

# ABRAHAM LINCOLN

*"Words That Challenge," "Words That Heal"*

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by Ronald C. White

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Project Director: Macrae Hanke  
Book Design: Jude Landry

Printed in the United States of America.  
ISSN 1062-2527

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## PREFACE

In 2026 America is celebrating the 250th anniversary of the birth of our nation, signified in the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. Written by Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration received renewed emphasis when Abraham Lincoln made it the centerpiece of his reentry into politics in 1854. “Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it the practices and policy, which harmonize with it.” Lincoln’s unlikely rise culminated in his election as our 16th president in 1860 on the eve of the Civil War.

This anniversary year, when America finds itself in a complicated relationship with its past, is a good time to take a fresh look at the words Lincoln employed to express his ideas. As a nineteenth-century person, he did not directly address emerging issues of our time such as climate change

or artificial intelligence, but he is a rare American leader whose words still speak powerfully across time, for those who have ears to hear.

If the story of Lincoln's political leadership has long been recognized, his faith story, and the ways he conveyed it in his speech and writing, have been either overlooked or misunderstood. That faith odyssey would culminate in Lincoln's "Second Inaugural" offered on March 4, 1865. In only 701 words he mentioned God fourteen times, quoted the Bible four times, and invoked prayer three times. In forty-one days he would be dead.

America at 250 is a special time to refresh our memories, or expand our knowledge, of Lincoln. There is no better way than through the words he left us, and I have chosen texts to help us hear Lincoln today.

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# ABRAHAM LINCOLN

*Words That Challenge,  
Words That Heal*

Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809, at the Sinking Spring farm in Kentucky. In 1816, when Abraham was seven, his father Thomas Lincoln moved the family to southern Indiana, in part out of a desire to live in a free state. His mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, died of what was known as “milk sickness” in 1818 when her son was nine. Thomas went back to Kentucky and married a widow, Sarah Bush Johnson, who came into Abraham Lincoln’s life when he was ten. She became an important influence in his young life.

Young Abraham had a hunger for learning. Boys were expected to work with their fathers on the family farm. Only in January and February, when it was too cold to work outside, did he receive at most a total of one year of formal education spaced out over five or six years.

In the winter of 1830 Thomas Lincoln moved his family once more, this time to Illinois. Striking out on his own, twenty-two-year-old Abraham settled in the new village of New Salem.

In 1833 Lincoln’s New Salem friends encouraged him to run for political office.

Following the custom of the day he announced his candidacy for the Illinois state legislature in the local newspaper. He concluded his statement with these words:

*“First Announcement of Candidacy for Political Office,” March 15, 1832*

**Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition. Whether it be true or not, I can say for one that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition, is yet to be developed. I am young and unknown to many of you. I was born and have ever remained in the most humble walks of life. I have no wealthy or popular relations to recommend. My case is thrown exclusively upon the independent voters of this county, and if elected they will have conferred a favor upon me, for which I shall be unremitting in my labors to compensate. But if the good people in their wisdom shall see fit to keep me in the background, I have been too familiar with disappointment to be very much chagrined.**

In asking for votes he admitted his “ambition”—using the word twice. He recognized that ambition could easily become egotism. Lincoln turned his desire to be esteemed into a desire to be worthy to be esteemed, a decision that would be rendered by the voters.

Lincoln closed by admitting that in his young life he was already well acquainted with disappointment, and that in his first foray into politics he would not “be very much chagrined” if he loses.

Lincoln was defeated in the 1832 election, finishing eighth of thirteen candidates. But in the precinct that included New Salem he received 277 of 300 votes.

In 1834 Lincoln decided to run again. His circle of friends had widened. This time he finished second among thirteen candidates. In December he

began the first of four consecutive terms in the Illinois legislature, meeting in Vandalia.

On April 15, 1837, Lincoln saddled a borrowed horse to ride the twenty-one miles from New Salem to take up residence in Springfield, as the state legislature was about to move from Vandalia to Springfield.

In Lincoln's quest for self-improvement he joined the Young Men's Lyceum. On a wintry evening in 1838 he addressed the Lyceum on "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions."

