

The Final Paradox

by Elton Trueblood

Abraham Lincoln's mature theology was characterized by a deep understanding of Providence and the moral significance of history, which guided his decisions and actions as President.

Scripture: Psalm 19:9, Psalm 65:5, Isaiah 46:10, Matthew 7:1, John 14:27

Topics: "God's Sovereignty", "Divine Justice"

Description

Elton Trueblood delves into the profound theological reflections of Abraham Lincoln, emphasizing his unwavering belief in the sovereignty and guidance of God in the midst of great trials and national crises. Lincoln's patriotism was rooted in a deep sense of divine will, leading him to prioritize God's plan in all human decisions, especially in the moral development of nations like the United States. His speeches, including the Second Inaugural Address and the Gettysburg Address, reveal a theology steeped in Scripture, emphasizing the paradox of God's justice and mercy in the unfolding of history.

Transcript

I have felt His hand upon me in great trials.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Abraham Lincoln will be remembered for many things, but he may be remembered longest for his prophetic interpretation of American history. His patriotism was of such magnitude that it cannot easily be exaggerated, but it was never idolatrous, and it was saved from idolatry by the overwhelming sense of the sovereignty of God. As the Illinois lawyer grew into a world statesman, he grew primarily by the depth of his thinking which included more than political strategy.

In his mature thinking, which became established by the end of 1862, and which continued with no essential variation until the assassination, the conception of the divine will was paramount. By this time Lincoln envisaged God's will as the primary consideration in any human decision. While God's will concerned the lives of poor struggling individuals of every race and nation, it also concerned groups and, above all, nations. From the prophets of Israel Lincoln had learned the noble idea that there can be a

Page 119

servant people, with a responsibility to the entire "family of man." Patriotism, in this context, became even more compelling, but it was purged of all pride. In Lincoln's understanding, the group calling did not deny

the individual calling. But it was in great moral developments, such as the elimination of slavery without the destruction of the Union, that Lincoln saw the working of the divine order most clearly.

We achieve a better understanding of the way in which Lincoln's patriotism transcended local limitations when we note that two of his most perceptive interpreters, Lord Charnwood and John Drinkwater, were Englishmen. The former was convinced at the end of his careful studies that the single most powerful idea in Lincoln's mind was the idea of Providence. This idea, which had grown for years, being mentioned repeatedly in the small addresses given on the journey to Washington prior to the First Inaugural, was given its fullest statement in the addresses of the last two years of Lincoln's life. "His theology, in the narrower sense," wrote Lord Charnwood, "may be said to have been limited to an intense belief in a vast and overruling Providence."¹ Like Charnwood, John Drinkwater also saw the direction in which Lincoln grew.

Two years of darkness and this man but grows

Greater in resolution, more constant in compassion.²

It is only when we see the slavery issue in the larger theological context that we are able to understand the sometimes baffling complexity of Lincoln's attitude. Lincoln refused all along to ally himself with the simplified politics of the Abolitionists, because, though he was trying to rid the world of human slavery, that was not his only purpose. Few interpreters of Lincoln's character

Page 120

have understood this as well as did Lord Charnwood, when he wrote, "We may regard, and himself regarded, the liberation of the slaves, which will always be associated with his name, as a part of the larger work, the restoration of his country to its earliest and noblest tradition, which alone gave permanence or worth to its existence as a nation."³

John Bright is remembered for his influence upon American history, both in the way he helped to avoid armed conflict between Britain and America, and also in the way he prevented the recognition of the Confederacy by Great Britain and France. But many who are familiar with the work of Bright as a statesman are not equally familiar with him as a thinker who influenced the mind of Abraham Lincoln. The fact that most of the connection was through Charles Sumner, as an intermediary, does not lessen the importance of the impact. In Bright, Lincoln found a true model, an astute statesman who, like himself, had a pervading sense of the sovereignty of God. Bright's clearest statement of this position was made at Birmingham, on December 18, 1862, at the end of Lincoln's most agonizing year. "I believe," he said, "the question is in the hand, not of my hon. Friend, nor in that of Lord Palmerston, nor in that even of President Lincoln, but it is in the hand of the Supreme Ruler, who is bringing about one of those great transactions in history which men often will not regard when they are passing before them, but which they look back upon with awe and astonishment some years after they are past."⁴

As Bright indicated, and as Lincoln knew very well, it is difficult to look forward and see where the Guiding Hand is leading. But, seen in later perspective, the working out of a plan is sometimes obvious. Now enough years have elapsed for us, who belong to another generation, to see something of the pattern which

Page 121

was developing, in spite of the inadequacy of the human instruments, when these responsible men lived and made decisions which affected the destinies of millions of people then unborn. What is truly remarkable is the way in which John Bright and Abraham Lincoln could see with so much perspective even while the events were transpiring. In the midst of history they partly discerned the meaning of that history!

