

**Remarks Prepared for Delivery by Senator Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senate Assistant Majority Leader  
*Lincoln's Unfinished Work:  
The Morrill Act and the Future of Higher Education Today*  
Oct. 23, 2009  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**

I want to thank President Ikenberry for that generous introduction and for his tireless dedication to this great institution. It is a pleasure to be among so many distinguished scholars and education leaders, including Martha Kanter, our new U.S. Under Secretary for Education; Jim Montgomery of the University of Illinois Board of Trustees; Judy Erwin, executive director of the Illinois Board of Higher Education; my old friend from the House, former Congressman – and professor – Jim Leach, our new chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

I especially want to thank the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for hosting this conference on President Lincoln's revolutionary and still urgently relevant plan for higher education in America. Thanks as well to our co-hosts: the American Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, and the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission.

I am honored to co-chair the Lincoln Bicentennial Commission with one of America's most prolific Lincoln scholars, Harold Holzer. It is said that more books have been written about Abraham Lincoln than all of our other presidents combined. I think Harold wrote half of them. He's in New York this evening, probably writing another. We had a third co-chair, Ray LaHood. But another brilliant, tall, lanky President from Illinois needed him more, so we had to release him from his duties. He is now the U.S. Secretary of Transportation, another area in which President Lincoln made historic progress.

The Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission is blessed with exceptional commissioners, like my friend Jean Douglas Bandler, who is here this evening. But all of our brilliant ideas for celebrating Lincoln's life and legacy during this bicentennial year would have remained just that – *ideas* – without the work of the commission's executive director, Eileen Mackevich and her tireless staff. The events they have organized – in Kentucky and Indiana, in Springfield and Washington, and here this weekend – have helped bring Abraham Lincoln's vision for America into clear focus, just when we desperately need it. They deserve a round of applause.

*How Lincoln changed America*

There are moments when it is stunningly clear how fundamentally Abraham Lincoln changed America and made us the nation we are today. I will never forget last January 20<sup>th</sup>, watching my friend, Barack Obama, place his hand on President Lincoln's small family Bible and take the oath of office. More than a million people lined the National Mall. And down at the end of the Mall, watching over the scene serenely, was President Lincoln in his memorial. You knew in that moment that we were all standing in the shadow of Abraham Lincoln.

And if he had done nothing besides steer our nation through the fiery trial of civil war, history would probably still count Lincoln as our greatest president. But Abraham Lincoln refused to accept that America's sole purpose was mere survival.

Even as he guided the nation through a terrible conflict, he could look to the nation's better future. So even as the war raged, he was laying the foundations for a modern economy. He committed America to invest in bold infrastructure projects such as the transcontinental railroad and the building of canals through much of the nation. And he knew that America would prosper in this new economy only to the extent that average men and women could prosper, so he committed America to invest in its most precious infrastructure: the minds of its people.

One year to the day before Gettysburg would be won, when the fate of the Union was still in grave doubt, Lincoln signed into law the Morrill Act creating a land-grant university in every state in the union. Those universities – “democracy's colleges,” as some called them – transformed higher education in America.

### *America before the Morrill Act*

Think about this: Before the Morrill Act, less than 2 percent of the college-age population in America ever went to college. Higher education in America was dominated by private and religious institutions.

Studies focused almost entirely on the classics, Greek and Latin. Modern science, practical engineering – even American history and English literature – were almost never taught. It was a good education if you had a family fortune to fall back on – but hardly an adequate preparation for making a living.

### *Justin Morrill*

Then came Congressman Justin Morrill of Vermont, the son of a blacksmith. Morrill had hoped to go to college but he couldn't afford the fees. So he left school at the age of 15, went to work as a clerk for a local merchant and eventually became the prosperous owner of his own general store.

At 42, he was elected to Congress, determined to open for others those doors of opportunity that had been closed to him. In 1856, he introduced a very modest proposal to create “one or more” national agricultural schools to which each state could send a small number of its best students. The bill failed.

The next year, Morrill proposed a more ambitious bill. Failed again. Undeterred, he offered an even bolder plan the following year. I'll tell you, we could use some of that Morrill moxie in Congress today on health care! If at first you don't succeed, be bolder. America would get a public option!

Finally, in 1859, in the midst of an economic downturn, the Morrill College Land Bill squeaked through both houses of Congress – and was promptly vetoed by President James Buchanan.

### *Morrill and Lincoln together*

When he re-introduced his bill in 1861, Morrill knew he was up against long odds. The nation had been plunged into a bloody and costly civil war. Support for the transcontinental railroad – another expensive endeavor – was growing.

But Morrill was determined. And he had two powerful new advantages. The Southern states, whose senators and representatives had opposed him most bitterly, were gone. And Abraham Lincoln was in the White House.

### *Education should be practical as well as intellectual*

Under the Morrill Act, for the first time, the federal government took a leadership role in higher education in the United States. It used public land as an endowment for education. Each state was given 30,000 acres of federal land for every senator and representative it had in Congress. Monies from those lands would be used to found or invigorate a state “land-grant” university.