*"Address Before The Young Men's Lyceum," Springfield, Jan 27, 1838*

**How then, shall we perform it? At what point shall we expect the approach of danger? By what means shall we fortify against it? Shall we expect some transatlantic military giant, to step the Ocean, and crush us at a blow? Never! All the armies of Europe, Asia and Africa combined, with all the treasure of the earth (our own excepted) in their military chest; with a Bonaparte for a commander, could not by force, take a drink from the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a trial of a thousand years.**

**At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reach us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.**

Lincoln moved quickly to assess the present problem that lay behind the address. He called it "mobocracy" or violence. Several months before, Elijah Lovejoy, a Presbyterian minister and editor, had been murdered by a mob while defending his antislavery newspaper in Alton, a Mississippi river town in Illinois.

In 1838 Lincoln was suggesting that the present generation's internal problem was quite different from the founding generation's external threat from Great Britain: a growing divisiveness within America. Lincoln's words of warning—"As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide"—has been recovered recently to warn of contemporary crises in America.



After serving four terms in the Illinois state legislature, in 1846 Lincoln was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. He would serve one term, from 1847 to 1849. Returning to Springfield, Lincoln practiced law for the next five years until a new debate over the issue of slavery brought him back into politics.

In 1854 the Kansas-Nebraska Act repealed the 1820 Missouri Compromise. The new act allowed settlers to vote on the legality of slavery in the newly created territories of Kansas and Nebraska.

If Lincoln would become known for his many public speeches in these years, and his debates with Senator Stephen Douglas in 1858, unknown at the time were his private notes to himself in which he wrestled with many issues, especially slavery. Lincoln never titled, dated, or signed these notes because he never expected anyone to ever see them. Dates have been assigned to these notes by editors attempting to place the notes in the context of Lincoln's life. Editors across the years have called some of them "fragments" because, often in a hurry in his public life, he left them unfinished. One hundred eleven of these notes have survived.

The following is a Lincoln note on slavery. There is no date, but the suggestion is that it was written in the middle of 1854 as Lincoln was reentering politics.

*“Fragment on Slavery,” [July 1, 1854?]*

**If A. can prove, however conclusively, that he may, of right, enslave B. – why may not B. snatch the same argument, and prove equally, that he may enslave A?—You say A. is white, and B. is black. It is color, then; the lighter, having the right to enslave the darker? Take care. By this rule, you are to be a slave to the first man you meet, with a fairer skin than your own. You do not mean color exactly?—You mean whites are intellectually the superiors to blacks, and therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with an intellect superior to your own. But say you, it is a question of interest; and, if you can make it your interest, you have the right to enslave another. Very well. And if he can make it his interest, he has the right to enslave you.**

In this fragment on slavery one can picture Lincoln walking back and forth in his law office in Springfield bringing a court case: “You say”; “You mean.” And pushing back, “But say you.”

As a lawyer, always wanting to be ready for his opponent’s first argument, he believed the initial contention would be over color. The term “Negro,” in wide use in that day, was focused on color. As a young man he traveled to New Orleans where he witnessed inhumane slave markets. He challenged “this rule” by suggesting anyone could become a slave to the first person encountered “with a fairer skin than your own.”

Lincoln then suggests his imaginary opponent will argue that whites are “intellectually superior to blacks.” He knew that behind this argument was the then-common belief that black slaves did not possess the intelligence to live together with whites in nineteenth century society. Lincoln quickly destroyed this contention by saying “you are to be slave to the first person you meet, with an intellect superior to your own.”

Thirdly, when Lincoln speaks of “interest,” he is alluding to southern

slaveowners who thought of enslaved persons as property.

This fragment on slavery never found its way into any of Lincoln's public speeches, but it showcases how he used these private musings to think through this most important issue of his day.



On February 11, 1861, Abraham Lincoln entered the Great Western railway station in Springfield ready to travel to Washington for his inauguration as the sixteenth president of the United States.

Lincoln had resolved that he would offer no remarks that day. Newspaperman Henry Villard, posted to Springfield by the *New York Herald*, captured a remarkable scene. He observed that Lincoln's "face was pale, and quivered with emotion so deep as to render him almost unable to utter a single word" to friends who wished him well.

