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Office of the White House Press Secretary

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THE WHITE HOUSE

TEXT OF REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT  
TO BE DELIVERED AT THE  
UNVEILING OF THE CORNERSTONE  
AT THE LINCOLN HOME NATIONAL VISITORS' CENTER  
THE LINCOLN HOME  
SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS

It has been said that more words have been written about Abraham Lincoln than about any other American. Certainly more speeches have been made about him, especially by candidates in election campaigns, and I confess I have been guilty of this myself on numerous occasions.

I remember my first visit to this house about a dozen years ago in the company of my good friend Paul Findley and the late Senator Dirksen, who was about the best story-teller to come out of central Illinois since Lincoln himself. I had just been elected Republican Leader of the House of Representatives and Ev was teaching me something about the trade, since he had been Republican Leader of the Senate for six years.

I can't remember what I said about Abraham Lincoln that day in Springfield, but I do remember the difficulty I had trying to put him into words. Carl Sandburg and others have spent whole lifetimes in this effort, and almost everything there is to say about Lincoln has been said many times before, and probably much better. Nobody ever has been able to capture his great spirit fully in a few sentences -- even his own eloquent sentences cannot explain Lincoln's universal appeal to human hearts.

There is a story about a young family visiting the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. The mother leans over to her little girl, about 3 or 4, and points up to the white marble statue.

"Now you know who that is, don't you?" she asks.

Quick as a flash the child answers:

"Oh yes. He's my friend."

Whether that story is true or not, it explains a lot. Every American feels that he or she knows Abraham Lincoln in a personal way -- as surely as his Springfield neighbors did when he bid them a last farewell before taking the train to Washington.

All along the way, people called out to him as "Abe" -- sometimes "Old Abe" -- though he was only 52. It was a term of affection, just as "Ike" was for President Eisenhower or "Ev" for Senator Dirksen.

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The wonder is that this communion between Lincoln and the people, so evident in his own time, continues to this day. His amazing ability to communicate some of his own calm courage and compassion to his fellow-countrymen -- across more than a century -- sets Abraham Lincoln apart from all the great Americans whose names we honor.

Others are legends.

Lincoln is real.

He is especially real here in Springfield, the home town that shaped his political career, the capitol city where his "house divided" speech struck the conscience of the nation.

If we were visiting Mount Vernon, and the ghost of George Washington suddenly appeared, I'm sure we would all stand to attention until he spoke first.

But here, I almost expect Mr. Lincoln himself to open that door and invite us in to sit a spell.

You may have heard about the Lincoln ghost that is supposed to haunt the White House.

Frankly, I'm not much of a believer in ghosts myself, and I've never seen any, including the Lincoln ghost. But I can tell you that the presence of Abraham Lincoln is surely there in the White House, perhaps more than that of any other President.

It is a comforting presence -- gently reminding his successors that no matter how worrisome, none of their troubles can be worse than his, none of their critics more cruel, none of their decisions more difficult.

I know you will appreciate how much encouragement I find today in Lincoln's philosophical reply to political attacks on his leadership. He told a visitor at the White House:

"If I were to try to read, much less answer, all the attacks made on me, this shop might as well be closed for any other business.

"I do the very best I know how -- the very best I can, and I mean to keep doing so until the end.

"If the end brings me out all right, what is said against me won't amount to anything."

Abraham Lincoln kept on doing the very best he knew how. He stuck to his steady course and he saved the Union. What sustained him? I'll tell you -- his faith in the ultimate justice of the people.

"Is there any better or equal hope in the world?" he asked.

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I still believe there is no better hope. The strength and wisdom of the American people have become the hope of free men everywhere. The great legacy of Abraham Lincoln is that government of the people, by the people, for the people, did not perish but endures here in these United States of America.

Ours is a more perfect Union than the Founding Fathers created, because of this one man. It is to Abraham Lincoln that we owe the opportunity to observe our national Bicentennial -- at peace among ourselves and with all nations.

Thank you.

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