Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address

By Jamie Eves • April 30, 2020

I am thinking a lot lately about civil wars and divisions within nations. One reason for this is that my freshman United States History classes at Eastern Connecticut State University and the University of Connecticut have been examining — this year via COVID-created distance learning — the causes of the American Civil War (1861-65). But the fact that today's American body politic is also so deeply divided has added an additional urgency to their study. The students have all written essays (which they have just submitted to me online) where they discuss the two leading schools of thought among historians about what caused the Civil War. The so-called "fundamentalist" historians see secession and the Civil War as the inevitable result of a long-term process (beginning perhaps during the Revolutionary War) in which Northern and Southern society and culture grew increasingly further and further apart from each other, with slavery as by far and away the most important "wedge issue," until by 1860 the United States was essentially two countries, not one, trapped together in a Union that served neither fully. The so-called "revisionist" historians, however, see secession and the Civil War as essentially a short-term failure of political leadership in the 1850s, as an inept generation of politicians (Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, Abraham Lincoln, Stephen Douglas, Thaddeus Stevens, Charles Sumner, Preston Brooks, Jefferson Davis, and others) who, faced with the problem of slavery, were unable to come up with the kind of broadly acceptable compromises that leaders in previous generations had found — compromises like the Constitution of 1787-88 and the Missouri Compromise of 1820. The revisionists view the problem as having been short-term and primarily political, and blame the politicians for their failure. The fundamentalists see the problem as long-term and primarily social, and thus blame society as a whole. When deciding which of these schools of thought makes the most sense to them, I challenge students to think about it by asking questions. Was the Civil War (or secession without war, if that were possible) inevitable, as the fundamentalists believe? Should we ever look at war or secession as inevitable? If, as the revisionists believe, with the right leadership compromise is always possible, what compromise would have held the Union

together without also prolonging slavery? Would such a compromise have been justifiable?

I don't tell them — until after they have written their essays — what Abraham Lincoln thought, for not surprisingly he had strong views on the subject. Lincoln's own understanding on slavery, secession, and the Civil War changed over time, as he responded to the whirl of secession, war, emancipation, and suffering. By the time he embarked on his second term in office in March 1865, Lincoln had come to view the Civil War in biblical terms, as God's just punishment of America for the terrible sin of slavery, a sin in which not just the South but the entire nation was complicit. We know this from his Second Inaugural Address, one of the most remarkable Presidential speeches ever given. And perhaps also the greatest. It is a speech worth examining.



Lincoln delivered his Second Inaugural Address before a large crowd of supporters — most of them Northern Republicans — in March of 1865 immediately after he took the oath of office for his second Presidential term. The photo above is from the Library of Congress, and it shows Lincoln speaking from a podium in front of the Capitol, surrounded by legions of supporters, most of whom probably expected a rousing partisan speech. Partisanship was not, as it turned out, on the President's mind that day. Caught up in morbid thoughts of his own mortality (Lincoln suffered from clinical depression, and had frequent premonitions of his own death), Lincoln sought, for what he feared might be the final time, to explain to the country what he thought the war had been about. And he did it in his own unique way.

Historians often say that the Second Inaugural Address is unlike any other Presidential speech. For one thing, it is short, only a few paragraphs. It is a bit longer than Lincoln's more famous Gettysburg Address, but not by much. Another thing that makes it different from most Presidential speeches is that, also like the Gettysburg Address, it is more poetry than prose. It is sometimes maintained by modern Presidents (President Obama being one) that Presidents should campaign in poetry, but govern in prose. Lincoln, however, did just the opposite. His campaign oratory was generally quite prosey — a combination of humor and logical argumentation, as with the famous debates with Stephen Douglas, or the Address at Cooper Union, which took the form of a well-argued (and brilliant) legal brief. Yet the Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural Address, both delivered while he was President, are manifestly poetical. That Lincoln would sometimes turn to poetry when he had something especially important to say is not hard to understand. Growing up on the frontier, he had had access to only a few books, but those books included the King James Version of the Bible and several volumes of British poetry, which he had read over and over, until the cadences of poetry ever after ran through his head. Poetry communicates big thoughts in just a few words, but those words have to be the right words, words that are capable of evoking strong emotions. In Lincoln's mind, truth was spoken in poetry.

A final reason that the Second Inaugural Address is different is that it was overwhelmingly honest. Lincoln answered the question of what caused the Civil War with something his supporters did not want to hear. *We* caused it, Lincoln said. We Americans. All of us, collectively, as a nation. The war was caused by slavery, and we are all responsible for slavery. To be clear, Lincoln did not mean that all Americans were guilty *individually*. African Americans, for example, were obviously blameless. Rather, he was saying that we were all responsible *as a nation*. If America is our country, then we as Americans are responsible for what it does, and for paying the price if what it does is wrong, regardless of what each of us did as individuals. If we want to claim the benefits of citizenship — the Bill of Rights, republican government — then we have own up to the responsibilities. Hundreds of African American soldiers had died in combat fighting for their country, although not one of them was individually responsible for slavery, which Lincoln believed was the cause of the war. (The illustration below shows African American soldiers marching at the inauguration.)



So, here is the text of the Address, with some commentary:

Fellow countrymen: at this second appearing to take the oath of the presidential office there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then, a statement somewhat in detail of a course to be pursued seemed fitting and proper. Now, at the expiration of four years during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every point and phase of the great contest which still absorbs the attention and engrosses the energies of the nation, little that is new could be presented. The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself, and it is I trust reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.

