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2013

## March 1865: The End of Elegance

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## March 1865: The End of Elegance

*Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address is a well-known and much-analyzed speech. But one prominent feature, its use of chiasmus (or inverse repetition), has gone largely unremarked, as it has gone largely unremarked in analyses of Lincoln's thought and language more generally. If chiasmus was important for Lincoln, however, it is curiously absent at a key moment in the Second Inaugural—the end of the third paragraph. Why? To answer that question is to understand something important about Lincoln's political and rhetorical ideology.*

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A new essay about Lincoln should be offered only with great humility.<sup>1</sup> After all, so much has already been written on the subject—more words “than about any other figure in the history of the world with the exception of Jesus,” according to one recent book reviewer.<sup>2</sup> And when one's words can be read as praise, the urge to hold back should be especially strong since commending Lincoln is one of the principal clichés of our national discourse.

Now, in the context of *my* family history, praise of Lincoln might be excused, since it was my great-great-grandfather's brother, Nathan Neely Fleming, who, as speaker of the North Carolina House of Commons, first moved for secession of that state from the Union and did so specifically out of opposition to Lincoln.<sup>3</sup> In a January 1861 speech, Fleming accused Lincoln and his “black republican party” of “violent, vindictive, and fanatical hatred” of Southerners, quoted derisively from Lincoln's speeches against slavery, and, convinced that Lincoln's election marked a newly aggressive federal policy against the South, recommended that the state legislature “immediately withdraw North Carolina from the Union.”<sup>4</sup>

By my own childhood in North Carolina, however, if not well before, my family was as much on the Lincoln bandwagon as any other. When my older brother got in trouble on the last day of school in 1974, part of his punishment was

to memorize the Gettysburg Address. In meting out that sentence, my father was not just impressing famous words on my brother and me (since out of curiosity I ended up memorizing the speech as well); he was also employing a distinctly Lincolnian educational method, one suffused with reverence for the founders and devotion to the study of foundational texts.

Four decades later, the text I find myself returning to, however, is not the Gettysburg Address, but the Second Inaugural, a speech that used to be thought neglected compared to others in the Lincoln canon.<sup>5</sup> That claim is hard to sustain anymore given that two scholarly monographs on the speech, as well as numerous chapters and essays, have been published in just the last decade.<sup>6</sup> And even before this recent spate of attention, the address was hardly unfamiliar: It is one of two speeches, for example, carved on an interior wall of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC.

Still, the Second Inaugural deserves re-examination, and not just because we are fast approaching its sesquicentennial. Best known for its conclusion, which urges charity toward the victims of war and envisions peace for a reunited nation, the speech contains other passages that are almost blood-thirsty, combining images of divine retribution and human butchery as terrifying as any ever produced by a US political leader. It's also a speech of stunning national self-reproach; for that reason alone, it may be worth revisiting. As Ronald C. White, Jr. writes in his 2002 book on the Second Inaugural, Americans have always been uncomfortable "facing up to their own malevolence"; this speech forces us to do so.<sup>7</sup>

My goal here, however, is to see what the Second Inaugural can teach us about *political morality*. In particular, I want to use the speech to think through some of the ethical problems associated with argumentation in highly polarized political communities and to reflect on the conduct of *rhetorical* leadership in situations of radical uncertainty and seemingly intractable conflict.

Lincoln's Second Inaugural is a speech of only 703 words, the second shortest inaugural address in US history. It was divided by its author's own hand into four paragraphs<sup>8</sup> and was delivered from the eastern steps of the US Capitol on March 4, 1865, a moment in Lincoln's presidency when he could rightfully have adopted a more triumphant tone. After all, he had survived a hard-fought election the previous fall, the first president to win a second term since Andrew Jackson more than thirty years before (and the first non-Southerner ever); the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery in the United States, largely shepherded through Congress by Lincoln himself, had passed the House in January; and a brutal and bloody civil war was finally drawing to a close under mounting Union victories, attributable in part to the unrelenting leadership of Lincoln himself. But the mood of the speech is far from victorious.<sup>9</sup>

The last paragraph, in fact, is famously conciliatory. When you read this speech with students, that paragraph is almost always their favorite. And it's not hard to see why: It's the most stirring, certainly the most quoted, of the address. It's also a good example of what one might call Lincoln's *rounded style*, one designed for balance, symmetry, and elegance. Here's that final paragraph, a single sentence of seventy-five words, with Lincoln's own punctuation ("six commas, four semicolons, and one dash," as White puts it<sup>10</sup>) and diagrammed to highlight its structure:

- 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 a lasting peace,
  - among ourselves, and with all nations.

Why do students like this passage? Well, the sentiments are clearly non-objectionable, carried along by words like *charity*, *strive*, *care*, *orphan*, *cherish*, and *peace*. Its references are inclusive, being all about *us*, *ourselves*, all *nations*. And it's exhortative in genre, meant to inspire and lead, actions we expect from our leaders.

