The nation’s tribute to Abraham Lincoln is enshrined in the Lincoln Memorial, where visitors encounter an enormous statue of the sitting president posed as a wise but brooding and saddened figure. Flanking the statue are inscriptions of the two rhetorical masterpieces he voiced during the Civil War—the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural. Together those orations have awed historians for their concision, majesty, poetry, and power; they nearly always have been linked together as the ultimate expressions of Northern purpose in the war between the states. For Allan Nevins, the Gettysburg Address was an “immortal speech,” a “prose-poem,” while for Frank Williams it was “not only [Lincoln’s] best work but also the most eloquent statement of the American political dream” and, according to Douglas O. Wilson, the speech was the most “stunning act of statesmanship in our history;” Garry Wills believed that the short oration was so well phrased that the “Civil War is, to most Americans, what Lincoln wanted it to mean.” The Second Inaugural, depending on the author, ranks only slightly second to the Gettysburg Address. In Kenneth M. Stampp’s opinion, the Second Inaugural “embrac[ed] the cause of the slave,” and all authors agree that it was the most religious of Lincoln’s speeches, virtually a sermon on the coming of the war, God’s judgment on the institution of slavery, and the duty of a Christian people to pursue and obtain a peace fashioned not by vengeance but by reconciliation.1


The Lost Cause of the North: A Reflection on Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural

JAMES L. HUSTON
In the past two decades, an astounding number of works on Abraham Lincoln have been published, and authors are now devoting entire books to his individual speeches, with the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural attracting the lion’s share of that scholarship. But I disagree with those who believe that the Gettysburg Address is superior to the Second Inaugural Address. In terms of themes the Second Inaugural supersedes the Gettysburg Address and reduces it to secondary importance. In fact, the Gettysburg Address can be seen as the North’s Lost Cause.

Lost Cause is the label for the literature justifying the Confederates’ attempt to create a new nation by separating from the federal Union and ultimately sacrificing so many of their sons in a losing war. Central tenets of the Lost Cause are the depiction of Robert E. Lee as a saint due to his courtly manners and elegant battle maneuvers; the heroism of the common Southern soldier; the perfidy of James Longstreet; the brutality of Yankees; and the military clumsiness of the ultimate victorious general, Ulysses S. Grant. But the military side of the sectional

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collision aside, the importance of the Lost Cause of the South was what Southerners thought they were fighting for. After the war, defeated Confederates dismissed the argument that slavery was at the center of the conflict, denied that the moral question of slavery or its institutional effects had any role in bringing about the war. Instead, Southerners resorted to secession because Northerners and Southerners had become two separate peoples, two separate civilizations that produced two different and antagonist political philosophies: one favoring national consolidation, centralization, and democratic conformity; the other prizing decentralization, individual liberty, and local control of government. For modern Americans, this division postulated by Lost Cause proponents has come down to us as the struggle between Northerners’ embrace of a powerful central government versus Southerners’ love of states’ rights.5

The Gettysburg Address mimics the Southern Lost Cause by seeing the war between the states as a constitutional battle over principles of government—democratic practices versus tyranny by a minority. What ties the two Lost Causes together is that they were both rationalizations of the conflict by an Anglo-American culture that prized governmental forms. Both Lost Causes in their own way tried to excise the role of African Americans and the institution of slavery. As Alexander Saxton has summarized, the United States in the nineteenth century was preeminently a nation pursuing advancement of whites to the detriment of non-Europeans; its politics, diplomacy, economic endeavors, and legal practices embodied a conviction to grant power and status to whites while belittling non-whites.6 And that is why the

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Second Inaugural is so unusual and invalidates both the Southern and the Northern Lost Causes: in it Lincoln recognized the centrality of slavery in the American past and the havoc it produced; in it, Lincoln confessed that the white republic had sinned and was paying the divine penalty.

The select themes Lincoln would embed in the Gettysburg Address emerged from his first presidential arguments against secession. He relentlessly repeated and refined them, striving to find the correct formulation in English that would mentally compel the citizenry to assent to the necessity of the war. By late 1863 his formulation was almost wholly encapsulated in the idea that a republican form of government operates, and can only operate, by the principle of majority rule. Actually, Lincoln used multiple arguments against secession in his first months as president, distilling them over two years until he got to the largely monolithic explanation he presented at Gettysburg.

