

# Abe's eloquence

reviewed by [Allen Guelzo](#) in the [May 22, 2002](#) issue

Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural.

By Ronald C. White Jr. Simon & Schuster, 203 pp., \$24.00.

A mark of how little in the way of eloquence we expect from our presidents is that our most memorable political utterances come from people who, like Daniel Webster or William Jennings Bryan, were chronically rebuffed in their bids for the great prize. In the long catalogues of presidential papers, volume after volume and page after page of proclamations, addresses and dispatches read like the literary equivalent of a muggy August day in Washington.

Except for Abraham Lincoln. The only president whose works are collected in his own Library of America volume, Lincoln stands out from the pack of presidential verbal mediocrities like an Atlas of the political word. "No one can read Mr. Lincoln's state papers without perceiving in them a most remarkable facility of 'putting things' so as to command the attention and assent of the people," wrote Henry J. Raymond of the *New York Times* in 1864. Massachusetts Congressman George Boutwell, reminiscing for Allen Thorndike Rice 20 years after Lincoln's death, thought that "Lincoln's fame" would "be carried along the ages" by his writings, and especially the "three great papers . . . the proclamation of emancipation, his oration at Gettysburg, and his second inaugural address."

It is the last of this trio which Ronald J. White of San Francisco Theological Seminary has singled out as the summit of Lincoln's oratorical range. The commentary on this speech is surprisingly thin, especially in contrast to the mass of material on the Gettysburg Address and the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858. Yet White is surely correct in seeing in the Second Inaugural a remarkably powerful meditation on the meaning of the Civil War and, for a president, a strangely theological resolution to the perplexities of that war.

There is nothing quite like this short speech of little over 700 words in any other presidential inaugural; in fact, there is nothing quite like it in any of Lincoln's other public speeches. It has supplied to the American memory the words which, after the

Gettysburg Address, we most often associate with Abraham Lincoln: "With malice toward none; with charity for all . . ."

Lincoln was a ferociously private man, and piecing together a coherent string of causes behind his words is never less than risky. This is especially true of the Second Inaugural. The closest anticipations of the ideas of that address are found only in two of Lincoln's letters and a scrap of notes of uncertain date. For that reason White has had to construct a context from whatever materials he can bring to bear. The first chapter, for instance, is concerned with the setting of the inauguration ceremonies on March 4, 1865; a sizable chunk of White's chapter on Lincoln's citations of the Bible is devoted to a discussion of the American Bible Society.

As a result, White wobbles a little unsteadily between explicating Lincoln's text, analyzing his style and commenting on various topics as they surface in the Second Inaugural. Some of the contexts are poorly chosen (such as the oft-told howler that Lincoln secretly attended midweek prayer meeting at the New York Presbyterian Church, sitting in an adjoining room with the door half open to conceal him from the ordinary parishioner). Yet others give delightful glimpses into Lincoln's daring originality of utterance (only John Quincy Adams before him had the courage to breach the "wall of separation" by quoting the Bible in an inaugural address, and Lincoln did it four times).

Although White acknowledges him only once, Reinhold Niebuhr is a shadowy presence on almost every page of this book. White echoes the paradoxes of Niebuhr's own understanding of Lincoln. He sees the ultimate argument of the Second Inaugural as a theodicy which offered "both judgment and reconciliation" under the purpose of "an inclusive God." Like Niebuhr's Lincoln, White's "speaks forever against a 'God Bless America' theology that fails to come to terms with evil and hypocrisy in its own house."

All of this is true, as far as it goes. But on other occasions, Lincoln didn't hesitate to describe the American republic as the "last, best hope of earth," or speak of its citizens as an "almost chosen people." As Lincoln explained wryly to Thurlow Weed, he intended the Second Inaugural as a warning to radicals who saw in Northern victory a divine ratification of their own anointed self-righteousness. But he never doubted that the antislavery cause in particular, and the principles of free-labor American capitalism and American constitutionalism in general, were "the fondest hope, of the lovers of freedom, throughout the world."

One question which White fails to ask is whether Lincoln's theodicy was really all that unique. Charles Hodge, that doyen of Princetonian orthodoxy, also discouraged Northern triumphalism when he asked, "Do not the Scriptures and all experience teach us that God is a sovereign, that the orderings of his providence are not determined by justice, but by mysterious wisdom for the accomplishment of higher ends than mere punishment or reward?" Lincoln could hardly have put it better.

Nor does White explore the darker side of Lincoln's inclusivity, which is his tendency toward moral relativism. Lincoln had often said that he could not blame Southerners for the crimes of slavery because Northerners would have done the very same thing in their places. But this could lead to paralysis of judgment as easily as to mercy, and the two are far from the same thing.

White's is a short, preacherly book, mercifully well leavened with sharp historical insights and free from the temptation to deify Lincoln or attach Lincoln to any partisan brand of religious thought. Wisely, White accepts what can and cannot be known about the religion of our strangest and greatest president and lets the soft glow of Lincoln's words take front stage. Without question our best commentary on Lincoln's deepest and most intellectually self-revealing speech, this book leaves us wishing for more, from White and from Lincoln.