To question, as some have done, whether Lincoln believed in God is a clear waste of time and effort. The answer is obvious. The only valuable inquiry is that of how he believed. In this regard the President grew prodigiously, and in this growth John Bright was one of his many teachers. Among other things, Bright helped by his emphasis upon moral consequences. As Bright looked at history he was convinced, as had been the major prophets of Israel, that God's hand in the course of events is seen in the working out of an objective moral law. A sin as great as the sin of enslaving other people was bound, thought Bright, to have agonizing consequences for a very long time. "Is not this war," he asked, "the penalty which inexorable justice exacts from America, North and South, for the enormous guilt of cherishing that frightful iniquity of slavery, for the last eighty years?"⁵

When we consider Bright's question carefully, we are prepared to understand why Lincoln may be truly called the theologian of American anguish. The prairie lawyer answered Bright's question in the affirmative, haltingly at first, but finally with amazing firmness. He grew convinced that our universe, far from demonstrating a merely mechanical order, is a theater for the working out of the moral law. If he were alive today he would not be surprised at the continued agony which marks the relationships of black people and white people, not only in America, but also in many other parts of the world. The mills of the moral order,

Page 122

he thought, grind slowly, but they grind relentlessly. Slavery was a sin so terrible that men and women may still be paying for it a hundred years from now.

Lincoln was not, of course, alone in his understanding of the moral pattern of history with its consequent sorrow. Few who have understood the idea of Providence have spoken primarily of comfort. Lincoln's correspondent, Eliza Gurney, spoke to him not only of the ecstasy, but also of the agony. "By terrible things in righteousness," she wrote, "the Lord seems indeed to have been answering our prayers that He would make us wholly His own." More than a hundred years earlier, John Woolman, in the midst of his 1746 visit to colonies where the slave trade was common, wrote in his Journal, "I Saw in these Southern Provinces, so many Vices and Corruptions increased by this trade and this way of life, that it appeared to me as a dark gloominess hanging over the Land, and though now many willingly run into it, yet in the future the Consequence will be grievous to posterity." And then, to make sure that the reader would not suppose that the journalist was expressing a temporary emotion, Woolman added, "I express it as it hath appeared to me, not at once, nor twice, but as a matter fixed on my mind."⁶ Indeed, Woolman believed that the high cost of slavery, not only for the slaves, but also for owners and for the entire nation, would with the ensuing years grow greater rather than less. In 1757 he said, "I believe that burthen will grow heavier and heavier, till times change in a way disagreeable to us."⁷ The events of Lincoln's administration were verifications of the truth of Woolman's remarkable prediction more than a century earlier. With Woolman and with Mrs. Gurney, Abraham Lincoln understood the concept of "terrible things in righteousness," because, like them, he knew Psalm 65:5.

One significant aspect of Lincoln's emphasis upon God's will was his complete lack of self-righteousness. In this he was remarkably different from many of his contemporaries, especially the extreme idealists who seemed to suppose that instant Utopia was possible. He differed from the fanatical moralists primarily in that he was always perplexed. No sooner did he believe that he was doing God's will than he began to admit that God's purpose might be different from his own. In short, he never forgot the immense contrast between the absolute goodness of God and the faltering goodness of all who are in the finite predicament. It was his recognition of the universality of human fallibility that made him conscious of the dangers involved in any governmental process, including the most democratic one. There is, he saw, no possible insurance against human error. His skepticism referred even to the judicial system, which is evident from his consideration of the Dred Scott decision. Indeed, as early as July 17, 1858, he quoted Thomas Jefferson with approbation on this very point. Jefferson's words, as Lincoln quoted them were: Our judges are as honest as other men, and not more so. They have, with others, the same passions for party, for power, and the privilege of their corps."⁸

