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Lincoln's Second Inaugural: Press Reactions to the Most Eloquent Presidential Address in American History

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 43 (Spring, 2004), pp. 44-46

Published by: [The JBHE Foundation, Inc](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4133544>

Accessed: 05/07/2012 11:05

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❑ **Lincoln's Second Inaugural:
Press Reactions to the Most Eloquent
Presidential Address in American History**

New online databases and search technologies now enable historians to readily determine precisely how the press reacted to events that happened a century or more ago. JBHE has applied these techniques to President Lincoln's second inaugural address.

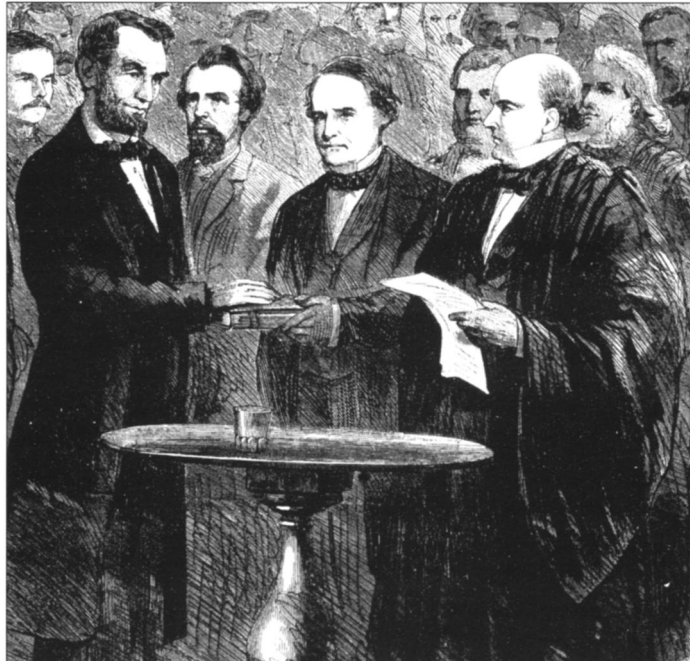
President Lincoln's two-minute, 268-word Gettysburg Address of November 19, 1863 is generally considered among the most eloquent orations ever delivered by an American public figure. But many Lincoln scholars believe that his second inaugural address was a more compelling speech. On March 4, 1865, just slightly more than a month

before the end of the Civil War and Lincoln's assassination, the reelected president delivered a remarkable 700-word oration on the steps of the U.S. Capitol. With the Union troops on the outskirts of Richmond and the war nearing an end, Lincoln's effort was directed to the goals of healing the nation's wounds and creating a permanent peace. He blamed neither side for the conflict. As to the cause of the war he simply related that "the Almighty has his own purposes." Apparently, Lincoln believed that the war was divine punishment inflicted

on the whole of America for the nation's role in the enslavement of millions of black men, women, and children.

The New York Herald reported that "Negroes ejaculated 'bless de Lord' in a low murmur at the end of almost every sentence of Lincoln's speech."

In the famous closing paragraph, Lincoln begins with the only line that is frequently quoted from the second inaugural address, "With malice toward none; with charity for all . . ." But in reading the full text it is evident that the entire document is an oratorical gem.



President Abraham Lincoln taking the second inaugural oath of office from Chief Justice of the United States Salmon P. Chase, March 4, 1865

According to an account in *The New York Times* on March 6, 1865, very few people, including reporters, were able to hear the president's second inaugural address. Because of the rainy weather, the inauguration ceremony was moved indoors to the Senate chamber. After the swearing in of Vice

"The speech was interrupted by only small, short bursts of applause. But for the hundreds of African Americans in attendance, the speech was pure gold."

President Andrew Johnson who gave a brief speech, the sun came out and it was decided that the inauguration ceremony would be moved outside as originally planned. Because

access to the Capitol had been restricted to one entrance, the thousands of people in the Senate chamber had to scramble to find places on the grounds where the inaugural ceremonies were to take place. Few people were present when Lincoln's speech was given. And the hubbub that was created by the crowd trying to gain access to the Capitol grounds made it difficult for those present to hear the president's words. The speech was interrupted by only small, short bursts of applause. But for the hundreds of African Americans in attendance, the

speech was pure gold. The *New York Herald* reported that "Negroes ejaculated 'bless de Lord' in a low murmur at the end of almost every sentence" of Lincoln's speech.

