LINCOLN'S GREATEST SPEECH?

by GARRY WILLS

Frederick Douglass called it "a sacred effort," and Lincoln himself thought that his Second Inaugural, which offered a theodicy of the Civil War, was better than the Gettysburg Address

March 4, 1865, the day of Lincoln's second inauguration as President, began in a driving rain that raddled Washington's famously muddy thoroughfares—women would wear the mud caked to their long dresses throughout the day's ceremonies. Walt Whitman saw Lincoln's carriage dash through the rain "on sharp trot" from the White House to the Capitol, scene of the swearing-in. He thought Lincoln might have preceded the tacky parade in order to avoid association with a muslin Temple of Liberty or a pasteboard model of the ironclad Monitor. Though Whitman was a close observer of the President, and would shadow him throughout this day, there was no way for Lincoln to recognize him in the crowd.

It was otherwise with Frederick Douglass. After the parade had arrived at the Capitol's east portico and the presidential company had come out, Lincoln recognized the civil-rights leader from Douglass's earlier visits to the White House. He pointed him out to Andrew Johnson, who had just been sworn in as Vice President in the Senate chamber. Douglass thought Johnson looked drunk, but did not know what a fool the Tennessean had made of himself after taking the oath. After John-
son had given a rambling and slurred speech attacking privilege, he melodramatically waved the Bible in the air and passionately kissed it. Benjamin Butler, of Massachusetts, who later led the impeachment effort against Johnson, said in a public speech that the Vice President "slobbered the Holy Book with a drunken kiss." Lincoln, who studiously avoided looking up during Johnson's odd performance in the Senate, quietly told the parade marshal, "Do not let Johnson speak outside." Perhaps Lincoln was trying to be compensatorily reassuring when he made conversation with Johnson by pointing out Douglass. But Johnson's disoriented sullenness came out as pure hate when this former slave owner looked at the escaped slave who was now a celebrity. Douglass recorded the instant.

The first expression which came to his face, and which I think was the true index of his heart, was one of bitter contempt and aversion. Seeing that I observed him, he tried to assume a more friendly appearance, but it was too late; it is useless to close the door when all within has been seen.

Much of future tragedy could be glimpsed in that silent interchange of glances—and much of the problem Lincoln faced in framing a speech for this occasion. Johnson, who had served entertaining such notions as that southern state lines should be erased and the conquered area territorialized. Lincoln feared that such congressional initiatives would reduce his flexibility in trying to bargain with the South. He placated the radicals with his Emancipation Proclamations (provisional on September 22, 1862, final on January 1, 1863) enough to be able to make his Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction on December 8, 1863. It readmitted any state that could form a government of at least 10 percent of the electorate which was willing to take an oath of allegiance to the Union and to accept the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln's proposal failed to affect the nettlesome problems in Louisiana (the Emancipation Proclamation did not apply to those parts of Louisiana that were not formally out of the Union when it was issued). In December of 1864 Lincoln was still protesting to critics that his approach to Louisiana was merely a temporary expedient for putting the state back in operation, and that "we can never finish this, if we never begin it."

People were laboring through all these controversies as they labored through the mud to Lincoln's inaugural ceremony. The end of the war was in sight—Lee would surrender at Appomattox a mere five weeks after the inauguration. But what would be done with that victory? Lincoln's appeal for latitude in the use of executive power, on the grounds that it was needed for waging the war, would lose all force when the guns fell silent. What new authority would he argue for to reach new goals? This was as thorny a situation, in its own way, as that which Lincoln had addressed in his lengthy First Inaugural. Then he had had to explain what terms he would accept for maintaining peace (including a promise to leave slavery perpetually undisturbed where it already existed) and what terms he would not accept (secession). That was a legal argument, involving constitutional philosophy, with many fine distinctions to be sharply drawn. If anything, the legal problems were even more complex in 1865. "Would the Confederacy be a conquered nation? Or would it be a continuing part of America, in which some had committed crimes and others were innocent? How could the guilty be distinguished from the innocent, for assigning proper punishments or rewards? On what timetable? Under whose supervision? Using what instruments of discipline or reform (trials, oaths of allegiance, perpetual disqualification for office)? And what of the former slaves? Were they to be allowed suffrage, indemnified for losses, given lands forfeited by the rebels, guaranteed work and workers' rights? The problems were endless, and the very norms for discussing them were still to be agreed on. Lincoln had his work cut out for him, and his audience could reasonably expect a serious engagement with matters that were haunting everyone on the eve of victory.

