

Abraham Lincoln and the Text of America

By Clay Jenkinson

Towards the end of his First Inaugural Address, inaudibly delivered on March 4, 1801, Thomas Jefferson reaffirmed the core values of the American republic—trial by jury, freedom of press and religion, subordination of the military to the civilian authority, a restrained and peaceful engagement with the rest of the world, etc.—and then declared that these principles “should be the creed of our political faith—the *text* of civil instruction—the touchstone by which we try the services of those we trust.” Jefferson compressed all of this doctrine into a mere 240 words, freely admitting that he only had time to state the “general principle, but not all its limitations.”

The key word here is *text*. More than any other Founding Father, Jefferson understood that he was self-consciously laying down the *texts* by which America would attempt to define itself, and reclaim itself after periods of errancy. Imbued to the point of saturation with the Enlightenment’s program of reason, human rights, and reform, Jefferson all of his life looked for opportunities to formulate texts that he assumed would be invoked throughout American history to keep the republic on track. The Declaration of Independence (1776) is the most famous of these texts, and the sometimes vicious political struggle of the 1790s—a fight for the soul of America, a debate over the meaning of the American Revolution—can be seen as Jefferson’s attempt to make sure the *text* of the early national period would bind future generations to the right course.

One of the reasons that Jefferson has emerged as the most controversial and most heavily criticized of the Founding Fathers is that he did not let his own compromised and contingent behavior through a long and complex life temper the universalist bromides he trotted out on every opportune occasion. **The gap between his breathtakingly**

articulated golden ideals and his much less ideal actual behavior in the real world bothers us much more than it ever did him. As his most perceptive critic Joseph Ellis has argued, Jefferson was able to keep incompatibilities separated into tidy catalogues in his mind. There is no evidence that Jefferson paid a psychological cost for living with contradictions so pronounced that modern critics cannot avoid the term hypocrisy in describing them. Jefferson would be the first to declare that it is the Enlightenment ideals that really matter anyway, and that his own imperfect behavior should not be used to discredit those ideals, even if it discredits him.

In a sense, all of American history has been a series of “readings” of the preamble of the Declaration of Independence.

In 1848 at Seneca Falls, Elizabeth Cady Stanton famously wondered if “all men” meant all males, indeed all white males, or all men and women? She was pretty sure that Jefferson had written the sentence in a restrictive sense, but even more sure that it was time to reread the word “men” as a generic term for “every human being.” By invoking the Declaration of Independence in a literal, even parodic fashion, Stanton essentially argued that if Jefferson was a serious advocate of human rights, there could be no reason to exclude women from his self-evident truths; if he intended to declare rights for “all white men of a certainly property base,” he was not a revolutionary but a separationist.

More than a century later, Martin Luther King revisited Jefferson by way of a banking metaphor in his famous “I have a dream” speech on the mall in Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963. King wrote,

In a sense we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the

Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check.

Thanks to this ingenious analogy, King managed to make white America seem stingy rather than racist. At the same time he forced them to realize that of course there were sufficient funds in the bank account of American justice, if white people would only reflect on the unbelievable solvency of the American experiment.

The African-American poet Langston Hughes (1902-1967) returned to the paradox of Thomas Jefferson again and again in the course of his career. In "Freedom's Plow," for example, he wrote:

A long time ago, but not too long ago, a man said:

ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL--
ENDOWED BY THEIR CREATOR
WITH CERTAIN UNALIENABLE RIGHTS--
AMONG THESE LIFE, LIBERTY
AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS.

His name was Jefferson. There were slaves then,
But in their hearts the slaves believed him, too,
And silently took for granted
That what he said was also meant for them.

One wonders what Jefferson's slaves thought about all his lofty talk, delivered over a glass of fine Bordeaux, in the finest private house in America, with its fabulous library, its furnishings from London and Paris, Enlightenment texts, according

to a favored slave, strewn all over the master's impeccable carpets.

Possibly the most important rereading of the Declaration of Independence in American history was formulated by Abraham Lincoln in speeches and letters written in the years before he was elected to the Presidency. Lincoln had a lifelong fascination with Jefferson. In a letter of April 6, 1859, Lincoln wrote one of the greatest tributes ever offered to Jefferson: "All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression."

In a sense Lincoln rescued Thomas Jefferson from the defensive states rights doctrine that represents one of the main strains of his constitutional (and, truth be told, race) philosophy, a doctrine that hardened in Jefferson's last years. Southern constitutional theorists and defenders of the South's "peculiar institutions" invoked Jefferson more and more frequently as the sectional crises of the 1830s, 40s, and 50s deepened, to the exclusion of the wider range of his thinking and his unmistakable distaste for slavery.

