

THE BICENTENNIAL OF GIANTS

On February 12th, 1809, a man who would be called America's Emancipator was born in a log cabin in the Kentucky woods. That man was Abraham Lincoln, our Nation's 16th President. That same day, Charles Darwin, the world's first evolutionist, was born to a family of doctors and industrialists on the other side of the Atlantic, in England. The two men came from different backgrounds and had wholly different interests, yet, with their genius, they helped to make our moral modernity, and so changed the world. The bicentennials of these giants were celebrated with lectures, exhibits, and other tributes. America's to Lincoln celebrated a Nation united in adversity. The world's to Darwin encapsulates the progress of science.

Abraham Lincoln

A day of tributes to the American Emancipator

—by Michael E. Ruane and Debbi Wilgoren

The wind was whipping so strongly at the Lincoln Memorial on February 12th that Frank J. Williams, a retired Rhode Island Supreme Court justice and long-time collector of Lincoln memorabilia, lost his place while reading the Gettysburg address. But the D.C. schoolchildren reciting it with him had committed the speech to memory. As Williams fumbled with the blowing pages, they kept going strong.



“The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. . . . We here highly resolve that these deeds 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.”

Williams and the students from Strong John Thompson Elementary School in downtown Washington were part of a colorful wreath-laying ceremony at the memo-

rial that kicked off a day of tributes to the 16th U.S. President, who was born 200 years ago on Feb. 12, 1809.

“We are a freer and infinitely better nation because of Lincoln,” said Senate Majority Whip Richard J. Durbin (D), who hails from Lincoln’s home state of Illinois.

Noting that the dedication of the memorial at the west end of the Mall in 1922 took place in front of a segregated crowd, Durbin said the inauguration last month of the first black U.S. president moved America much closer to realizing Lincoln’s ideals.

“For so long our nation failed the essence of Lincoln’s message,” Durbin said. “Why does this man, this prairie lawyer, still enthrall us? . . . He is, in many ways, the definition of what it means to be an American.”

The ceremony, under bright but turbulent skies, included a rendition of the National Anthem performed by Grammy Award nominee Michael Feinstein and the U.S. Marine Corps Band, a work by poet Nikki Giovanni specially written to commemorate the bicentennial birthday, and a 21-gun salute across the Reflecting Pool.

There were Lincoln impersonators and others in Union Army uniforms. About a dozen wreaths were laid at the foot of the grand marble monument, near the spots where Martin Luther King Jr. made his famed “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963, and President Obama and his family hosted an inaugural welcome concert.

A second wreath-laying took place at Ford’s Theatre, where Lincoln was assassinated on April 14, 1865. The theater—closed for 18 months for renovations—reopened on February 12 to public tours. A brass band performed at the ceremony and District schoolchildren recited from Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and several of his speeches. The public could see the original document of the Proclamation at a special, five-day exhibit at the National Archives.

The theater celebrated both Lincoln’s birthday and its own makeover the night before with a star-studded gala that featured actor Sidney Poitier and “Star Wars” director George Lucas.

Members of Congress and President Obama paid their tribute to Lincoln in a ceremony in the Capitol Rotunda.



“It is an honor to be here,” remarked the President, “a place where Lincoln served, was inaugurated, and where the Nation he saved bid him a last farewell. As we mark the bicentennial of our 16th President’s birth, I cannot claim to know as much about his life and works as many of those who are also speaking today, but I can say that I feel a special gratitude to this singular figure who in so many ways made my own story possible, and who in so many ways made America’s story possible.”

In the afternoon, the festivities continued with a live webcast at the National Archives entitled “National Teach-In on Lincoln.” Scholars Doris Kearns Goodwin, Matthew Pinsker, and Harold Holzer answered students’ questions from all over the country.

That same day late in the afternoon, the Gettysburg Address and a trove of other Lincoln documents and artifacts—including the Lincoln Bible used at President Obama’s inauguration—went on public display in the Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress.

The brooding, brilliant man who would have preferred a full term in the Senate “where there was more chance to make reputation and less danger of losing it” was greeted with “gloom and doom” in some parts of the land on the day of his election as President. But even

though different generations have had a different take on Lincoln and his legacy, his was largely a legacy of firm belief that “even in times of war, the work must go on; that even when the Nation itself is in doubt, its future is secured; that ‘these things are as they should be.’” Our Nation would not have succeeded as much as it has done without this strong belief in its fundamental strength and resilience, and singular humanity.



Remarks at the Capitol Rotunda

“The event at the Capitol Rotunda is fitting for the life of this building is bound ever so closely to Lincoln’s time,” said President Obama at the beginning of his remarks at the ceremony. “Built by artisans and craftsmen, immigrants, and slaves, it was here, in the Rotunda, that union soldiers received help from a makeshift hospital; it was downstairs, in the basement, that they were baked bread to give them strength; and it was in the Senate and House chambers, where they slept at night, and spent some of their days.

What those soldiers saw when they looked on this building was a very different sight than the one we see today. For it remained unfinished until the end of the war. The laborers who built the dome came to work wondering whether

each day would be their last; whether the metal they were using for its frame would be requisitioned for the war and melted down into bullets. But each day went by without any orders to halt construction, and so they kept on working and kept on building.

When President Lincoln was finally told of all the metal being used here, his response was short and clear: ‘it is as it should be’. The American people needed to be

reminded that on that distant day, when the guns fell silent, a national capitol would stand, with a statue of freedom at its peak, as a symbol of unity in a land still mending its divisions.

It is this sense of unity, this ability to plan for a shared future even at a moment our Nation was torn apart, that I reflect on today. And while there are any number of moments that reveal that particular side of this extraordinary man—that particular aspect of

his leadership—there is one that is particularly revealing.

In the war’s final weeks, aboard Grant’s flagship, *The River Queen*, President Lincoln was asked what was to be done with the rebel armies once General Lee surrendered. With victory at hand, Lincoln could have sought revenge. But he did not. He ordered that Confederate troops be treated ‘liberally all round.’

That was the only way, Lincoln knew, to repair the rifts that had torn this country apart. It was the only way to begin the healing that our Nation so desperately needed. For what Lincoln never forgot, not even in the midst of civil war, was that despite all that divided us—north and south, black and white—we were, at heart, one Nation and one people, sharing a bond as Americans that could not break.”