



## Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

Featuring collections from the Western Reserve Historical Society and  
The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

### **MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.**

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

---

Reel  
163

Box  
59

Folder  
841

Abraham Lincoln Revisits Washington, 1951.



ABRAHAM LINCOLN REVISITS WASHINGTON

February 11, 1951

If Abraham Lincoln were to revisit Washington, the capital of the United States, today, I believe that his heart would be gladdened by the sight of the beautiful city which, since his day, has become one of the most magnificent capitals of the world. He would have been pleased greatly with its architectural grandeur and with all that it betokened of wealth and the progress of the nation which he loved so dearly. His heart would have been gladdened, too, by observing that the Union which he died to preserve has endured. It would now be more than four score years since the battle banners of the Civil War were furled, almost as many years as the Union endured from its inception until the time of the Civil War. And now in 1951 Abraham Lincoln would have found that Union stronger than ever before, in spite of all the strains and the tensions and the sectional conflicts of the succeeding years since the Civil War, and in spite of the searching and the testing of three wars - two World Wars - since that day. That Union which he died to preserve was never again endangered. His heart would have been gladdened by the fact that so many other states have joined that Union, that from a population of some 31,000,000 in his day, the United States today had a population of over 150,000,000.

The heart of the great emancipator would have been gladdened, I am sure, by the fact that the bitter memories of that Civil War which rent his country apart in fratricidal strife have been, in not completely erased, certainly they have faded. The American people today is cemented as one people, one United States of America. That which he had hoped for and prayed for had come to pass. You will recall the remarkable words which he spoke at the close of the first inaugural address, March 4, 1861:

I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break, our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.



His prophecy has come true. The better nature of the American people prevailed.

Abraham Lincoln, in revisiting Washington in 1951, would have been glad to note that the emancipation of the Negro which he initiated has steadily advanced in many other fields. He had emancipated the Negro from serfdom; he had given them political freedom. He must have known, I am sure, that what he was doing was only the beginning of their liberation. No people passes from total slavery to total freedom overnight and by an edict of emancipation. He knew his Bible; he knew the story of the emancipation of the Hebrew slaves at the hands of Moses. They did not pass from slavery to freedom overnight. They had to pass through many scorching years of wandering in a wilderness, and the whole generation of the emancipated slaves had to perish in the wilderness, before the people was ready for freedom.

Long and hard is the road, with many retreats and many detours. He must have known, I am sure, that even the political freedom which he granted to the Negro would be resisted after the way, and that ways would be sought and found to get around their legal enfranchisement, even though it was officially proclaimed and written into an amendment in the Constitution of the United States.

But while their advance to total freedom has suffered many checks and retardations, it has been steady and continuous through the years, and that would have gratified the heart of Abraham Lincoln. The Negro in the United States has made remarkable advances in education, in the rise of their standard of living, in industrial opportunities, in the professions, in government, and more and more the members of this race are forging to the very forefront in the arts, in the sciences and in government.

Abraham Lincoln in 1951 would know that his work was not yet completed by any means and that there were some very dark areas on the continent. He would have been grieved to learn that measures at their complete civil rights and against discrimination in employment are still being frustrated in the Congress of the United States. And yet the penetrating eye of Lincoln - for his eye was that of a prophet - could not fail to see the steady and irresistible forward march of the race for which he sacrificed so much, and that that race would ultimately achieve its complete emancipation.



And his patient spirit would not be cast down, therefore, by the evidences of the imperfection and the incompleteness of his task. He would be satisfied that the spirit of his America was still in the ascendancy.

I think Abraham Lincoln, too, in revisiting our capital in 1951, would have been pleased with the fact that the spirit of know-nothingism which was so rampant in his day and ravaged his country, while it has not entirely disappeared and occasionally flares up here and there, has not succeeded in kindling any widespread conflagration in our country; that bigotry and intolerance find no serious and certainly no permanent lodgement either in the Congress of the United States or in its courts, in its legislative or in its executive branches. How mightily he fought the spirit of know-nothingism in his day, which expressed itself then against foreigners and against Catholics. He knew what a violation all that was of the spirit and the genius of America, and how much it endangered our free institutions. He declared in 1855:

I am not a Know-nothing; that is certain. How could I be? How can anyone who abhors the oppression of Negroes be in favor of degrading classes of white people? Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation we began by declaring that "all men are created equal." We now practically read it "all men are created equal, except Negroes". When the Know-nothings get control, it will read "all men are created equal except Negroes and foreigners and Catholics." When it comes to this, I shall prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty - to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.

