

LINCOLN LORE

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AN INAUGURAL ADDRESS THAT WEARS WELL

Among the many compliments Abraham Lincoln received on his Second Inaugural Address one from Thurlow Weed caused the President to reply that he expected it "to wear as well as—perhaps better than—anything I have produced, but I believe it is not immediately popular."

There is some evidence that it was not immediately popular. In fact those who heard it did not respond with any great degree of enthusiasm. The correspondent for the *New York Herald* apparently took special pains to observe the reaction of those present and while the address was so short that there was little opportunity to judge sustained interest, the representative of the *Herald* did make these observations:

"It was not strictly an inaugural address . . . It was more like a valedictory . . . Negroes ejaculated 'bress de Lord' in a low murmur at the end of almost every sentence. Beyond this there was no cheering of any consequence. Even the soldiers did not hurrah much."

Harper's Weekly felt "The Inaugural Address of the President is characteristically simple and solemn. He neither speculates, nor prophesies, nor sentimentalizes." The editor of *Harper's* does refer to "a certain grand and quaint vigor unprecedented in modern politics . . . With a fine sense of propriety he says in the gravest and most impressive way that he accepts the trust and prays for strength to do his duty." It is with Lincoln's statement about the address "wearing well" with which we are immediately interested.

The *Boston Evening Transcript* on March 6, 1865, stated editorially, "The President's Inaugural is a singular state paper,—made so by the times. No similar document has ever been published to the world . . . The President was lifted above the level upon which political rulers usually stand, and felt himself "in the very presence of the very mystery of Providence."

Supplementing the Boston paper's comment a Boston statesman reacted extremely favorable to the address especially so inasmuch as he was a member of the intellectual Adams family. Charles Francis Adams Jr. wrote to the senior Adams, "What think you of the inaugural? That rail splitting lawyer is one of the wonders of the day . . . This inaugural strikes me in its grand simplicity and directness as being for all time the historic keynote of this war . . . Not a prince or minister in all Europe could have risen to such an equality with the occasion."

A few English newspapers immediately grasped the significance of the Second Inaugural Address. The *British Standard* stated editorially that it was:

"The most remarkable thing ever pronounced by any President of the United States from the first day until now. It's Alpha and Omega is Almighty God, the God of justice and the father of mercies, who is working out the purpose of his love. It is invested with a dignity and pathos which left it high above everything of its kind whether in the old world or in the new . . . there is in fact much of the old prophet about it."

The *London Times* also contributed to the deep appreciation shown for the address by English newspapers when it observed that it was "an address full of a kind of Cromwellian diction and breathing a spirit very different from the usual unearnest utterances of successful politicians."

The *London Spectator* was even more praiseworthy, if that were possible, in this brief testimonial: "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."

If an Adams could compliment the Railsplitter whom he had not held in much esteem, it is equally surprising to find an Englishman of outstanding intellectual endowment present his glowing tribute. Gladstone was born the same year that Lincoln first saw the light of day in a Kentucky cabin and he might truly be called the supreme European Minister of his day. In these words he referred to Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address:

"I am taken captive by so striking an utterance as this. I see in it the effect of sharp trial when rightly borne to raise men to a higher level of thought and feeling. It is by cruel suffering that nations are sometimes born to a better life: so it is with individual men. Mr. Lincoln's words show that upon him anxiety and sorrow wrought their true effect. The address gives evidence of a moral elevation most rare in a statesman, or indeed in any man."

Possibly the most extravagant reference to the address as it began to grow in favor came from Ralph Waldo Emerson. According to James Grant Wilson, "Emerson said he thought it was likely to outlive anything now in print in the English language."

As time moved on the address lost nothing of its grandeur possibly due in a measure to its Biblical content. One-half of the entire address is couched in Biblical lore. One-third of the text is comprised of Biblical passages and interpretations of them and in fourteen instances Lincoln refers directly or indirectly to God. The spirit of the theme has led some one to call the address "Abraham Lincoln's Sermon on the Mount."