on SECOND THOUGHT

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note from the executive director

THE AMERICAN DICTATOR

At a time when our nation is engaged in the bicentennial celebration of Abraham Lincoln's birth, it is probably not altogether wise to confess that I have an uneasy relationship with Mr. Lincoln.

I find no fault in Lincoln's character, but rather feel uneasy at what he felt he must do to preserve the Union. On April 27, 1861, Lincoln suspended the writ of habeas corpus in order to quell Confederate rebellion in Maryland. Army officers began arresting suspected secessionists and imprisoned them without the right to trial, including the mayor of Baltimore, George Brown. According to historian James McPherson, "Although Lincoln justified the prolonged detention of these men on grounds of 'tangible and unmistakable evidence' of their 'substantial and unmistakable complicity with those in armed rebellion,' the government never revealed the evidence or brought any of the prisoners to trial. Some of them, probably including Mayor Brown, were guilty of little more than southern sympathies or lukewarm unionism. They were victims of the obsessive quest for security that arises in time of war."

In an address at the annual meeting of the Abraham Lincoln Association held in Springfield, Illinois, on February 12, 1936, Andrew C. McLaughlin summed up my own unease at this situation perfectly, "Arbitrary arrests are the favorite and indispensable agencies of tyranny. What prevents them from becoming the foundation of a despotic government or from being used with crafty and high injustice?" The answer for McLaughlin was simple, "the conscience, the moral attitude, the sense of civic duty, and the respect for law in the breast of the man that wields this enormous and dangerous power."

What McLaughlin is essentially saying here is that the slide into totalitarianism from democracy is not so very far. In the time of Lincoln, America fell into the hands of a dictator, albeit the most benevolent one imaginable. This is a hard truth of history, hard because if ever there was a man to lionize in our national story, Lincoln is that man. Yet, if we are to stay true to Lincoln, and I believe he deserves at least this much respect, we must never underestimate the challenge he faced. This is easy to do, because we already know and approve of the way the story ends, making it convenient to forget about the ugly trials at the center of the narrative. What is difficult to come to terms with is that Lincoln's decision to suspend the rights of Americans guaranteed in the Constitution represents a profound betrayal of democracy. The paradox is that Lincoln acted in order to preserve the very freedom he was temporarily willing to deny.

There is a deep humanities question here: Is it the main duty of a democratic nation to defend freedom no matter the cost, or is the preservation of the nation its defining and paramount purpose? As American citizens, we have been brought up to believe that the words freedom and America are synonymous. What are we to make of this question that threatens one of our most sacred principles?

As one who signed the Constitution, Benjamin Franklin left very little room for interpretation to this question when he declared that, "Those who sacrifice freedom for security deserve neither." There is no question where Franklin's ultimate fealty lay at the time. Lincoln obviously interpreted the Constitution otherwise and defended his actions by stating, "My oath to preserve the constitution to the best of my ability, imposed upon me the duty of preserving, by every indispensable means, that government—that nation—of which that constitution was the organic law." Lincoln could not see how it was possible to lose the nation, and yet save the constitution.

There is profound truth in the words of both Franklin and Lincoln. In a democratic nation, we would do well to remember the fragile nature of freedom and contemplate them both deeply. We could do Lincoln no greater honor on his 200th birthday than to try to understand the depths of his trials on our behalf.

Brenna Daugherty
Executive Director

History as Theater

As the country commemorates the two-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, North Dakotans will have the chance to hear from the president himself, on stage at the

Everett Albers Chautauqua Program.

The parlor of the first governor of Dakota Territory, William Jayne, provides the setting for the visits of three historical figures who lived through, wrote about, and played a significant role in the shaping of the United States in the nineteenth century.

Governor William Jayne is portrayed by Dr. D. Jerome Tweton.

Dr. George Frein portrays President Lincoln.

Dr. Carrol Peterson portrays Walt Whitman, whose famous poem, "O Captain, My Captain!" was written after Lincoln's assassination.

Charles Everett Pace appears as Frederick Douglass, freed slave, abolitionist, and statesman.

The president, the poet, the slave—all speak of this land and liberty. Those three giants of the Civil War Era come to North Dakota's Chautauqua stages to remind us of yesterday's issues, but also to stimulate us to think about now and the future.

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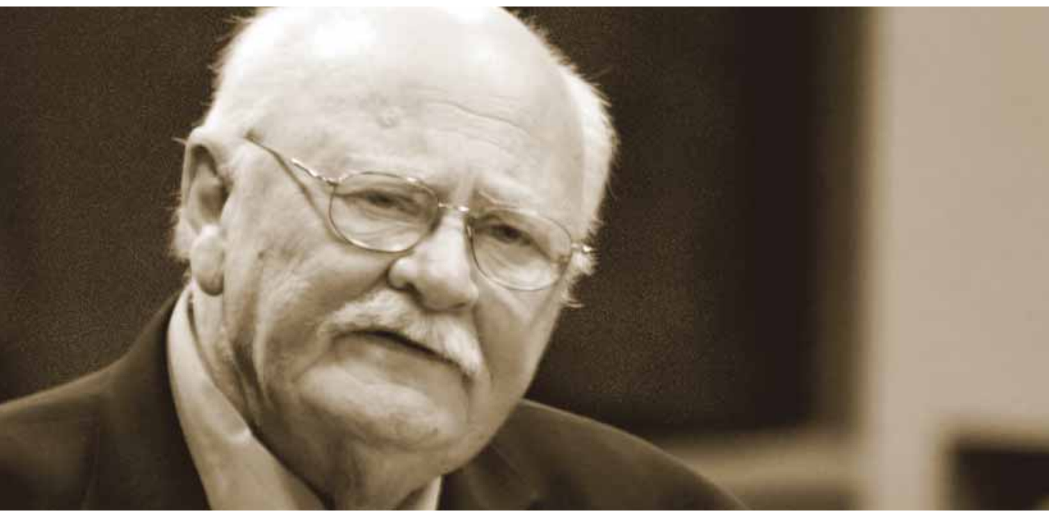


William Jayne: First Governor of Dakota Territory

By D. Jerome Tweton

D. Jerome Tweton is the evening host and moderator of the Lincoln Chautauqua in the character of Dr. William Jayne, Lincoln's personal physician and the first governor of Dakota Territory (1862-63). Senior consultant to the North Dakota Humanities Council and Chester Fritz Distinguished Professor Emeritus from the University of North Dakota, Dr. Tweton is the author/editor of fourteen books and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Oklahoma.

In 1854, the political situation in Illinois was volatile. Abolitionists were outraged that Congress had given the people in the territories of Kansas and Nebraska the right to decide whether or not to allow slavery. The Know-Nothing party was demanding laws that would restrict immigration in a campaign that lauded "America for Americans."

A committee of Know-Nothings from Springfield wanted to nominate Abraham Lincoln for the Illinois legislature. Lincoln, who had already served in the U.S. Congress in 1847-49, saw this as a backward political move, and, hoping that the legislature might select him as United States senator, refused their overtures.

On September 3, William A. Jayne (1826-1916), Lincoln's physician and Know-Nothing abolitionist, disregarded his wishes and placed an ad in the Illinois State Journal that announced Lincoln's candidacy. An angry Mary Lincoln, looking out for her husband's political career, hurried to the newspaper's office and demanded the withdrawal of his name. Undaunted, Jayne rushed over to Lincoln's house to convince him to stay in the race. As Jayne recalled many years later, Lincoln was "the saddest man I ever saw—the gloomiest." Lincoln paced back and forth on the verge of tears, laying out the reasons he could not run. Jayne refused to take no for an answer, and finally Lincoln very reluctantly gave in.

Lincoln won the November election in a landslide. Sensing that the legislature might send him to Washington, Lincoln declined election. Abolitionists and Know-Nothings were furious. Dr. Jayne felt betrayed and now, in his words, everyone was "down on Lincoln—hated him."

Jayne and Lincoln remained good friends, however. In 1860, Jayne, now the mayor of Springfield, won election to the Illinois state senate, and Lincoln captured the White House. After Congress created Dakota Territory on March 2, 1861, Lincoln rewarded his good friend and physician by appointing him the first governor of Dakota Territory. As soon as the snows melted, Jayne headed west to oversee the organization of a governmental structure for the new territory.

Dakota Territory's white population was small and scattered. The largest town was Yankton, with around 300 people. J. B. S. Todd, a cousin of Mrs. Lincoln, ran a trading company and controlled most businesses in town. Folks referred to Yankton as "Captain Todd's town." "His" town was a collection of sod and log houses; the Ash Hotel provided beds, food, and whiskey. Other settlements along the Missouri—Vermillion, Bon Homme, and Elk Point—claimed no more than a handful of residents. To the north, land speculators had lured a few dozen Minnesota people to the Sioux Falls area, and to the far north about 300 people, mostly Metis, lived around Pembina on the Canadian border.

Jayne arrived in Sioux City, Iowa, in late May, rented rooms for his wife, and set out by horse and buggy for Yankton. The new governor selected Yankton as the seat of government upon the suggestion of Mrs. Lincoln, until the legislature could make an official selection. Until an adequate log house was built for the governor, he spent the first six weeks at the Ash Hotel where he had to share a bed with the attorney general.

He created three judicial districts and assigned a judge to each. He divided the settled areas into legislative districts, ordered an election for September 16, and scheduled the first session for the following March. Todd won the most important elected office—the territorial delegate to the Congress. Although the delegate could not vote, the salary was good and life in Washington much superior to that in Yankton.

After the September election, the appointed and the elected officials left for their homes in the East, avoiding a bleak Dakota winter. Governor Jayne and the other officials returned in March 1862 for the first legislative session. In his address to the lawmakers, he envisioned a great future for Dakota: "We have combined the pleasant, salubrious climate of southern Minnesota with the fertility of soil of central Illinois. I venture the prediction that the wheat granary of the continent will be found in the valley of the Red River." That first session has been described as "rough-and-tumble" and "wild-and-woolly." Capital selection was the main order of business and tested the patience of Governor Jayne. The towns of Bon Homme, Vermilllion, and Yankton

fought it out. At one point Jayne had to provide military protection for the speaker of the house whom Todd had thrown through a closed window. Yankton won. Moses Armstrong of the surveyor general's office described the process: "A little blood was shed, much whiskey drunk, a few eyes blackened, revolvers drawn, and some running done."

"A little blood was shed, much whiskey drunk, a few eyes blackened, revolvers drawn, and some running done."

If the politics of the 1862 legislative session were hectic, the September election of 1862 and the legislative session of 1863 surpassed hectic. The September election was the territory's first general election. Voting irregularities were common: ballot box stuffing, minors and nonresidents voting. The election's centerpiece was the contest for the representative to Congress. Governor Jayne decided to run against incumbent Todd. Voters had to choose between Mrs. Lincoln's cousin and President Lincoln's doctor. The canvassing board declared Jayne the winner by sixteen votes. But the ballots from Pembina, a Todd stronghold, arrived too late to be counted. Todd immediately filed a protest with Congress.

The 1863 legislative session was a bitter, divisive affair. Because of disputed election results in several legislative districts, two sets of lawmakers from each district arrived in Yankton—one group was loyal to Todd, the other to Jayne. The attorney general ruled in favor of the Todd legislators; Jayne, however, refused to accept that decision and worked with his own lawmakers. Dakota Territory had two legislatures. Finally a compromise was worked out and the session completed its work in relative peace.