With the end in sight, Lincoln did not voice the expectable emotion that most leaders would in such a situation—a declaration that the rightful cause had triumphed.
MANY-LAYERED MEANING

ONLY against the backdrop of such concerns can we appreciate the daring, almost the effrontery, of the Second Inaugural’s most obvious characteristic—its extreme brevity. It is true that the Gettysburg Address is even refer (272 words to the Inaugural’s 703), but that was given a ceremonial occasion for which Lincoln was not even the incipient speaker. No one expected serious discussion of national imperatives when the business of the day was honoring fallen soldiers. It is a different matter when a presidential address is given during a war that is collapsing into a potentially more divisive peace. Yet Lincoln almost breezily dismissed sections of both war and peace, saying that nothing in either tailored for lengthy treatment. Was he not able to appreciate the scale of the difficulties facing him? Did he think he could reduce them to manageable size by ignoring or belittling them?

That this bold defiance of expectation was deliberate is clear from the pride Lincoln took in this speech. Some have wondered if he realized what a masterpiece he had created at Gettysburg. He clearly knew that he had done well, but he expected to do even better in the years ahead—years he would not be given. He believed he had already equaled or surpassed the Gettysburg Address at least once—in his Second Inaugural.

seven days after delivering it he wrote to Thurlow Weed, the Republican organizer in New York, that he expected it to “wear well as—perhaps better than—anything I have produced.” Yet if this later speech was better than the earlier one, that was because it built on the earlier one. At Gettysburg, Lincoln proved to himself and others the virtues of economy in the use of words. He had put many-layered meaning in lapidary terms. He aspired to the same thing in his inaugural speech. This was more surprising when we consider the full-blown nature of most nineteenth-century oratory, and the fact that Presidents had so few opportunities for making speeches at that time. They did not deliver their annual messages to Congress in person. They did not address the conventions that nominated them. They could address groups that came to visit them in Washington, but Lincoln tried to avoid impromptu statements. All the words of a man in his position had to be well considered. He had denied himself the chance to make campaign speeches in both his presidential races, for fear of saying something divisive. All this must have been frustrating to Lincoln, who knew well the power of his oratory—what it had accomplished in the “House Divided” speech and the Douglas debates of 1858, and the Cooper Union speech in 1860, and at Gettysburg in 1863. The temptation must have been strong to ad lib his inaugural address with everything he had been wanting to say. Here, at last, was his opportunity, too good to be wasted, ad at just the moment when major issues were being hotly debated and an intervention by the President was desired.

The first thing to admire, then, is the discipline that kept him from saying anything more than what he considered essential, as at Gettysburg. The earlier speech was a model for more than its brevity. He used the same rhetorical ploy to begin the two addresses. At Gettysburg he would not dedicate the battlefield, though he admitted that that was “altogether fitting and proper.” In the Second Inaugural he would not make an extended speech, though he conceded that doing so had been “fitting and proper” at his first inauguration. (The phrase “fitting and proper” occurring in these two short addresses, thus ends up being repeated in the inscriptions on the Lincoln Memorial.) Familiarity with both speeches has made us appreciate too little how unexpected this approach was at the time.

We most easily read Lincoln’s refusal to dedicate the battlefield as acting like a praeteritio in rhetoric: “I will not mention . . .” But it has been mentioned in the very statement that refuses mention, and that device draws more attention, after all, to the “unmentioned” thing. So we expect Lincoln to say that he will not dedicate in some sense or other, leaving the impression of dedication at a deeper level. But Lincoln was not doing anything so tame. He did not distinguish different kinds of dedication. He turned the whole subject upside down: We cannot dedicate the field. The field must dedicate us.

BEYOND CONTROL

THE defiance of expectation is not so obvious in the Second Inaugural, but it is clearly there, and is carefully stated in order to exclude things that people wanted Lincoln to say. He said that he would not speak at length, as he did in the First Inaugural (when he was “loth to close”), when there were important things to discuss. Now, in contrast (and this had to be a shocker to some people), there was nothing useful to say about the war. It took its course, and he did not even pretend to be steering it anymore, much less to predict the time of its conclusion.

