

A Book Review

Ronald C. White Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural

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I selected Ronald C. White's Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural as a way to improve my ability to guide my students through a primary source analysis. I gained so much more than that. Before White begins dissecting the speech he brings the reader back to the place and time it was delivered. His description reinforced a notion that I have always had as a teacher. Establishing relevancy and hooking students into wanting to read the documents, and a willingness to analyze them, requires context. The author describes Washington DC on the eve of the inaugural in a way that brings the reader to that place and time.

“...the mud soaked streets were guarded by troops looking for suspicious characters, a task complicated by the presence of large numbers of confederate deserters. Washington, which had been transformed into an armed camp in the early days of war, had now become a gigantic hospital. Neither the dense fog, nor the teaming rain could dampen the spirits of the throngs of visitors. The most striking difference in the composition of the audience for Lincoln's second inaugural address from the first one was the presence of black soldiers”. The Times of London reported another striking contrast. “Most in the crowd, because of the weather, were dressed in “old clothes”. Yet African Americans, despite the dismal weather, were noticeable also because of their dress in festive reds, blues, and yellows and very gaudy colors”.

Set against this vivid historical backdrop White writes two hundred and three pages to dissect a speech that was only seven hundred and three words. White breaks down the speech historically, technically, literally and poetically. His work reveals how Lincoln overcame his lack of formal education and it peels away the layers of Lincoln's spirituality. White's analysis both explains and defends the President's pragmatism. White allows the reader to get inside the mind of Lincoln. The speech was short and his intent was clear. He wanted the divided and wounded nation to forgive and heal. How he accomplished so much with such brevity is the point of White's analysis.

White guides the reader through the speech line by line so Lincoln can be credited for his artistic genius. Lincoln had no ghostwriters. The voice was his own. White reveals not only what Lincoln's intent was, but also how Lincoln got there. He guides us through the first paragraph in order to demonstrate how the purpose of it is revealed later in the speech. The speech references the past, the present and the future. Paragraph one is all about historical causation. Lincoln wants the audience to think not only about causes, but also about the purpose of war. (59) For Lincoln, understanding the causes of the war at the end of it would not be about blame. He asked both sides to take a personal inventory in order to understand what had to be fixed in order to move on.

Paragraph two is where Lincoln's artistry "starts to be revealed". White shows how Lincoln uses rhythm and cadence to accomplish his "overarching strategy to emphasize common actions and emotions". (65) Having described the commonalities Lincoln then shifts to how the two sides differed.

One of them would make war, rather than let the nation survive; the other would accept war rather than let it perish.

This is one of White's favorite examples of Lincoln's "rhetorical genius". (66) That there were rhetorical strategies contrasts sharply to the critics who argued the speech was too simplistic. White takes issue directly with Vernon Louis Parrington's interpretation that Lincoln's speech was "plain homespun" (60) Parrington was the author of the basic text used in White's undergraduate history course. White's complaint seems to be with Parrington's Progressive Era politics.

"As a historian growing up in the Progressive Era, Parrington held strong opinions about heroes and villains who had advanced or retarded his progressive, secular

vision...When Parrington came to Lincoln, he considered this man out of the West to be a splendid leader, but averred, "Few men who have risen to enduring eloquence have been so little indebted to rhetoric." He went on to describe Lincoln's speaking style: "His usual style was plain homespun, clear and convincing, but bare of imagery and lacking distinction of phrase". For good or ill. Parrington's characterization of Lincoln as a public speaker did not make a lasting impression on this college sophomore" (60)

By this point in the book I was compelled to know more about White. This resentment against Parrington led me to suspect that he might have an underlying agenda. In addition to analyzing the religious and biblical undertones in the speech was White going to proselytize?

Ronald C. White is a professor of United States History and Theology. He is a noted Lincoln scholar and his writing has mass appeal. In 2009 White released *A. Lincoln: A Biography* that became a New York Times best seller. I found an article published in the Winter 2009 *Wilson Quarterly* called *Lincoln's Memo to Obama* that affirmed, for me, that this is not a man with a "right-wing Christian Coalition" style agenda. The scholarship on his website intimates tolerance, and in my humble opinion, an authentic appraisal of the role religion has played in American politics.