This is all furthered by a strikingly elegant arrangement of words and phrases, clearly oriented toward emotion, memory, and, above all, the ear. Note, for example:

- (1) the mathematical precision of the sentence, with three phrases before and three after the central main clause;
- (2) the repetition of beginnings in both opening and closing phrases: "with," "with," "with"; and "to," "to," "to" (a rhetorical device the Greeks called *anaphora*);

- (3) the prominent alliteration of “w’s” (“work,” “we,” “wounds,” “who,” “widow,” “which,” “with”), “f’s” (“firmness” and “finish”), and “b’s” (“borne,” “battle”);
- (4) the nearly perfect parallelism of the opening two phrases—“With malice toward none; with charity for all”—further marked by antithesis;
- (5) the repetition of endings (or epistrophe) in the third opening phrase (“with firmness in I, as God gives us to see the right”), all leading up to:
- (6) the simple, direct, central clause (notable for its monosyllabic eloquence: “let us strive on to finish the work we are in”<sup>11</sup>), followed by
- (7) the three final phrases, infinitive rather than prepositional, urging us to *do* rather than to *feel*, and characterized by
- (8) a combination of asyndeton (as in the opening “with” phrases, there’s no conjunction before the final “to” in the closing series<sup>12</sup>) and polysyndeton (in contrast, there’s an excess of conjunctions in the phrases “*and* for his widow *and* his orphan”; “a just *and* a lasting peace,” and so forth<sup>13</sup>); and, finally,
- (9) the *conceptual* climax: from binding wounds to caring for soldiers and their families to achieving peace at home and everywhere.

There’s good reason, in other words, to find all this very eloquent.

But if students are drawn without prompting to that last paragraph, they must be patiently directed to other parts of the text that are less conventionally elegant but that turn out, I believe, to be the true heart of the speech. Indeed, Lincoln’s efforts at balance, symmetry, and integration, prominent in the sentence we’ve just been reading, are countered in other parts of the speech by an unforgiving, almost frighteningly propulsive narrative that has its climax not in the fourth paragraph but at the end of the third. In looking closely at those other parts of the speech, I hope to show that what Lincoln communicates here is not primarily a message of charity and peace but one of sin and retribution, that the dominant image of the Second Inaugural is not the proffering of an olive branch but blood-letting on a horrific scale, and that the speech turns not on hope for the future but on preoccupation with the past, especially on the offenses of an erring nation and God’s subsequent punishment for those sins.

What I will focus on specifically is Lincoln’s use of chiasmus, a rhetorical device that fits well in a rounded style oriented to balance and symmetry.

Now, chiasmus, from the Greek letter *X* or *chi*, is a figure of speech that involves inverse repetition. It is usually represented by the formula A B B A, where A and B are linguistic or conceptual elements repeated in *reverse* order.

A	B
X	
B	A

The classic case of chiasmus is the “inverted bicolon”<sup>14</sup> of expressions like “When the going gets tough, the tough get going,” where the second clause repeats in reverse order the first. Other examples will now occur to you: “One should eat to live, not live to eat”; “Never let a fool kiss you, or a kiss fool you.”<sup>15</sup>

The term for exact reverse repetition of words is sometimes given as *antimetabole*, chiasmus reserved for more conceptual, thematic, or structural inversions (as in *Othello*, 3.3: “But O, what damned minutes tells he o’er / Who dotes, yet doubts; suspects, yet strongly loves”<sup>16</sup>), where meanings but not words are repeated in reverse order:

dotes	doubts
X	
suspects	strongly loves

Here, I’ll be using chiasmus for *any* instance of reverse repetition.

The figure is ancient: the Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh*, translated here into English, opens with the lines:

After heaven from earth had been moved,  
After earth from heaven had been separated.<sup>17</sup>

The device is also prevalent in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. There’s a chiasmus, for example, in Genesis 9:6 (again, translated here into English): “Who sheds the blood of a man, by a man shall his blood be shed.” The figure shows up in the New Testament as well, in, for example, Matthew 19:13: “But many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first.” Or Revelations 3:7, where Christ is described as

He who opens and no one shuts,  
and shuts and no one opens.

Chiasmus is prevalent in modern discourse as well. Perhaps the most famous line ever uttered in a US presidential inaugural address is, in fact, chiastic: "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country."<sup>18</sup> But chiasmus shows up outside politics, too, for example, in Tom Waits's "I'd rather have a bottle in front of me than a frontal lobotomy."

Now, what is the purpose of chiasmus? Well, for one thing, it's memorable. In "Never let a fool kiss you, or a kiss fool you," the pleasing effect comes partly from each of the two key terms being used once as a noun and once as a verb, changing position in the process. Louis Rukeyser did something like this when, commenting on the 1994 Whitewater investigations, he said, "Though there is not a shred of evidence, there is evidence of shredding."<sup>19</sup> But chiasmus is often about more than mere word play: In the *Othello* quotation above for example, straight repetition would have impelled the thought forward from love to doubt whereas reverse repetition encloses the two emotions, puts a boundary around them, stressing doubt but allowing love to be beginning and end—or, to put it another way, giving love the first and last word yet populating the space between with instability, hesitation, and irony.<sup>20</sup>

Chiasmus can also have a kind of mystifying effect, leaving us to dwell for a moment in a problem with no apparent resolution, in which normal narrative propulsion is refused. After the third US presidential debate in fall 2008, television commentator Mark Shields said of Barack Obama: "He can move people; you wonder what will move him."<sup>21</sup> Two days later, his PBS colleague David Brooks wrote of Obama that he "doesn't seem to need the audience's love. But they need his."<sup>22</sup> Chiasmus was used effectively that political season to emphasize Obama's alleged inscrutability, his calm inside a hurricane.