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.

That impersonal last sentence, with its dangling prepositional phrase, reflects the nonassertiveness that Lincoln wanted to recommend at this point. To show that predictions were worthless, he pointed out how little the war’s development had been, or could have been, predicted.

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.

With the end in sight, Lincoln did not voice the expectable, even forgivable, emotion that most leaders would in such a situation—a declaration that the rightful cause had triumphed, as it must. The prayers of both [sides] could not be answered:
that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes." To Lincoln, as he looked back, even his First Inaugural seemed to have been an exercise in futility.

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 [sic] 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.

Events were beyond anyone’s control. War came of itself, the personified process overriding personal agents.

What was going on here? His audience had a right to think Lincoln disingenuous when he said there were no thorny policy problems to be addressed now, as there had been in the First Inaugural. His words sound almost eerily “above it all.” As the historian David Donald says, “It was a remarkably impersonal address. After the opening paragraph, Lincoln did not use the first-person-singular pronoun, nor did he refer to anything he had said or done during the previous four years.” Lincoln was hardly the one to say that no great issues were resolved by the war, or that high ideals should not be used for guidance in the waging of peace. His Gettysburg Address had been sweeping in its claims—that the war would demonstrate whether all men are created equal, and would determine whether popular government could long endure. Now he was expressing an agnosticism about human purpose in general, and a submission to inscrutable providence. This resigned mood seems inappropriate for bracing people to the task of rebuilding a nation—a nation bloodily wrenched from all normal politics and facing problems without precedent.

“PRACTICAL RELATIONS”

But it was precisely because he saw the staggering size of the problems that had to be addressed that he was setting a mood of pragmatic accommodation to each challenge as it came up. Doctrinaire approaches, he was sure, would lead to fighting the war over again in peacetime—which is what happened during Reconstruction under Andrew Johnson. Some people argued that the South had committed treason, had withdrawn from the Union, and should be treated like any conquered nation. Others felt that the southern states were never out of the Union, and that their citizens’ rights should be respected even as criminal acts were punished (mainly by the defeat itself). Though Lincoln believed that the states had not seceded because legally they could not, he did not want to let the discussion reach for grand theories or ultimate principles, since that would make the problems of living together again irresolvable. The Second Inaugural was meant, with great daring, to spell out a principle of not acting principle. In the nation’s murky situation all principles—except this one of forgoing principle—were compromised. I was giving a basis for the pragmatic position he had taken the Proclamation of Amnesty, which was deliberately shrewd, looking only a step at a time down the long, hard road ahead. He defended that proclamation again in the last speech he gave, a month after the Second Inaugural. Speaking from the White House window to a crowd celebrating the war’s end he read carefully written words.

I have been shown a letter on this subject [Reconstruction], supposed to be an able one, in which the writer expresses regret that my mind has not seemed to be definitely fixed on the question whether the seceded States, so called, are in the Union or out of it. It would perhaps, add astonishment to his regret, were he to learn that since I have found professed Union men endeavoring to make that question, I have purposely forborne any public expression upon it. As it appears to me that question has not been, nor yet is, a practically material one, and that any discussion of it, while it thus remains practically immaterial, could have no effect other than the mischievous one of dividing our friends. As yet, whatever it may hereafter become, that question is bad, as the basis for controversy, and good for nothing at all—a merely pernicious abstraction.

To steer around theoretical claims that would carry people too far in one or another direction, Lincoln chose a resolute, nontheoretical statement of Reconstruction’s goal—to restore the “proper practical relations” between the states. That phrase is emphatically repeated five times in his final speech. If restoring practical relations be accepted as the immediate goal, the

I believe it is not only possible, but in fact, easier, to do this, without deciding, or even considering, whether these states have ever been out of the Union, than with it. Finding themselves safely at home, it would be utterly immaterial whether they had ever been abroad. Let us all join in doing the acts necessary to restoring the proper practical relations between these States and the Union; and each forever after, innocently indulge his own opinion whether, in doing the acts, he brought the States from without, into the Union, or only gave them proper assistance, they never having been out of it.