The new president refused to acknowledge the secession of seven slaveholding states, and his reasons were laid out in his First Inaugural and then his July 4, 1861, message to Congress. He defined the Union as “perpetual,” that the people not the states formed the Union; that the president had to enforce the laws as his oath required him; that so long as the forms of the Constitution were followed, no state had a legitimate reason to secede; that no Constitution could ever cover all future contingencies, thereby leaving the national legislature to settle some disputes by majority voting; that a republican form of

ciderable literature on the white republic; for examples, see Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Paul Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict during the Mexican-American War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). For an example of how this perspective has been used to reevaluate Civil War military strategy, see Mark E. Neely Jr., *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007). Lerone Bennett Jr. has written a diatribe against Abraham Lincoln as a racist pursuing a dream of white America, a work generally disliked by Lincoln scholars. Bennett’s critique of Lincoln is correct in one essential: Lincoln was not a Garrisonian abolitionist. Rare among Lincoln scholars, Bennett forcefully and with exaggeration mauls Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. But in one area, this article agrees with his assessment: the Gettysburg Address did reflect the concerns of the white republic. Indeed, it is rare to find any commentary at all on the Gettysburg Address by African American leaders such as Frederick Douglass, and in some ways Douglass even chided Lincoln for the views he expressed in the speech. Lerone Bennett Jr., *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln’s White Dream* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 2000), 556–83. On Frederick Douglass, see his speech, “The Mission of the War,” at the Cooper Union Institute, February 13, 1864, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, vol. 3 of *The Civil War, 1861–1865*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1952), 394–95.
government rested entirely on majority voting, and without it the entity would become some form of aristocracy (minority rule); that if allowed, the process of single state separation would promote further separations until the entire nation dissolved; that the essence of secession was anarchy; that slavery was the only real difference between slaveholding states and nonslaveholding ones; and that given the nation’s geography, the problems that would arise from dismemberment would generate frictions leading to future conflicts.7

Four months later Lincoln began his repetition of these claims, arguing that secession “presents to the whole family of man, the question, whether a constitutional republic, or a democracy—a government of the people, by the same people” could maintain itself against internal foes—whether a republic or democracy could allow a minority to “break up their Government, and thus practically put an end to free government upon the earth.” He entered into a long digression on whether the action of Southern slaveholders constituted treason or secession, a question he thought important because it involved the question of moral legitimacy of the action. He then went into a small treatise on states’ rights, when the Union was formed, the meaning of the word “sovereignty,” and the relation of states to the Constitution. He investigated the Confederate Constitution, found it wanting, and then famously declared that the struggle was “essentially a People’s contest,” the side of the Union for a form of government framed by majority rights and recognizing citizen equality that allowed “men” to pursue their happiness without having to struggle under “artificial weights.” What he did not say but implied was that the Confederate States of America was a nation based on the supremacy of a propertied minority, on marked inequality among groups, and on a system of special privileges for some and crushing burdens for others.8

Ultimately Lincoln would focus on representative government and democratic procedures as his major complaint against secession, but his early messages exhibited a scattershot approach to villainizing secession. He used every argument imaginable against the Confederacy. Some of his arguments were irrefutable, although it turns out that he did not make them centerpieces of his oratory and certainly did not include them in the Gettysburg Address. Secession by any rational accounting was illegal, and no mention of states’ rights, the correct founding date of the nation, or whether the states or the people made

the Constitution was required to demonstrate it. Southern defenses of secession, as well as their neo-Confederate ancestors, were, in a purely constitutional sense, illegitimate. But in the final analysis, Lincoln did not use these counterarguments to secession because they lacked the lofty idealism he needed to clothe the Northern war effort.

The first point to be made, although Lincoln did not present it in this order, was that the South Carolina doctrine of state secession was a work of fiction that had no legal standing. Of it Lincoln wrote, “The sophism itself is, that any state of the Union may . . . lawfully, and peacefully, withdraw from the Union, without the consent of the Union, or of any other state.” This idea and the corollary to it that the seceders alone were “the sole judge” of whether conditions merited secession was “too thin to merit any notice.”9 Lincoln was wrong on that point; it needed elaboration. The Union under the Constitution—no reference to the Revolution or to the Articles of Confederation or to states’ rights needed here—was an agreement among the states (or the peoples in the states) about the rules under which they would all live (one might say “compact” if the term were not so laden with other connotations). For any rule to be observed, consent of all the members had to be obtained. Southern states might have claimed that their rule about individual state secession was legal—although whether they did so by state statute prior to November 6, 1860, is dubious—but the Northern states never did. It therefore had no legal standing; there was no declaration about secession that all the states, or three-fourths of them or two-thirds of Congress or the constitutional writers, had agreed upon. Without consent by the appropriate number of states, the doctrine was invalid. South Carolina’s idea of secession was merely a theory about the Constitution; it had no legal validity until consent by other states elevated it into a rule that all had to obey.10

Lincoln captured the essence of the South Carolina doctrine of secession, but he did not dwell upon it. He said in one key phrase, “They invented an ingenious sophism, which, if conceded, was followed by perfectly logical steps, . . . to the complete destruction of the Union.”

10. The claim by states-rights theorists that secession was a reserved right of the states embodied in the Tenth Amendment to the Constitution rests on the shaky ground that because secession was not explicitly denied by the Constitution it was therefore a reserved right. However, what was explicit about the Constitution was the duty of citizens to obey the Constitution, and without consent of the other citizens (the votes aggregated by states), secession was obvious disobedience to the Constitution and therefore illegal. When seceders justified their actions by a claim to revolution, the whole argument shifted to an entirely different terrain in which legalities simply did not matter.
Southerners, in their maniac desire to remove slavery from any tinkering from nonslaveholders or any policy that endangered the institution, invented constitutional doctrines for certain subjects and then declared them to be the sacred text governing the situation. Thus, Jefferson invented the procedure of nullification; various South Carolinians and John C. Calhoun invented the doctrine that the tariff could never be used for protectionism because it violated the ideal that all actions of the federal government must result in equal burdens and benefits for all the individual states; Calhoun and others invented the doctrine that the Constitution only permitted Congress to parcel out land in the territories and not prescribe rules for settlers there. Whenever politicians in the Cotton South believed Congressional policy was inimical to their interests, they invented a constitutional interpretation to protect themselves. All these ideas about the Constitution were created well after its formation, and the key element about all of them is that Northerners never consented to them in a formal way.

