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To Finish the Work We are in: Abraham Lincoln's Speeches, from Lawyer's Briefs to Moral Manifesto

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND CIVIL WAR AMERICA. A biography. By William E. Gienapp. 256pp. Oxford University Press. Paperback, £10.99 (US \$14.95). - 0 19 515100 6

LINCOLN'S CONSTITUTION. By Daniel Farber. 256pp. University of Chicago Press. \$27.50; distributed in the UK by Wiley. £19.50. - 0 226 23793 1

THE LINCOLN MEMORIAL AND AMERICAN LIFE. By Christopher A. Thomas. 213pp. Princeton University Press. \$35; distributed in the UK by Wiley. £24.95. - 0 691 01194 X

LINCOLN'S GREATEST SPEECH. The Second Inaugural Address. By Ronald C. White, Jr. 256pp. Simon and Schuster. Paperback, \$14. - 0 7432 1299 1

LINCOLN'S MORAL VISION. The Second Inaugural Address. By James Tackach. 176pp. University of Mississippi Press. \$28. - 1 57806 495 3

Abraham Lincoln's speeches, from lawyer's brief to moral manifesto

It cannot be said too many times that the number of Civil War dead still exceeds that in all other American wars combined. As the historian David Potter observed, by the time it ended in 1865, after four years of bloody fighting, "slavery was dead; secession was dead; and six hundred thousand men were dead".

But through it the modern United States - unitary country, common market, and polity founded, at least in principle, upon political equality, freedom of all citizens, and universal suffrage - was born. To study it is a necessity for anyone seeking to understand contemporary America.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, each year produces a raft of new war books, some aimed at the scholarly niche of Lincoln and Civil War studies, and others targeted to an apparently inexhaustible demand among general readers.

The Harvard historian William E. Gienapp's Abraham Lincoln and Civil War America enters these lists as a splendidly readable, short biography. Accessible yet erudite, and informed by the latest research, Gienapp presents a balanced portrait of Lincoln, the man and his politics, and the War, eschewing some of the more "interpretative" Lincoln studies of recent years, some of which have tended to emphasize particular motifs, such as Lincoln the redeemer, Lincoln's religious or moral sentiments, or Lincoln's roots in Whiggism, which, while important in drawing out aspects of the man, are essentially monographs requiring other works to put them in context. Gienapp's work is a brief but unitary whole. The Lincoln that emerges from his biography is one characterized by the transition from Lincoln's First Inaugural Address, delivered in 1861 amid the crisis of secessions by Southern States even before the new President had entered office, to the Second Inaugural Address of 1865, delivered a few weeks before the end of the War and Lincoln's assassination in Ford's Theater.

The First Inaugural is fundamentally a lawyer's brief against secession.

President-elect Lincoln composed it through careful study of constitutional history while still at the Illinois state capital of Springfield before journeying to Washington, DC. It consists of an argument and an omission. The omission is, simply, slavery, and it is not addressed as the cause of both secession and War until the Second Inaugural Address, near the end of the conflict. For as long as humanly possible, Lincoln sought every means to avoid characterizing the War as even being over slavery as such, and he likewise sought every avenue to render the war a means of returning to no more than the constitutional status quo ante, including its compromise acceptance of slavery in the Southern States. The First Inaugural, seeking to convince the secessionist states that they had acted precipitately, from baseless fears of the President elect and the Republican Party, says again and again that the President and Federal Government have no legal ability to alter slavery in the slave states, but only to prohibit it from Federal territories and new states in the West; anything more would require constitutional amendment. It claims that slavery, as a legal institution, therefore cannot be the cause of war except by misunderstanding the constitution.

Yet the very omission of arguing the immorality of slavery in the First Inaugural has the deliberate effect of claiming that the legality or illegality of unilateral secession, somehow unrelated to the morality of slavery, is the issue on which sectional strife rests, and is finally the cause of war. The positive argument of the First Inaugural is therefore against secession as a constitutional matter, but it is, for precisely that reason, rendered curiously abstract and, indeed, somehow false.

It is uprooted from the only reason why American antebellum sectional strife might ever become an issue contentious enough to lead to secession. Lincoln made clear, that although he would seek to avoid backing any state into a corner from which there would be no retreat except by fighting, in the end he would commit all blood and treasure for the abstract principle of Union.

