

Second Inaugural Address (1865)

Abraham Lincoln

Historical Background

The first half of 1864, the last year of President Abraham Lincoln's first term, was a difficult time for the president. As a result of war weariness and increasing and staggering casualties at battles such as the Wilderness and Spotsylvania in Virginia, many (including Lincoln himself) felt that the president would not be reelected. Military victories late in the year by General Sheridan in Virginia and General Sherman in Georgia, however, lifted the spirits of the Union armies and the population at large, leading to Lincoln's overwhelming reelection. Given the resounding nature of his electoral victory and the looming defeat of the Confederacy, whose primary fighting force was besieged in Richmond and Petersburg, one might have expected a quite partisan speech – both pro-Union and pro-Republican – to be given to those who assembled to watch Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address.

Historical Significance

Indeed, an attendee with those expectations was likely to be quite astounded with the speech that was actually delivered. Abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass, who was in attendance that day, said that the speech “sounded more like a sermon than like a state paper.” Lincoln's “sermon” touched only briefly on the current situation of the Union and instead ascended to a discussion of the causes of the Civil War. Lincoln asserts that all knew that the slaveholding “interest” was the cause of the war. In the struggle between those who wanted this “interest” contained and those who wanted it expanded, “both read the same Bible and pray to the same God.” Instead of insisting that the South should be held solely responsible for the conflict, Lincoln argues that it is best to forbear judging, as all are guilty. Lincoln supposes that the most reasonable way to interpret divine providence is that God has given both the North and the South this terrible war “as the woe due to those by whom the offense came.” Lincoln reaches the climax of his speech arguing that, while they pray for mercy, a just God may let the war continue until the blood spilled and wealth reaped by the injustice of slavery is repaid in kind, by the expenditure of the entire blood and treasure of the nation. Only after this stunning theological climax does Lincoln utter his famous counsel to show “malice toward none” and “charity toward all.” Lincoln's approximately 700-word speech is then an argument about the reasons for the war, moral responsibility for slavery, and a broad rhetorical outline of an ideal reunification of the country after four long years of Civil War.

Key Concepts and Learning Objectives

Concepts: sectionalism; nationalism; reconstruction; reconciliation; causes of the Civil War; slavery

Learning objectives: On completion of this unit, students will be able to:

- explain why Lincoln's rhetorical strategy portrays the Civil War as a divine punishment on both North and South;
- judge or evaluate Congressional Reconstruction by the criteria given in Lincoln's speech;
- design a plan of national reunification based on Lincoln's vision;
- describe Lincoln's view of the cause(s) of the Civil War;
- compare and contrast Lincoln's use of religious language with modern political discourse.

Questions to Explore

How does Lincoln frame the causes of the war in a way different from the way both a Northern Republican and a Southern Democrat would? Is this reframing persuasive either rhetorically or historically?

What is the proper relationship between religious language and public political speech? If this relationship has changed over time, why has it?

Do those who enable, encourage, or passively accept great moral wrongs committed by others share equally in the responsibility for those actions? Does living in a modern extended commercial republic alter this answer compared to living in a smaller and more close-knit community such as a church, a neighborhood or a school?

How should the need for reconciliation be balanced with the demands of justice for the punishment of the wrongs committed by the warring parties either before or during a war – especially in a civil war?

Does moral responsibility require that one understand that what one does is wrong? How do you think Lincoln would have addressed this question in the case of the slaveholders?