The key theme in Lincoln’s discussions of Reconstruction was flexibility. Over and over he stressed that his Proclamation of Amnesty was just one plan to be tried as a practical experiment, to be altered or abandoned as better arrangement became possible. This was a first attempt to reintegrate the parts of the South reclaimed by force. “But, as bad promise are better broken than kept, I shall treat this as a bad promise and break it, whenever I shall be convinced that keeping it is adverse to the public interest.” Those who have claimed that Andrew Johnson simply carried out Lincoln’s plan for Reconstruction miss the main point of Lincoln’s plan—its flexibility, which Johnson’s plan lacked.
God's Hand

THE problem with compromise on this scale is that it seems morally neutral, open even to injustices if they work. Answering that objection was the task Lincoln set himself in the Second Inaugural. Everything said there was meant to prove that pragmatism was, in this situation, not only moral but pious. Men could not pretend to have God's adjudicating powers. People had acted for mixed motives on all sides of the civil conflict just past. The perfectly calibrated punishment or reward for each leader, each soldier, each state, could not be incorporated into a single political disposition of the problems. As he put it on April 11,

And yet so great peculiarities pertain to each state; and such important and sudden changes occur in the same state; and, withal, so new and unprecedented is the whole case, that no exclusive, and inflexible plan can safely be prescribed as to details and colaterals [sic]. Such an [an] exclusive, and inflexible plan, would surely become a new entanglement.

Abstract principle can lead to the attitude Fiat iustitia, ruat coelum—"Justice be done, though it bring down the cosmos." Lincoln had learned to have a modest view of his ability to know what ultimate justice was, and to hesitate before bringing down the whole nation in its pursuit. He asked others to recognize in the intractability of events the disposing hand of a God with darker, more compelling purposes than any man or group of men could foresee.

This lesson, learned from the war, he meant to apply to the equally intractable problems of the peace. In fact, the whole Second Inaugural was already present, in germ, in his letter of April 4, 1864, to Albert G. Hodges, a newspaper editor in Kentucky.

I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me. Now, at the end of three years struggle the nation's condition is not what either party, or any man devised, or expected. God alone can claim it. Whither it is tending seems plain. If God now wills the removal of a great wrong, and wills also that we of the North as well as you of the South, shall pay fairly for our complicity in that wrong, impartial history will find therein new cause to attest and revere the justice and goodness of God.

These were reflections very important to him. At the Sanitary Fair (an early form of Red Cross activity), in Baltimore, on April 18, 1864, he said,

When the war began, three years ago, neither party, nor any man, expected it would last till now. Each looked for the end, in some way, long ere to-day. Neither did any anticipate that domestic slavery would be much affected by the war. But here we are; the war has not ended, and slavery has been much affected—how much needs not now to be recounted. So true is it that man proposes, and God disposes.

To the Quaker Eliza Gurney he wrote, on September 4, 1864:

The purposes of the Almighty are perfect, and must prevail, though we erring mortals may fail to accurately perceive them in advance. We hoped for a happy termination of this terrible war long before this; but God knows best, and has ruled otherwise. We shall yet acknowledge His wisdom and our own error therein. Meanwhile we must work earnestly in the best light He gives us, trusting that so working still conduces to the great ends He ordains. Surely He intends some great good to follow this mighty convulsion, which no mortal could make, and no mortal could stay.

Along with the agnosticism about God’s purposes in advance goes the recognition of some, at least, of God’s plan, as seen in retrospect—such as the train of necessities leading to the abolition of slavery (the Thirteenth Amendment was in process as he delivered the Second Inaugural). He did not begin the war with abolition as a goal. It was necessary for military purposes by the time of his limited and conditional Emancipation Proclamation, and then in the opportunity given Congress for initiating the Thirteenth Amendment. The force that led him was, he came to believe, divine. As he wrote to Mrs. Horace Mann, when she asked for an immediate emancipation of all slave children in the spring of 1864, "I have not the power to grant all they ask, I trust they will remember that God has, and that, as it seems, He wills to do it." So flexibility about Reconstruction should not deny the divine purpose of eliminating slavery (whatever practical steps might be called for in that elimination). Lincoln put this matter more starkly and vividly in the Second Inaugural by invoking the lex talionis ("an eye for an eye").

