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**Why We Should Celebrate Lincoln's Birthday**

by

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Abraham Lincoln was born on this day, Feb. 12, in 1809. While Lincoln's birthday has never been recognized separately as an official federal holiday, in the past it was widely celebrated. And it is still officially observed as a legal holiday in several states, including, unsurprisingly, in Illinois.

Lincoln's birthday is acknowledged, along with George Washington and other presidents, on Presidents' Day, the third Monday in February. Interestingly, while we commonly refer to the holiday this Feb, 16 as "Presidents' Day," by federal law, it's still officially denominated "Washington's Birthday."

Now, with this bit of calendric background in mind, I want to consider the preeminent role played by the Declaration of Independence in influencing Lincoln's political philosophy, especially now as our nation commemorates the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration in 1776. With all due respect to Washington and other of our nation's Founders, including, of course, Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration's principal draftsman, I suggest Lincoln

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deserves special recognition on his birthday during this year celebrating the Declaration's semiquincentennial anniversary.

Simply put, no other president has evidenced Abraham Lincoln's deep understanding of the Declaration's transcendent meaning to America's still ongoing experiment as a democratic Republic. And certainly no other president has been able to express that understanding so eloquently.

On February 22, 1861 – which happened to be Washington's birthday – on his way to Washington to be inaugurated, Lincoln delivered what he told his audience was a "wholly unprepared speech" in Independence Hall. Whether prepared or not, Lincoln declared: "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence." No one then in attendance, or now, would find it easy to challenge his assertion.

For by the time Lincoln was elected president in 1860 – as a civil war loomed over the issue of slavery – Lincoln's attachment to the intertwined "equality" and "consent" principles at the heart of the Declaration already was well known. As far back as his address in Peoria, Illinois, in October 1854, responding to the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act which voided the Missouri Compromise's restriction on the extension of slavery, Lincoln had made this attachment clear.

In Peoria, Lincoln grounded his argument against slavery firmly in the philosophy and principles expounded in the Founders' Declaration of 1776, not in the Constitution of 1787. Referring to the Declaration repeatedly throughout his hours-long stemwinder, Lincoln recited for his audience verbatim the Declaration's core: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, DERIVING THEIR JUST POWERS FROM THE CONSENT OF THE GOVERNED." [The italics and ALL CAPS are in Lincoln's original draft of the speech.]

In Peoria, Lincoln memorably called this inextricable binding together of inalienable equal rights and freely given consent – the Declaration's self-evident truths – "the sheet anchor of American republicanism."

Then, at Gettysburg in November 1863, consecrating what would quickly become sacred ground, Lincoln began his famous address with this unforgettable invocation: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Unless the mathematical calculation is ingrained in memory, it is easy to miss that Lincoln's "four score and seven years" harkens back to 1776, not 1787. That is back to the Declaration, not to the Constitution. For Lincoln, the Declaration expressed the foundational ideals embodying the new nation's promise.

To be sure, acknowledge the contributions of Washington and whichever other presidents you wish on Presidents' Day, February 16. But make a special effort to honor Lincoln on his February 12 birthday.

And especially during this year of celebrating America's 250<sup>th</sup> birthday, please take time to reflect upon the way in which Lincoln repeatedly turned to the Declaration of Independence to explain the true meaning of the American democratic experiment.

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