

“ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE CONSTITUTION”

WEEK 8 — KEVIN PORTEUS ~ ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF POLITICS

ABRAHAM LINCOLN’S FIDELITY to the Declaration of Independence is equally a fidelity to the Constitution. The Constitution takes its moral life from the principles of liberty and equality, and was created to serve those principles. We are divided as a nation today, as in Lincoln’s time, because we have severed the connection between these two documents.

LECTURE SUMMARY

Lincoln’s “Fragment on the Constitution and the Union” contains the central theme of Lincoln’s life and work. Drawing upon biblical language, Lincoln describes the Declaration of Independence as an “apple of gold,” and the Constitution as the “frame of silver” around it. We cannot consider the Constitution independently of the purpose which it was designed to serve.

The Constitution acts to guard the principles enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. As the embodiment of the Declaration’s principles, the Constitution created a frame of government with a clear objective. The Constitution is not a collection of compromises, or an empty vessel whose meaning can be redefined to meet the needs of the time; it is the embodiment of an eternal, immutable truth.

Abraham Lincoln defended the Union and sought to defeat the Confederate insurrection because he held that the principles of the Declaration and Constitution were inviolable. In his speeches and in his statecraft, Lincoln wished to demonstrate that self-government is not doomed to either be so strong that it overwhelms the rights of the people or so weak that it is incapable of surviving.

KEY PASSAGES FROM THE READINGS

FRAGMENT ON THE CONSTITUTION AND THE UNION ~ *Abraham Lincoln*

“The assertion of that *principle*, at that *time*, was *the* word, ‘*fitly spoken*’ which has proved an ‘apple of gold’ to us. The *Union*, and the *Constitution*, are the *picture* of *silver*, subsequently

framed around it. The picture was made, not to *conceal*, or *destroy* the apple; but to *adorn*, and *preserve* it. The *picture* was made *for* the apple—not the apple for the picture.”
(*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 67)

FIRST INAUGURAL ADDRESS ~ Abraham Lincoln

“I hold, that in contemplation of universal law, and of the Constitution, the Union of these States is perpetual.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 587)

MESSAGE TO CONGRESS IN SPECIAL SESSION ~ Abraham Lincoln

“It presents the question, whether discontented individuals, too few in numbers to control administration, according to organic law, in any case, can always, upon the pretenses made in this case, or on any other pretenses, or arbitrarily, without any pretense, break up their Government, and thus practically put an end to free government upon the earth.”
(*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 596)

THE GETTYSBURG ADDRESS ~ Abraham Lincoln

“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. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 611)

“It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”
(*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, pages 611-612)

SECOND INAUGURAL ADDRESS ~ Abraham Lincoln

“Fondly do we hope—ferently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, ‘the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.’”
(*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 614)

“With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.” (*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, page 614)

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What does Abraham Lincoln call the “apple of gold”? And what is the “frame of silver”? How are the two elements related to each other?
2. According to Abraham Lincoln, what is the central principle of the American regime?
3. How does Lincoln employ the “house divided” metaphor to explain the crisis of his time?
4. How does Abraham Lincoln argue against secession? Why, according to him, is it illegitimate?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did Abraham Lincoln understand the American Founding?
2. How does the idea of secession relate to the consent of the governed and republicanism?
3. Is Lincoln’s argument against secession valid?
4. What parallels are there between the crisis of the Civil War and today’s constitutional crisis?



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33 EAST COLLEGE STREET
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