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Abraham Lincoln

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AT COOPER INSTITUTE

In October 1859, Lincoln received an invitation to speak at Henry Ward Beecher's church in Brooklyn. He replied that he could give a speech in February if it could be on a political subject. This was agreed to. On Monday evening, February 27, 1860, a committee waited on Lincoln at his New York hotel to accompany him to Cooper Institute, which had replaced Plymouth Church as the place of the meeting. They found Lincoln dressed in a sleek shining new suit of black covered with creases and wrinkles. The committee conducted Lincoln to the hall and ushered him to the platform. Here he found the most cultivated men and women of the city awaiting him. An immense audience filled the hall. No less a person than William Cullen Bryant introduced him. It is doubtful if Lincoln ever prepared another speech as carefully as the one he gave that night. Herndon has testified to the great effort Lincoln spent upon it. Before delivering this address he was known in the East chiefly as a rather obscure western lawyer who had gained some prestige a little over a year earlier in the debates with Douglas during the Illinois senatorial contest. The day after the address Horace Greeley's New York Tribune said of him, "No man ever before made such an impression on his first appeal to a New York audience." This speech put within Lincoln's grasp a chance for the Presidency. His closing words are given below.

If slavery is right, all words, acts, laws, and constitutions against it are themselves wrong, and should be silenced and swept away. If it is right, we cannot justly object to its nationality—its universality; if it is wrong, they cannot justly insist upon its extension—its enlargement. All they ask we could readily grant, if we thought slavery right; all we ask they could as readily grant, if they thought it wrong. Their thinking it right and our thinking it wrong is the precise fact upon which depends the whole controversy. Thinking it right, as they do, they are not to blame for desiring its full recognition as being right; but thinking it wrong, as we do, can we yield to them? Can we cast our votes with their view, and against our own? In view of our moral, social, and political responsibilities, can we do this?

Wrong as we think slavery is, we can yet afford to let it alone where it is, because that much is due to the necessity arising from its actual presence in the nation; but can we, while our votes will prevent it, allow it to spread into the national Territories, and to overrun us here in these free States? If our sense of duty forbids this, then let us stand by our duty fearlessly and effectively. Let us be diverted by none of those sophistical contrivances wherewith we are so industriously plied and belabored—contrivances such as groping for some middle ground between the right and the wrong: vain as the search for a man who should be neither a living man nor a dead man; such as a policy of "don't care" on a question about which all true men do care; such as Union appeals beseeching true Union men to yield to Disunionists, reversing the divine rule, and calling, not the sinners, but the righteous to repentance; such as invocations to Washington, imploring men to unsay what Washington said and undo what Washington did.

Neither let us be slandered from our duty by false accusations against us, nor frightened from it by menaces of destruction to the government, nor of dungeons to ourselves. Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith let us to the end dare to do our duty as we understand it.

LINCOLN ADDRESS AT COOPER INSTITUTE,
NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 27, 1860.