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What is America?

What is *America*? Even in objective terms, America is a glorious thing; it is the first nation since the Roman Empire to successfully achieve a republican system of government. What began with little more than an idea and a desire soon evolved into one of the most powerful sovereign bodies that the earth has ever seen. Beyond the absolute definitions of what this country is, however, lie even more profound ideological truths.

America is a testament to the individual, an example of how far the human race can come if allowed to operate in harmony with itself. Moreover, it is a living lesson in overcoming tyranny of all forms, and in securing the rights and freedoms of every man and woman. From Independence Day to *Obergefell v. Hodges*, and every day in between, we've marched persistently forward in the name of self-determination. Our progress has been far from unimpeded, however. Every step of the way, there has been some group present to stymie the individualists. Be they Tories, Confederates, Anti-Suffragists, or a coterie by any other name, some party has been out to form or preserve their power over others in spite of civil parity.

The intolerant and the greedy have always existed, and likely always will. It is these people who Abraham Lincoln warned against in the following quote: "America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves." In this popular rule of ours, the responsibility of gaining and maintaining our freedoms lies in the hands of the majority. This is an active duty, for it requires a collective diligence; there will always be those who seek to take our freedoms away the moment we take our eyes off them.

Lincoln's words are true in every sense. The first of the two statements, that "America will never be destroyed from the outside," is indeed quite accurate, though arguably of less significance. A country shall always be granted far more stability if it is built not on the backs of its people, but by their hands. When the individual is given dignity, and allowed to hold their weight the way they see fit, everything changes. Reform, readjustment, and redistribution all suddenly come under the management of the people, and so become exponentially more efficient and complete than previously.

It is unreasonable to think, then, that if a nation adopts a democratic-republican system of rule, it would ever surrender its liberties back to a central authority of its own accord. Even if, through some act, power were seized by an outside source, *America* as a concept would never truly be destroyed. The ideals of individualism that we all hold so dearly would keep the flames of freedom alive. Something resembling our former glory would inevitably rise like a phoenix from the ashes, even in the face of utmost adversity.

The one caveat of our system of self-governance is the pitfall of which Lincoln speaks: that the collective may grow aloof from, or ignorant of, itself. The moment that the majority loses its perception of its situation, the opportunity arises for a conniving minority to exploit them, just as in the days of despotism. Be they politicians, aristocrats, or even clergy, some powerful group will always be there to take advantage of ignorance. A small-scale example comes from the

colloquial image of the “snake oil salesman.” In the lawless west during the 1800s, these men would offer “snake oil” as a sort of cure-all for the ailments of the settlers. The people, being uninformed, bought into the salesman's miraculous rhetoric, and paid out of pocket for a liquid that would ultimately do nothing for them -- or worse. The salesman leaves town a richer man, moves to the next settlement, and the cycle continues.

Lincoln knew that such a cycle could only be broken by the action of the people. It takes the effort to speak out against the salesman, and to establish legitimate medical facilities, in order to halt the exploitation. Though true on the individual level, this example applies equally well on the national scale. We must all beware not only of snake oil salesmen, but of snake oil parties, corporations, and even governments. Only through aggressive situational awareness can we hope to be rid of civil abuse. Should we grow complacent or indifferent, America as we know it will surely slip from our grasp.

Lincoln's maxim, though undoubtedly applicable during its conception, is more relevant than ever today. Threats towards freedom are closing in from every side. The National Security Agency, with the help of the Patriot Act, has been systemically harvesting and storing the personal data of millions upon millions of individuals totally without their knowledge. If it weren't for whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden, this flagrant attack on our right to privacy would still be unknown to the general public. Numerous bills, under names such as SOPA, CISPA, OPEN, and other such acronyms, have been introduced into Congress under the guise of “protecting people's rights.” At face value, they are claimed to be reinforcing our individual rights to copyright protection, safeguarding the private property of the people. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that these bills were written not for the average user, but for corporations, and their “right to own” nearly everything on the internet. What was said to be a boon for freedom actually turned out to be a tool with which to obstruct free speech. Again, without us taking the time to read and inform ourselves, these bills might have been passed unopposed.

Though our vulnerabilities grow by the day, so too does our capacity to inform. Technology is on our side, and it is our responsibility, our duty as children of America, to do everything within our power to further defend the freedoms that great men such as Lincoln have secured for us. We must fight every day, lest we destroy ourselves.