

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN'S ONE SENTENCE MASTERPIECE

Brevity is one of the habits that Abraham Lincoln cultivated in both writing and speaking. It is a contribution to his compositions partly responsible for so many of his works receiving recognition. He lived in a day of labored epistles and extended orations and the conciseness of his presentations were as refreshing as his conversational method of conveying his ideas. A little known acknowledgment of the Electoral Court's report submitted on February 9, 1865 might be called: Lincoln's "One Sentence Masterpiece." Possibly it should be associated, from the viewpoint of brevity with the Second Inaugural, Gettysburg Address and Bixby Letter.

The press was advised preliminary to the delivery of the Second Inaugural that it was to be very brief. Thurlow Weed's *Albany Evening Journal*, the day before the ceremonies, came out with this statement, "President Lincoln's messages are always characterized by that brevity which is said to be the soul of wit; but it is said that his Inaugural to be delivered tomorrow will be even more brief than any of his previous utterances." As a matter of fact the document contained but 699 words. The *London Spectator* declared: "It is the noblest political document known to history and should have for the nation and the statesman left behind something of a sacred and almost prophetic authority." The *British Standard* commented: "The most remarkable thing ever pronounced by any President of the United States from the first day until now. . . . It is invested with a dignity and pathos which lift it high above everything of its kind whether in the old world or the new."

Charles Francis Adams, Jr. in writing to his father propounded, "What think you of the inaugural? The rail splitting lawyer is one of the wonders of the day. Once at Gettysburg and now on a greater occasion, he has shown his capacity for rising to the need of the hour."

Many other authorities have asso-

ciated the Second Inaugural and Gettysburg Address in mentioning Lincoln's greatest literary productions, although the latter contained but 271 words nearly one-third less than the Inaugural. With reference to Lincoln's oration at Gettysburg, M. E. Dusergier de Hauranne of France, editor of *Revue des Deux Mondes*, stated, "I do not believe that modern speech has ever produced anything that will excell his eloquent discourse." An English contemporary reacted to the address in this manner, "One of the noblest extant specimens of human eloquence."

Lincoln's consoling letter to the Widow Bixby for the loss of her sons by war, which writing is often associated because of its literary merit with the address at the 2nd inaugural and the oration delivered at Gettysburg, contains but 130 words or less than half as many as the speech in the Gettysburg Cemetery. When Woodrow Wilson was President he very much needed a letter of similar character to send to some grieving mothers who had lost their sons in battle. Although he was a man of unusual ability as a writer he finally ordered that President Lincoln's Bixby letter be sent to the bereaved women as the finest expression of sympathy available.

One is impressed with the brevity of these compositions and in referring to a speaker much given to wordiness Lincoln once said, "He can compress the most words into the smallest ideas of any man I ever met." The President seems to have been able to incorporate profound and abiding pronouncements in the most condensed grammatical constructions.

A communication, shorter even than the Bixby letter and containing but eighty-three words is probably one of the most comprehensive single sentences Lincoln ever wrote. In a letter written to the President on March 4, 1865 Thurlow Weed commented on Lincoln's brief acknowledgment of the communication from the Electoral Court in these words: "The reply to

the Committee of Congress informing of your reelection is not only the neatest but the most pregnant and effective use to which the English language was ever put."

While Weed is not known to have been an authority on good literature he was an expert on propaganda which influenced groups as well as the masses. It is apparent in this sentence that follows which constitutes Lincoln's entire reply to the committee, with exception of salutation and conclusion, that the President purposely limited to just one sentence his reaction to the committee's notification memorandum advising him officially of his reelection to the Presidency. He wrote:

"With deep gratitude to my countrymen for this mark of their confidence; with a distrust of my own ability to perform the duty required under the most favorable circumstances, and now rendered doubly difficult by existing national perils; yet with a firm reliance on the strength of our free government, and the eventual loyalty of the people to the just principles upon which it is founded, and above all with an unshaken faith in the Supreme Ruler of nations, I accept this trust."

It will be observed that the President expressed his feeling of appreciation, humility, confidence in the people, consecration to his task and faith in God, in one single sentence. This letter of acknowledgment might have been extended by some verbose writer to several paragraphs. The genius of condensation, of which Lincoln was a master, however, allowed him to cover the entire ground in just one sentence. This was done without appearing to be unduly curt or disrespectfully terse.

While the association of this brief note with the eloquent writings of the President already mentioned does not imply that it should stand among the choice contributions Abraham Lincoln has made to literature, it does seem that it should have some recognition as a masterpiece in brevity.