Every Drop of Blood

PEOPLE who stress only Lincoln's final words about charity for all, about the healing of wounds, may think that Lincoln was calling for a fairly indiscriminate forgiveness toward the South, especially since he referred to the North's share in the guilt for slavery. But the appeal to "Gospel forgiveness" is preceded by a submission to "Torah judgment" and divine wrath— an odd vehicle for a message of forgiveness. How seriously Lincoln took the lex talionis principle of punishment comes out in his Order of Retaliation, from July of 1863.

It is therefore ordered that for every soldier of the United States killed in violation of the laws of war, a rebel soldier should be executed; and for every one enslaved by the enemy or sold into slavery, a rebel soldier shall be placed at hard labor on the public works and continued at such labor until the other shall be released and receive the treatment due to a prisoner of war.

Corpses for corpses would be the rule, and slave for slave. In the Second Inaugural, Lincoln imagined God performing the kind of harsh wartime act that he was driven to. Blood for blood is
rendered in strict accountant’s language: the verb “sunk” comes from the scheduling of sinking debts.

Yet, if God wills that it [war] 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 [it] was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said “the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.”

If anyone thought that Lincoln’s principle of compromise must lead to moral relativism, this came as a strict reminder that justice must be done even in the partial and fumbling ways available to mankind. Otherwise divine punishment would be duly exacted.

**FLEXIBLE STEEL**

No one can pretend to know what Reconstruction would have been like if Lincoln had lived, since he did not know himself, and he was open to experiment, reversal, and practical maneuvering. But the whole process would have been conducted in light of the Second Inaugural’s recognition that slavery was the great national sin—a view that Andrew

---

**MAN LISTENING TO DISC**

This is not bad—ambling along 44th Street with Sonny Rollins for company, his music flowing through the soft calipers of these earphones,

as if he were right beside me on this clear day in March, the pavement sparkling with sunlight, pigeons fluttering off the curb, nodding over a profusion of bread crumbs.

In fact, I would say my delight at being suffused with phrases from his saxophone—some like honey, some like vinegar—is surpassed only by my gratitude to Tommy Potter for taking the time to join us on this breezy afternoon with his most unwieldy bass and to the esteemed Arthur Taylor who is somehow managing to navigate this crowd with his cumbersome drums. And I bow deeply to Thelonious Monk for figuring out a way to motorize—or whatever—his huge piano so he could be with us today.

This music is loud yet so confidential. I cannot help feeling even more like the center of the universe than usual as I walk along to a rapid little version of “The Way You Look Tonight,” and all I can say to my fellow pedestrians, to the woman in the white sweater, the man in the tan raincoat and the heavy glasses, who mistake themselves for the center of the universe—all I can say is watch your step, because the five of us, instruments and all, are about to angle over to the south side of the street and then, in our own tightly knit way, turn the corner at Sixth Avenue. And if any of you are curious about where this aggregation, this whole battery-powered crew, is headed, let us just say that the real center of the universe, the only true point of view, is full of hope that he, the hub of the cosmos with his hair blown sideways, will eventually make it all the way downtown.

—BILLY COLLINS
Johnson did not share. Paying the cost of slavery was not something that would end with the war. It would be paid in the agony of defeated men deprived of the slave labor on which their prosperity depended. It would be paid in the effort to defend the freed blacks from white hostility and persecution. Lincoln asked for charity, but he knew that the healing of the nation's wounds would be a complex and demanding process, and no one could be smug about it. All sides would have to question their own moral credentials. They could not get an easy and overall answer to particular problems by saying that traitors deserved whatever they got, or that southerners, as erring citizens, should simply resume their former political status. If God's purposes were to be discerned, they would not be manifest at the outset, any more than they had been when the war began. They would have to be read, slowly and patiently, in the moral complexities of a developing situation.

It was a very delicate task that Lincoln had assigned himself in this speech. He performed something like the somersault of the Gettysburg Address. There he had said that his audience must not dedicat but be dedicated. Here he said that his audience must not judge but be judged. This entailed a very subtle appeal to the national psyche (which may be why he thought this speech perhaps superior to the earlier one). Americans must be judged in a comprehensive judgment binding on all—God's judgment on slavery, which was to be worked out of the system with pains still counted in the nation's "sinking debt" of guilt. There was no "easy grace" of all-round good will in the message. The speech was flexible, but it was flexible steel.

