
LINCOLN ON DEMOCRACY



His Own
Words, with
Essays by
America's
Foremost
Civil War
Historians

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY

**MARIO M. CUOMO
AND HAROLD HOLZER**

LINCOLN ON DEMOCRACY

Edited and Introduced by
MARIO M. CUOMO
and
Harold Holzer



WITH ESSAYS BY
Gabor S. Boritt
William E. Gienapp
Charles B. Strozier
Richard Nelson Current
James M. McPherson
Mark E. Neely, Jr.
Hans L. Trefousse

Afterword by Frank J. Williams
President, The Abraham Lincoln Association



A Cornelia & Michael Bessie Book
An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

LINCOLN ON DEMOCRACY. Copyright © 1990 by The State of New York/Lincoln on Democracy Project. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

FIRST EDITION

Designed by Helene Berinsky

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lincoln, Abraham, 1809-1865

Lincoln on democracy / edited and introduced by Mario M. Cuomo and Harold Holzer; with essays by Gabor S. Boritt [et al.]—1st ed.
p. cm.

"A Cornelia & Michael Bessie book"

ISBN 0-06-039126-X

1. Lincoln, Abraham, 1809-1865—Views on democracy 2. Democracy.
I. Cuomo, Mario Matthew II. Holzer, Harold III. Boritt, G. S.,
1940- . IV. Title.

E457.92 1990

973.7'092—dc20

89-46504

90 91 92 93 94 CC/FG 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

Preface

BY MARIO M. CUOMO

In July of 1989—months before democracy blossomed in the capitals of Eastern Europe—the seed for this book on democracy was planted halfway around the world, in the capital of New York State.

I had the privilege of welcoming to Albany a delegation of leading educators from Poland, a nation with a long history of yearning and fighting for liberty, but at the time, only the briefest experience enjoying liberty itself.

They were members of the Teachers' Section of Poland's Solidarity Union, the heroic coalition of working people that had been advocating democratization in the face of rigid, historic repression. They had come to the United States on a tour sponsored by the "Democracy Project," a global exchange program organized by American teachers to foster understanding and opportunity among teaching professionals here and overseas. The American hosts had invited me to greet their Polish colleagues, and I was delighted to accept, hardly realizing that their visit would inspire this volume.

When they arrived in July, I proudly guided the delegation through our recently restored and refurbished "official" governor's office. This is an ornate chamber in the capitol building known as the "Red Room," where many of my predecessors, including Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Thomas E. Dewey, all enjoyed working, but which I use only for ceremonial purposes, preferring to work in smaller quarters next door. The Red Room, with its gleaming wood paneling, stately chandeliers, formal drapery, and gilt molding, is an architectural marvel. And it is more. It is a reminder of all that was accomplished

by those who came before us, and of our obligation to preserve what they left us and to build upon it for the benefit of those who will come after us.

What better room to display to our Polish visitors, I thought, than a chamber where so much of our own history has taken place, where democratically elected chief executives have administered one of the greatest states in the Union. The Poles seemed to share my enthusiasm for these surroundings. But our visitors had something more on their minds than the highlights of our capitol. There is no shortage of graceful public architecture or lavish interior design in Warsaw. What *had* long been missing there was the guarantee of freedom, not its trappings; the privilege of self-government, not monuments in its honor. What had been lacking there, in those dark days before Poland and her neighbors in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and East Germany so dramatically threw off the stifling yoke of longtime oppression, was the personal experience of democracy, and with it a meaningful, inspiring credo of freedom and self-determination that could be relied on to illuminate democratization in the future.

Speaking through translators, the Polish teachers asked whether I might help them begin building an archive of great thoughts and writings on democracy, by telling them which American writings on the subject had meant the most to me in my life and career, and might provide similar guidance for them.

I did not need to reflect on the question. My choice of a source was immediate and unequivocal: Abraham Lincoln.