Jayne resigned in late March after the session to begin his life as territorial delegate. Lincoln, upon Jayne's recommendation, appointed Newton Edmunds, the chief clerk in the surveyor general's office, to the governorship. Jayne took his seat in Congress in January 1864. In May, however, the House Committee on Elections ruled that the Pembina votes, which were overwhelmingly for Todd, should be counted. Todd was declared the winner and served from June 1864 through March 1865. Jayne went back to Springfield where he served as mayor for several terms and continued to practice medicine. He died in 1916 at the age of eighty-nine. □

George Frein (above) presents Abraham Lincoln, sixteenth president of the United States at the Lincoln Chautauqua. Dr. Frein taught in the Philosophy and Religion Department at the University of North Dakota from 1968 to 1997. With encouragement and direction from Everett Albers, Frein was a Chautauqua scholar from 1986 to 1997, portraying Father De Smet, Henry Adams, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain. In 1998, he helped organize the National Chautauqua Tour which held Chautauquas in states outside the Great Plains.

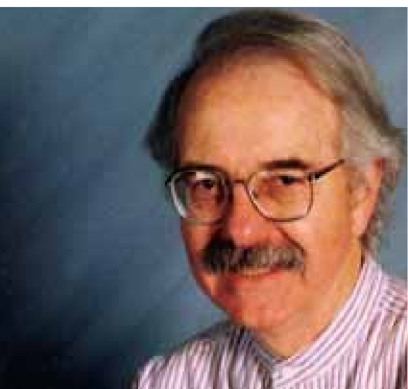
Abraham Lincoln on Land and Liberty

By George Frein

In 1864 Congress passed and President Lincoln signed a bill into law that ceded the land around Yosemite Valley to the State of California, "upon the express conditions that the premises shall be held for public use, resort, and recreation, and shall be held inalienable for all time." Lincoln made a brief signing statement: "A nation may be said to consist of its territory, its people, and its laws. The territory is the only part which is of certain durability. One generation passeth away, and another generation commeth, but the earth abideth forever. It is of first importance to duly consider, and estimate, this ever-enduring part."

This signing statement contains the germ of the idea of National Parks in America. Lincoln brought his keen, visionary mind to a simple signing statement that was surely not his chief preoccupation that day. And yet, it was characteristic of so much of what he wrote, for it called attention to a simple fact inside a complex relationship of people and their land. His thoughts about law and liberty took up most of his time and energy, but it was the same sharp mind that addressed all topics: land, liberty, law and more. The Civil War, of course, was his chief daily concern. Lincoln did not live to write memoirs in his leisure. And yet, in the speeches he gave during the war, Lincoln created perhaps the most compelling of all Civil War narratives.

What made Lincoln's story so compelling was his ability to bring together his uncompromising conviction that slavery was simply evil with a complex understanding of his legal obligations under the Constitution and the political



George Frein

reality created by a divided and volatile public opinion. While many lesser minds complicated what was simple with tortured arguments in support of slavery, others simplified legal and political complexities with a demand for immediate abolition that was politically unrealistic. Lincoln had the strength of intellect to hold the combination of a simple moral truth and a complex legal/political reality together as he led the country through its most trying time.

Lincoln's mind showed its greatness most brilliantly in his speeches. He was a politician and a shrewd one. He was aware of the political consequences of whatever he did. But, he only trained himself to be a politician. Deeper down in his soul, where his untrained, instinctual being was shaped, Lincoln was a thinker and writer. As a rule, he spoke only after considerable thought. He carefully wrote out his speeches and kept revising them right up to the time of delivery. The story of his drafting the Gettysburg Address on the back of an envelope at the last minute in the train going to the cemetery is not true. Like all of his major addresses it was carefully composed beforehand.

Lincoln began, long before the war, saying in utter simplicity that slavery was wrong. "A monstrous injustice," he called it, in an 1854 speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act. But, at once he acknowledged the complexity of American slavery: "I think I have no prejudice against the Southern people. They are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not exist among them they would not introduce it. If it did now exist among us, we should not instantly give it up."

In his famous debates with Senator Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln said his opponent "carefully excludes the thought that there is anything wrong in slavery." Douglas talked only of "popular sovereignty"—insisting that only the people of the territory should decide whether to be slave or free. Lincoln exposed Douglas' sophistry, by saying that Douglas' idea was only this: "that if any one man chose to enslave another, no third shall be allowed to object."

At the Cooper Union in New York, in the speech that immediately made him a contender for the Republican nomination, Lincoln agreed with Douglas that the founding fathers understood the question of slavery better than we do. He went on to show, however, that they not only allowed slavery, they also legislated against it in ways that Douglas' simple understanding of American history now would forbid: they excluded it from the territories.

In his inaugural address Lincoln put the existing state of affairs simply: "One section believes slavery is right and should be extended, while the other believes it is wrong and ought not be extended." And yet, Lincoln said: "I have no purpose to interfere with slavery in the states where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so." Lincoln's moral and constitutional convictions were held together in a complex intellectual web that neither secessionists nor abolitionists, each with narrower ideas, were equipped to appreciate.

During the war, Lincoln once received a delegation of Kentucky politicians who came to complain about recruitment of slaves as soldiers. Lincoln heard their complaints and then said: "I am naturally anti-slavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I cannot remember when I did not so think, and feel. And yet I have never understood that the Presidency conferred upon me an unrestricted right to act officially upon this judgment and feeling." And yet to save the constitution he said he was obliged to emancipate slaves and use black soldiers. Those who want to save the Union without the aid of the slaves themselves, he argued, "cannot face the truth." Again Lincoln's thinking was both simpler and more complex than his visitors' view. Most famously, Lincoln's two minute address at Gettysburg was simpler than Edward Everett's two-hour lecture. But Lincoln was nonetheless subtly complex as he linked the nation of 1776—"conceived in

liberty"—to the nation of 1863 which needed a "new birth of freedom."

Finally, in his Second Inaugural, Lincoln combined simple truth with complex reality most eloquently. Put simply: all knew slavery was "somehow the cause of the war," he said. But, when he came to express himself on the ultimate meaning of the war, Lincoln's language rose to the complex level of philosophical and theological discourse. He speculated that the war was a punishment on both North and South for the crime of slavery.

...the war was a punishment on both North and South for the crime of slavery.

"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?"

Here in a marvelously complex sentence, Lincoln took his listeners to as lofty a place as it is imaginatively possible to go. And no one else, North or South—not minister, not professor, not any other politician—sought to put the war in as large and as meaningful a setting. In no other telling of the war were Americans offered the possibility for so profound a healing of its terrible devastation.

Only days later, after Lee's surrender, Lincoln spoke about reconstruction to a crowd outside the White House. John Wilkes Booth was in the crowd and heard the President as he continued to write the story of the war by recommending Negro suffrage. Booth said, "That is the last speech he will ever make." And so it was; but the land, its people, and its laws saw a new birth of liberty nonetheless. □

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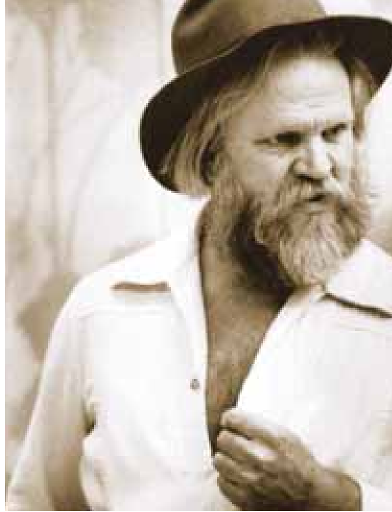
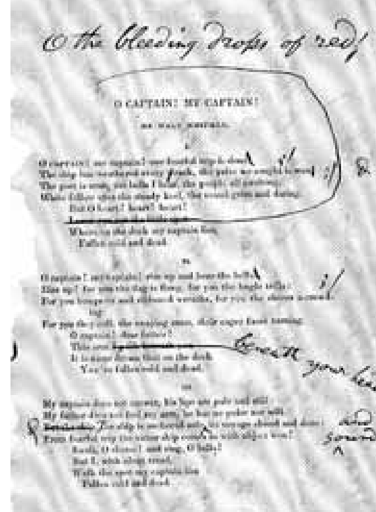
Carrol D. Peterson (right) presents Walt Whitman, the great American poet at the Lincoln Chautauqua. Peterson was a Phi Beta Kappa scholar at the University of Arkansas, where he earned his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in English. He taught at Doane College in Crete, Nebraska, from 1964 to 2000, has studied at Yale, and served as a visiting professor of English at Kwassui University in Japan.





O the bleeding drops of red!

O CAPTAIN! MY CAPTAIN!

Walt Whitman, America's Poet (1819-1892)

By Carrol Peterson

No poem has been more memorized by American school children than Walt Whitman's, "Oh Captain! My Captain!" No poet has set himself more determinedly to become a legend than Whitman. No past American writer continues to receive more critical attention than "the good gray poet." And no poet from our country's past seems more relevant to America today than Whitman.

Whitman personally wanted to achieve, first of all, a new poetry for the new world. But he also felt that the nation itself had a purpose to become the exemplary democracy for the world. He believed that America was ordained to spread the gospel of democracy and freedom through the world, a belief that led to war with Mexico in Whitman's time—a belief that has led to many of America's continuing international involvements. Whitman is a poet, but he is far from non-political.

Whitman and his father accepted Thomas Paine's interpretation of history—that the establishment of the American republic was a rejection of the feudal past. This view applied not just to politics, but to literature as well. Though Whitman admired Shakespeare immensely, he felt that even his writings showed some of the faults of medieval feudalism. This view of history explains Whitman's enthusiasm for progress. His account of his pleasure in riding on trains and his assertion that the poetic muse is to be found "among the kitchenware" (in "Song of the Exposition") are distinctive. Politics, poetry, and progress are connected in Whitman.

His long poem, "Song of Myself," is not just a celebration of one life, though it is self-revelatory. Underlying Whitman's political faith in democracy and his poetic practice is his endless delight in the variety of life. Whitman is the rhapsodist of variety and of whatever is individual. He emphasizes America's potential—not Tocqueville's potential for a tyranny of the majority, but the

potential for ever-proliferating and mutually enhancing differentiations. Even his remarkable poems on sex are celebrations of individuality. Whitman is, among other things, a religious seer. He is convinced of the harmony of democracy with nature itself. Politics, poetry, and religion unite.

Yet the work which voices Whitman's claim to be the poet of democracy, *Leaves of Grass,* was not a popular success when it was first published in 1855. True, ten days after the book's publication, Whitman received a letter from the famous Ralph Waldo Emerson, saying, "I greet you at the beginning of a great career," but Emerson was in the minority. Whitman wrote self-promoting reviews of the book, and the second edition (1856) has the Emerson quote blazoned on the cover. Still, the book did not sell well enough to provide a living for Whitman. Even after many more editions, Whitman admitted in *A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads* (1889), "I have not gain'd the acceptance of my own time," and "from a worldly and business point of view *Leaves of Grass* has been worse than a failure." But Whitman did not doubt that the America of the future would acknowledge the greatness of his poetry.

The most important influence on *Leaves of Grass* was Emerson. Whitman had read Emerson's Essays in 1854, and even earlier he heard Emerson give his lecture "The Poet." "I was simmering, simmering, and Emerson brought me to a boil," said Whitman in 1860. Emerson's transcendentalism, his emphasis on the poet as representative of society, standing "among partial men for the complete man," and his appeal for a distinctly American literature, all became elements of *Leaves of Grass,* especially of the long poem, "Song of Myself."

Whitman's achievements received little encouragement from the public in his day. Worst of all, the nation's achievement as exemplary democracy was seemingly destroyed by the Civil War. Whitman was too old to be a soldier, but he spent years in Washington, nursing the dying and the wounded. His war poetry, the greatest literary record of America's greatest tragedy, is filled with a new sadness and disappointment, yet the mood is never one of despair. Even after viewing such horrible scenes as he records in "The Wound Dresser," Whitman's hope survives.