But chiasmus has another and different use, an ethical one which is linked to the principle of reciprocity: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matthew 7:12, Luke 6:31) is in fact a chiasmus. Reciprocity can also of course take the form of reversal and thus have a more subversive edge: "My father used to take care of me; now I take care of him." This draws father and son together but also shows their relationship changing, the new supplanting the old. The role of chiasmus in thinking about the relationship between God and humans was highlighted in the summer of 2008 when a video of Sarah Palin surfaced in which she claimed that the invasion of Iraq had been God's task for America. In later defending the claim, she said she had been paraphrasing a quotation of Lincoln's. In the story as usually recounted, a guest tells President Lincoln that he is sure God is on the side of the Union. "We trust, sir, that God is on our side," responds Lincoln chiastically: "It is more important to know that we are on God's side."<sup>23</sup> Unlike Palin, Lincoln here doesn't presume to know what or even *if* God thinks of us; the best we can do is keep thinking of Him. This seems to be one of the more powerful effects of chiasmus: to put things in their place.<sup>24</sup>

As the last example shows, Lincoln was a great trafficker in *chiasmi*, a discursive habit of his that has not been previously examined.<sup>25</sup> What is interesting about Lincoln's use of chiasmus in the Second Inaugural is that it shows up nearly everywhere in the speech *except the end of the third paragraph*, where his style suddenly takes on a different cast, the rounded style of the beginning and end, emphasizing symmetry, balance, and identification, suddenly supplanted by a linear narrative that is anything but elegant in the traditional sense. It is that shift in style and what it might mean for our understanding of political morality that I want to try to tease out here.

Let's look, then, at the first paragraph of the speech:

[1.1] 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. [1.2] Then a statement, somewhat in detail, of a course to be pursued, seemed fitting and proper. [1.3] 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. [1.4] 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. [1.5] With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.

There are *chiasmi* all over this paragraph, all serving, I would argue, to shift attention away from the future, from news and celebration, and toward a self-critical reflection on what has happened to the country during the previous four years. The *chiasmi* enact, that is, an encircling around and between the first and second inaugurations that leaves the nation forced, in a sense, to examine itself.

Take, for example, the first three sentences of the paragraph, in which the present rhetorical occasion chiastically envelopes the former one:

- (A) At this second inaugural, there is less occasion for a long speech
- (B) than at the first.
- (B) Then, a detailed plan was fitting.
- (A) Now, after four years of noise, little that is new can be presented.

In other words, Lincoln is not going to report or celebrate victory; he's not going to congratulate himself or his audience; he's not going to predict the future. He's



going to return to the cause of the war and try to understand it all over again.

The second paragraph of the speech, meanwhile, contains a striking instance of chiasmus that has not to my knowledge been examined or explained before.

[2.1] On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. [2.2] All dreaded it—all sought to avert it. [2.3] While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place, devoted altogether to *saving* the Union without war, insurgent agents were in the city seeking to *destroy* it without war—seeking to dissolve the Union, and divide effects, by negotiation. [2.4] 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. [2.5] And the war came.

Or, to show this in a form which highlights the subjects of the different sentences:

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.

[N] While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place,  
devoted altogether to *saving* the Union without war,

[S] insurgent 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,

[S] but one of them would *make* war rather than let the nation  
survive;

[N] and the other would accept war rather than let it perish.

And ***the war*** came.

There are several things worth noting here: the extraordinary alliteration (note the eight “d”s: “directed,” “dreaded,” “delivered,” “devoted,” “destroy,” “dissolve,” “divide,” “deprecated”) and the memorable antitheses (“saving the Union,” “destroying the Union,” “making war,” “accepting war,” “letting the nation survive,” “letting it perish”), to name two. But equally striking is the chiasmus of sentences 2.3–4, the two parties at war repeated in inverse order so that their union

in the first, middle, and last parts of the paragraph is confirmed in 2.3–4 but with a difference, the North now chiasmically distinguished from the South, occupying the two exterior positions. Finally, there's the movement of the word *war*, used nine times in this paragraph (including the two “its”), from object position in the first eight instances to subject position in the final sentence (2.5), the shortest of the speech: four monosyllabic words, beginning, remarkably, with a conjunction and ending with the past tense of the intransitive verb *come*.

The combination of *rounded* and *pointed* styles here is striking: We have, in essence, a chiasmus, the two parties balanced against each other in the inward-looking way of most chiasmi, undercut by a narrative in which a *third* party is given control over the two previous ones. I almost want to say that Lincoln has invented a new rhetorical device—we might call it a “superintended chiasmus”—in which reciprocally related elements, opposed in a kind of tense equilibrium, are embedded in a right-moving plot in which *both* are ultimately put in their place, even if one remains closer to the side of the “superintendent” than the other. And what is writ small here Lincoln uses on a larger scale, I believe, in the whole speech.

The extreme humility of the first paragraph—its lack of ego, its awkward impersonality, its palpable weariness, its silence on the one topic (victory) its audience most wanted to hear about—is somewhat unexpected, even odd. The union of North and South in the second paragraph is a little surprising and was perhaps disappointing to the audience of the speech. But with 2.5, we get something genuinely puzzling, even disconcerting.<sup>26</sup>

It's time, though, to move on to paragraph 3, which I'll divide into two parts, beginning with the first:

[3.1] One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the Southern part of it. [3.2] These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. [3.3] All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war. [3.4] 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. [3.5] Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. [3.6] Neither anticipated that the *cause* of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. [3.7] Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. [3.8] Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. [3.9] 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. [3.10] The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. [3.11] The Almighty has His own purposes.

