
PRESIDENT LINCOLN'S FIRST INAUGURAL ADDRESS, 1861

Introduction

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.

In address, the new president appealed to the “mystic chords of memory” and to “the better angels of our nature” to hold the nation together. Seeking to alleviate the “Apprehension [that] seems to exist among the Southern States,” Lincoln pledged not to interfere with slavery in the South and pleaded with the Confederate states to reconcile with the North. Twenty times he used the word “Union.” But he also sent a clear message that he would not allow the Union to be peacefully dissolved. “We cannot separate,” Lincoln declared, and “The Union . . . will constitutionally defend, and maintain itself.” Though he wished for a peaceful resolution to the conflicts between the North and the South, Lincoln made clear that the Union would not back down if provoked and would not condone secession: “There needs to be no bloodshed or violence; and there shall be none, unless it be forced upon the national authority.”

Excerpt

In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict, without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to “preserve, protect and defend” it.

I am loth to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

Questions for Discussion

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

1. In what way did Lincoln clearly indicate that the responsibility for any future bloodshed would fall upon the South?
2. Why were many abolitionists disappointed with the theme of Lincoln’s Inaugural?
3. How did Lincoln explain his legal authority and constitutional obligation?

A PROCLAMATION ON THE SUSPENSION OF HABEAS CORPUS, 1862

Introduction

The doctrine of habeas corpus is the right of any person under arrest to appear in person before the court, to ensure that they have not been falsely accused. The US Constitution specifically protects this right in Article I, Section 4: “The privilege of the writ of habeas corpus shall not be suspended, unless when in cases of rebellion or invasion the public safety may require it.” Lincoln initially suspended habeas corpus in the volatile border state of Maryland in 1861 in order to try large numbers of civilian rioters in military courts and to prevent the movement of Confederate troops on Washington. The order was eventually extended in response to different threats. In the summer of 1862, President Lincoln had called up the state militias, leading to increased opposition within the Union. By General Orders No. 141, September 25, 1862, Lincoln subjected protestors to martial law and the suspension of habeas corpus.

The suspension of habeas corpus was one of Lincoln’s most controversial decisions. In the spring of 1863, General Ambrose Burnside arrested Peace Democrat Clement Vallandigham, who had been critical of the US government, and banned publication of the Chicago Times, which was supportive of Vallandigham. Burnside’s actions drew widespread criticism, to which Lincoln responded by reducing Vallandigham’s sentence and revoking Burnside’s order suppressing the Times. Lincoln defended himself against charges that his administration had subverted the Constitution, however, arguing that acts that might be illegal in peace time might be necessary “in cases of rebellion,” when the nation’s survival was at stake.

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction, examine the document, and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the following questions.

1. Why did the Founders make certain to incorporate the right of habeas corpus as the sole liberty included in the original text of the US Constitution?
2. Make a chart with two columns. In one column list the stipulations in the Constitution under which habeas corpus may be suspended. In the second column list President Lincoln’s reasons for ordering the suspension of habeas corpus.
3. To what extent do Lincoln’s reasons satisfy the Constitutional provisions under which habeas corpus may be suspended?
4. Why is this historical event of particular interest to Americans today?

GENERAL ORDERS, }
No. 141. }

WAR DEPARTMENT,
ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE,
Washington, September 25, 1862.

The following Proclamation by the President is published for the information and government of the Army and all concerned:

BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

A PROCLAMATION.

WHEREAS it has become necessary to call into service not only Volunteers but also portions of the Militia of the States by draft, in order to suppress the insurrection existing in the United States, and disloyal persons are not adequately restrained by the ordinary processes of law from hindering this measure and from giving aid and comfort in various ways to the insurrection:

Now, therefore, be it ordered—

First. That during the existing insurrection, and as a necessary measure for suppressing the same, all rebels and insurgents, their aiders and abettors, within the United States, and all persons discouraging volunteer enlistments, resisting militia drafts, or guilty of any disloyal practice, affording aid and comfort to rebels against the authority of the United States, shall be subject to martial law, and liable to trial and punishment by courts-martial or military commission.

Second. That the writ of habeas corpus is suspended in respect to all persons arrested, or who are now, or hereafter during the rebellion shall be, imprisoned in any fort, camp, arsenal, military prison, or other place of confinement by any military authority, or by the sentence of any court-martial or military commission.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand, and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the city of Washington, this twenty-fourth day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred [L. S.] and sixty-two, and of the Independence of the United States the eighty-seventh.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

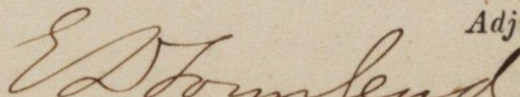
By the President:

WILLIAM H. SEWARD,
Secretary of State.

BY ORDER OF THE SECRETARY OF WAR:

L. THOMAS,
Adjutant General.

OFFICIAL:



PRESIDENT LINCOLN'S SECOND INAUGURAL ADDRESS, 1865

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.

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 even by war, while the Government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it.

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.

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...

...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? ...

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.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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

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