While in Washington, Whitman's admiration for President Lincoln grew. He noted the burden of sorrow evident in Lincoln's face when they passed in the street. Finally, Whitman was hit hard by the assassination of Lincoln. His grief, however, did not lead to despondency. Lincoln's tragic death instead produced two outstanding poems: the often recited "Oh Captain! My Captain!" and the elegy "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." At the end of the war, what the nation could achieve seemed as clear as ever to Whitman. "Affection shall solve the problems of freedom yet," he announces in "Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice."

Whitman's optimism could not be called glib, however. Having seen the worst of war, he viewed the worst of peacetime American failures in Democratic Vistas (1870): "Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness of heart than . . . here in the United States. . . . We live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout. . . . The depravity of the business classes of our country is not less than has been supposed, but infinitely greater. . . ." Government agencies "are saturated in corruption, bribery, falsehood, mal-administration." "In business, (this all-devouring modern word, business) the one sole object is, by any means, pecuniary gain." Whitman concludes that "Our New World democracy . . . is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects. . . . It is as if we were somehow being endow'd with a vast and more and more thoroughly appointed body, and then left with little or no soul."

Still, Whitman's hope survives. "The fruition of democracy," he says, "resides altogether in the future." It may come after even worse wars and it may take centuries, but it will come. "Those who love each other shall become invincible," says the "prophetic" voice, and that voice survives today. □

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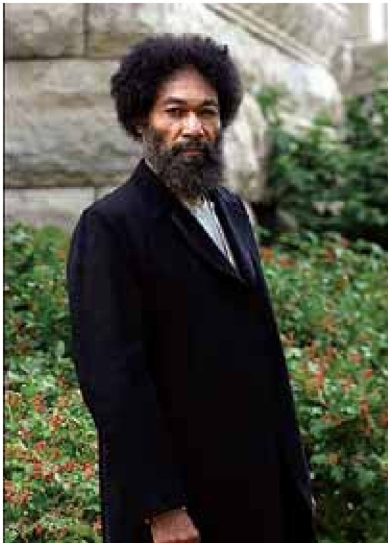

Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln: In Service of a Reconstructed Humanity

By Charles Everett Pace

Charles Everett Pace (top) presents Frederick Douglass, editor, orator, writer, abolitionist, and statesman at the Lincoln Chautauqua. With an M.A. in American studies, history/anthropology from Purdue University, Pace is a long-time participant in Chautauqua programs nationwide. In previous years, he interpreted the African American leader and writer W. E. B. DuBois; York, the man servant of Captain Clark, as well as Booker T. Washington.

In 1860, Frederick Douglass wrote to his abolitionist friend Gerrit Smith that though he hoped for a Republican victory in the upcoming presidential election, he would cast his vote for the Radical Abolitionist candidate because "I cannot support Lincoln." Clearly, Douglass's abolitionist's goals diverged from the goals of the Republican party with Lincoln as its standard bearer. Lincoln felt that slavery was morally wrong. He argued that, while the framers of the U.S. Constitution allowed slavery to continue, it was a compromise move—one that ensured the union of the southern and northern colonies to form the United States of America. But, Lincoln also believed, as he argued the framers believed, that slavery would eventually be disbanded by those same states some time in the future. Nevertheless, because slavery was the law of the land, Lincoln said he would uphold the law.

What he and the Republicans did was to hold slavery within its present locales and restrict its expansion into any newly acquired territories. Thus, the Republicans supported a policy of containment rather than of abolition. Even though Lincoln confessed, "I have always [personally] hated slavery," this tension between the personal and the political made Lincoln an unacceptable candidate to Douglass and his abolitionist cohorts. Yet, Douglass was also a realist, and because of his own personal and political decisions, had himself incurred severe criticism, even ostracism, from abolitionist friends, including his mentor William Lloyd Garrison.

In 1848, following his move from Lynn, Massachusetts, to Rochester, New York, Douglass, in becoming his "own man," joined the political abolitionist in a move that placed him at odds with the "moral persuasions" position of the Garrisonians. They championed three main points that Douglass, after numerous conversations with Gerrit Smith, came to doubt and to eventually oppose. The Garrisonian position was: 1) The U.S. Constitution is a pro-slavery document; therefore, they did not engage in party politics, politics that derived its validity from said Constitution; 2) the church was a proslavery institution; and 3) moral persuasion should be the strongest action employed to overthrow the institution of slavery.

Douglass aligned himself with Smith, arguing that the Constitution was actually anti-slavery, and thus it was not only a proper but a wise choice to leverage the power of the political mainstream in his opposition to slavery. He eventually concluded that while southern churches were proslavery and there should be no union with them, this restriction did not apply to northern churches that broke their affiliation with their southern counterparts.

Influenced by the ideas of John Brown and outraged by the passage of the Kansas–Nebraska Act, the Fugitive Slave Bill, and The Dred Scott Decision in 1850, Douglass concluded that armed resistance might be necessary to oppose the growing power of the southern planters.

Thus, by the time that he published his second book *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855, Douglass was indeed free, not only from the physical power of slave holders to control his body and labor, but free from Garrison to control his mind. Frederick Douglass assumed the mantle of national leadership in his own right. In restructuring and 'reconstructing' his position relative to the Garrisonians, he succeeded in 'reconstructing' himself.

Douglass was now in a position to be both a moralist and a politician. He had positioned himself to shift his position in accordance with changes in the world. And, like Lincoln, Douglass understood the power of persuasive words to influence and sometimes even to control public opinion, as well as to advance one's moral and political agenda. Thus when it became clear that the "war of the rebellion" was not a "skirmish," a fight that would be easily and effectively put down by Northern troops, both Douglass and Lincoln escalated their efforts in personal and political reconstruction.

With the realization that the country was in the midst of a full-scale civil war, Douglass emerged as an ardent supporter of Lincoln, even though he remained critical of his policy of only opposing the rebelling slave holders, rather than warring with the real enemy, slavery itself, which was the basis of the slave holders' power. As a result, he called for a war to free the slaves, as well as a war to save the union. He also called for the even more radical position of arming black men to fight in the Union military. Douglass felt that this position would have the multiplier effect of joining slavery's moral opposition with the political agenda of saving the union.

This was, of course, precisely the position that Lincoln, by late 1862, himself had reached. He declared in his Emancipation Proclamation that as of January 1, 1863, all slaves in the rebellious states were now and "forever free." Lincoln also adopted the radical position, long advocated by Douglass, that black military might was a resource that must be tapped, and he too became an abolitionist.

When Lincoln gave the order, Douglass himself

became a major recruiter of the Massachusetts 54th and 55th Regiments. His oldest sons were his first two recruits. Also, in a meeting with Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, Douglass agreed that upon receipt of his promised commission in the officer corps, he would join General Lorenzo Thomas in the Mississippi Valley. When his commission was not issued, he refused to join the army but did continue to recruit.

In the end, it was this juxtaposition of the abolitionist War to Save the Union that set Douglass up to become not only a challenger, but also a champion of Lincoln as a symbol of reconstructionist ideals. It set Douglass on the road to becoming a staunch and life-long Republican operative.

After the war, Douglass worked to aid Lincoln's Reconstruction aims. After five years of combat with more than 600,000 dead, northern and southern whites were much more willing to unify with each other than either side was to unify with blacks, whom they regarded as the primary beneficiaries of the war. Many, if not most, whites questioned not only the desirability but also the very possibility of union, in terms of human equality, between blacks and whites.

Around this issue, Douglass once again merged the personal with the political by leveraging the memory of his three war-time meetings with Lincoln as a demonstration of the reality of black and white social relations based on the recognition of human equality. In so doing, he hoped that their personal and political relationship would serve as the living symbol of a racially unified America. It could serve as a model for the potential, reconstructed, equal relationship between blacks and whites in the nation as a whole.

In later years, Douglass made sure that his reception by the president got maximum contemporary and historical coverage, the most prominent being his speech, "Oration by Frederick Douglass, delivered on the occasion of the unveiling of the Freedmen's Monument, in memory of Abraham Lincoln, in Lincoln Park, Washington, D.C., April 14, 1876."

In this address, Douglass portrays how Lincoln, during the course of his administration from 1860 to 1863, in fact, reconstructed himself—in both his racial consciousness, as well as in his relationship to blacks. At the beginning of his administration, Lincoln, the self-made man, was a man of the masses. He was one of them in belief and behavior. But in order to save the union, Lincoln was forced into a confrontation with his own psyche and concluded that for our national salvation (and perhaps his own), he would have to, and he did, reconstruct his ideas, policies and behavior to meet the realities of a changing and new world/national order. The result of this personal/political reconstruction is that former slaves were now citizens and the "divided house" was now unified.

Thus Lincoln serves as a model of the mental and behavioral transition that others, the masses, people like him, must and can make with the right type of leadership. And, because of this example, black people are in his debt and paid homage to him symbolically through the erection of the Lincoln monuments. Reflecting on this fact, Douglass went on: "When therefore, it shall be asked what we have to do with the memory of Abraham Lincoln, or what Abraham Lincoln had to do with us, the answer is ready, full, and complete.

Through this oration, he places the black race squarely within the actions of a civilized people. He links the monument's dedication with the reconstructionist vision of the assassinated president. Douglass closes with a comforting admonition, noting that when the humanity of blacks is questioned even further, during those times "…we may point to the monument we have this day erected to the memory of Abraham Lincoln" and proclaim their right to sit at the seat of the highest reaches of a common humanity. ☐

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION:

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Programs

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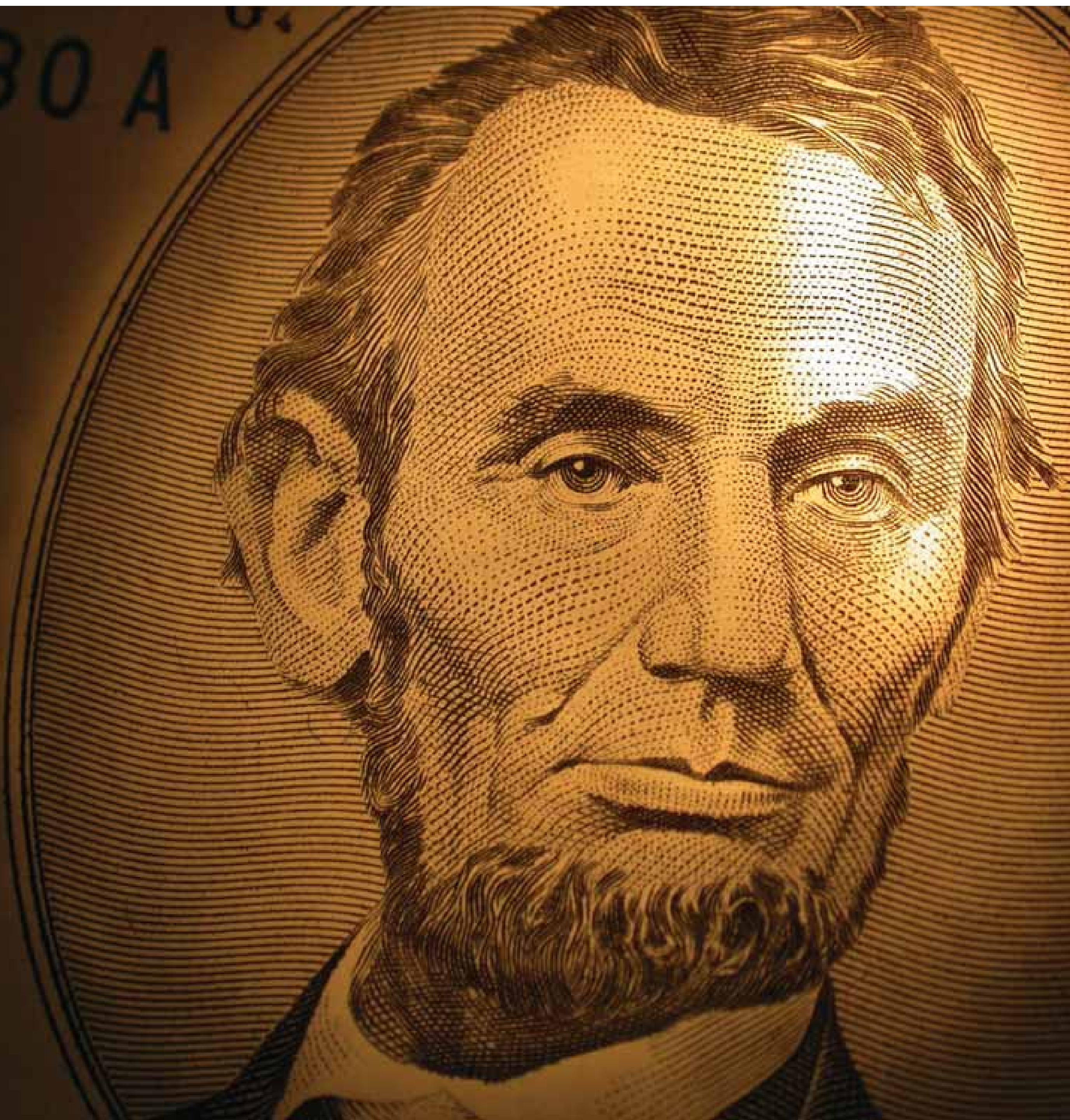
Defining Lincoln's Religion

