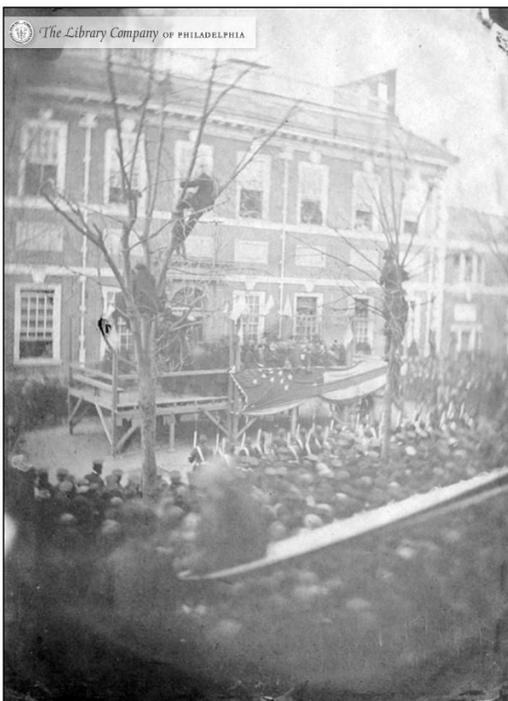


BROADSIDE

A Journal of the Wars for Independence for Students

LINCOLN, JEFFERSON, AND THE DECLARATION



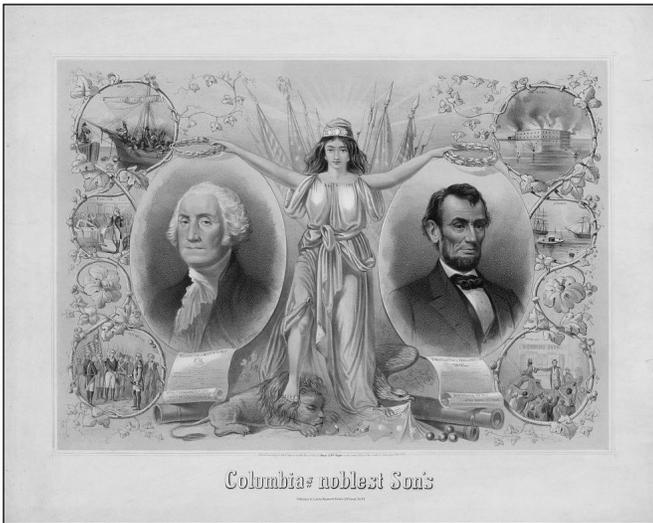
Picture of President-Elect Lincoln raising the American Flag over Independence Hall (Library Company of Philadelphia)

“All honor to Jefferson,” wrote Abraham Lincoln to his friend H.L. Piece on April 6, 1859, “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 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. For Lincoln, the Declaration of Independence was the bedrock of American life, in his opinion it superseded the Constitution. Thus, it was of no small matter that when Lincoln traveled from Illinois to Washington, DC to his inauguration one of the places where his train stopped was Philadelphia, on February 22, 1861, where Lincoln addressed a crowd and then hoisted aloft on a flag pole outside Independence Hall the Stars and Stripes. In his remarks he praised not only the document but the sacred soil and the building which sat on it saying, “I am filled with deep emotion at finding myself standing here in the place where were collected together the wisdom, the patriotism, the devotion to principle, from which sprang the institutions under which we live. You have kindly suggested to me that in my hands is the task of restoring peace to our distracted country. I can say in return, sir, that all the political sentiments I entertain have been drawn, so far as I have been able to draw them, from the sentiments which originated, and

“Now, my friends, can this country be saved upon that basis if it can, I will consider myself one of the happiest men of 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 to it.”

-Abraham Lincoln

were given to the world, from this hall in which we stand. 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.”



A print honoring Presidents Washington and Lincoln as “Columbia’s noblest sons, made soon after the latter’s assassination in April of 1865. As President Lincoln was a great admirer of Washington, he would have been delighted at the comparison. (Library of Congress)

As a youth Lincoln had grown up admiring the founders, particularly George Washington. Parson Weems’ biography of Washington was one of Lincoln’s favorites. His thoughts on Jefferson, though, were a bit nuanced. According to Lincoln’s long-time law partner William Herndon, “Mr. Lincoln hated Jefferson the man.” Lincoln did not admire Jefferson’s behavior as a politician as well as the paradox of him being a slave owner who wrote the phrase, “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.” Yet Lincoln understood the genius of Jefferson’s pen and referred often to the Declaration of Independence in many of his speeches and debates. For Lincoln the United States was in his opinion, “the last best hope of earth,” a place where men could rise as far as their natural talents would take them. Lincoln used his own life as a living example of this maxim.

Lincoln returned to politics after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1856 and took up once again stump speaking, a skill which he honed to perfection. Two years later he addressed a gathering in Lewiston, Illinois, “Now, my countrymen, if you have been taught doctrines conflict

with the great landmarks of the Declaration of Independence; if you have listened to suggestions which would take away from its grandeur and mutilate the fair symmetry of its proportions; if you have been inclined to believe that all men are not created equal in those inalienable rights enumerated in our charter of liberty, let me entreat you to come back. Return to the fountain whose waters spring close by the blood of the revolution. Think nothing of me – take no thought for the political of any man whomsoever – but come back to truths that are in the Declaration of Independence. You may do anything with me you choose, if you will but heed these sacred principles.”

The idea of equality as Lincoln saw it was also rooted in Euclidian Geometry which reasons all sides of the same thing were mathematically equal to the other side. This provided Lincoln with undoubted proof “that all men are created equal.”

To Lincoln Scholar, Richard M. Current, “Lincoln passionately believed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. To him these documents were not merely historical relics; they embodied fundamental ideals, ideals in the process of realization, ideals that formed the basis for his political thinking. As Lincoln saw it the United States was an experiment, a serious attempt to see if the principles of the Constitution and the Declaration would permanently work. Only time would tell if Americans could govern themselves with full success. The experiment was of vital interest, not only to them but also to the whole ‘family of man’ for the result would affect the future of self-government throughout the world. If at last the experiment should fail, Lincoln felt the failure would not be caused by defeat at the hands of some foreign enemy, ‘some transatlantic military giant. No, the danger, if ever came, must come from within, ‘must spring up amongst us.’” On November 19, 1863 at the dedication of the National Cemetery at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, Lincoln delivered his “few appropriate remarks,” enshrined in history as the Gettysburg Address. Immediately he hearkened to 1776, “Four score and seven years ago, on this continent a new nation was conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proclamation that ‘all men are created equal’.” In his stirring ten sentence 282-word, two-minute address he reclaimed the dream of the founders, as he understood them citing a “new birth of freedom and forever changing the definition of what it meant to be an American. Some would argue that Jefferson made the promise in 1776 and Lincoln kept it in 1863.

Activity

Show students the three-minute excerpt from the Steven Spielberg film, *Lincoln*, where Lincoln discusses Euclidian Geometry with War Department clerks. Hold a conversation with students after watching the clip about the idea of equality and how it relates to the United States today.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZjIIMeKIJY>