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Abraham Lincoln

The First and Greatest

The Gettysburg Address

NOVEMBER 19, 1863

BATTLEFIELD, GETTYSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

It is a flat failure.

—Abraham Lincoln to his friend Ward Lamon after delivering the Gettysburg Address

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here

> *to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.*

Throughout his life, Abraham Lincoln was surrounded by death. He was born on February 12, 1809, in a log cabin on a Kentucky farm, and his childhood and early adulthood had been an arduous lesson in mortality. His younger brother, Thomas, died in infancy. Then, when Abraham was nine years old, his mother, Nancy Lincoln, contracted "milk sickness" from her uncle and aunt, Thomas and Elizabeth Sparrow. The disease was caused by drinking milk from cows that had ingested poisonous white snakeroot. That all three individuals had fallen ill was doubly difficult for Lincoln, as the Sparrows had been like grandparents to him. So when Thomas and Elizabeth died from milk sickness, Lincoln was crestfallen. But his grief would pale to that which he would experience two weeks later when Nancy succumbed to the disease as well. On her deathbed, just moments before her final passing, Lincoln's mother told him, "I am going away from you, Abraham. And I shall not return."[1]

Ten years later, at the age of nineteen, Lincoln's older sister, Sarah, died while giving birth. Following Nancy's passing, Sarah had been like a second mother to Lincoln. Yet again, Lincoln had been forced to absorb loss, and with it the melancholy that would hover over him like a fog throughout his life. Even as he delivered the speech for which he is most remembered—the Gettysburg Address—Lincoln had donned the symbols of death. His iconic black silk stovepipe hat had been outfitted with a mourner's ribbon to recognize the recent

death of yet another person close to him: his beloved son Willie. He had *worn* death.

Indeed, Lincoln felt at home with loss. He had numbed himself to its pain. And so perhaps it should not be surprising that as president Lincoln delivered his most famous speech while standing inside the vortex of a war that had become a whirlwind of human carnage. The pangs of loss Lincoln had experienced throughout his life had burrowed themselves into the rhythms and cadence of his rhetoric. And it was these qualities that culminated on November 19, 1863, in the greatest presidential speech in U.S. history.

It is hard for modern people to wrap their minds around the magnitude of death the Civil War produced. Two percent of the entire U.S. population had been killed, roughly 618,000 dead. Were such losses to be experienced given today's U.S. population, they would result in roughly six million dead Americans. What's more, over the course of those four blood-soaked years, it was quite common for two- and three-day battles to account for more deaths than the total loss experienced in some U.S. wars. From July 1–3, 1863, the three-day Battle of Gettysburg claimed fifty thousand men, almost as many men as would die during the eleven years of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

To be sure, during the 1800s death was a much more prevalent and accepted part of daily life. Infant mortality rates and deaths from diseases and childbirth were exponentially higher than those of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Likely because of this fact, people living in the nineteenth century possessed a fascination with death in general and cemeteries in particular. Historian Garry Wills goes so far as to describe the period as a "culture of death." And it is in this context that Lincoln's Gettysburg Address must be viewed.[2]

Yet even given the more accepted attitudes toward human loss, the Battle of Gettysburg had been especially brutal, even by Civil War standards. The three-day summer battle began on the morning of July 1, when Confederate soldiers had spotted Union horsemen on Cashtown Road, just northwest of the city of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. By

day's end, the rebel forces had pushed the Union army south of the city and pinned them into defensive positions on Culp's Hill and Cemetery Hill. By day three, at three in the afternoon, General Robert E. Lee ordered Confederate soldiers to attack the center of the Union line in what became the ill-fated "Pickett's Charge." When General George Pickett's men mounted the assault, they ran into a wall of withering artillery and musket fire from Union general Gordon Meade's troops. When the smoke cleared, an estimated fifty thousand bodies lay strewn on the battlefield.

As was customary during this period, particularly during the first two years of the Civil War, soldiers were frequently buried in the place they had been killed in battle, often in graves that had been haphazardly marked. But all this would soon change when Andrew G. Curtin, the Republican governor of Pennsylvania, toured the Gettysburg battlefield with David Wills, a prominent local attorney. Historian Ronald C. White Jr. describes what Curtin and Wills saw on July 10, 1863, as well as what this scene spurred them to do:

> They observed that graves were crudely marked, here by a piece of fencing, there by boards from ammunition or cracker boxes. Before returning to Harrisburg, Curtin asked Wills to be his agent, taking charge of plans to properly bury the dead even as farmers sought to resume their farming in these same fields. The diligent Wills became a prime mover in formulating plans for a national cemetery for a national army. He accumulated possession of seventeen acres for the new cemetery. The governors of all eighteen states in the Union were contacted. An interstate commission was formed. . . . The decision was made early on that such a national cemetery required a national dedication.[3]

The event planners, headed by Wills, wanted to secure Edward Everett as the keynote speaker. Everett was a man of great accomplishment and oratorical skill. He boasted an impressive resume: a former president of Harvard College, a former U.S. senator for the state of Massachusetts, and a former secretary of state. But when organizers

contacted Everett a month before the originally planned October 23 event, Everett, ever the perfectionist, quickly replied that a month was hardly enough time for him to research and prepare his speech. November 19, said Everett, would be the preferred date to present a speech of this magnitude.[4] Thus the date was set.

Lincoln did not receive his official invitation to speak until just seventeen days before the event. Lincoln had not been invited to deliver a formal oration, but "as Chief Executive of the nation, [to] formally set apart these grounds to their sacred use by a few appropriate remarks." The president's invitation was likely preceded by backchannel communications through Lincoln's close friend and associate, Ward Hill Lamon, whom organizers had selected to serve as the grand marshal of the procession at Gettysburg, most likely because of his closeness to the president.[5] Popular myth holds that Lincoln dashed off the Gettysburg Address on the back of an envelope en route to the speech. This is entirely false. While many of Lincoln's early prepresidential speeches had been delivered impromptu, his presidential addresses were carefully crafted. And so it was with the Gettysburg Address. Almost from the moment he received the formal invitation, Lincoln devoted serious time and attention to the remarks he would deliver at the dedication of the new national cemetery. He even employed the counsel of White House landscape architect William Saunders to learn the topography of the location where he would soon speak. Using White House stationery, Lincoln began to write.[6]

At only 272 words in length, the Gettysburg Address draws its historic power from at least three central features of its design. The first and most structurally pervasive of these elements is Lincoln's use of life-cycle metaphors that build a temporal organizational pattern throughout the speech's introduction, body, and conclusion. These metaphors have the effect of taking the listener from the past to the present and into the future. Collectively, these metaphors conceptualize the nation as a living entity that must be nurtured, protected, and defended. In the *prooemium* (introduction) of the Gettysburg Address, for example,

Lincoln says that the nation had been "*conceived* in Liberty"; later, in the body of the speech he repeats the word *conceived* and then states that dedicating a portion of the battlefield is critical because the men who fought and died at Gettysburg had done so "that that nation might *live*"; and then in his epilogue (closure), the Republican president declares that these men had not died in vain, but had instead died so that the new nation could experience a "new *birth* of freedom" in order that that nation would not "*perish*" from the earth.

The second structural feature of Lincoln's speech—its use of biblical allusion and religious symbolism—builds off the first. By patterning his speech after the life cycle, not only had Lincoln used a chronological sequence from "conception" to "living" to "rebirth" but he had also embedded his deep Christian belief in the afterlife into the text. Like the Christian believer, Lincoln argued, the nation's sin of slavery could be washed clean so that the nation could experience salvation and thus experience a "new birth" (as in the modern locution "born-again Christian") so that the nation "shall not perish" (eternal life).

The structure of Lincoln's speech wasn't the only thing that was suffused with Christian belief. The words themselves radiated biblical tones and truths. Arguably the most famous six words of any American presidential speech, "Four score and seven years ago" was not only an attention-getting way of saying "eighty-seven years ago" but it also echoed the King James version of Psalm 90:10: "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labor and sorrow." In reference to the spiritual quality of Lincoln's speech opener, rhetoric critic Edwin Black notes, "The first paragraph of the Gettysburg Address seems addressed to the ages. Lincoln does not imply a particular audience. He speaks the voice of omniscience."[7]

But beyond the religious-laden structure of his speech, Lincoln's lexical choices were sure to resonate with an audience steeped in Christianity. One of the most striking examples of this occurs in the president's use of a *scala*, a rhetorical device that uses words of ascending importance to create an upward moving staircaselike structure, as in Lincoln's memorable line "But, in a sense, we can not dedicate—

we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground." To *dedicate* something means to set it apart for God's purposes. To *consecrate* it involves the process of sanctification or making it sacred, as in the preparation of the Eucharist elements in Communion. But to *hallow* something means to render it "holy." In this way, Lincoln's line creates a crescendo of spiritual significance for the president's Christian listeners.

