

Tom Braden

Why Lincoln's 2d Inaugural Might Embarrass Mr. Nixon

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LIKE A LOT of other former school-boys who can't quite remember, I scurried to the text to find out why Abraham Lincoln's second Inaugural Address was thought by some at the White House to be a possible source of "embarrassment" to President Nixon at inaugural time. "It might embarrass the President" was the explanation given to composer Vincent Persichetti as the reason for canceling a 12-minute composition he had written for the inaugural ceremonies, using the Lincoln speech as text.

Why would it be embarrassing? Because the Lincoln speech is so good that nobody has ever equalled it? Because a comparison with Lincoln is embarrassing to normal men? These are not reasons which might come readily to the minds of White House assistants these days. They have trained themselves to think of Mr. Nixon in terms that will bear comparison with anybody. So, I think you have to go to the text of the Lincoln speech to see why somebody close to the President vetoed Mr. Persichetti's composition.

Lincoln's second inaugural, which he expected "to wear as well—perhaps better—than anything I have produced," was entirely about war. "At this second appearing to take the oath of the presidential office, there is less occasion for an extended address than at the first," he began.

"Then a statement somewhat in detail of the course to pursue seemed very fitting and proper; now at the expiration of four years, during which public declarations have constantly been called forth concerning every point and place of the great contest which still absorbs attention and engrosses the energies of the nation, little that is new could be presented. The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself. It is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With a high hope for the fu-

ture, no prediction in that regard is ventured."

THE COMPARISON of "Mr. Lincoln's war," as some people then called it, with Mr. Nixon's war is surely embarrassing, and it is heartening that someone around the White House is still possessed of sufficient discernment to note it. But Mr. Lincoln then turns to the purpose for which the war is being fought. The embarrassment becomes a little greater.

Mr. Lincoln began his statement with a quotation: "Woe unto the world because of offenses, for it needs be that offense come; but woe unto that man by whom the offense cometh."

He proceeded: "If we shall suppose American slavery one of those offenses, which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove and that He gives to both north and south this terrible war, as was due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern that there is a departure from those divine attributes which believers in the living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may pass away; yet if it be God's will that it continue until the wealth piled by bondsmen by 250 years unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid with another drawn with the sword, as was said 3,000 years ago, so still it must be said that judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

So Mr. Lincoln defines as to the purpose of his war and the judgment of history is that it was worth the struggle. The embarrassment is that Mr. Nixon cannot define the purpose of the war he has been waging any more than his predecessor could define it before him. Eight years. And all those bodies. For what? The White House assistant is right. It is embarrassing.