

Abraham lincoln's second inaugural address



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Abraham Lincoln and His " Second Inaugural Address" Delivered March 4, 1864

Though delivered almost 150 years ago, Abraham Lincoln's (1809-1865) second inaugural address continues today to be an exemplary model of leadership, demonstrating its abilities in political unification, cues to nation-building, goals of social progression, and most importantly, its expression of the importance of national reconciliation. Given at a time when a young American country was still reeling from the Civil War, Lincoln's address not only reaffirmed the Union's justification for fighting against Confederate secession and insurgency, but also extended a hand to the formerly rebellious states that found themselves structurally and economically debilitated by the end of the war. A work of oratory mastery, Lincoln's content was not nearly as important as the address' literary devices such as assonance, alliteration, and diction. Then-president Lincoln's style and delivery prove that today's politicians and leadership stand much to gain from the model presented at Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address.

The beginning of Lincoln's final term saw a distressed nation left economically and structurally ravaged. Costing the lives of more Americans than any war in its short history, the Civil War was the product of a social, economic, and political rift between the Northern Union and the insurgent Southern Confederacy of secessionist states. Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address therefore had to satisfy several requisites. The speech had to take special care to give praise where due to the Northern Union army and its loyal population without alienating the defeated South, still reeling from the economic blow dealt to its agrarian majority by the abolition of slavery. In

order to maintain this delicate balance, “ Lincoln began the shift in content and tone that would give” the second inaugural address “ its singular meaning,” inclusive to both North and South (White 61). In his Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural, Ronald C. White makes note of Lincoln's “ masterful understanding and use of both imagery and distinctive phrase,” tools that America's sixteenth president would use as part of an “ overarching strategy” emphasizing “ common actions and emotions” (White 61). George Rable stressed the importance of non-political language in Lincoln's address in his The Confederate Republic: A Revolution against Politics, as the Southern population was infamously apolitical in its views and practices.

Lincoln's diction therefore had to be deliberately neutral in diction and content so as not to highlight the existing tension between North and South, the major differences manifested in the stereotypes of the prototypical agrarian Southerner and politicized, industrial Northerner. Lincoln was less “ intellectual and studied in tone” in delivering his second inaugural address, focusing more on religious allusions and spiritual reference (White 22). A key feature of the address, Lincoln's use of religious overtones was neutral in its acceptance in both the North and South. Though taking great care to give the North credit for “ accepting the war rather than let it perish” (Lincoln, lines 17-18) Lincoln did his best not to alienate the South but also took great care not to indemnify the insurgents in the face of his loyal Union constituency. To avoid a potentially catastrophic venture, Lincoln used Christianity and references to Protestant texts shared by both national contingents. With such radically different constituents, religion was the only

common ground, resulting in a final address that notorious author and black activist Frederick Douglass found more akin to a “ sermon than a speech” (White ii).

Lincoln’s religious allusions served to emphasize national unity in similarity, as seen in lines 29-30 in his reference to Northern and Southern populations “ both [reading] the same Bible and [praying] to the same God.”

Furthermore, Lincoln alluded to religion as a mechanism to displace blame on either party for the violence that transpired following the Confederate secession from the Union. In lines 29-32, Lincoln urges the two halves of the nation to “ judge not” its counterpart lest they in turn “ be judged”. Placing the final victory in an intangible God’s proverbial hands, the politically masterful president did not place the moral imperative in the hands of either North or South, instead referencing the “ Almighty’s [purposes]” in line 30 which in turn were assumed in the Judeo-Christian tradition incomprehensible by man. The heavily religious theme of the address kept abreast of the apocalyptic undertones of the war. In such a fractious time in American politics, both sides endorsed the distribution of their own versions of the Bible. White links the use of religion as a propaganda tool to encourage both reluctant Northern and Southern populations of their justifications for war:

“ With the beginning of hostilities, Bibles were produced almost as quickly as bullets. The American Bible Society made the decision to supply Bibles to all soldiers. At the Bible House, headquarters of the ABS in New York City, sixteen power presses printed and bound the books. The increase in the publication of Bibles was astonishing. In the first year of the Civil War, the <https://assignbuster.com/abraham-lincolns-second-inaugural-address/>

American Bible Society printed 370, 000 more Bibles than in the previous year" (White 102).

Lincoln's somewhat exploitative use of religious allegory was therefore not a novel concept; the hastened production of Bibles reflects both the Union and the Confederacy's employment of religious justification to override whatever national allegiances would erstwhile prevent war. Lincoln's address counteracted this stratagem employed by both North and South, neither negating nor supporting either side's contentions that divine providence remained with their respective side.

Richard Striner detailed the importance of the religious factor in Lincoln's speech through a private letter Lincoln wrote to a contemporary, wherein Lincoln made special note to mention that "men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them"; "to deny it, however, in this case, is to deny that there is a God governing the world" (Striner 251). The letter continued, stating that the concept of man's helplessness under divine will "is a truth which [Lincoln] thought needed to be told" (Striner 251).

