

Lessons from Lincoln in Advancing Freedom in Today's America

By Tarren Bragdon, CEO of The Maine Heritage Policy Center

First, I want to thank George Henkel and the Hancock County Republicans for inviting me to address you tonight. It is an honor to be asked to speak at an event celebrating the leadership, values and achievements of Abraham Lincoln. Thank you for giving me that honor.

Abraham Lincoln was elected as the first Republican president 150 years ago. America was so very different then it seems.

Our own state of Maine had 628,000 people, about half its current size. Maine was the second biggest state in New England and one of the most populated states in the US with more people than California and Texas. In fact, in the election of 1860, Maine had as many electoral votes as California and Texas combined.

Maine had a major role in that election cycle. Lincoln's Vice President, of course, was Hannibal Hamlin who lived in Bangor. Hamlin was a celebrated Democrat Senator who walked away from his powerful position with the Party to join the newly formed Republican Party because he was so strongly opposed to slavery. When Hamlin learned that he has been selected to be the Vice Presidential candidate he

wrote to his wife, Ellen "I neither expected it or desired it. But it has been made and as a faithful man to the [anti-slavery] cause, it leaves me no alternative but to accept it."

The America of 1860 had 31 and one half million people – 27.5 million of them free and 4 million of them slaves. That would be equivalent to today's America having about 40 million slaves.

After Lincoln was elected, but before he was inaugurated the following March, seven Southern states seceded from the union. The Confederacy was formed. Jefferson Davis was sworn in as their new President.

Three weeks after Jefferson Davis took his oath, President Lincoln became the President of an America ripped asunder. The next month - April, the confederacy fired on Fort Sumter.

Years later, President Lincoln said "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me."

Today's America faces incredible challenges – record deficits, skyrocketing federal debt, a growing dependency class, unsustainable

entitlements, high unemployment and climbing interest rates and inflation just around the corner.

Don't despair. It was worse in 1860.

As we look at lessons from Lincoln for Advancing Freedom in Today's America, the first lesson is simple.

Lead. Rise to the challenge. America calls us all to be leaders. Lincoln, who was not known for his looks, said that "Common looking people are the best in the world: that is the reason the Lord makes so many of them." All of us common folk must meet the challenge that past events and present concerns demand.

Inertia is the most powerful force in most people's lives. But not Lincoln. He led. Lincoln was elected to Congress for one term in 1846. After Congress, he worked as an attorney, even arguing a case before the Supreme Court, before getting back into politics until 1854 to challenge Stephen Douglass. Stephen Douglass was the most powerful man in the Senate and an Illinois Democrat. Douglass advanced the Kansas-Nebraska act that allowed states to decide by vote whether to allow slavery, rather than have Congress decide as was the case under

the Missouri Compromise of 1820, when Maine (free) and Missouri (slave) became states.

Today, history calls upon all of us to take on another powerful Illinois Democrat.

Although the reasons are very different, our President's out of control spending, deficits and big government expansions threaten our future freedom and prosperity. We must lead. And thankfully that is what millions of Americans are doing. Whether through citizen movements like the tea parties, through the Party like those here tonight, or through other means and organizations, we must lead.

Tonight, we have with us six of the eight people running for the Republican nomination for Governor. They are seeking to meet the challenge of leading Maine in this fiscally and economically tumultuous time. For that, I thank them all for striving to lead at this time when our state so needs strong leadership. Will the gubernatorial candidates please rise and accept our gratitude for running.

However, in this case, eight is not enough. Maybe in the race for governor it is; but we must all recognize our responsibility to lead – in

our own communities, in our work place, in our families and, yes, in our state and in the political discourse.

Lincoln led. We all must as well.

Lincoln was a clear unapologetic leader. Listen to his words:

“As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy.”

Lincoln led to make America freer. How are you working to make our state and country freer?

The second great leadership lesson from Lincoln is Sacrifice.

We are so blessed to live in America. I have no idea why God let me be born in America. When I see the tragedy and suffering elsewhere, I am particularly grateful. But because we are in America we have a tremendous obligation.

With all its challenges, today's America is still the best country on earth. But in order for that to be so in the future, we must be prepared to sacrifice today.

Don't worry, I don't mean sacrifice as in pay more taxes.

I mean sacrifice as in give of your time, your talent and your treasure to ensure that America remains strong and that your family remains strong. A strong, prosperous and free America is the best hope for advancing freedom and prosperity across the globe and the key to privately funding compassion and charity worldwide.

Lincoln understood this even 150 years ago. He stated in his second address to Congress that "In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free - honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth. Other means may succeed; this could not fail. The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just - a way which, if followed, the world will forever applaud, and God must forever bless."

We honor the sacrifice of the military but noting that "freedom is not free." Nor is it cheap. We all must sacrifice our time and resources to

ensure that tomorrow is freer than today. That is our obligation to those that come after and our challenge each day as Americans.

Lincoln taught us a final key lesson in advancing freedom. Persevere.

Lincoln said “Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it.”

Political trends and politicians come and go. But all of us, as lovers of freedom, as leaders and those willing to sacrifice to preserve the greatness that is America, must persevere. The power of perseverance has recently played out in a still unimaginable way.

When President Obama and the majority in Congress proposed a massive government takeover of our health care system, America rose up. Despite overwhelming majorities in both the House and Senate, every day Americans like you said no. And kept saying no. And said it louder. And kept engaged, involved and not discouraged.

And because we all said no. The Republican Senators said no. And our two Senators – two of only three Republicans in Congress in all of New England – said No. And because it was 60-40 No, the voters in Massachusetts were given a chance to send a powerful message. And provide the 41st no. It is too simplistic to just say Senator Scott Brown

was the 41st No. He was part of those resolved and dedicated to preserving freedom of the doctor patient relationship and freedom from a new array of bloated, unaffordable government entitlements. And, because we all persevered, politicians will not get a chance to play doctor and the government will not takeover our health care system.

Yet. But we will persevere and not let it be in the future as well.

In closing, I again repeat the words of Lincoln:

“I leave you, hoping that the lamp of liberty will burn in your bosoms until there shall no longer be a doubt that all men are created free and equal.’

May it be so. Not only for us, but for our children and grandchildren. Because of the leadership, sacrifice and perseverance of you, and you, and you, and you, and you, and everyone else ...and me.

Thank you and God bless.