How early Abraham Lincoln accepted the ruling idea of the moral significance of history we cannot know, but we do know that he read Robinson Crusoe as a boy in Indiana, and was familiar with the words which Defoe put in Crusoe's mouth: "I ought to leave them to the justice of God, who is the governor of Nations, and knows how, by national punishments, to make a just retribution for national offences and to bring public judgments upon those who offend in a public manner, by such ways as best please him." We have reason to be grateful to Dr. Louis A. Warren for pointing out the similarity between this passage in Lincoln's boyhood reading and the Second Inaugural, produced forty-five

years later.⁹ The words of Lincoln which parallel the words of Defoe are, "If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those 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 therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him?"

Always, in Lincoln's matured theology, there is paradox. There is sternness, yet there is also tenderness; there is melancholy, yet there is also humor; there is moral law, yet there is also compassion. History is the scene of the working out of God's justice, which we can never escape, but it is also the scene of the revelation of the everlasting mercy. Lincoln knew that, if we stress only the mercy, we become sentimentalists, while, if we stress only the justice, we are driven to despair. The secret of rationality is the maintenance of the tension. The greatest possible mistake is the fatuous supposition that we have resolved it. Scholars have noted in the passage from the Second Inaugural quoted above that the words succeed in expressing both the pious and the skeptical notes in Lincoln's mature faith. Reinhold Niebuhr drew attention to the reason why both notes were required, if the truth was to be told. Both are needed, he explained, because "the drama of history is shot through with moral meaning; but the meaning is never exact. Sin and punishment, virtue and reward are never precisely proportioned."¹⁰ Lincoln believed in Providence, but, in Niebuhr's terms, he understood "the error of identifying providence with the cause to which the agent is committed."¹¹ When dedicated people forget the ubiquity of this

danger, they are almost sure to become self-righteous. Only the person who recognizes that he is personally involved in the evils which he seeks to eliminate has any chance of avoiding this primary moral mistake. Lincoln, conscious as he was of the radical difference between the divine will and the human will, understood that ambiguities appear in the moral stance of even the most dedicated crusaders.

The character of Lincoln's intellectual achievement is better appreciated when we recognize that the combination which he demonstrated is exceedingly rare. There are many instances in history of people who allow their skepticism to cut the nerve of moral effort, and there are numerous people, on the other hand, who are fierce crusaders at the price of fanaticism. In his political commitments the fanatic makes claims for his particular cause which cannot be validated by either a transcendent Providence or a neutral posterity.

Lincoln's achievement looms the greater in our own years, since they are marked almost as much by anguish as were his own. The more we observe the failure of the obvious alternatives, i.e., spirituality without passion, and passion without perspective, the more we realize the real brilliance of Lincoln's mature solution of the problem. "It was," said Niebuhr, "Lincoln's achievement to embrace a paradox which lies at the center of the spirituality of all western culture; namely, the affirmation of a meaningful history and the religious reservation about the partiality and bias which the human actors and agents betray in the definition of meaning."¹² Both Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis were patriotic and also reverent men, but there was a crucial difference between them, because Lincoln appreciated paradox as Jefferson Davis did not.

Abraham Lincoln was a patriot who was devoted to something far more profound than what is ordinarily understood as nationalism.

Page 126

America was important in his eyes because God, he believed, had a magnificent work for America to perform, a work significant for the whole world. This, as he said at Trenton before his first inauguration, was "something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come."¹³ In calling Americans to this vision of greatness, God might even go so far, he thought, as to compel obedience. In this conviction Lincoln's mood was similar to that of some of the Old Testament prophets. In June, 1862, the crucial month for making up his mind whether to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, he had an important confrontation with a group brought to him by James F. Wilson, Iowa Congressman and Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee.

