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POLSCI 456

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A1 Short Essay Assignment

In his “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions” speech, Abraham Lincoln indicates his fear of a passionate man, belonging “to the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle.” (Basler 83), who will destroy the political institutions of America in his desire for greatness. Lincoln’s fear is justified, given that the preponderance in America of mob violence created an environment conducive to the rise of tyrant from within the United States of America, and this tyrant would not be satisfied with participating in the system of beneficial drudgery that is American government and would therefore set about to destroy the political institutions of the nation.

The rise in mob violence in the United States of America validates Lincoln’s fear of a tyrant rising to power, in that such lawlessness provides the conditions necessary to the rise of such a man. Lincoln correctly establishes the recent rise in mob violence across America as the state of affairs necessary to promote the rise of a man of, “the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle” (Basler 83) who would destroy the political institutions of America, a “disregard for law” (Basler 77) being the necessary condition for such an event. Before Lincoln even explicitly mentions men of “the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle.” (Basler 86) he says that the rise of mob justice will create the, “circumstances, [where] men of sufficient talent and ambition will not be wanting to seize the opportunity, strike the blow…” (Basler 80) against American government and destroy the political institutions of the country. Lincoln’s description of how mob violence affects both the lawless and the lawful provides the explanation for this claim that mob violence creates an environment suitable for the rise of a tyrant who would destroy American political institutions. Lincoln states that, “the strongest bulwark of any Government” is “the *attachment* of the People.” (Basler 80) and goes on to state that mob violence deteriorates this attachment by corroding the admiration lawful citizens have for their government. Lincoln correctly believes that the “mobocratic spirit, which all must admit, is now abroad in the land” (Basler 80) will cause lawless men to feel they can do whatever they want, which in turn will cause lawful men to hate the government because it’s not protecting them from the actions of these lawless men. As Lincoln states of lawful citizens, “if the laws be continually despised and disregarded, if their rights to be secure in their persons and property, are held by no better tenure than the caprice of a mob, the alienation of their affections from the Government is the natural consequence; and to that, sooner or later, it must come.” (Basler 80). In this statement Lincoln hits on a key duty of the government, namely the protection of its citizens’ persons and property. Once a government becomes incapable of protecting these chief concerns of their citizenry, then it no longer really deserves the loyalty of its citizens. Which all leads to, as Lincoln says, them thinking favorably of “a change in which they imagine they have nothing left to lose” (Basler 80) a change in their political institutions that would be provided to them by the demagogues Lincoln fears.

Lincoln is right when he says that America wouldn’t satisfy the likes of “an Alexander, a Caesar, or a Napoleon” (Basler 83), because such brilliant men are not well suited to the continuation and steady upkeep of already established institutions, like that of the United States government. While discussing what a tyrant desires, Lincoln states that “Distinction will be his paramount object… yet; that opportunity being past, and nothing left to be done in the way of building up, he would set boldly to the task of pulling down” (Basler 83). This statement justifies Lincoln’s fears of a tyrant destroying America’s political institutions because in the already perfect system of these institutions there is no room for brilliant and overly-ambitious men to distinguish themselves. The continuation of established practices and participation in the beneficial drudgery that is the process of American government will not satisfy these tyrants. The political institutions of America, while beneficial and amazing due to their focus on democracy and “civil and religious liberty” (Basler 84), have already been established and are in Lincoln’s eyes perfect, and thus the only thing a tyrant could seek to do to make a name for himself in America would be to destroy them. Of course, he is not saying that Washington D.C. is devoid of men of ambition, it is indeed full of them, but he is saying that these are men whose ambition is satisfied by being part of a greater whole working for a greater good, men “whose ambition would aspire to nothing beyond a seat in Congress, a gubernatorial or a presidential chair” (83). They do not desire the amount of distinction that a tyrant such as Caesar, Alexander or Napoleon desired. Indeed, Lincoln would prefer these less ambitious men because they’d perpetuate the already established political institutions of America while posing none of the danger that Lincoln rightfully fears from a tyrant.

Lincoln is correct in his fear, because his observations of the current state of affairs in America would indeed support the rise of a demagogue and the destruction of American political institutions. The fault lies not with the potential tyrant, but rather the American people in their creation of an environment that would allow such a tyrant to succeed in their endeavors. Lincoln is right in two regards, men of brilliance and ambition are not suited towards the beneficial drudgery of continuing America’s political institutions, it is not within their nature, secondly, he is right in that the American public, through allowing mob violence to fester, have indeed created an environment that would allow such a demagogue to succeed in the destruction of American political institutions.

Works Cited

Basler, Roy P., editor. *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*. Cleveland: World Pub. Co., 1946.