

Lincoln on “Temperance”

Isabela March, 11th Grade, Cab Calloway School of the Arts

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Introduction

On February 22, 1842, as a fourth term representative to the Illinois House of Representatives and two decades prior to his presidency, Abraham Lincoln addressed the Springfield Washington Temperance Society. As the crowd gathered into a small Presbyterian Church, amiably situated in the city of Springfield, Illinois, they had no idea what lay in store for them. The group was working towards moderation, “temperance,” to address societal “ills” by promoting abstinence from alcohol and other vices plaguing society. Temperance was not only a vast movement in Springfield, but by the beginning of the 19th century, America was far from oblivious to the idea of temperance, especially regarding the consumption of alcohol. A new religious enlightenment period involving “revivals,” spread the message of temperance across the country. And in 1842, the then Illinois House Representative found himself in a precarious situation; giving a speech to a group of people who had the good intention of “tempering” society’s ills by controlling the freedoms of their fellow Americans. This approach was illogical to Lincoln, a staunch Republican better understood in today’s world as an anti-federalist. The audience expected a speech supporting their ideals, but instead they received an indignant shove against their self-prevailing wave of thinking they knew better.

Lincoln’s Argument

Lincoln’s speech, in its entirety, was an effort to stir the pot when it came to the topic of

controlling fellow Americans under the guise of the temperance movement. At one point in the speech, the point on which this essay is based, Lincoln stated, “It is an old and a true maxim, that a ‘drop of honey catches more flies than a gallon of gall’.” With this metaphor, Lincoln set the tone and hinted to the fact that the Springfield Washington Temperance Society was going about changing the behaviors of society in the wrong way. In Lincoln’s mind, controlling others through harsh restrictions was not the way to change a freely chosen behavior. Lincoln explained that “if you would win a man to your cause, first convince him that you are his sincere friend.” It is not until common ground is found with the opposition that there can be room to exchange ideas. To truly make an impact in another’s decisions, there must be a rational discussion that is free of incrimination. “Friends” do not attack each other. Only a change made by a person’s own volition can last. Another aspect of Lincoln’s speech was a warning. Lincoln stated that when you “assume to dictate to [another’s] judgment, or to command [another’s] action, or to mark him as one to be shunned and despised,” he will “retreat within himself.” This reaction by the opposition will stop all communication and only scorn for the opposition is found. Change will not be achieved.

Lincoln’s Claims

There is much to be said about Lincoln’s approach to the temperance movement. Although one may think that the Americans who lived in 1842 would enthusiastically join the temperance movement, Lincoln was correct in his assessment of the opposition. His speech was a perfect example of not only his political views, but also his understanding of human nature. Americans cherish their freedom of choice and will not relinquish it without a fight. And in general, people don’t like to be told what they can and cannot do. I agree unreservedly with

Lincoln's assessment. America was founded on the basis of individual freedoms. And although this ideology once led to the Articles of Confederation, it evolved into the U.S. Constitution that balances freedom with governance today.

Another persuasive portion of Lincoln's argument was that he never "relieved" individuals of any accountability. Though Lincoln disagreed with the manner in which the temperance movement was imposing judgements onto others, he believed that people should be held responsible for their actions.

Lincoln's Perspective Continues to be Relevant

Lincoln's opinions of the temperance movement can be used as an example of how American society could move forward in addressing some of its most divisive issues. His stance on temperance is applicable to many situations in which there is a perceived interference with individual freedom. For instance, with mask mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens in the United States were split as to whether the government should impose those mandates. Those in favor of the mandates interpret the U.S. Constitution as permitting state government powers that are not delegated to the federal government, i.e., public healthcare (exemplified only by states that use that power). Those in opposition claim that individual freedoms cannot be infringed upon. They have the individual freedom to control their own behavior when it comes to their personal health choices, including mask-wearing. The only complication is that the freedom to abstain from wearing a mask impacts other individuals and therefore infringes upon their own rights. Therefore, Lincoln's "Temperance Address" exemplifies the dichotomy between the necessity to regulate a citizen's behavior, and their natural rights and freedoms. Lincoln was very wise in his stance on Temperance. He did not outright state that the "war" against others'

behaviors was invalid, but rather justified those beliefs by providing his opinion with an alternative course of action. He made his beliefs clear in that instead of forcing people to behave a certain way, opposing sides should first seek understanding and common ground. A path to change that starts with understanding is a more effective way to solve the ills of society.

In conclusion, Lincoln's arguments can teach us that the most effective solution to a problem does not come from direct opposition, but by finding an area where opposing sides can stand on, free of accusation. At that point, each side can gain a new perspective. With the achievement of this first step, the divisive political issues of today: inflation, reproductive rights, and public health regulations have a chance of being addressed to a favorable conclusion. As former President Lincoln stated over a decade later, "A house divided cannot stand." (II. Republican Senatorial Candidate Acceptance Speech, June 16, 1858).