

Bush opens long-awaited Lincoln museum with tribute to Great Emancipator



GERALD HERBERT/THE GAMECOCK
President Bush and House Speaker Dennis Hastert walk past a mural of Abraham Lincoln during the dedication ceremonies of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, in Springfield, Ill., on Tuesday.

By CHRISTOPHER WILLS
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. — Opening the Abraham Lincoln library and museum, President Bush said it should help generations rediscover the 16th president whose commitment to freedom for all embodies "the meaning and promise of America."

"From the lunch counter to the schoolhouse door to the Army barracks, President Lincoln has continued to hold this nation to its promises," Bush told an audience of thousands — including scores of Lincoln impersonators — gathered on a hot day before the low-slung, \$145 million complex of wheat-colored stone. "And we will never relent, we will never rest until those promises are met."

The dedication of the museum portion of the state-of-the-art showplace capped 25 years of effort. The \$145 million Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, with 40,000 square feet of

understated architecture, is designed to generate new interest in Lincoln and explain his life and legacy. The library portion opened last October.

Before the public ceremony, Bush and House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., took a 20-minute private tour. With their wives, they were led through a section devoted to Lincoln's life before his presidency and one on his White House years, as well as an exhibit marking the 140th anniversary of Lincoln's assassination.

The new library also offers details of the controversies surrounding Lincoln's policies. The museum presents his changing views on slavery, restrictions on free speech and the limitations of his Emancipation Proclamation.

Bush steered mostly clear of such topics, portraying criticism of Lincoln as mostly a media creation.

"In a small way, I can relate to the rail splitter from out West, because he has a way of speaking that was not always appreciated by the newspapers back East," Bush

said with a chuckle.

Sen. Barack Obama, the Illinois Democrat who is the Senate's only black member, touched gingerly on the questions about Lincoln.

"Lincoln was not a perfect man, nor a perfect president," Obama said. "By modern standards, his condemnation of slavery might be considered tentative, his Emancipation Proclamation more a military document than a clarion call for justice. He wasn't immune to political considerations. His temperament could be indecisive and morose."

Bush focused on praising Lincoln for the war he fought to free slaves and keep the union together.

"When his life was taken, Abraham Lincoln assumed a greater role in the story of America than man or president," he said. "Every generation has looked up to him as the Great Emancipator, the hero of unity and martyr of freedom."

He added: "To understand the life and the sacrifice of Abraham Lincoln is to understand the

meaning and promise of America."

Some fear the museum is more about amusement than education, using gimmickry and special effects to bring Lincoln to life.

Seats shake and cannons belch smoke during a movie. Holographic "ghosts" haunt a presentation on the library's research. Fake campaign commercials illustrate Lincoln's political career. Latex statues replicate scenes from Lincoln's life.

In the library half, which holds the world's largest collection of Lincoln artifacts and documents, visitors can see a signed copy of the Emancipation Proclamation and a handwritten version of the Gettysburg Address.

Unlike most presidential libraries, this one isn't operated by the National Archives and it isn't the official repository of documents from Lincoln's presidency. The state of Illinois runs the library and museum, and the federal government has agreed to provide up to \$50 million.

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