

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks at the Abraham Lincoln Association Annual Banquet in Springfield, Illinois

February 12, 2009

Thank you very much. Well, it is wonderful to be back in Springfield, and I see so many familiar faces—to Mr. Hart; to Marilyn; to my Secretary of Transportation, Ray LaHood; to two of the finest Governors that we've had in the past, Jim Thompson and Jim Edgar; to Lura Lynn Ryan and to our new Governor, who's going to be doing outstanding work for us in the future, Pat Quinn; to Reverend McCants and to my dear friend Loretta Durbin.

I do feel guilty because Dick was the one who brought this event to my attention. *[Laughter]* I'm here, and he's there. *[Laughter]* But part of the reason that Dick Durbin has been such a great friend, not just to me but to the people of Illinois, is because his work always comes first. And he has been unbelievable in providing leadership in the Senate through thick and through thin. And I'm very, very grateful to him. He is one of my greatest friends, and I would not be standing here if it were not for Dick Durbin. So please give Dick Durbin a big round of applause.

So it is wonderful to be back in Springfield, the city where I got my start in elective office, where I served for nearly a decade. I see some of my colleagues, your attorney general, Lisa Madigan, in the house. And you've got some constitutional officers there. I think that's Alexi, your treasurer, who's going to be playing basketball with me at some point; Dan Hynes, comptroller, and just an incredible supporter during this past race; and your new senate president, John Cullerton, one of the sharpest legislators that we've ever had. Is the speaker around? He's over there? Mr. Speaker, it's good to see you. Thank you.

So I've got a lot of friends here. I've got to stop there, otherwise I'm going to be using up all my time.

I served here for nearly a decade and, as has already been mentioned, this is where I launched my candidacy for President 2 years ago this week, on the steps of the Old State Capitol where Abraham Lincoln served and prepared for the Presidency.

It was here, nearly 150 years ago, that the man whose life we are celebrating today, who you've been celebrating all week, bid farewell to this city that he had come to call his own. And as has already been mentioned, on a platform at a train station not far from where we're gathered, Lincoln turned to the crowd that had come to see him off and said, "To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe everything." And being here tonight, surrounded by all of you, I share his sentiment. But looking out at this room full of so many who did so much for me, I'm also reminded of what Lincoln once said to a favor-seeker who claimed it was his efforts that made the difference in the election. *[Laughter]* And Lincoln asked him, "So you think you made me President?" "Yes," the man replied, "under Providence, I think I did." "Well," said Lincoln, "it's a pretty mess you've got me into." *[Laughter]* "But I forgive you."

So whoever of you think you are responsible for this, we're taking names. *[Laughter]*

It's a humbling task, marking the bicentennial of our 16th President's birth—humbling for me in particular because it's fair to say that the Presidency of this singular figure who we celebrate in so many ways made my own story possible.

Here in Springfield, it's easier, though, to reflect on Lincoln the man rather than the marble giant—before Gettysburg, before Antietam, before Fredericksburg and Bull Run, before emancipation was proclaimed and the captives were set free. In 1854, Lincoln was simply a Springfield lawyer who'd served just a single term in Congress. Possibly in his law office, his feet on a cluttered desk, his sons playing around him, his clothes a bit too small to fit his uncommon frame, maybe wondering if somebody might call him up and ask him to be Commerce Secretary—[laughter]—he put some thoughts on paper, and for what purpose we do not know: "The legitimate object of government," he wrote, "is to do for the people what needs to be done, but which they cannot, by individual effort, do at all, or do so well, by themselves."

To do for the people what needs to be done but which they cannot do on their own. It's a simple statement, but it answers a central question of Abraham Lincoln's life. Why did he land on the side of union? What was it that made him so unrelenting in pursuit of victory that he was willing to test the Constitution he ultimately preserved? What was it that led this man to give his last full measure of devotion so that our Nation might endure?

And these are not easy questions to answer, and I cannot know if I'm right. But I suspect that his devotion to the idea of union came not from a belief that government always had the answer. It came not from a failure to understand our individual rights and responsibilities. This rugged rail-splitter, born in a log cabin of pioneer stock—who cleared a path through the woods as a boy, who lost a mother and a sister to the rigors of frontier life, who taught himself all that he knew, and everything that he had was because of his hard work—this man, our first Republican President, knew better than anybody what it meant to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. He understood that strain of personal liberty and self-reliance, that fierce independence at the heart of the American experience.

But he also understood something else. He recognized that while each of us must do our part—work as hard as we can, be as responsible as we can—although we are responsible for our own fates, in the end, there are certain things we cannot do on our own. There are certain things we can only do together. There are certain things only a union can do.

Only a union could harness the courage of our pioneers to settle the American West, which is why Lincoln passed a Homestead Act giving a tract of land to anyone seeking a stake in our growing economy.

Only a union could foster the ingenuity of our framers—the ingenuity of our farmers, which is why he set up land-grant colleges that taught them how to make the most of their land while giving their children an education that let them dream the American Dream.

Only a union could speed our expansion and connect our coasts with a transcontinental railroad, and so, even in the midst of civil war, Lincoln built one. He fueled new enterprises with a national currency and spurred innovation and ignited America's imagination with a national academy of sciences, believing we must, as he put it, add "the fuel of interest to the fire of genius in the discovery . . . of new and useful things." And on this day that is also the bicentennial of Charles Darwin's birth, it's worth a moment to pause and renew that commitment to science and innovation and discovery that Lincoln understood so well.

