

Fragment on the Constitution and the Union by Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) – Reprinted from The U.S. Constitution, A Reader, Published by Hillsdale College

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This never appeared in Lincoln’s public speeches, but it is possible that he composed it while writing his First Inaugural Address. It draws upon the King James translation of Proverbs 25:11–“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver”–to describe the relationship between the principles of the Declaration and the purpose of the Constitution.

January 1861

All this is not the result of accident. It has a philosophical cause. Without the *Constitution* and the *Union*, we could not have attained the result; but even these, are not the primary cause of our great prosperity. There is something back of these, entwining itself more closely about the human heart. That something, is the principle of “Liberty to all”–the principle that clears the *path* for all–gives *hope* to all–and, by consequence, *enterprise*, and *industry* to all.

The *expression* of that principle, in our Declaration of Independence, was most happy, and fortunate. *Without* this, as well as *with* it, we could have declared our independence of Great Britain; but *without* it, we could not, I think, have secured our free government, and consequent prosperity. No oppressed, people will *fight*, and *endure*, as our fathers did, without the promise of something better, than a mere change of masters.

The assertion of that *principle*, at *that time*, was the word, “*fitly spoken*” which has proved an “apple of gold” to us. The *Union*, and the *Constitution*, are the *picture* of *silver*, subsequently framed around it. The picture was made, not to *conceal*, or *destroy* the apple; but to *adorn*, and *preserve* it. The *picture* was made *for* the apple–*not* the apple for the picture.

So let us act, that neither *picture*, or *apple* shall ever be blurred, or bruised or broken.

That we may so act, we must study, and understand the points of danger

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1. Abraham Lincoln, “Fragment on the Constitution and the Union,” January 1861, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Vol. 4 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 168-69. Reprinted with the permission of the Abraham Lincoln Association, Springfield, IL.

