Book Review

Every Drop of Blood: The Momentous Second Inauguration of Abraham Lincoln

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Edward Achorn, Atlantic Monthly Press, 416 pages

Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address is counted as one of his most memorable speeches. Containing just 700 words, it is inscribed in stone in the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, along with the Gettysburg Address.

The Second Inaugural Address was unique in being the first Lincoln speech that condemned slavery as an unmitigated evil. It brought to an end decades in which the question of slavery had been the subject of repeated attempts at compromise aimed at establishing a *modus vivendi* between the slaveholding South and the North.

A new book by Providence, Rhode Island, journalist Edward Achorn traces the events surrounding Lincoln's second inauguration and follows several side stories relating to the lives of African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass, assassin John Wilkes Booth, and poet Walt Whitman.

A prologue provides some historical stage-setting. In early March 1865, the American Civil War was nearing its end. After four years of unparalleled bloodshed, the Confederacy was in its final weeks. Union General Sherman's troops were marching north through the Carolinas, while Grant's army held a tight grip on Confederate General Lee's dwindling forces defending Richmond.

The war triggered by the secession of the Southern states had been originally waged only to preserve the union. It had, through remorseless logic, evolved into a revolutionary struggle against the system of chattel slavery. Hundreds of thousands of freed slaves had been armed to fight the Confederacy, and in January 1865, the US Congress completed passage of the 13th Amendment banning slavery.

In the summer of 1864, as the war entered a phase of attrition, it appeared that Lincoln might lose the presidential election to former Union General George McClellan, who favored peace with the Confederacy and the preservation of slavery. The Democratic campaign was the most racist in US history, with lurid claims that white women would be forced into unions with African Americans. Lincoln, however, stood steadfastly behind the Emancipation Proclamation and the goal of ending slavery.

The capture of Atlanta by General William Tecumseh Sherman in September helped shift the popular mood, and Lincoln won re-election by a decisive margin, propelled by the votes of Union soldiers.

The import of the struggle in America was recognized throughout the world. Achorn does not mention it, but on Lincoln's re-election Karl Marx, on behalf of the First International Workingmen's Association, sent congratulations to Lincoln. "They consider it an earnest of the epoch to come that it fell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class, to lead his country through the matchless struggle for the rescue of an enchained race and the reconstruction of a social world."

Now the Confederacy was nearing collapse and the end seemed near. The question of what would become of the freed slaves loomed large. The Second Inaugural signaled the completion of a major shift on the part of Lincoln, and public opinion more broadly, against slavery and toward accepting African Americans as citizens.

The Second Inaugural speech is among the most eloquent political addresses in the English language. Clothed in biblical allusions, the speech contains these immortal words:

"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 bond-man'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 still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.'"

Prior to this soaring passage, Lincoln's speech had provided a sharp exposition of the role of slavery in causing the Civil War. It deserves to be read in its entirety.

Achorn makes a careful and, in my view, sensitive and moving analysis of Lincoln's extraordinary speech. Achorn shows that this dark and troubling speech, in which there was not a trace of self-congratulating triumphalism, was the work of a man who had thought deeply about the nation's relation to its history and the inescapable claims of the past upon the present. It was a damning and unanswerable indictment of slavery—a crime rooted in historical circumstances, which could not be expiated except through the shedding of blood on a massive scale.

The author concentrates on Lincoln's citations from the Bible, but he does not do so to claim Lincoln for religion. Though he does not refer to Melville, one cannot avoid thinking that Lincoln had carefully read and re-read the novelist's masterpiece, *Moby Dick*. There is a haunting passage, from Ahab's speech to Starbuck, which may have served as inspiration for Lincoln:

"Ahab is forever Ahab, man. This whole act's immutably decreed. 'Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fates' lieutenant; I act under orders."

Lincoln, somewhat like Ahab, felt that he was acting under the compulsion of forces that no individual can resist.

Lincoln, the materialist who (according to William Herndon) had studied Feuerbach, had a profound sense of the force of historical

circumstances, which determine actions and overwhelm motives. As he wrote on another occasion: “I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.”

The book is fairly wide-ranging and follows a number of different events and actors.

The author devotes one chapter to Sherman’s march through the Carolinas, which placed Lee’s army in the vice between Ulysses S. Grant in the north and Sherman in the south. With a flair for the theatrical, Sherman arranged to explode the first cannon used to fire on Fort Sumter to coincide with Lincoln taking the oath of office.

