



2013

Civil War Gave Democracy "Moral Grandeur"

Kim Hill

Illinois Wesleyan University

Recommended Citation

Hill, Kim, "Civil War Gave Democracy "Moral Grandeur"" (2013). *News and Events*. Paper 2257.
<http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/2257>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Ames Library, the Andrew W. Mellon Center for Curricular and Faculty Development, the Office of the Provost and the Office of the President. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Commons @ IWU by the faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Civil War Gave Democracy "Moral Grandeur"

Feb. 28, 2013

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Nationally recognized Civil War scholar Allen C. Guelzo shed light on the complex motivations that prompted President Abraham Lincoln to abolish slavery. Guelzo made his remarks Wednesday during Illinois Wesleyan University's Founders' Day Convocation, in this 150th anniversary year of the Emancipation Proclamation.

"What Lincoln hated in slavery was not just its racial injustice, but the re-emergence in America of the old demon of monarchy, where some people were born with uncalloused hands, booted and spurred and ready to ride on the backs of everyone else who had to work," said the award-winning historian on the life and presidency of Lincoln.



Allen C. Guelzo

Guelzo is currently the Henry R. Luce Professor of the Civil War Era and the director of Civil War Era Studies at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania. Guelzo is the author of *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America*.

The Lincoln scholar said that the principal goal of the emancipationists was not racial redemption. We tend to think of slavery today almost purely as a racial injustice, Guelzo said, and in that sense emancipation was a revolution, noting that "in the long history of Western society, it was without precedent for a slave population of such magnitude to be absolutely and immediately emancipated, without compensation to its owners, and then boosted at once into the realm of citizenship."

In the eyes of the emancipationists, however, the fundamental offense posed by slavery was that it represented a step away from a democratic political order, replaced with what Guelzo calls "the kind of Romantic aristocracy which re-established itself in Europe after the French Revolution."

The Lincoln scholar said the 16th president believed slavery promoted aristocratic habits, appealed to men who thought work was "vulgar and ungentlemanly," and "violated the noblest political system the world ever saw." In his address entitled "Was the Civil War a Second American Revolution?" Guelzo noted that the Civil War was not really revolutionary in terms of military affairs or in law and politics.

The Civil War was overwhelmingly revolutionary, however, with respect to the emancipation of 3.9 million black slaves, according to Guelzo. "The Civil War not only violently excised all legal traces of slavery from the federal Constitution, but practically destroyed all the wealth invested in it, to the tune of nearly \$3 billion," said Guelzo.

"So if there was a revolution taking place in the Civil War years, it was a revolution by the slaveholding aristocrats of the South against the principles of the Declaration and the Constitution," said Guelzo. "The promoters of emancipation were not bent on promoting a revolution, so much as they were intent on snuffing one out – a backwards-looking, aristocratic revolution – and put the South back on the track it should have been from the beginning of the republic."

Lincoln and the Civil War gave democracy "a nobility and a moral grandeur that democracy has sometimes lacked," said Guelzo, noting democracy in action can be quite ordinary and lacks the pomp of monarchy. The victory over slavery was "a moment in which democracy shed any appearance of the commonplace and the ho-hum, and was borne up on the wings of courage, self-sacrifice, and the soaring eloquence of one very humble but very extraordinary president," Guelzo said.

"Lincoln and the Civil War gave democracy the strength of giants and put into its hand the shining sword of freedom," the scholar said. "...in the Civil War, what we got was not revolution, but freedom."

Founders' Day honors the 30 individuals who signed the charter for Illinois Wesleyan in 1850. Guelzo noted four of those men — "Peter Cartwright, James Jaquess, William Rutledge, William Wallace — read like a who's who of who knew Lincoln," said Guelzo. "And Lincoln had no closer friend than Bloomington's own David Davis. In such company, I am genuinely honored."

In commemorating the founding of the University 163 years ago, President Richard F. Wilson said the founders were a diverse group in terms of background, religious beliefs and walks of life who encountered significant roadblocks in establishing Illinois Wesleyan.

"The efforts of our founders have been embraced and sustained over the years by others who cared deeply about the mission of the University and who worked diligently each day to provide students with an undergraduate experience of the highest quality," Wilson said. "The work of all these people reflects a care and understanding of the meaning of the phrase inscribed on our founders gate: 'we stand in a position of incalculable responsibility.' "

Other events at Illinois Wesleyan celebrating Founders' Day include the viewing of documents at The Ames Library related to the founding, and birthday cake at dining locations across campus.

Contact: [Kim Hill](#), (309) 556-3960