Lincoln reclaimed Jefferson as a national rather than a southern figure. To do this, he played down the accident of Jefferson's lifelong complicity with slavery (and his complicity in the expansion of slavery into the American West), and focused on the better angel of Jefferson's nature.

Lincoln's logic went something like this. 1. Jefferson wrote the sentence, "all men are created equal." 2. Jefferson either meant this as a universal or a restricted proposition. 3. We cannot be altogether sure that he meant it as a universalist ideal, and his involvement in slavery certainly complicates the problem. 4. But Jefferson more often gravitated to the universalist than the contingent end of the spectrum. 5. In the end, it

doesn't really matter what Jefferson intended, because we cannot go on as an experiment in liberty unless we read Jefferson in the universalist sense. 6. Therefore, it is absolutely essential for the future of the American experiment that we read "all men are created equal" to include African-American slaves and free black men and women. 7. Confederate interpretations of this *text* may perhaps have historical validity, but they are no longer legitimate readings. 8 America's project is to work towards the realization of the universalist implications of the Founder's texts, and restrictive readings have brought the country to constitutional collapse and fratricidal war. 9. In other words, restrictive readings of the key text of American history are unsustainable. 10. The phrase, "all men are created equal," either means everything or it means nothing. 11. We cannot go on unless we realize that from now on it has to mean everything.

Before the Civil War, most Americans including at times Jefferson himself were willing to live in the interstices between the universalist ideals of the Declaration of Independence and its more mundane usefulness as a justification for revolution. It's one of the most interesting questions in American history—what did Jefferson really mean when he formulated that sentence? If a casuist had asked him point blank what his most famous sentence would mean, now or eventually, for African-Americans, what would he have replied? Would he swallow hard and say, yes, that's self-evident or would he have backed away into a textual reading closer to "all white males of a certain property base"? In my view, this can never be determined. This, in fact, is the particular genius of Jefferson and the source of greatest frustration to scholars, biographers, and informed citizens. If he meant the proposition universally, how could he not only learn to live with slavery, but help to perpetuate it in a way that inevitably brought on the Civil War? If he was just striking an Enlightenment pose to justify the American declaration of independence, then in what sense is he really the "Apostle of Liberty" we have etched onto the walls of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., or the granite mountain in South Dakota?

Most southerners and some scholars, then and now, have argued that the Civil War was really about constitutional questions: state's rights, the Constitution's explicit protections of slavery, the Jeffersonian distinction between the few truly national questions and the majority of concerns that are best suited to a state and local resolution.

Even Abraham Lincoln tried to make union the argument as long as possible. As late as August 22, 1862, in response to an abolitionist editorial by Horace Greeley of the New York Tribune, Lincoln wrote:

If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union.

Few Presidents grow in office. Abraham Lincoln grew perhaps more than any other President in American history between his first and second inaugurations. At some point it came to him that the text quoted above, his response to Horace Greeley, was a temporary political expedient that might have held its validity if the war had ended quickly before so much blood and treasure had been spilled. In other words, the moral implications of the American tragedy that unfolded between Fort Sumter and the Battle of Atlanta overwhelmed and invalidated the master narrative that Lincoln conceived—at the beginning of the crisis—as a "solution" to the problem of America: a union partly slave and partly free in which slavery was grandfathered into the existing slave states but carefully excluded from new territories in the West. By the time of his second inauguration, Lincoln had come to realize that slavery and union were no longer compatible, that slavery made union impossible in ways that went beyond the sectional arguments that had prevailed before the great war.

Lincoln's second inauguration proved to be a day of remarkable drama. His new Vice President

Andrew Johnson humiliated himself and those around him by delivering a rambling, mawkish, disingenuously “plebian” address inside the Capitol, the dome of which was now at last finished, before Lincoln delivered his famous words outside. Johnson’s speech was so incoherent, emotionally fulsome, and self-depreciating that everyone assumed—correctly--that he had been drinking.

That night a second and much more dramatic incident occurred. The nation’s leading African-American human rights activist Frederick Douglass had the temerity to present himself as the sole African-American among the 5000 citizens who paraded through the White House to shake the hands of the President and First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln. He was barred entry. Douglass and Lincoln were good friends. “On reaching the door,” Douglass later wrote, “two policemen stationed there took me rudely by the arm and ordered me to stand back, for their directions were to admit no persons of my color.” Douglass assured the security officers that “no such order could have emanated from President Lincoln.” The policemen refused to budge. Fortunately, an unidentified gentleman carried Douglass’ plea to the President. The word came back to admit the guest.

