

**ABRAHAM LINCOLN: AN
ORATION, DELIVERED ON
WASHINGTON'S
BIRTHDAY, 1891**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649258543

Abraham Lincoln: An Oration, Delivered on Washington's Birthday, 1891 by William G. Frost

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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WILLIAM G. FROST

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AN ORATION

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BY

WILLIAM G. FROST

Great Captains, with their guns and drums,
Disturb our judgment for an hour,
But at last silence comes;
These all are gone, and, standing like a tower,
Our children shall behold his fame,
The kindly-earnest, brave, foreseeing man,
Sagacious, patient, dreading praise, not blame,
New birth of our new soil, the first American.

—LOWELL.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen:

The best teaching is by example. Ideas are most potent when embodied in living men, and thus invested with personality. The surest way to foster any noble sentiment is to select some event which illustrates it, or some hero who personifies it, and to set apart for that event or that hero a commemorative day. Let the artisan lay aside his tools, the matron her household cares, the student his books, and the very children their play. Let the pressure of routine be lifted; let our souls expand, and our best feelings assert themselves, while the great lesson is impressed upon our hearts.

American patriotism is reenforced by four such commemorative days. The sun of July is greeted by earth-shaking cannon and sky-piercing rockets, which assert with boisterous acclaim the independence of a new nation.

The breath of May sweeps over a more quiet gathering. It brings flowers—as though kind nature were a sharer of our grief—flowers for the humble grave of the private soldier; and it reminds us of the million arms that can strike as one for the defence of a righteous cause.

The dull sky of November is a fitting background for the festival of household cheer. Thanksgiving teaches us to love our homes, to revere a pious ancestry, and to worship God.

And there is one other national day. The snows of February remind us of the spotless fame of him who was our first great national representative and leader.

This is a most important anniversary. Aristotle reminds us that praise is an inverted precept. To say, "Do thus and so," is a precept; to say, "He is noble because he hath done thus and so," is praise. It is a worthy task therefore to praise, to eulogise such a man as Washington. What does our country need more than those precepts regarding public service and leadership which come to us from a life like his?

Doubtless we shall make the best use of this occasion if we interpret it broadly and liberally. We need not confine our thoughts to a single name—although that were amply sufficient—but may make of this a kind of "Leader's Day." We cannot set apart a day for each of our great men,—there are too many, thank God, even in our first century—but we may group them all with Washington who was the first.

One year ago we listened to a description of the Father of his Country which I am sure we can never forget. It would be presumptuous for me to touch that theme to-day. I ask your leave, therefore, to present a kindred subject—the Preserver of his Country,
ABRAHAM LINCOLN,

Our great representative leaders are perhaps our chief national possession. They are not ancient landmarks, but beacon-lights for the future. They have set a standard of public and private excellence. Aeschines, the second orator of Greece, has left us the profound maxim that

"The people become like to the Statesman whom they crown."

Happy is that people which has, in the saints, or martyrs, or heroes whom it reveres, noble ideals.

Every nation, too, is judged largely by its great men. We judge Rome by Julius Cæsar, and Sweden

by Gustavus Adolphus. If men ask what the British Islands can produce they are pointed to Cromwell or to Gladstone. If we inquire for the flowering of their race the Frenchman will perhaps name Lafayette, and the German will say, "Look at Luther."

We could scarcely be a nation without possessing some such champions as these—without being able to contribute one or two names at least to the world's list of great men. How invaluable was the character of Washington in securing our first recognition among foreign peoples! The toast of Benjamin Franklin had a significance which give it a claim to be often repeated. The ambassador of England had eulogised his country as the sun in the heavens, traversing the entire globe, and blessing every land. Then the representative of France arose and likened his country to the moon, treading a pathway as majestic as that of the sun, and shining with a more refined lustre. Franklin stood up in his turn, and the resources of comparison seemed to be exhausted. Will he compare the United States to some star, or to some comet? "Gentlemen," said the American, "I propose to you the name of George Washington, the Joshua at whose bidding the sun and the moon stood still."

What men has America produced since the time of Washington who have caused the sun and the moon to stand still? I believe that there has been at least one.