In his prepared text, the president had not originally included the phrase "under God." Instead, rather unlike Lincoln, he added those words either just before the speech or during his delivery. What is clear is that Lincoln made certain that the three subsequent copies he prepared at later dates reflected his decision to include the phrase "that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom."[8]

Religious expressions made during funerals were hardly new. Neither was the model for eulogies. Indeed it was Pericles's Funeral Oration that had set the standard for funeral speeches to come. Pericles's funeral speech had praised not only the dead Athenian soldiers during the Peloponnesian War, but it had also praised the democratic ideals for which Athens stood. In elevating Athens, Pericles explained, citizens would elevate the men who died on its behalf: "I have dwelt upon the greatness of Athens because I want to show you that we are contending for a higher prize than those who enjoy none of these privileges, and to establish by manifest proof the merit of these men whom I am now commemorating. Their loftiest praise has been already spoken. For in magnifying the city I have magnified them, and men like them whose virtues made her glorious."

In speaking about the nation, Lincoln had been in keeping with the Athenian tradition set by Pericles. What differed, what made Lincoln's approach unique, was his application of Christian doctrine to a nonhuman entity, such as the nation. In this way, the Gettysburg Address is better understood as a speech focused on the transmogrification of a set of disparate, bloodied, sin-drenched states into a purified, unified nation. Thus, the salvation of which Lincoln spoke was directed at the *nation*, a term he uses five times throughout his address, not at the individuals he eulogized.

In addition, Lincoln's use of strategic ambiguity gives the speech its timeless quality. His lack of specificity, once considered, is quite striking and further confirms that Lincoln intended his speech to be a political reaffirmation of the morality of the Civil War just as much as a solemn dedication. Specific references to battles or individuals or even the actual location of which he speaks are nowhere to be found. "His tone was deliberately abstract," writes Pulitzer Prize–winning historian David Herbert Donald. "He made no specific reference to either the battle of Gettysburg or of the cemetery that he was dedicating, he did not mention the South or the Confederacy, and he did not speak of the Army of the Potomac or of its commanders. He was deliberately moving away from the particular occasion to make a general argument."[9]

Finally, blending both life-cycle metaphors with biblical allusions and symbols, Lincoln used antitheses to drive home the Civil War's stark moral stakes. With hundreds of thousands of deaths piling up over four years, the scourge of slavery had to be cast in the clearest of moral terms. For rhetoricians, the juxtaposition of oppositional forces is best accomplished through the use of antitheses—sentences that place antonyms in close proximity in order to create a striking contrast that grabs attention. This black-and-white vision of the moral universe leaves little room for gray. So, for example, Lincoln's antitheses involved opposites, such as *living* versus *dead*, *add* versus *detract*, *remember* versus *forget*, and *birth* versus *perish*. Each of these constructions further emphasizes the clarity of purpose and unequivocal nature of Lincoln's belief about the rightness of his cause.

On the day of the cemetery dedication, an estimated nine thousand people had formed a thick half-circle around the twelve-by-twenty-foot wooden platform from which Everett and President Lincoln would speak. Lincoln had spent the night before at David Wills's home. Following breakfast, the president and an entourage of governors, congressmen, military leaders, and cabinet officers had all made their entry into the venue on horseback. Lincoln's horse was chestnut in color and short in stature. So short, in fact, that observers

recalled that the president's long, lanky legs seemed to drag on the ground as his horse clopped along.[10]

Although it was a solemn occasion, well-wishers crowded Lincoln, greeting him with handshakes. Lincoln wore his trademark black suit and black silk stovepipe hat with a mourning band in honor of his son Willie. At the speaker's platform, Lincoln was forced to wait for Everett to arrive. Everett, who suffered from bladder dysfunction, had arranged for a small tent to be placed near the platform in case he had to relieve himself; he knew how long he planned to talk, and there was no telling how long Lincoln might speak or how long it might take to wade through the sea of spectators who had gathered for the occasion.[11]