Douglass walked into the East Room where the tall Lincoln towered over a sea of well-wishers. Douglass tells the story perfectly. “Recognizing me, even before I reached him, he exclaimed, so that all around could hear him, ‘Here comes my friend Douglass.’ Taking me by the hand, he said, ‘I am glad to see you. I saw you in the crowd to-day, listening to my inaugural address; how did you like it?’” Douglass did not wish to be the center of so much attention and he attempted to withdraw as quickly as protocol permitted. Lincoln would not permit it. “You must stop a little, Douglass,” said the President of the United States in a voice that could be heard throughout the room. “There is no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours. I want to know what you think of it.”

This is unquestionably one of the greatest moments in American history. Among other things, it exhibits the courage and greatness of Abraham Lincoln, who—like his hero Jefferson—knew that

the great texts of the American experiment are not all mediated by way of pen and paper. This text also signified to anyone who was listening that the victory of the union forces in the war was going to signify more than a triumph of union over disunion. The meaning of the war had changed. It now meant that the soaring ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the rights enshrined in the Constitution were now going in some meaningful way to be applied to black Americans. It was this thought, much more than the defeat of the Confederate armies, that propelled John Wilkes Booth to Ford’s Theater on April 15, 1865. One month and eleven days later, Abraham Lincoln would be dead.

The Address

The literature critic Harold Bloom has argued that all great literature is uncanny—by which he means improbable, strange, mysterious, and in some essential and irreducible way unfathomable. According to Bloom, this common essence, this uncanniness, marks the difference between the large number of very good works of art and that select club of works—like the Mona Lisa, like Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, like *Hamlet*—that represent the supreme works of world art.

Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address definitely belongs to the second category. It is regarded by most historians as the finest inaugural address in American history. It is one of the handful of indispensable documents in American history. Like some of Jefferson’s letters and state papers, it transcends political discourse and finds its ways into anthologies of American literature.

It is certainly uncanny.

Here is a paragraph-by-paragraph paraphrase of the 701 words of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address.

One: There is not much need for an “extended address” today. Four years ago I outlined my sense of the crisis we were in, and I have been making speeches and issuing declarations continuously since then, so there is not much that I could say that

you don't already know. You all know the course of the war as well as I.

Two: When I spoke here four years ago, we did not know whether the crisis would lead to war. Both sides said they wanted to avoid war, but the South “would make war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would accept war rather than let it perish.”

Three: When we clear away all the rhetoric, we all know deep down that the war was somehow about slavery. The South wanted to extend slavery into the West. The North sought to contain slavery in the existing slave states. Neither side anticipated that the war would engulf America as it has or go on as long as it has. The war has overwhelmed America and now it has become clear that slavery cannot survive the war. We are essentially the same people, northerners and southerners, and we read the same sacred text and pray to the same God. It would appear that the South has misread the Bible, but the key text in the Bible admonishes us not to judge others even when it seems right to do so.

Four: The North and the South have each been praying for divine aid, but God hasn't answered either the prayers of the North or the South in the way we might have each expected. So apparently we cannot any longer read slavery as a simple black vs. white, good vs. evil, freedom vs. slavery question. God clearly maintains a more complex interpretation of this conflict than we do. Maybe it works like this: America's complicity (North and South) in slavery has offended God. Instead of removing the scourge of slavery in some benign way, God has visited this terrible war on us. We must not grumble about God's punishment, however much we are all suffering. Yes, we pray that God will cease to punish us, but it must not be ruled out, given the catastrophe that has befallen us, that God may continue the war endlessly until the full measure of his wrath and justice have been delivered. Even if this is true, we must find a way to regard this as providential.

Five: So let us finish the narrative with as much humility and Christian charity as possible. And let us remember that when this awful tragedy ends, we

are still going to have to find a way to live together in a true union, so we need to start reaching out to each other to repair the psychological damage that this catastrophe has brought to us.

By the time of the Second Inaugural Address, it was becoming clear that the union forces were going to win the war. Now Lincoln saw fit for the first time explicitly to cut through the constitutional and even the “inviolability of the union” arguments. With beautiful understatement he writes that—whatever their public arguments--all Americans in fact knew that slavery “was, somehow, the cause of the war.”

