

## President Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, 1865

### Introduction

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On March 4, 1861, the day Abraham Lincoln was first sworn into office as President of the United States, the *Chicago Tribune* printed this special pamphlet of his First Inaugural Address.

Just 701 words long, Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address took only six or seven minutes to deliver, yet contains many of the most memorable phrases in American political oratory. The speech contained neither gloating nor rejoicing. Rather, it offered Lincoln's most profound reflections on the causes and meaning of the war. The "scourge of war," he explained, was best understood as divine punishment for the sin of slavery, a sin in which all Americans, North as well as South, were complicit. It describes a national moral debt that had been created by the "bondsmen's 250 years of unrequited toil," and ends with a call for compassion and reconciliation.

With its biblical allusions, alliteration, repetition, and parallel structure, and its reliance on one-syllable words, the address has the power of a sermon. It incorporates many of the themes of the religious revivals: sin, sacrifice, and redemption. At a White House reception, President Lincoln encountered Frederick Douglass. "I saw you in the crowd today, listening to my inaugural address," the president remarked. "How did you like it?" "Mr. Lincoln," Douglass answered, "that was a sacred effort."

In this printing of the Second Inaugural, the blue ink is a significant design detail. After Lincoln's death on April 15, 1865, all copies were printed in black ink appropriate to a national mood of mourning. In the days before Lincoln's assassination, readers were focused primarily on the tone of reconciliation that on March 4 had moved his audience to tears.

### *Excerpt*

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.

### Questions for Discussion

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Read the document introduction, the transcript or the original document, and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. Those attending the inauguration noted that many in the crowd were Union veterans,

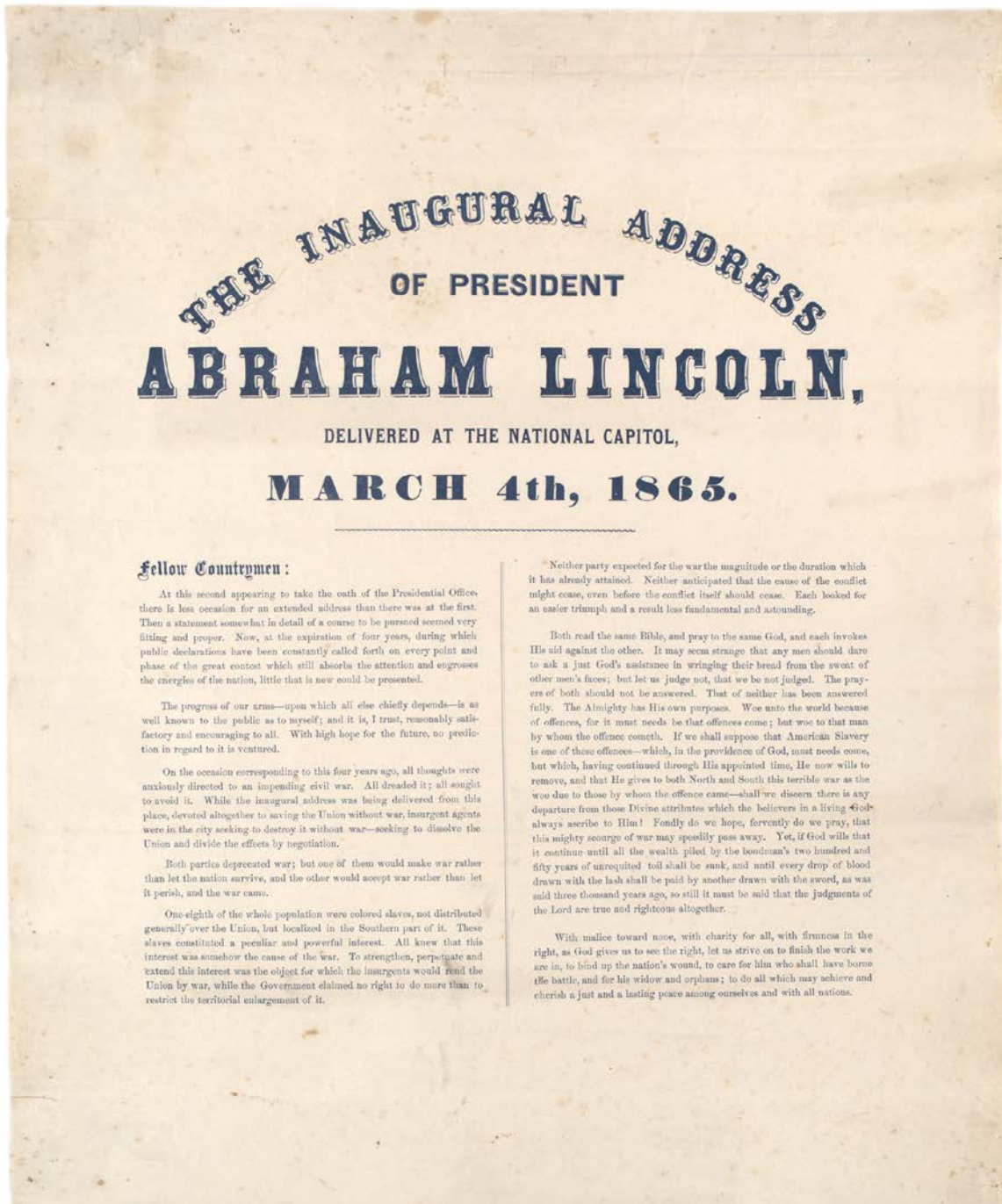
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often recovering from wounds. There were also family members of Union soldiers killed on the battlefields. What type of speech did they expect to hear? How did President Lincoln surprise them?

2. Compare Lincoln's references to the importance of slavery in his first and second Inaugural speeches. Note specific changes in tone.
3. How would you address the comments by some that Lincoln was not a religious man?
4. Conduct some research to determine how this speech was received by elements of the Northern and Southern press.

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Image



The Inaugural address of President Abraham Lincoln delivered at the National Capitol, March 4, 1865. (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC06044)

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### Transcript

The Inaugural address of President Abraham Lincoln delivered at the National Capitol, March 4, 1865. (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC06044)

THE INAUGURAL ADDRESS  
OF PRESIDENT  
ABRAHAM LINCOLN.  
DELIVERED AT THE NATIONAL CAPITOL,  
**MARCH 4TH, 1865**

#### **fellow Countrymen:**

At this second appearing to take the oath of the Presidential Office, there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then a statement somewhat in detail of a course to be pursued seemed very fitting and proper. Now, at the expiration of four years, during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every point and phase of the great contest which still absorbs the attention and engrosses the energies of the nation, little that is new could be presented.

The progress of our arms—upon which all else chiefly depends—is as well known to the public as to myself; and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future, no

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, even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph and a result less fundamental and astounding.

Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both should not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. Woe unto the world because of offences, for it

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prediction in regard to it is ventured.

On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it; all sought to avoid 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 the effects by negotiation.

Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would accept war rather than let it perish, and the war came.

One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the Southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union by war, while the Government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it.

must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh. If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of these offences—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 offence came—shall we discern there is any departure from those Divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman'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 that the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wound, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and orphans; to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.