Glen Thurow's Abraham Lincoln and Political Religion portrays Lincoln as a shrewd politician who understood the power of religious allegory in political speech. Thurow accentuates Lincoln's foresight in his recollection that "Lincoln's law partner, William H. Herndon, [claimed] after [Lincoln's] death that the president was not a believer in Christianity; [and] some even testified he was an atheist" (Thurow 12). From this vantage, a different Lincoln is brought to the forefront, his re-election address taking on an

entirely new significance. For all his political foresight and social innovation, Lincoln did not challenge the heavily religious tones of Washington. Selective of what views he would reveal to the American public, Lincoln was hence an innovator in every sense of the word, an abolitionist leader of a nation whose agrarian half depended on the institution of bondage for its sustenance.

Moreover, Lincoln was also an atheist president of a religious people, one of the primary reasons his two most impacting speeches—the Second Inaugural Address and the Gettysburg Address—were so religious in their hyperbole.

More than maintaining the façade of Lincoln's religious piety, religious speech bolstered what White refers to as the "homespun" factor (White 15).

As a man of humble beginnings, Lincoln's appeal as a self-made man sharply contrasted that of the social elite who elected him into power. The apolitical South, despite its misgivings about Lincoln's intentions for the future of

America, recognized Lincoln as more than a member of the political

bourgeois. Though they perceived his immense support from the Northern

elite, the Southern contingent of the country also observed his detractors

decrying his "homespun" style of speech and persona as something that

gained him the enmity of his Northern opposition. A considerable amount of

confusion stemmed from Lincoln's religious ambiguities; though he never

belonged to an established church, Lincoln frequently attended services with

his wife, Mary. Thurow observes that "much of the confusion surrounding

Lincoln's religion stems from the fact that commentators have tried to see

whether he belonged to the religion of the churches, neglecting the

possibility that his speeches were political, not religious, or were religious

because they were political" (Thurow 14). It was not Lincoln's lack of

professed faith that made him a leader, but rather his understanding of the

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unifying effect of religion and his “carefully thought-out understanding of political religion in America” (Thurow 14). Just as the Confederacy would make use of Christianity’s most sacred texts to justify everything from slavery to secession, so would Lincoln take advantage of religious overtones to unify America and promote national reconciliation and reconstruction.

A brilliant orator, Lincoln’s choice of diction played a significant role in the delivery and conveyance of Lincoln’s message of national reconciliation and unity.

Taking care not to use divisive terms such as “we” or “they” to refer to Northern and Southern constituents (respectively), Lincoln used strategic terms repeatedly to emphasize unity no matter the events of the war. In describing the course of the Civil War, Lincoln describes the other side not as an intangible “it” but with a genuine sense of moral equivalency and respect. There are frequent references to the nation’s civil war as a tragedy for the collective nation. For example, the war is described as “the progress of our arms” (line 8). In describing what the war meant to the people of the United States, Lincoln uses the phrases “all” repetitively in line 12 (“all dreaded it, all sought to avert it”), the phrase “both” (line 16) and the term “each” (line 25) as well. Though Lincoln does ascribe some separating characteristics to North and South, he does not specifically assign blame, instead ascribing relatively ambiguous terms. Halfway through the address, Lincoln has established the terms of the war and begins to reconcile using the word “neither” (line 24) to address both the North and the South; in using the negative “neither,” the president further reconciled the two parties by removing them both from the realm of culpability. Exonerating

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both entities, the president continues in the address by portraying opposing struggles in relatively positive terms. For instance, in line 28 the president describes each side's fighting as the means in which both parties sought "an easier triumph", giving all involved moral equivalency to one another. The venerated master politician closes the address with the completed theme of national reconciliation with the quotes "malice toward none" and "charity for all" (line 47).

The strategic repetition of certain alliteration and assonance serves to emphasize the president's points. For example, the issue of slavery is evoked as one of great importance by the repeated 'p' sound of "peculiar and powerful" (line 20). National reconciliation is reflected by the use of the 'f' sound of line 41, as the president communicates his perception of the American citizen as "fondly" hoping and "fervently" praying for a positive future. Such optimism was a necessity, as it was of the utmost importance that unity and reconciliation for a bright future were touted foremost on the political agenda. Despite the mass havoc, destruction, and loss of human life throughout the rebellious Confederate states, Lincoln's address was crafted with an uncharacteristic optimism for the time. White notes that "after four years as a war president, Lincoln could look ahead to four years as a peace president" (White 22). The Civil War was not the only issue addressed, however. North and South were only one party at odds with each other. The fledgling Republican party Lincoln so aptly represented was highly criticized for its disputed reconstruction plan. Moreover, political rifts still remained between Northern Democrats who remained loyal to the Union and the predominantly Southern Democrats who seceded. Thus, the "election of

1864 would be one of the most decisive in American history—and potentially the most catastrophic” (Striner 217).

Lincoln’s political strategies were remarkable, most notably his ability to entertain the political goals of many without compromising his base of support. Alexander McClure’s compilation of letters revealed how politicians with opposing political agendas including “ antagonistic elements to [Lincoln’s] own support” approached the president, who made it a point to “ maintain close and often apparently confidential relations with each without offence to the other” (McClure 85).