By John Helgeland

Abraham Lincoln did not join a church. For many, whose only model of religion is built around a church or synagogue, the case is closed: Lincoln could not have been religious. Yet many who study religion in its various forms regard Lincoln as articulating original and creative religious sentiments that mark him as the most profound religious thinker in the nineteenth century. That such an understanding of religion should come from one reared in the back woods of Kentucky and Indiana with less than two years of formal education indicates that we are confronted by genius.



Where did his sophistication originate, then, if not in church? We are told that he was a voracious reader and that he read from the best authors of the Western culture's canon with the Bible and Shakespeare most regularly consulted. He read so consistently that his neighbors regarded him as lazy and a shirker. In addition to these literary texts, he read law and eventually became prepared to earn his living as a lawyer, one who was highly regarded in the profession.

LINCOLN'S RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENT

The year Lincoln was born, 1809, was close to the time that the Second Great Awakening began to make its impact on the frontier; at least we could say that this religion and his early years ran together. The nature of this religious style must have offended Lincoln's sensitivities. Largely instrumental, this awakening aimed at producing mass conversions in a procedural sort of way. It first began its approach by causing a deep-seated sense of guilt and sinfulness, moving from there to show that surrender to Jesus was the only way out for the sinner otherwise destined to roast in the flames of hell.

From the colonial period onward, America has been subject to this type of apocalyptic preaching. This preaching has created a structure of thought that shapes people's understanding of the direction in which history is moving. History is the stage on which there are two forces vying for ascendancy – good and evil. One or the other will triumph, usually as a consequence of a Holy War or a Crusade. God will support only one side and bestow it with victory. From the perspective of the righteous and holy side, the duty is clear – those that have taken the evil course are beyond saving and must be destroyed. Failure to destroy evil is itself a moral fault which God will punish.

Where could such extreme and simplistic views of good and evil originate? The Puritan preachers, it has been discovered, took the majority of texts for their sermons from the book of Revelation in the New Testament. From here they developed the worldview that we have just seen above. Once this dualistic perspective takes root, it becomes a structure of thought. For example, this structure demands an enemy; if such an enemy is not readily at hand then one must be invented. Once invented, it then must be struck down without mercy.

It is only a short time before the beginning of the Civil War that we have a salient example of just that kind of thinking. John Brown saw himself as a righteous crusader because, with a Bible in one hand and a pistol in the other, he set about to destroy the pro-slavery settlers on Pottawatomie Creek in Kansas who, unarmed, became victims of Brown's holy militia. Brown bragged about his raid later in Boston in the company of famous abolitionists. In 1859, Brown put together a raiding party of sixteen men to attack the Harper's Ferry arsenal to capture arms and munitions to distribute to black slaves and white abolitionists. He hoped that a war could be started to put an end to slavery once and for all. Taken out to be hung in December 1859, Brown proclaimed himself a martyr, another salient theme of the apocalyptic mind-set.

Lincoln was not attracted to revivalist religion or to apocalyptic themes. What religious interest we can detect in him in his early manhood was a fascination for Deist or Enlightenment religious thought. He went down this path so far as to experiment with agnostic ideas. Later in life when he ran for public office, his friends sought to repress those writings since they were aware of how damaging an agnostic reputation could be to an incipient political career. Indeed, in the time of the Second Great Awakening it was popular to ridicule, if not condemn outright, the Deists, many of whom were involved with our country's founding documents.

Perhaps this time of skeptical free-thought formed one aspect of Lincoln's religion later in life. From this time forward Lincoln had no faith in creeds or any elaborate theological constructions. He witnessed churches competing for membership by attacking each other's doctrines. Watching this warfare proceed gave Lincoln the idea that when two churches with radically different teachings claim to represent the true teachings of God it becomes clear that while one church may be right, certainly both may not be right, and it is beyond us to tell the difference. Such thoughts returned to Lincoln during the Civil War.

Even though not a church member, Lincoln had collegial relationships with some clergy. The one who perhaps had the most influence was Dr. James Smith. He was a great comfort when the Lincolns lost their first son. In addition, however, Smith wrote a book entitled *The Christian's Defense,* an answer to the attacks on religion put forth by the freethinkers. Lincoln found Smith's arguments (which he said that he read through a lawyer's eyes) to have answered his questions about the authenticity of scripture. Apparently, the book had quite an impact judging from the number of times Lincoln mentioned it to various friends and colleagues. It helped him to think about central religious themes such as sacrifice – a theme which appeared time and again as he sought to understand and explain the meaning of the war. Knowing Lincoln's aversion to technical and dogmatic theology, it is

interesting to see how he delved into this volume, all 600 pages of it. Why? First, he trusted the author. Second, Smith used the rules of evidence carefully, much as an attorney might do. And third, these arguments for scripture were "ethically clean" and did not set up the opponent to be a straw man. Finally, Lincoln was encouraged to find that faith and reason were not contradictory and to discover that God acts in history. "We cannot escape history," he said, meaning we cannot escape God.

ELEMENTS OF LINCOLN'S PERSONAL RELIGION

From early manhood until his death, Lincoln suffered from depression. So intense was it that at several times he contemplated taking his own life. When Ann Rutledge, an early sweetheart, died, his grief increased his depression to the extent that his friends formed a suicide watch. Joshua Speed, Lincoln's friend, told him he "must rally or die." Two decades later, Lincoln remembered those times and remarked to Speed, visiting him in the Whitehouse, that he rallied because he had something meaningful to accomplish, that is, to be the author of the Emancipation Proclamation. Clearly, Lincoln sensed that there was some meaningful purpose for which he had been created.

Lincoln also interpreted his sufferings as leading to something "purer and holier," that his melancholy was refining his character. As time wore on, Lincoln's true friend came to be the Bible about which he became more knowledgeable than most of his contemporaries. Certain parts of it attracted him more than others, and Job in particular resonated with Lincoln's suffering; he and Job suffered for no fault of their own.

Acquainted with grief, Lincoln had to struggle to keep that condition from destroying him. It was not only the passing of Ann Rutledge but also the deaths of two sons, one in Springfield, the other in the White House, that profoundly weighed on him. The latter was especially hard because his wife was completely undone by it. Only those who suffer seem to realize the depth of sadness others bear at such a time. Life has plenty of grief without adding a war to it. In the many cases of soldiers whom Lincoln knew personally, he was never tardy in sharing a word of compassion with the survivors, usually widows. Because of the profound experiences with his own losses, he seemed to be as pastoral as he was presidential in reaching out to survivors – and there were many of them. He assured one widow that better days will come, but not soon; life can eventually return to joy.

RELIGION IN THE WHITE HOUSE

Lincoln could not abide the thought that some men profit by the means of other's toil; slavery, therefore, was a blatant contradiction to the founding documents of the United States. Although he would not write the Emancipation Proclamation immediately after taking the oath of office (he waited for a decisive battle, in the North's favor before enacting it). In his own estimation it was his highest achievement. There are two sources for Lincoln's ethical stance toward ending slavery.

First, from the Book of Genesis (3:19): "In the sweat of your face shall you eat bread." It was a grave offense to Lincoln and others from the abolitionist side also that one man should produce bread from the sweat of his brow and another should eat it. For Lincoln this was the iconic thought that symbolized the entire system of slavery. And, secondly, the Declaration of Independence states that "All men are created equal." Not only are the slaves equal, but even more basic is the observation that they, too, are men.

Even before Lincoln took office, the nation began to be split by war, and by April of 1861, the attack on Ft. Sumter plunged America into a war that took four years to conclude. Lincoln had to wait two long years for the war to turn to the North's favor. This was the significance of the Battle of Gettysburg, for it was the high water mark of the Confederacy and was a decisive defeat for them deep in Northern territory. The total casualty list for the three days in July 1863 was over 50,000. The farmland around Gettysburg was set aside for a national cemetery; it was not until November that the chosen orator, Edward Everett from Harvard, was prepared to deliver his oration; it took slightly over two hours and, at the time, was considered an elegant statement. As it has been said, a great tree is most easily measured once it has fallen, and so the true magnificence of the Gettysburg Address is now regarded after Lincoln's death as one of the finest creations in the English language, an estimation which Everett himself made, confessing that Lincoln's three minutes captured the meaning of the battle more concisely than his two hours on the dais.

It is likely that the address had been the product of many months of reflection; what was the war about? What was it about really, down deep? For the answer, Lincoln moved far from the commonplace answers about this battle or concerns with whomever might be commanding. This was God's war, but not in the apocalyptic sense where one side is saintly and the other evil. As he looked from the podium across the battleground where, perhaps, half of the casualties awaited burial, Lincoln shared his carefully considered interpretation of what had happened there and would not stop for almost another two years. Had he promoted the apocalyptic viewpoint, then half of the

casualties, the Northern ones, would be martyrs and the rest would be demons, justifiably slain. Rather, reflecting his reading of scripture in verses not expressing the apocalyptic mythology, Lincoln interpreted the destruction of these soldiers as a sacrifice where they gave "their last measure of devotion." "They" meaning both Johnny Reb and Billy Yank. "From these honored dead" we are witnesses to a nation in the process of being reborn with the theme of freedom for all. Death, conception, and rebirth circumscribe the meaning of this war. There are those who would say that war is so horrible that it has no meaning, indeed that it blots out and destroys all meaning. But at Gettysburg, Lincoln, who had no church membership, became pastor to the nation – Union and Rebellion. He was looking forward to a future that he would briefly glimpse before the assassin's bullet found him. It was a future that would be a light to the world: "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." These "honored dead" perished that such a government could become real.

Another short speech was Lincoln's second inaugural address. This document, too, was a critique of the apocalyptic thought that had seized the minds and spirits of many of his countrymen. Of course, they thought, the Confederate general staff, especially Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis, the president of the South, ought to be hung as traitors after the war was finished. In this address, Lincoln makes more explicit why these "honored dead" were sacrificed. Though Lincoln refused to explain the mind of God, he does say that, if the war continues, it is the will of God. God is punishing the whole nation for slavery so that every drop of blood drawn by the slaveowner's lash will have to be repaid on the battlefield. Lincoln had a sense for the doctrine of corporate evil where no one is innocent. It is a fact that Northern textile mills profited greatly from the cotton from the South raised by slaves. All are guilty and all suffer from the dreadful war.