When Everett finally delivered his two-hour-and-eight-minute oration, he did so from memory. His speech manuscript, which lay unused on a nearby table, was over thirteen thousand words in length. The speech had been wrought and delivered in what ancient rhetoricians called "the grand style." Typified by its emphasis on ornate language, Everett's speech had been a study in detail and precision, further evidence of his trademark research and preparation. In fact, Everett had been so meticulous that he had spent three days before his speech surveying the battlefield terrain to check every detail and topographical reference to ensure the authenticity and accuracy of his descriptions. No less a powerful orator than John Quincy Adams, "Old Man Eloquent," as he was often called, once said that Everett's orations were "among the best ever delivered in this country and would stand the test of time."[12]

No sooner had Everett concluded his florid, baroque address than did Lincoln, with merely 272 words, whisk away a bygone era of old-style oratory and usher in the so-called plain style, a public speaking style Americans know well today. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, one could say, was the genesis of the modern sound-bite culture. It wasn't that economy of language was new; rather, it was that it had long been ignored in favor of the more embellished style.[13] So terse was Lincoln's Gettysburg Address that when a photographer at the foot of the speaking platform had made the unfortunate decision to reset his

equipment at the start of the president's speech, Lincoln had already concluded his remarks before the photographer could snap his first picture.

The brevity of the president's address stunned members of his audience. The hotels had been packed the night before; audience members had stood and waited for hours for the event to begin, even before Everett's two-hour address. Even the preacher's opening prayer had been longer than Lincoln's speech. And then, as audience members were settling in for another lengthy stem-winder like Everett's, in less than three minutes the towering president had said something about "government of the people, by the people, for the people," stopped speaking, and sat down. That was it. Nothing more. The audience had been so awestruck by the extreme brevity of Lincoln's speech that they had hesitated an unusually long time before applauding. Perhaps because of this, Lincoln had immediately felt his speech a failure. "Lamon," the president said aloud to his friend, "that speech won't *scour*! It is a flat failure, and the people are disappointed."[14]

But Everett's oratorical sensibilities told him otherwise. The day following their joint appearance, the magnanimous Everett wrote Lincoln a letter: "Permit me . . . to express my great admiration of the thoughts expressed by you, with such eloquent simplicity & appropriateness, at the consecration of the cemetery. I should be glad, if I could flatter myself, that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes."[15] In reply, an equally gracious Lincoln wrote, "Your kind note of today is received. In our respective parts yesterday, you could not have been excused to make a short address, nor I a long one. I am pleased to know that, in your judgment, the little I did say was not entirely a failure. Of course, I knew Mr. Everett would not fail, and yet, while the whole discourse was eminently satisfactory, and will be of great value, there were passages in it which transcended my expectations."[16]

Despite Lincoln's harsh self-critique, newspaper accounts of the Gettysburg Address varied widely. In his analysis of newspaper responses to the president's speech, Ronald F. Reid finds that, not surprisingly, Everett's speech received almost double the commentary as

Lincoln's. The historically partisan nature of newspapers was also reflected in the coverage: 40 percent of pro-administration "Republican" papers featured Lincoln's speech on the front page versus only 14 percent of the antiadministration newspapers.[17] Still, despite the smattering of positive and glowing reviews, the grandeur and gravity of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address would only grow henceforth.

As Edwin Black observes, the Gettysburg Address "is not just a vindication of the Civil War, or a poem to democracy, or a meditation on the legacies of the dead and the obligations of the living. It is also a map and a chronicle: it locates a burial ground in relation to all of space, and it fixes that moment of location in relation to all of time."[18] Lincoln's speech was just as much a political defense of his administration's war policies as it was a declaration of his commitment to democratic self-governance. But it was his use of life-cycle metaphors animated by both biblical allusion and antithetical sentence structures that made his address the magisterial marvel it became.

When Lincoln's special four-car presidential train brought him to Gettysburg the day before his speech, Lincoln stepped off the locomotive only to see hundreds of coffins on the train station platform. Just weeks before the cemetery dedication, the battlefield-turned-graveyard was still littered with fragments of human bone and hair belonging to the over fifty thousand men who fell there. But Lincoln felt right at home in such a place. Like the birth-death juxtapositions that filled his speech, Lincoln's melancholy life and deep spiritual faith had steeled him. They had allowed him to accept the inevitability of death as a necessary and essential part of rebirth and salvation, both of the human and the national souls.

