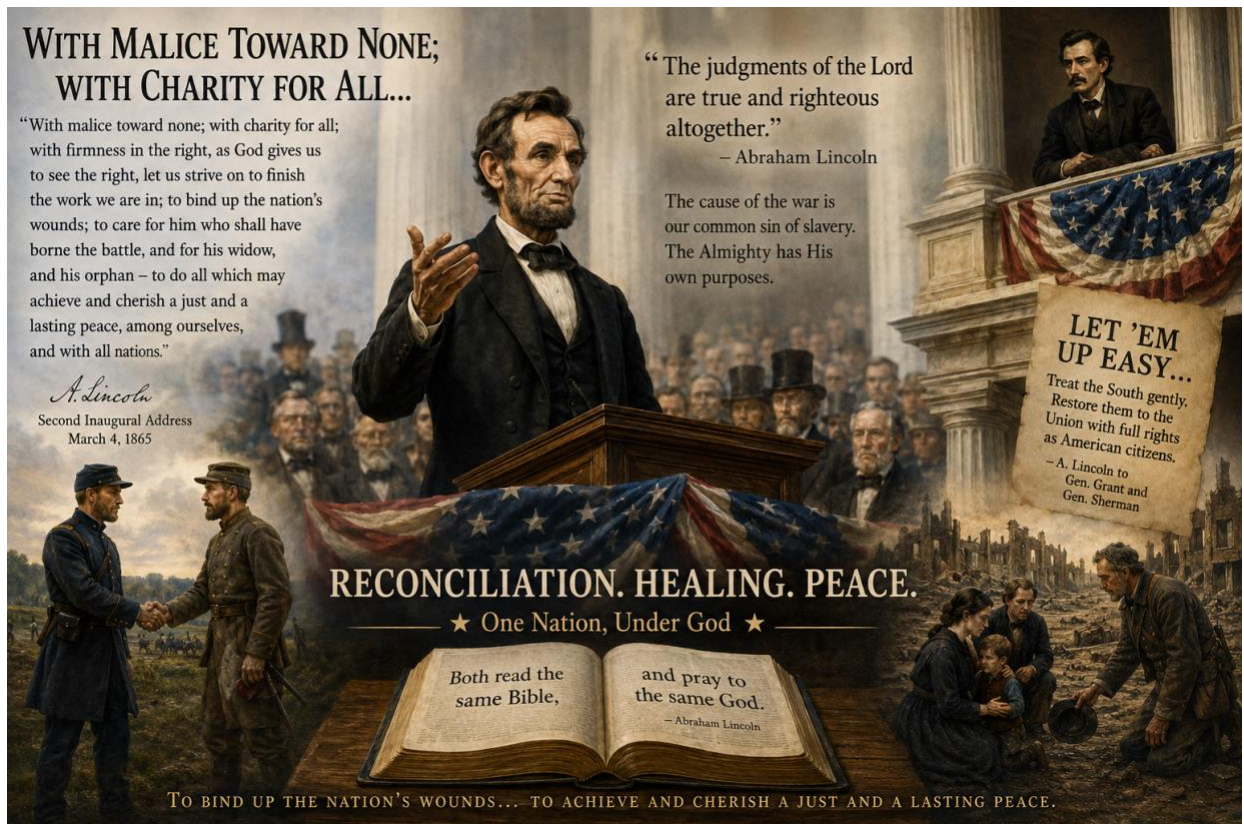




What the Address Was About

Lincoln's second inaugural address was about reconciliation and knitting back together a nation that had fallen into an abyss of hatred and killing - all of which somehow had some higher meaning in the plans of the Almighty. Lincoln felt that God chose to cleanse our country of the horrible sin of slavery through the suffering and destruction of the Civil War. If his eager audience expected Lincoln to gloat over the impending collapse of the Confederacy, they must have been disappointed.

What the crowd heard in Lincoln's address was a mixture of spirituality and politics. Lincoln urged sympathy and understanding of the nation's defeated and alienated citizens in the South. Lincoln insisted that there "were no unbridgeable differences: Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in (holding slaves); but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes."

Slavery- God's Punishment and The Real Cause of the Civil War

Lincoln suggested that the cause of the war was the North and the South's common sin of slavery. He continued, "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 250 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, so as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether." [1]

"With Malice Towards None..."

Abraham Lincoln had a rare wisdom and a temperament towards displaying kindness towards those who opposed him. (Many in his own cabinet were political rivals and political enemies who hated him; yet he employed them towards the end of winning the war.) In that vein, Lincoln issued the following plea to the soon-to-be-reunited country:

"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 a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."

Stephen Douglas Got the Message

Senator Stephen Douglas, Lincoln's old political foe from Illinois, was present, and he, too, understood Lincoln's views. As Lincoln uttered his biblical quote, "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether," Douglas understood: "I had a lump in my throat," wrote Douglas, "In one striking sentence Lincoln had answered all objections to his prolonging the way. He had declared it God's punishment on a guilty land, North and South alike, for the offense of slavery. How close he was to John Brown's vision! How close he was to the colored man who had heard in the roaring of the guns at Bull Run, Shiloh, and Antietam God's angry voice announcing that Judgment Day was at Hand!" [2]

Vindictive Radicals Did Not...

There were those in the North, though, who did not share Lincoln's conciliatory attitude. Radical Republicans in both Houses of Congress were eager to extract vengeance on the soon-to-be-defeated South. This vindictiveness and desire for revenge would result in a constitutional confrontation of the first magnitude with Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson. Lincoln, in the meantime, had a higher vision of in his hopes that we could "bind up the nation's wounds."

“Let ‘em Up Easy...”

The war would, for all intents and purposes, end the following month. In anticipation of the Union victory, Lincoln would instruct Generals Grant and Sherman that he wanted the South treated gently and returned to the Union with full rights as American citizens. Using a wrestling metaphor from his past, Lincoln wanted to "let 'em up easy." This policy was carried out faithfully by Grant and his subordinate generals, who would offer generous and salutary peace terms to the defeated Southern armies and probably prevented the morphing of the Civil War into an extended guerrilla war.

Lincoln's second inaugural address, then, was a plea for his countrymen to put the past behind them, to heal the wounds and destruction of a Civil War that no one expected would be so vicious and lengthy. Unfortunately, there were Southern sympathizers who could not abide this reconciliation. Present at the inauguration and watching from a railed balcony to above and to the right of the President's lectern was John Wilkes Booth.

Sources:

[1] Goodwin, Doris Kearns, "Team of Rivals," Simon and Shuster, New York: 2005, p. 697-699.

[2] Oates, Stephen B., "The Whirlwind of War, Voices from the Storm, 1861-1865, p. 646