I enjoy joking with people today that I've always admired Lincoln because he's reassuring to politicians like me. He was himself a big, homely-looking politician from a poor family who started off by losing a few elections, yet in the end succeeded brilliantly. Of course, my fascination with Lincoln goes far deeper, and has ever since I can remember. Lincoln was the president who argued that government has a responsibility "to do for the people what . . . they can not . . . do at all, or do so well, for themselves." I have quoted those lines many times to support my own belief that government today is no less obligated. I said so most recently at Gettysburg, on the 126th anniversary of the Gettysburg Address.

For me Lincoln's writing—his unique ability to craft arguments of raw power and breathtaking beauty, to argue with the seamless logic

of a great lawyer and the large heart of a great humanitarian—is among the best produced by any American, ever.

I have read Lincoln's words over and over from the volumes of his *Collected Works*. I am always taken by the humor, the pathos, the determination, the compassion that resonate in those words. And by the great ideas.

Above all, the theme that courses through so many letters, speeches, and fragments, the great addresses and the simple greetings alike, is the unyielding commitment to the principles of our Declaration of Independence, what he calls the "sheet anchor" of our democracy. Lincoln talked about the Declaration as a stump campaigner, during the debates with Stephen Douglas, and again as president at Gettysburg. All people were created equal. All people had the right to enjoy the fruits of their own labor. All people shared the right to advance as far as their talents could take them. America, Lincoln believed, was a great society because it promised to "clear a path for all," to provide opportunity for anyone with skill and ambition. When the institution of slavery blocked that road, it was Lincoln who cleared the path. Some have since argued that he did it too slowly, or too halfheartedly, or too imprecisely. But the fact remains that it was he who did it. He saved our democracy. He improved our democracy. And he characterized our democracy in timeless words of inspiration for the benefit of all the generations of Americans who have followed.

Lincoln has been an inspiration to me and to others for as long as his words have been heard or read. He was a man of principle and purpose, who not only forged in war America's new birth of freedom but hallowed it in words as well—unforgettable words that his mind sharpened into steel and his heart softened into an embrace. Words he spoke in Illinois and Washington and Gettysburg . . . calling for the highest sacrifices Americans could make to preserve their unique experiment in government, a system Lincoln believed was "the last best, hope of earth." Lincoln brought the American people to their feet, cheering, crying, and laughing, an unforgettable reminder of the indomitability of the human spirit.

Lincoln was a model of active presidential leadership in crisis. He fought actively to maintain our system of majority rule, then broke the chains that bound four million Americans to slavery, and finally showed us the way to expanding democratic rights.

His presidency was a crucial turning point in the evolution of democracy here, and remains an example to people everywhere who aspire to exercise the full measure of their own freedom.

And so I thought, when my Polish guests asked for my advice on which expressions on democracy were worth reading, that surely Lincoln could now provide such guidance for countries too long denied the basic rights and freedoms Lincoln fought here to preserve. Surely the brilliance of his prose could withstand translation into a foreign tongue. Surely the logic of his arguments would transcend the decades and the distance, as well.

"Do Polish students study Lincoln's words today?" I asked the Polish teachers.

"No," they told me, because Lincoln's words were simply not available in Poland—not since World War II, when freedom went into retreat there. When the Russians marched in, Lincoln went out; not surprising, since his passion for liberty was not suited for coexistence with tyranny. The teachers reported that not a single volume of Lincoln's words in Polish existed in their country. That seemed a tragedy that startled and saddened me, but also a challenge that could be overcome.

Without anything more than a quick, powerful impulse, I promised on the spot to use whatever influences I had, or could produce, to see that Lincoln's words on democracy were promptly translated into Polish and delivered to Poland for the fullest possible use of the Polish people. The teachers instantly greeted the idea with tremendous enthusiasm. Why not bring the volumes over yourself? they asked. I said I would be pleased to consider doing so. And the visit ended.