Some things, Lincoln believed, were worth fighting and dying for.

Second Inaugural

MARCH 4, 1865

U.S. CAPITOL, WASHINGTON, D.C.

That was a sacred effort.

—Frederick Douglass, Republican and former slave,
commenting on Lincoln's second inaugural

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.

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.

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. 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 offences! For it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!"

If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences 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 offence 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 bond-man'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."

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

On the morning of March 4, 1865, Frederick Douglass, a lifelong Republican and former slave turned Abolitionist leader, trudged his way through the wet Washington streets alongside the estimated fifty thousand citizens who had assembled at the Capitol to watch the second inauguration of Abraham Lincoln. As the era's leading black orator, Douglass had grown accustomed to standing behind the lectern, often advancing the cause of the Republican Party. But on this day he was a spectator. He had come to listen.

Douglass's commitment to the Republican Party was no secret: "I am a Republican, a black, dyed in the wool Republican, and I never intend to belong to any other party than the party of freedom and progress," he declared. Indeed, so sweeping was black support for the Grand Old Party (GOP) that of the over fifteen hundred black officeholders of the Reconstruction period, only fifteen were Democrats.[19] The reason? Like Douglass, black Americans had seen their Republican Party fight Democrats and the Ku Klux Klan, an organization that University of North Carolina emeritus professor of history William Trelease notes was "the terrorist arm of the Democratic

Party." Moreover, African Americans of the period knew their history. They had watched Republicans fight for and pass sweeping historic civil rights victories, including the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments; the Civil Rights Act of 1865; the First Reconstruction Act of 1867; the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871; and the Civil Rights Act of 1875.[20]

But on this day, Douglass had braved the unrelenting rains to see his fellow Republican and friend Abraham Lincoln deliver what would become the most famous presidential inaugural address in U.S. history. Following an embarrassing, drunken ramble of an oration by Andrew Johnson, his Democratic vice president, Lincoln leaned over to the parade marshal and whispered, "Do not let Johnson speak outside." After being introduced, Lincoln stood up, put on his steel-rimmed eyeglasses, and walked up to the white iron table that served as a lectern. Looking out over the ocean of faces that had assembled to see him speak, the president's eyes found Douglass's face in the crowd. That Douglass and the other black citizens had been permitted to participate in the ceremonies was somewhat unusual; blacks had been barred from attending previous inaugural festivities. But Douglass figured "it was not too great an assumption for a colored man to offer his congratulations to the President with those of other citizens."[21] So he went.

Also in the crowd had been myriad soldiers, fresh from Civil War battlefields and hospitals. The fact that many were amputees made them painfully easy to spot. Indeed, 75 percent of all Civil War surgeries were amputations. Citizens assembled for Lincoln's second inaugural had been shocked to see scores of soldiers missing arms and legs in the audience.[22] The words the president would soon speak, however, had been constructed to address both the literal and symbolic wounds of the nation. And like the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln's speech would depend heavily on his infusion of Christianity and biblical references as he sought to unite both North and South, even as Confederates were in the last throes of rebellion.

. . .

At the exact moment that President Lincoln began delivering his second inaugural, the cloud-covered skies parted and allowed a burst of sunshine to beam through. Later that day Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase, who would administer the oath of office to Lincoln, wrote to Mary Todd Lincoln, Lincoln's wife, that "the beautiful sunshine" breaking through the clouds had been "an auspicious omen of the dispersion of the clouds of war and the restoration of the clear sunlight of prosperous peace under the wise & just administration of him who took" the oath of office. Likewise, Lincoln later told a friend that he was "just superstitious enough to consider it a happy omen."[23] Lincoln began:

> *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.*

These beginning words of Lincoln's 703-word speech, the second-shortest inaugural address in U.S. history, did not portend a great oration. As rhetoric scholar Michael Leff observed, "the opening paragraph contains no striking ideas or stylistic flourishes, in fact, it has a somewhat awkward appearance."[24] Yet the lackluster, deflated, impersonal opening had the effect of directing focus away from Lincoln and toward uniting the nation.