Lincoln’s proclivity towards national reconciliation stemmed from an “ abiding faith in the people, in their intelligence and their patriotism”; the president “ estimated political results by ascertaining, as far as possible, the popular bearing of every vital question that was likely to arise, and he formed his conclusions by his keen intuitive perception as to how the people would be likely to deal with the issues” (McClure 87).

Lincoln was the ideal candidate to handle the fractious political environment of post-bellum America. There were few “ political movements of national importance during Lincoln’s administration in which he did not actively, although often hiddenly, participate” (McClure 85). Crossing political party lines, Lincoln successively galvanized Congress across partisan issues. The Civil War marginalized not only Southerners, but also Northern Democrats who were among the minority of said party to support the Union against the insurgency. The second inaugural address could not alienate the already marginalized white Northern Democrats, as the actions of their Southern

secessionist brethren made the Democratic Party something of a political pariah in the Union's eye. In the years leading to Lincoln's re-election, Democrats in the Union "never gave speeches, framed resolutions," or took any stance of progressive thought for fear of eschewing Southern Democratic support. The issue of slavery, for example, was pivotal in Democratic thought and political action. Though touted by the president as "two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil" and inherently frowned upon by "God" and morality, slavery was a divisive issue among Northern Democrats to say the least (line 43). Though pockets of the North such as New England were adamantly abolitionist, there was no significant shortage of support for the institution of slavery on the grounds of racial superiority. For every "popular expression of the [black man] as human, there" was a [derisive] counterpart" that dehumanized the so-called "Negro" cause (McClure 88). Consequently, Lincoln faced problems among the Northern elite, who "by using popular [racist] language and symbols" managed to "link popular sentiments to party agenda" (McClure 89).

Perhaps one of the most pivotal and important issues of the Lincoln administration, slavery and its abolition may very well have served as the archetype of social and political change for the American nation. Proponents of slavery were as such supportive of the institution for more than social or perceived moral imperative; in addition to being burdened by the incapacitation of agrarian and some industrial facilities at the end of the Civil War, the American economy would be burdened by the throwing of "4 million former slaves onto the world with virtually nothing: no land, no savings, little or no schooling, no experience of politics, the legal system, or

the free economy” (Golay 208). Despite the president’s push for abolition and moral recompense with the equivocation of “ every drop of blood drawn with the lash” to “ another drawn by the sword” (lines 44-45), there was a rift in opinion over how best to deal with the economic windfall of supporting four million newly impoverished freed slaves. The president encountered significant opposition from both parties in supporting the freed slave; Lincoln had established a bureau expected “ to protect the freed people, distribute emergency relief to the destitute, build an equitable free labor system, and establish a system of basic education throughout the South” (Golay 208). The funding for the said bureau would naturally come from Reconstruction efforts, but few members of White America—North or South—would give equal priority to freed black slaves as they would confederate states.

Lincoln faced the spectre of two types of nationalism: the nationalism defined by the then-predominantly Republican Union and the nationalism defined by what was a predominantly Democratic Confederacy. Jean Baker wrote in Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century that:

“ In the years before the Civil War one way to express nationalism was to be a Democrat. Some Americans still suspected political parties of subversion, but by mid-century the Democracy had emerged as an institution through which citizens could celebrate devotion to their country and at the same time favour particular programs, leaders, and ideals. No longer was partisanship considered antirepublican. On the contrary, its nature tended to evoke sentiment for the Union and thus forced Southern separatists like John

Calhoun and William Yancey to attempt a replacement. In the North, however, the Democracy continued to inspire unity” (Baker 318).

Once dominant in the public eye, the Democrats were faced with a new challenge and a new bane to overcome in the regaining of the Union’s trust. While the issue of partisan affiliation was not a topic nearly as frequented then as it is today, a considerable Democratic identity was established with the disaffected South; it was not for some time that the Democratic Party championed the Northern caucus. By comparison, Republicans in the mid-nineteenth century were equally as suspect to national dissolution, as the prevailing theme of the reigning Democratic party was “ inescapably nationalistic,” focusing on “ the preservation of union, liberty, and constitution” (Baker 318).

Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address became an insightful indicator of the requisite political, social, and economic changes that were necessary in the reconstruction of post-bellum America. Galvanizing the country’s opposing social and political factions, Lincoln’s address was a masterful piece of oration that testified to both his earnest nature and shrewd understanding of not just politics, but the political climate of America and its fragile stasis. Its diction, alliteration, and religious allegories worked together in a patchwork of executive prestidigitation; Lincoln’s delivery was almost a political sleight of hand in its theme and scope. Though he would be assassinated in a matter of a few months following the delivery of the speech, Lincoln achieved political normalcy in the aftermath of America’s most debilitating war, garnering the collective enmity of an entire half of a nation and the admiration of the remainder. To his opponents, Lincoln was a democratically-

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elected aspiring autocrat as evidenced by John Wilkes Booth's infamous quote " *sic semper tyrannus* . " To his grateful and loyal supporters, however, Lincoln managed the unthinkable: the abolition of slavery and the retention of American unity.

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