When we see what objects Lincoln had in mind for this speech, we recognize how skillfully he orchestrated his effects, moving to the goal of a moral flexibility—with emphasis on morality—to counter the suspicion that pragmatism meant the nation would settle for anything workable. The speech's first paragraph refuses to go into a basic discussion of the sort Lincoln had circumvented with his Proclamation of Amnesty. The second paragraph shows the futility of prior dogmatism with regard to the war. This is a beautifully rounded paragraph, its very symmetry showing the lack of effective action. It begins with a statement of the agreed-on goal of avoiding war, and ends with four dread monosyllables that mark that goal as unattainable: "And the war came."

Between the opening and the closing of the paragraph Lincoln stated again what all dreaded, all sought to avert—only to describe how the two sides (while still holding that their acts should be "without war . . . without war") diverged. The penultimate sentence recurs to the shared starting point (both still deprecated war), to show how even the limited agreement of the preceding sentence crumbled, one side making and the other accepting war. The effect of the passage is almost comic, a comedy of errors whose scurrying urgency undoes itself. Lincoln looked down from a great height on antilke efforts, establishing what the whole sequence might look like from God's vantage point, to which he had climbed by the end of the speech. Only at the end of the paragraph does the comedy of errors yield to tragedy in the lapidary last sentence. (I underline twice the shared hopes and once the diverging actions, to show how neatly they are balanced in this orderly presentation of disorder.)

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.

Having established that the war defeated all expectation, Lincoln mentioned the most unexpected turn of events—the drastic change in the condition of slaves. Admittedly, "All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war" (emphasis added). But as the war ground on, the effect on slavery became its most far-reaching social result. Here Lincoln reversed the order of the preceding paragraph, in which he had moved from what all agreed on to what saddened them from one another. Here he began with the two sides' divergence ("to . . . extend this interest" on the one side; "to restrict the territorial enlargement" on the other) and moved to the shared bafflement of hopes. This is a union of the two sides different from the first one—different from the shared hope of avoiding war by action. Activity divided men. The passivity of suffering would rejoin them.

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 [according to the progress of the Thirteenth Amendment], the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding.

Both sides felt that their basic values would not be disturbed, because both had come to terms with slavery—as either unre-
stricted or merely restricted—and thought that God had no stake in the matter.

Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. . . . The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully.

“AMERICAN SLAVERY”

BETWEEN these two sentences of shared frustration Lincoln introduced a note of partial divergence. It is odd that people could think God wanted some people to steal the labor of others—but he drew back from a total separation from the other side even here: “But let us judge not that we be not judged.” He put the same thought, before deepening it, by quoting the gospel of Matthew (18:7)—evil must, in God’s mysterious providence, come into the world, but “woe that man by whom the offense cometh.” Here the guilt of he South is clear, but Lincoln’s next sentence shows that the guilt is for American slavery. Both North and South counterbalanced it—in the Constitution, in the limited goal of restricting rather than eliminating such an injustice. This sentence is the first of three long ones that give his conclusion monumental scale, even in the short temporal space of this address. By its scale and weight, by an easy pace of magisterial utterance, it comes to us like a judgment handed down on the whole course of American history. The structure is marked out by grammatical parallels (which/but which and to both/to those).

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?

This whole sentence is a meditation on the text of Matthew—and the next long sentence will climb to an almost ecstatic citation of the Psalmist (19:9): “The judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.” This is the same Psalm that Lincoln alluded to in his letter to the Quaker Mrs. Surrney (“The law of the Lord is perfect,” 19:7), showing deep connection, for him, with this line of thought. Between Matthew above and the Psalmist below, Lincoln gave o his thought the sanction of both Old and New Testaments, both of them speaking here with minatory, not exculpatory, finality. But between these two great sentences he interjected a brief prayer, one marked by a modest recognition that what was prayed for might not correspond to God’s will—a note that marks this prayer off from the empty certitudes of the earlier prayers (by which both sides prayed to the same God).

Fondly do we hope—
fervently do we pray—
that this mighty scourge of war
may speedily pass away.

Resignation to God’s supervening will fills the next sentence, whose connections are made with tight internal parallels, as if riveting the judgment inexorably into place: until all/until every . . . piled by/drawn with . . . shall be sunk/shall be paid . . . as was said/so still it must be said.

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.”

