

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

A Very Peculiar God: Reading Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address

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On March 4, 1865—just a month before Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox—Abraham Lincoln delivered his Second Inaugural Address. Invoking theological speculation and quoting Scripture, he offered an interpretation of the meaning of the war, which enabled him to summon Americans to a new and more difficult public purpose. In this essay, Caitrin Nicol, managing editor of The New Atlantis, reveals the depths of Lincoln's address.

In an April 1864 letter to Albert G. Hodges, editor of the *Commonwealth* of Frankfort, Kentucky, Abraham Lincoln wrote, “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.”¹ President Lincoln’s reelection that fall might be attributed to the same power—a deeply unpopular president overseeing an exhausting war with no end in sight, challenged by two former generals and doubted by members of his own administration, he was not expected by anyone, including himself, to win until a handful of eleventh-hour military victories turned fate in his favor.²

The first words of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, “At this second appearing,” quietly acknowledge the unlikely event of his reelection (following, too, on the historical accident of his election in the first place).³ The opening paragraph is constructed mostly in the passive tense—“public declarations have been constantly called forth,” “little that is new could be presented,” “the progress of our arms...is as well known to the public as to myself,” “no prediction in regard to it is ventured”—mentioning Lincoln himself but little, and after this paragraph not at all. The unslakably ambitious man from the backwoods of Illinois implausibly (still) at the apex of power has acknowledged to himself and now admits to everyone that this power has been of precious little practical significance. He is not directing history. History is being directed in some other way.

The next paragraph suggests large and shifting public forces. From the unity of the “all” who “dreaded [war]” and “sought to avert it,” two opposing sides crystallized, one supplying rogue “agents” whose agenda forced the other into a response that “both

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parties deprecated.” But in the last line of the paragraph, these antagonistic human forces are overtaken and subsumed by one single, inhuman actor, a conflict that is ascribed agency of its own: “And the war came.”

The cause that called this power into being, Lincoln continues, was slavery. Throughout his political career, including his first campaign for the presidency and his First Inaugural Address, Lincoln assiduously denied that he would challenge slavery where it already existed, insisting that his administration sought above all to preserve the Union and did not pose a threat to the South. These declared intentions had no bearing on events. Even at the beginning of the war, when the North purported to be fighting not for the sake of abolition but only to reclaim the Union, everyone somehow knew, Lincoln says now, that slavery was at the heart of it. The “bloody and heaven-daring arrangement,” as William Lloyd Garrison called it, of including the peculiar institution in the Constitution of the first nation founded on equality, an unhappy compromise to purchase the ratification of slaveholding states, finally exploded with a burning force.⁴

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Even the institution of slavery, however, is insufficient explanation for what has happened: The war, whose magnitude and duration were wholly unanticipated by everyone involved in it, and which was set in motion by a catalyst too deeply embedded in the nation’s history to be touched by human power, had outlasted slavery. At the war’s outset, neither the government nor the insurgents, Lincoln says, “anticipated that the *cause* of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease.” But with the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln had formally ordered the freedom of the slaves in the Confederate states—a decision which, even though it would have no material effect until the Union won, amounted to a recognition of the subject that until then he had tried to write out of the conflict.⁵ Yet even so, the war went on according to its own design. No one meant to go to war to free the slaves, but the slaves were freed. No one meant for the war to go on so long. No one meant for six hundred thousand soldiers to die. If no one meant for it to happen, and if the initial catalyst has been burned away, who or what is actually responsible for all those casualties?

As if peeling an onion, the next causal layer that Lincoln strips back is the idea of a provincial God, even one interested in the clear cause of justice. “It may seem strange,” he says, “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 is it not even stranger that a just God would *not* have come to the assistance of those who oppose them? “Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other.... The prayers of

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both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully.”