I think Abraham Lincoln, if he revisited Washington this year, would have been troubled a bit by the evidences of too much government all around him, by the amazing bureaucracy that has been built up. I think he would have been frightened by it, for like all true democrats, he was apprehensive of excessive government as ultimately invading the freedom of its citizens. This trend towards government would have frightened him, just as in his day the armies of office seekers who descended on Washington disconcerted him and frightened him; people who wanted government to maintain them, to give them a comfortable berth for life - that's what government was for.



In one of his numerous stories of which he was such a master Lincoln told of a king who set out one day on a hunt with a large entourage, and before setting out he inquired of his astrologer what kind of weather it would be, and the astrologer assured him that it would be a very fine, sunshiny day, and it was all right to go ahead on the hunt. He set out, and on the way he encountered a farmer riding on a donkey, and in good spirit he greeted the farmer and said, "How do you do, farmer," and the farmer said, "How do you do, king," and the farmer said, "Oh king, you and your following here are going to be very wet before the day is over. There is a terrible thunderstorm coming." But the king, having received his assurance from his astrologer, didn't bother about the information which the farmer gave him, and went on, and of course, in the afternoon a thunder storm broke and he and his following were just drenched to the bone. On his return to the palace, he ordered the head of the astrologer to be cut off, naturally, and summoned the farmer in order to appoint him as the astrologer. And the farmer said, "No, oh king, I'm not the one who gave you this information. My donkey did. Any time there is a storm coming, the ears of my donkey assume a special position." And so the king ordered the donkey to be appointed as the court astrologer, and that, the king said, was the greatest mistake he ever made in his career. And then Abraham Lincoln paused, in telling the story, and the people listening to him said, "Why? Didn't the donkey continue to give him the right information?" "Oh," said Abraham Lincoln, "by all means, he did, but ever after every donkey in the country came to the palace and asked for a job."

I believe that Abraham Lincoln would have been greatly troubled by the hectic preparation for war that he would be seeing all around him in Washington in 1951. He would know there had been no secession, no rebellion, no invasion of our shores, no one has declared war on the United States, and yet a state of national emergency has been proclaimed, American citizens are being drafted into the army, the life of the nation is being feverishly regimented for war - he would have been troubled by all that. He would have heard all about him cries of war on Communism - abolish Communism by war! - just as in his day he heard voices, abolish slavery by war! Now, Abraham



Lincoln would have hated Communism quite as much as he hated slavery. He was a great lover of freedom and ~~basic~~ <sup>fundamental</sup> human rights. ~~And besides,~~ He was opposed to war on private property. Addressing ~~the working men,~~ a Committee from the Workingmen's Association of New York, March 21, 1864, Abraham Lincoln said:

The strongest bond of human sympathy, outside of the family relation, should be one uniting all working people, of all nations, and tongues and kindreds. Nor should this lead to a war upon property, or the owners of property. Property is the fruit of labor; property is desirable; it is a positive good in the world. That some should be rich shows that others may become rich, and hence, is just encouragement to industry and enterprise. Let not him who is houseless pull down the house of another, but let him labor diligently and build one for himself, thus by example, assuring that his own shall be safe from violence when built.

He would especially have hated Communism because of its character of dictatorship, suppressing the rights of the individual, but he never would have urged a crusade against Communism any more than he ever urged a crusade against slavery. He hated slavery violently. "Slavery," he said, "was a foul lie that could never be consecrated into God's hallowed truth." He wanted all men to be free, and yet, he made it clear time and time again, before he became President of the United States and while he was President, that the paramount objective of the nation was to save the Union and not either to save or to destroy slavery. He was prepared to let slavery exist in those states where it did exist, hoping that time and progress would bring about its inevitable destruction, as it had in other countries and without war. "It is in the course of ultimate extinction," he said. It was a foul lie that could not permanently endure. He was opposed to the extension of slavery into the territories. He wanted to arrest its further spread and that is why he vigorously denounced the Dred Scott Decision, which denied Congress the right to prohibit slavery in the territories. But he refused to make the destruction of slavery the paramount objective of national policy. Slavery was morally wrong, but Congress had no right to interfere with it where it existed.