The symmetries of retributive justice could not be better imaged than in this sentence’s careful balancing of payments due. The war was winding down; but Lincoln summoned no giddy feelings of victory. A chastened sense of man’s limits was the only proper attitude to bring to the rebuilding of the nation, looking to God for guidance but not aspiring to replace him as the arbiter of national fate.

The Gettysburg Address called people to be dedicated to “the great task remaining before us.” The last sentence of the Second Inaugural supplied the moral music, as it were, with which the nation must “finish the work we are in.”

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.
Long as this sentence is, it is simple in structure, gliding down from the heights of the preceding period. Instead of the complex interconnections of the other long sentences, which have an internal dialectic, this one begins with simple anaphora in the three opening phrases (with/with/with), and then lines up four infinitives (to finish/to bind/to care/to do), the last one expanded into a coda. The tone is supplicating, like the sighing repetitions of a litany.

WHAT WE LOST

When he had finished the speech, to somewhat puzzled cheers and applause, Lincoln took the oath of office. There was a solemnity here that had been lacking in the slobbery performance of Johnson’s oath. The day’s storm had yielded to dramatic meteorological effects during the speech. A peephole in the dark clouds let some see a bright star in midday. Sun slanted through the lattice of clouds with spot-lighting effects. Whitman saw a “curious little white cloud . . . like a hovering bird, right over him.” Despite this breaking of the storm, Lincoln seemed “very much worn and tired” when Whitman saw his carriage returning, with only Lincoln and his ten-year-old son sitting in it. Later that evening, at the White House reception, Whitman noticed the same sad weariness in the expression of the President (which inhibited Whitman from going up to shake his hand).

Lincoln no doubt wondered how many, if any, understood the profound message he had crafted. The response of the crowd was proper, but the religious tone of the speech hardly called for jubilance. His tone puzzled the reporter from the New York Herald (Lincoln’s grudging ally).

It was not strictly an inaugural address . . . It was more like a valedictory . . . Negroes ejaculated “bress de Lord” in a low murmur at the end of almost every sentence. Beyond this there was no cheering of any consequence. Even the soldiers did not hurrah much.

The Herald deplored the lack of specifics about peace terms and urgent problems. Harsher critics found, in the speech’s paradoxes and subtlety, mere incoherence.

Lincoln expected some to dislike the address, not because they did not understand it but because they understood it too well. In the letter to Thurlow Weed in which he called it as good as anything he had written, he continued,

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. It is a truth which I thought needed to be told; and as whatever of humiliation there is in it, falls most directly on myself, I thought others might afford [an occasion?] for me to tell it.

Before Inauguration Day was over, Lincoln was cheered by the realization that one man at least had understood his message. But that comfort was almost denied him, when guards at the White House tried first to turn Frederick Douglass away from the reception, and then to conduct him rapidly through before he could see the President. But Douglass caught the attention of another guest, and the guards let him alone. He went to the East Room, where Lincoln was receiving the guests.

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-to-day, 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.

Douglass obviously did not see moral relativism or unprincipled pragmatism in the address. It laid the basis for a continuing exposition of the national purpose, an exposition interrupted by the assassin’s bullet. That was, among other things, a blow to American literature. Lincoln had been growing as a writer and deepening as a thinker under the pressure of the war, which made him weight every word with the fateful events impending on it. He was at the peak of his creativity when he wrote the Second Inaugural Address, fired in the crucible of his and the nation’s ordeal.

But tragedy was shadowing things more important than our literary annals. The loss of Lincoln would scar our politics for decades. The sad pendant of the scene of Douglass’s Inauguration Day meeting with Lincoln is the very next appearance Douglass made at the White House, as part of a black delegation that protested Johnson’s opposition to suffrage for blacks in the District of Columbia. Johnson lectured the visitors on blacks’ oppression of poor whites (whom Johnson considered his people). After Douglass left, Johnson exploded before his private secretary, who passed on his reaction to a sympathetic reporter. Johnson said, “Those damned sons of bitches thought they had me in a trap. I know that damned Douglass; he’s just like any nigger, and he would sooner cut a white man’s throat than not.” It is clear that Lincoln’s inaugural address did not reach the befuddled Vice President who sat behind him as he delivered it, though he was the man who most needed its message. The executive mansion was a darker place in every way when Lincoln was removed from it, and from us. The Second Inaugural is the towering measure of our loss. ☹