Lincoln's obsession had always been the preservation of the union, and though he had come to realize that the meaning of the war was now bigger than the union, on this occasion, with the end of the war on the horizon, he gave his best energies to a meditation on what union might mean after so devastating a national crisis. Given his concern about how a nation so torn could actually “bind up . . . [its] wounds,” Lincoln's strategy in the speech was to make the war seem as “nonpartisan” as possible, to make it seem like a common national calamity, like a hurricane or an earthquake, not one with a winner and a loser. And yet because it was a war he was talking about, indeed a civil war, not a legislative debate or an election, he could not talk honestly about the future without insisting firmly but in the most unrighteous manner possible, that the right side was winning and that the South, not the North, had brought on the crisis. Listen to the care with which he dances this dance: “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.” Both sides said they wanted to avoid war, but the South *made* war and the North (sigh) *accepted* it.

The restraint in the text is everywhere palpable. Lincoln says the “progress of our arms” has been “reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all,” and yet he does not permit himself to predict the victory that was clear to all rational observers. He will not permit himself to gloat.

Lincoln has four arguments to make about slavery in the Second Inaugural Address. First, the war is a complicated event, but we all know, both North and South, that somehow at its core it is about slavery. Second, nobody could have predicted at the start of the conflict that slavery might have to end for the war to end. But that now appears to be the case. Third, however much we might wish to withhold judgment, the South's moral position is a problematic one, that the slaveholders can sincerely believe that God could support a people who exacts labor from another man against his will. Fourth, slavery is an American, not just a southern, offence against God.

Three things make the Second Inaugural Address a work of genius.

First, it is brief. Most inaugural addresses come in at somewhere between 1500 and 3000 words. The longest in American history was delivered by William Henry Harrison on March 4, 1841. It was a whopping 8,445 words. It may be said literally to have cost Harrison his life, for he died one month later of pneumonia. The shortest was George Washington's second inaugural address, delivered on March 4, 1793. It was just 135 words long, and it effectively said, at the end of a very long and very distinguished career as statesman and war hero, I believe I need no further introduction. On March 4, 1865, Lincoln delivered the third shortest inaugural address in American history. The second shortest was Franklin Delano Roosevelt's fourth, January 20, 1945: 559 words.

Because it is so brief and spare, it does not permit the reader to get distracted on subordinate theses or collateral thoughts. You cannot read the Second Inaugural Address without facing Lincoln's core argument. Whatever it was at the beginning, the war is now about slavery. The war is bigger in every way than anybody could ever have conceived. When the war ends we are going to be a ravaged people and things can never again be the same in America. But we are going to be a union after all, and we are going to have to find a way to live together. That is going to take a level of Christ-like charity never before witnessed in America, but

without mercy, charity, and generosity of spirit, we cannot go on.

The second source of its genius is the way that it combines a haunting melancholy simplicity, almost starkness, with a muted but unmistakable hopefulness. It's almost impossible to assess the tone of the address in anything like a definitive analysis. Because there are so few rhetorical flourishes in the speech, it has the feel of profound authenticity, as if Lincoln were simply saying what he had on his mind without making any attempt to shape his discourse. This is, of course, untrue, but the effect is to give the speech a sense of candor that a more rhetorically sophisticated speech would fail to deliver. It's as if Lincoln is saying, there is no room for Ciceronian rhetoric in this national calamity. Things are very bad and they may get worse. Even the pending victory by Union forces is not necessarily good news, unless we all can agree on the meaning of the text. "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we wish," represents one of the few rhetorical flourishes in the speech. "Fondly" is perfectly chosen to signify Lincoln's hope that the war might soon end as well as his realization that he may be deluded. It is a word one would expect to be associated with a lover or a child, not a bloody war. It is a word that emanates from grief, as from a parent who has just lost a child. It is one of the great words of the address. It is a perfect example of the uncanniness at the center of Lincoln's greatness.

Third, the Second Inaugural Address is profoundly Biblical. The doctrine of the speech is clearly Biblical, though not in anything like a simple way. So too is the language. To an extent greater than any other President, including Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln mediated his pronouncements—that is, gave them rhetorical shape—through his reading. Lincoln's reading was wide and eclectic, but Shakespeare and the Bible clearly influenced him most, and shaped his mature prose style. More than any other American writer, Lincoln may be said to have "absorbed" a Biblical rhetoric.

Haunted as he was by the idea of a civil war, aged and furrowed by the immense burden of leadership in such a conflict, and unwilling to produce a

reductionist text in which the North is innocent and good and the South is sinful and evil, Lincoln constructs one of the starkest arguments in American history.

