

Significance of the Morrill Act

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As we commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Morrill Act we should ask **ourselves why this Act of July 2, 1862 has come to be regarded as one of the most transformative legislative acts in history.**

Taking a closer look, we find Abraham Lincoln signing the Morrill Act, against the backdrop of a raging civil war that was tearing our country apart. At the same time, ***we cannot escape the conclusion that it must have had a much broader and deeper significance than a mere deed of land to the states to sell for the founding of practical colleges for the masses.***

Time has shown us that the Morrill Act's significance was that it established a new prototype for higher education. We now know that ***it established a framework for higher education based on uniquely American principles.***

I don't think that great ideas like the Morrill Act burst upon the world unannounced. Indeed, ***the principles of the Morrill Act encapsulate the three very definite propositions set out in the Declaration of Independence some 86 years earlier: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed with certain inalienable rights, and that the strength of government must originate from the consent of the governed.***

The Morrill Act of 1862 recognized that education was a ***right***, and thus, provided a ***right of entry*** previously unavailable to the working classes and the underprivileged. It should be noted that in 1890, Congressman Morrill pushed for the creation of black land-grant colleges and, in 1994, an Act of Congress created the Native American Land Grant Institutions.

The Morrill Act elevated practical studies, especially agriculture and engineering, as vital additions to, but not replacements for, the classics, literature, and the other liberal arts. It was based on a conviction that attending a land-grant college would develop a strong economic foundation from which citizens, states, and the nation would profit. ***Moreover, giving access to higher education created uncharted opportunities for social mobility and success that was,***

until that time, unattainable to the masses. In essence, the Morrill Act formed the basis of public education in America.

But equality and access for all were not the only uniquely American democratic ideals that forged the Morrill Act. *Instead of creating a federal university system, the core of its governance was designed to be decentralized; giving individual states the right and responsibility of primary funding and management.*

I often wonder whether Justin Morrill or Abe Lincoln could have imagined the magnitude of the land grants' impact on America: **Today, land-grant universities are the driving force of research and graduate education in our Nation awarding about 1/3 of the Bachelor degrees, 1/3 of the Master Degrees, 60% of all the doctorates and 70% of all the engineering degrees.** The fruits of these research and graduate programs have profoundly benefited the world in increased job creation, economic development, food security, food production and food safety; improved human health and nutrition; and greater natural resource conservation. The production of pure uranium, pioneering developments in television and the transistor, advances in meteorology, the field ion microscope and the cyclotron, the isolation of helium, new plant strains resistant to disease and insects—these and so much more have come from land-grant institutions. *Not to mention great football, Gatorade and Ben & Jerry's ice cream... In other words, these institutions have built this country and they continue to do so today.*

In summary, I don't believe that governments make ideals, but ideals **do make governments**. In the development of our land-grant institutions we can honestly claim that ***we have remained true to the principles of the Morrill Act signed 150 years ago. We have made quality mass education the rule, and not the exception. In all the essentials, we have achieved an equality which has never been rivaled by any other people.*** I believe Abe Lincoln and Justin Smith Morrill would be proud of the work their vision wrought. I know that I am.

Please join me in wishing a Happy 150th Anniversary to the Morrill Act and its continued successes well into its tercentennial.