

The Second Inaugural Address and the Meaning of the Civil War Interview Thread Transcript

Chris Bonner

So one of the things that Lincoln says that's most profound to me and that sticks with me is the idea from the second inaugural address that if God would will that the war should continue until all of the wealth that slavery generated was lost. And all of the blood that was shed by the whips of overseers was shed by the guns and the cannons of soldiers. If God willed that that would be the case then this would be just. Then the Civil War would be a just repayment for the suffering of slavery.

And so I think that this is a really incredible statement from a president about the foundational reality that slavery was injustice and the reality of what slavery actually meant to enslaved people. Slavery was not only the suffering of bodies. Slavery was not only the compulsion to labor. Slavery was the deprivation of opportunity. Enslaved people were denied access to the fruits of their labor for generations. And one of the things that Lincoln is sort of suggesting, I think, in this second inaugural address, by talking about the extensive injustice of slavery, I think what he's suggesting is that the U.S. government was responsible in some ways for rectifying that, for repaying the debt that is owed to enslaved people and really to the descendants of enslaved people for the horrific centuries of bondage and deprivation that slavery meant to African Americans.

James Oakes

The great historian Richard Hofstadter once commented that Lincoln was horrified by the amount of death in the war. Maybe Hofstadter said, "More horrified than a person in a position of power can afford to be." And I do think, I do think the increasingly serious, sober tone of his public messages, culminating in his second inaugural address, is a function of his recognition that a valuable, invaluable service to the freedom of humanity has come at a cost that neither he, nor anyone, could have imagined would be necessary.

Lincoln was never much for organized religion, but he wasn't an atheist. He was something closer to a deist, which meant that he believed there was a God and that human events were designed providentially, but that we human beings were incapable of knowing what the inscrutable will of God was. And that's what his final statements about God's will in this war indicate, that both Northerners and Southerners pray to the same God, but neither of us really can figure out what God actually intends in this war. Right? And if God wills that every drop of blood drawn from the lash shall be paid for by another

drop drawn by the sword, so let it be said, God's will be done. Who are we to say otherwise? It's quite remarkable.

What's remarkable about that second inaugural address is that this terrible war has ended with a victory by the North, and there is not even a hint of gloating on Lincoln's part. And that also is quite remarkable. There is no... He doesn't get up on a platform with a banner that says "Mission accomplished" behind him. Right? He just wasn't going to gloat. He was too conscious of, first, the fact that now that the war is over the North and the South are going to have to live together somehow, and gloating isn't going to help. But also, I just think he wasn't inclined to gloat under any circumstances. He was, as I say, he was way too conscious of the price that had been paid for this victory.

Edward Widmer

The mood in Washington on March 4th, 1865 is festive. Everyone knows it's a matter of weeks before the rebellion is suppressed or the war is over. You could say it either way. And Lincoln uses the phrase Civil War in the speech, although earlier in the war he didn't want to use that because even that phrase suggests legitimacy for the other side and at the beginning, he preferred to call them rebels. and so a lot of people are coming into Washington to hear what Lincoln has to say. It's been a while since he gave a major speech in public. A couple orations at charity events in late 1864 or remarks to regiments or some pretty interesting speeches to Ohio regiments, but not really since the Gettysburg Address, which is November 19th, 1863, has Lincoln given a major speech and everyone knows he has to give one on March 4th, 1865, but they feel like history is closing in. So they want to be there.

So farmers, civilians, political employees in the much larger U.S. government than the one he came in to direct four years earlier – they're all there outside the east front of the Capitol. We have photographs. The photographs have become better over four years. So in 1861, you can't see Lincoln. The crowd you can see, but you can't see the person on the lectern. In 1865, he's right there and you can see the people around him, and you can almost put yourself in the scene itself, and many people believe they can see John Wilkes Booth in some of those photographs.

The weather was overcast in the morning, but it becomes sunny right as he begins to speak, incredibly. And there were all kinds of other unusual signs that people noticed at the time. Walt Whitman noticed a tiny little cloud right above Lincoln as he was speaking, and an unusual pattern in the sky that you could see the planets in the middle of

the day. It starts at noon and you could look up and see a few planets, including Venus, and Whitman remembered it and later put it into one of his greatest poems, *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*, which is this haunting poem about Lincoln's death, that these were all portents of what was coming. Right after the speech, John Burroughs, a naturalist, bird lover, nature lover, who's a good friend of Whitman's, felt this tremendous wind blowing over the assemblage – felt supernatural to him. So there all these things people are noticing.

But then there's the speech itself, which is a kind of history of the war. It's really, it's almost like the first draft. And Lincoln being the politician he is, understands that it's important to tell the story your own way, and he begins to do that and he stops. He actually... In a way, it's a corrective to himself because he says, "All knew that the slaves were somehow the source of the war." He doesn't say it as a criticism of them, what he's trying to say is that slavery caused this war. And that's a correction because four years earlier, he was going to some length to say that's not at all what we're fighting over, we will protect slavery, we just are fighting against an illegal secession. But now he's saying it really was about slavery. And then that haunting pretty long paragraph in which he talks about the scale of the suffering caused by slavery and the need to redeem that sin and how the suffering of the war has offered that redemption and how we can never understand the ways of God completely, but it does appear that we have gone some distance toward settling this great debt that we owed generations of people who'd been treated so sinfully by earlier Americans. And then it ends – that might've been the end and that's a pretty stark message like something out of the *Old Testament*: you have sinned and now I am punishing you. That's a lot of the Old Testament is like that. But then it goes into a language that's a lot like the language of Jesus in the New Testament and says "with malice toward none, with charity for all" – it's all about forgiveness, which is really is the message of Jesus. "Love thy neighbor as thyself." And the South was the neighbor of the North. Often in towns, Southerners and Northerners lived next door to each other, and as a country, we lived next door to each other. And so Lincoln calls for forgiveness and says a few specific things that are highly important, including calling for aid to be given to the widows of soldiers and to their children.

Which is a way of saying we will need to have benefits for veterans or in case the veteran was killed, for the families of veterans, which will call in to being a huge new federal bureaucracy to administer the payment of veterans benefits, which will continue into the 21st century, actually, because there are young women who married old Civil War veterans, and who got their vet checks until very recently, but more importantly, it's even a precedent for the New Deal because Lincoln is saying when people can't take care of themselves, we need the federal government to step in and send checks out to people, and so in the 1930s, people remembered what Lincoln said at the end of the second inaugural and even some other language at the end saying we now will act in a spirit of peace toward all nations.

And that was important because Mexico was in rough shape and had been invaded by France. We were too distracted to stop it from happening. We had once said the Monroe Doctrine means no European powers should interfere in our hemisphere. Well, guess what? France takes over Mexico in the middle of our Civil War and we're too weak and distracted to stop them, but we might've started to intervene in Central America. We had a huge military at the end of the Civil War. Even Europeans were afraid of the American Army, and in fact, they were studying it. The Prussians especially were studying our very rapid advance in military technology, in guns, railroads, artillery, naval vessels, and all of these ways Americans had really reinvented modern warfare over four years, and so there was a fear even in Europe that the Americans might come over and start fighting. And by saying we will now be at peace with all nations, Lincoln was saying something really important and in the spirit of George Washington, who also assured peace at the end of his presidency. So for all these reasons, it's a very heavy speech loaded with significance for the 20th and 21st centuries as well as the 19th.