen Bryant and David Dudley Field; and it was William Cullen Bryant who introduced the Man From Illinois to that audience one hundred years ago tonight.

Here in Cooper Union the Man From Illinois, in his ill-fitting wrinkled clothes, answered the South; here he answered those who charged his party with resorting to sectionalism; here he answered those who charged his party with inciting John Brown's insurrection; here he established beyond all doubt that the founding fathers not only understood the slavery issue but that a majority of those framers of our basic law pursued a constant and consistent course in not limiting the Federal power to deal with this institution in the Territories; and here it was that he set his foot on the first rung of the political ladder which took him to the Presidency, for it was but a few days more than a year after his appearance at Cooper Union that he took the oath as President of the United States of America.

How often in the century which has elapsed have his fellow countrymen expressed the prayerful wish and hope that he might be alive in days when we were confronted by a crisis. This human frailty
is not strange. It is in the nature of mankind to wish their heroes 
back from their pedestals when the way seems dark and the future un-
certain. Once in an hour of crisis and despair in England's history 
a celebrated Englishman was moved to say, "John Milton, thou shouldst 
be living at this hour."

But the Man From Illinois lives on because he speaks con-
stantly to all the generations who have come after him. The Apostle 
Paul, in his letter to the Hebrews, comments on the sacrifices made 
by Abel to gain righteousness, and then said, "Being dead, yet speakekth". 
The Man From Illinois, being dead yet speakekth to his countrymen time 
after time. And what does he say?

He speaks of liberty not merely in its relation to the slave 
issue of his own day, but because of its promise to all and its impor-
tance to the unfoldment of the Republic. In a fragment which he set 
down on paper in 1861 in the very turmoil of conflict, he paid testimony 
to the Constitution and to the Union and their impact upon our national 
well-being, and then he added, "but even these are not the primary 
cause of our great prosperity. There is something else, and that 
something is the principle of liberty to all--the principle that clears 
the path to all--gives hope to all--and by consequence, enterprise and 
industry to all." That sentiment might well have been uttered in every 
home, at every fireside, at every work bench, in every citadel of com-
merce this very night one hundred years after the Man From Illinois 
stood here.
He spoke of unshakable purpose in the pursuit of fundamental principles. To a friend, Henry Asbury, he wrote in 1858 that the "cause of civil liberty must not be surrendered at the end of one or even one hundred defeats". To Secretary Seward he wrote in 1862, "I expect to maintain this contest until successful, or until I die, or am conquered, or my term expires, or the Congress, or the country forsakes me." In this hour, a century later, what a nourishing sentiment this is, as the Congress, having before it a vivid recollection of the incidents at Clinton, Tennessee and Little Rock, Arkansas, wrestles with the great issue of civil rights, civil liberty and the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Constitution.

The Man From Illinois spoke of the steady course as the true course in preserving a great cause. Then as now there were those who would move faster. Then as now there were those who urged a course of action that might well have jeopardized the very cause for which so much blood had been shed. Heavy as were his burdens, he could still say to Senator Chandler in 1863, "I hope to stand firm enough not to go backward and yet not go forward fast enough to wreck the country's cause." What a lesson for those who in this tumultuous period would recreate America over night and spurn all the lessons of the past.

The Man From Illinois even now speaks of courage and devotion to a great issue and a great cause regardless of the political consequences. Even as a young man while addressing a church group in the city of Springfield, Illinois, he could say, "Let not the
probability of defeat deter us from asserting a cause which is just."
In this day and time the lure of political victory is great. The lure
of public office is even greater. The desire to appease sectional and
economic groups is difficult to restrain. The impulse to yield to
pressure is not unknown. Well might we listen to the Man From Illinois,
as he placed causes and principles above all other considerations.

Above all else, he speaks to us of the future. How pre-
occupied each generation becomes with its own affairs and concerns,
and how often the future is forgotten.

The Man From Illinois was thinking not merely of his own
time but of the future of the Republic, knowing that unnumbered gen-
erations would live in this fair land. What then was to be their
legacy?

In his message to Congress in 1861, he said, "The struggle
of today is not altogether for today--it is for a vast future also."

But it was at Gettysburg that the grand sweep of the past,
the present and the future was in his mind and in his heart. First
came the deathless question whether a nation conceived in liberty and
dedicated to equality could long endure. It is a deathless question
for it continues to roll down the corridors of time as an ever recurring
challenge.

Then came the haunting present, as he noted the sacrifices
which had already been made on the altar of that cause. And then came
the future expressed in terms of the unfinished work, the great task
that remained, and finally the flaming hope "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."

The Man From Illinois still speaks to his countrymen. So
long as Providence endows his countrymen with the capacity to remem-
ber, he shall continue to speak to them, even as he spoke to them
here one hundred years ago this night. The Man From Illinois--his
name was Abraham Lincoln.

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