Such thoughts robbed many of the justification for punishing the South. Lincoln's great concern in the closing months of the war was to bind up wounds and achieve normality as soon as possible. Revenge, however, is an attitude most at home in the apocalyptic imagination. In the Second Inaugural Address it is clear that Lincoln rose above that attitude; maybe he even had to fight it in his own

He was certainly not divine, but divinity from time to time shown through him.

soul, thinking of the many friends who died on the battlefield. "Malice toward none and charity for all," was Lincoln's response even to great men such as Henry Ward Beecher who dreamed of endless retribution.

Lincoln's spirit of reconciliation was already becoming real. When General Lee surrendered to General Grant, humiliation and revenge were not part of the picture. Lee kept his sword, his men kept their mounts for spring plowing, and the blue boys shared their provisions with the famished gray boys. It may be that this magnanimity prevented a guerilla war from lasting years, as some in the South vowed that it should. Who can say that if Lincoln would have been granted old age that the revenge that sprouted after his death, leading to harsh treatment of the South, might have been otherwise? Even today the hatred of Yankees remains operative in places in the South.

In the final analysis, we can, as we have, chart some of the influences on Lincoln's religion and locate him in the context of the time. Nevertheless, he remains a mystery, a ball of contradictions, and as strange to himself as to those near him. He was certainly not divine, but divinity from time to time shown through him. Maybe it is enough to say that Lincoln epitomized the very best of our culture. He was with us for a while and we matured on that account. Comes the assassination and he is no more. Was he a martyr? No. Perhaps he would say rather that he was part of the sacrifice that God asked of the whole nation in those days. □

John Helgeland is a professor of history at NDSU. He received his PhD from the University of Chicago. He currently serves on the NDSU Bush Ethics Committee. John also has received the Blue Key Distinguished Educator Award.

Upcoming Events

BISMARCK

February 20 Eric Sevaried and the Invention of Broadcast News, *BSC (Lee Auditorium)*

March 11 Sir Richard Burton and the Source of the Nile, *BSC (Lee Auditorium)*

March 19 TR Forum
BSC (Energy Center of Excellence)

May 5 Energy, Environment, and Ethics
BSC (Lee Auditorium)

BEULAH

July 31-Aug 2 Everett Albers Chautauqua

BOTTINEAU

February 26 TR Forum
MSU Bottineau Alumni Center

July 27-29 Everett Albers Chautauqua

BOWMAN

February 3 Dakota Discussions
Bowman Regional Library

February 8 Lewis and Clark in North Dakota
Pioneer Trails Museum

March 5 Author Chat with Debra Marquart
Bowman Regional Library

March 29 The Great Plains in Story and Song, *Pioneer Trails Museum*

April 7 Dakota Discussions,
Bowman Regional Library

April 19 Good Day: A Yanktonai Sioux Woman, *Pioneer Trails Museum*

May 10 Sheheke: Mandan Indian Diplomat, *Pioneer Trails Museum*

CASSELTON

February 7 Dakota Discussions
Casselton Public Library

March 7 Dakota Discussions
Casselton Public Library

April 4 Dakota Discussions
Casselton Public Library

COOPERSTOWN

February 24 Dakota Discussions
Cooperstown City Hall

March 24 Dakota Discussions
Cooperstown City Hall

April 21 Dakota Discussions
Cooperstown City Hall

CROSBY

March 27 Dakota Discussions
Divide County Library

DEVILS LAKE

March 5 Dakota Discussions
Lake Region State College

April 2 Dakota Discussions
Lake Region State College

April 16 Author Chat with Susan Power
Lake Region State College

ENDERLIN

May 29 Journey Stories Smithsonian Exhibit opens

FARGO (listen statewide)

February 8 Why? Radio Show

March 8 Why? Radio Show

April 12 Why? Radio Show

May 10 Why? Radio Show

June 14 Why? Radio Show

GRAND FORKS

February 5 TR Forum
UND Lecture Bowl

February 22 Film: When the Landscape is Quite Again, *Empire Theatre*

Mar 31-Apr 4 UND Writers Conference

July 24-26 Everett Albers Chautauqua

JAMESTOWN

February 18 TR Forum
Jamestown Arts Center

LANGDON

February 17 Dakota Discussions
Vic Sturlaugson Learning Center

March 16 Dakota Discussions
Vic Sturlaugson Learning Center

April 6 Dakota Discussions
Vic Sturlaugson Learning Center

MINOT

February 2 Dakota Discussions
Main Street Books

February 25 TR Forum
Minot State University

March 2 Dakota Discussions
Main Street Books

April 6 Dakota Discussions
Main Street Books

POWERS LAKE

April 28 Dakota Discussions
Powers Lake Community Room

RUGBY

February 4 TR Forum
Rugby High School

February 22 Dakota Discussions
Heart of America Library

March 22 Dakota Discussions
Heart of America Library

April 19 Dakota Discussions
Heart of America Library

VELVA

February 8 Dakota Discussions
Velva School and Public Library

February 22 Film: When the Landscape is Quiet Again, *Velva School and Public Library*

March 7 Author Chat with Debra Marquart
Velva School and Public Library

April 19 Dakota Discussions
Velva School and Public Library

Events added weekly.
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Picturing America

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JOURNEY STORIES

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Washburn / December 7-January 18, 2010
Ellendale / January 25-March 14, 2010

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A Tiny Bit of Artful Government

By George F. Will

In Winslow Homer's 1865 painting, "The Veteran in a New Field," a farmer, bathed in sunshine, his back to the viewer, his Union uniform jacket cast on the ground, harvests wheat with a single-bladed scythe. That tool was out of date, and Homer first depicted the farmer wielding a more modern implement. Homer then painted over it, replacing it with what evokes a timeless symbol of death—the grim reaper's scythe. The painting reminds viewers how much Civil War blood was shed, as at Gettysburg, in wheat fields.

Homer's painting is one of 40 works of art that the National Endowment for the Humanities is distributing, in 24-by-36-inch reproductions, with teaching guides, to all primary and secondary schools and libraries that ask for them. About one-third have done so, according to Bruce Cole, the NEH's chairman.

So as Washington's dreariest year in decades sags to an end—a year in which trillion-dollar improvisations that will debase the dollar have been bracketed by a stimulus that did not stimulate and a rescue that will prolong automakers' drownings—at the end of this feast of folly, consider something rarer than rubies. It is a 2008 government program that costs next to nothing —$2.6 million this year; a rounding error in the smallest of the bailouts. And "Picturing America" adds to the public stock of something scarce—understanding of the nation's past and present.

The 40 works of art include some almost universally familiar ones—John Singleton Copley's 1768 portrait of a silversmith named Paul Revere; Emanuel Leutze's 1851 "Washington Crossing the Delaware;" Augustus Saint-Gaudens's bronze relief sculpture "Robert Gould Shaw and the Fifty-fourth Regiment Memorial" on Boston Common. But "Picturing America" is not, Cole takes pains to insist, "the government's 'top 40.' " Forty times 40 other selections of art and architecture could just as effectively illustrate how visual works are revealing records of the nation's history and culture, and how visual stimulation can spark the synthesizing of information by students.

The colorful impressionism of Childe Hassam's flag-filled painting, "Allies Day, May 1917," captures America's waxing nationalism a month after entry into World War I. And it makes all the more moving the waning of hope captured in Dorothea Lange's 1936 photograph "Migrant Mother." This haunting image of a destitute 32-year-old pea picker, a mother of seven, is a springboard into John Steinbeck's novel "The Grapes of Wrath." One of the images in "Picturing America" is more timely than Cole could have suspected when the project was launched in February. It is a photograph of Manhattan's Chrysler Building.

Built between 1926 and 1930—between the giddy ascent of the '20s stock market and the crash —this art deco monument to the might of America's automobile industry is decorated with motifs of machines and streamlining. There are winged forms of a Chrysler radiator cap; an ornamental frieze replicates a band of hubcaps. The stainless steel of the famous spire suggests the signature of the automobile industry in its salad days—chrome.

To understand the animal spirits that drove New York's skyscraper competition—the Chrysler Building was the world's tallest for less than a year, until the Empire State Building was completed—is to understand an era. Two eras, actually—the one that built the building, and ours, which has reasons to be reminded of the evanescence of seemingly solid supremacies.

Emanuel Leutze (1816-1868), "Washington Crossing the Delaware," 1851. Oil on canvas, 149x255 in. (378.5x647.7 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of John Stewart Kennedy, 1897 (97.34). Photograph © 1992 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

After seven years of service, Cole, the longest-serving chairman in the 43-year history of the NEH, is leaving to head the American Revolution Center at Valley Forge. America has thousands of museums, including the Studebaker National Museum (South Bend, Ind.), the Packard Museum (Dayton, Ohio)—yes, Virginia, there was a time when automobile companies were allowed to perish—the Hammer Museum (Haines, Alaska), the Mustard Museum (Mount Horeb, Wis.) and the Spam Museum (Austin, Minn.) featuring the sort-of-meat, not the Internet annoyance. There is, however, no museum devoted to the most important political event that ever happened, here or anywhere else—the American Revolution.

Cole says there will be one, at Valley Forge. It will be built mostly by private money, for a tiny fraction of the sum of public money being lavished on corporations. Perhaps a subsequent iteration of "Picturing America" will feature a thought-provoking photograph of the gleaming towers that currently house, among other things, General Motors' headquarters. Looming over Detroit's moonscape desolation, the building is called the Renaissance Center. Really. ☐

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Picturing Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln was the first American president to use photography for political purposes. During his first presidential campaign in 1860, some thirty-five portraits of the candidate by the photographer Mathew Brady were circulated throughout the country. The immediacy of a photograph created a sense of intimacy between voter and candidate that few painted portraits could achieve—particularly in the mid-nineteenth century, when the medium was still a novelty for many Americans. Acknowledging its power to move the populace, Lincoln gave portrait photography credit for his victory. "Make no mistake," he said. "Brady made me President!"

This photograph of Lincoln by Alexander Gardner was made some years later, when the burden of the presidency had taken its toll. Gardner had been one in a team of photographers employed by Brady to follow the Union troops and make a visual record of the Civil War. He began to work independently in 1863, when he established his own studio in Washington, D.C., and became known for his portraits of uniformed soldiers setting off for war. President Lincoln visited Gardner's studio one Sunday in February 1865, the final year of the Civil War, accompanied by the American portraitist Matthew Wilson. Wilson had been commissioned to paint the president's portrait, but because Lincoln could spare so little time to pose, the artist needed recent photographs to work from. The pictures served their purpose, but the resulting painting—a traditional, formal, bust-length portrait in an oval format—is not particularly distinguished and hardly remembered today. Gardner's surprisingly candid photographs have proven more enduring, even though they were not originally intended to stand alone as works of art.

