

The Civil War: A People's Contest

By Lewis E. Lehrman

Putnam County News & Recorder

On July 4, 1861, the U.S. Congress convened in special session. Its first act was to receive a "Special Message" from the President about the onset of the Civil War. For several weeks, President Lincoln had been hard at work summarizing the events following his inauguration on March 4.

The night before, Lincoln had told an old Illinois friend "that of all the trials I have had since I came here, none begin to compare with those I had between the inauguration and the fall of Fort Sumter. They were so great that could I have anticipated them, I would not have believed it possible to survive them." But President Lincoln continued to focus on his special message to Congress.

As a politician, Lincoln had long been dedicated to the language of the Declaration of Independence -- especially his interpretation of its equality clause. Now, as President, he noted in his message that the Confederate states did not show the same reverence for equality of opportunity.

"Our adversaries have adopted some declarations of independence in which, unlike the good old one penned by Jefferson, they omit the words 'all men are created equal.' "Why?" Lincoln asked in his message which was read to Congress on July 5. "They have adopted a temporary national constitution, in the preamble of which, unlike our good old one signed by Washington, they omit 'We, the people,' and substitute 'We, the deputies of

the sovereign and independent States.' Why? Why this deliberate pressing out of view the rights of men and the authority of the people?"

For Lincoln, the difference between the Union and the Confederacy was clear. "This is essentially a people's contest. On the side of the Union, it is a struggle for maintaining in the world that form and substance of government whose leading object is to elevate the condition of men; to lift artificial weights from all shoulders; to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all; to afford all an unfettered start and a fair chance in the race of life. Yielding to partial and temporary departures, from necessity, this is the leading object of the Government for whose existence we contend."

Lincoln noted that many American military officers had renounced their oath of allegiance to the Union in order to join the secession: "I am most happy to believe that the plain people understand and appreciate this. It is worthy of note that while in this the Government's hour of trial large numbers of those in the Army and Navy who have been favored with the offices have resigned and proved false to the hand which had pampered them, not one common soldier or common sailor is known to have deserted his flag."

President Lincoln always worried about America's future example to the world as well as the support of America's people for the Union. For Lincoln, the very concept of democracy was at stake. "Our popular Government has often been called an experiment. Two points in it our people have already settled -- the successful establishing and the successful administering of it. One still remains -- its successful maintenance against a formidable internal attempt to overthrow it. It is now for them to demonstrate to the world that those who can fairly carry an election can also suppress a rebellion; that ballots are the rightful and peaceful successors of bullets, and that when ballots have fairly and

constitutionally decided there can be no successful appeal back to bullets; that there can be no successful appeal except to ballots themselves at succeeding elections.”

Back at the White House on July 4, Lincoln reviewed several New York Regiments, but declined to give a speech to them: “I appear before you in obedience to your call; not, however, to make a speech. I have made a great many poor speeches in my life, and I feel considerably relieved now to know that the dignity of the position in which I have been placed does not permit me to expose myself any longer.” The President, increasingly hesitant to say something that he had not carefully planned, then turned over the program to General Winfield Scott for his remarks.

The next day, Friday, July 5, Congressmen and Senators met separately to hear the message read and listen to Lincoln’s call for enlistment of 400,000 soldiers. “Hurrah for Uncle Abe!” yelled one soldier from the House gallery.

Many Americans agreed. “This Government was founded upon the rights of man; and for the first time in long years the President recognizes that fact,” George William Curtis, editor of *Harper’s Weekly*, subsequently observed. “At length there is a people’s President...and the Government of the United States is restored to its original principles.”

The union of the American people was imperiled by secession. The “people’s contest” would last four years; it would ultimately cost 700,000 American lives; but President Lincoln and the Union would prevail.

Lewis E. Lehrman, co-founder of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, is author of “Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point” (Stackpole, 2008) and “Lincoln ‘by littles’” (TLI Books, 2013).