

In The Words of Abraham Lincoln...

By Michael Hutchison
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*Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history.
We of... this administration, will be remembered in spite of ourselves...
The firey trial through which we pass will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the
latest generation...*

Abraham Lincoln
Concluding remarks, Annual Message to Congress, 1862

Introduction

Frequently, historic figures in American history are remembered because of their words. People immediately link, “the only thing we have to fear, is fear itself...” with Franklin D. Roosevelt, “ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country...” to John F. Kennedy, and the simple, yet eloquent, “I have a dream...” to Martin Luther King.

Abraham Lincoln falls into this same category. Children recite the Gettysburg Address, adults can recall his famous line, “as I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master...” or recall Lincoln’s second Inaugural address where he mentioned, “with malice toward none, with charity for all”. In addition, Lincoln spoke at a time when there was no radio, television, film, or audio or videotape to capture his words. We don’t know how Lincoln’s voice *sounded*, but we do know *what he meant*.

In this activity three of Lincoln’s works will be analyzed. By far the most famous is the Gettysburg Address. However, two other works symbolize Lincoln’s commitment to the Union and its preservation as well as recognizing the losses suffered in the war; the 1862 Annual Message to Congress, as well as his “Letter to Mrs. Bixby”.

Standards

This lesson addresses the following national content standards established by the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)
(<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>)

History Standards

- Understands how important figures reacted to their times and why they were significant to the history of our democracy (e.g., George Washington; Thomas Jefferson; Abraham Lincoln; Sojourner Truth; Susan B. Anthony; Mary McLeod Bethune; Eleanor Roosevelt; Martin Luther King, Jr.)
- Understands the influence of Abraham Lincoln's ideas on the Civil War (e.g., the Gettysburg Address, how the Emancipation Proclamation transformed the goals of the Civil War)
- Analyzes the values held by specific people who influenced history and the role their values played in influencing history
- Analyzes the influences specific ideas and beliefs had on a period of history and specifies how events might have been different in the absence of those ideas and beliefs
- Analyzes the effects specific decisions had on history and studies how things might have been different in the absence of those decisions

Related Resources for this lesson:

Several sites are available for all three resources. Following are representative of each, based on the stable availability of the site, and the ease of printing the materials for classroom use.

The Gettysburg Address can be found at <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/gettyb.htm>

Concluding Remarks, Annual Address to Congress, 1862, can be found at <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/congress.htm>

Lincoln's Letter to Mrs. Bixby can be found at <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/bixby.htm>

Supplemental Resource:

Many sites contain one, two, or all three of the related resources. However, the American Civil War site contains a substantial collection of primary source material from the Civil War. It can be accessed at http://www.swcivilwar.com/cw_articles_listed.html

Strategy for the lesson:

The teacher can introduce the lesson by a discussion of how political leaders sometimes use rhetoric to unite the nation, or as a call to action, such as President George W. Bush did after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, or President Franklin D. Roosevelt's request for a declaration of war against Japan on December 8, 1941. (Teachers wanting to review President Bush's remarks as a comparison for the lesson can find them at http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/sept_11/president_025.htm. FDR's "Day of Infamy" speech can be found at <http://www.law.ou.edu/hist/infamy.html>)

Next, the teacher should discuss *why* Lincoln might have needed the ability to rally with his words and thoughts, specifically the idea that at many points during the war, Union morale was low.

The teacher should also note that frequently, modern politicians and artists use Lincoln's words as a tribute to him, or to serve other purposes. For example, students may recollect that Lincoln's "Letter to Mrs. Bixby" was used in the film, *Saving Private Ryan*. While the film did not deal with the Civil War, the letter was used to relate the suffering and loss of an American family in a war with great purpose.

(Note: while audio clips of actors reading Lincoln's "Letter to Mrs. Bixby" probably are not available, the Civil War series does include a segment of the Gettysburg Address with actor Sam Waterston as Abraham Lincoln. Also, Aaron Copeland's *Lincoln Portrait* (1942) uses segments of Lincoln's "Annual Message to Congress" as narration. While downloadable audio files of the work may be difficult or impossible to find, they are probably available for purchase or many public libraries may stock it. Also, many famous American actors, including Gregory Peck and James Earl Jones have narrated the work. Waterston also narrates a small portion of the "Address to Congress" in the Civil War series.)

Next, the teacher can either direct the students to the various web sites to read the related materials, or can distribute photocopies of them. (Note: The "Letter to Mrs. Bixby", and "Gettysburg Address" are relatively short and can be pasted together in one document. The "Annual Message to Congress" is somewhat longer, but can be cut and pasted into a word processing file.)

If the teacher desires, students can read the works quietly, or, either the teacher or students may read the works, should audio versions of them not be available. Next, the teacher should distribute the question sheets and ask the students to answer the questions on the works.