According to White, the Bible was the single most important book in Lincoln's library. It was the only book he had for much of his life. Although he totally embraced the Judeo-Christian value system, he always had an "ambivalent relationship with religion" (112). Lincoln liked to "wield the Bible as a sword, using one edge to affirm and the other to question" (113) He was a true student of the Bible, not a literal interpreter of it and he had no patience for those who misused it for partisan purposes. (111) The Bible permeates his speech, but not to demonstrate that the North had God on their side. Lincoln never joined a church, yet according to White, Lincoln "has

left us in his second inaugural address the most profound speech combining politics and religion ever delivered to the American public. In only 703 words, Lincoln mentions God 14 times, quotes the Bible four times, and invokes prayer three times.” Yet, the speech is not a religious one, it is spiritual.

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 not be judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has his own purposes

The paradox is clear. But Lincoln does not only state the conflict, he is asking the audience to take responsibility for it. What Lincoln wanted Americans to embrace was the simple and logical concept that those two opposing prayers could not be answered. White maintains that Lincoln is speaking out against a tribal God.... and spoke instead of an inclusive God...in both judgment and reconciliation. (113) Neither side could claim God as their own. White traces Lincoln's theological language back to the Presbyterian minister, Phineas Densmore Gurley (131). Although he never joined a church Lincoln was drawn to the preaching of this man who could reconcile the paradox of free will and providence in a way that demanded individual accountability. By the end of the war Lincoln regularly attended Gurley's sermons. (141) In paragraph three Lincoln shifts from being a chronicler of history to analysis and then “unexpectedly –became sermonic”. (88) For many in the audience it came as a surprise that Lincoln was not celebrating victory, but holding both sides accountable. “Instead of self-congratulation, he asked his fellow citizens for self-analysis”. He asked Americans to reflect on the “malignancy of slavery”. By the end of the third paragraph it is becoming clear that Lincoln's purpose for chronicling the events of the war “was actually his long look back on the ethical behavior of the nation...Lincoln carried his speech to the scales of justice...of divine justice”

(151) Willing to take responsibility, but not willing to dwell on the past Lincoln shifted the speech from “judgment to hope” (163) The demonstration, for White, that Lincoln came to believe in divine providence lies in the difference between the Second Inaugural and his other speeches. In his 1860 Cooper Union Address, on the eve of war, Lincoln ended the speech with “Let us have the faith that right makes right, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it” compared to “with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right” (160)

The final paragraph of the speech is its most memorable and in it Lincoln “proclaims a timeless promise of reconciliation” as he asks Americans to enter a new era armed not with weapons but with forgiveness. (164) The introduction of the final paragraph spoken weeks before his assassination would become his legacy. However poignant, “with malice toward none; with charity for all” is not the only important line of the speech. White maintains that focusing only on one or two sentences the reader would miss Lincoln’s strategy. And it was the brilliance of that strategy that makes his second Inaugural address Lincoln’s greatest speech.

White’s deconstruction of this speech has definitely enhanced my ability to guide students though not only this but virtually all primary sources included in my curriculum. While I found his focus on grammar, syntax and rhetoric fascinating ultimately his analysis becomes too dense for the average high school student. However, the first chapter sets the stage as if it is a screenplay. I would assign chapter one in isolation. Using visuals to establish a historical context and setting is something I have always done for my students. However, I am always looking for a useable reenactment that works in terms of historical accuracy and length. The length of the average PBS and History Channel documentaries do not always lend themselves to

classroom use and Hollywood inevitably manipulates the history. Recently, HBO's John Adams has demonstrated that good history and Hollywood do mix. What I am always trying to find is a series that recreates the drama of significant events In United States History provocatively and accurately in twenty minute to half hour segments. As the production costs of period pieces are exorbitant this type of series has yet to be made. However I think it can be done. The time is perfect to find the funding for a project that will enhance history education. I have actually pitched my idea to a filmmaker, a recent graduate of UCLA Film School who has worked on John Stossel's "Stupid in America". My idea for funding includes appealing to the Gates Foundation, media critics of education and celebrities willing to support a project that will greatly enhance the quality of history education across the United States. I have already revealed more than I should, as my "contact" liked the pitch. This just may end up being more than a "pie in the sky" idea. Just one more personal aside: I started reading White's book in a doctor's waiting room in South Carolina. I have to admit to feeling rather smug as I held the book high, glancing occasionally at the faces of those whose cars were parked in a lot dotted with pick up trucks displaying the Confederate flag. I was in that office bringing my father to the appointment that would diagnose his brain cancer. I spent the next six weeks reading the book, writing this paper and being with my Dad - for what would be the last weeks of his life. Ironically, it was at his funeral that I was able to pitch my idea. Whatever ends up happening, every time I teach Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address I will be honoring the memory of my father.