And I doubt, therefore, whether Abraham Lincoln would have hurried his nation into a crusade against Communism all over the globe, as President Truman has endeavored to do. He would have worked for the strengthening of the Union, of the union of Nations,



of the United Nations, as the paramount issue in international life today. He would have accepted the existence of the Communist state as a fact, unpalatable but inevitable. We had recognized the right of these states to exist when we joined with them in the United Nations..

Believing, as he did, in the eternal truth and the inevitable victory of liberty all over the world, he would have had confidence in the ultimate extinction of any and every form of dictatorship. Practical man that he was, he would arm his nation - he would have sought to make it strong - but, he would not have sent his nation forth, I believe, as an international Don Quixote to tilt with all the windmills of hated and frightening ideologies in the world. He did not provoke war with the South; it was the South which first attacked; it was the South which seceded. He did not incite war against it just because it was slave-holding, and unto the last he pleaded for understanding and unity. He was prepared to make great concessions to maintain unity, having the larger vision <sup>that</sup> ~~of~~ the ultimate would show complete freedom. He was not much concerned about prestige or face-saving. (In his famous debates with Douglas time and again he stated;

Think nothing of me - take no thought for the political fate of any man whomsoever - but come back to the truths that are in the Declaration of Independence. You may do anything with me you choose, if you will but heed these sacred principles. You may not only defeat me for the Senate, but you may take me and put me to death. While pretending no indifference to earthly honors, I do claim to be actuated in this contest by something higher than an anxiety for office. I charge you to drop every paltry and insignificant thought for any man's success. It is nothing; I am nothing; Judge Douglas is nothing. But do not destroy that immortal emblem of Humanity - the Declaration of American Independence.

He failed. The South was determined upon the extension of slavery and the bloody Civil War followed, the greatest tragedy in American history, for the slaves could have been emancipated without a civil war. It was not necessary for hundreds of thousands of American citizens to be butchered and for half of a country to be laid waste in ruins.



Now, we may fail in 1951 to preserve the Union of Nations, the United Nations. The Soviet Union may push on to extend the borders of Communism, and so, provoke the Third World War. But surely, Abraham Lincoln's advice to those responsible for the fate of our country in 1951 would be what it was in the days before the Civil War: "Do nothing to provoke war; seize every opportunity for conference and negotiation, for compromise and concessions, but no war! And do not make the destruction of Communism the basic national policy of the United States." The slogan of the nation should be "Union" - the Union of humanity, one world, just as in his day it was the Union of the States.

I think Abraham Lincoln would have been disturbed today in Washington by the hysteria propaganda which is going on, by the noise and the shouting and the ranting, the denunciations. He was opposed to that type of propaganda, of inciting people. (He was fond of telling the story of a traveller who lost his way in an inhospitable region, and a terrific thunderstorm came up to add to his troubles. He floundered along for a time until his horse gave out, and then the lightning afforded him the only clue on his way, but the peals of thunder were frightening and one bolt particularly brought him to his knees. He was not a praying man, and accordingly, his petition was very short and to the point. "Oh, Lord," he prayed, "if it's all the same to You, give us a little more light and a little less noise."

(Light - more light, less noise.) He did not like in his day to hear people saying that the "Lord is on our side". We are the saints; they were the sinners. We were all white; they were all black with sin. If you read his amazing second inaugural which reads like a page from the Bible, after years of bloody war, you are amazed to find that he is still speaking of one people, all sharing alike in the responsibility for what has taken place, all equally guilty - North and South alike - and when he heard one day a minister proclaim that "the Lord is on our side", he said to him, "I am not at all concerned with that. God is always on the side of the right. What I am concerned about is that we should be on the side of God." That's a marvelous spirit to have in



days such as those in which we live today. *stop*

He would have been troubled, too, I believe by the absence of a certain strength of character on the part of his nation which enables it to say publicly in the face of the whole world occasionally "It's my sin. I am guilty. I made the mistake." He did that. He did that in amazing situations - in the famous Trent affair. I want to read you a paragraph or two out of a very fine book written by one of our friends here in Cleveland on "Lawyer Lincoln" - Albert A. Waldman. Mr. Waldman tells the story of the Trent affair, and it is illustrative of the greatness of this man, of a quality and greatness of which we are so desperately in need today.