If the South Carolina doctrine of secession fails from the lack of consent among the contracting parties to its provisions, the absence of consent shows what should have happened but never did. The Constitution writers never put in a provision about how a state could leave the Union. Reasons abound why the founders did not do so, but there are fewer excuses why later generations did not consider the problem and try to solve it. After Jackson’s presidency and the brush with Nullification in 1832–1833, someone in Congress should have pushed for a definition of a process by which a state could leave the Union. No one ever did. This partly explains why in 1861 the question led to war; no generation would stand up and demand that a process for secession be defined and then agreed upon; without it, everyone was left either in confusion or self-righteous arrogance.11

The second strong argument Lincoln gave against secession of the cotton states in March, 1861, involved an inconsistency in his presentation. He famously wrote, “I hold . . . the union of these States is perpetual . . . [N]o government proper, ever had a provision in its organic law for its own termination.” He actually contradicted himself because two paragraphs later he implied how some parts of the Union might disassociate themselves from the rest. “It follows from these views

that no State, upon its own mere motion, can lawfully get out of the Union. . . .” That is the key element: single state secession was illegal and void.12 But states could leave the Union if they had the consent of the other states. How consent might be obtained was left undefined. One certain way a state could leave the Union was by constitutional amendment, a procedure noted by an editor of the New York Times.13 Constitutional amendment implied consent by three-fourths of the states and two-thirds of Congress, and Lincoln would have (or should have) accepted such a fate if that procedure had been used.14 But as states came into the Union by an enabling act of Congress, it could be argued that a simple majority vote of Congress might enable a state to leave. These options were seldom discussed, let alone pursued.15

Lincoln presented a third strong argument laying out the illegality of disunion by a single state, although he seemed to have disliked it. In his first inaugural address, he said, “Again, if the United States be not a government proper, but an association of States in the nature of contract merely, can it, as a contract, be peaceably unmade, by less than all the parties who made it? One party to a contract may violate it—break it, so to speak; but does it not require all to lawfully rescind it?” Perhaps this presentation came too close to the compact theory of the Constitution to suit Lincoln’s tastes, but just as likely he did not


15. For the Lincoln side of the constitutional errors in secessionist doctrine, see Farber, Lincoln’s Constitution; William Lee Miller, President Lincoln: The Duty of a Statesman (New York: Knopf, 2008), chap. 7; for the neo-Confederate alternative, DiLorenzo, Real Lincoln; and Kennedy and Kennedy, Was Jefferson Davis Right? For a defense of Lincoln’s anti-secessionist position based on natural equality, and a rebuke to current libertarian, neo-Confederate writing, see Thomas L. Krannawitter, Vindicating Lincoln: Defending the Politics of Our Greatest President (Lanham, Md.: Rowan & Littlefield, 2008), chaps. 5 and 6. However, the ideas used in the section of this article are not found in most of the writing on secession and Lincoln.
enjoy reducing the Constitution and American nationality to the status of a business contract. There was a good reason why he preferred to think of the Union more in terms of marriage; a marriage implied more emotional commitment than a business contract. The words by which the marriage partners vowed to keep together, which could almost be taken analogous to the Union and the citizens’ commitment to it, were “in good times and bad, in sickness and in health,” are absolutely not put into contracts governing debts and payments over specified time intervals.

Even so the Constitution was, at the very least, as Lincoln said, a contract between the states to obey a set of rules. The Anglo-American law governing contracts was embodied, lawyerlike, in the sanctity of contracts. A responsible person lived up to the conditions listed in the contract, and the contracts only could be altered by the consent of all the contracting parties. If one of the parties to a contract could declare the contract void or alter the conditions solely by that party’s decision, then sanctity of contracts was dead; each party to a contract would violate it as soon as it was in the party’s self-interest to do so, no party had any obligation to live up to the conditions of a contract, and no power existed to enforce a contract.

How the law of contracts made Southern secession illegal should be made clear. States did not “voluntarily” join the Union, and therefore could not voluntarily leave. Rather, all members of the Union had to be voted into the Union, had to obtain the consent of the majority of states already in the Union. In the case of the original eleven states that formed the United States on March 4, 1789, the mutual invitation was the Constitutional Convention when the delegates of all the states agreed that the states that fought the Revolutionary War and had formed the Articles of Confederation should be asked to join. After that, new states were admitted by majority vote of Congress (the single condition being that the new members produced a “republican”

16. Lincoln used a divorce/marriage analogy in his first inaugural address, but his reference to it indicated that the Union had more emotional bonds than did a marriage because of geography; Collected Works, 4: 269.