Buried in this paragraph is the first suggestion of what Lincoln’s objective is for this address (which he had begun by announcing what it was *not*): “[L]et us judge not that we be not judged.” This phrase may sound flip and noncommittal to our ears in this present age of “tolerance,” but in context it is an astonishing request. As Lincoln wrote in the letter to Hodges, “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.”⁶ Now he begins a sentence by indicting slavery but concludes it by saying that we must not judge. By March 1865, the North is on the cusp of victory. With the end finally in sight, the president could be expected to deliver a sonorous, triumphant ode to the Union Army’s accomplishments and the righteousness of its cause, something to suggest that the price the North had paid for victory was being justly validated.⁷ But why, Lincoln asked himself, if the North was being granted victory at the hand of a just God, had the war gone on so long and at such high cost to all? Looking at the question from the other side of the conflict, Confederate General Edward Porter Alexander put it thus: “It is customary to say that ‘Providence did not intend that we should win,’ but I do not subscribe in the least to that doctrine. Providence did not care a row of pins about it. If it did it was a very unintelligent Providence not to bring the business to a close—the close it wanted—in less than four years of most terrible & bloody war.”⁸

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The answer that Lincoln finally offers, a comprehensive but harrowing theodicy of American history stretching back before the nation’s founding, undermines the comforting assurances and vindication that the North would be expecting on the eve of victory:

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

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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.”⁹

The Union forces have been fighting to reestablish all the states as a single nation. As one nation, they have a common past, a common character, and a common destiny. There can be no such thing as sins committed solely by “the South,” accountable only to “the South,” for the South is only part of one great but guilty nation. No one whose life was lost in the ghastly national atonement of the Civil War was personally involved in the Atlantic slave trade (in which, before it ended in 1808, Northerners were heavily complicit), in the inclusion of slavery in the Constitution, or in the many other historical foundations for the South’s slave-based economy, but it is these historical foundations, Lincoln says, as much or more than any current and particular sin of slave-holding, for which everyone has now to pay. Just as liberty and self-government are the legacy of the “fathers” who “brought forth...a new nation” (in the words of the Gettysburg Address¹⁰), their guilt is everyone’s inheritance as well—the sins of the fathers visited on the children to the third and fourth generation.¹¹ If there is anything more horrifying than the Civil War then playing out before them, it must be the two and a half centuries’ worth of slaves who went to their graves unavenged—could there be any justice in a nation that was *not* called to account for them in full measure?

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But this theory of corporate guilt for the evil at the heart of the American experiment, humbling as it ought to be to a Northerner, cannot quite encompass the fatalism in this passage, in which the forces at work are still more abstract and incomprehensible than the traditional understanding of freely chosen human action: it *must needs be* that offenses come into the world, but woe is due to the unfortunates through whom they come. Is it actually the purpose of the Almighty, as Lincoln’s quoted verse from Matthew seems to say, that woes are preordained to come into the world where select men—or, in this case, a nation—are destined to pay for them? This is not a theodicy that justifies woe as the byproduct of a greater good, such as the free determination of the human conscience. This account of woe lays it directly at the feet of the Almighty, and concludes, claiming there is no other conclusion left to draw, that it, like all His other judgments, is “true and righteous altogether.” The Lincoln who three decades earlier looked to “cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason” as the bedrock of the future of America has long since disappeared.¹² The Lincoln of 1865 is prostrated by a great and tragic mystery whose scope he cannot explain, but whose source he yet refuses to attribute to malevolence. The literary critic Alfred Kazin put it wonderfully in his essay “The Almighty Has His Own

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Purposes”:

“Let us suppose,” [Lincoln] says in effect, that slavery is an offense that God inexplicably allowed into human history. Let us even suppose that he allowed just so much time for it. To suppose anything like this is actually to suppose a very peculiar God. But since it all happened as described, and believers hold God accountable for all things, one can only yield to the enigma of having such a God at all. It is clear that the terrible war has overwhelmed the Lincoln who identified himself as the man of reason. It has brought him to his knees, so to speak, in heartbreaking awareness of the restrictions imposed by a mystery so encompassing it can only be called “God.” Lincoln could find no other word for it.¹³

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Lincoln’s text goes further on this point than Kazin suggests—the Almighty of the Second Inaugural seems not only to have *allowed* slavery into human history for a predetermined length of time, but in fact played an active role in bringing and removing it. “Almighty” means “all powerful,” after all—where is the power for such activity to come from, if not from Him?

A sometime aficionado of Thomas Paine and Voltaire, never a conventionally religious man or member of any church congregation, Lincoln the depressive agnostic had always had a streak of fatalism. But here, facing the worst evil and deepest tragedy of American history, he somehow turns from fatalism to Providence. All these offenses, he claims, came about through the *providence* of God—and who are we to say there is “therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him?” “To deny it,” Lincoln wrote to Republican politician Thurlow Weed a few days after delivering the Second Inaugural, “is to deny that there is a God governing the world.”¹⁴ But what are we to do when faced with such a woeful God and asked to believe that He is not malevolent?

