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A Leap of Faith

In the face of division, lies, and insult, do not waver from what you know to be right. After an hour of eloquent deconstruction, debunking, and debate, this is the message Abraham Lincoln left with his audience of New Yorkers, cleverly phrased in the following words: "Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it." In a speech rich with empirical argumentation, historical fact-checking, and witty exchanges, Lincoln makes his case against Democrats' expansion of slavery into American territories. The audience of vehement Republican urbanites soon found themselves entranced by their six-foot-tall orator's hour-long address.

"Right makes might"—what about Lincoln's final line makes it so inspiring? These three words subvert a time-tested aphorism—"might makes right"—that is the subject of numerous philosophical, fictional, and political works. Perhaps the principle is most skillfully distilled in Jean de la Fontaine's seventeenth-century fable *The Wolf and The Lamb.* In the fable, a hungry wolf interrogates an innocent lamb in hopes of finding sufficient reason to eat it for supper. Unable to prove that the lamb committed any infraction, the greedy wolf eventually abandons his fruitless cross-examination and gobbles up the lamb without further hesitation. Even when the truth is on one's side, La Fontaine implies, those with the most money, power, or brute force may well prevail.

Reframed through the lens of Lincoln's subversive sentiment, the lamb *can* prevail. No matter the sharpness of the wolf's teeth, or the speediness of its pounce, the lamb need only uphold and defend its own strengths—its moral fortitude, its desire for survival—to escape the jaws of its predator. Applied to antebellum America, this meant taking a leap of faith—protecting constitutional truths and moral principles from the taint of partisan attacks and heartless misinformation. As Lincoln solemnly advised anti-slavery Republicans at the end of his speech, "let us stand by our duty, fearlessly, and effectively."

A century after Abraham Lincoln rallied New Yorkers in support of the Republicans' anti-slavery platform, the sequel to the abolition of slavery—African Americans' struggle for desegregation—demanded a similar strategy. Delaware, a border state where northern and southern traditions fused, proved the site of some of the nation's earliest and most concerted activism for school integration. Despite formidable obstacles, from Delaware's 1897 Code mandating segregation, to the state's paucity of African American education officials, local

desegregation proponents maintained their faith in the words of our Declaration of Independence—that "all men are created equal"—and ultimately prevailed.

The movement to desegregate Delaware's classrooms began at the grassroots level when Black parents and students frustrated by their schools' meager resources petitioned state officials for redress. The flagrant disparities between white and Black schools in the First State were plain to see: in 1948, the Delaware Fellowship Commission judged 66% of Black secondary schools to be in poor condition, compared to just 25% of White high schools. Any foreign onlooker could distinguish a Black classroom simply by its overcrowded capacity and severe lack of hygiene. Confronted with such stark numbers, Delaware education officials yet held close to their Jim Crow policies—until, that is, the NAACP initiated a legal challenge.

In one of the NAACP's first integration lawsuits against Delaware, Ethel Belton, a Black parent and Claymont resident who faced a nine-mile commute every day to drive her daughter to the Black Howard High School in Wilmington, reflected on how segregation had affected the mind of her child. Answering Louis Redding, her attorney and the state's first Black lawyer, at her family's hearing in the 1952, Ms. Belton said, "I don't want my child growing up feeling that she is not as good an American as any other American, so much so that the school she goes to, she has to be separated." The argument was simple, but powerful: segregation, a vehicle for inequality, rendered Black Americans second-class citizens.

After hearing testimony from prominent psychologists who affirmed the detrimental effects of segregation on the human psyche, the Beltons' judge ordered that Claymont High School, a White school located in the same town as the Beltons, admit the Beltons' daughter, Ethel. *Belton v. Gebhart* (1952), promptly appealed by the state, would soon find itself in the Supreme Court, where it would help achieve a ruling that has fundamentally reshaped education in America.

Lincoln's profound statement not only exhibits historical relevance; the final, resolute words of his 1860 speech provide our world with a path forward amid humanity's most formidable challenge: climate change. If Abe had peered into the future and beheld the environmental crisis that we face today, what would he tell the citizens of the world? His advice, perhaps, would not stray far from the sentiment he shared at Cooper Union: have faith in the facts. No matter how many obstacles cloud the future of our Earth, from the thirst of industry and the neglect of leaders to the spread of misinformation and consequent apathy, follow the science. Confronted by the findings of scientists, the people will demand change, and the powerful will have no other choice but to listen.

Is this too optimistic an appraisal? Indeed, as Lincoln suggested, optimism is a requisite, an indispensable element to faith. Progress is rarely immediate, a fact that requires all the more

courage. A mere year after desegregation advocates successfully opened the doors of several Delaware White schools in 1952, Delawareans founded the NAAWP, a white supremacy group that prolonged the fight for integration. Furthermore, decades after *Brown v. Board,* segregation is on the rise across the country. As for climate change, the current administration has removed America from the most far-reaching climate agreement to date.

As the mighty stack the odds against them, the world's youth has answered with all the more determination. Following the lead of Lincoln, students have held close their conception of justice, protesting climate change and segregation alike. Will the world listen? We have but one answer: if we persist.