17. There is a sound reason for avoiding business language in the ideal behind a constitutional union based on consent of the entities joining together. This harkens back to the revolutionary ideal of republicanism and virtuous behavior—giving up self-interested behavior for the benefit of the public good. This had its most famous application in “patriotism”—giving one’s life in combat to protect the nation from aggressors. That idea of people giving up their lives or self-interest for the benefit of others has no place in a standard business contract.

form of government). A state might wish to join the Union (such as Kansas under the Lecompton Constitution), but asking for entry was not the same as obtaining entry; a majority of states already in the Union had to approve newcomers. This becomes the contract by several parties that could not and should not have been broken except by all the parties involved.

Southern radicals cited the election of the Republican presidential nominee, Abraham Lincoln, as justification for secession. But as countless Northerners insisted, including Northern Democrats, no rules of this election were broken; all the legal forms of the Constitution were carried out—there was no violation of the rules of the Constitution, rules to which the Southern states had agreed. Southern politicians had, over the previous forty years, insisted that Northerners live up to the compromises in the Constitution, particularly the Fugitive Slave Law. Now, Northerners replied during the winter of secession, Southerners had to live up to the Constitution by accepting the newly elected president and vice-president. The people of the seven cotton-plantation states absolutely refused. They broke the constitutional contract.

These three arguments together explain how Lincoln derived the conclusion that secession represented “anarchy.” Anarchy meant life without laws or rules, with each individual concocting rules and living by them regardless of their impact on other people. Secessionists demonstrated they would not live by rules, that they would not abide by the terms of a contract mutually agreed upon, and that they would at the slightest hint of any disagreeable outcome demand that the rules be changed to their benefit.

19. Harry V. Jaffa wrote in 2000 that slavery was a nonrepublican institution; New Birth of Freedom, 209.


21. See Huston, Douglas, 181–82. Two points about the Fugitive Slave Law: First, the law was enforced, and all indications are that fugitive slaves were returned in large numbers to the South; Thomas D. Morris, Free Men All: The Personal Liberty Laws of the North, 1780–1861 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); and Stanley W. Campbell, The Slave-Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850–1860 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968). Second, even if the law went unenforced, Southerners had no real beef with the federal government; their problem was with Northern states, which exercised their states’ rights by passing personal liberty laws and interfering with the return of alleged fugitives. There are, as Lincoln indicated, further problems with fashioning the appropriate laws governing runaway slaves; the Constitution pointed out a duty but did not describe a procedure.
Lincoln did not reiterate and elevate this set of arguments against secession, yet these rationales for combating Southern separation—lack of consent of others, no justifiable reason for the action, and the one-sided breaking of contracts—lay behind the outrage Northerners openly displayed toward secessionists. Secessionists demanded mastery of the federal government and of its policies, and when they figured they were in danger of losing that mastery they repudiated covenants, mocked the idea of sanctity of contracts, denied the need to consult anyone else, and left the Union; if they could not win the game they would leave the playing field in a egomaniacal huff. Some Northerners blamed Republican pronouncements on slavery and racial equality for Southern behavior, but almost all Northerners found secessionist behavior illegal and insulting. Northerners were being emasculated and shamed by secessionist behavior, for the essential secessionist position was that the seceders could do whatever they wanted, break any law they wanted, and Northerners would cowardly back down and accept their debasement. It came as a shock to Northerners that in the game of national politics they were never going to be allowed to win; the game had always been rigged, and when for unanticipated reasons the North looked as if it might become victorious, Southern secessionists tore victory from their grasp and openly belittled them. No wonder Northerners exploded in military wrath at the firing on Fort Sumter; the assault on Northern pride had already heated the emotional atmosphere in the North, and then the cannonading of Fort Sumter added physical assault to the list of grievances. Northerners en masse demanded reclamation of their honor. The Northern states, in essence, did not really go to war in April 1861 because of a reasoned argument about republican forms of government and the duties of states and citizens, they went for the emotional reason of justifying their manhood and reclaiming their honor—to prove they could not be bullied.

Lincoln, however, did not publicize or manipulate the sense of shame that drove Northerners to seek vindication of their honor on the battlefield, and he did not emphasize those three irrefutable arguments. The reasons for waging war on the secessionists were not particularly high-minded and inspirational—they were actually vengeful. Rather, he stuck to the abstract idea that secession imper-

iled free government by destroying the principle of majority rule. He put the idea that the Civil War was being fought over the future existence of free government—majority rule rather than minority rule—in his messages to Congress and his foreign correspondence.\(^{23}\)