Lincoln’s answer is charity. It is not a reasonable answer, but it is a practical one. Reason has no more to say on this subject. And, indeed, in terms of the actual events, even the military players in this conflict will soon find their parts on the front lines of this drama coming to an end. There is no longer a question of whether the South will be won back by brute subjugation, but Lincoln, ever still the savior of the *union*, has looked through the mournful eyes of history and seen that this is not enough—“a just, and a lasting peace” will not be brought about except by humility and charity. Lincoln foresees

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the disastrous result of Reconstruction should it be carried out with a heavy, judgmental hand, instead of one made gentle by sorrow and mutual repentance. His final instructions, read now with our knowledge of his assassination, take on an undercurrent of eerie foreboding for the miserable Reconstruction that was actually to take place—but, in a deeper sense, they offer America a charge which it is never too late to heed:

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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.

The qualitative difference between fate and Providence is charity. The idea of Providence posits that charity directs our destiny even if it is in a way that we cannot comprehend. When we come to the edges of our understanding of it, we can only take it up and keep going—or not. Even if there is ultimately no such thing as Providence—it would be a fair assumption, in fact, to think that this was a strong possibility in Lincoln's private mind—we can still act with charity; and for a nation that has just killed six hundred thousand of her own, there is no other way forward. Lincoln proposes a practical and transformative response to horror, a kind of active love that reaches past the limits of reason. We do not know the ways of the Almighty. We do not know the future, and we may not understand the past. But we know our obligations to each other, drawn from the character of the Christian Providence, whatever that ultimately means. *This* is the final objective of the president who was almost mysteriously appointed to lead America through her Civil War, a national apocalypse with the opportunity to be reborn on the other side.

Lincoln was shot just five weeks later—on Good Friday, of all days—and instantly became a sainted martyr, the holy savior of a nation venerated as such even to this day. The “truth which [he] thought needed to be told” thus became his final testament—but “whatever of humiliation there is in it,” he concluded his letter to Weed, “falls most directly on myself.” If there *is* a just God governing the world, perhaps Lincoln was sacrificed not because he was innocent, but, as he suggests, because he was guilty. A very peculiar God it is that would call us in such a way to the work of charity.

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¹ Abraham Lincoln to Albert G. Hodges, April 4, 1864, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), Volume VII, page 282. Available online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln7/1:617.1?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>.

² Major General John C. Frémont, who had commanded the Union's Mountain Department until June 1862, was selected as the presidential nominee of one faction of the Republican Party in 1864. Major General George B. McClellan, whose command of the Army of the Potomac was terminated by Lincoln in November 1862, was nominated as the Democratic Party's candidate in 1864. Frémont withdrew in September 1864. Following Union General Sherman's victorious Atlanta campaign, Lincoln defeated McClellan in the November election.

³ Lincoln delivered his Second Inaugural Address on the East Front of the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C. on March 4, 1865. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Volume VIII, pages 332-333. Available online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln8/1:711.1?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>. All subsequent quotations from the Second Inaugural are taken from this text. All italics are in the original.

⁴ William Lloyd Garrison, "The Great Crisis!," *The Liberator*, December 29, 1832, page 207 (leftmost column).

⁵ Abraham Lincoln, Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1863, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Volume VI, pages 28-30. Available online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln6/1:53.1?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>.

⁶ Lincoln to Hodges, page 281.

⁷ Ronald C. White Jr., *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (Simon & Schuster, 2002).

⁸ Edward Porter Alexander, *Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), pages 58-59.

⁹ In this passage, Lincoln quotes from Matthew 18:7 and Psalm 19:9 (both King James Version).

¹⁰ Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Volume VII, page 23. Available online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln7/1:40?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

¹¹ See, for instance, Exodus 20:5, Exodus 34:7, and Deuteronomy 5:9.

¹² Abraham Lincoln, Address Before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, January 27, 1838, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Volume I, page 115. Available online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln1/1:130.1?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>.

¹³ Alfred Kazin, "Lincoln: The Almighty Has His Own Purposes," *God and the American Writer* (New York: Knopf, 1997), page 138.

¹⁴ Abraham Lincoln to Thurlow Weed, March 15, 1865, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Volume VIII, page 356. Available online at

<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln8/1:764.1?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>