

Lesson 6: An “Apple of Gold” in a “Picture of Silver”: The Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution

“Fragment on the Constitution and Union”



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Introduction: Abraham Lincoln wrote the text below during the time between his 1860 election and his inauguration in 1861. It was never finished as a complete speech or letter but seems to be Lincoln’s attempt at organizing his thoughts on the American Founding.

Source: “Fragment on the Constitution and Union,” Abraham Lincoln, January 1, 1861

	<i>Notes</i>
<p>Without the Constitution and the Union, we could not have attained ... our great prosperity. There is something back of these, entwining itself more closely about the human heart. That something, is the principle of “Liberty to all”—the principle that clears the path for all—gives hope to all—and, by consequence, enterprize, and industry to all.</p> <p>The expression of that principle, in our Declaration of Independence, was most happy, and fortunate... [W]ithout it, we could not, I think, have secured our free government, and consequent prosperity. No oppressed people will fight, and endure, as our fathers did, without the promise of something better, than a mere change of masters.</p> <p>The assertion of that principle ... has proved an “apple of gold” to us. The Union, and the Constitution, are the picture of silver, subsequently framed around it. The picture was made, not to conceal, or destroy the apple; but to adorn, and preserve it. The picture was made for the apple—not the apple for the picture.</p> <p>So let us act, that neither picture, or apple shall ever be blurred, or bruised or broken.</p>	

Comprehension Questions

1. According to Lincoln, what has allowed the United States to attain prosperity?
2. What principle provides the foundation for the Constitution?
3. In which document is this principle discussed?
4. Why is this principle important?
5. What is the relationship of the Constitution to the “apple of gold”?