The penultimate conclusion of Lincoln’s quest for defining the war as a struggle to preserve majority rule and republican government came, of course, at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863. In 272 words Lincoln laid out his interpretation of the meaning of the conflict and hoped to imprint it on the Northern mind. Legions of writers on the Gettysburg Address believed he achieved his objective—and did even more. Some scholars think that the Address was the start of “civil religion” in the United States; others, that it was a reinterpretation of the Constitution that sanctioned the use of governmental power to promote equality instead of restricting the federal government to enhance individual liberty. Others hold that Lincoln smuggled in the Emancipation Proclamation and the promise to promote racial equality by his use of undefined terms (“and dedicated to the proposition that all men were created equal.”) A number of commentators suggest that Lincoln subtly replaced devotion to the Constitution—a distinctly legal document—with allegiance to the Declaration of Independence—a piece of propaganda with an unbounded vision and with no appropriate governmental apparatus. Historians in the first half of the twentieth century saw the Gettysburg Address as the finest expression in English affirming the worth of the political system of democracy. In all these explications, there is more than a little exaggeration. As Barry Schwartz has written, much of this literature is excessive in eking out transcendental significances from the two-minute speech, some authors having created mountains of ideological change from molehills of common Lincolnian ideas—finely crafted ideas, to be sure, but common nonetheless.\(^{24}\)


Another way to read the Gettysburg Address is to emphasize how it embraced older notions, not that that it introduced new ones. The key phrases easily could be understood by people aware of their own history. “Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” That was a reference to the Revolution as the starting point of the nation, and if anyone doubted it, why was there for decades in the United States a celebration on July 4 and never on the day the Constitution went into effect, March 4? And in terms of foreign powers, the United States assembled in Congress was a new nation; foreign nations made treaties with Continental Congress, not with the separate states. No one should doubt that, rhetorically, “liberty” was the goal of the Revolution; in the mob action leading up to the Revolution, the popular cry...
was “Liberty and Property,” and the urban rioters who helped create the revolution called themselves the “Sons of Liberty.”  

The single phrase “a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” has been the lightning rod that has drawn the electrifying bolts of interpretation from both Lincoln’s modern conservative detractors and his admirers. They claim that Lincoln betrayed the original purpose of the Revolution and gave the nation new ideals, but it is dubious whether he was injecting any novelty into the Declaration. Since the time of the Revolution, the individuals who created the new American republic understood precisely that their government was to be republican in character, to be governed by elections and majority rule; they all had a fairly common idea of individual liberty, and for them “equality” meant equality before the law. The great difference between the American and European systems of governance—the true reference point for almost all political discussions—was between aristocracy and republicanism. 

On whether the infant United States had liberty and equality as national ideals, one easily becomes confused when analyzing American domestic political squabbles, especially when controversies invoked concerns about the powers of state governments versus the federal government. That confusion evaporates as soon as one turns to the observations of foreign visitors to the United States. They uniformly called the United States an experiment in living without social orders, with all having equal liberty, and they were obsessed with the existence of equality in America. DeTocqueville’s famous book was precisely on that subject: Democracy in America, and by way of admission, life without aristocracy. The lack of deference in poor people and servants took British visitors aback and often appalled them. More
specifically, they said that the American nation was the proving ground for the egalitarian ideal. One 1848 text urging Britishers to migrate to American lands declared that migrants would find “the truth of that mighty principle on which her Constitution [sic] is founded, ‘all Men are created equal, and are endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable rights—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’” In 1823 the visitor Isaac Holmes wrote that for centuries people had been ruled by princes and grandees, but in “this new empire [U.S.] they have tried without them; and the fundamental basis of their constitution is, that they shall never exist in the country; and it would be treason for any one to attempt to introduce the rule of a monarch.” Another writer, William Hancock, published an 1860 book that explained the idea of equality: “free and equal rights of membership,” which produced in the lower classes “independence of character and demeanour.” This equality of position startled foreigners because they were “accustomed to the obsequious humility of people in a subordinate station at home.” The Scottish visitor Alexander MacKay observed, “The only thing in which the American system is simple is the principle upon which it is based—the political equality of man.” That notion that the American experiment was one of equality permeates the nineteenth-century literature of foreign travelers to the United States. Even James Bryce in the late 1880s, though noting that economic effects were generating more inequality that had existed in the past, discussed the lack of great families and privileged orders—that Americans still sneered at the idea of titles and hereditary aristocracy.27

Given that background, nothing in the Gettysburg Address twists or distorts the experience of the United States. People very much alive to the emancipation question and to the causes of Southern secession might try to read hidden intent into the phrases, but that is, in literary discourse, grafting meanings onto the phrases that do not naturally emanate from the language.