The land-grant schools were not just new universities, but a new kind of university. They were based on what was then a controversial belief – that education should be practical as well as intellectual. The idea was to put knowledge to *work*. These new universities would create new knowledge to solve the problems of the new economy.

It was the beginning of the modern research university.

Land-grant colleges – and later, Historically Black Colleges and women’s colleges – democratized education – and made it possible for sons and daughters of farmers and tradesmen to lead a better life, with greater economic opportunity and stability. And it did these things at just the right historical moment, when America was forced to create a new economy.

### *America before Sputnik and NDEA*

Fast-forward a century to Oct. 4, 1957. The Soviet Union launches Sputnik, the first satellite to orbit the Earth.

Sputnik weighed only 185 pounds – but it shook us to our core. We were terrified that we might lose the Cold War. So Congress passed the National Defense Education Act.

America made a commitment to lead the world in scientific and technological innovation and to invest in education.

The NDEA also made a commitment that “no student of ability will be denied an opportunity for higher education because of financial need.” To keep that promise, we provided low-interest federal loans to kids from working-class families.

I was one of those kids. The National Defense Student Loan Program helped put me through college and law school. When I graduated from law school, I looked at how much I had borrowed over seven years. It was a staggering sum: \$8,500 – with 3 percent interest, starting a year after I graduated. I thought: I’ll never be able to pay this much money back! But I did. And so did millions of others.

Before Congress passed the NDEA, only half of the top quarter of each graduating high school class attended college. And half of those students dropped out before completing their degrees.

The NDEA changed that. From 1962, when I started college, through 1976, college enrollment in America increased by 174 percent. We trained a generation of scientists and engineers to solve some of the most complex challenges imaginable.

Think about this: On December 11, 1972, when the Apollo 17 astronauts became the last men to set foot on the moon, the average age of the scientists in NASA’s mission control room was just 26. Those scientists were just 12 years old when President Eisenhower signed the National Defense Education Act.

#### *Where we are today*

I believe that our young people today are just as eager, just as capable, of solving the great scientific and social challenges of this new century.

We need to renew the commitment that President Lincoln made a century and a half ago and give our young people the education and training, and the opportunities, to create new products, new jobs, new businesses, and whole new industries.

Our economy can’t survive just making deals. We have to make the products and find the solutions to feed a hungry world, make health care better, more affordable and more available, and head off looming crises in the supply and demand for clean water and clean energy.

It was a scientist trained at a land-grant university, Norman Borlaug, who pioneered the disease-resistant and highly adaptable crop varieties that sparked the first Green Revolution – saving hundreds of millions of the world’s poorest people from starvation, and winning a Nobel Peace Prize.

There is no reason that scientists working in the labs of our great land-grant universities today can’t lead the next Green Revolution: the race for clean, renewable energy. U of I research scientists are already working hard in this area; eight of them served on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which shared the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize with former Vice President

Al Gore for their efforts to inform the public about climate change and lay the foundation to stop it.

### *Historic new investments in institutions*

President Obama has made a commitment that America will devote more than 3 percent of our GDP to research and development. We will invest in basic and applied research, create new incentives through private innovation, promote breakthroughs in energy and medicine, and improve education in math and science.

That is already happening. Through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, Congress and the Obama Administration are providing the largest single boost to investment in basic research in American history. And much of that research, many of those breakthrough discoveries, will come from the labs of our great research universities.

The Recovery Act includes \$100 billion for education – the largest new federal investment in education in more than 40 years. More than \$21 billion is for scientific research and education projects, with another \$3.5 billion for research facilities and equipment.

In addition, the President's first budget – versions of which have passed the House and the Senate – doubles the budget of the National Science Foundation, and makes substantial new commitments to the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Energy, and NASA – all major sources of funding for academic research.

These investments are critically important now, with colleges and universities struggling with tightened budgets and shrinking endowments.

### *College affordability*

President Obama has also set a goal that by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.

Among all Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development Nations, the US ranks first in the percentage of adults with college degrees – among 45- to 64-year-olds. That's my generation – those of us who benefitted from the National Defense Education Act. But among 25- to 34-year-olds, America isn't in the top three, not even in the top five. We're number nine.

One reason: The rapidly escalating cost of college. Between 2000 and 2006, incomes for most working families stayed flat – while the average tuition at four-year public institutions went up more than 63 percent. According to new figures released just this week by the College Board, the average total cost of attendance at a four-year public university is now more than \$15,000.

One way we're going to reach the President's goal is by reforming our student lending system.

It makes no sense that American taxpayers are paying banks a premium of billions of dollars a year to act as middle men in the making of student loans. We ought to be using that money to invest directly in our students and our economy.

Millions of families are now eligible for \$2,500 annual tax credits to help pay the cost of tuition. We already raised the maximum Pell Grant to \$5,500 this year. And we're pegging Pell grants to a fixed rate above inflation – so their value doesn't decline when families need them most.