We should first note here the introduction of slavery in 3.1 and 3.2, a topic Lincoln will return to with a vengeance later in the paragraph but which he treats here somewhat tentatively and then simply drops because by 3.3, the subject position has now reverted to the two parties at war. As above, they are distinguished but also united in a series of elegantly arranged negative statements that emphasize both sides' misapprehension of the war. Then, in 3.8, we are introduced to a whole new agent—God—who, following the chiasmus of 3.9, is given the subject position for the first time in 3.11, the second shortest sentence of the speech, echoing 2.5.

Sentence 3.9, meanwhile, includes the last chiasmus of the speech, a quotation from the Bible—"let us judge not that we be not judged" (Matt. 7:1)—preceded by Lincoln's paraphrase of *another* quotation from the Bible—"it may seem strange that any men should ask God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces" (Gen. 3:19), the two verses together constituting a classic example of paralipsis, a rhetorical move in which the speaker claims *not* to be doing something *as* he does it, in this case judging Southerners while pretending, chiastically, not to.<sup>27</sup>

Lincoln had used chiasmus before to talk about slavery. In a fragment usually dated to July 1854, after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Acts, Lincoln worked through a series of logical refutations of slavery, beginning with this chiasmic formulation: "If A. can prove, however conclusively, that he may, of right, enslave B.—why may not B. snatch the same argument and prove equally that he may enslave A.?"<sup>28</sup> Even as late as August 1863, Lincoln was still using chiasmus this way. In his letter to James Cook Conkling, to be read to Northerners upset by the Emancipation Proclamation, he wrote: "You say you will not fight to free negroes. Some of them seem willing to fight for you; but, no matter. Fight you, then, exclusively to save the Union."<sup>29</sup>

Lincoln used other figures of speech to work through and publicly articulate his position on slavery and its role in the war; indeed, there's evidence that both his thinking about slavery, and the rhetorical style with which he expressed it, evolved over the course of his life, including the course of the Civil War. In his often-quoted August 1862 letter to *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley, for example, Lincoln used symploce, the repetition of both beginnings and ends, to, in effect, deny slavery any role in the conflict whatsoever:

My paramount object in this struggle *is* to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that.<sup>30</sup>

This is, in a way, the exact opposite of chiasmus since in symploce the middle drops out completely, whereas in chiasmus, the middle is where all the trouble is.

But by the winter of 1865, and by the middle of the third paragraph of the Second Inaugural, Lincoln had come to realize, perhaps not entirely consciously, that chiasmus in particular, and the rounded style in general, were no longer adequate to explaining the Civil War and motivating continued sacrifice in prosecuting it. To put this another way: At the end of the third paragraph of the Second Inaugural, in a stunning series of sentences unique in US history, *all hell breaks loose*. Elegance, symmetry, and reciprocity are left behind, or at least suspended, and we are thrown headlong into a frightening, terrible maelstrom.

Here's that section of the speech:

[3.12] "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!" [3.13] 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? [3.14] Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. [3.15] Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man'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."

What is going on here? For one thing, we've got a four-sentence passage that begins and ends with biblical scripture (Matt. 18:7, Ps. 19:9–10), two more verses to add to the two Lincoln quoted in 3.9.<sup>31</sup> This is in itself unique. Ronald White looked at the eighteen inaugural addresses delivered before Lincoln's second and found only one, that of John Quincy Adams, quoting from the Bible.<sup>32</sup> Here, in the

last half of one paragraph in the second shortest inaugural address in US history, Lincoln quotes the Bible *four* times.

But it's what's between those two final biblical quotations that is so stunning. In 3.13, 3.14, and 3.15, we have two of the longest, most complicated, least "rounded," sentences of the speech, together articulating a new, unflattering interpretation of the war, bridged by a small, artfully crafted prayer. It's an extraordinary rhetorical complex, utterly unique in US presidential discourse.

Let's take it apart, piece by piece.

[3.13]

- (1) If we shall suppose
  - a. that American slavery is one of those offenses
    - i. which, in the providence of God,
      1. must needs come,
    - ii. but which, having continued through His appointed time,
      1. He now wills to remove
  - b. and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war
    - i. as the woe due to those by whom the offense came,
- (2) shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him?

At seventy-eight words, this is the longest sentence of the speech. And it's a doozie, including a conditional clause, divided into two linked subclauses, each of which embeds further dependent clauses, all followed by a main clause, which is actually a negative rhetorical question! "Of all the great sentences crafted by American writers," Joseph Williams once wrote, "none is craftier than this one, the longest and by far the most complex in the speech."<sup>33</sup> It is, he added, "the stylistic tour de force of American literature."<sup>34</sup>

Now, there's a lot going on here. There's the somewhat shocking inclusion of the North in slavery's evil, both through the description of slavery as "American" rather than "Southern" and the claim that the war was God's punishment for *both* North and South as the fitting woe for their sins.<sup>35</sup> And there's the role of God, referred to six times here, an awesome power superintending human affairs, though the strange conditional form of the sentence, beginning with "if we suppose," combined with the convoluted, negative rhetorical question at the end, distinguish this from anything an old-style Calvinist minister might have uttered.

But let's move on:

[3.14]  
 Fondly do we hope—  
 fervently do we pray—  
 that this mighty scourge of war  
 may speedily pass away.

James Tackach uses a phrase from Emily Dickinson to describe this sentence as “a pause between the heavens of a storm.” Occurring where it does, between the awesome 3.13 and the woeful 3.15, it’s also a touchingly *human* sentence, a little poem really, almost pitiful in its pretensions. I think in fact it’s self-deprecating—Lincoln might as well have referred to his own rhetorical power here: Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, eloquently do we speak—it’s all for naught! That’s because of what happens next.