Then Lincoln alluded to his understanding of what the war was

about: Whether a republican form of government that operated by majority rule “can long endure,” a question he had posited many times before November 19, 1863. After praising the dedication of the Union soldiers who fought the battle, he called for the Northern public to follow their example so that the fallen “shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that, government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” The “new birth of freedom” likely referred to a rebirth of faith in the founding idea of the Revolution and the Declaration of Independence, something Lincoln had called for consistently in the 1850s.28

If there was any doubt about Lincoln’s intentions, it was in his use of the word men. Republics operated on majority rule for the citizenry, but not for the whole population; past republics restricted the franchise and public speaking to those who had appropriate qualities of mind and property; the ancient republics permitted slavery, but slaves were not citizens and had no political rights. Lincoln did not define—and neither did the Declaration—what people were included in the term men. That probably led Democrats in 1863 and 1864 to revile the Address because they read into it that Lincoln meant African Americans as well as Europeans. They probably would have preferred the phrase, “of the citizens, by the citizens, and for the citizens.” But overall the Gettysburg Address in 1863 added no new interpretation about the nation’s history and gave no new doctrines at all; it certainly did add a grand poem to the nation’s literature, made all the more unusual because a politician composed it. But any novelties in it came from the grafts placed on it by suspicious partisan minds.29

It is often recognized but sometimes underweighted in assessments of the Gettysburg Address that at the same time Lincoln pushed the interpretation of the war as a struggle to preserve the system of representative government, Northerners also insisted that this was a war that had nothing to do with African Americans. The first resolution of the special session of Congress in July 1861 was the Crittenden-Johnson resolution, passed nearly unanimously, that the conflict was only intended to preserve the Union and not to interfere with property—i.e.,


slavery—in any state. Historians have chronicled in massive detail how, during the first two years of the Lincoln presidency, Northerners forcefully refused to allow African Americans any role in the war and assiduously avoided the question of slavery. William Klingaman’s monograph on Lincoln and emancipation has for its second chapter’s title, “The White Man’s War.” When Jessie Benton Frémont visited Lincoln about his revocation of John C. Frémont’s declaration in Missouri freeing slaves who were the property of active insurgents, Lincoln reportedly replied, “It is a war for a great national object, and the Negro has nothing to do with it.” White Northern soldiers at first deprecated the possibility of blacks enlisting: “We want you damned niggers to keep out of this, this is a white man’s war.” Lincoln said time and time again that the war was about restoration of the Union, and his actions and words have become an academic battleground among those who want to see Lincoln as either a racist forced into emancipation, or an ambivalent racist who wanted above all the preservation of the Union, or a secret emancipationist who was simply waiting for the right moment to produce a coalition strong enough to make emancipation a reality. Phillip Paludan has offered a middle approach: restoration of the Union and emancipation went together, because neither one was possible without the other.30

Though Lincoln presented the Gettysburg Address a little more than one year after his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, his speech nonetheless primarily reflected well-established themes about the fate of representative government. The Gettysburg Address at best only subtly hinted at emancipation, otherwise it was a full and moving expression of the goal of preservation of the Union and the preservation of representative government. And that set of ideas about the war and the form of government were securely anchored in the Northern sentiment that the conflict between the states was a “white man’s war.” The Gettysburg Address and the racial attitudes of Northerners at the start of the conflagration mirrored—and did not contradict—each other. Like the Southern Lost Cause that appeared after the war and that claimed that states’ rights was the source of the conflict while trying to forget or downplay the role of slavery and race, so the Northern Lost Cause—enunciated during the war and imbedded in the Gettysburg Address—tried to claim a rationale for the conflict based on democracy and people’s rights while also downplaying or evading the question of slavery and race. Both Lost Causes were steeped in the Anglo-American tradition of viewing all conflicts as political disputes among white Europeans.31

Some of the assertions made in the North’s Lost Cause require reassessment—in the same fashion as historians have probed into the arguments imbedded in the South’s Lost Cause. The first has to be presented frankly. Lincoln tried throughout his presidency to persuade the public that the cause for which the North fought was
preservation of the representative form of government that operated on majority rule. In truth, he was not solely for preservation of the Union; he was for preservation of the Union that lived up to the creed of majority rule. As Mark E. Neely observes, he had a “carefully crafted nationalism.” One does have to ask, however, how much of that “carefully crafted nationalism” soaked into the Northern public or anyone else. Adam I. P. Smith quotes the *Atlantic Monthly* as stating that the war was fought “for the preservation of our national power and greatness.” That was not the Lincolnian message. One does not find in the plethora of works on nationalism in the twenty-first century the Lincolnian message; one finds instead simple nationalism, a hatred of Southerners, and a desire for economic and military greatness; or, sometimes, one finds what has now become called America’s “civil religion.” As James M. McPherson and James Hogue state, the Union had “transcendent values” about the nation that were “almost . . . a religion.” But religion is emotional and unthinking; Lincoln’s reasons for the war were logical and precisely formulated. In short, how deeply the Northern public believed that the conflict was over representative government may be questioned; it may have been no more than “my country right or wrong” or a European sense of nationalism.

