

# 2009 LAW DAY ESSAY CONTEST

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## **THIRD PLACE**

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A Legacy of Liberty:  
Celebrating Lincoln's  
Bicentennial

Joshua Shepherd  
Tri-Cities Christian School  
11th Grade, Jonesborough

Abraham Lincoln was the sixteenth President of the United States of America. He came into office during a time of turmoil that eventually erupted into the Civil War. Also, it was a time of major political change that had a dramatic effect on the United States. For example, in the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln states that all men are created equal. This belief of his can be seen through the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862. Through this, President Lincoln freed all of the slaves that were originally under the control of the Confederacy. During this period of extreme tension, he set the standard for how the government should deal with the concern of equality of people. Whether the government upheld these standards was an entirely different subject.

In the years following the Civil War, African Americans in particular faced many hardships. Though they had been freed from slavery, they encountered stiff opposition as they tried to do the things that white Americans did. For instance, they stood little chance of acquiring any kind of job with the exception of working for very small wages in dangerous factories or as laborers on the Southern plantations they had fought so hard to escape. In the latter setting, black people were treated even worse than when they had been slaves. They were forced to sign labor contracts, which essentially made them consent to poverty. The basic idea behind these agreements was that after the black laborer had farmed the land, maintained the plantation, paid for and maintained his own tools, subjected himself to the commands of the plantation owner, and harvested the crops, the laborer was given a portion (usually around one-third) of the crops, a place to live, and meager wages. This left the majority to the plantation owner, who could withhold the laborer's earnings if he was considered to have broken a part of the stringent agreement.

Unfortunately, this was only one of many racial quandaries that African Americans, and many other cultural groups, encountered. In 1866, The Ku Klux Klan was organized and became a major source of racial violence. They were responsible for the kidnapping and lynching of many black Americans. Even though Congress passed the Ku Klux Klan Act in 1871, punishing any conspiracies that denied a person's rights, little was done to control the violence which persisted even into the twentieth century.

Another group that received the brunt of racial discrimination was the Chinese. After the development of the west coast, many Chinese men and women immigrated to the United States. Those who came to live here took jobs that most white people refused. As unemployment rose during the 1870's, the Chinese were looked upon with contempt, since they were filling up valuable job positions. The tension grew to be so intense, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was the first ever act that kept a certain group from immigrating to the United States.

Jews were also among those persecuted because of their cultural background. As they came to America, most Jews came to live in small towns known as shtetls. Many of these Jews lived in poverty, due to restrictions placed on their ability to trade, own land, and do business. Of course, this was the life that awaited them if they were able to first gain entrance into the country. In places such as Ellis Island on the East Coast and Angel Island on the West Coast, strict investigations made entry to the United States extremely difficult. Immigrants were screened for numerous things, such as their health and background. Some of these investigations lasted upwards of a year or more, leaving the immigrants to be quarantined on the islands or return to their homelands.

Another, much broader group of people had also found themselves trapped behind a barrier of discrimination and bigotry. These were the women of all races in the United States. Women have been categorized unfairly throughout the whole of the history of America. From the early settlers refusing to speak diplomatically with women of Native American tribes to the barring of women from the rights and positions of men in the twentieth century, women have received unjust treatment. Women in America desired the freedom of equality for a long period of time, starting largely with women's rights advocates like the Grimké sisters. Women persisted in their efforts of equality to men, winning small successes here and there with larger ones coming as time progressed. A major victory was when working conditions were improved significantly following the aftermath of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire in New York City. This tragedy left almost 150 women dead after a fire broke out from the upper floors of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company building. The executives had locked the inside doors where the women worked to ensure that they did not leave early or take unscheduled breaks. The irony of this disaster was that it could have been avoided, had officials listened to their lobbying for safer working conditions a year earlier.

Through these occurrences, it is simple to see that America has gone through a long history, filled with racial prejudices and partiality. Unfortunately, this bias went so far as to cost many people their lives. It would seem that the government has failed to uphold the ideals of equality portrayed in the Declaration of Independence and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Though America has come a long way in terms of its egalitarianism, there is still much that the law has to do protect the rights of those under it.