My promise was, indeed, the product of the moment. But even as the idea flashed into my mind and spilled out in unrehearsed conversation, there was good reason to believe that the promise could be kept. For one thing, New York State has an International Partnership Program, which we created specifically to establish cultural and economic links to foreign nations. With an already established record of outreach to Italy, Israel, Africa, and Spain, we found Lincoln a perfect way to launch a relationship with the reemerging nations of Eastern Europe.

For another thing, I am fortunate in that the professionals in the world of Lincoln scholarship are not strangers to me, and I knew I would be able at least to ask for their help. Harold Holzer, for example,

who later became the co-editor of this volume, has worked with me since 1984, and I have known him since 1977. When I was preparing to deliver a speech on Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois, on February 12, 1985, Holzer introduced me to several historians who came to Albany expressly to share their vast knowledge of the subject, and their infectious enthusiasm for it. When they published my remarks in a scholarly journal the following year, I felt, if not one of them, at least one who had been generously received by them, and it made me quite proud.

On the other hand, the promise proved easier to make than to keep. Frankly, I had thought that all we needed to do was select the best existing treasury of Lincoln's expressions on democracy and have it translated. Then I learned something that surprised me even more than the revelation that no such volume existed in Poland. No such volume existed here! Lincoln's unique prose on the subjects of freedom, self-government, and equality had never before been assembled together in English, either.

As it turned out, what might have dampened our enthusiasm for the Polish project instead heightened our enthusiasm for an English-language edition to be published in the United States. Even with Lincoln's *Collected Works* on so many library shelves, the need for access to Lincoln's thoughts on democracy had never been met. *The Collected Works* boasts a 378-page index, but not once does it mention the term "democracy."

And that is how and why this book was born. It is an American book inspired by the Polish people, just as it will be a Polish book devoted to an American—an American who belongs to another time and place, but whose devotion to democracy offers a sublime and universal diplomacy in transcendent prose.

On November 17, 1989, I had the further pleasure of formally announcing the "Lincoln on Democracy" project at an event honoring the chairman of the Solidarity Union, Lech Walesa, during his first visit to the United States. I told this extraordinary freedom fighter: "As you shake off four decades of doctrinaire rigidity, working to open the windows of liberty in every library and schoolroom in Poland—letting the sun shine in on minds too long denied the birthright of free expression—we want to help." *Lincoln on Democracy*, I suggested, constituted "a tangible way to link your struggle for freedom with our historic respect for liberty and democracy." The Polish edition, we

proposed, might be only the first of many. Future translations might include Hungarian, Czech, German—even Russian and Chinese—books for every nation where there is a yearning for democracy, a need for the guidance of historical truth, and the absence until now of available materials.

“This makes me feel even more warm,” Mr. Walesa said in his reply. “But I don’t know if you will be able to keep pace with the other languages, because the line is forming already.”

Lincoln’s words belong to everyone in that line.

Lincoln brought forth a “new birth of freedom” for America, as he put it at Gettysburg. But it was not just for America that he struggled. It was to save democracy for the world. He knew that by preserving *our* Union, he would guarantee “the civil and religious liberties of mankind in many countries and through many ages.”

Early in his presidency, Abraham Lincoln reminded a foreign visitor that Americans “cherish especial sentiments” for “those who, like themselves, have founded their institutions on the principle of the equal rights of men.”

We cherish the same sentiments for the new spirit in Poland and all of Eastern Europe. It is our hope that *Lincoln on Democracy* not only will be tangible proof of that affection but will be of genuine and lasting benefit to future generations there, and here as well—an inspiration to further progress on the road to freedom in Eastern Europe, and for us in America an inspiration to renew faith in our own values. No one expressed or exemplified those values better than Abraham Lincoln.