- [3.15]  
 (1) Yet, if God wills that it continue,  
     a. until all the wealth  
         i. piled by the bondman’s two hundred and fifty years  
            of unrequited toil  
         1. shall be sunk,  
     b. and until every drop of blood  
         i. drawn with the lash,  
         1. shall be paid by another  
            a. drawn with the sword,  
 (2) as was said three thousand years ago,  
     a. so still it must be said,  
     b. the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.”

Contra Williams, I believe *this* is the real tour de force of the Second Inaugural: its heart, its climax, its central message. It may also be the key to Lincoln’s growth as a leader and thinker and perhaps the definitive interpretation of the Civil War itself.

Let’s begin with the first seven words, which are, in their historical context, *stunning*. We should briefly remind ourselves of the carnage in the background here. By the spring of 1865, no person, no family, no part of the country had been unaffected by the war: millions injured, widowed, and orphaned, hundreds of cities burned, farms destroyed, fortunes lost, families torn apart. The butchery was unimaginable, and it did not let up until the very end. In fact, the summer of 1864, with Lincoln’s own re-election on the line and the war already

more than three years old, was the deadliest season of all. In a May 30, 1864, letter home to his parents from Union lines in Virginia, a twenty-three-year-old Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. scrawled on the back of an envelope: "It's still kill—kill—all the time."<sup>36</sup> He had just witnessed the Battles of the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Courthouse, and North Anna, and would soon see Cold Harbor. It was the bloodiest six weeks of the whole war, in which tens of thousands lost their lives.<sup>37</sup>

No one would come through it unscathed. In his letter home, Holmes calls his father "stupid" and tells him that things will be different when he returns. For Lincoln too, there was evolution, especially in his views on slavery, race, and religion.<sup>38</sup> But then, finally, starting with the fall of Atlanta in September 1864, the tide began to turn. And by March 1865, Northerners were seeing light at the end of the tunnel. Good news was breaking out all over. Lincoln himself says, "Fondly do we hope . . ." But then what does he tell his audience? All those widows and orphans? All those exhausted soldiers? "[I]f God wills that it continue. . . ,"<sup>39</sup> *so be it*. It is a frightening sentence, the most vivid in the speech, with the most specific agent, the most concrete acts, the most striking images.<sup>39</sup> Its timeline is also the most expansive, the first clause encompassing 250 years of American depravity; the final one taking in three thousand years of human prostration before God. We are playing now on a very big field, and it is littered with corpses.

Importantly, for a politician dogged his whole career with charges of "doubleness"<sup>40</sup>—with saying one thing in the northern part of Illinois and another in the southern, with wanting to be both anti-slavery *and* anti-abolition—there is no middle ground whatsoever in this sentence, just as there is no concern for the widows and orphans who will appear, almost as an afterthought, in 4.1. This is bloody stuff, and it gives no ground. If 3.15, like 3.13, is couched in the form of a conditional if/then structure, that doesn't lessen its terror.

Now, as with 3.13, there is undeniable symmetry here. Note the balance sheet being toted up: "[E]very drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with sword." But the accounting occurs here in the context of God's unrelenting and unending providence. The balance is no longer between North and South; it's now a balance of sin and retribution, offense and woe, blood exacted and wealth sunk. It's the balance between sinful humans in their earthly sphere and a divine God willing and punishing from above and beyond. *And that's no balance at all.*

It's an extraordinary sentence. David Herbert Donald called it "one of the most terrible statements ever made by an American public official."<sup>41</sup> Alfred Kazin referred to it as "a great public cry from the heart."<sup>42</sup> Carl Becker wrote that it was evidence of Lincoln's "profoundly emotional apprehension of experience," something that could not be found in Jefferson's prose *anywhere*.<sup>43</sup> It was

also Frederick Douglass's favorite sentence in the speech. Douglass had been at the inaugural; and when he saw Lincoln later at the White House, he told him he thought the address "a sacred effort." A month later, on the evening of the day Lincoln died, Douglass recited 3.15 from memory at a memorial service for the dead president.<sup>44</sup>

Of course, given what comes next, it's easy to see how the speech might be read differently, how the message of national wrongdoing and divine retribution in the third paragraph could be subordinated to the conciliatory and hopeful fourth paragraph. I mentioned earlier my students, who, on first reading this text, focus on the ending and think of the speech through the soft gauze of hope, inspiration, and harmony. They are not the only ones. Richard Carwardine, in his award-winning biography of Lincoln, describes the Second Inaugural as "a short, seven-hundred-word address in which [Lincoln] avoided blame, spoke inclusively, emphasized the shared experience of the two parties to the conflict, and set out a case for a lack of vengeance toward the south."<sup>45</sup> He then quotes in full the fourth paragraph and calls *it* the "climax" of the speech.

Even Joseph Williams, whom I quoted above, and whose reading of 3.13 I find instructive, in my opinion overemphasized Lincoln's inclusiveness in the speech, his subordination of both North and South to God. Williams claimed that Lincoln was arguing in the speech that the North had no right to exact retribution from the South

for it was not the South that caused the terrible war, but God. . . . Nor was it the North that ended slavery. God did that too. . . . And (as we see later) it will not be a triumphant North that ends the war, but God, and at a time of His own choosing. . . . In other words, the North has no right to visit its wrath on the South for starting the war or to take credit for ending either it or slavery; it was God.<sup>46</sup>

But just as Carwardine is perhaps too taken with 4.1, I'm afraid Williams was too taken here with 3.13, with its mention of "American" slavery and its claim that God gave *both* North and South the terrible war.

