

Statement of the Honorable Donald A. Manzullo (IL-16th) in support of H.Con.Res.281

February 12, 2008

Madam Speaker, it is with a great honor and a sense of humility as the senior Republican from the Land of Lincoln that I offer this resolution to celebrate the birthday of our nation's 16th President. I want to first offer my deep thanks and gratitude to the Chairman and Ranking Minority Member of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee, Mr. Waxman of California and Mr. Davis of Virginia, respectively, for allowing this resolution to come up on the floor to coincide with President Lincoln's birthday. I recognize that this was an unusual procedure and that normal committee protocol was waived to expedite consideration of this resolution to time with Lincoln's birthday today. I also want to offer my profound appreciation to my good friend and fellow Illinoisan, Representative Danny Davis of Chicago, who made all of this possible to happen today.

Abraham Lincoln was born 199 years ago today to Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks at Knob Creek Farm near Hodgenville, Kentucky in Hardin County. Today starts a series of celebrations over the next two years to commemorate the life of Abraham Lincoln based on the *Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission Act*, which was signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 2000. These commemorations include a special kick-off ceremony at Lincoln's boyhood home, the redesign of the Lincoln penny, a special bicentennial postage stamp, a rededication of the Lincoln Memorial, and a special joint session or meeting of Congress for ceremonies and activities related to Abraham Lincoln. I am absolutely delighted that the House will join in this kick-off celebration in Kentucky, albeit delayed because of an ice storm, with the debate over this resolution. This resolution will continue honoring Lincoln's legacy beyond the next two years by requesting the President to issue a proclamation every year in his honor as he does for many other great figures of American history.

In the fall of 1816, Thomas and Nancy Lincoln packed their belongings and their two children – Sarah, 9, and Abraham, 7 – and left Kentucky bound for the new frontier of Spencer County in southern Indiana. Abraham Lincoln lived in Indiana for the next 14 years until he was 21 years old. However, in October 1818, when Abraham was nine years old, his mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, died. His feelings for her were still strong some 40 years later when he said, "All that I am or hope to be, I owe to my angel mother."

In 1830, Thomas Lincoln, then re-married, decided to move the family to another new frontier – this time to the tiny village of Decatur, Illinois, located in Macon County. Hard working and intellectually inquisitive, Abraham Lincoln's first foray into public service came in 1832 when he was elected and served as a captain of an Illinois militia company during the Black Hawk War. Following his military service, Lincoln was elected to the Illinois legislature in 1834 from Sangamon County and was successively reelected until 1840. In 1846, Abraham Lincoln was elected to serve in this great House, where he ably represented central Illinois in the seat now held by my good friend and colleague, Representative Ray LaHood.

Lincoln grew to prominence as an attorney and a legislator with a reputation for fairness, honesty, and a belief that all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. He founded these beliefs in the ideals of the Declaration of Independence—a document which, as President, he would cite frequently as his inspiration for saving the Union and as the basis for his opposition to slavery. During a speech at Independence Hall in 1861, Lincoln stated, “I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence . . . [it is these sentiments] which gave liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but, I hope, to the world, for all future time.” Lincoln’s belief in the principles espoused by the Declaration formed the motivating moral and natural law principle for his opposition to the spread of slavery and his belief in slavery’s ultimate demise.

Lincoln found his belief in the equality of men to be directly at odds with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1856. This legislation promulgated the concept of “popular sovereignty”—the idea that state citizens should be able to determine the presence of slavery in their state by popular referendum. Lincoln’s strong feelings against the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act propelled Lincoln to return to politics, and he began a bid for the U.S. Senate.

During his campaign for the Senate, Lincoln engaged in a series of seven debates with his opponent, Stephen Douglas. Now known as the Lincoln-Douglas debates, Lincoln’s eloquence and studied opposition to the spread of slavery brought him into national prominence.

The second of these debates was held in Freeport, Illinois, a city in the district that I am privileged to represent, and was the origin of what is now known as the “Freeport Doctrine.” Cornered by Lincoln into choosing between the notion of popular sovereignty or the prohibition against outlawing slavery put forth by the infamous Dred Scott Supreme Court decision, Stephen Douglas responded that slavery could be prevented from any territory by the refusal of the people living in that territory to pass laws favorable to slavery. Likewise, if the people of the territory supported slavery, legislation would provide for its continued existence. While this Doctrine would see Douglas reelected to the Senate over Lincoln, it would be a key factor in his loss in the 1860 presidential election.

Lincoln’s performance in the debates won him national prominence and a reputation for courage, character and patriotism. These factors played heavily into his election to office as the 16th President of the United States on November 6, 1860.

Upon taking office, Lincoln was thrust into the throes of the Civil War. Leading a partitioned Union, Lincoln relied heavily on his political ideals born of the Declaration of Independence. On January 1, 1863, Lincoln issued what would become the most iconic document of his presidency—the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing all the slaves in southern States that seceded from the Union. His commitment to the promises of the Declaration of Independence were further evidenced in the opening lines of his greatest speech at Gettysburg: “Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth, on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

On November 8, 1864, Abraham Lincoln was reelected to the Presidency by 55 percent of the popular vote. He continued to act as a courageous and principled leader until he was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth on April 14, 1865. Abraham Lincoln died on April 15, 1865.

Abraham Lincoln's profound and courageous belief in the equality of men and the sacredness of the American Union propelled him forward as one of the greatest presidents our nation has known. Last Sunday, at a White House ceremony honoring Abraham Lincoln, President George W. Bush said, "he, of all the successors to George Washington, none had greater impact on the presidency and on the country...He was a fabulous man, a great President. His life was one of humble beginnings, and steadfast convictions. And so we celebrate his deeds, we lift up his ideals, and we honor this good man."

Lincoln is a hero to so many of us here in this House on both sides of the aisle, as he is to me. The prominence of President Abraham Lincoln is an undisputed fact of American history. The man best known for freeing the slaves and saving an imperiled Union has attained iconic status among historians and citizens alike as evidenced by best selling books such as Team of Rivals by Doris Kearns Goodwin that documented the political genius of Lincoln in winning the presidency and governing the nation.

And yet, this man of great genius, compassion and acumen lacks official federal recognition for the day of his birth, February 12, because what is popularly known as President's Day is legally Washington's Birthday. While I do not wish to diminish the contributions George Washington made to the establishment of this great country, this resolution will finally give Lincoln his due without the cost of a separate federal holiday by simply requesting the President each year to issue a proclamation honoring this great man and encouraging the people of the United States to observe his birthday with appropriate ceremonies and activities. The resolution also encourages State and local governments and local educational agencies to study and appreciate the reverence and respect Abraham Lincoln had for the Declaration of Independence in the development of American history, jurisprudence, and the spread of freedom around the world.

Madam Speaker, I urge my colleagues to join me in honoring Abraham Lincoln today and in recognizing the profound influence the Declaration of Independence had upon Lincoln's political philosophy as a model for us emulate.