

Close Reading: A Speech to the Great Central Sanitary Fair

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For three weeks in June 1864, the Great Central Fair was held in Logan Square in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The purpose of this fair was to raise funds for the care of the Union soldier both on the battlefield and off. Several of these fairs had been held around the country and now it was Philadelphia's time to prove their patriotism. Massive tents were constructed and filled with wonderful displays to be enjoyed and goods to be purchased. A visitor could buy everything from floral arrangement to India rubber boots, from pianos to a horse carriage. School children created so many handmade goods one woman seeing the piles of their creations before the sale remarked "Oh, what a waste of time and stuff! Poor children! How mortified the children will be when the fair is over to find their work in vain". At the end of the Fair they were completely sold out and this project of the school children alone raised over \$15,000.<sup>1</sup> It is phenomenal that the entire fair raised more than one million dollars during the third year of a devastating war.<sup>2</sup>

On June 16, President Lincoln, his wife Mary, and a contingent of officials came from Washington City to attend the event. The crowds crushed him as he attempted to walk down "Union Avenue", the main hall specially constructed for the event. Reports from bystanders claimed he looked like he was enjoying himself although he did not have the freedom to wander the fair like everyone else.<sup>3</sup>

Later that afternoon, Lincoln shared a light meal with a group of dignitaries and citizens. After they drank a toast to the President, he got up to address the crowd:

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<sup>1</sup> "Memorial of the Great Central Fair for the U.S. Sanitary Commission, held at Philadelphia, June 1864." *Internet Archive: Digital Library of Free Books, Movies, Music & Wayback Machine*. N.p., n.d. <<http://archive.org/stream/memorialofgreate00stil#page/n7/mode/2up>>.

<sup>2</sup> "John A. McAllister's Civil War: The Philadelphia Homefront." The Library Company of Philadelphia Homepage. <http://www.librarycompany.org/mcallisterexhibition/section6.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

*I suppose that this toast was intended to open the way for me to say something.*

*[Laughter.] War, at the best, is terrible, and this war of ours, in its magnitude and in its duration, is one of the most terrible. It has deranged business, totally in many localities, and partially in all localities. It has destroyed property, and ruined homes; it has produced a national debt and taxation unprecedented, at least in this country. It has carried mourning to almost every home, until it can almost be said that the `heavens are hung in black.'"<sup>4</sup>*

Although a self-educated man, Abraham Lincoln was well-read and was speaking to a well-educated audience. They would have caught that his “heavens are hung in black”, was a reference to the opening lines of Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*. The Duke of Bedford begins the play with a similar line that “hung be the heavens with black” mourning the death of the former King.<sup>5</sup>

Lincoln, who enjoyed going to the theater, may also have known that of the few staging’s Shakespeare used, hanging black curtains on the back of the stage represented that this production was a tragedy.<sup>6</sup> The current war they were all experiencing, in “almost every home” was certainly a tragedy.

*Yet it continues, and several relieving coincidents [coincidences] have accompanied it from the very beginning, which have not been known, as I understood [understand], or have any knowledge of, in any former wars in the history of the world. The Sanitary Commission, with all its benevolent labors, the Christian commission, with all its*

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<sup>4</sup> “Abraham Lincoln, Speech at the Great Central Sanitary Fair, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, June 16, 1864.” Daily Report. <http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/40455>

<sup>5</sup> "Henry VI, part 1: Entire Play ." *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* . N.p., n.d. 12 Oct. 2013. <<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/1henryvi/full.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> "Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer - Fred Kaplan - Google Books." *Google Books*. N.p., n.d.