This half-length portrait of Lincoln is one of the finest from that February studio session. The president sits comfortably in a sturdy chair, his left elbow resting on its arm, his right on his own slightly elevated knee. There is nothing in this photograph to indicate Lincoln's exalted position: we might just as well be looking at a humble country doctor. His clothing appears plain (though not unfashionable) and his loosely knotted bowtie has been left slightly askew. By this point in his public life, the president had sat for dozens of photographs, and he would have been mindful of the

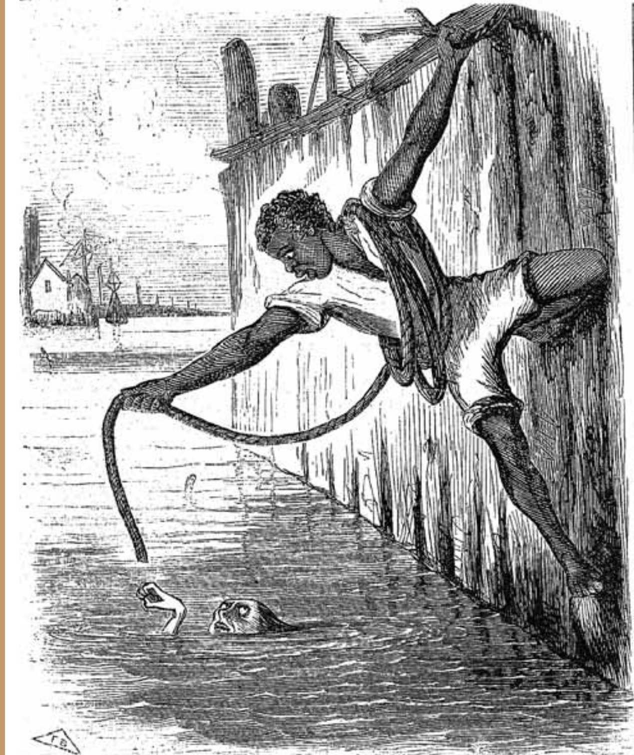
need to hold perfectly still during the several minutes it took to make an exposure. In this print, Lincoln's eyes look steadily toward the camera but his hands fiddle impatiently with his eyeglasses and pencil as if to remind the photographer that he had more important things to do.

What draws and holds our attention is Lincoln's expression, which the poet Walt Whitman described as "a deep latent sadness." At the time this picture was taken, Lincoln had weathered the worst of the war and almost succeeded in his fight to preserve the Union, yet he was painfully aware how much that cause had cost the nation. Lincoln appears much older than his fifty-five years, and Gardner did nothing to flatter the president's haggard, careworn features. The photographer may even have exaggerated them, for the turn of Lincoln's head leaves one side of his face slightly in shadow, making his right eye and cheek appear hollow and cadaverous.

Gardner's photograph took on another dimension shortly after Abraham Lincoln's assassination on April 14, 1865. A Boston publishing firm exploited the nation's grief by producing prints of the portrait Matthew Wilson had based on Gardner's photographs. Gardner's own publisher countered a few days later by offering this and other photographs from the February studio session. They were advertised as the products of "Mr. Lincoln's last sitting." That unsupported (and until recently, unquestioned) claim gave rise to the tradition that Gardner's portraits had been taken just four days before Lincoln's death, investing them with a special aura of martyrdom. We now know that these were not in fact the last portraits of Abraham Lincoln. Even though Gardner's picture does not belong to the president's final days, it records his weary and worried countenance during the last long weeks of the war, when the surrender at Appomattox was still some months away. □

Text excerpted from the *Picturing America Teachers Resource Book,* a publication of the National Endowment for the Humanities, used with permission.

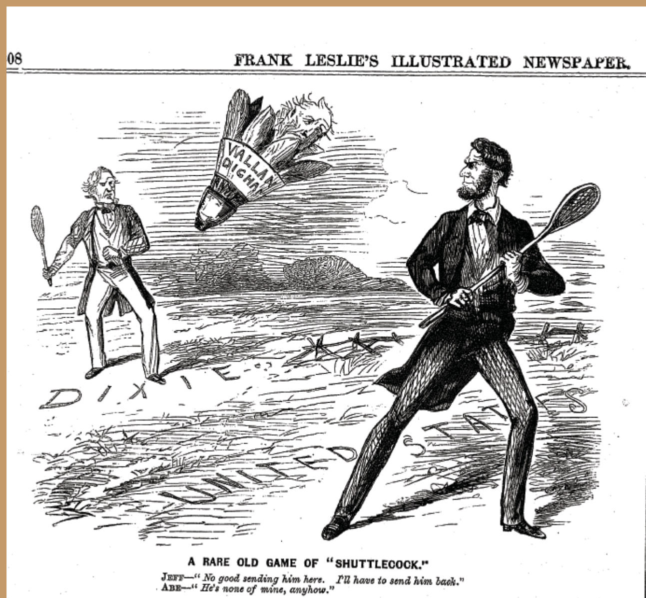
Photo: Alexander Gardner (1821-1882), *Abraham Lincoln,* February 5, 1865. Photographic print. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



A CONSISTENT NEGROPHOBIST.

DROWNING GENTLEMAN. "Take that Rope away, you darned Nigger! What decent White Man, do you suppose, is going to allow himself to be saved by a confounded Nig——" (*Goes down, consistent to the last.*)

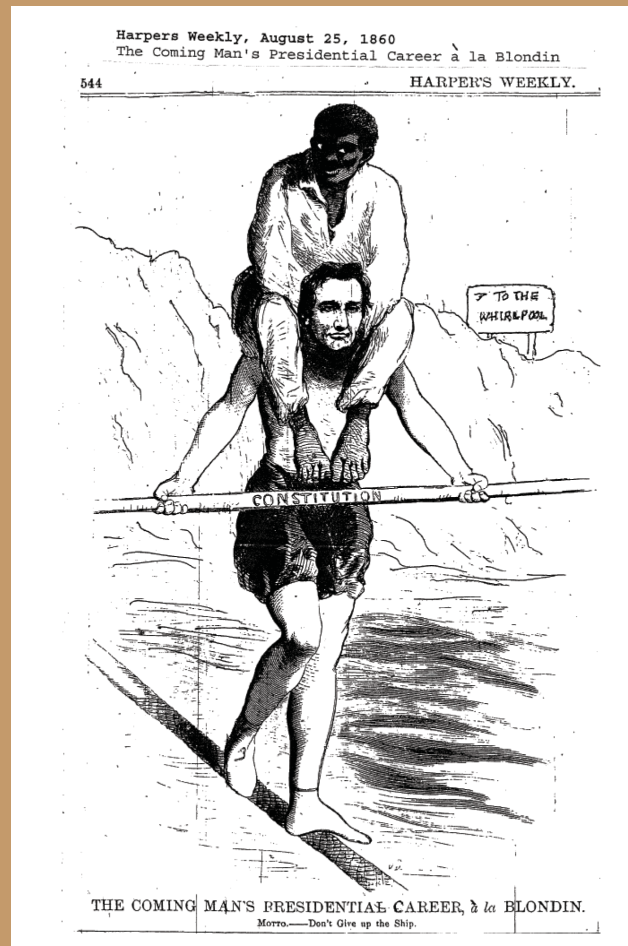
By the summer of 1862, many Confederates feared that the Federal government would adopt an emancipation policy. Probably the most important reason most Confederates were upset by the prospect was that it would upset society as they knew it and would put to question whether race made blacks inferior to whites. The cartoon exaggerates the issue in order to put the question clearly. The artist was telling his readers that he believed that without emancipation the Confederacy would be doomed, pointing out that there were some Confederates who would rather go down to defeat that accept emancipation. The cartoon also points out that if blacks were freed, some Confederates would support their conscription into the army. Would white Confederates prefer free blacks in their army enhancing their chances of independence, or keep blacks out of the army and in slavery, and accept defeat? *Harpers Magazine,* August 16, 1862.



A RARE OLD GAME OF "SHUTTLECOCK."

JEFF—"*No good sending him here. I'll have to send him back.*"
ABE—"*He's none of mine, anyhow.*"

This cartoon clearly captures the dilemma of Abraham Lincoln and the country as the 1860 presidential election approached. Charles Blondin was a famous French tightrope walker, who walked Niagara Falls. The task was more difficult than he expected however, and he almost lost his life and that of his manager who was riding on his back. Here Lincoln must balance his way across the falls of American politics, balancing the slave issue on his back, a political trick that was equally as difficult and carried the threat of equal disaster. *Harpers Weekly,* August 25, 1860.



THE COMING MAN'S PRESIDENTIAL CAREER, *à la* BLONDIN.

MOTTO.—Don't Give up the Ship.

Clement Vallandigham was in Congress when the Civil War broke out. His opposition to war measures alienated his constituents and he lost the 1862 election. Without authority to do so, General Burnside arrested him and subjected him to a court martial. He was convicted but Lincoln, embarrassed and wanting to let him off but not keep him around, expelled him to the Confederacy. Confederates did not want him either, and sent him to Canada where he continued his criticism. In1864, he returned to Ohio and was let alone. Neither Lincoln nor Davis trusted him. *Frank Leslies Illustrated Newspaper,* June 20, 1863.

The Union Army engaged in several unsuccessful campaigns, which the cartoon lists as part of the past, depicting the unsuccessful generals – Irvin McDowell, George B. McClellan, Ambrose E. Burnside – who lost their commands as a result. The artist implies that in the future others might suffer a similar fate unless Lincoln awakes from his nightmare and realizes his dream of "a good time coming." *Frank Leslies Illustrated Newspaper,* February 14, 1963.

Illustrating History

Cartoons and captions compiled by
Dr. Richard E. Beringer, professor of history emeritus at the University of North Dakota.

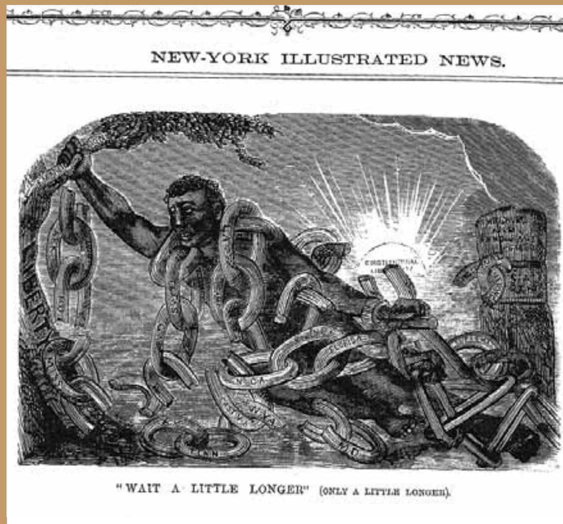
This cartoon is a powerful reminder of what emancipation would mean for the slave, and of the urgency with which many northerners advocated it. It is especially interesting in that it was published before the Emancipation Proclamation, at a time when it was uncertain whether there would ever by such a proclamation. However, Congress passed a series of weak and poorly enforced Confiscation Acts in 1861 and 1862, and local area commanders sometimes proclaimed emancipation, although these were generally repudiated by the government. But the issue was ever alive and being pushed by supporters such as this cartoonist. *New York Illustrated News,* April 12, 1862.

There was considerable objection to the 1863 Union draft law, but nowhere more than in New York City. Here rioters attacked blacks in the streets of the city and killed many. The most extreme opponents were Irish, many of whom disliked blacks because they feared job competition from free blacks. Rioting was so serious that some soldiers who had fought at Gettysburg the month before had to be brought into the city to restore order. There was also resistance to the draft in the Confederacy, but not nearly so extreme. *Harpers Weekly,* August 1, 1863.

This anti-slavery cartoon was published after the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863. Using the rhythm of Edgar Allan Poe's famous poem, "The Raven," the artist pictures a black man with the bust of Horace Greely, a New York newspaper editor who had been a strong advocate of emancipation. The black raven crows his determination that he will never again be a slave. The slave owner, frightened, holds a knife to his Bible. One suspects that the smoke coming from the lamp chimney is intended to represent opium. *Harpers Weekly,* May 30, 1863.

Illustrating History

THE SLAVE OWNER'S SPECTRE.
And the Nigger never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
On that horrid bust of HORACE just above my chamber-door;
And his lips, they have the snigger, of a worthless freeborn Nigger,
And he swells his sombre figger, when I ask him, with a roar,
"Will you blacks again be Cattle, as you used to be before?"
Cries the Chattel, "Never more!"


NEW-YORK ILLUSTRATED NEWS.

"WAIT A LITTLE LONGER" (ONLY A LITTLE LONGER).

