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Thinking About Lincoln: War, Reconciliation, and the "Better Angels of our Nature"

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Photo credit

BY JAMES MARTEN

On a rainy March afternoon in 1865, Abraham Lincoln gave the greatest speech of his life. Pennsylvania Avenue was packed with people: a sea of desperately wounded soldiers, weary politicians, and hopeful African Americans who, a few years or even months earlier, had been slaves. On the east steps of the White House, Lincoln delivered a humble, patriotic, and devout coda to the American Civil War, the bloodiest war in American history. At just over 700 words, the speech was one of the shortest inaugural addresses to come from a president. Yet, despite its brevity, it will forever be remembered if only for the famous last paragraph, which begins, “With malice toward none; with charity for all.”

These famous words, long considered an eloquent testament to forgiveness and reconciliation, reflected Lincoln’s own surprising moderation. Although sectional differences and political partisanship had literally torn America in half during his first term as president,

Lincoln had never considered himself to be anything less than a moderate. Lincoln, like Confederate President Jefferson Davis, was born in the pro-slavery state of Kentucky. Though he was raised in poverty and had little formal schooling, Lincoln rose through the ranks as a frontier lawyer, soldier, and legislator. He was selected as the 1860 Republican candidate—later becoming the first Republican ever elected to the office of president—precisely because of his moderate view.

Although he came to be known as the “Great Emancipator,” he never considered himself to be an abolitionist. And, even though he was the commander in chief of the Union army, many members of his wife’s family were Confederate officers and slave owners. Indeed, more than most Americans at the time, Lincoln understood the tragedy of sectionalism that had spiraled out of control and turned into a civil war that claimed the lives of 600,000 of his fellow Americans.

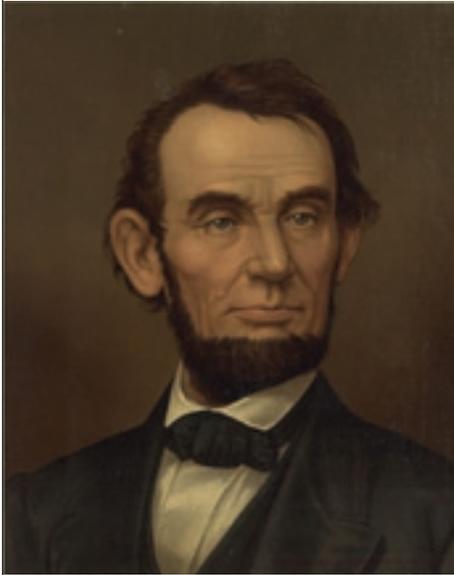
Lincoln’s search for moderation and for a renewed national purpose finds expression in the careful language and nuanced arguments of the Second Inaugural Address. This five- or six-minute speech, delivered only a month before the official close of the American Civil War, reveals a far more complicated Lincoln than most Americans know. The speech seeks to explain the origins and progress of the war and Lincoln provides a stunningly simple interpretation: “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.” His choice of verbs indicated his belief that the South was more in the wrong than the North, yet the passive verb of the next passage seems less accusatory: “And the war came.”

After leading his country through four brutal years of war, after issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, and after witnessing the escape and amnesty of hundreds of thousands of slaves, Lincoln

was willing to say that by 1865, “all knew that [slavery] was, somehow, the cause of war.” Even though neither side “anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease,” Lincoln believed that the “mighty scourge of war” was the providential way—the only way—to end the equally mighty scourge of slavery.

The Second Inaugural, like many of Lincoln’s speeches, draws on both secular humanist and biblical inspiration for rhetorical effect. Lincoln points to the folly of appealing to God for victory and tells us that, even though Americans in both the North and the South “read the same Bible, and pray to the same God,” each “invokes His aid against the other.”

Neither side shall receive absolute victory, however, because “the prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully.” Lincoln’s sobering reminder that the plans and prayers of men are always subject to the will of God gives way to his soaring ending, used by Americans ever since to support their image of Lincoln as the gentle emancipator, empathetic humanist, and archetypal American: “With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the



Abraham Lincoln, chromolithograph; 28 x 23 cm. Cincinnati: Strobridge & Co., c. 1877.

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 a lasting peace, among ourselves and with all nations.”

Lincoln was killed by an assassin’s bullet less than a month after he delivered his now-famous speech, and the

nation soon fell into the hyper-partisanship of the Reconstruction years. But this does not lessen the power of his words, which came at a time when Americans needed inspiration and reconciliation; a time not unlike today, when we seek—to borrow the last few words from Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address—“the better angels of our nature.”

And while Lincoln spent just a few days in Wisconsin during his lifetime, passing through as captain of a military company during the 1832 Black Hawk War and again returning as president in 1859 to address a crowd at the Wisconsin State Fair in Milwaukee, Wisconsinites—like all Americans—have been inspired by his words and deeds. ✨

James Marten is professor and chair of the history department at Marquette University. A member of the Wisconsin Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, he is the author of several books on the Civil War era, including Texas Divided: Loyalty and Dissent in the Lone Star State, 1856–1874 (1990); Civil War America: Voices from the Homefront (2003), and The Children’s Civil War (1998). He is currently writing a book about Civil War veterans in Gilded Age society.

LINCOLN TEACH-IN KICKS OFF THIS YEAR

This essay reflects the message of the “Lincoln Teach-In” that will be held on college and university campuses throughout Wisconsin on March 4, 2009, the 144th anniversary of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address. The discussions, lectures, essays, and web postings planned for the teach-in are part of a statewide, year-long commemoration of the bicentennial of Lincoln’s February 12 birthday. Many teach-in events will be sponsored by the Wisconsin Lincoln Bicentennial Commission (WLBC), whose members are amateur and professional historians, teachers, lawyers, public servants, and representatives of various government and nonprofit agencies appointed by Governor Jim Doyle. The Commission website, hosted by the Wisconsin Department of Tourism, provides an up-to-date listing of these events at Lincoln200.wi.gov. Members of the public who would like to join Wisconsin students in a discussion of this historic speech can find it, along with a discussion guide and Lincoln bibliography, on the WLBC website.

The “Lincoln Teach-In” seeks to help the rising generation contemplate the nature of patriotism, the issue of race, the role of religion in public life, and a myriad of other issues through the lens of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address. The teach-in, one of the earliest events sponsored by the WLBC, will encourage students and professors to think beyond what we know of the Second Inaugural, to understand the larger contexts in which the speech was delivered, and to reflect on the American values that Lincoln’s words represent. “Lincoln is present to us in his own agonizing struggle for justice and reconciliation,” writes Ronald C. White Jr. in his new book, *Lincoln’s Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural*. “He encourages us to ask difficult questions as we accept responsibility for defining America in our time.” Making that connection between the past and the present will be the challenge for the Commission. It’s their task to reintroduce Wisconsin teachers, students, and interested citizens to a speech many think they already know.