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 still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'

Even though **this is a dark reading of the text of the war, certainly the darkest that any major political figure ever offered**, there is something comforting in it. The suffering may just go on and on, says Lincoln, but there will eventually come an end when the karmic measure shall have been filled. And though the calamity may persist indefinitely, it is in a sense out of our hands, out of human control, and therefore, as with all such calamities, our work is merely to endure.

What Lincoln is essentially arguing, I think, is that the "Civil War" may have begun as a constitutional conflict, or perhaps a sectional conflict, and then it became a war, indeed the worst kind of war, a fratricidal war, but none of those terms quite encompasses the nature of the tragedy that has befallen the United States. None of these terms is quite dramatic enough. Because the war did not end quickly as both sides had arrogantly predicted, it grew beyond the capacity of American political thinkers to understand it, certainly beyond the categories by which American thinkers attempted to contain and understand it.

Just what caused slavery to visit itself on the world is unclear (or unstated) but it is clear to Lincoln that it came because of human "offenses." Slavery, it turns out, is a text that has chapters, a beginning, middle, and end, and up until now the American people have been trying to impose the wrong master narrative on the cataclysm. Since the war was not yet over at the time of Lincoln's address, he leaves open the horrific possibility that the narrative cannot end until some sort of karmic

equilization has been achieved, and in *that* narrative the North is not more innocent than the South, not any less implicated in the assessment and the punishment of the "offenses" that brought the struggle on. It may be, Lincoln says, that God will not have finished the text until he has exacted from the white populations of America, north and south, the exact quantum of blood that the history of slavery has extracted from Africans and African-Americans, and the exact measure of all the gross national product that slaves have contributed to America against their will.

If this is the meaning of the *text* of the Civil War, Lincoln is saying, then North and South are the wrong terms. The story is about the American people and the American experiment, north and south, white and black, abolitionists and bigot, civil philosopher and simple slaveholder. Mankind must finish this bloody journey, must complete the still-unfinished text, and though the Confederacy may be thought to have a special burden to bear in the narrative, it is by no means the culprit in any simplistic sense.

In a broader Biblical sense, Lincoln is essentially wondering if the Old or the New Testament is the right text by which to read the war. Is it *lex talionis* (a tooth for a tooth) or is it a tale of unaccountable forgiveness in the face of seemingly unbearable injury? In other words, Lincoln is asking, is this a New Testament story or an Old Testament story? Or both at once? Perhaps he is saying, let God be the Old Testament figure in this story, but let American (and particularly the victorious north) be the New Testament figure. Hagiographers and many sober biographers have been unable to resist ascribing to Abraham Lincoln Christ-like capacities for forgiveness and redemption. Under that formulation the armies of Grant and Sherman and the severe reconstructionists are God the Father, and Abraham Lincoln is God the Son.

It would be impossible to improve on the Biblical simplicity, the Biblical cadences, and the Biblical sense of weary mercy of Lincoln's peroration:

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.

As with the greatest pronouncements of Jesus, one is left to wonder just how this can be: no malice after the most catastrophic war in American history? A sense of righteousness that at the same time doubts the value of righteousness? To love in the aftermath of the war the very enemies we have done our best to smite in battle, and particularly to mete out charity to the innocent noncombatants whose lives will never be the same. And at the end, in the phrase “lasting peace . . . with all nations,” a brief practical glance at Britain—an industrial nation that was always toying for economic reasons with a formal recognition of the Confederacy and economic aid too—and moreover a tantalizingly brief utopian hint that the Civil War might somehow serve as a text for all of humanity, and not just the United States.

Lincoln was serious that evening in the White House when he asked Frederick Douglass what he thought of the Second Inaugural Address. Douglass,

once he had overcome his self-consciousness and humility in the East Room, assured the President that “that was a sacred effort.”

Lincoln himself characteristically avoided a simple or simplistic reading of his speech. He reckoned to be sure that it was one of his best texts. At the same time, he sensed that the stark and dark karmic argument of the speech must trouble anyone who studied it with care. “Men are not flattered,” he said, “by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them.” Though he did not say so explicitly, he meant here men of both North and South.

Such is the Second Inaugural Address. Though it is possible to unpack it in this way and tease out some of its meanings, every reader who wrestles with the 701 words that Lincoln spoke that day in front of the newly-completed Capitol of the United States, is finally reduced to mere admiration and a sense of the address’ uncanniness. Like all great literature it resists a final textual interpretation. Like a koan, it invites sustained and unconclusive meditation. Like all great literature, it is newly great each time you take the time to read it with rigor, imagination, and a willingness to be left in indeterminacy.

A longer version of this column is posted at www.jeffersonhour.org.