

Presidents Day Remarks 2025

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The story is told of a hard-working lawyer who passes away and – arriving in the Hereafter – finds himself standing before the heavenly tribunal. The benevolent angelic magistrates gently welcome him... saying, “We have been waiting for you for a long time.” The surprised attorney responds, “How can that be? I am only 40 years old.” The angels respond: “That’s impossible... Based on your billable hours alone, you must be at least 90!”

All kidding aside... On this Presidents Day, I wish to pay particularly grateful tribute to the 27 attorneys-at-law who went on to serve the nation as President –well over half of our chief executives. The first among these lawyer-presidents was Harvard-trained John Adams of my native Massachusetts. The most recent lawyer to occupy the Oval Office was President Joe Biden – who was graduated from Syracuse University College of Law... not terribly long before his first election to the United States Senate.

Surely the most revered of Lawyer-Presidents – and the President most defined by his early career as an attorney – was Abraham Lincoln... an active, creative, and storied trial lawyer. Though he, too, died far too young... he is by no means to be confused with the departed lawyer I described in my opening anecdote.

Abraham Lincoln revered the law... he understood the indispensable role that devotion and submission to the law served... as a bulwark and as the indispensable foundation of American governance and society. He understood the grandeur of the judicial system and the deferential esteem due the judiciary branch. Honest Abe left us invaluable words of guidance regarding the place of law in our nation. While I fully recognize that the meaning and nuance of words change over time... Lincoln seems here to be addressing the hot-button issues of our own day directly. At the tender age of 28 – in January of 1838 – he shared this prayerful and powerful message:

“Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother to the lisping babe that prattles on her lap -- let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; let it be written in Primers, spelling books, and in Almanacs; -- let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.”

I share these words extolling the virtues of law with you at a particularly apt moment in the Jewish Calendar. This past Sabbath – just two days ago – in every synagogue and Jewish community in the world – Jews listened to the dramatic reading of the Ten Commandments from the Book of Exodus. In the Hebrew Bible, the Decalogue is followed immediately by long chapters of law – regulating every conceivable aspect of Israelite religious, interpersonal, and national life. These will be read this coming Sabbath. Today, we stand in the very midst of our sacred law. Notwithstanding their incalculable sanctity and sweeping vision... the Ten Commandments have always been viewed in Jewish Tradition as impractically vague and general... requiring a detailed system of law and thoughtful legislation to shape and drive communal life in practice. That

realization – the need for law – has – ever since Sinai – been one of the great gifts bestowed upon humanity by the Jewish People.

America’s constitutional Democracy – and our many lawyer-Presidents – offer testimony to the impact of that gift on this nation.

As a congregational rabbi of almost 40 years tenure, I spend much of my time studying, interpreting, teaching, and applying the Law that was born at Sinai... and which continues to unfold. In my work as a Rabbi... but also in my life as an American... I am guided by the wisdom of Abraham Lincoln in my understanding of law... and of the role of those charged with its administration.

In the Cooper Union address that helped propel Lincoln to the presidency... he said this:

“Now, and here, let me guard a little against being misunderstood. I do not mean to say we are bound to follow implicitly in whatever our fathers did. To do so, would be to discard all the lights of current experience - to reject all progress - all improvement. What I do say is, that if we would supplant the opinions and policy of our fathers in any case, we should do so upon evidence so conclusive, and argument so clear, that even their great authority, fairly considered and weighed, cannot stand; and most surely not in a case whereof we ourselves declare they understood the question better than we.”

There is a reason we have so often been led as a nation by attorneys at law... There is a reason that among our most reason Presidents are those who revered and served the Law... and who truly revered and faithfully served the Constitution. Abraham Lincoln was such a President.

As we turn our attention once again to Lincoln’s most famous words -- his Gettysburg Address... read here as you are unlikely to hear it read elsewhere (chanted to the musical strains of the Hebrew prophets)... let us take to heart also his plea with us – to revere the law... and to demand that reverence in all who would presume to lead us. Defending and revering the law – Lincoln taught – was the responsibility of every Americans... and reverence for the law alone guarantees the freedom and happiness, the safety and the well-being of all Americans... as Lincoln himself said: “the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions.”

The angels – “the better angels of our nature” – have been “waiting a long time” for us to heed Lincoln’s call. May we honestly devote our waking hours to bringing that vision about... before our own bill comes due.