On *my* reading, the key sentence in the speech is 3.15, and if its tone is hardly pleasant to Northern ears, there should be no question who Lincoln has in mind when he mentions the lash and who he has in mind when he mentions the sword; and there could be no doubt in anyone's mind which party the speaker hoped would prevail and why. At other places in this speech, Lincoln clearly puts the South in its place: at 2.3–4, 3.4, and 3.9, for example. *There is no appeasement here*. If 3.15 is indicative, Lincoln was ready to do whatever it took, however terrible, to see the war to its end. You can see his resolve a month after the address



when he spelled out in a letter to a prominent Virginian the three indispensable requirements for peace: (1) restoration of the national authority throughout the states, (2) no receding on the slavery question, and (3) the disbanding of all forces hostile to the government. Until those requirements were met, Lincoln wrote, the bloodshed would continue.<sup>47</sup>

It is remarkable, then, that Williams came very close to asserting a widely held opinion, advanced most famously by David Herbert Donald, that Lincoln's nature was "essentially passive" and that the Second Inaugural is evidence to that effect. On this view, the speech is Lincoln's great refusal of responsibility, both blame and duty, in the face of an all-powerful God. Now, it's true that Lincoln admits here that nothing in the war has happened as he or anyone else could have foreseen or wanted. And in a few days, he will write in a letter to Thurlow Weed that the war had especially humiliated *him*. But I am sure that Lincoln did *not* believe that God's providence absolved him or anyone else from continuing to strive on in the right, *as God gave them to see that right*. There is no other way to read the bloody last sentence of the third paragraph.

In an 1863 letter to Eliza Gurney, Lincoln had written that although the purposes of the Almighty are perfect, our perception of them is imperfect. But that acknowledgement, a central tenet of all Protestantism, does not take us off the hook. "We must work earnestly in the best light He gives us, trusting that so working . . . conduces to the great ends He ordains."<sup>48</sup> So yes, as Lincoln once wrote chiasmically, he had not controlled events—events had controlled him.<sup>49</sup> But that's *not* what Lincoln says here at the end of the third paragraph of the Second Inaugural. Supremely confident that the fundamental principles he believed in were right—that the Union was perpetual, that the Declaration of Independence was its guide, that slavery should be put on a path of ultimate extinction—the famously compromising Lincoln was by war's end ready to *annihilate* any obstacle to making those principles true throughout the nation.

Yet there's much here to undercut that view, one reason I don't simply subsume this text into the American jeremiad tradition as others do.<sup>50</sup> There's the modesty of paragraph 1, the impersonality of 2.5, the "somehow" of 3.3, the collective ignorance of 3.5–3.10, the refusal to judge at 3.9, the prostration of 3.11, the "if we suppose" of 3.13, the strange little poem at 3.14, the hypothetical of 3.15, the qualification of 4.1. This is *not* a jeremiad. There's uncertainty, charity, supplication everywhere. God is inscrutable, our knowledge of Him conditional, our own virtue *tending* at best. For these reasons the sword of 3.15 is everywhere else sheathed, as it should be—it would be too terrible if the speech went on in that vein too long.

Indeed, if Lincoln was self-confident—his secretary John Hay said that his intellectual self-confidence was “galling” to others<sup>51</sup>—he was *never* self-righteous. In his State Fair speech of October 1854, after carefully and systematically laying out his opposition to slavery, he revealed his utter inability to demonize those who disagreed with him. Lincoln says of Southerners that “they are just what we would be in their situation.”<sup>52</sup> That’s a remarkable statement for a politician to make, especially in the midst of such a heated public debate. And I think Lincoln really believed it. I also think there’s a chiasmus hidden in that sentence, one that may provide a clue to Lincoln’s political morality but that may also be the reason Lincoln is so often misread. Take his non-extension policy on slavery, which he reiterated throughout the 1850s, and which has seemed to many to be evidence of Lincoln’s border-state tendency to try to be all things to all people, to both share and transcend the common sense of his time and place. From that perspective it’s easy to see why some readers of the Second Inaugural forget the unpleasant third paragraph once they get to the more agreeable fourth.

We know from Lincoln’s own hand, however, that he did not read the speech that way. In a March 15, 1865 letter to Thurlow Weed, a Republican party supporter from New York, he wrote:

My dear Sir. Every one likes a compliment. Thank you for yours on my little notification speech, and on the recent Inaugural Address. I expect the latter to wear as well as—perhaps better than—any thing I have produced; but I believe it is not immediately popular. 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. *It is a truth which I thought needed to be told*; and as whatever humiliation there is in it, falls most directly on myself; I thought others might afford for me to tell it. Yours truly.<sup>53</sup>

In other words, there is a truth enunciated in the Second Inaugural: It is singular, and it is unpleasant to hear. Now, that can’t refer to the fourth paragraph—there’s nothing unpleasant in that sentence. And there’s nothing in the first two and a half paragraphs that answers the description either. Lincoln must be referring to the second half of the third paragraph, that terrible narrative of tyranny, sin, and retribution. It is *not* the message of an appeaser, nor is it in any way self-righteous. It is a claim, and a promise, of rhetorical, political, and moral *responsibility*.<sup>54</sup>

When my brothers and I were little, attending Sunday morning services at First Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, our mother would let us borrow books from the church library to occupy us during the interminable sermons.

