



On January 27, 1838, Abraham Lincoln rose before the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois, to make a speech. Just 28 years old, Lincoln had begun to practice law and had political ambitions. But he was worried that his generation might not preserve the republic that the founders had handed to it for transmission to yet another generation. He took as his topic for that January evening, "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions."

Lincoln saw trouble coming, but not from a foreign power, as other countries feared. The destruction of the United States, he warned, could come only from within. "If destruction be our lot," he said, "we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide."

The trouble Lincoln perceived stemmed from the growing lawlessness in the country as men ignored the rule of law and acted on their passions, imposing their will on their neighbors through violence. He pointed specifically to two recent events: the 1836 lynching of free Black man Francis McIntosh in St. Louis, Missouri, and the 1837 murder of white abolitionist editor Elijah P. Lovejoy by a proslavery mob in Alton, Illinois.

But the problem of lawlessness was not limited to individual instances, he said. A public practice of ignoring the law eventually broke down all the guardrails designed to protect individuals, while lawbreakers, going unpunished, became convinced they were entitled to act without restraint. "Having ever regarded Government as their deadliest bane," Lincoln said, "they make a jubilee of the suspension of its operations; and pray for nothing so much as its total annihilation."

The only way to guard against such destruction, Lincoln said, was to protect the rule of law on which the country was founded. "As the patriots of seventy-six did to the support of the Declaration of Independence, so to the support of

the Constitution and Laws, let every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor.... Let reverence for the laws...become the *political religion* of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.”

Lincoln was quick to clarify that he was not saying all laws were good. Indeed, he said, bad laws should be challenged and repealed. But the underlying structure of the rule of law, based in the Constitution, could not be abandoned without losing democracy.

Lincoln didn't stop there. He warned that the very success of the American republic threatened its continuation. “[M]en of ambition and talents” could no longer make their name by building the nation—that glory had already been won. Their ambition could not be served simply by preserving what those before them had created, so they would achieve distinction through destruction.

For such a man, Lincoln said, “Distinction will be his paramount object, and although he would as willingly, perhaps more so, acquire it by doing good as harm; yet, that opportunity being past, and nothing left to be done in the way of building up, he would set boldly to the task of pulling down.” With no dangerous foreign power to turn people's passions against, people would turn from the project of “establishing and maintaining civil and religious liberty” and would instead turn against each other.

Lincoln reminded his audience that the torch of American democracy had been passed to them. The Founders had used their passions to create a system of laws, but the time for passion had passed, lest it tear the nation apart. The next generation must support democracy through “sober reason,” he said. He called for Americans to exercise “*general intelligence, sound morality, and in particular, a reverence for the constitution and laws.*”

“Upon these let the proud fabric of freedom rest, as the rock of its basis; and as truly as has been said of the only greater institution, ‘*the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*’”

What became known as the Lyceum Address is one of the earliest speeches of Lincoln's to have been preserved, and at the time it established him as a

rising politician and political thinker. But his recognition, in a time of religious fervor and moral crusades, that the law must prevail over individual passions reverberates far beyond the specific crises of the 1830s.