

March 4, 1865

Abraham Lincoln, The Second Inaugural Address

Abraham Lincoln waited for the Civil War to end with hopes that he would not be forced to impose a vengeful peace on the South, and that the states of the collapsing Confederacy would be restored quickly to the Union.

He used the occasion of his second inaugural address to make an eloquent plea for his policies. It was delivered on March 4, 1865, a few weeks before the final victory of the armies of the Union. The excerpt printed here was the second half of his brief speech.

One-eighth of the population was 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 duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the *cause* of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict 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. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The almighty has His own purposes. 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? 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 till it must be said, "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 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

1. Why do you think Lincoln uses almost half his speech to talk about God's will? Does he claim that God is on the Union's side, or does he assume that the war is a punishment for both the North and South? If you were writing the speech, would you be tempted to introduce a word like "but," or "however" at the beginning of the second paragraph? Why? What might have he thought would be the political advantages of this religious way of talking about the problem of Reconstruction?
2. How do you think a former slaveholder would respond to the final paragraph? An ex-slave? A disabled Union veteran? A militant Republican critic of slavery and the South?