I alternated between *A Boy's Life of JFK* and *The Illustrated Story of Abraham Lincoln*. In the latter, like many before me, I followed intently the days of young Abraham—there were the requisite drawings of him chopping wood with an axe and reading books by firelight. And the narrative of the assassination was, of course, riveting: the little pistol, the leap onto the stage, the manhunt through the woods. But it was the *photographs* of Lincoln that captivated me—they were alternately intimidating and touching. I was drawn, as others have been, to the eyes. There is in them, as Walt Whitman once put it, “a deep latent sadness.”<sup>55</sup> Perhaps that’s why so many of us seem to wish, 150 years later, that we could somehow minister to the man, relieve his burdens.<sup>56</sup>

Something like that feeling must be behind a line from Edmund Wilson that has always haunted me. In an essay from the 1930s, Wilson writes about the summers he spent as a boy at an old family home in Talcottville, New York. He recalls his grandparents and reflects on the crudeness and poverty of their time and place. And he summons, as they might have summoned, an image of Abraham Lincoln coming out of just such a place, a story he finds “not merely moving [but almost] agonizing.” Wilson recalls a song he used to sing about Lincoln. And then he suddenly stops: “I can hardly bear the thought of [him].”<sup>57</sup>

I can hardly bear the thought of him either. Lincoln’s kind seems unattainable today. And yet the man was no saint. He arrived at his political positions the way most of us do, in the course of growing up in a particular place and time. But his positions also took shape by study and deliberation, and he kept studying and deliberating even after he made those positions public. The Cooper Union speech must be the single greatest act of political *research*, of openly studying and deliberating one’s beliefs, ever conducted on a public stage. Later, as chief executive, Lincoln prosecuted his positions with firmness and resolve. But even then he exuded humility, empathy, and respect for practical constraints. As Harriet Beecher Stowe once put it, his strength was not that of a stone buttress but a wire cable, able to respond to external forces, to adapt and move within certain bounds, but capable of maintaining its purpose to the end.<sup>58</sup>

Of course, it’s not easy being flexible and resolved at the same time. When Lincoln finished delivering the Second Inaugural, he sat down. “I am a tired man,” he is said to have remarked. “Sometimes I think I am the tireddest man on earth.”<sup>59</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thank you to *RR* reviewers Barbara Warnick and Andrew King and Editor Theresa Enos for their comments and encouragement regarding this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Michiko Kakutani, “Lincoln as the Visionary with His Eye on the Prize,” *The New York Times*, October 25, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Nathan Neely Fleming was brother of my great-great-grandfather, John Giles Fleming, and namesake of my great-grandfather, his nephew.

<sup>4</sup> *Speech of N. N. Fleming, Esq., of Rowan, on the convention question, delivered in Committee of the Whole in the House of Commons of North-Carolina, January 16th, 1861* (Raleigh, NC: 1861). Available in The North Carolina Collection of the UNC Libraries, Chapel Hill, NC. I am grateful to Julie Oliver Fleming for locating and copying this speech.

<sup>5</sup> Tackach, *Lincoln's Moral Vision*.

<sup>6</sup> White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*; Tackach, *Lincoln's Moral Vision*.

<sup>7</sup> White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech* 151.

<sup>8</sup> See images of the manuscript in Lincoln's hand at [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=pin\\_mssmisc&fileName=pin/pin2202/pin2202page.db&recNum=0&itemLink=r?ammem/pin:@field\(NUMBER+pin2202\)&linkText=0](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=pin_mssmisc&fileName=pin/pin2202/pin2202page.db&recNum=0&itemLink=r?ammem/pin:@field(NUMBER+pin2202)&linkText=0). I take my text from this manuscript, adding my own paragraph and sentence numbers (e.g., 2.4). A full version of the text with my lineation can be found at <http://people.umass.edu/dfleming/english550-lincoln.html>.

<sup>9</sup> White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*, is a good source on the background of the speech.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 165.

<sup>11</sup> The whole speech in fact is highly monosyllabic: 505 of 703 words are monosyllables according to White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech* 48.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. "government of the people, by the people, for the people" from the Gettysburg Address.

<sup>13</sup> Lincoln may have learned this formulation from Daniel Webster's 1830 speech against Hayne, with its call for "liberty and union, now and forever, one and inseparable" (Miller, *Lincoln's Virtues* 83, 113).

<sup>14</sup> Fahnestock, *Rhetorical Figures in Science*, 123.

<sup>15</sup> Dr. Mardy Grothe, *Never Let a Fool Kiss You, or a Kiss Fool You* (New York: Penguin, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> I take the example from Gideon Burton's "Forest of Rhetoric" website: <http://humanities.byu.edu/rhetoric/silva.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> Fahnestock, *Rhetorical Figures in Science* 123.

<sup>18</sup> John F. Kennedy *Inaugural Address*, January 20, 1961.

<sup>19</sup> Fahnestock, *Rhetorical Figures in Science* 135.

<sup>20</sup> "Chiasmus seems to set up a natural internal dynamic that draws the parts closer together, as if the second element wanted to flip over and back over the first. . . . The ABBA form seems to exhaust the possibilities of argument, as when Samuel Johnson destroyed an aspiring author with, 'Your manuscript is both good and original; but the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good'" (Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, 2nd ed. [Berkeley: U of California P, 1991]: 33).

<sup>21</sup> PBS *NewsHour*, October 15, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> David Brooks, "Thinking About Obama," *The New York Times*, October 17, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Tackach, *Lincoln's Moral Vision* 122 (quoting Elton Trueblood).