A second principle in the Gettysburg Address and the North’s Lost Cause that must be scrutinized was Lincoln’s legal argument against secession. Indeed, on a purely legal basis, Lincoln’s rejection of secession was complete and irrefutable, but the circumstances of the winter of 1860–1861 may have escaped normal legal boundaries and called for a different analysis. In short, the legal outlook of Lincoln may have been inappropriate, and perhaps he should have paid more attention to the broader situation of a disaffection so deep and rampant in the seven states of the Confederacy that amicable union was no longer


practicable. Modern scholarship, especially since 2000, has been more open to the possibility that Lincoln should have avoided war by allowing the Confederate States of America of March 1861 to depart, while at the same time preserving the essence of republican government. Lincoln and Northern Republicans in general needed to confess that at times states should divide when geographical parts of a nation become vastly dissimilar because of either diverging material interests or mentalities. At the very least, Lincoln is open to criticism on two grounds: he vastly overrated Union sentiment among the nonslaveholders in the slaveholding states, and he adhered too strongly to a “slave-power conspiracy” view of the planter class. He emphasized the illegality of secession without coming to grips with the reality of mass disaffection with the Union, a disaffection that made the Union as constituted in 1860 somewhat impractical. The legalistic vision of Lincoln in 1860–1861 may have been too short-sighted for the situation, at least in terms of obtaining a peaceful resolution and averting the possibility of a terrible war.34

The weakest part of the Gettysburg Address is a bit of nationalism that boastfully claims the importance of the United States to the world: it was the phrase that the purpose of the war was to insure that representative government “shall not perish from the earth.” The libertarian historian Jeffrey Rogers Hummel openly scoffed in 1996 at the idea that representative government depended on the Union being preserved. Whatever the demerits of his book, he has some justification for questioning that assertion. From the beginning, Lincoln continuously framed the outcome of the Civil War in cosmic terms.

34. I do not wish here to outline extensively the alternatives Lincoln had before him and dismissed, but one suggestion is in order. Lincoln could have called upon Congress to reconvene immediately, recognize the Confederacy by statute, then have called for a constitutional convention of the remaining states in the Union to complete the Constitution by creating an amendment outlining a process of state separation. Much literature critical of Lincoln’s handling of the secession crisis has appeared since 2000, in opposition to much of the previous four decades of work praising his actions. I do not include neo-Confederate authors in this category, most of whom seem to operate under the political dictum derived from individualism that whenever a spoiled brat wants to throw a tantrum in public, it is the duty of the mature adults composing the public to let the brat have its way. For modern scholarship questioning Lincoln’s policies in the winter of secession, see Daniel W. Crofts, Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Nelson D. Lankford, Cry Havoc! The Crooked Road to Civil War, 1861 (New York: Penguin Books, 2007); James L. Abrahamson, The Men of Secession and Civil War, 1859–1861 (Wilmington, Del: Scholarly Resources, 2000); Russell McClintock, Lincoln and the Decision for War: The Northern Response to Secession (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).
Yet most historians should—and ought to have—weighed that idea carefully. Most historians would likely argue that representative government arose when the old landholding elite faced challenges from urban populations and manufacturing; in other words, with the birth of a middle class. The Civil War was not going to alter that process in Europe or, later on, in other lands. Certainly defeat of the Union in the Civil War was not going to dethrone representative government in Great Britain, although it might have slowed down its progress. Lincoln’s line, “that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth” is indeed a beautiful sentence, but the reality it depicts is open to skepticism.35

And then there is the question about the accuracy of the wonderful phrase “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” One has to ask what has happened to American democracy in the nearly 150 years since Lincoln pronounced this sentence. For two or three decades after the Civil War, one might argue that the “people” continued to govern the states and the national government. As one moved further into the twentieth century, however, government of, by, and for the people has become less tenable as an accurate description of the processes of Congress. Today, it might be more accurate to say that conflicting economic and ideological interest groups control legislation, not the will of the “people.” The political scientist Theodore Lowi famously denounced that development in the late 1960s and its impact on citizen life by blaming citizen apathy upon the then current political philosophy of “pluralism.”36 Matters have only worsened since his time, and one wonders just how much “democracy” is left in the American democratic experiment.

Lincoln partially repudiated the Gettysburg Address in his Second Inaugural, but he did so not by admitting misjudgments but by omitting its most prominent themes. Historians have attended more in


36. Theodore J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism: The Second Republic of the United States*, 2d ed. (1969; reprint, New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 22–36, 50–51. It should be noted that Lowi marked the end of the First Republic, which can be equated with Lincoln’s time, during the New Deal of the 1930s, when the interest-group (the Second) Republic started to emerge.
recent years to the Second Inaugural and especially to its religious pronouncements, its seeming impersonality, its use of an Old Testament God of judgment in its body that then shifts to a New Testament practice of charity and forgiveness in its last paragraph. Scholars have been impressed with Lincoln’s sense that the both North and South were wrapped up in the sin of slavery and thus both were being punished for having tolerated and participated in the peculiar institution.37 Kenneth M. Stampp has been one of the few historians to have noted how different the Second Inaugural was from the Gettysburg Address. Stampp wrote that Lincoln had come “full circle” in his view of the strife; he started by announcing that the purpose of the war was to restore majority rule and the Union, not to end slavery; but he then ended by viewing the purpose of the war as a means to end slavery while the cause of the Union was “ancillary.”38

Lincoln made a huge leap out of the grip of the white republic’s ideology in the Second Inaugural. The centrality of slavery, but not racism, breathes through the entire document save for the last, and probably most famous, paragraph. What was startling is that form of government was not mentioned at all. Indeed, one could argue from his words that forms of government did not matter—monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, republic, or oligarchy. Slavery when geographically concentrated in one nation would rend that nation in twain regardless of the form of government. His use of the word “somehow” in ascribing to slavery causative powers may be the key to the mysticism Lincoln found in the Civil War. While Lincoln had come to some obvious conclusions about slavery, property rights, race relations, and Southern history, he evidently did not understand the depth of those relations. It was the depth of the relations of slavery to the white populations of the seceding states that made the war so long, so expensive, and so murderous—and Lincoln found himself stumped at the institution’s power.