One member of Wilson's delegation, a strong antislavery man, said to the President, "Slavery must be stricken down wherever it exists. If we do not do right I believe God will let us go our own way to our ruin. But if we do right I believe he will lead us safely out of this wilderness, crown our arms with victory, and restore our now dissevered Union." The significance of Lincoln's response lies in the way in which he picked up the man's idea of divine guidance and went beyond it. He rose slowly to his full height, "his right arm outstretched toward the gentleman who had just ceased speaking, his face aglow like the face of a prophet," reported the Congressman. To the surprise of his admonisher the President said, "My faith is greater than yours." In common with his visitor, he, too, believed in the role of God in history, but he went on to declare a new thing, to the effect that God will not abandon us to the foolishness of our own devices. "I also believe," he continued, "that He will compel us to do right in order that He may do these things, not so much because we desire them as that they accord with His plan of dealing with this

nation, in the midst of which He means to establish justice. I think He means that we shall do more than we have yet done in furtherance of His plans, and He will open the way for our doing it. I have felt His hand upon me in great trials and submitted to His guidance, and I trust that as He shall further open the way, I will be ready to walk therein, relying on His help and trusting in His goodness and wisdom."¹⁴

The Wilson interview is clearly one of the most revealing scenes in the entire career of Abraham Lincoln. Just the experience of reading the words now is a truly ennobling one. Here we are, at last, far removed from the cracker-barrel discussions of free will, of fatalism and of foreordination, which marked the early growth of Lincoln's philosophy in Illinois. Those discussions were abstract, but what Lincoln told the delegation in June, 1862, referred with urgency to the concrete developments of history. Thinking was not an empty game; it made a difference in the course of events. Part of the paradox was that the more agonizing the decisions became, the more Lincoln was convinced that even his personal choices were being guided by Another.

It is fortunate that we possess corroborating accounts of the way in which Lincoln's convictions were developing into a mature theology during the final chapter of his life. The report of the Register of the Treasury, L.E. Chittenden (1824-1900), supplements that of the Wilson confrontation. "His calm serenity at times when others were so anxious," reported Chittenden, "his confidence that his own judgment was directed by the Almighty, so impressed me that when I next had the opportunity, at some risk of giving offence, I ventured to ask him directly how far he believed the Almighty actually directed our national affairs. There was a considerable pause before he spoke, and when he did speak, what he said was more in the nature of a monologue than

an answer to my inquiry. 'That the Almighty does make use of human agencies, and directly intervenes in human affairs, is' he said, 'one of the plainest statements of the Bible. I have had so many evidences of his direction, so many instances when I have been controlled by some other power than my own will, that I cannot doubt that this power comes from above. I frequently see my way clear to a decision when I have no sufficient facts upon which to found it. But I cannot recall one instance in which I have followed my own judgment, founded upon such a decision, where the results were unsatisfactory, whereas, in almost every instance where I have yielded to the views of others, I have had occasion to regret it. I am satisfied that when the Almighty wants me to do or not to do a particular thing, he finds a way of letting me know it. I am confident that it is his design to restore the Union. He will do it in his own good time.'¹⁵

The paradox that man is most free when he is most guided was something which Abraham Lincoln had to work out for himself, but he was neither the first nor the last to do so. In our own century Professor Donald Baillie of St. Andrews University has reached a conclusion identical with that reached by Lincoln in the midst of national danger. "Guided freedom," said Baillie, "is a paradox, because the ascription of all the glory to God for anything good that is in us does not imply any destruction of our freedom as human personalities, but precisely the reverse: our actions are never more truly free and personal and human, they are never more truly our own, than when they are wrought in us by God."¹⁶

During the last months of his life Lincoln's thinking achieved a genuine synthesis. The solution to which he felt led about emancipation did not please those whose thinking was less complicated.

Such people freely accused the President of expediency, but in this they were wrong. At the heart of the momentous decision there was a hard core of principle from which nothing could move him. What the Abolitionists condemned as expediency was really a matter of intelligent tactics and no more, and the historical outcome has justified the tactics. Referring to the Emancipation Proclamation and the criticism of its partial nature, Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out that "both its timing and its immediate scope were the fruits of statesmanlike calculations," for Lincoln, while he was a prophet, was also more than a prophet. "Lincoln's faith," said Niebuhr, "is identical with that of the Hebraic prophets, who first conceived the idea of a meaningful history," but he was also "a responsible statesman." Lincoln's philosophy was flexible. He sought to choose among the possibles and thereby do the right thing in the light of circumstances, but "all of his actions and attitudes can be explained and justified," in Niebuhr's judgment, "by his hierarchy of values."¹⁷ He did not move at the speed for which some of his critics, such as Horace Greeley, clamored, but he was saved from moral ambiguity by absolute firmness at one central point.

