

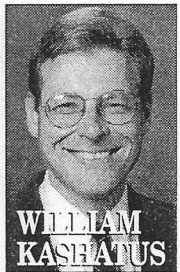
Declaration of Independence and Philly inspired Lincoln

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On Feb. 22, 1861, Abraham Lincoln made his first visit to Philadelphia. It was a moving experience for the president-elect, a prairie lawyer chosen by a minority of the popular vote and considered by many to be ill-equipped for high office.

Facing the insurmountable problem of holding the nation together as it moved hopelessly toward civil war, Lincoln admitted to being "filled with deep emotion" as he stood in front of Independence Hall. He spoke of his strong reverence for the Declaration of Independence, which gave "liberty, not alone to the people of this great country, but hope to the world for all future time."



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Then, addressing the impending crisis, Lincoln resolved: "If this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle — I would rather be assassinated on this spot than to surrender it. It is the only principle that I am willing to live by, and, in the pleasure of Almighty God, die by."

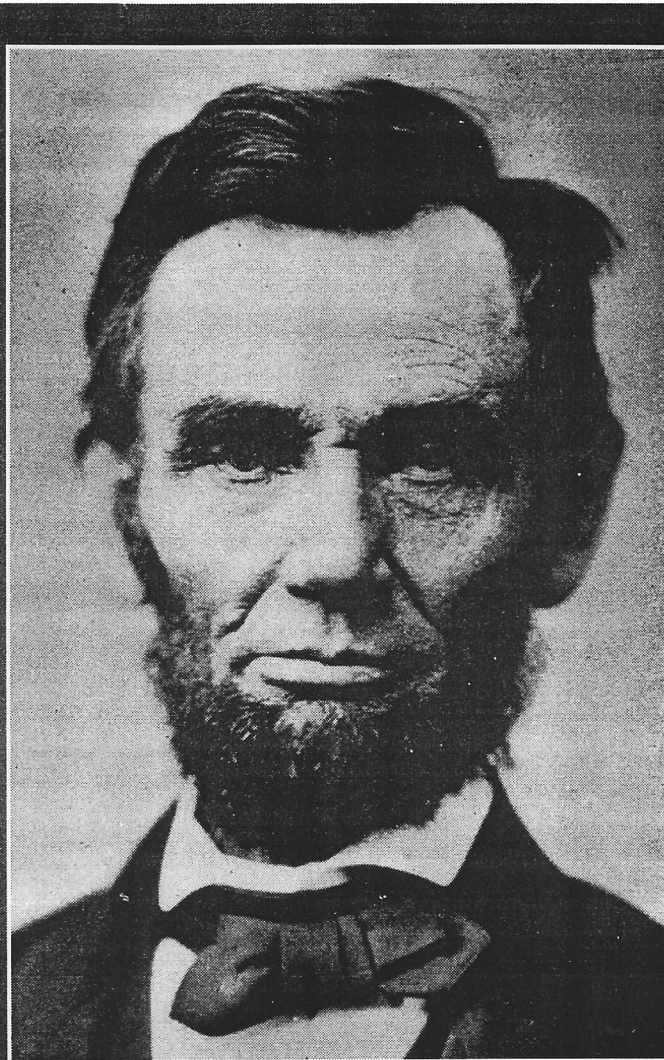
His words proved to be prophetic — four years later, he returned to Independence Hall in a flag-draped coffin en route to his burial in Springfield, Ill. Between those two visits, Lincoln became the greatest leader this country has ever had.

It is only fitting that we celebrate Abraham Lincoln on President's Day (his birthday is on Saturday). He brought to the American political culture more headstrong conviction, moral energy and compassion than any other man who preceded or followed him in office. But the true genius of his leadership was his exceptional ability to grow from a shrewd politician to a deeply spiritual leader with a strong resolve to link the abolition of slavery to his original goal of preserving the Union. His reverence for the Declaration of Independence as well as his evolving faith were instrumental in that change.

While Lincoln had a strong moral revulsion against slavery, the idea of emancipating blacks by executive order went against his political instincts. He realized that he had not been elected on an abolitionist platform and he knew that a leader who defied public opinion could lose his capacity to lead altogether.

Increasingly, Lincoln struggled with the "monstrous injustice of slavery." Then, after the disastrous loss at the Second Battle of Bull Run, he began to question why the South was winning the war, if, in fact, the will of God prevails.

The Union victory at Antietam on Sept. 17,



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the Emancipation Proclamation.

Although the Civil War would continue for nearly three more years, Lincoln's sense that the contest had some deeper religious meaning increasingly manifested itself in his actions and behavior. He toured hospitals to visit the sick and wounded of both armies. His visible display of compassion inspired trust, loyalty and admiration not only from his subordinates but from the people themselves.

brief address that is considered the greatest speech in our nation's history, he called on Americans to rededicate themselves to the principle "that all men are created equal" so that "this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom."

It was a masterful stroke of oratory, insisting that the American people must, in consistency with the principles of the Declaration, relinquish their prejudice against blacks. But the message was delivered with genuine conviction that the two sentiments could no longer co-exist if the great sacrifice of "those who gave their lives that the nation might live" was to be duly honored.

Abraham Lincoln did not see himself in the same company as the founding fathers. Nor did he view himself as an exceptionally religious man, refusing to join any church. Yet his leadership was grounded in a deep reverence for the Declaration of Independence and an unshakable belief that God's will was discernible.

The best hope for the nation, he

believed, lay in conforming to both. He acted on this conviction without being self-righteous, but with a respect for the dignity of all the American people, appealing to their fundamental sense of justice and morality. In so doing, Lincoln gave a powerful new meaning to the phrase "all men are created equal" and a new birth of freedom to the nation. ■

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