Yet it should be said that the moral goodness of "Unionism" alone, detached from the issue of slavery, is less than immediately self-evident. If slavery had not existed and not been an issue, why should the agrarian Southern States not have gone their own way, because of increasing sectional differences with the industrializing north, for example, over economic integration and such issues? Both sides of the legal and moral argument over the alleged right of secession are illuminated in Daniel Farber's legal analysis of Lincoln's constitutional vision and actions during the war, *Lincoln's Constitution*. It is a very intelligent book in what, it must be said, is a dangerous genre dangerous in that it goes beyond Gienapp's careful siting of Lincoln within history, to mix freely historical and contemporary legal analysis. Farber examines secession, sovereignty, civil liberties and a host of other issues in both their historical and contemporary meanings - doing so, he says, out of the awareness that the Civil War is past, but also present for Americans; we still live the repercussions both legal and political.

Lincoln's Constitution is a successful book in large part because Farber resists the temptation to turn the inheritance of Lincoln's constitution in the present day into a mere attempt to claim the mantle of Lincoln for today's partisan politics - Garry Wills, particularly in his articles, is notoriously not slow to imply that Lincoln, were he alive today, would bless the agenda of the Democratic Party. Farber is wisely much more cautious. Although the risks of drawing conclusions about the present from history are notorious, and although the historian can professionally steer clear of them, Farber says convincingly, constitutional lawyers do not have that luxury and neither do the rest of us. The antebellum theories of a John Calhoun

about states' rights and sovereignty against the Federal Government are a live issue even today. And as Farber makes plain - examining arguments ranging from ancient US legal precedents to contemporary opinions of the Supreme Court of Canada - the moral and legal arguments over unilateral secession resonate across the world today, whether in Kurdistan, Quebec, Kosovo, or Catalonia.

The messy problem of secession, or its obverse, self-determination, in other words, is that there is no a priori answer to the question, "what is my home?" It is simply a matter of fact, given by contingencies of history, birth, politics, economics, culture, language, religion, and all the rest. What "deserves" to be a nation-state has traditionally been settled on the basis not of prior principle, although such are frequently invoked rhetorically, but instead by that for which people - sometimes a people, but often a people dragging along unwilling political, ethnic, or religious minorities present in the territory - are willing to fight; sovereignty out of the barrel of a gun.

It was the principle of the Civil War, on both sides. And so, offered a command in the Federal forces to put down the southern rebellion, Robert E. Lee replies to the effect that his being a citizen of the United States is a consequence of his being a citizen of Virginia, and that therefore Virginia and its political institutions have first call upon his allegiance. Lee in fact had grave moral qualms about slavery; in 1856, he termed it "a moral and political evil" and, in language reminiscent of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, foresaw that "the country will have to pass through a terrible ordeal, a necessary expiation perhaps for our national sins". Yet when it finally comes to fundamental loyalties, he chose state over country. Still, without the moral taint of slavery, why is his argument that one is subordinate to the other any better or any worse than Lincoln's that it is the other way around?

Lincoln gives a very precise answer to this question in the First Inaugural Address. Unilateral secession, he insists, destroys the very possibility of democratic self-government. Why? Because the possibility of unilateral secession implies that every major disagreement, rather than being decided by majority will, tempered by supermajoritarian constitutional conditions, result serially in further division and sub-division over successive disagreements, until finally no polity remains and democracy is at an end. The First Inaugural is therefore a vision of Union for its own sake, Union that allowed the continuation of slavery, a political vision of a unified polity that was not about the moral question of slavery, but instead about the size and reach of a polity, who was in and who was out, whether they wanted to be or not.

Still, by not addressing the real issue, slavery, the First Inaugural provides the political foundation for a prominent Southern account, during and following the war, in which slavery figures only residually, and the fighting, if not precisely constituting a war purely over abstract political philosophy, is the result of precipitate actions not of the seceding states, but of Lincoln. Lincoln, in this interpretation, created sectional war by not allowing time for loyal Unionists in the Southern States and in the most important and prestigious of all, Virginia - men like Lee - time to regain the initiative from radical secessionists. Lincoln stands accused of acting too hastily following the Confederate assault upon Fort Sumter in South Carolina, by calling up 75,000 volunteers to subdue the rebellion. He forced the hands of even otherwise Union-inclined Virginians unwilling to see their lands "invaded" by Yankees. So, in a strikingly contemporary trope, Lincoln is charged with failing to make war the last resort.

Recent scholarship has decisively shown that the leadership of the Confederacy - the civilian Confederate commissioners, in particular - understood very well that slavery, not the abstract question of Union, was their issue.

