

Readers of this magazine know that it's our judgment that the American public—for all the complaining about its alleged lack of interest, knowledge, etc.—acquits itself well in the electoral process and in general as it plays the role democratic theory assigns it. Abraham Lincoln thought so, too, and spoke eloquently about it. We introduce this post-election issue with a selection of the 16th President's observations on public opinion and American democracy. Every word that follows is Lincoln's.

Public Opinion and American Democracy

by Abraham Lincoln

Most governments have been based, practically, on the denial of equal rights of men, as I have, in part, stated them; ours began, by affirming those rights. They said, some men are too ignorant, and vicious, to share in government. Possibly so, said we; and, by your system, you would always keep them ignorant, and vicious. We proposed to give all a chance; and we expected the weak to grow stronger, the ignorant, wiser; and all better, and happier together.¹

The Declaration as Fountain

I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence. I have often pondered over the dangers which were incurred by the men who assembled here and adopted that Declaration of Independence—I have pondered over the toils that were endured by the officers and soldiers of the army, who achieved that Independence. I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the mother land; but something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that all should have an equal chance. This is the sentiment embodied in that Declaration of Independence.

Now, my friends can this country be saved upon that basis? If it can, I will consider myself one of the happiest men in the world if I can help to save it. If it can't be saved upon that principle, it will be truly awful. But, if this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle—I was about to say I would rather be assassinated on this spot than to surrender it.²

All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.³

The Founders Did Their Job; We Must Do Ours

I am tolerably well acquainted with the history of the country, and I know that it has endured eighty-two years, half slave and half free....I believe that it has endured

because, during all that time, until the introduction of the Nebraska Bill, the public mind did rest, all the time, in the belief that slavery was in course of ultimate extinction....They had reason so to believe.⁴

The adoption of the Constitution and its attendant history led the people to believe so; and that such was the belief of the framers of the Constitution itself. Why did those old men, about the time of the adoption of the Constitution, decree that Slavery should not go into the new Territory, where it had not already gone? Why declare that within twenty years the African Slave Trade, by which slaves are supplied, might be cut off by Congress? Why were all these acts?....What were they but a clear indication that the framers of the Constitution intended and expected the ultimate extinction of that institution.⁵

And I understand the contemporaneous history of those times to be that covert language was used with a purpose, and that purpose was that in our Constitution, which it was hoped and is still hoped will endure forever—when it should be read by intelligent and patriotic men, after the institution of slavery had passed from among us—there should be nothing on the face of the great charter of liberty suggesting that such a thing as negro slavery had ever existed among us. This is part of the evidence that the fathers of the Government expected and intended the institution of slavery to come to an end.⁶

Public Opinion and...

And now,...when I say that I think the opponents of slavery will resist the farther spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest with the belief that it is in course of ultimate extinction, I only mean to say, that they will place it where the founders of this Government originally placed it..⁷

So I say in relation to the principle that all men are created equal, let it be as nearly reached as we can. If we cannot give freedom to every creature, let us do nothing that will impose slavery upon any other creatures. Let us then turn this government back into the channel in which the framers of the Constitution originally placed it. Let us stand firmly by each other..⁸

The Ideal as the Real and the Essential

Chief Justice Taney, in his opinion in the Dred Scott case, admits that the language of the Declaration is broad enough to include the whole human family, but he and Judge Douglas argue that the authors of that instrument did not intend to include negroes, by the fact that they did not at once, actually place them on an equality with the whites. Now this grave argument comes to just nothing at all, by the other fact, that they did not at once, or ever afterwards, actually place all white people on an equality with one or another. And this is the staple argument of both the Chief Justice and the Senator, for doing this obvious violence to the plain unmistakable language of the Declaration. I think the authors of that notable instrument [the Declaration of Independence] intended to include all men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal in all respects. They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness, in what respects they did consider all men created equal—equal in “certain inalienable rights,

among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” This they said, and this meant. They did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet, that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the right, so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit. They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere. The assertion that “all men are created equal” was of no practical use in effecting our separation from Great Britain; and it was placed in the Declaration not for that, but for future use. Its authors meant it to be, thank God, it is now proving itself, a stumbling block to those who in after times might seek to turn a free people back into the hateful paths of despotism. They knew the proneness of prosperity to breed tyrants, and they meant when such should re-appear in this fair land and commence their vocation they should find left for them at least one hard nut to crack..⁹

