

Robert Russa Moton

Born in Virginia and educated at Hampton Institute, Moton (1867–1940) succeeded Booker T. Washington as principal of Tuskegee Institute in 1915. A leading “accommodationist” who had advised the Wilson and Harding administrations on racial issues, Moton was predictably chosen to speak on behalf of his race at the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., on May 30, 1922. Yet the draft address he submitted two weeks before the ceremony to Chief Justice William Howard Taft, the chairman of the Memorial Commission, proved too outspoken for the event’s organizers, and Moton was advised to mute his criticism of the racial status quo. In the address he eventually gave, Moton replaced the concluding section of his draft (pages 432.31–434.23 in this volume) with more anodyne passages praising Lincoln and America’s progress in achieving better race relations, although he did end his oration with a plea for “equal justice and equal opportunity for all.” A further irony marked the ceremony: while the organizers treated Moton with respect, granting him his rightful place on the speakers’ platform not far from Robert Lincoln, military ushers, many of them Southern-born, rudely herded all of the black spectators into a roped-off “colored section” to the rear of the vast crowd. In his speech Chief Justice Taft never mentioned slavery, while President Warren Harding assured the audience that Lincoln had seen emancipation only as a means to “the great end—maintained union and nationality.” The text of Moton’s address printed here is taken from the original typescript draft in the Library of Congress; it was never delivered and has remained unpublished until now.

Draft of Speech at the Lincoln Memorial

When the Pilgrim Fathers set foot upon the shores of America in 1620, they laid the foundations of our national existence upon the bed-rock of liberty. From that day to this, liberty has been the watchword, liberty has been the rallying call, liberty has been the battle-cry of our united people. In 1776, the

altars of a new nation were set up in the name of liberty and the flag of freedom unfurled before the nations of the earth. In 1812, in the name of liberty, we bared our youthful might, and struck for the freedom of the seas. Again, in '61, when the charter of the nation's birth was assailed, the sons of liberty declared anew the principles of their fathers and liberty became co-extensive with the union. In '98, the call once more was heard and freedom became co-extensive with the hemisphere. And as we stand in solemn silence here today before this newly consecrated shrine of liberty, there still come rumbling out of the East the slowly dying echoes of the last great struggle to make freedom co-extensive with the seven seas. Freedom is the life-blood of the nation. Freedom is the heritage bequeathed to all her sons. For sage and scholar, for poet and prophet, for soldier and statesman, freedom is the underlying philosophy of our national existence.

But at the same time, another influence was working within the nation. While the *Mayflower* was riding at anchor preparing for her epoch-making voyage, another ship had already arrived at Jamestown, Virginia. The first was to bear the pioneers of freedom, freedom of thought and freedom of conscience; the latter had already borne the pioneers of bondage, a bondage degrading alike to body, mind and spirit. Here then, upon American soil, within a year, met the two great forces that were to shape the destiny of the nation. They developed side by side. Freedom was the great compelling force that dominated all and, like a great and shining light, beckoned the oppressed of every nation to the hospitality of these shores. But slavery like a brittle thread in a beautiful garment was woven year by year into the fabric of the nation's life. They who for themselves sought liberty and paid the price thereof in precious blood and priceless treasure, somehow still found it possible while defending its eternal principles for themselves, to deny that same precious boon to others.

And how shall we account for it, except it be that in the Providence of God the black race in America was thrust across the path of the onward-marching white race to demonstrate not only for America, but for the world whether the principles of freedom were of universal application. From the ends of the

earth were brought together the extremes of humanity to prove whether the right to life, liberty and the pursuit or happiness should apply with equal force to all mankind.

In the process of time, these two great forces met, as was inevitable, in open conflict upon the field of battle. And how strange it is that by the same over-ruling Providence, the children of those who bought and sold their fellows into bondage should be the very ones to cast aside ties of language, of race, of religion and even of kinship, in order that a people not of their own race, nor primarily of their own creed or color, but brethren withal, should have the same measure of liberty and freedom which they enjoyed.

What a costly sacrifice upon the altar of freedom! How costly the world can never know nor estimate. The flower of the nation's manhood and the accumulated treasure of two hundred and fifty years of unremitting toil: and at length, when the bitter strife was over, when the marshalled hosts had turned again to broken, desolated firesides, a cruel fate, unsatisfied with the awful toll of four long years of carnage, struck at the nation's head and brought to the dust the already wearied frame of him, whose patient fortitude, whose unembittered charity, whose never failing trust in the guiding hand of God had brought the nation, weltering through a sea of blood, yet one and indivisible, to the placid plains of peace. On that day, Abraham Lincoln laid down his life for America, the last and costliest sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

We do well to raise here this symbol of our gratitude. Here today assemble all those who are blessed by that sacrifice. The united nation stands about this memorial mingling its reverent praise with tokens of eternal gratitude: and not America only, but every nation where liberty is loved and freedom flourishes, joins the chorus of universal praise for him, who with his death, sealed forever the pledge of liberty for all mankind.