Speech Gets Mixed Reviews

At the beginning of the Civil War there were more than 2,500 newspapers published in the United States, more than in the rest of the world combined. Many of these newspapers were highly partisan. Therefore, it is no surprise that Lincoln's second inaugural address received mixed reviews. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that the speech was "strong in its naturalness and impressive in its simplicity, directness

Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address
March 4, 1865

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 offenses! for it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses 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 offense 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 bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn by 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 lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.



and force." The *Philadelphia Inquirer*, a solid supporter of President Lincoln, reported, "The address is characteristic of Mr. Lincoln. It exhibits afresh the kindness of heart and the large charity which has ever marked his actions toward those who are his personal enemies as well as enemies of his country."

The *Jersey City Times* was lavish in its praise. Its editorial read, "It will stand forever as an announcement, grand in its simplicity, and unflexible in its resolve, of the faith of the

American people in the stability of their free government and the justice and invincibility of their cause." The *Washington Daily National Intelligencer* said of Lincoln's words: "They are equally distinguished for patriotism, statesmanship, and benevolence, and deserve to be printed in gold."

Harper's Weekly called the president's address "simple and solemn," given "with a certain grand and quaint vigor, unprecedented in modern politics." The paper goes on to

The Gettysburg Address

November 19, 1863



"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 battlefield 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 cannot 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."

say, "He was taking the oath to continue the work in which his conduct has so satisfied the country that he is continued in office by general assent. With a fine sense of propriety, he says, in the gravest and most impressive way, that he accepts the trust and prays for strength to do his duty."

The New York Times said, "He makes no boasts about what he has done or promises of what he will do."

Not all newspapers were so kind. The *New York Herald* called the address "a little speech of glittering generalities used only to fill the program." The *New York World* editorial said that "with a blush of shame and wounded pride as American citizens that we lay before our readers today the inaugural address of President Lincoln." The *World* went on

to say, "The pity of it that a divided nation should neither be sustained in this crisis of agony by words of wisdom nor cheered with words of hope."

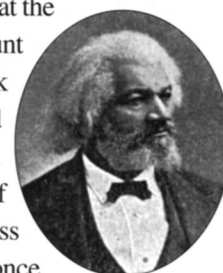
The Chicago Times wrote that "we did not conceive it possible that even Mr. Lincoln could produce a paper so slipshod, so loose-jointed, so puerile, not alone in literary construction, but in its ideas, its sentiments, its grasp."

The *Daily Illinois State Register*, published in Lincoln's hometown of Springfield, said that the speech was "not a very felicitous nor satisfactory performance." The *Chicago Times*, a newspaper that had opposed the emancipation of slaves, issued the harshest criticism of the president's inaugural address. It told readers, "We did not conceive it possible that even Mr. Lincoln could produce a paper so slipshod, so loose-jointed, so puerile, not alone in literary construction, but in its ideas, its sentiments, its grasp. By the side of it, mediocrity is superb."

Even *The New York Times*, which was generally supportive of the president, was not impressed with the speech. An editorial in the *Times* read, "He makes no boasts of what he has done, or promises of what he will do. All that he does is simply advert to the cause of the war."

At the time of the second inauguration there were only 22 newspapers still being published in the states of the Confederacy. The *Richmond Examiner* summed up the southern position: "It reads like the tail of some old sermon, and seems to have no particular meaning of any kind, at least, if any meaning lurks in it we fail to perceive it."

On the evening of March 4 after the inauguration ceremonies, the president held a reception at the White House. According to an account in *The New York Times*, Frederick Douglass was stopped at the door and as a black man not permitted to enter. When the president was informed of the situation, he ordered that Douglass be admitted to the reception at once.



Greeting Douglass, the president asked Frederick Douglass him what he had thought of his second inaugural address. Frederick Douglass, the former slave, replied simply that it was "a sacred effort."