Albany, New York
February 12, 1990



Introduction

BY HAROLD HOLZER

The Civil War had been over for twenty years, five postwar presidents had come and gone, and one of them had fallen victim to another assassin's bullet by the time poet Walt Whitman looked back, took the measure of history, and pronounced Abraham Lincoln still "the grandest figure yet, on all the crowded canvas of the Nineteenth Century." So he surely seemed to the vast majority of his countrymen, after leading the convulsive struggle to save the Union and destroy slavery.

To Whitman, whose own life and work seemed to one contemporary "imbued with the spirit of democracy," the explanation for Lincoln's unwavering appeal was obvious. He had been "Dear to Democracy, to the very last!" Still, Whitman wondered: "Who knows what the future may decide?"

In fact, the future has not substantially revised Whitman's generous appraisal. For more than a century and a quarter, Lincoln's enduring spirit has animated the American experience. The sobriquets attached to him in life and the tributes that greeted his death have all been fixed in our nomenclature so firmly for so long that they nearly constitute biography. To many, Lincoln is still Honest Abe, Father Abraham, the Great Emancipator, the Martyr of Liberty. His rise from log cabin to White House, from prairie lawyer to master statesman, justifiably remains the most famous and inspiring of all the validations of American opportunity. His face alone, homely yet intrinsically noble—"so awful ugly it becomes beautiful," in Whitman's words—remains indelibly inscribed on the national consciousness, whether one pictures it gazing down from the lofty heights of Mount Rushmore or staring out from

the ubiquitous copper penny. In an increasingly diverse culture, it is a palpable emblem of our common aspirations, itself an icon of democracy.

Inevitably, the real Lincoln has also become a victim of the irreversible passage of time. His life has entered the firm embrace of legend. The real man in large part has been subsumed by the prolonged leavening of folklore, history, and counter-history. No longer a figure of bright memory but one of the flickering past, he is partially, perhaps permanently veiled by distance and myth.

Even so, Lincoln may be said to hold his firmest grip on the American imagination by continuing to suggest in vivid and universal terms the boundless possibilities of a free society. It was not surprising that one newspaper of his day found him "as American in his fibre as the granite foundations of our Appalachian range," noting that "the very noblest impulses, peculiarities and aspirations of our whole people . . . were more collectively and vividly reproduced in his genial and yet unswerving nature than in that of any other public man of whom our chronicles bear record." In short, he was "as indiginous to our soil as the cranberry crop." To paraphrase Lincoln's own best-known words, he himself was of, by, and for the people—suggesting both an ideal and an idea, as historian Earl Schenck Miers expressed it. In both his time and ours, moreover, Lincoln's America seemed the one place in the world where a Lincoln was possible; America alone offered the hope, as Lincoln would tell a regiment of soldiers at the White House, that "any one of your children may look to come here as my father's child has." Nowhere else, he suggested, was "presented a government of so much liberty and equality. To the humblest and poorest amongst us are held out the highest privileges and positions." By himself attaining the highest positions, Lincoln convincingly authenticated democratic government itself, government ruled by ballots, he would emphasize, not bullets.

Lincoln learned the limits and possibilities of American democracy firsthand, early on, and from the political grass roots up. In the words of one of his old Illinois law colleagues, he was never "exempt from bearing his full share of the burden" in the hurly-burly of nineteenth-century campaigns. As a young man, he served as an election day teller in one local contest for judge, and as a clerk in village elections for constable and sheriff, personally recording and tallying votes at rustic

polling places set up inside neighbors' log cabins. In the presidential election of 1840, he got paid \$19 to deliver election returns on horseback from a nearby county to the state capital; four years later, he performed the same service, but for \$1.40 less. He was alert to potential abuses of democracy, too; once he seized a poll book he believed contained evidence of fraud.