The ringing of the train's bell alerted Lincoln it was time to board. As he stepped out onto the platform, he found himself surrounded by a crowd of about one thousand of his fellow citizens. Despite his stated intention not to speak, the crowd persuaded him to offer some remarks.

***"Farewell Address at Springfield," February 11, 1861***

**My friends—No one, not in my situation, can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe everything. Here I have lived a quarter of a century, and have passed from a young to an old man. Here my children have been born, and one is buried. I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being, who**

**ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him, who can go with me, and remain with you and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell.**

Lincoln, who usually concealed rather than revealed his emotions, spoke of his feelings as he prepared to leave this place and these people. He had lived twenty-four years in Springfield.

Lincoln moved from past to present when he said he had “a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington.” These words flew across the nation. So far, in the long four months that in the nineteenth century lay between a presidential election in November and the inauguration in March, he had avoided speaking about the task that lay ahead. Now, in spontaneous remarks he spoke what could sound like an audacious comment about his task as president.

As a young boy, Lincoln had developed an admiration for George Washington, encouraged by reading Parson Weems’s *Life of George Washington*. Was he now comparing himself to the father of the country?

These words were not arrogant. Lincoln offered them with a dawning comprehension of his appointment with destiny.

Lincoln concluded his farewell remarks by invoking the omnipresence of God.

Today it has become commonplace for political leaders, in carefully prepared speeches, to invoke religion to justify their conclusions. But Lincoln’s speech was not pre-planned. This reality increases our curiosity about the prominent place Lincoln gives both to the presence of God and the practice of prayer. Even in his brief remarks Lincoln goes deeper than any “God Bless America” at the conclusion of a contemporary speech.

The God that Lincoln appealed to was a God who acts in history. His words about prayer were not passive platitudes but instead a call to action in

the nation's time of need.

Reporter Villard captured the response to Lincoln's farewell address. Lincoln's exhortation to pray elicited exclamations from within the crowd of "We will do it, we will do it."

Lincoln spoke only 152 words. Yet his farewell at Springfield did not stay in Springfield only. The words were printed in newspapers and in *Harper's Weekly*. Citizens in towns and cities across America were eager to learn more about this gangly man from the West who was about to become their president.



Lincoln arrived in Washington on Saturday, February 23, 1861. On Sunday, he joined William Seward, once his rival for the Republican nomination for president and now chosen as his Secretary of State, for worship at St. John's Episcopal Church. Lincoln asked Seward, who he knew to be an excellent speaker, if he would read the manuscript of his inaugural address and make suggestions. Seward agreed to do so.

On Monday evening, Lincoln answered a knock on the door at parlor suite 6 at Willard's Hotel. Standing there was Frederick Seward, son of the Secretary of State, who handed Lincoln his father's suggestions of how to improve the inaugural address—49 suggestions written on seven pages. Lincoln's draft concluded with a question, "Shall it be peace or sword?" Seward offered two new last paragraphs, from which he suggested Lincoln choose.

Lincoln chose Seward's first conclusion. In so doing we are provided a chance to see Lincoln at work as an editor of someone else's words. We do so by comparing Seward's four sentences with Lincoln's four sentences. Lincoln transformed Seward's sentences into poetic language that became some of his most cherished words.

*“First Inaugural Address,” March 4, 1861*SEWARD**I close.****We are not, we must not be, aliens  
or enemies, but fellow-countrymen  
and brethren.****Although passion has strained our  
bonds of affection too hardly, they  
must not, I am sure they will not,  
be broken.****The mystic chords which, proceeding  
from so many battlefields and so  
many patriot graves, pass through  
all the hearts and all the hearths  
in this broad continent of ours, will  
yet again harmonize in their ancient  
music when breathed upon by the  
guardian angel of the nation.**LINCOLN**I am loath to close.****We are not enemies, but friends.  
We must not be enemies.****Though passion may have  
strained, it must not break  
our bonds of affection.****The mystic chords of memory,  
stretching from every battlefield,  
and patriot grave, to every living  
heart and hearth-stone, all over  
this broad land, will yet swell the  
chorus of the Union, when again  
touched, touched, as surely they  
will be, by the better angels of our  
nature.**

In the first sentence, with Lincoln's understanding of the sound of words, he expands Seward's "I close" to "I am loath to close," thereby attaining a pleasing rhythmic sound. He uses assonance, a literary technique in which comparable vowel sounds are repeated in nearby words.