We've created a new G.I bill for our returning service men and women.

By ending the Federal Family Education Loan program and shifting entirely over to Direct Loans, we'll make college more affordable for 8 ½ million students. And we'll have billions in savings to invest in other education priorities, instead of lining bankers' pockets.

The House has already passed a student lending reform bill. I expect the Senate to pass a bill in the next few months. We'll have the help of another Illinoisan, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, to implement this important legislation.

The special interests who are losing their windfall won't like it when we cut out the middle man. Al Lord, who made enough money running Sallie Mae to build his own private golf course on his estate, won't like it. But we are going to do it.

### *College Readiness*

Every year, hundreds of thousands of young people are blocked from going to college because of cost. They can do college work, they just can't pay college tuition.

Too many more young people make it to college -- but lack the skills to succeed. At some community colleges in Illinois, 60 percent of the students are in remedial coursework.

Colleges need to do all they can to support these students and guide them toward a successful graduation. And I know that you are working hard to do exactly that. But wouldn't it be better for everyone if more universities worked with middle schools and high schools to ensure a smooth transition from high school to college?

Whenever the doors of education and opportunity shut – whether it's because of lack of money or lack of basic skills -- it's not a loss just for that student. It is a lost opportunity for our nation.

### *DREAM Act*

Still thousands more young people are prevented from going to college every year for another reason. They include honor-roll students, star athletes, talented artists, homecoming queens, and aspiring teachers and doctors. They have followed the rules and worked hard in school.

Unfortunately, they are undocumented. Their parents brought them to the United States when they were young children.

I first became aware of this problem several years ago when a family contacted my office for help. The daughter had been accepted at Julliard. She was filling out some paperwork when she got to the box that asked her citizenship. She asked her mother, “American, right?”

That’s when she learned. Her younger brother and sister were born in this country. But somehow, her parents had forgotten to file the right paperwork for her.

We called Immigration and they said, “The answer is clear. She has to go back to Korea.”

Every year, we grant thousands of H1(b) visas to allow foreign workers to come to this country and do jobs that Americans supposedly can’t perform. At the same time, we are telling talented young people who have lived here nearly all their lives and who want to give something back to America, “Leave, we don’t want you here.” That makes no sense.

This is America; we don’t punish young people for the mistakes of their parents. I’ve introduced a bill called the DREAM Act that would permit undocumented young people them to become permanent residents if they are long-term U.S. residents, have good moral character, and attend college or enlist in the military for at least two years.

The DREAM Act would also repeal a provision of federal law that prevents states from granting in-state tuition rates to undocumented students and return to states the authority to determine their own tuition policies.

Abraham Lincoln knew that it was partly the labor of immigrants that had enabled America to stretch from coast to coast and lay the foundation for a new economy. And it is the hard work and hopes of new Americans that can help ensure that our economy remains an engine of economic opportunity and progress in this new century.

#### *Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Commission*

Finally, I believe the United States must do more to encourage students in this country to study abroad, especially in developing nations.

Less than 1 percent of American undergraduate students study abroad. And only one-tenth of 1 percent chooses to study in nations outside of Western Europe. Yet, it is estimated that 95 percent of the world’s population growth in the next 50 years will occur outside of that area.

How can America be a force for progress in a world we do not even know? That’s a question a very smart man used to ask frequently. His name was Senator Paul Simon. He was my best friend in politics.

After the attacks of 9/11, Paul Simon returned to Washington to try to persuade Congress of the need to strengthen Americans' international understanding.

As a result of his work, Congress established the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Commission, on which I served, along with President Peter McPherson of the American Association of Public and Land-grant Universities and others.

The Commission urged that America set a goal of having at least 1 million US undergraduate students study abroad each year, and that a substantial number of these Lincoln Fellows study in developing nations.

I have introduced a bill, called the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Act, that would enable us to meet that goal. By showing more of the world what Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature," we can strengthen our national and economic security.

### *Conclusion*

In 1832, a 23-year-old Abraham Lincoln, new to Illinois, was running for a seat in the state General Assembly.

During that campaign, he published his very first political announcement in a local newspaper. It read in part, "Upon the subject of education, not presuming to dictate any plan or system respecting it, I can only say that I view it as the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in."

He went on to say, "For my part, I desire to see the time when education – and, by its means, morality, sobriety, enterprise, and industry – shall become much more general than at present, and should be gratified to have it in my power to contribute something to the advancement of any measure which might have a tendency to accelerate that happy period."

Abraham Lincoln didn't win that election. In fact, he finished eighth in a field of 13 candidates. But over the course of his life, and especially during his Presidency, he not only *contributed* to American education, he *transformed* it and democratized America's universities. And in doing so, laid the foundation for the strongest middle class and the most vibrant economy the world has ever known. He showed us the way. It is up to us to preserve and expand his legacy for this new century.

Thank you for all you are doing to meet this challenge. I am proud to be your partner.

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