In discussing Sherman’s role, the author places a somewhat one-sided emphasis on the destruction visited on the slave-owning oligarchy by the Union army in South Carolina. The accounts of a few of the wealthy ladies of the South are presented as “the Southern” point of view, largely excluding the views of slaves and ignoring entirely the mass of poor whites who had no slaves or plantations, indeed no stake in slavery.

Some of the most interesting passages of the book deal with the changing attitudes of Frederick Douglass toward Lincoln. Always an opponent of slavery, Lincoln was by no means an abolitionist and sought only to halt the spread of slavery into new areas.

Douglass’s first face-to-face meeting with Lincoln was at the White House in August 1863. As the author notes, he got in immediately even though he did not have an appointment. Douglass later remarked, “In his company I was never in any way reminded of my humble origin, or my unpopular color.” When asked by Lincoln his views on the political and military situation, Douglass criticized Lincoln for what he felt was the president’s “tardy, hesitating, vacillating policy.” Lincoln replied that he might seem slow but did not vacillate. “I think it cannot be shown that when I have once taken a position, I have ever retreated from it.”

At their second meeting, in August 1864, Lincoln warned Douglass that he might lose the upcoming election. He asked Douglass to help encourage as many slaves as possible to seek protection behind Union lines so they would be free after the war was over. Douglass recalled, “What he said on this day showed a deeper moral conviction against slavery than I had ever seen before in anything spoken or written by him.”

Years later, Douglass recalled that, measured by the perspective of abolitionists, Lincoln might have seemed “tardy.” But, he added, “Measure him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult”; Lincoln was “swift, zealous, radical and determined.”

This view of Lincoln contradicts the recent attempts by the *New York Times* and its 1619 Project to present a racialized view of US history, which presents Lincoln as just another white racist president uninterested in the fate of the slaves, and denies the enormous, revolutionary significance of the American Civil War.

As Douglass said in a speech in January 1864 at Cooper Union In New York, the world had never seen a “nobler or grander war than that which the loyal people of this country are now waging against the slaveholding rebels. The blow we strike is not merely to free a country or a continent but the whole world from slavery—for when slavery falls here, it will fall everywhere.”

Not surprisingly, Lincoln’s Second Inaugural speech evoked sharply polarized views. The pro-Democratic *Chicago Times* said it did not seem possible Lincoln could produce “a paper so slip shod, so loose jointed, so puerile not only in literary construction, but in its ideas, its sentiments, its grasp.”

On the other hand, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote that it was noteworthy for its brevity and “still more remarkable for its simplicity, force, clearness of style, and its nobleness of spirit. It is worthy of the man and the occasion.”

Writing to a supporter, Lincoln said he expected the Second Inaugural “to wear as well as—perhaps better than—anything I have produced; but I believe it is not immediately popular.”

Charles Francis Adams Jr., the son of the US ambassador to Britain, called Lincoln one of the “wonders of the ages” and he thought the speech “the historical keynote of the war.”

At the reception following the inauguration, Douglass was determined to shake hands with Lincoln, despite the efforts by security to bar him because of his race. He finally managed to get inside with the help of an unnamed member of Congress who recognized him. Lincoln insisted on pausing to ask Douglass what he thought of the inauguration speech. That was a “sacred effort,” Douglass replied.

Achorn concludes his book with an epilogue recounting the dark events at Ford’s Theatre and the assassination of Lincoln. Shadowing Lincoln throughout the time of the inauguration, Booth had long plotted to kidnap the president. His plan later turned into a murder plot after he learned Lincoln favored giving the vote to at least some freed slaves.

The assassination of Lincoln put Vice President Andrew Johnson in charge. Johnson’s drunken, incoherent speech at the inauguration is dealt with in some detail by Achorn. Johnson was a bitter opponent of civil rights for African Americans and indeed the entire program of radical reconstruction.

It is legitimate to speculate on the impact on Reconstruction if Lincoln had not been killed. But in the long run, the decision by the Northern ruling elites to eventually end Reconstruction and restore power to the remnants of the old Southern slavocracy was determined by their common fear of the emergence of the industrial working class as a powerful social force.

No effort should be criticized for failing to take up every aspect of the immense historical drama that is the American Civil War. Achorn brings a journalist’s eye to stories and “angles” surrounding Lincoln’s second inauguration. Such detail can only enrich the Civil War’s revolutionary significance, so beautifully articulated by Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address.