Former Senators James M. Mason of Virginia and John Slidell of Louisiana had boarded the British mail-steamer Trent at Havana, en route to England and France, there to act as emissaries of the Southern Confederacy. Watchful Captain Charles Wilkes of the United States Navy seized the Trent, forcibly removed Mason and Slidell and their secretaries, and permitted the vessel to proceed on her way.

The North went wild with joy at the capture of the Confederate envoys, and Secretary of the Navy Welles even telegraphed his congratulations to the indiscreet naval officer, praising him for the great public service he had rendered. Secretary of War Stanton applauded the exploit, and Congress passed a resolution of thanks to Captain Wilkes. Never had the hostility towards England become more violent and demonstrative.

But in England an uncontrollable wave of indignation swept over the island kingdom. The British Cabinet was hastily summoned, and amid great excitement denounced Captain Wilkes's exploit as a violation of international laws of neutrality and an affront to the British flag. The immediate release of the Confederate emissaries and reparations were demanded in no uncertain terms. Refusal to comply with these demands made war inevitable.

The controversy placed President Lincoln in a most difficult position, one in which a less resolute leader would surely have failed. His legal training enabled him at once to comprehend the grave and indefensible aspect of the affair. He was quick to see that Captain Wilkes' act constituted a flagrant reversal of the very principles and practices for which the United States had always contended, and that it was more like the former British practice of extracting seamen out of neutral vessels upon the high seas. Now Great Britain was demanding a right which for more than a half a century she had arrogantly denied others, and for the defense of which the United States had fought the War of 1812.

In international law there is no process by which a nation may extract from a neutral ship on the high seas a hostile ambassador or persons charged with treason or any other crime. If Captain Wilkes had followed the procedure of bringing the Trent into a Northern port, and



there having a prize court adjudge Mason and Slidell to be the bearers of enemy dispatches, he would have been within the law. Then the rebel envoys, being citizens charged with treason, would have been amenable to the laws of the United States. The American naval officer's conduct, however, clearly violated well-established international usage and subjected his Government, although it had not authorized the act, to the well-founded protests of the offended British nation.

Shortly after the news of the stopping of the Trent had been brought to President Lincoln's attention, he walked into the office of Attorney-General Bates, and . . . said: "I am not getting much sleep out of that exploit of Wilkes's, and I suppose we must look up the law of the case. I am not much of a prize lawyer, but it seems to me pretty clear that if Wilkes saw fit to make that capture on the high seas, he had no right to turn his quarterdeck into a prize court."

On the other hand, the current political difficulties, the temper of public sentiment, and the injudicious advice of more than one member of Lincoln's cabinet made a peremptory compliance with the British demands most difficult.

But the wary Lawyer-President was not carried away by the public clamor. As a lawyer he had learned that there are two sides to every controversy of merit, both of which have to be known to understand either. He had learned to study his adversary's case as well as his own, and recognized the strength as well as the weakness of the opposition. In his study of the Trent affair he came to the conclusion that international law and justice were on the side of the British.

"We must stick to American principles concerning the rights of neutrals," President Lincoln declared. "We fought Great Britain for insisting, by theory and practice, on the right to do precisely what Captain Wilkes has done. If Great Britain shall now protest against the act and demand their release, we must give them up, apologize for the act as a violation of our doctrines, and thus forever bind her over to keep the peace in relation to neutrals, and so acknowledge that she has been wrong for 60 years."

Breasting public sentiment, the President joined with Secretary Seward in ordering the release of Mason and Slidell.

Now that's America at its best and at its greatest.

Well, good friends, there is so much more that one could speak about of Abraham Lincoln, this amazing personality, one of the greatest in human history - so many facets to his character, so much wisdom that emanates from his life and his teachings. It were good for all men to turn to him; as someone said, "In him was vindicated the greatness of real goodness, and the goodness of real greatness." American needs in 1951 the type of a man who could say in the midst of the blood and the muck of the Civil War, "With malice toward none and with charity for all;" a man who was able to say at all



times, "to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Our prayer is that the spirit of Abraham Lincoln may guide the destinies of our nation in the trouble d days ahead, as it guided our nation through its most dangerous and desperate hour, the hour when brother in blindness and in bitterness turned against brother. We must not make the same mistake on a world scale.