In sentences two, three, and four, Lincoln compresses Seward's language. In sentence three he shortens Seward's twenty-one words to thirteen words.

In the final sentence he does away with unneeded words. Thus, “aliens or enemies” becomes for Lincoln simply “enemies”; “fellow-countrymen and brethren” becomes “friends.”

Lincoln, often employing alliteration--the repetition of the same consonant sound with closely connected words—here uses the consonant *b* five times in the final two sentences:

*break*

*bonds*

*battlefield*

*broad*

*better.*

Lincoln, the man with but one year of formal education, speaking to a divided nation, achieves in the final paragraph of his “First Inaugural Address” a marvelous sense of the enduring meaning of the Union across time.



Abraham Lincoln summoned a cabinet meeting on September 2, 1862, in the midst of public hysteria. Union troops, fighting at the Second Battle of Bull Run in northern Virginia on August 28, had been soundly defeated by Confederate troops led by Robert E. Lee and “Stonewall” Jackson. The Union troops retreated in confusion all the way back to Washington. The northern press heaped criticism on Lincoln and his generals.

At the cabinet meeting Attorney General Edward Bates recorded Lincoln’s mood. Bates wrote in his diary that Lincoln “seemed wrung by the bitterest anguish—said he felt almost ready to hang himself.”

Later that day Lincoln wrote a private musing on a piece of lined paper as he sought to understand the will of God following a disastrous Union defeat.

*“Meditation on the Divine Will,” September [2?], 1862*

**The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be wrong. God cannot be for, and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God’s purpose is something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect his purpose. I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.**

Lincoln’s reflection would not be known during his life. John Hay, his young secretary, discovered it after the president’s death. Lincoln did not title it, but Hay affixed the title “Meditation on the Divine Will” to it. Hay and John G. Nicolay, in their 1890 biography of Lincoln wrote, “This meditation was not meant to be seen by men.” The meditation is central in understanding the development of Lincoln’s faith in the crucible of the Civil War and after the death of his eleven-year-old son Willie six months earlier.

Lincoln began with an assertion: “The will of God prevails.” At this moment he was not dealing with some theoretical problem in philosophy or theology. For more than a year delegations of politicians and church leaders had been coming to him with claims of “God is on our side.” He knew similar claims were being made to Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederacy.

His first response: “Both may be, and one must be wrong.” Lincoln frequently underlined words he wished to emphasize.

Once, in presenting the Meditation to eleventh grade high school students studying American history, I asked them how long they thought

it took Lincoln to write it. They answered: two or three minutes. I believe Lincoln may have taken quite some time to pause after pondering these competing claims.

Then, he offered his preliminary conclusion: “God cannot be for, and against the same thing at the same time.”

His answer assumed something central in his understanding of God. God was not the “Great Clockmaker” God of Deism, who set in place natural laws and then the universe functioned on its own. Rather, Lincoln’s meditation is about a God who acts in history—who was acting in the Civil War

What follows is a sentence that Lincoln as President would never say in public. “In the present civil war it is quite possible that God’s purpose is something different from the purpose of either party.” Lincoln is writing here about all those who are overconfident about knowing the purposes of God.

He completes this central sentence, “and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose.” Lincoln believes that God acts in history, yet at the same time he affirms human agency.

Lincoln offered next a theological assertion: “God wills this contest.” But by qualifying this statement with “almost,” he might be saying this is a perspective to which he was now concluding. He moderated this statement further by adding a second adverb: “probably.”

Even more stunning was Lincoln’s assertion that God wills this war and “that it shall not end yet.” In the days after the defeat at the Second Battle of Bull Run, in public Lincoln was laboring to assemble every resource at his command to bring the war to an end, yet in private he was musing that perhaps God seemed to be deciding that the war would continue. He could never utter such a statement in public!

