
Abraham Lincoln on Equality and “Free Labor” (1854)

On the eve of his first inauguration, Lincoln professed while visiting Independence Hall in Philadelphia that he had “never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence.” A few years later, when he looked back to the birth of the nation from Gettysburg, he counted “four score and seven years” to 1776, the year of the Declaration of Independence. The principle that Lincoln revered in the Declaration was that “all men are created equal”—this proposition, he believed, lay at the heart of the new nation. As a politician, Lincoln sometimes choked on the idea of whites and African Americans living side by side as equals. (Even after the Civil War had begun, Lincoln for a time promoted the colonization of former slaves.) But there was no doubt that he despised slavery. Lincoln penned this fragment in 1854, about a month after the Kansas-Nebraska Act negated the Missouri Compromise and allowed the further expansion of slavery. Here Lincoln praised not only the ideal of equality but also the principle of “free labor,” which played a crucial role in the growth of the new Republican Party. —D. Voelker

Bibliography: Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999) and “Introduction,” *The Portable Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Penguin, 1992).

[1] Equality in society alike beats inequality, whether the latter be of the British aristocratic sort or of the domestic slavery sort.

[2] We know Southern men declare that their slaves are better off than hired laborers amongst us. How little they know whereof they speak! There is no permanent class of hired laborers amongst us. Twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer. The hired laborer of yesterday labors on his own account to-day, and will hire others to labor for him to-morrow.

[3] Advancement—improvement in condition—is the order of things in a society of equals. As labor is the common burden of our race, so the effort of some to shift their share of the burden on to the shoulders of others is the great durable curse of the race. Originally a curse for transgression upon the whole race, when, as by slavery, it is concentrated on a part only, it becomes the double-refined curse of God upon his creatures.

[4] Free labor has the inspiration of hope; pure slavery has no hope. The power of hope upon human exertion and happiness is wonderful. The slave-master himself has a conception of it, and hence the system of tasks among slaves. The slave whom you cannot drive with the lash to break seventy-five pounds of hemp in a day, if you will task him to break a hundred, and promise him pay for all he does over, he will break you and hundred and fifty. You have substituted hope for the rod.

[5] And yet perhaps it does not occur to you that, to the extent of your gain in the case, you have given up on the slave system and adopted the free system of labor.

SOURCE: *Speeches & Letters of Abraham Lincoln, 1832-1865*. (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1907), 26. Spelling has been modernized and paragraph numbers added.



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