Struggling in the light of the rising sun of Constitutional Liberty, the slave has broken free of the pillar of the church, the Democratic Party of 1860, and state rights, and the chains of local institutions (a term often used to denote slavery), and the Supreme Court (referring to the Dred Scott decision). Still bound by chains bearing the names of the slave states, he reaches for the branch of emancipation on the tree of liberty. Although the Emancipation Proclamation was issued eighteen months earlier, the slave must still "wait a little longer." Perhaps because the slave population of Delaware was very small, there appears to be no chain link bearing the name of that slave state. Despite the rather poor lithography, the cartoon carries a strong message. *New York Illustrated News*, June 25, 1864.

DEDICATED TO THE CHICAGO CONVENTION.

This early Thomas Nast cartoon is a strong statement against the Democratic Party and its sympathizers in the 1864 presidential election. A significant segment of Democrats, called Copperheads, opposed Lincoln's war measures. Some even proposed ending the war on the basis of a compromise that would have resulted in Confederate independence. Nast's cartoons could be very complex, and one cannot explain all the symbolism here. However, note the American flag flown upside down as a symbol of distress, the Confederate soldier strong, healthy and carrying a whip, the Union soldier maimed, the sword ("northern power") broken, and all this dedicated to the "UNION HEROES WHO FELL IN A USELESS WAR" if the Democrats won the election. (However, the Democratic nominee, George C. McClellan, renounced the party's platform). With great sarcasm, Nast dedicated this cartoon to the Democratic convention, which was held in Chicago. *Harpers Weekly,* September 3, 1864.

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Abraham Lincoln and the Text of America

By Clay S. Jenkinson

Towards the end of his First Inaugural Address, inaudibly delivered on March 4, 1801, Thomas Jefferson reaffirmed the core values of the American republic—trial by jury, freedom of press and religion, subordination of the military to the civilian authority, a restrained and peaceful engagement with the rest of the world, etc.—and then declared that these principles "should be the creed of our political faith—the text of civil instruction—the touchstone by which we try the services of those we trust." Jefferson compressed all of this doctrine into a mere 240 words, freely admitting that he only had time to state the "general principle, but not all its limitations."

The key word here is text. More than any other Founding Father, Jefferson understood that he was self-consciously laying down the texts by which America would attempt to define itself, and reclaim itself after periods of errancy. Imbued to the point of saturation with the Enlightenment's program of reason, human rights, and reform, Jefferson all of his life looked for opportunities to formulate texts that he assumed would be invoked throughout American history to keep the republic

on track. The Declaration of Independence (1776) is the most famous of these texts, and the sometimes vicious political struggle of the 1790s—a fight for the soul of America, a debate over the meaning of the American Revolution—can be seen as Jefferson's attempt to make sure the text of the early national period would bind future generations to the right course.

One of the reasons that Jefferson has emerged as the most controversial and most heavily criticized of the Founding Fathers is that he did not let his own compromised and contingent behavior through a long and complex life temper the universalist bromides he trotted out on every opportune occasion. The gap between his breathtakingly articulated golden ideals and his much less ideal actual behavior in the real world bothers us much more than it ever did him. As his most perceptive critic Joseph Ellis has argued, Jefferson was able to keep incompatibilities separated into tidy catalogues in his mind. There is no evidence that Jefferson paid a psychological cost for living with contradictions so pronounced that modern critics cannot avoid the term hypocrisy in describing them. Jefferson would be the first to declare that it is the Enlightenment ideals that really matter anyway, and that his own imperfect behavior should not be used to discredit those ideals, even if it discredits him.

In a sense, all of American history has been a series of "readings" of the preamble of the Declaration of Independence.

In 1848 at Seneca Falls, Elizabeth Cady Stanton famously wondered if "all men" meant all males, indeed all white males, or all men and women? She was pretty sure that Jefferson had written the sentence in a restrictive sense, but even more sure that it was time to reread the word "men" as a generic term for "every human being." By invoking the Declaration of Independence in a literal, even parodic fashion, Stanton essentially argued that if Jefferson was a serious advocate of human rights, there could be no reason to exclude women from his self-evident truths; if he intended to declare rights for "all white men of a certainly property base," he was not a revolutionary but a separationist.

More than a century later, Martin Luther King revisited Jefferson by way of a banking metaphor in his famous "I have a dream" speech on the mall in Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963. King wrote,

> *In a sense we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check.*

Thanks to this ingenious analogy, King managed to make white America seem stingy rather than racist. At the same time he forced them to realize that of course there were sufficient funds in the bank account of American justice, if white people would only reflect on the unbelievable solvency of the American experiment.

The African-American poet Langston Hughes (1902-1967) returned to the paradox of Thomas Jefferson again and again in the course of his career. In "Freedom's Plow," for example, he wrote:

> A long time ago, but not too long ago, a man said:
> *ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL—*
> *ENDOWED BY THEIR CREATOR*
> *WITH CERTAIN UNALIENABLE RIGHTS—*
> *AMONG THESE LIFE, LIBERTY*
> *AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS.*
> *His name was Jefferson. There were slaves then,*
> *But in their hearts the slaves believed him, too,*
> *And silently took for granted*
> *That what he said was also meant for them.*

One wonders what Jefferson's slaves thought about all his lofty talk, delivered over a glass of fine Bordeaux, in the finest private house in America, with its fabulous library, its furnishings from London and Paris, Enlightenment texts, according to a favored slave, strewn all over the master's impeccable carpets.

Possibly the most important rereading of the Declaration of Independence in American history was formulated by Abraham Lincoln in speeches and letters written in the years before he was elected to the Presidency. Lincoln had a lifelong fascination with Jefferson. In a letter of April 6, 1859, Lincoln wrote one of the greatest tributes ever offered to Jefferson: "All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that

to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression."

In a sense Lincoln rescued Thomas Jefferson from the defensive states rights doctrine that represents one of the main strains of his constitutional (and, truth be told, race) philosophy, a doctrine that hardened in Jefferson's last years. Southern constitutional theorists and defenders of the South's "peculiar institutions" invoked Jefferson more and more frequently as the sectional crises of the 1830s, 40s, and 50s deepened, to the exclusion of the wider range of his thinking and his unmistakable distaste for slavery.

Lincoln reclaimed Jefferson as a national rather than a southern figure. To do this, he played down the accident of Jefferson's lifelong complicity with slavery (and his complicity in the expansion of slavery into the American West), and focused on the better angel of Jefferson's nature.

Lincoln's logic went something like this. 1. Jefferson wrote the sentence, "all men are created equal." 2. Jefferson either meant this as a universal or a restricted proposition. 3. We cannot be altogether sure that he meant it as a universalist ideal, and his involvement in slavery certainly complicates the problem. 4. But Jefferson more often gravitated to the universalist than the contingent end of the spectrum. 5. In the end, it doesn't really matter what Jefferson intended, because we cannot go on as an experiment in liberty unless we read Jefferson in the universalist sense. 6. Therefore, it is absolutely essential for the future of the American experiment that we read "all men are created equal" to include African-American slaves and free black men and women. 7. Confederate interpretations of this text may perhaps have historical validity, but they are no longer legitimate readings. 8. America's project is to work towards the realization of the universalist implications of the Founder's texts, and restrictive readings have brought the country to constitutional collapse and fratricidal war. 9. In other words, restrictive readings of the key text of American history are unsustainable. 10. The phrase, "all men are created equal," either means everything or it means nothing. 11. We cannot go on unless we realize that from now on it has to mean everything.

Before the Civil War, most Americans including at times Jefferson himself were willing to live in the interstices between the universalist ideals of the Declaration of Independence and its more mundane usefulness as a justification for revolution. It's one of the most interesting questions in American history—what did Jefferson really mean when he formulated that sentence? If a casuist had asked him point blank what his most famous sentence would mean, now or eventually, for African-Americans, what would he have replied? Would he swallow hard and say, yes, that's self-evident or would he have backed away into a textual reading closer to "all white males of a certain property base"? In my view, this can never be determined. This, in fact, is the particular genius of Jefferson and the source of greatest frustration to scholars, biographers, and informed citizens. If he meant the proposition universally, how could he not only learn to live with slavery, but help to perpetuate it in a way that inevitably brought on the Civil War? If he was just striking an Enlightenment pose to justify the American declaration of independence, then in what sense is he really the "Apostle of Liberty" we have etched onto the walls of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., or the granite mountain in South Dakota?

Most southerners and some scholars, then and now, have argued that the Civil War was really about constitutional questions: state's rights, the Constitution's explicit protections of slavery, the Jeffersonian distinction between the few truly national questions and the majority of concerns that are best suited to a state and local resolution.

Even Abraham Lincoln tried to make union the argument as long as possible. As late as August 22, 1862, in response to an abolitionist editorial by Horace Greeley of the New York Tribune, Lincoln wrote:

> *If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union.*

Few Presidents grow in office. Abraham Lincoln grew perhaps more than any other President in American history between his first and second inaugurations. At some point it came to him that the text quoted above, his response to Horace Greeley, was a temporary political expedient that might have held its validity if the war had ended quickly before so much blood and treasure had been spilled. In other words, the moral implications of the American tragedy that unfolded between Fort Sumter and the Battle of Atlanta overwhelmed and invalidated the master narrative that Lincoln conceived—at the beginning of the crisis—as a "solution" to the problem of America: a union partly slave and partly free in which slavery was grandfathered into the existing slave states but carefully excluded from new territories in the West. By the time of his second inauguration, Lincoln had come to realize that slavery and union were no longer compatible, that slavery made union impossible in ways that went beyond the sectionalist arguments that had prevailed before the great war.

Lincoln's second inauguration proved to be a day of remarkable drama. His new Vice President Andrew Johnson humiliated himself and those around him by delivering a rambling, mawkish, disingenuously "plebian" address inside the Capitol, the dome of which was now at last finished, before Lincoln delivered his famous words outside. Johnson's speech was so incoherent, emotionally fulsome, and self-depreciating that everyone assumed—correctly—that he had been drinking.

That night a second and much more dramatic incident occurred. The nation's leading African-American human rights activist Frederick Douglass had the temerity to present himself as the sole African-American among the 5000 citizens who paraded through the White House to shake the hands of the President and First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln. He was barred entry. Douglass and Lincoln were good friends. "On reaching the door," Douglass later wrote, "two policemen stationed there took me rudely by the arm and ordered me to stand back, for their directions were to admit no persons of my color." Douglass assured the security officers that "no such order could have emanated from President Lincoln." The policemen refused to budge. Fortunately, an unidentified gentleman carried Douglass' plea to the President. The word came back to admit the guest.

Douglass walked into the East Room where the tall Lincoln towered over a sea of well-wishers. Douglass tells the story perfectly. "Recognizing me, even before I reached him, he exclaimed, so that all around could hear him, 'Here comes my friend Douglass.' Taking me by the hand, he said, 'I am glad to see you. I saw you in the crowd to-day, listening to my inaugural address; how did you like it?'" Douglass did not wish to be the center of so much attention and he attempted to withdraw as quickly as protocol permitted. Lincoln would not permit it. "You must stop a little, Douglass," said the President of the United States in a voice that could be heard throughout the room. "There is no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours. I want to know what you think of it."

This is unquestionably one of the greatest moments in American history. Among other things, it exhibits the courage and greatness of Abraham Lincoln, who—like his hero Jefferson—knew that the great texts of the American experiment are not all mediated by way of pen and paper. This text also signified to anyone who was listening that the victory of the union forces in the war was going to signify more than a triumph of union over disunion. The meaning of the war had changed. It now meant that the soaring ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the rights enshrined in the Constitution were now going in some meaningful way to be applied to black Americans. It was this thought, much more than the defeat of the Confederate armies, that propelled John Wilkes Booth to Ford's Theater on April 15, 1865. One month and eleven days later, Abraham Lincoln would be dead.