As Lincoln concludes his brief note of nine sentences, he wishes to ascribe once more to God an active role in the Civil War: “He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest.”

At this point in his conversation with himself, Lincoln employed the word

“yet” twice:

“Yet the contest began,”

and,

“Yet the contest proceeds.”

Lincoln’s decision to use this word meant that he wanted to hold onto the balance between divine and human action. His “Meditation on the Divine Will” illuminated how far Lincoln had traveled in his faith journey.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the leading twentieth century American theologian and social ethicist, believed that “Lincoln’s religious convictions were superior in depth and purity to those held by the religious as well as by the political leaders of his day.” Furthermore, Lincoln’s faith “was informed primarily by a sense of providence.” What impressed Niebuhr as the “purity and profundity of Lincoln’s sense of providence” was his capacity to resist “the natural temptation” to do what nearly all political leaders have done throughout history: “identify providence with the cause to which he was committed.”



***“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 battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who 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 cannot consecrate--we cannot 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, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.**

On the sultry summer days of July 1, 2, and 3, 1863, 170,000 Union and Confederate soldiers fought at the village of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. At the conclusion of the three-day battle, more than 50,000 dead, wounded, and missing lay on the battlefield, in hospitals, or with the retreating Confederate army. Within days afterward, the plans were set in motion that would lead to a national soldier's cemetery. Thirty-two-year-old David Wills, a successful Gettysburg attorney, took possession of seventeen acres for the new cemetery. Early on Wills decided that a national cemetery should have a national dedication.

He invited Edward Everett, the most acclaimed speaker in the United States, to offer the main address. Abraham Lincoln was the last speaker invited. Wills asked the President to offer "a few appropriate remarks."

On November 19, a crowd of 15,000 to 20,000 people gathered for the dedication. Everett spoke first, for two hours and eight minutes, to polite applause.

With the crowd restless after such a long oration, Lincoln was introduced. Beyond the audience he could see row on row of soldiers' graves. He began to

speak—from memory.

“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.”

Lincoln’s opening words were embedded in words from Psalm 90;

The days of our years are threescore and ten;  
And if by reason of strength they be fourscore years.

Lincoln loved the Psalms. Multiple eyewitnesses have left reports of Lincoln reading the Bible in the White House, particularly the Psalms.

Lincoln divided his address into three paragraphs: past, present, and future. He had used this same temporal arrangement in his other great short speech, the “Farewell to Springfield” in February 1861.

Beginning his address in the past, Lincoln asked his audience to think back eighty-seven years. He reminded them that the starting point of the nation was not the Constitution, nor the election of George Washington as the nation’s first President, but the Declaration of Independence signed in 1776 with its timeless declaration, “all men are created equal.”

After his long starting sentence, Lincoln moved quickly forward from the American Revolution to the Civil War. With lively words he reviewed the meaning of the Civil War, but in contrast to Everett never spoke of the details of the battle itself. As a now-experienced speaker he had become sparing with adjectives but on this occurrence modified both civil war and battlefield with “great.” Lincoln’s intention was to transform the dedication with a larger meaning of the “nation,” a word he would use five times in his brief address. He interpreted the Civil War as a “*testing*” of the nation’s founding values to determine whether they could “endure.”

When Lincoln said “But in a larger sense,” he signaled to his audience that he was about to enlarge the purpose of his address. Pivoting, he started

his movement from the past battle in July to the present dedication in November.

But before Lincoln turned his eyes from the battlefield, he told his audience what they were *unable* to do:

we cannot dedicate

we cannot consecrate

we cannot hallow

Lincoln, like Shakespeare and the Bible—“thou shalt not”—understood the power of the negative in making moral arguments. By declaring the negative first, Lincoln was readying the audience for the positive of what each person could do.

In the “Gettysburg Address” he did not quote from the Bible, as he would do so notably in less than sixteen months in his “Second Inaugural Address.” Yet what has been overlooked is that his entire speech was suffused with both biblical content and religious language.

