

Lincoln speech on slavery and the American Dream

Introduction

Through the 1830s and 1840s, Abraham Lincoln's primary political focus was on economic issues. However, the escalating debate over slavery in the 1850s, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act in particular, compelled Lincoln to change his emphasis.

In this manuscript, a fragment from one of Lincoln's speeches during the 1858 Illinois Senate race against Stephen Douglas, Lincoln advances the fundamental truth to which all creatures are entitled, declaring that even a slave kept in ignorance "does constantly know that he is wronged." And he uses economic logic against slavery, arguing that in freedom "the weak . . . grow stronger, the ignorant, wiser; and all better, and happier together." Lincoln also says of those who strive "to prove slavery a very good thing, we never hear of the man who wishes to take the good of it, by being a slave himself."

In these twenty-seven lines, Lincoln invokes the nation's founding principles to stress the injustice of slavery, and in the course defines the American Dream, declaring, "Most governments have been based, practically, on the denial of the equal rights of men, as I have, in part, stated them; ours began, by affirming those rights."

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction, view the image, and read the transcript. Then apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. How does Lincoln attempt to destroy the arguments of those who defended slavery and claimed that it was "a very good thing"?
2. Why does Lincoln consider the American system far superior to most other governments?
3. Explain the benefits Lincoln outlines, and add your own, when citizens are provided with equal opportunity.

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Image

dent truths— Made so plain by our good Father
 in Heaven, that all feel and understand it, even
 down to brutes and creeping insects— The ant, who has
 toiled and dragged a crumb to his nest, will furiously
 defend the fruit of his labor, against whatever robber
 snails him— So plain, that the most dumb and
 stupid slave that ever toiled for a master, does
 constantly know that he is wronged— So plain that
 no one, high or low, ever does mistake it, except in
 a plain peevish way; for although volumes upon
 volumes is written to prove slavery a very good
 thing, we never hear of the man who wishes to take
 the good of it, by being a slave himself—

Most governments have been based, practically, on
 the denial of the equal rights of men, as I have, in
 part, stated them; but began, by affirming those
 rights— They say, 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—

We made the experiment; and the fruit is before
 us— Look at it— think of it— Look at it, in its
 aggregate grandeur, of extent of country, and numbers
 of population— of ships, and steamboats, and rails—

Abraham Lincoln, speech fragment on slavery and the American government, ca. 1857–1858. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC03251)

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Transcript

Abraham Lincoln, speech fragment on slavery and the American government, ca. 1857–1858. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC03251)

...dent truth. Made so plain by our good Father in Heaven, that all feel and understand it, even down to brutes and creeping insects. The ant, who has toiled and dragged a crumb to his nest, will furiously defend the fruit of his labor, against whatever robber assails him. So plain, that the most dumb and stupid slave that ever toiled for a master, does constantly know that he is wronged. So plain that no one, high or low, ever does mistake it, except in a plainly selfish way; for although volume upon volume is written to prove slavery a very good thing, we never hear of the man who wishes to take the good of it, by being a slave himself.

Most governments have been based, practically, on the denial of the 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.

We made the experiment; and the fruit is before us. Look at it-- Think of it-- Look at it, in its aggregate grandeur, of extent of country, and numbers of population, of ship, and steamboat, and rail...