

## CONSTITUTION 101

Module 12: Slavery in America: From the Founding to America's Second Founding  
12.4 Primary Source

# ABRAHAM LINCOLN, SECOND INAUGURAL ADDRESS (1865)

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## SUMMARY

In 1864, the nation held a presidential election during the Civil War—a powerful symbol of the American people's commitment to democratic self-governance. The election was largely a referendum on President Lincoln's war record, and it pitted Lincoln against his former top general, George McClellan. As late as August 1864, Lincoln believed that he might lose the election. Furthermore, he feared that a President McClellan might compromise with the Confederacy and put an end to the Civil War without emancipation. However, a series of battlefield victories helped to rally the electorate to the Union's cause, and Lincoln won reelection in a landslide—the first president reelected since Andrew Jackson. With Lincoln's reelection secure and Union victory within reach, the debate in the North pivoted to how Lincoln, the Republican Congress, and the U.S. Army would handle the nation's transition to peace—with Republican leaders disagreeing over the pace and scope of Reconstruction. Lincoln reflected on the meaning of the Civil War and the looming challenge of Reconstruction when he delivered his Second Inaugural Address on March 4, 1865.

## Excerpt

Fellow-Countrymen:

**The war is going well, and there's not much that I can say today that everyone doesn't already know.** At this second appearing to take the oath of the Presidential office there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then a statement somewhat in detail of a course to be pursued seemed fitting and proper. Now, at the expiration of four years, during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every point and phase of this great conflict which is of primary concern to the nation as a whole, 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, and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.

**When I delivered my First Inaugural Address, everyone feared a civil war; neither side wanted war; but the Confederates were committed to making war rather than staying in the Union; and the North was willing to fight a war to keep the nation together.** On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago all thoughts were anxiously directed to an

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impending civil war. All dreaded it, all sought to avert it. While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place, devoted altogether to saving the Union without war, insurgent agents were in the city seeking to destroy it without war—seeking to dissolve the Union and divide effects by negotiation. 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.

**Slavery caused the Civil War; the Confederate states tried to leave the Union in order to defend slavery, even though the national government claimed no power to abolish slavery inside the states where it already existed; the national government only wanted to keep slavery out of the federal territories.** One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union even by war, while the Government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it.

**Neither side thought that it would be a long war or end in the abolition of slavery; both sides prayed for God's aid.** Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. 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. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.

**The Civil War may be God's punishment for the evils of slavery.** "Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is 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 the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him?

**We hope that the war will end soon; but that's in God's hands.** 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 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."



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**We must finish the work that we have set out to do, without malice and with both firmness and charity.** 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.

**\*Bold sentences give the big idea of the excerpt and are not a part of the primary source.**



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