



2-27-2013

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Recommended Citation

Green, Jonathan, "Introduction of Allen C. Guelzo" (2013). *Remarks and Messages*. 6.
https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/provost_news/6

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Introduction of Allen C. Guelzo
Jonathan D. Green
Founder's Day Convocation
27 February 2013

In a year when we as an academic community examine social justice as a touchstone for integrated learning across disciplines it is appropriate that we should have the opportunity to celebrate the sesquicentennial of one of the most transformative documents in our history, and it is all the more fitting that the founding fathers of this noble university would be able hands in the ethical workshop that forged it.

It is a cautionary tale that a nation settled by refugees seeking religious freedom and founded by intellectuals opposed to the oppressions of political tyranny would be built on the backs of slaves. The first enslaved African “American” was sold to a Virginia settler in 1619, one year before the Pilgrims arrived in Plymouth. The abominable institution of slavery would persist in our land for nearly two and a half centuries and the scars have yet to heal fully a century and half hence.

As we witness our nation's leaders today unable to achieve consensus, we must remember that the legal practice of slavery in the newly established United States was established and perpetuated through political and moral compromise. Just last week, the president of Emory University came under fire for racial insensitivity in a column he wrote that referred to the three-fifths compromise of 1787, in which slaves were counted as three-fifths of a person in calculating legislative representation, as an effective example of finding political common ground in a polarized environment. It is an important reminder that effective governance is not necessarily good governance.

As Henry David Thoreau stated in his essay, *Civil Disobedience*:

Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once? ... If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth—certainly the machine will wear out. If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank. exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will be worse than the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see...that I do not lend myself to the wrong, which I condemn.

This was the quandary in which Lincoln as President found himself. He was part of the machine his conscience challenged him to break. Confronted by his obligation as the Chief Executive Officer of our nation elected and sworn to defend the

constitution, and yet “touched by the better angels of his nature,”¹ Lincoln divined a path using his authority as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces that allowed him to honor both responsibilities and more fundamentally aimed at a long-term goal of healing a fractured nation.

In a house then truly divided, Lincoln proclaimed the end of slavery, and sent our republic toddling forth toward justice. Many of the great challenges we have faced in the past 150 years have been as a nation learning to walk as one people. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said on our campus in 1966, “We have come a long, long way, but we have a long, long way to go before the problem is solved.”

When we consider the educational, economic, and ethical injustices surrounding Henrietta Lacks and her family, we see the long, insidious shadow of slavery cast over them. When we consider the staggering incarceration rates of African American men today and the gross inequities of the death penalty laid bare by Sister Prejean at this very event last year, the specter of slavery’s legacy continues, and yet we have come a long, long way. It is incumbent on all of to push our campus, our nation, and our world ever forward toward social justice.

Lincoln led our country as a chess player looking deep into the game, imagining moves he would never live to see. How would you have played Lincoln’s position, and how can we learn from his insights and moral purpose as we continue to participate in an ongoing American revolution?

Bringing a Lincoln scholar to central Illinois is like bringing coals to Newcastle, unless, of course, the coal is a diamond, which is the case today. It is my privilege to introduce our convocation speaker, the first double winner of both the Lincoln Prize and the Abraham Lincoln Institute Prize, Allen Guelzo, Henry R. Luce Professor of the Civil War Era at Gettysburg College, one of our most prolific and insightful Lincoln scholars, and a leading thinker on the elements of that era that continue to mold our nation.

A great historian helps us to achieve a better future by provoking us to deeply understand the shaping forces of the past, please join me in welcoming such an exemplar to our campus, Dr. Guelzo.

¹ Lincoln: First Inaugural Address – “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.”