

Finding Common Ground during Turmoil

Vivian Li

11th Grade, Caesar Rodney High School

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With four headstrong candidates competing to become the leader of this growing nation, the Election of 1860 was among the most divided presidential elections in America. However, only one man came out victorious, and that man was none other than one of the greatest presidents in U.S. history—Abraham Lincoln. Ten days after the election, Lincoln thanked a group of his supporters for their kindness at a Republican victory celebration in Springfield. The newly elected president also encouraged his jubilant supporters to "neither express, nor cherish, any harsh feeling towards any citizen who, by his vote, has differed with us," for "all American citizens are brothers of a common country, and should dwell together in the bonds of fraternal feeling." Lincoln's wise words exemplify the increasing importance of finding common ground during times of turmoil.

While Lincoln's honest personality, as well as his strong opposition to slavery, made him a figure that many Northerners commended, he was understandably unpopular in the slave states of the South. Southerners viewed Lincoln's triumph as a threat to the institution of slavery. Because of this, it was vital for Lincoln to address the growing tensions between the North and South, encouraging peaceful interactions between the two regions. His brief speech in Springfield, Illinois, served this very purpose. Even during the exuberant victory celebration of the Republican Party, Lincoln was aware that the disparagement of the opposing parties would

taint the cheerful atmosphere of the celebration. Therefore, Lincoln deemed it necessary to remind the passersby not to "express, nor cherish, any harsh feeling towards any citizen who, by his vote, has differed with us." The additional phrase "by his vote" to Lincoln's statement conveyed his argument that despite their political differences, both parties shared other resemblances—particularly the shared environment that all Americans grew up in. Lincoln's use of diction that connoted unity, such as "common country," "bonds," and "fraternal feeling," also contributed to this objective. Additionally, the adroit orator's incorporation of anaphoras with his repetition of the phrase "Let us" at the beginning of each sentence in the excerpt allows for his guidance to stick in the minds of his people. Amid the potential disunion of the nation, having his supporters grasp the concept of unity was more important than ever for Lincoln.

Even though he refrained from engaging with the South after the election, an action that some historians criticized, Lincoln was ultimately right in promoting feelings of mutuality among his people. The president's words—which were unequivocally chosen carefully with prudence and consideration—were both logical and straightforward. Lincoln's supporters likely viewed his success in the recent election as an immense victory that would inevitably lead to sectarianism among members of the newly established Republican Party. His statements hold much truth, as ideological differences often obstruct a country's path to happiness. However, if ideological differences are removed between men of good conscience, understanding between both parties is more likely to follow. Lincoln conveyed this point to his audience in an efficient, coherent manner that would have likely taken a less proficient speaker at least double the amount of time.

With the increasing sectional divide between the Democrats and the Republicans, Lincoln's

perspective remains more relevant than ever. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center during the tumultuous coronavirus outbreak proves this statement to be true. From mask wearing to the performance of health officials, the opinions of Democrats and Republicans differed over numerous topics, and the two parties rarely reached a consensus. In fact, 77% of Americans believed the country to be more divided than before the coronavirus outbreak. The main factor contributing to this pattern of sectionalism within America was the rigid nature of the two-party system, making differences appear more prominent and conspicuous. However, President Biden—who governed America during the second half of the pandemic—sought to look beyond this division and view America as a whole. Just like during the victory celebration in Springfield, people generally viewed politics in the same manner: one man's victory was another man's loss. This approach would make the importance of fighting for a common cause—a defining characteristic of successful governments that many modern democracies lack—virtually impossible. Because of the importance of unity, many elements of Lincoln's speech in Springfield were still present 160 years later during the first speech of President Biden's presidential career. Similarly, Biden also attempted to promote feelings of mutuality across the states once he was in office and believed that “With unity, we can do great things.” He vowed to look beyond the Republican and Democratic parties—a goal that would undoubtedly be extremely difficult in America's increasingly polarized society. Despite this, politicians after Lincoln, such as President Biden, still saw the importance of maintaining peace during challenging periods. Even after 160 years and 30 total presidential transitions, presidents continued to promote the concept of unity relentlessly, hoping to diminish the divisions within American society.

Although Lincoln's speech at Springfield, Illinois, on November 20, 1860, was far from the length of most ideal speeches, he still managed to get his point across flawlessly.

Unfortunately, despite Lincoln's continuous efforts, he was unsuccessful in preventing the Civil War from occurring. Without Lincoln's remarkable leadership during the war, however, the South would have likely stood victorious instead, ultimately leading to the continuation of slavery. Therefore, the president achieved something equally important—the preservation of the Union as a whole and later—the abolition of slavery. Lincoln's presidency made a lasting impact on American democracy, and his beliefs on the importance of finding common ground during tumultuous times are shared even by politicians today.