

2008

Carl Albin Spader Leadership Luncheon

John Owens

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, jowens2@unl.edu

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SHERYL SNYDER -

Carl Albin Spader Leadership Luncheon
Friday, March 14, 2008
East Campus Union

LEAD CLASS 26

Topic: *The Leading Object: Best of Things from the Worst of Times*
John C. Owens, NU Vice President and Harlan Vice Chancellor, IANR

In the past two years you've had a number of opportunities to explore and strengthen your own, personal leadership abilities. You've also been able to observe and study the leadership styles of people working at the state, national, and international levels.

"Congratulations!" You saw an opportunity in the LEAD program and you've made the very most of it. Seeing - and, indeed, making -- opportunities is something leaders just have to do. We all look forward to the opportunities you, as leaders, will see - and make - in the future for Nebraska. Your vision, and your commitment to it, are something we at the University of Nebraska will depend upon for the years ahead - for our state, for your communities, and for you.

Today I would like to visit with you about two leaders who, in the very worst of times, fixed their eyes on a vision well above the conflict and ruin everywhere around them to pause and to put in place something so unique, so vital to the nation's healing, and its future, that you and I now enjoy its benefits today, as will our children, and our children's children.

"The worst of times" I refer to was the Civil War - which, of course, was "anything" but civil. Fought on our own soil, it was a horrific, bloody war in which state fought state, neighbor fought neighbor, and even brother fought brother.

It would have been so "very easy" for the two leaders I'm going to talk about today to focus so totally on the "horrible events" around them that they could not even briefly think of the future because of their concerns for the present. Yet these two men - born slightly more than a year apart, from different parts of our nation, one quite handsome, the other known to say, "If I were two-faced, would I be wearing this one?" - truly changed our country.

One left school at 15 to become a merchant. He did "so well" he retired at an early age and became a gentleman farmer. "The other," having no more than a year of formal schooling, worked as a farmhand, clerk, flatboatman, store-owner, surveyor, postmaster, and lawyer. One had an "eloquence of speech"; the other did not, although his speeches "always" were carefully written and his arguments were especially well-supported.

Self-educated, "together" they forged a legacy for the United States of America, an educational legacy that I truly believe has made our country the world leader it is today.

The two men: Abraham Lincoln, and Justin Smith Morrill, senator from Vermont, author of the Morrill Act which President Lincoln signed into law July 2, 1862. The Morrill Act created this country's great land-grant university system of publicly-funded education. It made higher education available to the common man and woman, when higher education before Congress' action had been the privilege only of the elite. Behind it lay the premise of true democracy, the firm belief that every child should have an affordable opportunity for as complete an education as that child's talents, and tastes, and drive warranted, without restriction of class, fortune, sex, or geography.

Both men realized higher education's importance in moving the nation forward, from the immediate damages of the Civil War and, also, well into the future. Their own lives speak of how they valued education, seeing it as absolutely-critical to building an informed and industrious population of United States citizens.

One died at age 56, martyred by an assassin's bullet. The other died at 88, still serving as a U.S. Senator, a position he held 32 years, after serving as a Congressman for 12 years.

32
12
44 YEARS

I'd like to talk with you today about these two men, their time in history, and the leadership lessons we can draw from their lives.

Ending:

Poet and philosopher George Santayana, born one year after the Morrill Act passed, once said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” We hear variations of that phrase often in our lives, such as, “Those who don’t remember history are doomed to repeat it.”

Both are warning statements, myself, I view history as the opportunity to glean knowledge from those who’ve gone before us so we can apply our own lessons for the future.

When we look at Abraham Lincoln and Justin Smith Morrill, we see leaders of great vision, committed people able to look beyond themselves to view “the true needs” of their country, and then, and most importantly, to meet those needs.

Both men had “inner compasses” that directed them “to what” they felt was right, and that kept them on course, no matter “the winds” that blew. Abraham Lincoln put it this way: “Be sure you put your feet in the right place, then stand firm.”

Yet both were known for their efforts at conciliation, their willingness to seek common-ground as much as common-ground was possible to achieve.

Both had courage - not the absence of fear, but the certainty that they must act in the best interests of those they served, no matter the personal or professional cost to them. Both had tremendous senses of duty. "Let us have faith that right makes might," Abraham Lincoln said, "and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it."

Both were tenacious. And while each had his own sense of urgency - Lincoln was known to advise, "Leave nothing for tomorrow which can be done today" - they were thinkers and they were doers who knew that good and lasting-things take time to achieve.

They were not vindictive. They were not mean-spirited. As the Civil War came to an end, Lincoln urged magnanimity. Unfortunately, an assassin's bullet ended his life, ended his leadership, and ended the possibility of the forgiving peace he so wanted to foster.

I'm going to end today with three Lincoln quotes I hope you will carry with you, to consider when you, yourself, face a heavy leadership burden, situations where opposition is difficult, or where you are unsure as to what you should do.

The first is this:

"I am not bound to win, but I am bound to be true. I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to live by the light that I have. I must stand with anybody that stands right, and stand with him while he is right, and part with him when he goes wrong."

The second is this:

"I desire so to conduct the affairs of this administration that if at the end ... I have lost every other friend on earth, I shall at least have one friend left, and that friend shall be down inside of me."

And the third quote, which I believe ^{to be} the very essence of the two leaders I've talked about today. Lincoln said:

“If I were to try to read, much less answer, all the attacks made on me, this shop might as well be closed for any other business. I do the very best I know how - the very best I can; and I mean to keep doing so until the end. If the end brings me out all-right, what’s said against me won’t amount to anything. If the end brings me out wrong, ten angels swearing I was right would make no difference.”

Do the very best you can. Stand with those who do right. Be tenacious. Be true. Live by the light you, yourself, have. Trust that the end will bring you out all right. Respect others. Make friends of your enemies - another wise piece of Lincoln advice. Be magnanimous. Build for the future.

Follow the lessons of Justin Morrill and Abraham Lincoln. I can offer no better leadership advice than that.

Thank you.

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