Further, Gienapp shows that in fact Lincoln bent over backwards to try and allow Southern loyalists the time and space to correct matters themselves. He made clear to the seceding states that slavery was protected by the Constitution; he even made clear that he would not seek to alter the status quo by enforcing Federal judicial authority in the seceding states, or so much as continue the postal service if they refused it. With respect to Federal forts in the South, he informed the South Carolina Governor that a resupply fleet, if not resisted, would land only provisions and not weaponry or troops. Seeking an alternative to war, Lincoln was offering the Confederate authorities a continuation of the existing stalemate But he had little hope now that war could be averted. After a fumbling start . . . Lincoln had maneuvered the situation so that if war ensued, the Confederates would have to fire the first shot.

And yet it was also clear - entirely clear to the Confederate President, Jefferson Davis - that Lincoln had every intention of bringing the secessionist states back into the Union, by force if need be. At some point, force would be used; the stalemate would not go on for ever, even if it meant being the first to use force.

It so happened that the line was drawn in the sand with respect to Federal military installations. It was by pretext and symbolic manoeuvring that the Confederacy fired first; eventually the Union would have done so. From both a historical and contemporary view, there was no "necessary" last resort to use force. Lincoln had endless scope to engage in more peaceful manoeuvring, send more envoys, exchange letters, seek mediation, cajole, entreat, threaten, plead, appease - all those things which always constitute an "alternative" to force as the last resort. Yet, as Michael Walzer has stated forcefully in reply especially to religious leaders who anxiously argue that the "just war" requirement of "last resort" had not been met - in the Gulf war, the Iraq war, in every American war - the point at which war becomes a last resort is necessarily arbitrary. The actual point of last resort is, as Walzer says, not a matter in which bishops, theologians, or moralists have any special insight, much less moral authority, and their opinions should not count for much. It is an arbitrary line determined of necessity by politics, military practicalities, economic costs of holding military forces at the ready, and such morally accidental, rather than essential, qualities as the phases of the moon, darkness, tides and weather.

Four hard years later, by 1865, the situation was radically changed. As Clausewitz knew, war prizes open some doors and slams others shut in ways unimaginable before the fighting starts. The wartime service of more than 100,000 black soldiers and sailors in the fighting left blood on the field that in its own way made permanent, as Lincoln understood, the Emancipation Proclamation - made clear there could no longer be a return to the constitutional compromise over slavery. After the fighting, the question was how to reconstitute a Union that could not simply go on as before; what would reconstruction mean and what inter-pretation would it put onto the war? At stake was not merely the meaning of the years of fighting, but instead the vaster question of relations into the future between the three parties of the Civil War, the white North, the white South, and African-Americans. Changing relations among these three groups have characterized a struggle for national reconciliation that has occupied a sizeable part of the national imagination from Lee's surrender at Appomattox until today - the call for monetary reparations to black Americans being only its most current manifestation.

This struggle took physical form, however, in the creation of the Lincoln Memorial on the Mall in Washington, DC, the history and building of which are considered in *The Lincoln Memorial and American Life* by Christopher A. Thomas.

Thomas is an art historian, and his book combines architecture and design with a cultural history of the Memorial, on which construction began on Lincoln's birthday, 1914, and was not completed until 1922. The volume is a trove of information on the design and building, and the human story behind the construction. It is far less felicitous in its attempt at cultural theorizing about the place of the monument in American life, mostly because of what can only be called the author's nearly limitless sanctimony.

Thomas tells us, correctly, that the Lincoln Memorial is understood by Americans as something timeless and universal, a platonic temple, a "universal site honoring an indissoluble Union founded on indisputable ideals". This is, however, merely "an illusion", and although it may "seem a shocking act of sacrilege to root the planning and use of the Lincoln Memorial in material historical circumstances", the professor shall rend the illusion - secure, as he remarkably says, in his own Canadian identity, because being Canadian gives him "something in common with disenfranchised groups within the United States itself, such as African-Americans".

It is scarcely news, however, that the Lincoln Memorial has a material history to it, including budget fights and battles over design, as well as the national shame of building a memorial to Lincoln in a segregated, Jim Crow city. Nor is it news that the Memorial, apparently serene and immovable and unitary in its idealism, veritably squirms with the fundamental duality of the war's aims - Union, emancipation, or both. The outside, for example, bears the names of all the states of the Union, including those that seceded - whereas the inside is engraved with the Gettysburg Address, announcing a "new birth of freedom" for a whole new group of Americans and the end of slavery. The memorial, its design, construction and use, reflects all those ambiguities and tensions. On the one hand, therefore, the Memorial is a symbol of the reunification of the states but also the deliberate neglect of the reconciliation with African-Americans.