As a speaker who selected just the right words, here he used the words “dedicate” and “devotion.” They were both Christian words which would have brought to his audiences’ minds the call to commitment present in both revival meetings and Protestant church worship of that time.

At that moment Lincoln added his only extemporaneous words. His speaking text read, “that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom,” but he inserted “under God” after the word “nation” and before the phrase “shall have a new birth of freedom.” Furthermore, Lincoln decided to include “under God” in all three copies of the address he prepared at later dates.

The interjection of “under God” faced backward and forward. The words pointed backward to “this nation.” Lincoln had long asserted that America, from its beginning, drew strength from both political and religious foundations.

The interjection of “under God” pointed forward to “shall have a new birth of freedom.” These words were laden with religious as well as political meaning. They conjure up a contrast of the new with the old. At Gettysburg

Lincoln was no longer, as in his “First Inaugural Address,” defending an old Union. When he began as President he believed the Constitution restrained any attempt on his part to do away with slavery. The new Union, now that he had signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, would accomplish the promise of liberty, the critical step that the founders had declined to take.

Lincoln believed the “new birth” to be a paradox in both politics and religion. He had come to understand the Civil War as an act of purification. The old Union had to die. In its death came the possibility for a new Union.

As Lincoln came to the end of his short address he spoke the words that would be most remembered: “and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Historians, seeking to understand the source of these words have focused on earlier words by New England politician Daniel Webster or New England Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. Lincoln may have been aware of their words, but the primary sources of Lincoln’s words may be two of Lincoln’s own previous speeches.

In his “First Inaugural” Lincoln had declared, “The chief Magistrate derives all his authority from the people.”

In his message to Congress in special session on July 4, 1861, after the battle at Fort Sumter, he asked “Whether a constitutional republic, or a democracy—a government of the people, by the same people—can, or cannot, maintain its territorial integrity against its own domestic foes.”

Lincoln was working with a definition of democracy which he then expanded and refined in the “Gettysburg Address.”

With that, Lincoln was finished. The audience was expecting a longer speech. He stopped after speaking 272 words in less than three minutes.

Everett, on the following day, wrote to Lincoln. “Permit me... to express my great admiration of the thoughts expressed by you, with such eloquent simplicity and appropriateness, at the consecration of the cemetery.” Everett, who had almost three years earlier confided to his diary his criticisms of Lin-

coln's speaking abilities when Lincoln traveled from Springfield to Washington, now offered his opinion that "I should be glad, if I could flatter myself, that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours, as you did in two minutes."



Hope and despair were combined in the 25,000 to 30,000 people who made their way to the Capitol on March 4, 1865, to hear Lincoln's "Second Inaugural Address." Hope was in the air as a war that cost 750,000 lives—more than all of America's wars put together—was in its last gasps. Despair was present because nearly every person in attendance at the inaugural would have lost a father, husband, son, brother to death or horrible disability during the war. Seventy-five per cent of hospitalizations were for amputations. Also present was John Wilkes Booth, who found a place in the crowd thirty-five feet above and behind Lincoln.

Residents and visitors walking to the Capitol met armed patrols on horseback at many intersections. Rumors were circulating that Confederates, knowing defeat was imminent, might try to abduct or even assassinate the president. Sharpshooters, on the tops of buildings near the Capitol, were ready for whatever might come. The attendance on this day of both soldiers and African-Americans made the scene markedly different from Lincoln's first inauguration in 1861.

The crowd erupted into applause when Lincoln was introduced. Precisely at the moment Lincoln started to speak, the sun broke through the gloomy clouds, a sign remembered by spectators.

*“Second Inaugural Address,” March 4, 1865*

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 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."

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.

Lincoln's "Second Inaugural Address" was a mere 701 words. The architecture of the address was arranged in four paragraphs with twenty-six sentences. Five hundred and five of the words are one syllable.

A hallmark of the address is its biblical and theological language. Within 701 words Lincoln mentions God 14 times, quotes the Bible 4 times, and invokes prayer 3 times.

Lincoln's opening sentence does not stand out for its eloquence; a contrast with the first sentence of the "Gettysburg Address." In the first paragraph Lincoln, unlike speeches by modern politicians, wanted to diminish expectations. He did this with a trio of negatives.

