

LINCOLN LORE

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SOURCES OF THE SECOND INAUGURAL ADDRESS

Ninety years ago this week Abraham Lincoln for the second time was installed President of the United States. In the opening remarks of his inaugural address he commented: "At this second appearing to take the oath of the presidential office, there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then a statement, somewhat in detail, of a course to be pursued, seemed fitting and proper." This was the introductory statement in the shortest inaugural speech delivered by any President up to that time. It was limited to 700 words while Lincoln's first inaugural approached 3700.

Lord Curzon of English literary fame chose the Second Inaugural Address as one of the three outstanding examples of modern eloquence. So distinctive a tribute should arouse an interest in the background of this famous state paper. It is merely a matter of casual observance that the expression "fitting and proper" used at Gettysburg is also found in the introduction of the inaugural.

There are at least four independent sources that contributed greatly to the composition of the Second Inaugural Address and a proper interpretation of its majestic theme: a speech, an interview, a book and a letter. There is evidence that Lincoln fully appreciated the basic elements contributed by all of these creative factors.

The speech in question was delivered to three visitors at the White House and on April 4, 1864, shortly after their departure, Lincoln put his extemporaneous effort in writing. The three men were from Kentucky; Governor Bramlette, Senator Dixon, and Albert G. Hodges, editor of the *Frankfort Commonwealth*. To Hodges, Lincoln sent a written account of what he said, which was widely published. Horace Greeley on reading Lincoln's argument stated, "Few men have ever lived who could have better explained and commended his course and attitude with regard to slavery." The fact that Lincoln himself was born in Kentucky gives some emphasis to these opening words of his little speech in which he gives his earliest repercussions—almost from his days of infancy —, to the custom of holding men in bondage. He 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."

In the Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln uses the first two short paragraphs to set the stage for the main drama and he opens the third paragraph with the words, "One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves. . . ." Following the pattern set in the White House speech about slavery he approaches the transition for the more personal aspects of his argument, namely the participation of both north and south in the conduct of the war. To make this approach he uses an expression from this paragraph in the talk to Kentuckians in which he said:

"The nation's condition is not what either party, or any man devised or expected." The terminology in the inaugural is expressed in this way, "Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained."

It was a personal interview, however, that the President had with the wives of two southern men who wanted their husbands released from prison that apparently provided Lincoln with the main theme for his address. He was so impressed by this interview that he put part of it in writing. He then invited one of his secretaries in to hear it read. When it was suggested that the memorandum be given a title Mr. Lincoln wrote, "The President's Last, Shortest, and Best Speech."

It was printed in the Washington papers under this caption.

One of the women at the above mentioned interview insisted that her husband was a religious man which caused Lincoln to remark that "in my opinion, the religion that sets men to rebel and fight against their government, because, as they think, that government does not sufficiently help some men to eat their bread in the sweat of other men's faces, is not the sort of religion upon which people get to heaven."

This interview is reflected in the Second Inaugural in the statement, "It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces." It will be observed that the terminology used in both instances finds its source in the fourth chapter of Genesis where it is written: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread." But Lincoln hastens to follow this observation with another biblical passage from the second chapter of Matthew, "Judge not that ye be not judged."

These two quotations of scripture have introduced us to the book that was the main source of Lincoln's Second Inaugural terminology, the Holy Bible. Regardless of the brevity of the address it contains fourteen references to Deity, mentions prayer three times and paraphrases or uses verbatim four biblical quotations. The President introduces that part of the inaugural address which is more fully developed as a biblical argument by making this comment about the war antagonists, the North and the South: "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other." From this point Lincoln launches into the real argument of his sermonette and the subject he develops is found in the trite statement, "The Almighty has His own purposes." The words which follow this thesis might be looked upon as his scripture reading. It is taken verbatim, punctuation and all, from the seventh verse of the eighteenth chapter of Matthew:

"Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!"

Lincoln then advances the supposition that "American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come." The development of the argument follows the same line of thought with which Lincoln had closed his speech to the Kentuckians a year before, when he said:

"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."

In still another source, a letter about the Second Inaugural written to Thurlow Weed on March 15, 1865, Lincoln points out for us just where he had placed the emphasis in the address by commenting, "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."

The preachment which Lincoln has been developing prefaces its grand climax in the striking parable of "wealth piled up" and the bond-man's "unrequited toil;" of blood drawn "with the lash" and "with the sword." Then comes the majestic climax which Lincoln borrows from the nineteenth psalm, "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether." The benediction which comprises the last paragraph beginning "with malice towards none . . ." contains so much of the very spirit of the Christian faith that the President's Second Inaugural Address has been called "Lincoln's Sermon on the Mount."