

Is GOP Still the “Party of Lincoln”?

A challenge to Republican party members: Who authored the following?

“Labor is prior to, and independent of, capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration.”

No, not Karl Marx. Not even Bernie Sanders. Abraham Lincoln, First Annual Message, 12/3/1861.

Lincoln believed every worker was entitled to the fruit of his/her labor. He opposed exploitation of labor by capital. A new study of Lincoln by Harold Holzer and Norman Garfinkle argues that “free labor” was fundamental to Lincoln’s rationale in seeking to preserve and maintain the union.

Lincoln’s understanding of free labor encompassed both the circumstances of laborers and the rights they have to the benefits of their labors. As he declared in Baltimore less than two-and-a-half years later, on 4/18/1864:

“The world has never had a good definition of the word liberty, and the American people, just now, are in want of one. With some the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself, and the product of his labor; while with others the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men’s labor.”

Lincoln then contrasted the ways in which the sheep and the wolf might understand liberty. His sympathies clearly lay with the sheep. The wolf represents those who wish to do with others and others’ labors as they please. Lincoln wasn’t thinking only of the slaves and their labor, but of all laborers. As he put it, “precisely the same difference [between the sheep and the wolf] prevails today among us human creatures, even in the North.” He regarded slavery as a particularly egregious instance of the exploitation of labor that prevailed wherever political and economic arrangements allowed owners of capital to subject workers to conditions that did not allow them to prosper.

No one who is comfortable with the current distribution of wealth and power in America can rightly claim the mantle of Lincoln. The wolves of Wall Street are running roughshod. Corporate moguls extract all they can, leaving carnage in their wake.

Neither can opponents of a real living wage rightly claim Lincoln’s mantle. The full-time laborer who is unable to work his/ her way out of poverty is not “free.” He/she is captive and prey to a tyrannical domination system whose defenders and beneficiaries are ravenous wolves.

Transformation is needed in our political and economic structures – far beyond a more equitable distribution of income, wealth, and power. But here is one place where today’s Republicans should take notice. The GOP as it now exists is light years removed from the understanding Lincoln had of the conditions of freedom and free labor. It’s way past time to re-think prevailing Republican economic ideology, or abandon any pretext that the GOP has any claim to be the party of Lincoln.

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