Lincoln's first public statement which explained unmistakably his pivotal moral position was the Message to Congress of December 1, 1862. This Message, produced at the end of his year of greatest strain, contains the fundamental solution which he had reached. It was a solution he never questioned thereafter, though the problems continued to multiply. In this Message, which by common consent is one of Lincoln's best, the thoughtful President was really dealing with the philosophy of history. It is no wonder, then, that he began the final paragraph by saying, "Fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history." God, Lincoln believed, is seen more clearly in events than in nature, though He may be

seen there also. It is a majestic thing, thought Lincoln, for a person to be responsible. "The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation." History is never abstract because it is concerned with what persons do. "We -- even we here -- hold the power, and bear the responsibility."

The Message to Congress¹⁸ is significant for any person who seeks to understand Lincoln's unshakable center of conviction. Some indication of this had already been revealed in the letter to Horace Greeley, written three months earlier, when the President said, "My primary purpose is to save the Union." But the words of the Message to Congress go further. What was at stake, Lincoln had come to believe, was the conception of a really free society, such as the world had never seen. He knew human selfishness too well to think that a truly free society could be easily demonstrated anywhere, but he was convinced that the development of the American Union was peculiarly fortunate in its promise. God, he believed, was trying to bring to pass something unique on American shores and prairies. The Emancipation Proclamation, scheduled to take effect in exactly one month, was frankly a war measure designed to save the Union, and, by saving the Union, to keep open the opportunity for a life of freedom on the part of all who were involved, both black and white. Flexible as he was on other points, this was the rock from which Lincoln could not be moved. This is why, when the Confederate government made its peace overtures, Lincoln would not, in spite of his desire for the cessation of hostilities, sign his name to any agreement which referred to "two nations." If it were not one nation, the hope, he thought, was destroyed. Herein lies the enduring appeal of the familiar words with which the Message to Congress ended. His theme was the indivisibility of freedom. "In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to

the free -- honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best, hope of earth." With these words Lincoln had arrived. Not yet was there peace in the divided country and peace in the nation is, in one sense, still elusive today, but Abraham Lincoln had found peace in his own mind.

Reinhold Niebuhr's sober conclusion is one no thoughtful person can consider lightly. "It is, in short," he stated, "not too much to claim that Lincoln embraced the paradox of all human spirituality, and of western dynamism in particular, more adequately than any statesman of modern history."¹⁹ The way in which Lincoln embraced the paradox is demonstrated most thoroughly in the Second Inaugural, but, meantime, it received brief expression in the Gettysburg Address. Short as the speech was, it enabled Lincoln to express the larger meaning of the conflict. As Allan Nevins said in commemoration of the Address, Lincoln was amazingly successful in communicating "his realization that the war was a desperate test on a world stage of the question whether a democracy of continental dimensions and idealistic commitments could triumphantly survive or must ignobly collapse."²⁰

Before the Gettysburg battle such a definitive statement as that of November 19, 1863, would have been premature. But, after Gettysburg, Lincoln saw that in spite of sorrows yet to come the outcome was reasonably certain. The second time that Lee's army crossed the Potomac River into Virginia was the last. Accordingly, Lincoln, as the chief architect of victory, felt the time had come to make a definitive statement. He welcomed the opportunity and prepared carefully, even though all that he said can be printed, without difficulty, on one page. The second of Lincoln's three theological documents is much the shortest.

We know something of how the Gettysburg Address was

prepared because there are five copies, each one different and each in Lincoln's own handwriting. Edward Everett's long oration was an excellent one, but it would not even be remembered apart from the fact that the orator shared the platform with the President, who was not expected to do anything except to make a formal dedication of the battlefield. Everett's magnanimity is shown by his saying in a letter to the President, "I should be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours, as you did in two minutes."²¹ Lincoln's letter to Everett, dated Washington, November 20, 1863, was equally magnanimous. "In our respective parts yesterday," he wrote, "you could not have been excused to make a short address nor I a long one. I am pleased to know that, in your judgment, the little I did say was not entirely a failure."²²

