

Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, Annotated

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[Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address](#) has greatly influenced my thinking since I first read it in 2015. The speech provided me with some historical perspective about the (first) U.S. Civil War that I didn't already have, much of which informs how I think about events happening in our day. But more importantly, it has helped me define *fairness* and has taught me to look for fairness as a way to reach equanimity in situations where I initially intuit and am distressed by the absence of fairness.

The speech was delivered in Washington, D.C. on March 4th, 1865. The full text of the speech is included in this document in its original order with my commentary interspersed. I have fought the temptation to comment on every single phrase. The original stands for itself and every word of it is worth reading.

The first half of the speech is a purely factual summary of the situation at hand, or at least it is Lincoln's perception of the facts.

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.

I'm struck by how matter-of-fact the beginning of this speech is. At the time of Lincoln's first inaugural address, the secession crisis was just beginning. Seven states had already seceded and four more would follow. But this time the Confederacy was only a month away from surrendering, and it was clear that the Union was in a good position militarily. Lincoln essentially opens with, "It made sense to give a long speech last time because people wanted to know what my plans were. But this time I don't have a lot to say."

I think it's neat that Lincoln seems to have an attitude toward the news media that I didn't think was possible before the invention of the 24-hour cable news channel, namely that the public's appetite for news is voracious, but that there's a dearth of actual new content, so the press is saturated with a barrage of hot takes.

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.

Lincoln characterizes the progress of the military as the thing “upon which all else chiefly depends”. I wonder what specifically was included in “all else”. I imagine it referred in large part to Lincoln’s policy objectives. I take it that the “all else” is what really matters, and that the military is merely a tool to make it possible.

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, 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; 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.

I can understand if Lincoln didn’t want to be the president who let the Union collapse, but with the hindsight of the last century and a half, I can’t help but think that the Union should have let the South go. South Carolina [made a legalistic case](#) that it had just as much right to leave the Union as it had had to enter it, which I find completely compelling. Its motive for leaving, i.e. to preserve slavery, was horrific, but I don’t buy arguments that secession itself is somehow illegal. I think it would have been a good riddance. I suspect by now we in the Union would have established a European-style or Canadian-style social democracy, and the South would have been coerced by the international community into abolishing slavery. I recognize that I can’t account for every consequence. It’s possible the rest of the Union would have dissolved and bad things would have followed. Nonetheless I am left with a yearning for what a separation could have enabled here.

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.

Regardless of what apologists for the Confederacy say today, slavery was the cause of the war.

One lesson here is that “states’ rights” and “local control” are not themselves virtues, and in fact often lead to bad outcomes.

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.

In reminding that the government he led "claimed no right to do more" than prevent slavery from spreading beyond the South, Lincoln is emphasizing his moderation, as if opposing slavery

altogether were too radical. “If you like your slavery, you can keep it.” It’s a good reminder that neither moderation nor radicality are themselves virtues, and that what fits those labels is not universal but varies across time and across cultures.

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.

At the start of the war, the Union anticipated that the rebellion would be suppressed and then the issue of slavery would be dealt with later.

The remainder of the speech is a philosophical and theological assessment of the country’s situation. It seems Lincoln has been distraught by the question of how a just god could allow all the suffering brought about by the war, and in this speech he proposes his answer. Lincoln extensively discusses the god of the Christian Bible. I do not believe that that god exists, nor is it clear to me from this speech that Lincoln himself believes so either. Nevertheless, it’s a useful framework for meaningful analysis.

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 language of eating bread from the sweat of the face is a reference to [Genesis 3:19](#), but there it’s the sweat of *one’s own* face, and Lincoln characterizes slavery as *wringing* bread from the sweat of *someone else’s* face. The language of abstaining from judgement is from [Matthew 7:1](#) (part of the Sermon on the Mount), where Jesus explicitly instructs not to judge. But Lincoln makes sassy use of apophasis and is sure to get his shade throwing in before claiming to take the high road!

It’s an interesting truth of any circumstance where two parties are praying to the same god for mutually exclusive outcomes that at least one party will be disappointed.

The Almighty has his own purposes.

Lincoln posits that the prayers of both the North and the South may be in vain because God is conducting the war according to His own plan. Even without believing that the events of the world are orchestrated according to a higher purpose, I still identify with Lincoln’s resignation to

not having complete control. I acknowledge that my own purposes do not always dictate reality, and when I need help remembering that, I often think back to this sentence.

"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."

This is [Matthew 18:7](#).

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?

Here Lincoln explains the analogy to Matthew 18:7. Suppose that American slavery was an evil necessary to the foundation of the U.S., that now God wants to get rid of slavery, and that He has made the war especially terrible precisely to punish us for having brought about slavery. Lincoln asks: Wouldn't that still be compatible with a righteous God? And I interpret it as: Wouldn't that still be fair?

Two elements of Lincoln's rhetoric stand out to me here. One is that Lincoln never claims to believe any of this supposition, nor does he claim that he himself would ascribe any positive qualities to God. This makes the analogy fully accessible to me as a nonbeliever. I can entertain the same suppositions and find the same value in them.

The other rhetorical peculiarity is the reference to "American slavery". It's an acknowledgement that, while slavery has existed throughout human history, our version of it has a unique flavor and we bear a unique culpability. It's a label that feels very 21st-Century to me.

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."

The quote at the end is from [Psalms 19:9](#).

Here Lincoln spells out the Matthew 18:7 analogy in detail. As bloody and destructive as the war is, it is fair. Any one incidence of suffering may appear unfair when viewed in isolation because not every tat is repaid immediately with a corresponding tit. But when viewed with the right scope, the tits and the tats align. They are ultimately paid into the same account they were drawn from.

It seems Lincoln initially intuited the suffering caused by the war as unfair or at least undue. But Lincoln reasoned that if the war was being drawn out by a righteous God, then there must be some vantage from which the war was fair, and Lincoln found it. Witnessing this made me realize that fairness is in the eye of the beholder.

I mentioned at the beginning that this speech has helped me define *fairness*. My definition is that **fairness itself doesn't exist; rather it is the *perception* of fairness that exists**. This is how, for example, affirmative action can from one vantage make the world fairer and from another vantage make the world less fair. For this and many other policies, I can easily see from both vantages. For some policies, getting to the other vantage requires quite a leap. And of course there are some situations that are so grievous that it's impossible to find a vantage from which they genuinely appear fair.

When I am disheartened or angered by a situation outside of my control that I perceive to be unfair to me or to others, I recall this lesson and try to find a vantage from which it increases world's net fairness. I don't mean to say that I'm complacent when I or others are suffering. I am not. I am very motivated to bring about change. But I use this strategy to calm myself down when I can't make a difference.

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.

I read Lincoln here as saying that he intends to take a forgiving posture towards the Southern traitors. I have doubts about how just a peace that would achieve.

I actually don't operate with malice toward none. I am vengeful. I want to deliver the woe due to those by whom past offenses have come. I want evildoers prosecuted. I want Trump in jail. I would not perceive fairness otherwise.

I think often of the phrase "with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right". As far as I can tell, it's Lincoln's own phrasing and not a quote from scripture. Lincoln knows that both the North and the South believe in the rightness of their causes, and that both cannot be right simultaneously. He must be asking himself, what is the probability that he's in the right? It can't be taken as a certainty. But if his ability to discern right from wrong comes from God, who is he to doubt his own convictions?

When I'm timid about acting on a belief, I remind myself that I have firmness in the right insofar as I can see the right. I acknowledge that my ability to see the right is limited, but I feel

duty-bound to act on my values to the extent that I know what they are. I am motivated to put the world into a state where I can perceive maximal fairness.