Extension Activities

1. When invited to speak at Gettysburg, Lincoln was not the featured speaker, but was invited to give "a few appropriate remarks". Edward Everett had been given the role of featured speaker at the ceremony for dedication of the cemetery. (The text of Everett's address can be found at

- http://douglassarchives.org/ever_b21.htm.) Ask students to speculate why Everett might have been chosen over Lincoln to give the main address. Have students note also after the speech, Everett wrote Lincoln saying “I should be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes.” Have students speculate (either in class discussion or in writing) what Everett meant by this statement.
2. Some felt that Lincoln’s speech at Gettysburg was less than satisfactory, including Lincoln himself. (“That speech won’t scour, it’s a flat failure.”) The *London Times* felt that “The ceremony was rendered ludicrous by ... the sallies of that poor President Lincoln...” Have students act as journalists covering the speech at Gettysburg and ask them to write critical reviews, based on comparison of Lincoln’s speech with Everett’s.

**Question sheet for
In The Words of Abraham Lincoln**

1. Read Lincoln's "Letter to Mrs. Bixby". How does he describe the loss Mrs. Bixby has endured?

Lincoln notes that he has been "shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant-General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle."

2. How does Lincoln try to reconcile his own inability to comfort Mrs. Bixby? How does he try to console her?

He notes "I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming". Later in the letter, however, he mentions that he "prays our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement".

3. You may know that Steven Spielberg chose this letter for use in the 1998 film, *Saving Private Ryan*, which is a similar story of a family who has lost multiple members in war. In your own words, explain why you think the Bixby letter is effective in any time period.

Answers vary. Some students may have seen the film and consider the plot of the movie to be one where loyalty to family is outweighed by loyalty to country and duty.

4. Next look at the "Annual Message to Congress". In it, Lincoln notes, "Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history.... We will be remembered in spite of ourselves." He adds, "the fiery trial though which we pass will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation". Why do you think Lincoln used these words in his speech?

Answers vary. Lincoln may have been trying to get the members of Congress to realize that the decisions they made regarding emancipation and the conduct of the Civil War would be remembered for many generations.

5. In the "Annual Message", Lincoln also notes, "The dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and

we must rise—with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall (**Note:** there is a typographical error in the web transcript) ourselves, and then we shall save our country. In your own words, interpret what you think Lincoln is saying with this passage. (Hint: the word *disenthrall* means to free from a controlling force or influence.)

Answers vary. Students might catch the definition of the word *disenthrall* and believe that Lincoln was probably trying to say that if the members of the Congress liberate themselves from the “slavery” of the old “dogmas” and ideas, they could see the way to free blacks from slavery.

6. As he concluded the “Message”, Lincoln noted, “We—even we here—hold the power, and bear the responsibility. In *giving* freedom to the slave, we *assure* freedom to the *free*—honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve.” What sort of message do you think Lincoln was trying to convey to the members of Congress by this statement?

By this point, with only a few days until the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln was probably trying to get support for his plan to free the slaves, and tried to make Congress understand that by freeing the slaves, they freed themselves from the obligations of slavery as well as what he saw was destroying the Union.

7. Next, read Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Why do you think Lincoln opened the speech with the reference to the Declaration of Independence?

Lincoln wanted to remind the audience that Jefferson had written in the Declaration of Independence that all men were created equal, and that ideal was still important “four score and seven years” later.

8. Give examples of how Lincoln recalls the dead of Gettysburg. Give examples of how he commemorates the sacrifice of the battle.

He mentions this in the speech several times, “...those who gave their lives that that nation might live...” “The brave men, living and dead who struggled here...” “From these honored dead...” In commemoration of the battle, he uses terms such as “consecration”, “nobly advanced”.

9. Read the last sentences, “that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they 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.” Describe how you think Lincoln tried to start the reconciliation of North and South and bind the wounds of the war with this speech.

Answers vary. Possibly students might note that Lincoln doesn't specify whether the "honored dead" are Confederate or Union, and both sides could take comfort in his phrase, "these dead shall not have died in vain," Students may also note that Lincoln believes the sacrifices made by these men will make America a better nation.

10. Presume you have been selected to be a member of a committee established by the Library of Congress to develop a display of Lincoln written works and speeches. One of the tasks of the committee is to determine what work is going to be the center point of the display. The committee has determined that one of the three works you have analyzed will be the center point. Which one of the works will you select as the center of the exhibit? Why?

Answers vary. Many students will probably select the Gettysburg Address since it is well known. However, some may see the sincerity of his letter to Mrs. Bixby as a reason to select it, or of the goal of emancipation noted in the Annual Message, and select that work.