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**On Labor Day, Consider Abraham Lincoln's Views on Labor**

by

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There is a still [lively debate](#) as to whether Peter McGuire or Matthew Maguire should be credited as the founder of Labor Day. What's not in dispute is that on June 28, 1894, President Grover Cleveland signed a law making the first Monday in September of each year a national holiday.

The origin of our annual Labor Day holiday honoring working men and women was clearly rooted in America's organized labor movement.

But here I want to go back further in our nation's history to explore the relationship between an individual's labor, the creation of private property by virtue of such labor, and freedom. To do so, it is instructive to turn to Abraham Lincoln and recall how he resorted to the Declaration of Independence and the nation's Founders in addressing these connections. (My colleague, Seth Cooper, the Free State Foundation's Director of Policy Studies, deserves credit for his contribution to the research discussed in this piece.)

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Though Lincoln is not often associated with Labor Day, a holiday first observed a quarter century after his assassination, there is good reason, on Labor Day, to consider his views on what, before the Civil War, was called the "free labor" movement.

An integral part of the anti-slavery "Free Soil" movement was rooted in a "free labor" philosophy. Here is how prize-winning historian Eric Foner put it in *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War*:

For the concept of 'free labor' lay at the heart of the Republican ideology, and expressed a coherent social outlook, a model of the good society. Political anti-slavery was not merely a negative doctrine, an attack on southern slavery and the society built upon it; it was an affirmation of the superiority of the social system of the North—a dynamic, expanding capitalist society, whose achievements and destiny were almost wholly the result of the dignity and opportunities which it offered the average laboring man.

In his Gettysburg Address, Lincoln famously called for a "new birth of freedom." Given his background and his philosophical grounding in "free labor" antislavery principles, which he consistently related to the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence, it is not surprising that Lincoln often linked freedom to an individual's natural right to enjoy the fruits of his own labor. For Lincoln, this natural right was grounded in the Declaration's pronouncement of the self-evident truth that all men are endowed with the unalienable right to "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."

As far back as 1847 speaking at a Whig event, Lincoln declared: "I believe each individual is naturally entitled to do as he pleases with himself and the fruit of his labor, so far as it in no wise interferes with any other man's rights and that the general government, upon principle, has no right to interfere with anything other than that general class of things that does concern the whole."

And Lincoln frequently reminded his audiences that, "I always thought the man that made the corn should eat the corn."

This folksy saying is decidedly less formal than John Locke's famous injunction contained in his *Second Treatise of Government*: "Every man has a property in his own person: this no body has any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his."

As President, Lincoln affirmed his agreement with this Lockean view of the connection between property, labor, and prosperity in his [\*Reply to the New York Workingmen's Democratic Republican Association\*](#) in 1864:

Property is the fruit of labor...property is desirable...is a positive good in the world. That some should be rich shows that others may become rich, and hence is just encouragement to industry and enterprise. Let not him who is houseless pull down the house of another; but let him labor diligently and build one for himself....

And in his 1859 [Address to the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society](#), Lincoln connected free labor and a prosperous free enterprise system this way:

The prudent, penniless beginner in the world, labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land, for himself; then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him. This . . . is *free* labor – the just and generous, and prosperous system, which opens the way for all – gives hope to all, and energy, and progress, and improvement of condition to all.

As we celebrate Labor Day, take a moment to consider Lincoln's understanding of the importance of the "free labor" philosophy, and especially its integral relationship to a proper understanding of private property rights – and then, above all, to a proper understanding of freedom itself.

\* Randolph J. May is President of the Free State Foundation, a free market-oriented think tank in Rockville, MD. The views expressed in this *Perspectives* do not necessarily reflect the views of others on the staff of the Free State Foundation or those affiliated with it. *On Labor Day, Consider Abraham Lincoln's Views on Labor* was published in *RealClearMarkets* on September 2, 2024.