It is nigh four hundred years since the keel of Columbus grated upon the beach of San Salvador. It would be hard to show that any event in secular history has been more important than that. New worlds are not found every day. The devising of a path of commerce from this planet to the moon could not affect the life of man so much as did the discovery of this new

world. It was a discovery without a precedent and without a parallel, and we are preparing to celebrate it. We have been preparing through all these four hundred years. We have a city which sits by the inland sea, like Venice among her marshes. Chicago, with its million inhabitants where so recently the buffalo fed unscared, will make itself into an epitome of America, and send out its card of invitation to all the earth.

And the whole world will come to visit us. The Spaniard will come to see the continent which *he* discovered. The Frenchman will come to look upon the vast empires which he once coveted, and then helped to free. The Britain will come to mark the progress of his own race in a newer clime. The German will come claiming also a near relationship. The Russian will come to find out what liberty is like. There will be the Icelander with his fur, the Italian with his music, and the Chinaman with his cue. The motley procession will be filled out by wierd costumes from Egypt and Labrador, and all the other highways and hedges of the world. Those who do not come in person will come in thought, and the attention of the world will be focussed upon America.

We shall have much to show them. They will sail up the storied Hudson, stand beside the sublimity of Niagara, visit the far Yosemite, and the Yellowstone, and compare Lake Superior and the Mississippi with the Mediterranean and the Nile. They will compute our forests and our prairies, gauge our wells of oil and of gas, estimate our mines, and appraise all our natural resources. They may have the experience of Sheba's queen when they pass through our Patent Office, inspect our manufactories, traverse our railway systems, and visit our cities—cities which do not stand knee-deep in

the dust of ages, but which are struggling up through the intoxication of prosperity toward self-possession.

But while our visitors stand thus astonished at our material glories, and acknowledge that the half was not told them, they will still make some further inquiries. "What are the ideas," they will ask, "which all this wealth represents? What types of manhood does America produce? Who are your national heroes?" And we shall say to them: "If you would come near to the heart of America, and feel the breath of that spirit which has made her truly great, pass by New York with the thunder of its commerce, pass by Washington with the glitter of its display, and spend a thoughtful hour at Mt. Vernon. And when you have done that, pass by Chicago with its roar of traffic, and pause beside the tomb at Springfield."

The career of Lincoln may reveal, more than that of any other single individual, the genius of American institutions and of the American people. He was *all* American. The heroes of the old world are linked together in one vast dynasty of greatness. The Ptolemies, the Cæsars, the Plantagenets, still bear sway among their descendants and "rule us from their urns." But Columbia begins a new order. The shadow of the pyramids falls upon every European, but it does not cross the sea. Like the Greek colonists, to be sure, we brought the coals which were to kindle the altar fires of our civilization from the hearth of our mother city. But we have received fresh fire, also. The Promethean torch of our genius has been kindled from God's lightning above us, and from hard blows upon the flinty rock beneath us. We indeed revere the gracious influences which come to us from the cradle lands, but we have attained our intellectual majority, and we prove it by

pointing to men of finest grain and most heroic mould developed among surroundings which savor least of the old world.

So, too, the life of Lincoln is an epitome of America's history and aspirations. The political, constitutional, and moral struggles of all our annals converge upon the few eventful years of his public life. And so it happens that this man came to possess three kinds of greatness: He was great for the acts which he performed; the liberator of a race deserves to rank above the founders of dynasties, or the discoverers of continents. But many whose lot it has been to perform great deeds have been themselves unworthy, while Lincoln was in his own personality greater than any of his achievements. The one proclamation by which he will be remembered forever did not exhaust his powers. It was in him to write a hundred such proclamations. There is a third kind of greatness which belongs especially to those who serve republics, and which we may call representative greatness. There was a time when Napoleon had so engrossed the loyalty of his countrymen that he could say, "I am France." It was a far greater triumph, because a moral one, when Pericles enslaved the Athenians to his patriotism and his intellect, so that when he spoke it seemed the voice of the state. Such was the greatness of Lincoln. He came to be the representative and embodiment of the best sentiments, the triumphant sentiments of his nation, so that loyal millions spoke through his lips.

Lincoln was, first of all, God's man, raised up to meet a great emergency. We in America believe that "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them as we will."