On the other hand, it is the place made sacred as the altar of equality by Martin Luther King. Yet Dr King could not have used the monument as he did without exploiting both its timeless ideals and its ambiguous history. A monument purely to reconciliation with African-Americans might have existed somewhere in some corner of the North, but not in the genteel, sleepy, segregated Southern city that happened to be the nation's capital or, in other words, not anywhere useful to Dr King. King needed a site that captured both the ideal and the historical, the site of reconciliation between two parties over Union, whites of North and South, but which had left out the third, black Americans - if not precisely over the immediate issue of emancipation and freedom, then over equality.

But also tucked high up in the interior of the Lincoln Memorial is an inscription of the Second Inaugural Address. Despite being overshadowed in history by the Gettysburg Address, the Second Inaugural is arguably more important. Lincoln perhaps thought so. It lays aside all the lawyerly arguments of the First Inaugural, and instead utters bare and bleak truths, including that the "slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest.

All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war". The Second Inaugural is, as the theologian Ronald C. White, Jr, observes in Lincoln's Greatest Speech, the most overtly religious major speech in American history, the most overtly theological text in the American constitutional canon. James Tackach explains in Lincoln's Moral Vision that the Address was a "jeremiad", a well known form of colonial and early American political discourse, in which a leading clergyman or political leader delivered a denunciation of the polity and its sins, with the promise of both divine wrath and also redemption. It is Lincoln wrestling, for himself and

his country, with the divine meaning of the Civil War, the blood spilled, and at the same time laying out the beginnings of a policy of reconstruction and reconciliation.

It is remarkable, to be sure, that after having been somewhat neglected all these years, the Second Inaugural should provoke two books, published within a few months of each other. The proximate cause, no doubt, is the runaway success of Garry Wills's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (1993), which itself contains an important chapter on the Second Inaugural. White's book is essentially theology; what it does best is offer an account both of Lincoln's changing religiosity, and the religious context of antebellum America, up to the moment of the Second Inaugural and the complex theology of the Address itself. It is the religion, seemingly, of a man formally unattached to any particular sect, but shaped and animated spiritually by certain ideas of Calvinism and Providence especially. In Tackach's case, there is theology, but also more history - of slavery, religion, war and the several elements of the Address.

Although both books cover the same ground, and both are very well written, White's is more discursive, because it seeks to focus its chapters on individual, often famous, phrases from the text of the Address, which leads it to discuss its themes in an often non-linear fashion, divided into small subchapters which can sometimes be hard to fit together intellectually into a whole. Tackach's book, published by an academic press, has received far less attention, but is much more linear in its history and arguments, working its way through chapters on slavery, religion, war, and only in the final chapters reaching the Second Inaugural. It makes for clearer reading, and is no less profound.

Yet these two books are really just vessels by which to carry away the profundities of the Second Inaugural. The Address is a vigorous defence of the Union's War; yet it is tempered by a refusal, through recourse to God's mysterious intentions, to put the blame for the War entirely on one side or the other. It instead puts the blame onto the whole of the polity, with the result of profoundly binding the Union together in both the national shame of slavery and also its bloody expiation.

Likewise it is a general call upon all to the tasks of reconstruction and reconciliation - not out of some abstract humanitarianism, on account of our shared humanity merely, but instead because the whole land and people, North and South, are what and who we are. Finally, it is America's most eloquent promotion of what the late Christopher Lasch called the "spiritual discipline against resentment". "Let us strive on", says Lincoln, "to finish the work we are in" - a call even at war's end to win, by force of arms, the great and bloody war, without compromise of war aims or any surrender short of unconditional. There will be no negotiated peace. We are wont today, as Farber points out, mistakenly to see only the Lincoln "with malice toward none; with charity for all", the Lincoln of the promise of reconciliation, but miss the most determined, unyielding, stubborn war leader the United States has ever known.

Fight on, Lincoln abjures the Union, with "firmness in the right". Yet he immediately qualifies this moral certainty to add, "insofar as God gives us to see the right". It is a double injunction of moral subtlety and profundity, and it is what made Lincoln the greatest of all American leaders. This is not moral relativism - it is not to say, we see it this way and they that, and who is to say which is right? It is instead a call to the much more difficult, much more subtle and morally demanding virtue of anti-hubris. We do not have the luxury of not acting on our convictions; yet we know also that our convictions must always be partial. God, mysterious as it might seem to us, may give to others to see things differently. And therefore, notwithstanding that we must follow our consciences, it must always be with an essential spiritual forbearance and, finally, with modesty.

