

AMERICAN SYSTEM

Abraham Lincoln and American System politics

Senator Edward Kennedy may not yet be a declared candidate for President of the United States, but his antics around the country and in the halls of Congress make it clear that he is waiting for the green light from his mentors at the New York Council on Foreign Relations. He is raising a populist hue and cry over the evils of big business and the dangers of high technology and nuclear power in every sector of the economy—including health care. He already has legislation in Congress to deregulate industry and reform antitrust legislation—all, of course, in the name of democratic free trade.

We are reminded of similar "free trade" advocates of the 19th century: Stephen Douglas and George McClellan, the Democratic opponents to Abraham Lincoln. Their brand of politics and economics, widely known at the time as the British System, would have made impossible the industrial development of the United States. In the 1860s, Abraham Lincoln was the foremost spokesman for the American System, its conception of labor power and industrial progress. We present the following excerpts from his favorite campaign speech for the 1860 presidential election.

All creation is a mine, and every man a miner.

The whole earth, and all within it, upon it, and round about it, including himself, in his physical, moral, and intellectual nature,

and his susceptibilities, are the infinitely various "leads" from which, man, from the first, was to dig out his destiny.

In the beginning, the mine was unopened, and the miner stood naked, and knowledgeless, upon it....

Man is not the only animal who labors; but he is the only one who improves his workmanship. The improvement he effects by Discoveries and Inventions. His first important discovery was the fact that he was naked; and his first invention was the fig-leaf apron. ... The first important improvement he ever made in connection with clothing, was the invention of spinning and weaving....

The discovery of the properties of iron, and the making of iron tools, must have been among the earliest of important discoveries and inventions. We can scarcely conceive the possibility of making much of anything else, without the use of iron tools....

Transportation—the removal of persons and goods from place to place—would be an early object, if not a necessity with man. By his natural powers of locomotion, and without much assistance from discovery and invention, he could move himself about with considerable facility; and even, could carry small burthens with him. But very soon he would wish to lessen the labor, while he might, at the same time, extend, and ex-

pedite the business. For this object, wheel-carriages, and watercrafts—wagons and boats—are the most important inventions....

As man's food—his first necessity was to be derived from the vegetation of the earth, it was natural that his first care should be directed to the assistance of that vegetation. ... The plow, of very early origin; and reaping, and threshing, machines, of modern invention are, at this day, the principal improvements in agriculture. And even the oldest of these, the plow, could not have been conceived of, until a precedent conception had been caught, and put into practice—I mean the conception, or idea, of substituting other forces in nature, for man's own muscular power. These other forces, as now used, are principally, the strength of animals, and the power of the wind, of running streams and of steam....

The idea, being once conceived, ... would soon be extended to others....

The advantageous use of Steam-power is, unquestionably, a modern discovery. And yet, as much as two thousand years ago the power of steam was not only observed, but an ingenious toy was actually made and put into motion by it, at Alexandria in Egypt. What appears strange is, that neither the inventor of the toy, nor any one else, for so long a time afterwards, should perceive that steam would move useful machinery as well as a toy.