Lincoln also enjoyed the drama of political life. In his day, politics were also grand entertainment. In isolated western towns like Springfield, Illinois, to which he moved at the midway point in his life, the daily tedium was relieved only by the occasional visiting camp show, the state fair, the arrival of a guest orator, a revival meeting, or the perennial fever of local, county, state, and national politics. Townspeople thronged Fourth of July picnics, flagpole raisings, campaign barbecues, stem-winder speeches, and torchlight parades. They stood patiently and listened attentively through marathon debates. Lincoln was present, year in and year out, as both an observer and a participant in this ferment that combined ideas and spectacle. Twenty years before he engaged Stephen A. Douglas in the celebrated senatorial debates of 1858, for example, Lincoln looked on as young Douglas debated an early foe so venomously that his rival grabbed the "Little Giant" in his arms and threatened to thrash him. Douglas did not bother to ask for equal time to reply. He simply bit his opponent on the thumb.

Lincoln's own debates with Douglas would be more dignified, of course, but no less exciting for eyewitnesses. One 1858 encounter featured, according to an eyewitness, martial music, and even floats "profusely decorated with flags and bunting—and filled with young girls—in a number representing every state in the Union." Throughout the campaign, the candidates addressed crowds as large as fifteen thousand—some spectators traveling considerable distances, arriving on horseback, on foot, in covered wagons, and on the railroads, swarming into unshaded fields under blistering summer sun for the sheer pleasure of basking in the spectacle of the heated oratory. And onlookers participated as well, interrupting the debaters with hearty applause, roars of laughter, and occasional catcalls.

This was Lincoln's arena of democracy, and he thrived in it. But beyond its drama, he reveled in its substance. He meticulously researched speeches (for he publicly admitted that he was prone to say "foolish things" when he spoke extemporaneously; once as president,

he appeared in a doorway to tell an eager crowd only that it was important in his position "that I should not say foolish things," to which a voice in the audience shot back, "If you can help it."). As a young politician he carefully printed petitions, wrote election notices, drafted and offered legislative bills and resolutions, chaired legislative committees, and twice ran unsuccessfully for speaker of Illinois's lower house.

Nurtured by all this hands-on experience, and honing a gift for precise, powerful writing that elevated him above his contemporaries, Lincoln emerged from the frenzied environment of debates, meetings, lawmaking, and stump oratory as a spellbinding oracle of democratic ideals. No doubt it is difficult for citizens in today's often drab, mindless era of fifteen-second sound bites, glib advertising slogans, and political inarticulation to imagine a time when nearly all politicians could speak coherently in long, complex, compelling sentences; could cultivate serious ideas, argue and debate, convince and convert; could actually write incisive, evocative prose. America's nineteenth-century political culture in fact demanded that its leaders come equipped with both a loud voice and an agile pen, and Lincoln had both. He worked so hard to be heard to the outskirts of his vast audiences, for example, that an eleven-year-old boy who pushed his way to the front of one such crowd remembered gazing up at Lincoln and being doused with "falling mist upon my brow" which, he sympathetically explained, "any speaker will emit addressing an outdoor audience." The boy was forced to keep his red bandanna handkerchief at the ready whenever Lincoln "leaned directly toward me." And yet what Lincoln said seemed so gripping, "I had no thought of changing my position till the last word was said. . . . I had been baptized that day . . . into the faith of him who spoke." As historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., has pointed out, Lincoln would go on to become "not only our greatest president, but the greatest writer among our presidents."

In all, over the course of more than thirty years in public life, Lincoln composed more than a million known words. He did almost all of his writing himself. Even as president, he employed neither speechwriters nor ghostwriters to place words in his mouth or thoughts in his head. The rare note drafted by a secretary for his signature, the occasional diplomatic letter or Thanksgiving proclamation written at the State Department, were very much the exceptions, not the rule. In his day,

