Remarks by Robert H. Michel
1994 Lincoln Day Remarks

Since 1957, my first year in Congress, I have addressed Lincoln Day audiences every February of my Congressional career.

We took a rough estimate the other day, and came up with a conservative figure of well over 200 Lincoln Day speeches I have delivered, from Fairbanks, Alaska, to Portland, Maine, in 37 years.

I have spoken to fellow Republicans on Lincoln Day in the mid-1960s and mid-1970's when it was tough to be a Republican and in the glory days of the 1980's when the fortunes of our party were on the upswing.

So Lincoln Day has a lot of fond memories for me.
I recall two Lincoln Day celebrations when I had the honor of introducing two great Republicans to Tazewell County: Senator Dick Lugar of Indiana in 1983, and, in 1969, a truly great man, my former colleague, Dr. Walter Judd, one of the most dynamic speakers our party has ever produced.

But this is my last round of a Lincoln Day speeches as a member of the United States House of Representatives.

Don't get me wrong: I am still fighting for our party's principles, on every issue from health care to welfare reform -- and I intend to keep on working for the people of this district straight through this Congress.  

But I know you'll forgive me if this occasion brings forth just a bit of nostalgia.


This Lincoln Day celebration has a special meaning for me, for I can look back, and see the beginning of my Congressional career so long ago-- and I can see the swift passing of the years and then, even more swiftly, the decades.

I recently re-read some of the old texts of my Lincoln Day speeches.

I suppose one lesson I learned while looking through these old speeches is the ephemeral nature of hot political issues.

There were many references in my old speeches to the Soviet threat-- and now that threat is gone forever with the winds of revolution and change.

I came across references to Arab oil boycotts of the 1970's which then loomed so large in our minds and are now forgotten.
In 1991, I spoke of supporting President Bush on Operation Desert Storm--and now that swift, victorious war is scarcely mentioned by most Americans.

How quickly political issues are forgotten!

I am reminded of the story told by Lincoln of the ancient ruler who asked his advisers to give him advice that would be true in good times and in bad times.

And the advice they gave him was:

"This too shall pass."

And so much has passed in all these years/But so much remains to be done.

And that is the essence of my message to you tonight/I am not here to take a slow stroll down memory lane.
Memory lane has been bypassed these days by the information highway of the future.

And that is where I have always chosen to live my life in politics, in the present with its problems to be solved, and in the future with its hopes to be fulfilled.

In politics, there is just too much to be done tomorrow to spend today thinking about yesterday.

Our party has a great role to play in shaping the tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow of our nation's future.

We have lost the White House. But we haven't lost our principles or our vision or our confidence or our faith.
And in Illinois we are blessed with a great Governor, Jim Edgar, who is going to lead the Republican Party to a sweeping re-election victory in November.

We have great candidates at every level (RHM--EXTEM on Ray?)

Last year Republicans won seven special and regular elections nationwide. This is an astounding feat, proof that our party stands poised to make great gains in the 1994 elections and is prepared to recapture the White House in 1996.

But I am getting ahead of myself because at this special Lincoln Day celebration among so many friends -- and so many memories -- I want to talk about Lincoln. There is much we can learn about tomorrow from what he did and said so long ago.

And our visit yesterday to the Lincoln Home & Visitors Center in Springfield yesterday...
At this point you might ask after two hundred speeches what possibly is left to say about Lincoln?

Well, that's the strange thing. The subject of Abe Lincoln is all but inexhaustible.

Lincoln had something important and memorable to say on just about every major political subject from the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence to human rights and states rights from the way to fight a war to the way to build a just and lasting peace.

In 1863, in fewer than 300 words, in about two and a half minutes he redefined the meaning of the United States of America to such an extent that scholars are still debating the impact of his Gettysburg Address.
He knew how to begin things -- read both of his soaring Inaugural Addresses -- and he knew how to end things -- read his touching/heart-rending Farewell Speech to his friends and neighbors in Springfield in 1861.

The importance of Labor? / Lincoln spoke on it.

The need for capital? / Lincoln said a few words about that too.

The state of the Union / and the union of the states? / No American ever uttered such important words on those topics.

He knew the unique "high" of political victory -- and he knew the very depths of depression.

