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“Saying What Matters in 701 Words” by Ronald C. White, Jr.

...First inaugurals have provided many memorable lines. Franklin D. Roosevelt, taking office in the riptide of the nation’s greatest depression, asserted, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” John F. Kennedy told Americans, “Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country.” By contrast, the words of second inaugurals have largely slipped from memory.

There’s one important exception — the second inaugural of Abraham Lincoln, delivered on March 4, 1865.

Why have second inaugurals fared poorly, and why did Lincoln’s succeed?

To begin with, second inaugural addresses are almost always too long. Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Jackson, Grant, Reagan, Clinton and Bush II all gave second addresses longer than their first. Lincoln understood that less is more. He spoke only 701 words.

Second, one word typically dominates second inaugural addresses — “I,” “I” and “I”! Re-elected presidents like to personalize second inaugurals — believing they have more of a mandate than they did the first time around. By contrast, Lincoln disappeared in his second inaugural. The speech contains the word “I” only once. Lincoln was pointing beyond himself to the future of the American democratic experiment, “to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves; and with all nations.”

Third, second inaugural addresses are often too predictable. Audiences come expecting to hear about second-term agendas. Lincoln’s audience expected him to answer key questions. Would the Confederate States of America be treated as a conquered nation? How should one distinguish the guilty from the innocent?

But maybe it’s a bad idea to give an audience too much satisfaction. Lincoln decided not to address any of these questions. If his listeners expected a triumphalist address heralding a victorious North, they were instead asked to help initiate a new era of reconciliation — one marked “with malice toward none, with charity toward all.”

LINCOLN also surprised his audience by steeping his address in religious language. In those 701 words he mentioned God 14 times, referenced the Bible 4 times and emphasized the importance of prayer 3 times. The point is not to count but to listen to the way he invoked religion as a balm for a nation deeply divided.

Lincoln, so knowledgeable of the Constitution, understood that even though the founders separated church and state, America has never separated religion and politics. Lincoln is instructive in how religion can become inclusive. “Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God,” he said, telling an audience angry at the deaths of so many sons that the South read the Bible as much as the North.

Lincoln made a final move that also set himself apart. Inaugural addresses can be exercises in self-congratulation, both of the candidate and the nation. In his second Inaugural Address Lincoln, quoting Matthew 18:7, lovingly scolded America. “Woe unto the world because of offenses,” he said. Lincoln dared to declare there was something evil at the core of this great nation: “If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offenses.”

Abraham Lincoln

Second Inaugural address 1865, Saturday, March 4, 1865

Fellow-Countrymen:

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. Now, at the expiration of four years, during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every point and phase of the great contest which still absorbs the attention and engrosses the energies of the nation, little that is new could be presented. The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself, and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all.

With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.

On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it, all sought to avert it. While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place, devoted altogether to 'saving' the Union without war, urgent agents were in the city seeking to 'destroy' it without war-- seeking to dissolve the Union and divide effects by negotiation. 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.

One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union even by war, while the Government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it. Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the 'cause' of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. 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, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." 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? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. 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."

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.