

Speech that launched the Lincoln presidency

By William C. Kashatus

Today marks the 150th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's first inauguration as president of the United States. The address he delivered on March 4, 1861, was just 35 minutes long, but reflects the balanced rhetoric of a shrewd politician.

Because history has anointed Lincoln the "Great Emancipator," Americans tend to forget that when he assumed office, the 16th president vowed not to "interfere with slavery in the States where it existed."

Lincoln was referring to the South, where seven states had recently seceded from the Union. In fact, the central issue confronting the president-elect was whether secession was illegal and, if so, what would he do to stop it.

In his first inaugural, Lincoln insisted that the Union, as established under the Constitution, was perpetual. He added that even if the Constitution were to be construed as a simple contract among states, it could not be rescinded without an agreement of all of the states. Thus, the Union was unbroken, and secession legally impossible.

Lincoln also emphasized his constitutional responsibility to "see that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all states" — including those that had seceded. To that end, he pledged to "hold, occupy, and possess the property belonging to the government" in the South, including Fort Sumter in Charleston, S.C., which was under threat of Confederate attack.

The president was less confrontational on slavery.

From a contemporary standpoint, Lincoln's promise not to interfere with slavery was not only a constitutional necessity, but a matter of political expediency. Although he personally opposed the institution, Lincoln understood that he had not been elected on an abolitionist platform.

To avoid alienating the South, Lincoln's first inaugural avoided any mention of the Republican platform, which condemned all efforts to reopen the African slave trade and denied the authority of Congress to legalize slavery in the territories.

Instead, he stated that he had no objection to a proposed constitutional amendment that would "protect slavery in those States where it already existed, and assure to each state the right to establish or repudiate it."

In addition, Lincoln indicated his willingness to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, as long as free blacks were protected from kidnapping and being illegally sold into slavery. He made these concessions because he understood that a president who defied public opinion could lose his capacity to lead altogether. And he realized that slavery was also an inflammatory issue for most Northern whites who feared that emancipation would trigger a mass migration of former slaves into the North, where they would compete for white jobs.

Near the close of the first inaugural, Lincoln assured the rebellious states that the federal government would never initiate any



This portrait of Abraham Lincoln by Christopher S. German was taken two days before the president-elect left Illinois for his first inauguration in Washington.

conflict with them. Instead, he artfully placed the "momentous issue of civil war" in the "hands of his dissatisfied fellow countrymen" while reasserting his vow to "preserve, protect and defend the government." It was a shrewd ploy to win the support of the North if a war should come.

Until the final draft, the first inaugural had ended with a question for the South: "Shall it be peace or the sword?" But Secretary of State William Seward suggested that the wording broke with the spirit of reconciliation that characterized the rest of the speech. As a result, Lincoln moderated his tone dramatically, closing with the impassioned plea:

"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 battlefield 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."

Lincoln's plea for reconciliation failed to prevent the bloody Civil War, but the first inaugural served as an important benchmark in his evolution as a president.

During the war, Lincoln's greatest challenge was balancing his personal opposition to slavery and his fidelity to the Constitution. He could not distance himself from his belief that slavery was a grave injustice. As the number of Union casualties mounted, Lincoln began to consider the "Will of God" in the great conflict. And, on New Year's Day 1863, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation as "an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution upon military necessity."

Lincoln had made the abolition of slavery just as important as preserving the Union. In so doing he not only changed the meaning of the Civil War, but amended the Constitution to complement his unshakable conviction that all Americans, regardless of race, should be free.

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