*Christian and benevolent labors, and the various places, arrangements, so to speak, and institutions, have contributed to the comfort and relief of the soldiers. You have two of these places in this city---the Cooper-Shop and Union Volunteer Refreshment Saloons. [Great applause and cheers.]*<sup>7</sup>

This speech of Lincoln's is labeled as the "Speech at the Great Central Sanitary Fair". To our 21st century ears it sounds like a cleaning convention. But the United States Sanitary Commission was a well known volunteer group of citizens that presented its ideas to Head of the Army, General Winfield Scott, within weeks of the beginning of the war. Their purpose was "...to bring to bear the upon the health, comfort, and morale of our troops the fullest and ripest teachings of sanitary science in its application to military life."<sup>8</sup> Keep in mind this was still a decade before the discovery of germ theory, and yet lessons from the terrible death toll of the recent Crimean War in Europe were uppermost in these leaders minds.<sup>9</sup> The U. S. Sanitary Commission, along with the Christian Commission, became involved in supplying medical, nutritional, spiritual and sanitary assistance to the Union troops.

Locally, two establishments to provide for the troops opened in Philadelphia within weeks of the beginning of the war: the larger was the Union Volunteer Refreshment Saloon, and second the more locally beloved Cooper Shop Volunteer Refreshment Saloon. These were not what we think of today as saloons - they provided rest, hot meals, opportunities to wash up, and even medical care for any soldier traveling through Philadelphia - as individuals or by the

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<sup>7</sup> "Abraham Lincoln".

<sup>8</sup> "The United States Sanitary Commission. A Sketch of Its Purposes and Its Work. Compiled from Documents and Private Papers; The Sanitary Commission Bulletin; The Sanitary Reporter; Sanitary Commission Documents, from No. 1 to No. 78; Medical Papers of the Sanitary Commission, from A to S." *The North American Review* Apr. 1864: 370-419.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25100513>

<sup>9</sup> Bollet, Alfred J.. *Civil War medicine: challenges and triumphs*. Tucson, Ariz.: Galen Press, 2002.

Regiment. Mr. Cooper and his volunteers eventually added a hospital on the second floor of his Saloon. Both establishments kept their doors open until the end of the war, provided with food, supplies and work from local volunteers. Together they served well over a million men.<sup>10</sup>

*And lastly, these fairs, which, I believe, began only in last August, if I mistake not, in Chicago; then at Boston, at Cincinnati, Brooklyn, New York, at Baltimore, and those at present held at St. Louis, Pittsburg, and Philadelphia. The motive and object that lie at the bottom of all these are most worthy; for, say what you will, after all the most is due to the soldier, who takes his life in his hands and goes to fight the battles of his country. [Cheers.] In what is contributed to his comfort when he passes to and fro [from city to city], and in what is contributed to him when he is sick and wounded, in whatever shape it comes, whether from the fair and tender hand of woman, or from any other source, is much, very much; but, I think there is still that which has as much value to him [in the continual reminders he sees in the newspapers, that while he is absent he is yet remembered by the loved ones at home---he is not forgotten. [Cheers.]*<sup>11</sup>

A telling comment was made by a woman from New York, who was upset that her state did nothing for the traveling soldiers while “Philadelphia lets no regiment, of whatever State, whether going to or from battle, pass hungry through her streets.” Soldiers from other states also noted that “anyone who thinks there is any lack of support for the war has only to march through Philadelphia.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> "Refreshment Saloons in Civil War Philadelphia | Journal Divided." *House Divided: The Civil War Research Engine at Dickinson College*. N.p., n.d.  
<<http://housedivided.dickinson.edu/sites/journal/2010/07/13/refreshment-saloons-philadelphia/>>.

<sup>11</sup> “Abraham Lincoln.”

<sup>12</sup> “Refreshment Saloons.”

*Another view of these various institutions is worthy of consideration, I think; they are voluntary contributions, given freely, zealously, and earnestly, on top of all the disturbances of business, [of all the disorders,] the taxation and burdens that the war has imposed upon us, giving proof that the national resources are not at all exhausted, [cheers;] that the national spirit of patriotism is even [firmer and] stronger than at the commencement of the rebellion [war].<sup>13</sup>*

Next, Lincoln's subject shifts to the war itself. Despite the patriotism of the Fair, overall the country was war weary. The Presidential and federal elections were coming in the fall. Lincoln himself had just been re-nominated as candidate of his party, although they were not calling themselves Republicans this time around, but rather National Unionists.<sup>14</sup> His nomination had many detractors, and as poorly as the war was going, and how long it was dragging out, it did not look like he could win re-election. Lincoln now took the opportunity to talk to this important electorate about the upcoming months:

