

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MARCH 5, 1976

OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY
(Springfield, Illinois)

THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT THE
UNVEILING OF THE CORNERSTONE
AT THE
LINCOLN HOME NATIONAL VISITORS' CENTER

THE LINCOLN HOME

12:10 P.M. EST

Thank you very, very much, my good friend, Paul Findley. May I acknowledge my former colleagues in the House of Representatives, Congressman Michel, Congressman Railsback, Congressman Madigan, and, of course, one of my outstanding members of the Cabinet, Secretary Butz, Bishop McNicholas, Mr. Banton, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

I was very interested, Paul, in the story you told about Mr. Lincoln's experiences in the great State of Michigan. I am sure the heroic efforts of Mr. Lincoln in eliminating mosquitoes in Michigan have made Michigan a better and better place to live.

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

I do remember, however, my first visit to this house about a dozen years ago in the company of my good friends, Paul Findley and the late Senator Everett Dirksen. Ev was about the best storyteller to come out of Central Illinois since Lincoln himself.

I had just been elected in 1965 the Republican leader of the House of Representatives and Ev Dirksen was teaching me something about the trade, since Ev had been the Republican leader in the Senate for approximately six years. Frankly I can't remember what I said about Abraham Lincoln that day in 1965 in Springfield, but I do remember that I had difficulty trying to put Abraham Lincoln into words.

MORE

Carl Sandburg and others have spent a whole lifetime in this effort and almost everything there has been to say about Lincoln has been said many, many times before and probably much better. Nobody has ever been able to capture that great spirit fully in a few sentences -- even Lincoln's own eloquent sentences cannot explain Lincoln's universal appeal to human hearts.

There is a story, however, about a young family visiting the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. According to the story, the mother leans over to her little girl, who was about four or five years old, and points up to the marble statue of Lincoln in the Memorial. The mother asks, "Now you know who that is, don't you?" Quick as a flash, the child responds, "Oh yes, he is my friend."

MORE

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

All along the way, people called out, called 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. The wonder is that this communion between Lincoln and the people so evident in his own life continues to this very, very day.

His amazing ability to communicate some of his own calm courage, his own calm 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 capital city where his house divided speech struck the conscience of our entire nation.

If we were visiting in Mount Vernon and the ghost of George Washington suddenly appeared, I am sure that every one of us would all stand at attention until George Washington spoke first, but here I almost expect Mr. Lincoln himself to open that door behind us and invite us in to sit a spell.

You may have heard something about the Lincoln ghost that is supposed to haunt the White House. Frankly, I am not much of a believer in ghosts, and I have 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 in a long and wonderful history.

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

I know you will appreciate how much encouragement I find myself today in Lincoln's philosophical reply to political attacks on his leadership.

MORE

Lincoln told a visitor at the White House, and I quote, "If I were to try to read, much less answer, all the attacks made on me, the 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."

Those were Lincoln's wonderful words. Abraham Lincoln kept on doing the very best he knew how. He stuck to a steady course, and he saved the Union. What sustained him? I will tell you -- his faith in the ultimate justice of the American people.

"Is there any better or equal hope in the world," Lincoln asked. I still believe there is no better hope. The strength, the wisdom of the American people have become the hope of free men everywhere. The great legacy of Abraham Lincoln is that the Government of the people, by the people, for the people, did not perish but endures here in the 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 very, very much.

END (AT 12:17 P.M. EST)