

LINCOLN LORE

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COMMENTS ON THE SECOND INAUGURAL ADDRESS

Seventy-five years ago today Abraham Lincoln delivered the most remarkable inaugural address which has ever been given by a president of the nation and possibly the most outstanding official document from the viewpoint of literary merit which has been composed during the history of the Anglo Saxon race. The *London Times* referred to it as "the most sublime state paper of the century."

The address is not only a fine composition of English but it reveals the very character of the man who wrote it. There is no attempt on the part of the President to use this address as political propaganda for the party in power or to abuse the insurgent forces then in arms against the Government. It is a frank expression of just how Abraham Lincoln felt about the state of the nation.

The two words of salutation "Fellow-countrymen" offer a good example of the fine choice of language which Lincoln used throughout the entire address. So free from hackneyed form, even these opening words removed any barrier which might prejudice his appeal to the whole country, north and south.

Propriety

Abraham Lincoln always seemed to be concerned about the appropriateness of his remarks on anniversary or dedication occasions. When he prepared his first annual national Thanksgiving Proclamation on October 3, 1863, he wrote "It has seemed to me *fit and proper*" that God's mercy should be remembered. In preparing the Gettysburg Address for deliverance on November 19, 1863, he wrote with respect to dedicating a portion of the battlefield as a cemetery, "It is altogether *fitting and proper* that we should do this." In his Second Inaugural Lincoln mentioned that at the time of the First Inaugural "a statement, somewhat in detail, of a course to be pursued, seemed *fitting and proper*." Thus in the Proclamation, the Gettysburg Address, and the Second Inaugural he used the characteristic phrase "fitting and proper."

Humility

One of the first impressions received from a reading of the address is the humble spirit of the man who wrote it. Absolutely free from egotism he takes no credit for himself and on only one occasion uses the personal pronoun "I". Although on the very brink of immortality with his name continuously associated with the mighty Washington he assumes no attitude of superiority and shows no feeling of bigotry. The absence of any display of braggadocio for either self or party is especially appreciated in a world where dictators seem to feel and express their own importance. Lincoln could only say, "With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured."

Sincerity

The absolute frankness of the entire message is refreshing indeed in a world where executives keep the general public in ignorance about the plans and purposes of government. Lincoln said "The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself." With respect to the progress of the war the same sincerity is displayed in these words, "Neither party expected for this war the magnitude which it has already attained. . . . Each looked for an easier triumph with a result less fundamental and astounding." Lincoln's readiness to admit that he had not been able to visualize the importance and far-reaching influence of the contest stands out pre-

eminently in an age of dictators who claim infallibility as one of their many attainments.

Faith

Upon reading the Second Inaugural Address one is convinced that the author was a man with a deep and abiding faith in God. The paragraph on "The Almighty has his own purposes" is one of the most eloquent testimonials of faith that has been written. Here Lincoln clearly reveals his fervent supplication for peace, his recognition of justice, and finally, borrowing from the scriptures an adequate expression of his own faith, he affirms, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

The exposition on the doctrine of divine retribution is by far the most impressive comment in the address. On April 4, 1865, Lincoln wrote a letter to A. G. Hodges of Frankfort, Kentucky, in which he commented at length on the slavery and emancipation question. He summarized his argument with this statement, "If God now wills the removal of a great wrong, and wills also that we of the North, as well as you of the South, shall pay fairly for our complicity in that wrong, impartial history will find therein new cause to attest and revere the justice and goodness of God."

A week or two after the inaugural Lincoln replied to a letter from Thurlow Weed, who had complimented him on the address, in these words: "Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them. To deny it however, in this case, is to deny that there is a God governing the world."

While it is well known that Lincoln was not affiliated with any organized church group the Second Inaugural Address alone presents sufficient evidence that he was devoutly religious. One-half of the entire address is couched in Biblical lore and six times he mentions the word God and in eight additional instances refers to divinity. One-third of the entire address, or to be exact, two hundred and sixty-six of the seven hundred and two words used in the address were direct quotations from the Bible and words of application made to them.

Charity

Charity has been called the supreme virtue of the Christian faith. Nowhere in high places has it found a more sincere and genuine expression than in the life of Abraham Lincoln. One has called him "the gentlest memory since Christ."

The Second Inaugural Address is referred to as Lincoln's Sermon on the Mount because of its Christ-like sentiments. In one instance, where the President seems to be disturbed about some men professing religion but abusing their fellow man, he says, "but let us judge not, that we be not judged."

Where has one heard, through all the two thousand years of Christian civilization, a statesman standing in a high place in the midst of a great civil war with enemies everywhere about him who would take his life—and they did—saying sincerely from the heart, "With malice towards none, with charity for all."

In the concluding paragraph of the address Lincoln revealed the spirit of charity by making an appeal "to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan." The entreaty in Lincoln's final words for "a just and lasting peace among ourselves and among all nations" was the plea of a peace-loving man.