Lincoln could have no way of estimating the enduring significance of his address. Part of it was written in Washington, before he took the train about noon on the 18th. The writing was completed in Gettysburg, the last touches being added between nine and ten o'clock of the 19th in the home of Judge David Wills, his Gettysburg host. Contrary to popular legend, no part of the speech appears to have been written on the train. The brevity of the utterance was in marked contrast to the magnitude of the purpose. We can rightly be appreciative of the insight of Allan Nevins who has seen that Lincoln "chose to speak not to his country alone but to aspirants for freedom in all countries, and not to his own moment in history but to the centuries. The proposition that all men are created equal was a truth for the ages, and if America, under God, achieved a new birth of freedom, it would stand as an object lesson to all nations."²³

Lincoln was somewhat disappointed in the reaction received,

Page 133

even though he was four times interrupted by applause. The message was too powerful for his hearers to grasp its significance immediately, but there was, nevertheless, long-continued handclapping at its conclusion. How could the people standing there on the battlefield know that they were listening to some of the greatest words of the world? Because their expectation was that he would merely pronounce a formal dedication, it took some time for his fellow citizens to realize that the wartime President had done so much more. What had he done? The answer of Allan Nevins, in his Introduction to the commemorative volume produced after a century, is very impressive. Lincoln, he says, "had dedicated the nation to the defense and invigoration of free institutions wherever the influence of the republic might extend." It is not really surprising that, at first, only a few appreciated that Lincoln "had written one of the noblest prose poems of the language."

Of all the effective phrases in the well-known address, none is more revealing of the inner life of Lincoln than the words "under God." Since these words did not appear in the original version, we are driven to the conclusion that they were added extempore, as Lincoln rose to the occasion. The newspaper version includes the words "under God," as do the versions copied later, including the one which the President sent to Edward Everett on February 4, 1864.

When Lincoln inserted the now familiar phrase it was not in general use. In our time we have honored Lincoln's new phrase by making it an official part of the Salute to the Flag, but on November 19, 1863, it appeared to be merely a fortunate interpolation. Consideration of these words is necessary for any who try to probe the depths of Lincoln's understanding of the role of God's will in history. We cannot know all that Lincoln meant, but we can at least know that he was seeking to express a nonidolatrous patriotism and that he achieved this by the conviction

Page 134

that the nation, good as it may be, is never really supreme. All that we do as men and as patriots is seen in perspective when we realized that all of us are "under judgment."

The inspired interpolation in the Gettysburg Address was not, of course, Lincoln's first employment of the idea. Far from inserting something strange, he was expressing in the briefest manner possible the quintessence of his thinking on the major issue. The idea of the "almost chosen people" had finally come to flower after two and a half years of intellectual struggle. Lincoln was able to employ the words without prior intent, because they were already deeply embedded in his consciousness. On May 13, 1862, when he addressed the soldiers of the Twelfth Indiana Regiment, thanking the men for their sacrificial support of "free government and free institutions," he added "For the part that you and the brave army of which you are a part have, under Providence, performed in this great struggle, I tender more thanks."²⁴ The term "under Providence" is not identical with the term used at Gettysburg, but the meaning is similar.

Much earlier, indeed in his boyhood, the specific words "under God" evidently came to Lincoln's attention. The version of the Bible which young Lincoln read so avidly was, of course, that dedicated to King James in 1611. In the dedication, normally printed in all editions, the phrase appears in the following context: The translators address the King, not as absolute sovereign, but as the one "who, under God, is the immediate Author of their true happiness."

Today Lincoln's address is far better known than are the events which it was written to commemorate. Thousands now read the words on the interior wall of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. Even in London, at the Church of St. Clement Danes, in the Strand, American tourists are surprised to find part

Page 135

of it inscribed as an inspiration to all who will take the trouble to read. "The speech," said Charles Sumner, "will live when the memory of the battle will be lost or only remembered because of the speech."

President Lincoln's address on the occasion of his second inauguration has often been called the greatest state paper of the nineteenth century, but it is more than a state paper; it has already become a theological classic. Its length is in marked contrast to that of the First Inaugural, which was five times as long. The President began by explaining this contrast. Four years earlier it had seemed fitting and proper, he said, to state somewhat in detail the nature of the course which he expected to pursue, but in 1865 that need no longer existed. It did not exist because, during the intervening months, public declaration had "been constantly called forth on every point and phase of the great contest." Consequently, there was little new to be presented. The sad truth which Lincoln had had to face as he began his first term was recollected in an unforgettable manner. "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." In this last sentence of only four syllables is the quintessence of Lincoln's literary style.