<sup>24</sup> A useful analysis of the different effects of chiasmus can be found in Clark, "'Measure for Measure.'"

<sup>25</sup> As Kraemer notes ("It May Seem Strange"), Garry Wills interpreted the Gettysburg Address chiasmatically, claiming that Lincoln turned the dedicatory function of the occasion upside down: "We cannot dedicate the field. The field must dedicate us" (Wills, "Lincoln's Greatest Speech?" 63; see also 68). As far as I can tell, however, Wills never actually uses the word *chiasmus* in either his book-length treatment of that speech, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, or the more pointed discussion of it in his article on the Second Inaugural ("Lincoln's Greatest Speech?"). Kraemer, however, does use the

word *chiasmus* to talk about sentence 3.9 of the Second Inaugural, which I'll also examine below. But, as for more sustained treatments of chiasmus in Lincoln or in the Second Inaugural, Gardner's essay is the only example I could find, other than my own; his treatment, both of chiasmus and of the Second Inaugural, is so different from mine, however, that they are difficult to reconcile. The lack of attention to Lincoln's use of chiasmus in general, and its role in the Second Inaugural in particular, is curious given the detailed rhetorical analysis that is a staple of Lincoln scholarship (for examples of such analysis in terms of the Second Inaugural, see, for example, Slagell, "Anatomy of a Masterpiece"; White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*; and Wills's "Lincoln's Greatest Speech?"—none of which mentions chiasmus). Of course, many analysts have pointed out the balance and symmetry that characterize much of this speech, and several have further noted the tension here between a kind of New Testament discourse of charity and an Old Testament one of retribution.

<sup>26</sup> Ronald White (*Lincoln's Greatest Speech*) repeats a contemporary journalistic report that has Lincoln pausing significantly before sentence 2.5 (79). In support of that reading is the layout of Lincoln's actual delivery text (see Wilson's *Lincoln's Sword*), which can be viewed at [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=pin\\_mssmisc&fileName=pin/pin2202/-pin2202page.db&recNum=5&itemLink=r?ammem/pin:@field\(NUMBER+pin2202\)\)&linkText=0](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=pin_mssmisc&fileName=pin/pin2202/-pin2202page.db&recNum=5&itemLink=r?ammem/pin:@field(NUMBER+pin2202))&linkText=0).

<sup>27</sup> On the combination of chiasmus and paralipsis here, see also Kraemer, "'It may seem strange.'"

<sup>28</sup> Miller, *Lincoln's Virtue* 275.

<sup>29</sup> Roy P. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (1953), 6:409.

<sup>30</sup> White, *The Eloquent President* 125–52, 363–64, emphasis in original.

<sup>31</sup> They are, interestingly enough, arranged chiastically: OT NT NT OT.

<sup>32</sup> White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech* 101

<sup>33</sup> Williams, *Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* 241.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 243.

<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, this is the first and only mention of "North" and "South" in the speech.

<sup>36</sup> Menand, *Metaphysical Club* 56.

<sup>37</sup> Among the killed: a confederate officer from North Carolina named Nathan Neely Fleming.

<sup>38</sup> Tackach, *Lincoln's Moral Vision*.

<sup>39</sup> These words were probably uttered very slowly. (In Lincoln's August 1863 letter to James Cook Conkling, which accompanied his written remarks for a Springfield rally, he had suggested, "Read it very slowly" [see White, *The Eloquent President* 193].)

<sup>40</sup> Don E. Fehrenbacher, qtd. in Tackach, *Lincoln's Moral Vision* 38.

<sup>41</sup> David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* 567.

<sup>42</sup> Tackach, *Lincoln's Moral Vision* 138.

<sup>43</sup> Qtd. in Miller, *Lincoln's Virtues* 146.

<sup>44</sup> White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech* 162.

<sup>45</sup> Carwardine, *Lincoln* 246.

<sup>46</sup> Williams, *Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* 242.

<sup>47</sup> Tackach, *Lincoln's Moral Vision* 148.

<sup>48</sup> Qtd. in White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech* 141–43. "In Joshua Wolf Shenk's telling metaphor, Lincoln [saw clearly] by the summer of 1864 that he was NOT really the captain of the ship; but neither did he regard himself as an 'idle passenger. [He was rather] a sailor on deck with a job to do'" (Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword* 261).

<sup>49</sup> A paraphrase of Lincoln's April 1864 letter to Albert G. Hodges, qtd. in Wills, "Lincoln's Greatest Speech?" 66.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Slagell, "Anatomy of a Masterpiece"; Tackach, *Lincoln's Moral Vision*; White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*; Wills, "Lincoln's Greatest Speech?"

<sup>51</sup> Qtd. in Miller, *Lincoln's Virtues* 64.

<sup>52</sup> Miller, *Lincoln's Virtues* 252–72.

<sup>53</sup> Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches & Writings, 1859–1865*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (Library of America, 1989), 689, emphasis added; see also Tackach, *Lincoln's Moral Vision* 144; and Roy P. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (1953), 8:356.

<sup>54</sup> This ability of Lincoln to effect moral power without being moralizing is treated eloquently in Miller, *Lincoln's Virtues*, passim.

<sup>55</sup> Qtd. in White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech* 59.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Mallon, "Set in Stone: Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Memory," *The New Yorker*, Oct. 13, 2008: 143.

<sup>57</sup> Wilson, "The Old Stone House" 130.

<sup>58</sup> White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech* 93–94.

<sup>59</sup> Ward, Burns, and Burns, *The Civil War* 360.

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