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## Masterpiece

Second Inaugural Address (1865), by Abraham Lincoln

### Multiple Threads to Bind Up a Divided Nation

*Lincoln's second inaugural is actually three speeches in one. It aspires to three coherent but unique arguments in three distinct sections, each brief, each different in tone, and each conveying a discrete message: history, guilt and redemption—the past, the present and the future*

by Harold Holzer

“**Everyone** likes a compliment.” So Abraham Lincoln anxiously admitted to editor Thurlow Weed 11 days after delivering his greatest speech: the second inaugural address. Lincoln had misinterpreted Weed’s note praising some earlier remarks and assumed his correspondent also meant to laud the March 4, 1865, inaugural oration. “I expect the latter to wear as well as—perhaps better than—anything I have produced,” the president insisted, “but I believe it is not immediately popular.”

Lincoln had good reason to offer both the complaint and the prediction. “Disappointed” editor James Gordon Bennett of the New York Herald, a Democratic newspaper, dismissed the inaugural as “a little speech of ‘glittering generalities’ used only to fill in the program.” The long-hostile Chicago Times, once shut down by Union troops, mocked: “We did not conceive it possible that even Mr. Lincoln could produce a paper so slipshod, so loose-jointed, so puerile, not alone in literary construction, but in its ideas, its sentiments, its grasp.”

To be sure, most pro-Republican papers dutifully hailed the speech, but their praise must be taken with the same grain of salt as the criticism from the opposition. More important, Lincoln’s second inaugural has more than stood the test of time—etched now on the walls of the Lincoln Memorial opposite the Gettysburg Address, and surpassing even that speech in lyricism, timeliness and compact emotional power. Here is the finest work to come from the man critic Edmund Wilson judged the only president who might “in a different milieu” have become “a distinguished writer of a not merely political kind.”

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conveying a discrete message: history, guilt and redemption—the past, the present and the future. That one writer, in a mere 703 words, could address such momentous subjects so definitively, so provocatively and so succinctly is what makes the text so breathtaking. Lincoln read his second inaugural in just 10 minutes.

He began by answering a lingering question. How had the war against secession begun? Why had so many lives been sacrificed? Lincoln made clear where blame lay. “Insurgent agents” had crowded Washington four years earlier to hear the pacific words of his first inaugural address. But they had shunned compromise. One side “would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish.” When those opening thoughts elicited a burst of applause from the 40,000 spectators crowded around the East Portico of the Capitol, Lincoln paused before pronouncing his four-word conclusion: “And the war came.”

If his vast audience expected Lincoln to follow this calm recounting of the immediate cause of the rebellion with a triumphalist declaration of its imminent suppression, they were about to be shocked. There would be no chest-thumping, no vindication of Northern superiority, no claim of victory, no kudos for gallant generals, and no revelation of postwar plans. In their place came the full disclosure, at long last, that the war to save the Union had indeed been a war to destroy slavery. True, for four bloody years, each side had “looked for an easier triumph” than the upheavals now roiling society: emancipation, the recruitment and arming of black troops, and most recently the proposed 13th Amendment to the Constitution ending slavery altogether and everywhere. Lincoln counted himself no less surprised than his listeners at these “astounding” results, but there would be no going back.

Yet how to assess blame—and assign laurels—for “this mighty scourge of war,” its terrible cost, and its revolutionary outcome? After all, Lincoln reminded his listeners that both sides “pray to the same God” and invoke “His aid against the other.” Lincoln’s initial answer seemed unthreatening—“let us judge not that we be not judged... The Almighty has His own purposes”—soothing assurances from the Book of Matthew. American slavery was an “offence” of biblical proportions requiring almost biblical punishment. A plague not only on those who had created, perpetuated and defended it, but also on those who had accepted it without sufficient objection—Northerners as well as Southerners, both guilty of a similar sin. But rather than promise that the resulting war would now “speedily” end, Lincoln instead hurled a thunderbolt vow that might have come from a prophet of old: “Yet, if God wills that it continue... until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.’”

It was a “very short” speech, eyewitness Frederick Douglass remembered, “but he answered all the objections raised to his prolonging the war in one sentence... a very remarkable sentence.” In that single burst of 68 words, the reassuring serenity of Matthew yielded to the stern locutions of King David from Psalm 19, whose subsequent lines his audience likely knew by heart: “Moreover by them is thy servant warned: and in keeping of them, there is great reward.”

Lincoln knew what that reward must be—“a just, and a lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations”—and that is how he ended his speech, the most famous and the most frequently

quoted paragraph of this searing oration, but hardly its prevailing sentiment. Without even attempting a transition, Lincoln accomplished yet another abrupt change of mood and tone. “With malice toward none,” the third and last section began; “let us . . . bind up the nation’s wounds”—an insistence on inclusionary redemption.

Some reports held that the many African-American soldiers in the throng shouted back, church style, at both its thunder-and-lightning midsection and its prayerful conclusion. In the eyes of many, God himself responded. Though Lincoln began his address under dark, threatening skies, the clouds miraculously parted for the sun as he began to speak. “It made my heart jump,” Lincoln admitted of the omen. But he had long prayed to God for an “easier triumph” and it had not come. He would not be deceived now by signs and wonders.

“Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them,” Lincoln concluded his anxious post-inaugural letter to Thurlow Weed, offering a coda worthy of the speech itself. “To deny it, however, in this case, is to deny that there is a God governing the world. It is a truth which I thought needed to be told; and as whatever of humiliation there is in it, falls most directly on myself. I thought others might afford for me to tell it.” As Charles Francis Adams Jr. put it, it was nothing less than “the historical keynote of the war.”

—Mr. Holzer, author of numerous books on the 16th president, will receive the 2015 Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize for his latest, “Lincoln and the Power of the Press: The War for Public Opinion,” on April 23.

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