in and of itself such creativity was not unusual. What set Lincoln apart from other politicians was not that he crafted his own arguments but that he did so brilliantly and memorably, in resonant words that enriched the political dialogue of his age. Despite almost no formal education, this son of a farmer who could manage little more in the way of writing than to “bunglingly sign his own name” helped forge a new American political idiom, liberating it from the grandiloquent verbiage and ripe classical allusions then common to such oratory, and instead achieving, particularly after 1854, a simple grace, an assurance, a lively wit, an unshakable logic, and at times a soaring beauty. Even his earliest speeches, recalled his longtime law partner, William H. Herndon, were “cool—calm, earnest—sincere, clear.” And they were punctuated by dramatic ideas, not dramatic gestures. Eulogizing his hero, Henry Clay, in 1852, Lincoln recalled an eloquence that “did not consist of . . . elegant arrangement of words and sentences; but rather of that deeply earnest and impassioned tone, and manner, which can proceed only from great sincerity and a thorough conviction . . . of the justice and importance of his cause.” Taking up Clay’s mantle, Lincoln eschewed bombast in favor of sober straightforwardness—although his talent was such that “elegant arrangement of words” was also inevitable. A newspaperman from the town of Galena in northwestern Illinois was particularly impressed with Lincoln’s forthright manner. After hearing him speak for the first time, he filed this report in the local newspaper, the *Daily Advertiser*:

His voice is clear, sonorous and pleasant and he enunciated with distinctness and emphasis. His style of address is earnest, not . . . bombastic, but animated without being furious and impresses one with the fact that he is speaking what he believes. His manner is neither fanciful nor rhetorical but logical. His thoughts are strong thoughts and are strongly jointed together. He is a clear reasoner and has the faculty of making himself clearly understood. He does not leave a vague impression that he has said something worth hearing; the hearer remembers what that something is. The sledge hammer effect of his speech results from the . . . force of the argument of the logician, not the fierce gestures and loud rantings of the demagogue.

Herndon, too, noticed that Lincoln the orator “never beat the air—never sawed space with his hands—never gestured at all”—unless, that

is, "he was defending liberty." Then, Herndon remembered, Lincoln would extend his arms as if to "embrace the spirit of that which he so dearly loved."

Walt Whitman was not alone among the authors of his day who saw in Lincoln something unique. Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose own writing had helped awaken the nation to the corrosive evil of slavery, maintained that some of Lincoln's words were "worthy to be inscribed in letters of gold." In Mrs. Stowe's opinion, Lincoln's sincere appeals "to the simple human heart and head" evidenced "a greater power in writing than the most artful devices of rhetoric." Ralph Waldo Emerson believed Lincoln did "more for America than any other American man." Nathaniel Hawthorne, no admirer of his politically, reluctantly conceded after an interview with the President that he would as soon "have Uncle Abe for a ruler as any man." The leading historian of the day, George Bancroft, earmarked the Gettysburg Address for an honored place in an album of *Autograph Leaves of Our Country's Authors*. And to the great novelist Leo Tolstoy, Lincoln "aspired to be divine—and he was." George Washington seemed to the Russian author an ideal American much as Napoleon seemed an ideal Frenchman; but Lincoln "was a humanitarian as broad as the whole world."

Somehow, the critic Edmund Wilson seemed astonished years later to find in Lincoln's prose no evidence of the "folksy and jocular countryman" whom he had pictured "swapping yarns at the village store." Lincoln the writer, instead, seemed "intent, self-controlled, strong in intellect, tenacious of purpose." Added Wilson: "Alone among American presidents, it is possible to imagine Lincoln, grown up in a different milieu, becoming a distinguished writer of a not merely political kind."

Of course, Lincoln's writing was nearly all of a "political kind." And running like a silver thread through the fabric of his public utterances and private letters was the core sentiment that had made admirers of Whitman and others: democracy was dear to *him*. Lincoln not only defended democracy in war, he defined it in words. He was a politician, not a philosopher, but he knew that "whoever moulds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes, or pronounces judicial decisions." Accordingly, in logical and lyrical phrases that still echo in the vocabulary of our literature—"malice toward none," "a house divided," "a new birth of freedom," to name but a few—he vividly extolled the virtues and exposed the vulnerabilities of the American