THE ADDRESS

The literature critic Harold Bloom has argued that all great literature is uncanny—by which he means improbable, strange, mysterious, and in some essential and irreducible way, unfathomable. According to Bloom, this common essence, this uncanniness, marks the difference between the large number of very good works of art and that select club of works—like the Mona Lisa, like *Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment*, like *Hamlet*—that represent the supreme works of world art.

Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address definitely belongs to the second category. It is regarded by most historians as the finest inaugural address in American history. It is one of the handful of indispensible documents in American history. Like some of Jefferson's letters and state papers, it transcends political discourse and finds its ways into anthologies of American literature.

It is certainly uncanny.

Here is a paragraph-by-paragraph paraphrase of the 701 words of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address.

One: There is not much need for an "extended address" today. Four years ago I outlined my sense of the crisis we were in, and I have been making speeches and issuing declarations continuously since then, so there is not much that I could say that you don't already know. You all know the course of the war as well as I.

Two: When I spoke here four years ago, we did not know whether the crisis would lead to war. Both sides said they wanted to avoid war, but the South "would make war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would accept war rather than let it perish."

Three: When we clear away all the rhetoric, we all know deep down that the war was somehow about slavery. The South wanted to extend slavery into the West. The North sought to contain slavery in the existing slave states. Neither side anticipated that the war would engulf America as it has or go on as long as it has. The war has overwhelmed America and now it has become clear that slavery cannot survive the war. We are essentially the same people, northerners and southerners, and we read the same sacred text and pray to the same God. It would appear that the South has misread the Bible, but the key text in the Bible admonishes us not to judge others even when it seems right to do so.

Four: The North and the South have each been praying for divine aid, but God hasn't answered either the prayers of the North or the South in the way we might have each expected. So apparently we cannot any longer read slavery as a simple black vs. white, good vs. evil, freedom vs. slavery question. God clearly maintains a more complex interpretation of this conflict than we do. Maybe it works like this: America's complicity (North and South) in slavery has offended God. Instead of removing the scourge of slavery in some benign way, God has visited this terrible war on us. We must not grumble about God's punishment, however much we are all suffering. Yes, we pray that God will cease to punish us, but it must not be ruled out, given the catastrophe that has befallen us, that God may continue the war endlessly until the full measure of his wrath and justice have been delivered. Even if this is true, we must find a way to regard this as providential.

Five: So let us finish the narrative with as much humility and Christian charity as possible. And let us remember that when this awful tragedy ends, we are still going to have to find a way to live together in a true union, so we need to start reaching out to each other to repair the psychological damage that this catastrophe has brought to us.

By the time of the Second Inaugural Address, it was becoming clear that the union forces were going to win the war. Now Lincoln saw fit for the first time explicitly to cut

through the constitutional and even the "inviolability of the union" arguments. With beautiful understatement he writes that—whatever their public arguments—all Americans in fact knew that slavery "was, somehow, the cause of the war."

Lincoln's obsession had always been the preservation of the union, and though he had come to realize that the meaning of the war was now bigger than the union, on this occasion, with the end of the war on the horizon, he gave his best energies to a meditation on what union might mean after so devastating a national crisis. Given his concern about how a nation so torn could actually "bind up . . . [its] wounds," Lincoln's strategy in the speech was to make the war seem as "nonpartisan" as possible, to make it seem like a common national calamity, like a hurricane or an earthquake, not one with a winner and a loser. And yet because it was a war he was talking about, indeed a civil war, not a legislative debate or an election, he could not talk honestly about the future without insisting firmly but in the most unrighteous manner possible, that the right side was winning and that the South, not the North, had brought on the crisis. Listen to the care with which he dances this dance: "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." Both sides said they wanted to avoid war, but the South made war and the North (sigh) accepted it.

The restraint in the text is everywhere palpable. Lincoln says the "progress of our arms" has been "reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all," and yet he does not permit himself to predict the victory that was clear to all rational observers. He will not permit himself to gloat.

Lincoln has four arguments to make about slavery in the Second Inaugural Address. First, the war is a complicated event, but we all know, both North and South, that somehow at its core it is about slavery. Second, nobody could have predicted at the start of the conflict that slavery might have to end for the war to end. But that now appears to be the case. Third, however much we might wish to withhold judgment, the South's moral position is a problematic one, that the slaveholders can sincerely believe that God could support a people who exacts labor from another man against his will. Fourth, slavery is an American, not just a southern, offence against God.

Three things make the Second Inaugural Address a work of genius.

First, it is brief. Most inaugural addresses come in at somewhere between 1500 and 3000 words. The longest in American history was delivered by William Henry Harrison on March 4, 1841. It was a whopping 8,445 words. It may be said literally to have cost Harrison his life, for he died one month later of pneumonia. The shortest was George Washington's second inaugural address, delivered on March 4, 1793. It was just 135 words long, and it effectively said, at the end of a very long and very distinguished career as statesman and war hero, I believe I need no further introduction. On March 4, 1865, Lincoln delivered the third shortest inaugural address in American history. The second shortest was Franklin Delano Roosevelt's fourth, January 20, 1945: 559 words.

Because it is so brief and spare, it does not permit the reader to get distracted on subordinate theses or collateral thoughts. You cannot read the Second Inaugural Address without facing Lincoln's core argument. Whatever it was at the beginning, the war is now about slavery. The war is bigger in every way than anybody could ever have conceived. When the war ends we are going to be a ravaged people and things can never again be the same in America. But we are going to be a union after all, and we are going to have to find a way to live together. That is going to take a level of Christ-like charity never before witnessed in America, but without mercy, charity, and generosity of spirit, we cannot go on.

The second source of its genius is the way that it combines a haunting melancholy simplicity, almost starkness, with a muted but unmistakable hopefulness. It's almost impossible to assess the tone of the address in anything like a definitive analysis. Because there are so few rhetorical flourishes in the speech, it has the feel of profound authenticity, as if Lincoln were simply saying what he had on his mind without making any attempt to shape his discourse. This is, of course, untrue, but the effect is to give the speech a sense of candor that a more rhetorically sophisticated speech would fail to deliver. It's as if Lincoln is saying, there is no room for Ciceronian rhetoric in this national calamity. Things are very bad and they may get worse. Even the pending victory by Union forces is not necessarily good news, unless we all can agree on the meaning of the text. "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we wish," represents one of the few rhetorical flourishes in the speech. "Fondly" is perfectly chosen to signify Lincoln's hope that the war might soon end as well as his realization that he may be deluded. It is a word one would expect to be associated with a lover or a child, not a bloody war. It is a word that emanates from grief, as from a parent who has just lost a child. It is one of the great words of the address. It is a perfect example of the uncanniness at the center of Lincoln's greatness.

Third, the Second Inaugural Address is profoundly Biblical. The doctrine of the speech is clearly Biblical, though not in anything like a simple way. So too is the language. To an extent greater than any other President, including Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln mediated his pronouncements—that is,

gave them rhetorical shape—through his reading. Lincoln's reading was wide and eclectic, but Shakespeare and the Bible clearly influenced him most, and shaped his mature prose style. More than any other American writer, Lincoln may be said to have "absorbed" a Biblical rhetoric.

Haunted as he was by the idea of a civil war, aged and furrowed by the immense burden of leadership in such a conflict, and unwilling to produce a reductionist text in which the North is innocent and good and the South is sinful and evil, Lincoln constructs one of the starkest arguments in American history.

> *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.'*

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Even though this is a dark reading of the text of the war, certainly the darkest that any major political figure ever offered, there is something comforting in it. The suffering may just go on and on, says Lincoln, but there will eventually come an end when the karmic measure shall have been filled. And though the calamity may persist indefinitely, it is in a sense out of our hands, out of human control, and therefore, as with all such calamities, our work is merely to endure.

What Lincoln is essentially arguing, I think, is that the "Civil War" may have begun as a constitutional conflict, or perhaps a sectional conflict, and then it became a war, indeed the worst kind of war, a fratricidal war, but none of those terms quite encompasses the nature of the tragedy that has befallen the United States. None of these terms is quite dramatic enough. Because the war did not end quickly as both sides had arrogantly predicted, it grew beyond the capacity of American political thinkers to understand it, certainly beyond the categories by which American thinkers attempted to contain and understand it.

Just what caused slavery to visit itself on the world is unclear (or unstated) but it is clear to Lincoln that it came because of human "offenses." Slavery, it turns out, is a text that has chapters, a beginning, middle, and end, and up until now the American people have been trying to impose the wrong master narrative on the cataclysm. Since the war was not yet over at the time of Lincoln's address, he leaves open the horrific possibility that the narrative cannot end until some sort of karmic equilization has been achieved, and in that narrative the North is not more innocent than the South, not any less implicated in the assessment and the punishment of the "offenses" that brought the struggle on. It may be, Lincoln says, that God will not have finished the text until he has exacted from the white populations of America, north and south, the exact quantum of blood that the history of slavery has extracted from Africans and African-Americans, and the exact measure of all the gross national product that slaves have contributed to America against their will.

If this is the meaning of the text of the Civil War, Lincoln is saying, then North and South are the wrong terms. The story is about the American people and the American experiment, north and south, white and black, abolitionists and bigot, civil philosopher and simple slaveholder. Mankind must finish this bloody journey, must complete the still-unfinished text, and though the Confederacy may be thought to have a special burden to bear in the narrative, it is by no means the culprit in any simplistic sense.

In a broader biblical sense, Lincoln is essentially wondering if the Old or the New Testament is the right text by which to read the war. Is it lex talionis (a tooth for a tooth) or is it a tale of unaccountable forgiveness in the face of seemingly unbearable injury? In other words, Lincoln is asking, is this a New Testament story or an Old Testament story? Or both at once? Perhaps he is saying, let God be the Old Testament figure in this story, but let American (and particularly the victorious north) be the New Testament figure. Hagiographers and many sober biographers have been unable to resist ascribing to Abraham Lincoln Christ-like capacities for forgiveness and redemption. Under that formulation the armies of Grant and Sherman and the severe reconstructionists are God the Father, and Abraham Lincoln is God the Son.

It would be impossible to improve on the Biblical simplicity, the Biblical cadences, and the Biblical sense of weary mercy of Lincoln's peroration:

> *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.*

As with the greatest pronouncements of Jesus, one is left to wonder just how this can be: no malice after the most catastrophic war in American history? A sense of righteousness that at the same time doubts the value of righteousness? To love in the aftermath of the war the very enemies we have done our best to smite in battle, and particularly to mete out charity to the innocent noncombatants whose lives will never be the same. And at the end, in the phrase "lasting peace... with all nations," a brief practical glance at Britain—an industrial nation that was always toying for economic reasons with a formal recognition of the Confederacy and economic aid too—and moreover a tantalizingly brief utopian hint that the Civil War might somehow serve as a text for all of humanity, and not just the United States.

Lincoln was serious that evening in the White House when he asked Frederick Douglass what he thought of the Second Inaugural Address. Douglass, once he had overcome his self-consciousness and humility in the East Room, assured the President that "that was a sacred effort."

Lincoln himself characteristically avoided a simple or simplistic reading of his speech. He reckoned to be sure that it was one of his best texts. At the same time, he sensed that the stark and dark karmic argument of the speech must trouble anyone who studied it with care. "Men are not flattered," he said, "by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them." Though he did not say so explicitly, he meant here men of both North and South.

Such is the Second Inaugural Address. Though it is possible to unpack it in this way and tease out some of its meanings, every reader who wrestles with the 701 words that Lincoln spoke that day in front of the newly completed Capitol of the United States, is finally reduced to mere admiration and a sense of the address' uncanniness. Like all great literature, it resists a final textual interpretation. Like a koan, it invites sustained and unconclusive meditation. Like all great literature, it is newly great each time you take the time to read it with rigor, imagination, and a willingness to be left in indeterminacy. ☐

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