



New Interpretations of the Civil War

# Lincoln's Interpretation of the Civil War

by Eric Foner

On March 4, 1865, Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office for the second time. The setting itself reflected how much had changed in the past four years. When Lincoln delivered his First Inaugural Address, the new Capitol dome, which replaced the original wooden one, was only half-complete. Now the Statue of Freedom crowned the finished edifice, symbolizing the reconstitution of the nation on the basis of universal liberty. For the first time in American history, companies of black soldiers marched in the inaugural parade.



*Hon. Abraham Lincoln, Republican Candidate for Sixteenth President of the United States, Currier and Ives, New York, 1860. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)*

It must have been very tempting for Lincoln to use his address to review the progress of the war and congratulate himself and the nation on impending victory with the end of slavery and bloodshed in sight. Instead, he delivered a speech of almost unbelievable brevity and humility. He began by stating that there was no need for an “extended address” or an elaborate discussion of “the progress of our arms.” He refused to make any prediction as to when the war would end. One week after the inauguration, Senator Thomas A. Bayard of Delaware wrote that he had “slowly and reluctantly” come to understand the war’s “remote causes.” He did not delineate them as Lincoln chose to do in his Second Inaugural Address. Slavery, Lincoln stated, was the reason for the war:

HIDE FULL ESSAY ▲

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.

Lincoln, as always, was forthright yet chose his words carefully. Referring to the slaves as “one-eighth of the whole population” suggested that they were part of the nation, not an exotic, unassimilable element, as he had once viewed them. “Peculiar,” of course, was how Southerners themselves had so often described slavery. “Powerful” evoked Republicans’ prewar rhetoric about the Slave Power. To say that slavery was the cause placed responsibility for the bloodshed on the South. Yet Lincoln added simply, “and the war came,” seemingly avoiding the assignment of blame. The war, Lincoln continued, had had unanticipated consequences:

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.

The “astounding” outcome, of course, was the destruction of slavery. Countless Northern ministers had pointed to this as evidence of divine sanction for the Union war effort. Lincoln took a different approach. Rejecting self-congratulation, he offered a remarkably philosophical reflection on of the war's larger meaning:

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—ferently 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.”

Despite having promised not to judge the South, Lincoln, of course, does so in this address. He reiterates his condemnation of slavery as a theft of labor, combining this with the most direct allusion in all his writings to the institution's physical brutality. Lincoln was reminding the country that the “terrible” violence of the Civil War had been preceded by two and a half centuries of the terrible violence of slavery. Yet Lincoln calls it “American slavery,” not Southern slavery in the passage above: his point being that the nation as a whole was guilty of this sin.

Lincoln had long favored monetary compensation to the owners of emancipated slaves. The Second Inaugural Address, however, implicitly shifts the moral equation from what was due to slaveholders to the nation's obligation to the slaves. This passage, one of the most remarkable in American letters, echoes the abolitionists' view of slavery as a national evil deeply embedded in all the institutions of society and of the war itself as a “judgment of the Almighty” for this sin. Lincoln's words, an Illinois newspaper observed, “might claim paternity of Wendell Phillips.” Indeed, the radical editors of the *Chicago Tribune* pointed out that they had said much the same thing as Lincoln two and a half years earlier in a piece entitled “Justice of the Almighty,” even as they acknowledged that their exposition was not “so admirably condensed” as Lincoln's. The *Tribune* had referred to the likely destruction of “the sum total of profit that has been derived from slaveholding,” and how “our own sufferings” were “balance[d]” by the “bloodshed and tears” of two centuries of slavery.

Not for the first time, Lincoln had taken ideas that circulated in anti-slavery circles and distilled them into something uniquely his own. Through the delivery of the Second Inaugural Address, he was asking the entire nation to confront unblinkingly the legacy of the long history of bondage. What were the requirements of justice in the face of those 250 years of unpaid labor? What was necessary to enable the former slaves, their children, and their descendants to enjoy the pursuit of happiness he had always insisted was their natural right but that had been so long denied to them? Lincoln did not live to provide an answer. But even implicitly raising these questions suggested the magnitude of the task that lay ahead.

After the passage in which Lincoln, like Puritan preachers of old, struggles to understand the causes of God's anger with his chosen people, he closes his Second Inaugural with the eloquent words most often remembered:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; . . . 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 had been thinking a great deal about the process of reconciliation. In the first weeks of 1865, he had urged military commanders and Governor Thomas C. Fletcher to encourage the people of Missouri to abandon their internecine violence and let bygones be bygones rather than seeking vengeance. Neighborhood meetings, Lincoln suggested, should be held where all would agree to forget “whatever they may heretofore have thought, said or done . . . Each leaving all others alone, solves the problem.” Left unresolved in Lincoln's Missouri initiative and in the Second Inaugural itself was the tension between mercy to the former slaveowners and justice to the former slaves. Would the pursuit of one inevitably vitiate the other? “Equality before the law,” the Radical Republican leader Charles Sumner insisted, must precede forgiveness. “Then at last will come reconciliation, and not before.”

Frederick Douglass, who was in the audience, called the Second Inaugural “more like a sermon than a state paper.” In a speech of only 700 words, Lincoln had referred to God or the Almighty eight times and liberally quoted and paraphrased the Bible. Lincoln, of course, had long since acquired a deep knowledge of the Bible. And during the war, while he never joined a church, he seems to have undergone a spiritual awakening. Especially after the death of his young son Willie in 1862, Lincoln moved away from his earlier religious skepticism. Lincoln had long believed that a remote higher power controlled human destiny. He now concluded that God intervened directly in the world, although in ways men could not always fathom. Yet he managed to see the war as a divine punishment for slavery while avoiding the desire for blame and vengeance. If Lincoln's Second Inaugural was a sermon, it was quite different from those that Northerners had grown accustomed to hearing during the Civil War.

After the address, Douglass repaired with some 5,000 other persons to the White House. When he stepped forward to offer congratulations, Lincoln clasped his hand and said, “My dear Sir, I am glad to see you.” Douglass called the speech a “sacred effort.” Not every listener was as kind. Particularly harsh was the *New York World*, which printed the speech “with a blush of shame.” It was an “odious libel,” the editors complained, to equate the blood that “trickled from the lacerated backs of the negroes” with the carnage of “the bloodiest war in history.” Many Republicans also found the speech puzzling. Why, they asked, had Lincoln not promised an end to the war and laid out “some definite line of policy” regarding Reconstruction? A few contemporaries recognized the greatness of the address. Charles Francis Adams Jr., the colonel of a black regiment, wrote to his father, the ambassador in London: “That rail-splitting lawyer is one of the wonders of the day. . . . This inaugural strikes me in its grand simplicity and directness as being for all time the historical keynote of this war.” Overall, as Lincoln himself recognized, the address was “not immediately popular,” although he remained confident that it would “wear as well—perhaps better than—anything I have produced.” Lincoln thought he knew why people did not like his speech: “Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them.” Yet even in its critical reception, everyone could agree with George Templeton Strong as he noted in his diary that the Second Inaugural was “unlike any American state paper of this century.”

---

***Eric Foner, DeWitt Clinton Professor of History at Columbia University, is the author of numerous books on the Civil War and Reconstruction. His most recent book, The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery (2010), has received the Pulitzer Prize, the Bancroft Prize, and the Lincoln Prize.***

---