But in all this vast assemblage, there are none more grateful, none more reverent, than those who, representing twelve millions of black Americans, gather with their fellow-citizens of every race and creed to pay devout homage to him who was for them, more truly than for any other group, the author of their

freedom. There is no question that this man died to save the union. It is equally true that to the last extremity he defended the rights of states. But, when the last veteran has stacked his arms on fame's eternal camping ground; when only the memory of high courage and deep devotion remains to inspire the noble sons of valiant fathers; at such a time, the united voice of grateful posterity will say: the claim of greatness for Abraham Lincoln lies in this, that amid doubt and distrust, against the counsel of his chosen advisors, in the hour of the nation's utter peril, he put his trust in God and spoke the word that gave freedom to a race, and vindicated the honor of a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

But someone will ask: Has such a sacrifice been justified? Has such a martyrdom produced its worthy fruits? I speak for the Negro race. Upon us, more perhaps than upon any other group of the nation, rests the immediate obligation to justify so dear a price for our emancipation. In answer let me review the Negro's past upon American soil. No group has been more loyal. Whether bond or free, he has served alike his country's need. Let it never be omitted from the nation's annals that the blood of a black man—Crispus Attucks—was the first to be shed for the nation's freedom; and first his name appears in the long list of the nation's martyred dead. So again, when a world was threatened with disaster and the deciding hand of America was lifted to stay the peril, her black soldiers were among the first to cross the treacherous sea; and when the cause was won, and the record made of those who shared the cruel hardship, these same black soldiers had been longest in the trenches, nearest to the enemy and first to cross their border. All too well does the black man know his wrongs. No one is more sensible than he of his incongruous position in the great American republic. But be it recorded to his everlasting credit, that no failure on the part of the nation to deal fairly with him as a citizen has, in the least degree, ever qualified his loyalty.

In like manner has he served his country in the pursuits of peace. From the first blows that won the virgin soil from the woods and wilderness to the sudden, marvelous expansion of our industry that went so far to win the war, the Negro has been

the nation's greatest single asset in the development of its vast resources. Especially is this true in the South where his unrequited toil sustained the splendors of that life which gave to the nation a Washington and a Jefferson, a Jackson and a Lee. And afterwards, when devastating war had levelled this fair structure with the ground, the labor of the freedman restored it to its present proportions more substantial than before.

While all this was going on, in spite of limitations within and restrictions without, he still found the way to buy land, to build homes, to erect churches, to establish schools and to lay the foundations of future development in industry, integrity and thrift. It is no mere accident that Negroes in America after less than sixty years of freedom own 22,000,000 acres of land, 600,000 homes and 45,000 churches. It is no mere accident that after so short a time Negroes should operate 78 banks, 100 insurance companies, and 50,000 business enterprises representing a combined capital value of more than \$150,000,000. Neither is it an accident that there are within the race 60,000 professional men, 44,000 school teachers and 400 newspapers and magazines; that general illiteracy has been reduced to twenty per cent. Still the Negro race is only in the infancy of its development, so that, if anything in its history could justify the sacrifice that has been made, it is this: that a race that has exhibited such wonderful capacities for advancement should have the restrictions of bondage removed and be given the opportunity in freedom to develop its powers to the utmost, not only for itself, but for the nation and for humanity. Any race that could produce a Frederick Douglass in the midst of slavery, and a Booker Washington in the aftermath of reconstruction has a just claim to the fullest opportunity for developments.

But Lincoln died, not for the Negro alone, but to vindicate the honor of a nation pledged to the sacred cause of human freedom. Upon the field of Gettysburg he dedicated the nation to the great unfinished work of making sure that "government of the people, for the people and by the people should not perish from the earth". And this means ALL the people. So long as any group within our nation is denied the full protection of the law; that task is still unfinished. So long as any group within the

nation is denied an equal opportunity for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that task is still unfinished. So long as any group is denied the fullest privilege of a citizen to share both the making and the execution of the law which shapes its destiny—so long as any group does not enjoy every right and every privilege that belongs to every American citizen without regard to race, creed or color, that task for which the immortal Lincoln gave the last full measure of devotion—that task is still unfinished. What nobler thing can the nation do as it dedicates this shrine for him whose deed has made his name immortal—what nobler thing can the nation do than here about this shrine to dedicate itself by its own determined will to fulfill to the last letter the lofty task imposed upon it by the sacred dead?

More than sixty years ago he said in prophetic warning: "This nation cannot endure half slave and half free: it will become all one thing or all the other." With equal truth, it can be said today: no more can the nation endure half privileged and half repressed; half educated and half uneducated; half protected and half unprotected; half prosperous and half in poverty; half in health and half in sickness; half content and half in discontent; yes, half free and half yet in bondage.

My fellow citizens, in the great name which we honor here today, I say unto you that this memorial which we erect in token of our veneration is but a hollow mockery, a symbol of hypocrisy, unless we together can make real in our national life, in every state and in every section, the things for which he died. This is a fair and goodly land. Much right have we, both black and white, to be proud of our achievements at home and our increasing service in all the world. In like manner, there is abundant cause for rejoicing that sectional rancours and racial antagonisms are softening more and more into mutual understanding and increasing sectional and inter-racial cooperation. But unless here at home we are willing to grant to the least and humblest citizen the full enjoyment of every constitutional privilege, our boast is but a mockery and our professions as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal before the nations of the earth. This is the only way to peace and security at home, to honor and respect abroad.

Sometimes I think the national government itself has not

always set the best example for the states in this regard. A government which can venture abroad to put an end to injustice and mob-violence in another country can surely find a way to put an end to these same evils within our own borders. The Negro race is not insensible of the difficulties that such a task presents; but unless we can together, North and South, East and West, black and white, find the way out of these difficulties and square ourselves with the enlightened conscience and public opinion of all mankind, we must stand convicted not only of inconsistency and hypocrisy, but of the deepest ingratitude that could stain the nation's honor. Twelve million black men and women in this country are proud of their American citizenship, but they are determined that it shall mean for them no less than for any other group, the largest enjoyment of opportunity and the fullest blessings of freedom. We ask no special privileges; we claim no superior title; but we do expect in loyal cooperation with all true lovers of our common country to do our full share in lifting our country above reproach and saving her flag from stain or humiliation. Let us, therefore, with malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right—let us strive on to finish the work which he so nobly began, to make America the symbol for equal justice and equal opportunity for all.

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