> *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.*

The magnanimity of such a passage should be clear. With limbless Union soldiers hobbling about the Capitol, Lincoln's refusal to directly and unequivocally assign blame to Confederate states for the mass deaths the Union suffered all but ran the risk of offending Northern segments of his audience. But Lincoln was intent on striking an inclusive tone. Therefore, he used ambiguity as a form of absolution, as a way of "getting on with it." Nowhere does the president specify *which* party "made war" and which one "accepted it." All along, the president had desired to thrust the nation beyond the bloody conflict over slavery to a place of healing and reconciliation. So much so, in fact, that Lincoln made a point of visiting both Union and Confederate soldiers in the hospitals throughout Washington.

Still, Union supporters had a right to feel jilted; the war had lasted far longer than any had expected, largely because of the rebels' refusal to stop fighting, thus resulting in far greater total casualties for the North than the South. Lincoln's conciliatory tone led Republican leaders such as Pennsylvania congressman Thaddeus Stevens to forcefully lobby the president to not make too hasty and painless a peace with the South. Stevens wanted Lincoln to rub Southerners' faces in the sin of slavery. He wanted to force them to "eat the fruit of foul rebellion." When the congressman said this, Lincoln looked at him for a moment in silence before replying, "Stevens, this is a pretty big hog we are trying to catch, and to hold when we do catch him."[25]

Eschewing what must have been an enormous political temptation to scapegoat the causes, the war, and the immorality of slavery solely

on the South, Lincoln instead chose to share responsibility for the conflict in an effort to begin suturing the wounds of a riven nation. Even in that most powerful and famous last line of the passage—"And the war came"—Lincoln speaks as if the war were somehow inevitable, like an unavoidable natural disaster. Indeed, as Lincoln soon makes clear, that is precisely what the president suggests the Civil War may very well have been: a God-ordained punishment for the national sin of slavery.

> *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. 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 offences! For it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!"*

This passage sees the introduction of a barrage of biblical references woven together with the theological conundrums Lincoln saw running through the conflict. In total, the second inaugural contains

fourteen references to God (or some variation, as in "Almighty" or "His") and four direct quotes from the Bible. This passage, perhaps more than any other, fuses Lincoln's forgiving rhetoric of reconciliation with biblical insights and mysteries. Moreover, the use of words such as *both* as well as *and* further collapsed the divide between both sides, because they suggested a sameness, a oneness that mirrored the idea that all citizens are children of God who "read the same Bible, and pray to the same God."

Lincoln's first use of scripture came from Genesis 3:19; it was the closest he came to scolding the South for using prayer as a mechanism to maintain the institution of slavery. In the King James Version, Genesis 3:19 reads: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." By prefacing his biblical reference with "it may seem strange that any men should dare," Lincoln had delivered a rhetorical clenched fist wrapped in a velvet glove by suggesting that Confederate conceptions of Christianity as being compatible with slavery was "strange." Some scholars, such as Martha Solomon, suggest that Lincoln's rhetorical move represents a form of "moral hegemony" against the South.[26] But when considered alongside the president's next biblical reference, such a view seems overstated.

In the same sentence, the president pulls back the reins of indignation against Southern invocations of religion to preserve slavery. Citing Matthew 7:1, Lincoln said, "But let us judge not that we be not judged." Having planted the seed of Southern theological bastardization, Lincoln tempers the earlier half of the sentence by suggesting that it is not the place of humans to sit in judgment over God's designs. But he doesn't stop there. The president then shifts his focus to scold both sides for believing that God fully and completely favored one side over the other. Lincoln's is not a message of moral relativism, however. Far from it. He makes it clear that he believes God has a Divine purpose, plan, and will ("The Almighty has His own purposes"). But Lincoln also believed that man does not possess the intellectual capacity or spiritual knowledge required to decipher God's desires.

Finally, while warning against the temptation of hubris or moral superiority, Lincoln reminded the nation that sin is not without consequence. Underscoring God's abhorrence of sin, the president referenced Matthew 18:7: "Woe unto the world because of offences! For it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" This biblical reference concludes this passage and acts as a bridge into the next:

> *If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences 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 offence 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 bond-man'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."*

This second to last passage is remarkable on several levels. First, by saying "*American* Slavery" [emphasis mine], Lincoln underscores his inclusive theme. As Ronald C. White Jr. notes, Lincoln "could have said 'slavery' or 'Southern slavery,' or simply located slaves as residing in the South. Instead he uses the inclusive *American Slavery*."[27] In this way, Lincoln refuses to let the North off the moral hook; he seems to be saying that sins of omission (North) are no less repugnant in the eyes of God than sins of commission (South).

