

1

Lincoln.

No one would detract an iota from the justly high estimate of Lincoln held by men. He was one of the greatest of his race, and today when all the passions that surged around him during life have died, foe and friend alike can and do extend full justice to that most unique and pathetic figure.

However, the American people on occasions become emotional and lose the power of discrimination. Truth is vastly more important than the interest of any man or than the memory of all men. It is a fine trait that yields willing and full mead of praise to him to whom it of right belongs; but it is a finer trait to do that and at the same time keep to the truth. The disposition today is to exaggerate and claim for Lincoln a stature not his in truth. Of course, to paraphrase his Gettysburg speech, it little matters what we here and now say; rather will he in the end be judged by what he then did. But we should seek to get at the core of things; to over-estimate any man is not justice to him or to others, and I have that confidence in Lincoln's love of truth to feel that he would prefer to be judged as others are judged, and to be judged justly. The enthusiasts are trying to make a myth---a god---of his memory, all of which will fail as such things have failed all down the ages.

Posterity will sift and sift and sift, and in the end all we may today claim or deny unjustly will be dumped into the trash heap in the end. One would think from the perfervid oratory of today that Douglas was driven, in the contest of 1856, entirely from the field, downcast, discountenanced, out-done

and otherwise rubbed into the mud. Such was not the case in any sense. Those who read those splendid debates must be struck with the superior advocacy on both sides; nor should we forget that Lincoln's side was the growing one; that was much. It was moreover, the side that has written most of the history of that debate and of that time. Untoward conditions met Douglas immediately after that debate that ended his career. As a debate, taking the facts as they were, leaving out all sentiment, from after conditions, it would be perhaps more than the truth will justify, to say that Lincoln had the best of it. Still, in that debate Lincoln showed his greatest generalship. The propounding of the celebrated three questions split the Democracy, destroyed all hope of Douglas being elected president and made Lincoln the most conspicuous man in his party. But it led to war; it made further compromise impossible, it made the irrepressible conflict one of iron; from that hour it was fight and nothing but fight.

The one thing that I do not like in this hour of unstinted adulation is the unthinking, uncritical way in which Lincoln's celebrated Gettysburg speech is praised. As a composition it is excellent; as a means to an end it was a stroke of genius; as a truth,----it will not stand. He was speaking of the Union soldiers who fought on that field, in the light of American institutions, and the essence of what he said is in this expression: "That we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died" "in vain; that the nation shall have a new birth of freedom, that" "government of the people, for the people, by the people, shall" "not perish from the earth". This meant that the people of the South were trying to destroy "government of the people, for the people, by the people," which was not true. The South was

equally zealous, was as devoted to government of, for and by the people as was any Northern man who fought in that contest. Both sides equally desired that kind of government; nor was that kind of government in issue ^{or in danger}. The question in issue was rather whether there should be one government by, of and for the people North, and another government by, of and for the people South, or one government for both.

Truth will not permit anyone to say that that kind of government in the North was in any sense menaced. No one so desired such government "to perish from the earth"; nor ^{was any one} ~~were they~~ endeavoring to do anything which would produce such a result. Certainly the South was making no such effort. Had she been successful, the North would have had for herself "government of, for and by the people" just as she wanted it; ^{just as she had it before;} and so would the South, for her government, in that respect, ^{was} identical with the government established by the Fathers of the Republic. In truth, we might go further; as it was given to Lincoln to understand, he was, of course, telling the full truth, but in all honesty with prejudice laid aside, with a clearer light, we may ask, was he engaged in an enterprise that extended to the South "government of the people, by the people and for the people" in the sense of the Father's work? Truth will not permit it to be said that he was. He was denying to the South that kind of government. The frozen truth is that Lincoln was trying to save the Union in a way that negated the idea of such government; and he in substance ^{at another time} said that he would do anything to preserve the Union. That it was best to save the Union ^{and I believe it was} may be admitted; but that was not what he said. He was speaking of a thing that might or might not exist in

or out of the Union. To say that the Union was necessary in order that such government might exist will not do. That was not true then nor is it true now. What would have happened by way of change in that character of government North or South had the South succeeded, was ^{then} a matter of prophecy; and all the prophets have been dead for centuries. But to say that the establishment of the South as a separate government would destroy that character of government finds no justification in any process of reasoning from the then known facts. There were then abundant evidences of that stalwart spirit in the American people, both North and South, that would not permit that character of government to "perish from the earth", whether we remained ^{one} or became two distinct nations, and ^{there was} not one ~~fact~~ ~~reason~~ tending to show that such government would "perish from the earth" if the South succeeded.

A recognition of this is due to the brave and devoted people of the South who fought and died in the firm and honest belief that a right to have a government of their own choice was as much the right of eight million of Americans then in the South as it was of three million of Colonists in 1776.

That it has come about since 1865 that the South has a full measure of that kind of government is due, not to the logical ^{sequence} ~~power~~ of ~~the North from~~ that war ~~to fully deny it to her~~, but to the inherent love of that kind of government all over this Nation, ^{North and South-}

Since that war we have not lived up to that idea of government in dealing with others. This will not please our self-love; but it is a fact all the same. Read that phrase from Lincoln's speech and then look at Porto Rico and the Phillipines and see, if one can, where that doctrine comes in. The very spirit of the war

waged by the North for the Union was destructive, in its necessary tendencies, of the character of government Lincoln did not wish to "perish from the Earth". I am not saying whether that idea is at all times the best; neither am I contending that it would have been for the best had the South succeeded. All that is aside from the question; for what is the best kind of government depends upon a multitude of things, and what is best for one people or one condition may not be so good for other people or for the same people under different conditions. This truth lies behind the reason for the government by, of and for the people, that they may change it when they do not like what they have. *The power to change is the very essence of such a government; if this American government -*

There was enough of the great and good in Lincoln for an exceeding large mead of admiration and praise, but it should stop where he was wrong, as in that matter. *Not am I* ~~I do not~~ feel satisfied when I hear admirers of Lincoln claim that he was as great or greater than Washington. The equal of Washington never breathed the breath of life, and from present indications this estimate will stand forever as the truth of all the ages.

James W. Oates.

August, 1905.