*It is a pertinent question often asked in the mind privately, and from one to the other, when is the war to end? Surely I feel as deep [great] an interest in this question as any other can, but I do not wish to name a day, or month, or a year when it is to end. I do not wish to run any risk of seeing the time come, without our being ready for the end, and for fear of disappointment, because the time had come and not the end. [We accepted this war; we did not begin it.] We accepted this war for an object, a worthy object, and the*

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<sup>13</sup> "Abraham Lincoln."

<sup>14</sup> "Proceedings of the first three Republican national conventions of 1856, 1860 and 1864 (Open Library)." *Welcome to Open Library (Open Library)*. N.p., n.d.  
<[http://openlibrary.org/books/OL7052368M/Proceedings\\_of\\_the\\_first\\_three\\_Republican](http://openlibrary.org/books/OL7052368M/Proceedings_of_the_first_three_Republican)

*war will end when that object is attained. Under God, I hope it never will until that time.*  
*[Great cheering.]*<sup>15</sup>

The political opponents of the President, the Democrats, were willing to settle for peace immediately, even though it would probably mean either letting the South form their own country, or bring them back into the United States as slave holding states. Neither was the object that the North went to war to fight for. The war had been extremely costly in lives and treasure, and Lincoln did not want to see that squandered in vain.

*Speaking of the present campaign, General Grant is reported to have said, I am going through on this line if it takes all summer. [Cheers.] This war has taken three years; it was begun or accepted upon the line of restoring the national authority over the whole national domain, and for the American people, as far as my knowledge enables me to speak, I say we are going through on this line if it takes three years more. [Cheers.] My friends, I did not know but that I might be called upon to say a few words before I got away from here, but I did not know it was coming just here. [Laughter.] I have never been in the habit of making predictions in regard to the war, but I am almost tempted to make one. [(Do it---do it!)]---If I were to hazard it, it is this: That Grant is this evening, with General Meade and General Hancock, of Pennsylvania, and the brave officers and soldiers with him, in a position from whence he will never be dislodged until Richmond is taken [loud cheering],*<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “Abraham Lincoln.”

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

Lincoln knew that the Battle for Petersburg, Virginia had started the day before. Generals Grant, Meade, and the popular Philadelphia born Hancock<sup>17</sup>, would hold down their position for almost nine months, in the trenches around Petersburg, before they finally captured Richmond in April 1865... just before the South surrendered.<sup>18</sup>

*and I have but one single proposition to put now, and, perhaps, I can best put it in form of an interrogative [interragatory]. If I shall discover that General Grant and the noble officers and men under him can be greatly facilitated in their work by a sudden pouring forward [forth] of men and assistance, will you give them to me? [Cries of ``yes."'] Then, I say, stand ready, for I am watching for the chance. [Laughter and cheers.] I thank you, gentlemen.<sup>19</sup>*

Using his personal talent of involving the crowd, Lincoln wraps up with a hopeful look forward. He asks the audience for their help in “men and assistance” which probably had the multilayer meaning of not only their continued help raising money on the home-front, but possibly in raising the final troop counts to finish the war, and also their votes in the upcoming election. The crowd responded in the affirmative by cheers and verbal commitment.

President Lincoln finished the speech on a positive note with the encouraging voices of the citizens of Philadelphia wafting through the air on a beautiful and festive summer evening. One can only imagine this was a light-hearted celebratory event for the President, amongst so many other events where the war and politics were overwhelming in 1864.

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<sup>17</sup> Simon, John Y. “Hancock, Winfield Scott”. American National biography Online. Feb. 2000. <http://www.anb.org/articles/05/05-00313.html>

<sup>18</sup> McPherson, James M., *Battle cry of freedom: the Civil War era*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

<sup>19</sup> “Abraham Lincoln.”



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