Second, having already in the first paragraph buffered against grand declarations or predictions that the war is in its final gasps—"With

high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured"—Lincoln inoculates his military strategy against future criticism should the war languish on. By casting the "terrible war" and "mighty scourge of war" as forms of God's punishment and retributive justice for slavery, Lincoln attempts to silence both North and South from further critique of his administration. After all, Lincoln's argument goes, every drop of blood spilled by the slave owner's whip is even now being repaid by the blood spilled on the battlefield. Similar to the theme he developed at Gettysburg, Lincoln was saying that while the war may have begun as a way to preserve the Union, God may also have used the war to end and cleanse the nation of the unrighteousness of slavery. Moreover, he suggests, it is not the right of humans to question the purposes of God. Thus, "in destroying slavery, the war to save the Union had been worth the heavy cost. God in His wisdom had made it so."[28]

> *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 a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.*

In this, the most famous and quoted of passages from the second inaugural, Lincoln's lead antithesis juxtaposes the words *none* and *all* to further emphasize the inclusive, unifying theme developed throughout the speech. By making the nation a metaphorical patient in need of bandaging, as well as stressing the need to "care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan," Lincoln's line must have been especially moving for his audience, as many in the crowd were literally shoulder to shoulder with amputee veterans. Concern for the widows and orphans of soldiers—both Union and Confederate—was a message that transcended the conflict. What's more, he completes the final stop on his temporal time line that went from past to present to future with the words "let us

strive on to finish." He also balances moral clarity ("with firmness in the right") with Christian humility ("as God gives us to see the right"). As historian Doris Kearns Goodwin notes, "More than any of his other speeches, the Second Inaugural fused spiritual faith with politics."[29]

Newspaper coverage, while generally favorable, predictably broke mostly along partisan lines, just as it had with Lincoln's address at Gettysburg. But it had been the praise of one member of Lincoln's audience that had mattered most to him: his fellow Republican and friend, Frederick Douglass. At a White House reception following the president's speech, Lincoln stood shaking the hands of a long line of well-wishers who had come to congratulate him. At one point in the party, someone notified Lincoln that Douglass was at the front door, but that police had stopped the former slave from entering because he was black. Douglass describes in moving detail what happened next:

> I told the officers I was quite sure there must be some mistake, for no such order could have emanated from President Lincoln; and if he knew I was at the door he would desire my admission. They then . . . assumed an air of politeness, and offered to conduct me in. We followed their lead, and soon found ourselves walking some planks out of a window, which had been arranged as a temporary passage for the exit of visitors. . . . I said to the officers: "You have deceived me. I shall not go out of this building till I see President Lincoln." At this moment a gentleman who was passing in, recognized me, and I said to him: "Be so kind as to say to Mr. Lincoln that Frederick Douglass is detained by officers at the door."
>
> It was not long before Mrs. Dorsey and I walked into the spacious East Room, amid a scene of elegance such as in this country I had never witnessed before. Like a mountain pine high above all others, Mr. Lincoln stood,

> in his grand simplicity, and homelike beauty, recognizing me, even before I reached him, he exclaimed, so that all around could hear him, "Here comes my friend Douglass!" Taking me by the hand, he said, "I am glad to see you. I saw you in the crowd today, listening to my inaugural address; how did you like it?" I said, "Mr. Lincoln, I must not detain you with my poor opinion, when there are thousands waiting to shake hands with you." "No, no," he said, "you must stop a little, Douglass; there is no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours. I want to know what you think of it." I replied, "Mr. Lincoln, that was a sacred effort." "I am glad you liked it!" he said, and I passed on, feeling that any man, however distinguished, might well regard himself honored by such expressions, from such a man.[30]

In a letter written to Thurlow Weed the day after his speech, Lincoln confessed that he believed his second inaugural was possibly the best speech of his career. Lincoln said that while many might not warm to it immediately, his speech had placed himself and the Republican Party on the right side of history: "I expect the latter [speech] to wear as well as—perhaps better than—anything I have produced; but I believe it is not immediately popular. 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."[31]