experiment. Lincoln's rhetoric consecrated in high relief the crucible of civil war, and gave majesty to the ethic of majority rule, "the only true sovereign," as Lincoln expressed it, "of a free people." Law partner Herndon, for one, was not surprised by Lincoln's emergence as a spokesman for democracy. On the subjects of "justice, right, liberty, the Government, the Constitution, and the Union," Herndon predicted, "you may all stand aside; he will rule then, and no man can move him—no set of men can do it." Neither could a rebellion. Adding both new urgency and an international vision to the original ideas in the Declaration of Independence—equality and inalienable rights—Lincoln used words as powerfully as he used arms to fight for both the preservation of American democracy and, by purging it of slavery, its purification as well. It must be saved, he insisted, even as it faced what he called its "hour of trial," not only for ourselves but for people everywhere. For America's Declaration of Independence, he believed, offered "liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time," hope that "*all* should have an equal chance."

Most foreign governments, Lincoln pointed out, had been based "on the denial of equal rights of men." Ours, on the other hand, began "by *affirming* those rights"—by giving "*all* a chance." But if it was true that "no man is good enough to govern another man, without that other's consent," how could it be justified that Negro slaves enjoyed no such rights? "When the white man governs himself that is self-government," Lincoln insisted in 1854. "But when he governs himself, and also governs another man . . . that is despotism." In three sentences which he jotted down on a plain piece of paper a few years later, he summarized this philosophy at its purest, most basic level: "As I would not be a *slave*, so I would not be a *master*. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy."

It was the inherent despotism in slavery, Lincoln came to believe, that undermined the promise of American democracy and its potential inspiration for the rest of the world—precious little of which could be called democratic in Lincoln's day. As the Lincoln-era Massachusetts congressman George Boutwell explained it years later, "with the curse of slavery in America there was no hope for republican institutions in other countries. In the presence of slavery, the Declaration of Independence had lost its power; practically, it had become a lie." Slavery,

Lincoln worried in 1854, “enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites.” Lincoln urged Americans to return to the original idea of their government: “Universal Freedom.” Accordingly, inequality was unacceptable, Lincoln declared on another occasion, whether “of the British aristocratic sort or the domestic slavery sort.” As he expressed it at the final Lincoln-Douglas debate in 1858, there were “two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time, and will ever continue to struggle. The one is the common right of humanity; and the other, the divine right of kings.” To Lincoln, the latter represented “the same spirit that says, ‘You work and toil and earn bread, and I’ll eat it.’ No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king . . . or from one race of men . . . enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle.” In Lincoln’s words, the retrograde institution of slavery was a “danger to liberty itself.”

Lincoln was not prepared to let democracy and liberty die of hypocrisy. Americans, he believed, had not only the opportunity but the responsibility to champion democracy everywhere by defending democracy here. Appropriately, when Hungarian freedom fighter Lajos Kossuth began an American tour in 1852, Lincoln was one of several prominent men from his hometown to sign a resolution of support for “the cause of civil and religious liberty” in Europe—not only in Hungary but also in Ireland, Germany, and France. On another occasion, affixing his name to a resolution endorsing a Polish-American engineer for a military commission, Lincoln placed himself in sympathy with the Poles’ “bold but unfortunate attempt to regain their national independence.” Later, Lincoln extended to the Mexican liberator Benito Juárez, destined soon for temporary exile, his hopes for the “liberty of . . . your government, and its people.” As president, Lincoln could ill afford to give more than encouragement to democratic struggles in other countries, faced as he was with the dissolution of his own. He would instead let American democracy speak for itself; Lincoln came to represent not just words but democracy functioning under siege, or as historian Mark E. Neely, Jr., has put it, democracy in action. Under Lincoln the Civil War became a “People’s contest” to “maintain the capacity of man for self government.” If “our enemies succeed,” he warned, “every form of human right is endangered.” But if “all lovers of liberty everywhere” joined in sympathy, he predicted, “we shall not