

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Second Inaugural Address

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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Abraham Lincoln (1809–65), who presided over the successful prosecution of the Civil War, also gave deep thought to the war’s cause, meaning, and purpose, and also to what would be required to heal the nation after the war was over. In the Gettysburg Address (November 19, 1863), Lincoln had summoned Americans to rededicate themselves to the cause of freedom and equality (see selection in Chapter Two, above). Here, in his Second Inaugural Address (March 4, 1865), invoking theological speculation and quoting Scripture, Lincoln offers an interpretation of the meaning of the war, which enables him to summon all Americans to a new and more difficult public purpose.

How does Lincoln invite us to understand the Civil War? In what sense does he regard both North and South as guilty of the offense of American slavery? Why does Lincoln move beyond the discussion of slavery, which he calls the cause of the war, to the theological reflections of paragraphs four and five? What is the point of citing the passage from the Gospel of Matthew (“Woe unto the world because of offenses! . . .”)? How do those theological reflections lead him to the thoughts and mood of the stirring final paragraph? In the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln had claimed that the Civil War is a test of whether our nation, or any nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to equality, can long endure. Here, with the end of the war in sight, he suggests that the test of our nation will henceforth be its absence of malice and its capacity for charity, “firmness in the right,” and the pursuit of a just and lasting peace. What does Lincoln mean by charity? What do we owe the newly freed slaves? What do we owe our defeated, but perhaps unreconciled, Southern brethren? What do we owe our soldiers, their widows and their orphans? What do we owe to God, and how do we “pay” it?

After you have read the Second Inaugural, and pondered these questions, you may want to read the remarkable analysis of the speech (“A Very Peculiar God”) by Caitrin Nicol (b. 1985), managing editor of the New Atlantis, which appears below, as an Appendix.

Fellow Countrymen:

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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.

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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

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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.”

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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.