

2009 LAW DAY
ESSAY CONTEST

FIRST PLACE

A Legacy of Liberty:
Celebrating Lincoln's
Bicentennial

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This country's aspirations to greatness have come at no small cost. Freedom, as it is understood, is not free. Sacrifices for these lofty ambitions have been nearly innumerable, defined by wars and decided through struggle. Yet intrinsic rights like freedom and liberty, were once, and are still, fought over. Success, some say, is defined by the amount of effort put into an endeavor. It is not entirely unfair to say then, I believe, that America has been quite successful in striving for these aims.

Abraham Lincoln's celebrated vision for a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" ¹ has become a litmus test in this country for success. When asked to describe what America is to be to its people, that ideal is quoted more often than not. Yet what must be considered is if those hallowed words have become hollow. In our ventures as a country, do the American people shape what they seek based on this? Primary what needs to be considered in this question is what should the United States consider when it attempts to see these goals to fruition?

While the Declaration of Independence stated that every man is "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights" ², even then this meant a selective proportion of the American populous. It did not include women, men who were not land-owners, non-citizens, Native-Americans, and of course the African American slaves. Liberty and freedom were not "equal opportunity" in their allotment. It would take the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 to abolish slavery, eighty-nine years after the Declaration of Independence was made. It would take five more years for all men to have the same rights to citizenry and be able to vote. Yet what is important to realize, is not the inequity of these situations. It is easy to only view egregious acts; what is more imperative is that one look at what was done about these inequalities.

America has been and is replete of what have become known as “freedom fighters”; those who would go the extra mile to ensure those “unalienable rights” are indeed granted to every man, woman, and child. Thomas Paine once said “He that would make his own liberty secure, must guard even his enemy from opposition; for if he violates this duty he establishes a precedent that will reach himself.”³ It is vital that the United States realizes that we have a duty to one another to ensure all of these things. Many Americans before us have felt this call, and they have fought the good fight. John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King worked in the same era to promote racial equality; freedom for every man and not just every white man. Likewise, Abraham Lincoln sought unity for the country which he led and risked open war to unify multiple dissimilar factions in the United States.

Liberty is the utmost fruition of absolute freedom. When Abraham Lincoln addressed these principles in his Emancipation Proclamation speech delivered September 22, 1862, it left an indelible mark upon the American people. Slavery had only been so briefly addressed in the writing of the Constitution. The Founding Fathers left it to an entirely different generation to handle. This time was upon them, and Lincoln took up the reins of responsibility and drove his point home. An entire race of American people had just been handed their freedom, though it had lain dormant and suppressed since the founding of this nation. Lincoln was only making into law what was inherently considered as granted to every man.

Legislation regarding the freedom of citizens everywhere has continued to be pushed through in this country for decades. The indefatigable spirits of Dr. Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy are only two among a myriad of those freedom fighters whom

have made their very own convictions into an integral part of this great nation. The bill was met with immediate filibuster, after having bypassed a judiciary committee, by Georgia Democrat Richard Russell. However the filibuster was ended when Hubert Humphrey gleaned enough votes to pass the bill, a little lighter than its House version, to end the debate. With this great compromise came great retribution. It is said that President Johnson, having signed the bill turned to a White House Office Aide and said, "We have lost the South for a generation."⁴ Yet he went forward with this act, having ensured its quick passage through the Senate, and signed it into law. This audacity defines the determination of our country. Never before had a civil rights bill gained enough votes to end a filibuster-based debate. Equality reared its head and the south cowered at the idea. Yet this example of America's ability to persevere gives way to faith; a belief that while it is understood mankind by definition is not perfect, we strive for excellence and we have proved it possible.

Liberty and freedom can and do indeed co-exist. An entire generation geared themselves toward the propitiation of a divided nation, stood in the face of opposition, and won. We are now, as before of course, not perfect, yet we understand our ability to succeed. The idea that the United States has won the fight to make the principles of the Gettysburg Address and the Declaration of Independence absolute is flawed. It is an ongoing battle. While America still contains corners of intolerance, our country now fixes its eyes back onto the world. We have such an amazing ability to congregate as one and move fluidly as a people. It is time to tell our success story to nations around the globe. Success- because it is defined by how much effort is appropriated towards a goal, America, I would say, is THE success story.

Footnotes

- 1- Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address; delivered September 22, 1862
- 2- The United States' Declaration of Independence (1776)
- 3- Thomas Paine; unwritten source; direct quote from www.quotedb.com
- 4- Lyndon B. Johnson; July 2, 1964 (www.freerepublic.com)