
Abraham Lincoln, SECOND INAUGURAL ADDRESS

4 March 1865

Lincoln delivered this address to a throng of thirty or forty thousand people, many of them African Americans, gathered around the Capitol. The inauguration took place on a stormy day near the end of a war in which over 600,000 soldiers, from North and South, lost their lives. (Robert E. Lee would surrender his army at Appomattox on April 9th.) Both John Wilkes Booth, who would shoot Lincoln forty days later, and Frederick Douglass, who said approvingly that “the Address sounded more like a sermon than a state paper,” were within sight of Lincoln during the ceremony. Many newspapers criticized the speech. The New York Herald called the “little speech” a collection of “glittering generalities.” The New York World complained that the religious language “smacked . . . of the dark ages.” But Charles Francis Adams, Jr., who fought at Gettysburg, called the speech the “historical keynote of this war,” and Lincoln considered it to be among his best work. As the address’s several Biblical quotations suggested, Lincoln tried to illuminate not just the war’s causes but also its moral and spiritual significance. His words also reflected a personal struggle with the conflict’s overwhelming human costs and the relationship between the war and slavery. —D. Voelker

Bibliography: Ronald C. White, Jr., *Lincoln’s Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002); and Garry Wills, “Lincoln’s Greatest Speech?,” *Atlantic Monthly* (Sept. 1999), 60–70.

Fellow countrymen:

[1] 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.

[2] On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, 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, 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.

[3] 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. All knew that this interest was somehow 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.

[4] Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. 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. 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? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. 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."

[5] 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.

Discussion Questions:

1. How did Lincoln explain the origins of the war? How was the Republican Party that he represented implicated in the war's outbreak?
2. How did Lincoln understand the purpose of the war in 1865? How had his views on the war changed since Gettysburg?

SOURCE: *Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States from George Washington 1789 to Richard Milhous Nixon 1969* (Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1969), 127–28. Paragraph numbers have been added. Punctuation has been altered to be more consistent with Lincoln's manuscript.



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