Sentence 1: *less occasion for an extended address*

Sentence 3: *little that is new*

Sentence 5: *no prediction in regard to is ventured.*

Inaugural addresses, before Lincoln, and certainly in the present, have a heavy dose of the personal pronoun "I." In Lincoln's speeches he almost never spoke of himself. He did not use one personal pronoun in the "Gettysburg Address." In the "Second Inaugural" he would use two personal pronouns. From the outset of the "Second Inaugural" he directed the action away from himself.

If Lincoln does not speak of "I," he does speak of "all" and "both." Lincoln's Second Inaugural is marked by his use of inclusive language. To the surprise of his audience, he does not spend time blaming the South for the war. His continuous use of inclusive language is the first clue to the purpose of his address.

An objection may be raised that Lincoln does say of the South, "but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive."

Yes, but it is important to imagine what Lincoln could have said: "enemy" or "rebels." He chose not to use such words because he knew that they would have raised the emotional tone of his address.

One word towers over the second paragraph. Nine times in ninety-nine words Lincoln spoke the word "war." His repetition of the word "war" builds

and expands in the hearer's consciousness. To cite the statistic, 750,000 dead in a small nation of little more than thirty million persons, can never capture the real cost.

Lincoln's surprise is his conclusion to the paragraph. "And the war came."

Up until now war had been the direct object, both historically and grammatically, of the actions of both the North and the South. In the last sentence Lincoln reversed the equation by making "war" the subject. "*And the war came.*" Lincoln had come to realize that war, any war, started by a nation or president, will soon achieve a life of its own.

In the third, largest paragraph, Lincoln gets to the heart of the meaning of the war: a battle over slavery. The North, even when it spoke of defending the Union, knew—"somehow"—that slavery was the key moral issue beneath its political words. The South, even when it waxed on about its rights knew—"somehow"—that slavery was central to its way of life. Lincoln has traveled a long way since his "First Inaugural" when he said he would leave slavery alone.

"Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God." When Lincoln introduced the Bible and prayer he added a Christian accent to his use of inclusive language. "Both" Confederate and Union soldiers read the "same" Bible.

Lincoln understood how both the Bible and prayer could both be used and misused: "*and each invokes His aid against the other.*" The Bible had become a weapon in the religious patriotism that grew with the war.

He spelled out the misuse of prayer by quoting the first of four passages from the Bible. "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." Lincoln quoted this verse from Genesis to speak about whites in the South who produced cotton by the work of black enslaved persons.

It may appear that Lincoln was breaking with his rhetorical strategy of inclusivity, but quickly, with a semicolon, perhaps pausing to think this judgment might sound harsh, he balanced judgment with mercy by quoting from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, "but let us judge not that we be not

judged.” [Matthew 7:5]

With the declaration, “*The Almighty has His own purposes*,” Lincoln comes to the architectural center of his address. After describing the purposes of both North and South, Lincoln focuses the center of his address on the purposes of God.

Lincoln is not invoking a private God, but rather of a public God who is involved in the mayhem of war. When he employs the language, “the providence of God,” he is asking his audience to see the relationship of God’s providence to the American offence of slavery. In lifting up God as the unseen actor in the Civil War, he calls God the “*Living God*.”

The issue of slavery is the dominant idea in Lincoln’s central paragraph. All the critics of Lincoln’s views on slavery, then and now, must come to terms with the fact that Lincoln would spend a full one-third of his address speaking about slavery.

With his argument that begins, “If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences...,” Lincoln connected the ‘there and then’ of the biblical world with the ‘here and now’ of the United States in the 1860s.

Once more Lincoln begins his discourse of a primary idea with inclusive language. He could have said “slavery,” “southern slavery,” or located enslaved persons as residing in the South. Instead he uses the inclusive term “American slavery.”

In his “First Inaugural Address” Lincoln formed his argument around political and legal texts. He quoted from the Constitution and from the 1860 Republican platform. His address became a legal definition of what he was not going to do about slavery.