The longest paragraph of the Second Inaugural is devoted to a theological analysis of the conflict which was so much more than a series of battles. No one knew better than did Lincoln how doubtful the outcome had been. Paul H. Douglas, former Senator from Illinois, has shown, sensitively, what consequences depended upon the outcome at Gettysburg in July 1863. If there were draft riots in New York ten days after the Union victory at Gettysburg, "what would they have done," asks Douglas, "had Gettysburg been a Northern defeat?" The Copperhead movement was strong, with powerful organs in the New York World

Page 136

and the Chicago Times. Lord Palmerston would have welcomed an excuse to recognize the Confederacy.

"The turning of the Union flanks and the defeat of the Union army at Gettysburg, therefore," says Senator Douglas, "might well have meant the loss of the war with all the incalculable consequences which would have meant the creation of two hostile nations in the middle of North America, one dedicated to slavery and the other to freedom. The former would have inevitably sought to create a slave empire so that as southern soil became exhausted, the slaves could then be taken to Mexico, to Central America, and to the sugar-rich islands of the Caribbean. North America would then have become another Europe with deadly wars periodically waged between the two contending nations. Athens and Sparta would have again been locked in internecine warfare, and Gettysburg would have been but a prelude to still greater struggles on a continent drenched with blood."²⁵

The wonder of history is that what Senator Douglas has described so vividly did not occur, for the Union was preserved. How, the pensive Lincoln asked, was this possible? Certainly it did not come about as a consequence of the supreme wisdom or righteousness of the citizens of the North. The only reasonable explanation, in Lincoln's mature thought, was that of the Guiding Hand of God. The occasion on March 4, 1865, gave Lincoln his best opportunity to state the Biblical faith which, by this time, had come to form the center of his conviction. He included fourteen references to God, many scriptural allusions, and four direct

quotations from the Bible.²⁶ It is difficult to think of another state paper so steeped in Scripture and so devoted to theological reflection.

Readers in both America and abroad were quick to recognize

Page 137

the greatness of Lincoln's last major utterance. The praise expressed by the London Spectator was unqualified. "We cannot read it," said the Spectator after Lincoln's death, "without a renewed conviction that it is the noblest political document known to history, and should have for the nation and the statesman he left behind him something of a sacred and almost prophetic character. Surely, none was ever written under a stronger sense of the reality of God's government, and certainly none written in a period of passionate conflict ever so completely excluded the partiality of victorious faction, and breathed so pure a strain of mingled justice and mercy." Such a generous judgment makes us realize that the opinion makers of England had moved a long way since the time when John Bright had stood virtually alone in his support of Abraham Lincoln. Even the London Times, after a four-year record of pro-Confederate bias, reported the speech favorably.

The key sentence of the entire utterance appears in the middle of the long paragraph, "The Almighty has His own purposes." This is what Lincoln was already sensing in September, 1862, after the second catastrophe at Bull Run, when many believed that defeat was inevitable and the sad-eyed son of the prairie wrote the "Meditation on the Divine Will"; but not until the end was virtually in sight was he able to say it so simply. Here, near the close of the drama, he was verifying what he had said twenty-eight months earlier in the presence of Mrs. Gurney and others, "though with our limited understandings we may not be able to comprehend it, yet we cannot but believe that he who made the world still governs it."

If there has ever been any doubt about Lincoln's conception of God being personal, the Second Inaugural dispels that doubt. He refers without ambiguity to the "Living God." This is far removed from any philosophical system which sees God as an impersonal Force. God, as envisaged in the Second Inaugural, is

Page 138

personal because He has a "will," and "living" because He makes a difference in contemporary history. The personal understanding of God's will separates Lincoln's thinking from the fatalism which he sometimes discussed in his youthful speculations.