This first paragraph was just an introduction. In it, Lincoln tells he audience that he will be making only a short speech. Everyone knows how the War is progressing. The Union is winning, and Lincoln hopes the struggle will end soon.

Then, in the second paragraph, Lincoln switches gradually from prose to poetry.

On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago [meaning when he delivered his First Inaugural Address, in 1861, before the war began] *all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it ~ all sought to avert it. While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place devoted altogether to saving the Union without war* [in 1861, Lincoln had offered the South a desperate compromise — a Devil's bargain, if you will — that if the South remained in the Union, slavery would be protected and maintained in the slave states] *insurgent agents were in the city seeking to destroy it without war ~ seeking to dissolve the Union and divide effects by negotiation. Both parties deprecated war, but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would accept war rather than let it perish. And the war came.*

In the second paragraph, Lincoln noted that, four years earlier when he gave his First Inaugural Address, everyone was worried that there might be a civil war, but everyone also hoped that it might somehow have been avoided. Lincoln argues that his goal had been to save the Union and prevent secession without fighting a war. Secessionists, he argues, had hoped to secede without having to fight a war. But the secessionists were willing to fight a war in order to get what they wanted, and Lincoln would go to war if it were the only way to save the Union. And so, as he says, “the war came.”

Then, in the third paragraph — the meat of the Address — Lincoln explains what had caused things to reach a situation where war had been the only option. And he does it with the powerful cadences of biblical poetry, the language of Truth.

One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the union but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. [Here Lincoln does not mean that the slaves themselves were a "powerful interest," which would have been ludicrous. He means that slavery as an institution — and the slave owners and their allies who protected it — was a powerful interest. Lincoln is using a term from the 1850s, when many Northerners (including Lincoln himself) had referred to a "slave conspiracy" — meaning a conspiracy of those who benefited from slavery — not only to preserve slavery in the South (which Lincoln himself had accepted) but also to expand it into the North and West (which Lincoln had always opposed).] *All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war.* [This is straightforward: slavery was the cause of the war.] *To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union even by war, while the government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it. Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict* [i.e., slavery] *might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph and a result less fundamental and astounding.* [Here Lincoln admits that he and most of his supporters had not originally intended to end slavery in the South, but had been willing to accept its continued presence there, if that was what it cost to keep the Union together. Thus he admits his own guilt — and that of his fellow Republicans — for being willing to pursue "an easier triumph," to continue the sin of slavery if doing so would preserve the Union without war.] *Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other.* [Here Lincoln expresses his belief that Southerners and Northerners were culturally one people, not two, and that each side believed that it was in the right, that it represented the true America.] *It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not that we be not judged.* [Here Lincoln both acknowledges the awful sinfulness of

slavery, but also acknowledges that both South and North were guilty. Northerners should not "judge" Southerners, as they, too, had sinned, by allowing slavery to continue to exist for so long.] *The prayers of both could not be answered ~ that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses, for it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which having continued through His appointed time He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him.* [This is an incredibly powerful passage. Lincoln comes right out and says that slavery was a sin, and since America as a whole committed the sin, then, God, who punishes sin, has brought the war as His just punishment upon all of America for its collective sinfulness. And that the punishment was a just one.] *Fondly do we hope ~ fervently do we pray ~ that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away.* [This line is clearly poetry.] *Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and 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."* [In this powerful line, Lincoln says that, while he hopes the war will end soon, if God thinks that sinful America has not yet suffered enough, the war might go on. Indeed, it would be just if it continued until every last penny stolen from enslaved people by forcing them into bondage was paid back. It would be just if every drop of blood drawn by generations of cruel treatment was matched with blood shed on the battlefield. The war has been terrible, Lincoln says, but it is no more than we deserve. Indeed, it has been far less than we deserve.]

Having used stern biblical language to establish America's collective guilt in the sin of slavery, Lincoln suddenly pivots from punishment to forgiveness, for the same God who punishes sins also forgives them.

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan ~ to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations. [In this last paragraph, Lincoln's conclusion, he expresses his hope for the future. He has just told an assembled crowd made up mostly of his fellow Northerners that the North as well as South was complicit in the sin of slavery, and thus bears equal responsibility for the Civil War. Both sides have shared in God's punishment for that sin, for both sides have suffered. But punishment and forgiveness are always linked. Any "just and lasting peace" — and both the "just" and the "lasting" parts were important — must combine "malice toward none" (Northerners should not seek revenge against Southerners for their suffering) and "charity for all" (everyone involved should be treated with compassion and kindness, regardless of which side they were on) with "firmness in the right" (slavery and the mistreatment of African Americans must end). A victorious North should not punish a defeated South. But neither should the injustice of slavery be perpetuated. A righteous peace required "bind[ing] up the nation's wounds" — i.e., healing the rift between North and South — and "car[ing] for him who shall have borne the battle and his widow and his orphan," a reference to the soldiers and their families who had already done their penance, but which also could be understood to mean those who had suffered from the sin of slavery in other ways. Lincoln thus called for tempering justice with forgiveness, and also for tempering forgiveness with justice. In a civilized nation, he believed, one is impossible without the other.

As I think about the rifts, angers, rages, animosities, and seemingly uncompromisable issues that divide us today, I wonder if we will ever find a way to temper justice with charity, and forgiveness with righteousness.