In the “Second Inaugural” Lincoln spoke about slavery in a completely different way. He used emotive language: “every drop of blood drawn with the lash.” We hear not the legal Lincoln but a theological Lincoln. He referred to ideas of the prophets, the poetry of the psalmist, and the words of Jesus. If Lincoln had become known for his appeal to the Declaration of Independence, he now appealed to a God who has been at work in history for at least

three millennia.

There was a price to be paid for the American offence of slavery. The abolition of slavery was the only way to purge the nation of its sins.

Lincoln summarized his depiction of slavery and its consequences for the nation by a fourth biblical verse: “the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.” [Psalm 19:9]

In the final paragraph Lincoln picks up the inclusive language with which he began his address. “With malice toward none, with charity for all.”

He concluded his Second Inaugural with a plea for reconciliation:

to bind up . . .

to care for . . .

to do all which may achieve and cherish a just,  
and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all  
nations.

Lincoln was the best commentator on Lincoln. Thurlow Weed, a New York Republican politician, wrote to commend Lincoln on the address. Lincoln answered Weed eleven days later, “I expect the latter to wear as well—perhaps better—than anything I have produced.”

But Lincoln added, “But I believe it is not immediately popular. Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them.” He continued, “To deny it, however, in this case, is to deny that there is a God governing the world.” He concluded by telling Weed, “It is a truth that I thought needed to be told.”



As the Civil War impelled Lincoln to go deeper into both the Bible and theological reflection, he emerged with a deeper, broader—and humbler—view than most of his contemporaries in discerning the ways of God.

Even though we have no audio record of Abraham Lincoln's words, he speaks to us still, through his expressive letters and his eloquent speeches. He will continue to provide us with needed insight in times to come, if we have the humility to listen.

Lincoln came to believe that each generation must redefine America in relation to the problems of its time. As our generation does so during this 250th anniversary year of our founding, and in the years ahead, may we have the wisdom to hear the counsel of this extraordinary guide.





# The Trinity Forum

## GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

- 1** In his first announcement for political office at age 23, Lincoln uses the word “ambition” twice — and then immediately reframes it. What does this tell us about the values that mattered most to him at the outset of his public life?
- 2** Lincoln delivered his address to the Young Men’s Lyceum in Springfield in 1838, when he was just 29 years old. What signs in his language, structure, or argument suggest he was already becoming a remarkable speaker?
- 3** Lincoln wrote his fragment on slavery entirely for his own eyes — it never appeared in any public speech. What strikes you about how he thinks through the logic of slavery? What does it reveal about him as a thinker and moral reasoner?
- 4** Lincoln’s “Farewell to Springfield” was entirely unplanned — he had resolved to say nothing at all that day. Given that, what is most striking about how prominently God and prayer appear in those 152 spontaneous words?

5 Side by side, Seward's draft and Lincoln's revision of the "First Inaugural's" final paragraph show us a great editor at work. What specific changes does Lincoln make, and what do they reveal about how he understood the power of language?

6 Lincoln wrote the "Meditation on the Divine Will" alone, in the aftermath of a crushing military defeat, — and never intended anyone to read it. What does it tell us about his understanding of God, providence, and the limits of human certainty in a time of national catastrophe?

7 Lincoln did not quote the Bible directly in the "Gettysburg Address," yet the document is saturated with biblical language and religious content. What specific words or images do you notice, and how do they shape the meaning of the address?

8 Lincoln's "Second Inaugural" quotes four verses of Scripture — more biblical citations than any previous inaugural address. How does weaving those verses into the speech change its effect? What would be lost if the same ideas had been expressed in purely political language?

9 These readings offer glimpses of Lincoln in private — in unplanned remarks, personal fragments, and private meditations — as well as in his most public moments. Which of the readings surprised you most, and how has your understanding of Lincoln changed?



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## FURTHER RESOURCES

Richard Carwardine, *How Warring Religious Nationalists Forged Lincoln's Union* (Penguin Press, 2024)

David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (Simon & Schuster, 1995)

Allen Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (Eerdmans, 1999)

Jon Meacham, *And Then There Was Light: Abraham Lincoln and the American Struggle* (Random House, 2022)

Ronald C. White, A. *Lincoln: A Biography* (Random House, 2009)

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