37. For book-length treatment, consult White, Lincoln’s Greatest Speech and Tackach, Lincoln’s Moral Vision. Shorter treatment is in Carwardine, Lincoln, 240–42; Donald, Lincoln, 565–67; Waldo W. Braden, Abraham Lincoln Public Speaker (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), chap. 7; Einhorn, Lincoln the Orator, 86–90; Rawley, Lincoln and a Nation Worth Fighting For, 207–9; Wills, Lincoln at Gettysburg, 185–89; Briggs, Lincoln’s Speeches Reconsidered, 315–27. Garry Wills has tied the Second Inaugural to Reconstruction policies and the appropriate moral flexibility that Lincoln felt he needed to confront the issues, but much of his explication is in line with the other literature on the speech; Garry Wills, “Lincoln’s Greatest Speech?” Atlantic Monthly 284 (September 1999), 60–70.

The middle portion of the Second Inaugural dealt with divine wrath at the United States for the sin of slavery, and is almost abolitionist in its condemnation of the peculiar institution. Here, in the most religious portion of the speech, Lincoln declared that some force, which he could only describe as a “living God,” had determined slavery was to end, and thus the will of God, or simply fate, pushed the North and South into the war and demanded a human sacrifice necessary for its fall. Interestingly, in this most religious of all American presidential addresses, the reason why slavery had to perish was due less to sinning by transgressing against a religious commandment than by violating a natural law—an enlightenment economic dictum: “It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces, but let us judge not that we be not judged.” Essentially Lincoln agreed with Adam Smith and other free-market economists that a “just” economy was one that operated on consent, not on violence; and slavery was a system in which one group of people obtained wealth by inflicting violence upon others. While Lincoln relied on a biblical expression, “in the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat they bread,” he was putting foremost in American state papers the free-labor ideology; it was in many ways a repetition of what he had said at Alton, Illinois, in his debate against Stephen A. Douglas: “It is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world. . . The one is the common right of humanity and the other the divine right of kings. It is the same principle in whatever shape it develops itself. It is the same spirit that says, ‘You work and toil and earn bread, and I’ll eat it.’ No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle.”39 To atone for this sin against nature—and nature’s God—the war would have to 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 . . .” The cause of the war and its ending was all governed by the institution of slavery; slavery had been a major determinant of the nation’s path through history.

All that was left was to piece together the nation in a fitting manner

so that the wrath of the heavens would not again be visited upon the
nation—to make a just and lasting peace. The last paragraph of the
Second Inaugural departs from the free-labor ideology, abolitionism,
and—in truth, Old Testament judgment—to bring the nation’s citizens
into the forgiveness of the New Testament. While this paragraph was
gloriously written, “With malice toward none; with charity for all,” it
also left the theme of slavery behind and only at best subtly implied
a better fate for the former bondspeople.

The repudiation of the white republic theme—the Lost Cause
syndrome—in the Second Inaugural was explicit. Lincoln confessed
to the nation that slavery had a played a central role in its history and
was responsible for its catastrophic civil war, an admission that usually
only had been made by radical Republicans and abolitionists; the role of
African Americans in the United States’ past had usually been excised
by Anglo-American Northerners obsessing over governmental forms. A
famous incident confirmed that the Second Inaugural represented a dif-
ferent version of history than the ones given by other Anglo-American
orators. After the address, Lincoln asked black abolitionist Frederick
Douglass for his opinion, and Douglass responded by calling it “a
sacred effort.” Of course Douglass exulted in the president’s speech;
for the first time, the matter of racial slavery had been moved to center
stage in the evolution of the American republic.40

Most writers of the Civil War era would not say that Lincoln discard-
ed the Gettysburg Address in his Second Inaugural, that he relegated
the importance of representative government to a minor element at
the end of the Civil War. The Gettysburg Address nonetheless was a
product of the first two years of the war when Northerners, including
Lincoln, explicitly excluded African Americans from engagement in
the conflict and from a role in its outcome; government of, by, and
for the people was linked to white people, not to African Americans.
But the gravity of the war, the search for a means to victory, and the
stubbornness with which slaveholders clung to their slaves, forced the
subject of racial servitude above the matter of the form of government
and made slavery’s fate central to the fate of the nation. Even with this
admission, the nation never really grappled with the power behind
slavery, the maniacal devotion to white supremacy. But at least in the
Second Inaugural, the white republic finally confronted the grasp that
racial slavery had on the nation’s history and the fate of the Union.

40. Quote from Oates, *With Malice Toward None*, 447. This well-known incident is
reported by nearly every biographer of Lincoln. See interpretation of Second Inaugural