Only a union could serve the hopes of every citizen to knock down the barriers to opportunity and give each and every person the chance to pursue the American Dream. Lincoln understood what Washington understood when he led farmers and craftsmen and shopkeepers to rise up against an empire; what Roosevelt understood when he lifted us from

depression, built an arsenal of democracy, created the largest middle class in history with the GI bill. It's what Kennedy understood when he sent us to the Moon.

All these Presidents recognized that America is—and always has been—more than a band of 13 colonies or 50 states, more than a bunch of Yankees and Confederates, more than a collection of red States and blue States; but we are the United States. There isn't any dream beyond our reach—[*applause*]. There is no dream beyond our reach, any obstacle that can stand in our way when we recognize that our individual liberty is served, not negated, by a recognition of the common good. That is the spirit we are called to show once more.

The challenges we face are very different now: two wars; an economic crisis unlike any we've seen in our lifetime. Jobs have been lost; pensions are gone. Families' dreams have been endangered. Health care costs are exploding. Schools are falling short. We have an energy crisis that's hampering our economy and threatening our planet and enriching our adversaries.

And yet, while our challenges may be new, they did not come about overnight. Ultimately, they result from a failure to meet the test that Lincoln set. I understand there have been times in our history when our government has misjudged what we can do by individual effort alone, and what we can only do together; when we didn't draw the line as effectively as we should have; when government has done things that people can and should do for themselves.

Our welfare system, before reform, too often dampened individual initiative, discouraging people from taking responsibility for their own upward mobility. In education, sometimes we've lost sight of the role of parents, rather than government, in cultivating a thirst for knowledge and instilling those qualities of good character, hard work, and discipline and integrity that are so important to educational achievement and professional success.

But in recent years, we've seen the pendulum swing too far in the opposite direction. What's dominated is a philosophy that says every problem can be solved if only government would step out of the way. That if government were just dismantled and divvied up into tax breaks, that it would somehow benefit us all. Such knee-jerk disdain for government—this constant rejection of any common endeavor—cannot rebuild our levees or our roads or our bridges. It can't refurbish our schools or modernize our health care system. It can't lead to the next medical discovery or yield the research and technology that will spark a clean energy economy.

Only a nation can do those things. Only by coming together, all of us, in union, and expressing that sense of shared sacrifice and responsibility—for ourselves, yes, but also for one another—can we do the work that must be done in this country. That is part of the definition of being American.

It's only by rebuilding our economy and fostering the conditions of growth that willing workers can find a job and companies can find capital and the entrepreneurial spirit that is the key to our competitiveness can flourish. It's only by unleashing the potential of alternative fuels that will lower our energy bills and raise our industries' sights, make our Nation safer and our planet cleaner. It's only by remaking our schools for the 21st century that our children will get those good jobs so they can make of their lives what they will. It's only by coming together to do what people need done that we will, in Lincoln's words, "lift artificial weights from all shoulders [and give] an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life." That's all people are looking for, fair chance in the race of life.

That's what's required of us now and in the years ahead. We will be remembered for what we choose to make of this moment. And when posterity looks back on our time, as we are

looking back on Lincoln's, I don't want it said that we saw an economic crisis but did not stem it; that we saw our schools decline and our bridges crumble but we did not rebuild them; that the world changed in the 21st century but America did not lead it; that we were consumed with small things, petty things when we were called to do great things. Instead, let them say that this generation—our generation—of Americans rose to the moment and gave America a new birth of freedom and opportunity in our time.

These are trying days and they will grow tougher in the months to come. And there will be moments when our doubts rise and our hopes recede. But let's always remember that we as a people have been here before. There were times when our revolution itself seemed altogether improbable, when the Union was all but lost, when fascism seemed set to prevail around the world. And yet, what earlier generations discovered—and what we must rediscover right now—is that it is precisely when we are in the deepest valley, when the climb is steepest, that Americans relearn how to take the mountaintop together, as one nation, as one people. As one nation, as one people: That's how we will beat back our present dangers. That is how we will surpass what trials may come. That's how we will do what Lincoln called on us all to do and "nobly save . . . the last best hope on Earth." That's what this is, the last best hope on Earth. Lincoln has passed that legacy onto us. It is now our responsibility to pass it on to the next generation.

Thank you, God bless you, and may God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:32 p.m. at the Crowne Plaza Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Richard E. Hart, president, Abraham Lincoln Association; Marilyn Kushak, chairwoman, Illinois Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission; former Governors Jim Thompson and Jim Edgar of Illinois; Lura Lynn Ryan, wife of former Gov. George H. Ryan of Illinois; Rev. Gary McCants, presiding elder, Illinois Conference, Fourth Episcopal District, African Methodist Episcopal Church; Loretta S. Durbin, wife of Senator Richard J. Durbin of Illinois; and State Attorney General Lisa Madigan, State Treasurer Alexi Giannoulias, State Comptroller Daniel W. Hynes, State Senate President John Cullerton, and State Speaker of the House Michael J. Madigan of Illinois.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Abraham Lincoln Association annual banquet in Springfield, IL.

Locations: Springfield, IL.

Names: Cullerton, John; Durbin, Loretta; Durbin, Richard J.; Edgar, Jim; Giannoulias, Alexi; Hart, Richard E.; Hynes, Daniel W.; Kushak, Marilyn; LaHood, Ray H.; Madigan Michael J.; Madigan, Lisa; McCants, Gary; Quinn, Pat; Ryan, Lura Lynn; Thompson, Jim.

Subjects: Abraham Lincoln Association ; Economy, national : Recession, effects; Economy, national : Recession, effects; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Education : School improvement and renovation; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies; Illinois : President's visits; Illinois, Governor; Presidency, U.S. : Former President Abraham Lincoln's birthday.

DCPD Number: DCPD200900082.