He could tell a funny story / split a log / defend a client / win a wrestling match -- and win a war.
He could tenderly comfort a mother who had lost two sons in the Civil War. But he also could crack down hard on his generals who were not performing up to expectations.

With his unsurpassed gift for language, he created a rhetorical legacy.

His language has a kind of music to it, a singing quality, a rhythm and a cadence that never ceases to thrill.

And that has been one of the great thrills of giving a Lincoln Day speech—getting the chance to quote that majestic language every year.

As someone who likes to sing, I enjoy getting the chance to sing a well-written song—one with a soaring melody and rich harmonies.

Well, a similar experience can be had in quoting the words of Lincoln.
Listen to this familiar passage that ends Lincoln's First Inaugural Address:

---"Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living 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."

That, my friends, is poetry. And there is so much more:

---"As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew."

---"Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better or equal hope in the world?"
"The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present."

"We shall nobly save or meanly lose the last, best hope of earth."

"...a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal..."

"... a new birth of freedom..."

"...the world will little note nor long remember what we say here but it can never forget what they did here...."

"...government of the people by the people for the people..."

"...With malice toward none with charity for all with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right..."

I particularly like the phrase "as God gives us to see the right."
Abe Lincoln never said that he alone knew God's will about political questions.

That kind of humility is refreshing and is lamentably absent from discussions of political rights and wrongs in our own time.

These days, so many politicians -- on both sides -- claim to have a direct private hot line to the Almighty on political questions/an attitude Lincoln would have found absurd.

Carl Sandburg quotes Lincoln in an address to a delegation of clergymen. After telling them it was often quite difficult to discern the right thing to do in politics, Lincoln said:
"I must study the plain physical facts of the case, ascertain what is possible, and learn what appears to be wise and right. The subject is difficult and good men do not agree."

In my view, a good strong dose of Lincolnesque humility would not harm our current political debates about morality.

What makes Lincoln's words so relevant to our own problems is that they are not the dry abstractions of a political theorist who has no knowledge of rough-and-tumble politics.

They are the words of a practicing politician.

Abe Lincoln of Illinois was not some kind of other-worldly mystic or plaster saint -- which is how he is sometimes portrayed.
No, he was a shrewd Illinois political professional and he was proud of his political competence and his experience.

He knew when to compromise. In the Emancipation Proclamation, he freed slaves only in those states that had rebelled, knowing he must not alienate the border states he needed to win the war.

But he knew when to stand on principle, even if it meant war, which he did on the question of the Union.

That's the Lincoln I want to put before you tonight, the idealistic leader who was a realistic politician. He had to make tough political calls in the real world, and he was proud of his well-honed political instincts.
Abe Lincoln knew that the highest ideals of statecraft are irrelevant to ordinary life unless some political way can be found to make them work for the people.

He knew that "government of the people, by the people, for the people" means government of fallible human beings, by fallible human beings, for fallible human beings who, in many cases, have to make choices between the lesser of two evils.

Abe Lincoln wasn't "above" politics. But he didn't let politics drag him down.

I remember when I first told my parents that I was thinking of entering political life.

They warned me that politics was a dirty business and that I'd be better off doing something else.
I knew I had to prove to them that politics, at its best can be a high calling, a way of service, a chance to improve the lives of your friends and neighbors through the give-and-take of the democratic process.

And I suppose you can say that in one sense my entire political career has been a way of saying to my Mom and Dad: see, it can be a life of service, it can do good for folks, it doesn't have to be dirty or mean-spirited.

And so, in the spirit -- if not with the eloquence -- of Abe Lincoln, that idealistic pragmatist, let me just touch upon some of the practical political questions we Republicans have to deal with today:

(RHM: HEALTH CARE, WELFARE, CRIME, BUDGET, ETC.)

(Conclusion)
As I said earlier, I am happy to have the chance to serve the people of Tazewell County and the rest of the 18th Congressional District for the remainder of this Congress.

But since this will be what might be called my last "official" Lincoln Day speech to fellow Republicans, allow me to borrow once more from Abe Lincoln and say to you/as he said to his Illinois friends and neighbors on February 11, 1861:

"To this place and the kindness of these people, I owe everything...Trusting in Him who can go with me and remain with you and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well."

Thank you all so very much!