

MORE PERFECT

Remarks Given to The Lincoln Club of Orange County

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By Michael Capaldi

Every American heart must break when lies are told, from year to year, to boys and girls, who then grow up to think the worst – about their past, their people, their home.

That the American Revolution was fought to save slavery. That the Civil War was about money, not slaves. That America is a racist country.

Now, America didn't create slavery and racism. Our nation was born into a world where slavery and racism were deep, dark, and old. The Greeks kept slaves. Aztecs had slaves. The Israelites were slaves to the Egyptians, and 400 later, King Solomon built the temple to his God – with slaves. The Spanish brought slaves to North America, 200 years before the America founding. In 1776, every leading European nation traded in slaves.

And, from the beginning, Americans were split wide open about it.

In her book about Abraham Lincoln, Doris Goodwin tells this story from 1835, about William Seward and his wife Francis, two New Yorkers, who took a carriage trip through the South. Seward was a leader in the fight against slavery. 25 years later, he would be Lincoln's Secretary of State and become his friend. Kearns writes,

[Seward and his wife] sat in the backseat of a horse-drawn carriage, while their five-year-old son Fred sat up with the coachman, a former slave, William Johnson. As [the little party] traveled [through Virginia], they "came across a group of slave children chained together on a road outside of Richmond. '[T]en naked little boys, between six and 12 years old, tied together, two [by] two, [at] the wrists, all fastened to a long rope, and followed by a tall... white man, who, with his... lash, whipped ... the ... weary little procession, drove it to a horse-trough to drink, and [then] to a shed, where they lay down on the ground and sobbed and moaned themselves to sleep.' [Children! They] had been purchased from different plantations that day, and ... were on their way to [Richmond to] be auctioned off." Francis couldn't continue. "[S]he begged her husband to cancel the rest of their tour... They turned their [horses'] heads to the north and [went home].

Did Americans accept slavery? Did Americans tolerate it? Well, in fact, horrors like one that lit-off a Civil War:

How many American boys were killed over slavery? 600,000? 700,000? Today, historians say 800,000 died. Farm boys. City kids. Overwhelmingly white. White lives for black lives.

And, with the end of the war in sight, with the nation exhausted and sick of death, with mothers still wailing for their sons, Lincoln talked about the price of eradicating slavery.

Both [sides] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes [God's] aid against the other.... [But the] Almighty has His own purposes.... Fondly do we hope -- fervently do we pray -- that this mighty scourge of war [will quickly] pass away. [But], if God wills that [the war] continue, until all the wealth [stolen from] the [slave's] 250 years of [unpaid] toil, is ruined, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash – shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said [today], "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.

What leader stands before his people, tells me and tells you, at the moment of our deepest sorrow, my beloved son, your sweet brother, dead, and hundreds of thousands dead besides, that they paid with their lives for our sins? Who would say, that if God demands a drop of blood in battle for every drop spilled by the slave driver's whip, who would say, well, the judgments of the Lord are right and true?

An honest man. An American.

We were a nation *born into a slaveholding world, who prayed, and fought, and died to end it.* And, the truth is – our own birth certificate, the Declaration of Independence, was designed to be driven and crashed into a brutal, racist and slave-loving world.

The Declaration was the first crushing blow for equality and freedom. We said, we hold these truths to be self-evident: That all of us created equal and given by our Creator certain rights, the right to life, and liberty, and to pursue happiness – and when God gives rights, no man can take them away.

That Declaration never died. It rose again, when we passed the 13th Amendment that forbade slavery forever on every square inch of American soil. It burst forth in 1871, when Republicans waged war against the Ku Klux Klan to win voting rights for black Americans, and it triumphed in 1965 when we finally guaranteed those rights.

We're not a racist nation. *We're a nation that wars against racism.*

Human history is dark and barbaric, the strong exploit the weak. Our job, we Americans, our job, is to set people free.

And, our history is filled with people who never stopped trying. Not perfect people. Good people.

Humble men, like George Washington, who some wanted to make king after the Revolution, who had lifetime power within his grasp, but, instead, opened that hand, to release it, to set it free.

In 1776, there were no democracies anywhere in the world. We were alone. Our example lit the lamp of democracy.

In 1941, when that light flickered and went dim, when the Nazis with their racist fever dreams, conquered Europe, we sent Dwight Eisenhower and the American men on D-Day who charged the beach, with the Nazis waiting for them, and ran into a savage hail of iron and fire.

That morning, when none of them knew who would win and who would lose or who would live and who would die, Ike told them, "The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. You will destroy the German war machine; you will eliminate Nazi tyranny over...Europe; and you will win for ourselves a free world."

How many people did we set free?

We're the country that sent its boys into the trenches of Korea – my own father was one: Soldiers who fought in mud and snow, like even animals won't fight. Marines, who broke the Chinese line and sent them back to the Yalu River, who saved South Korea's millions from the hellish concentration camp that – even today – wastes the lives of their cousins in the north.

We fought and lost in Vietnam, we waged a war, cold and hot, to keep communists from locking in irons the hearts and minds and souls of average people in Central America, and Eastern Europe, and Asia. And under Ronald Reagan, we crushed the Soviet slave system once and for all.

We are the old man, the Dakota Sioux, who wears his ballcap to the feed store and his grandson's graduation and everywhere he goes – the blue hat with the words in gold that read, "Vietnam Veteran."

We are tenacious women, like little Rosa Parks, 5 foot 3, the seamstress, who put the weight of a race on her back like a cross when she climbed the steps of that bus in Montgomery, Alabama.

We are strong, black men who salute the flag because they've lived under that flag and they fought under that flag, during the Civil War, and in the Pacific, and Afghanistan, men who knew that Jim Crow lived here once, but who still say, "This is my country, Lord God, I have worked hard to build it; This is my country!"

We are men and women who know that America is not race, it's not blood, it's not soil; it is the idea, the revelation, it's the conviction that all of us are created equal.

We're a people who know America isn't perfect, but it's a promise that we make to each other. We say, God help us when we break that promise. God bless us when we keep it! We are brothers and sisters, one people, one tribe.

We are Americans. And we set people free.