Previews of the Second Inaugural Address came at many points in Lincoln's development. One of the most admired phrases is "with malice toward none," but he had already employed this idea earlier. At the close of a letter written July 28, 1862, the rejection of malice was specifically mentioned. In the letter he said: I am in no boastful mood. I shall not do more than I can, and I shall do all I can to save the government, which is my sworn duty as well as my personal inclination. I shall do nothing in malice. What I deal with is too vast for malicious dealing."²⁷

What Lincoln did superbly on March 4, 1865, was to give definitive form to ideas with which he was already familiar. One preview appeared eleven months earlier, on April 4, 1864, in a letter to Albert G. Hodges, editor of the Frankfort, Kentucky, Commonwealth. As in so many other productions, including the Second Inaugural itself, the essence is in the final paragraph. "If God now wills the removal of a great

wrong," he concluded, "and wills also that we of the North as well as you of the South, shall pay fairly for our complicity in that wrong, impartial history will find therein new cause to attest and revere the justice and goodness of God."²⁸ Only a slight development was required to give us the sentence which we know so well and which has already been quoted in this chapter.

Glad as readers are to know the reaction of people in America and in other countries to Lincoln's address, no criticism is more interesting than Lincoln's own estimate of his most ambitious literary effort. Fortunately, we know what he thought, because

Page 139

he expressed himself eleven days after the Inauguration to the journalist Thurlow Weed. The letter not only shows that, in spite of humility, he could make a just estimate of his own work, but also provides further insight into the thinking which lay behind the speech.

My dear Sir.

Everyone 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 -- anything 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 of humiliation there is in it falls most directly on myself, I thought others might afford for me to tell it.

Yours truly,

A. Lincoln.²⁹

The assassination of Lincoln was tragic when it came, but it would have been far more tragic if it had occurred two months earlier. Then America would have been deprived, not only of Lincoln's personal leadership, but also of a compendium of his thought. Lord Charnwood, as he meditated upon the sequence of events, recognized the existence of a dramatic pattern. "Here," he said, "is one of the few speeches ever delivered by a great man at the crisis of his fate on the sort of occasion which a tragedian telling his story would have devised for him."³⁰

One of the most revealing features of Lincoln's Second Inaugural is its intimation of what his policy would have been after the war, if he had survived. He would have treated Southerners as though they had never left the Union. One who saw this clearly was Sir Winston Churchill, who pointed out that "the death of

Page 140

Lincoln deprived the Union of the guiding hand which alone could have solved the problems of reconstruction and added to the triumph of armies those lasting victories which are gained over the hearts of men."³¹ At the Cabinet meeting on April 14, 1865, the very day on which he was shot, the President spoke of Robert E. Lee and other Confederate leaders with kindness. The assassin's bullet hurt the entire nation, but it hurt the southern part of the nation most of all. In Lincoln's last public address, given on April 11, 1865, three days before the assassination, he spoke directly of reconstruction after the war, saying that the problems it presented had pressed closely upon his attention. Then, in one of his laconic sentences, he added, "It is fraught with great difficulty."³²

Nothing in Lincoln's theology made him expect Utopia. He did not claim that the victory of the Union forces would necessarily produce the full liberation of people, black and white. All that he claimed was that such a victory would provide opportunity, while defeat would entail unmitigated disaster. He accepted the basic philosophy of the Founding Fathers, including the idea of a special destiny for America, but he was sufficiently acquainted with human failure to know that progress is never certain, as it is never easy. His only certainty lay in the conviction that God will never cease to call America to her true service, not only for her own sake but for the sake of the world. He desired unity and he knew that vision is the secret of unity. Consequently, his final appeal was for the completion of what he interpreted as a holy calling. This is the significance of the admonition, "Let us strive on to finish the work we are in." Knowing that the American experiment was incomplete, he was keenly aware of the appeal produced by any structure which is only partly finished and

Page 141

which, accordingly, cries out for completion. He did not predict an end to American anguish, but he did see the possibility of a determination "to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."

Index || Table of Contents

1. Charnwood, Abraham Lincoln (Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1917). [BACK]
2. Drinkwater, Abraham Lincoln, a Play (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1919), p. 52. [BACK]
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19. Nevins, p. 87. [BACK]
20. Ibid., p. 5. [BACK]
21. Collected Works, VII, p. 25. [BACK]
22. Ibid., p. 24. [BACK]
23. Nevins, p. 11. [BACK]
24. Collected Works, V, p. 213. [BACK]
25. Nevins, p. 99. [BACK]
26. The passages quoted are Genesis 3:19, Matthew 7:1, Matthew 18:7, and Psalm 19:9. [BACK]
27. Collected Works, V, p. 346. [BACK]
28. Collected Works, VII, p. 282. [BACK]
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