Fighting for the “Central Idea in Public Opinion

Our government rests in public opinion. Whoever can change public opinion, can change the government, practically just so much. Public opinion, on any subject, always has a “central idea,” from which all its minor thoughts radiate. That “central idea” in our political public opinion, at the beginning was, and until recently has continued to be, “the equality of men.” And although it was always submitted patiently to whatever of inequality there seemed to be as matter of actual necessity, its constant working has been a steady progress towards the practical equality of all men. The late Presidential election was a struggle, by one party, to discard that idea, and to substitute for it the opposite idea that slavery is right, in the abstract, the workings of which, as a central idea, may be the perpetuity of human slavery, and its extension to all countries and colors..¹⁰

In this age, and this country, public sentiment is every thing. With it, nothing can fail; against it, nothing can succeed. Whoever moulds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes, or pronounces judicial decisions. He makes possible the enforcement of these, else impossible....If, [Judge Douglas]... shall succeed in moulding public sentiment to a perfect accordance with his own—in bringing all men to endorse all court decisions [referring here primarily to the Dred Scott case], without caring to know whether they are right or wrong—in bringing all tongues to as perfect a silence as

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his own, as to there being any wrong in slavery—in bringing all to declare, with him, that they care not whether slavery be voted down or voted up [Nebraska bill]...when, I say, public sentiment shall be brought to all this, in the name of heaven, what barrier will be left against slavery being made lawful everywhere?¹¹

At the time the constitution of the United States was adopted it was expected that the slave trade would be abolished.... But I know that it was equally expected that slavery would be excluded from the territories and I can show by history, that in regard to these two things, public opinion was exactly alike...¹².

There is nothing in the history of those times, in favor of the matter being a *compromise* of the Constitution. It was the public expectation at the time, manifested in a thousand ways, that the spread of slavery should also be restricted.¹³

Now...it so happens that there is a vast portion of the American people that.... look upon...[slavery] as a vast moral evil.... and not as an evil merely confining itself to the States where it is situated.¹⁴

Now let me call your attention to one thing that has really happened, which shows this gradual and steady debauching of public opinion, this course of preparation for the revival of the slave trade, for the territorial slave code, and the new Dred Scott decision that is to carry slavery into the free States. Did you ever five years ago, hear of anybody in the world saying that the negro had no share in the Declaration of National Independence; that it did not mean negroes at all; and when "all men" were spoken of negroes were not included?¹⁵

I am satisfied that five years ago that proposition was not put upon paper by any living being anywhere. I have been unable at any time to find a man in an audience who would declare that he

had ever known any body saying so five years ago. But last year there was not a Douglas Popular sovereign [proponent] in Illinois who did not say it.¹⁶

Is not this change wrought in your minds a very important change? Public opinion in this country is everything. In a nation like ours this popular sovereignty and squatter sovereignty have already wrought a change in the public mind to the extent I have stated.¹⁷

Democracy Requires Constant Moral Energy

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If public sentiment has not been debauched already to this point, a new turn of the screw in that direction is all that is wanting; and this is constantly being done by the teachers of this insidious popular sovereignty. You need but one or two turns further until your minds, now ripening under these teachings will be ready for all these things, and you will receive and support, or submit to, the slave trade; revived with all its horrors; a slave code enforced in our territories, and a new Dred Scott decision to bring

slavery up into the very heart of the free North.¹⁸

In the first place, we know that in Government like this, in a Government of the people, where the voice of all the men of the country, substantially enter into the execution,—or administration rather—of the Government—in such a Government, what lies at the bottom of all of it, is public opinion.¹⁹....No policy that does not rest upon some philosophical public opinion can be permanently maintained.²⁰

Endnotes

¹Vol. I, p. 302.

²Vol. II, p. 213

³Ibid, p. 19.

⁴Vol. I, p. 447.

⁵Ibid, pp. 447-48.

⁶Ibid, pp. 801-02.

⁷Ibid, p. 448.

⁸Ibid, p. 458.

⁹Ibid, pp. 398-99.

¹⁰Ibid, pp. 385-86.

¹¹Ibid, pp. 493-94.

¹²Vol. II, p. 55.

¹³Ibid, p. 56.

¹⁴Vol. I, pp. 449-50.

¹⁵Vol. II, pp. 56-57.

¹⁶Ibid, p. 57.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid, pp. 57-58.

¹⁹Ibid, p. 63.

²⁰Ibid, p. 136.



These remarks by Abraham Lincoln on public opinion and American democracy are from: Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, in two volumes. The Library of America, 1989.