

War and Remembrance in Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address

Synopsis

by Lucas E. Morel

At Abraham Lincoln's second inauguration as president, he faced the problem of a defeated but determined South. Though beaten on the battlefield, many southerners were unwilling to accept the imminent Union victory as a just conclusion of the Civil War. As Johnny Reb might have put it, "Lincoln's might didn't make it right." The newly reelected president would have to find words to justify what federal troops had accomplished. Rejecting the South's defense of slavery as "a positive good" and the North's assumption that they bore no responsibility for the peculiar institution, Lincoln used his Second Inaugural Address to propose a common public memory of both the war and American slavery as the basis for restoring national unity.

He adopted a humble approach in stating the Administration's view of the war and the future of the American union. More important than a detailed agenda for the future, Lincoln thought, was a careful review of the past: what was the meaning of the conflict and how could this understanding help heal the wounds of the divided nation? He surprised many observers by rejecting the triumphalism of Radical Republicans in Congress, who sought to rule over the defeated Southern States with a vengeance. Moreover, in the face of Southern defiance spurred by Confederate President Jefferson Davis, who called Southerners "to stand to our arms," Lincoln counseled "malice toward none, with charity for all." The newly re-elected president sought to unite the American people by interpreting the waning conflict as a divine judgment upon *both* sides of the war. Lincoln gave a uniquely providential reading of the cause, duration, and consequences of the war in hopes that the duly chastened nation, both North and South, might "achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace."

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