

An Attempt To Unify: A Rhetorical Analysis On Abraham Lincoln's First Inaugural
Address

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Chanel E. Garcia

Dr. Bernard Duffy

Dr. Bernard Duffy

June 10, 2014

Senior Project Advisor

Signature

Date

Dr. Bernard Duffy

Dr. Bernard Duffy

June 10, 2014

Dr. Bernard Duffy
Department Chair

Signature

Date

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Chanel E. Garcia

An Attempt To Unify

Abstract

Abraham Lincoln stepped into the President's office representing a country that aborted its constitutional promise to be united. In the first few months, his job was focused on trying to mend the rift in the nation. One month before Abraham Lincoln delivered his First Inaugural Address a newly formed Confederate States of America had elected officers and penned their own constitution. He wanted the South to listen, but in order to get their ears; he needed them to want to listen. I will determine how Lincoln addressed issues in a way that resonated to soothe a nation in crisis. I will address Lincoln's strategy to defend the U.S Constitution and his disapproval of the secession of states. He did this in a way that made his words in the election seem rational. I will focus on Lincoln's pacifist political views and how he steered his audience away from the "irrational belief" that slaves can play a role in half of the United States. Lincoln knew that this speech needed to rely heavily on definition and rationality because a speech based on opinion and/or personal beliefs would have ceased to communication to all Southerners. I will focus on how he incorporates figures/tropes, specifically, metaphors and alliteration to draw in his audience to a resolution befitting the nation. He hoped for a commitment from the South, not based on his authority, (he was modest and humble as a president) but based on their wanting to listen – and through his rationale, he hoped they would want to agree. He knew that he needed to establish himself as an intelligent and strong leader, if his goal of stopping the secession.

The Historical Context

Lincoln began his speech with a revised conclusion by Seward, "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies" (Lincoln 115). On March 4, 1861, one hundred and fifty years ago, over twenty-five thousand Americans stood in front of the East Portico of the Capitol (Zarefsky 169), as Abraham Lincoln was sworn into office as the 16th President of the United States. The nation was caught in a secession crisis.

Lincoln was elected in November 1860 but did not take office until March. After Lincoln was elected president he spoke to feeling burdened by the position taking and trying to save a nation that would soon go to war. One ally he reached out to was his Secretary of State, William H. Seward, whom he had defeated for the nomination.

Lincoln had remained publicly silent about the secession crisis speaking neither about his policies or plans on what to do about the rebellious states. “Silence was his best policy, because any new statement, or restatement, of his views would lead to ‘new misrepresentations’ by opponents” (Donald 1). Lincoln knew that if the tone of his speech was too provocative, it might provoke the start of the secession. His first drafts of his speech were kept private. This silent period only lasted a short while before others started speaking on his behalf. David Zarefsky explains, “Lincoln’s silence was filled by others’ words, often less carefully nuanced or thoughtful . . . In turn, these statements seemed to lend credibility to the most incendiary claims of the fire-eaters, confirming their belief that Lincoln’s election by itself was just cause for the breakup of the Union” (166). “He won the presidential election with only forty percent of the popular vote during a dangerous era in history” (*The Election of 1860*). Lincoln was not on the ballot in some states, and since his election seven Southern states had seceded from the Union. At this point, Lincoln had lost half of his country, making the government and constitution that he fathered impossible to implement. With seven states already supporting the belief that Lincoln was responsible for the divide (Zarefsky 167), a compromise between the torn States was necessary but the agreement was the challenge. “The Republicans voiced that compromise measures would require that the party, having fairly won the election, concede the principles on which it had won, even before taking office” (167). Lincoln did not agree to this. However, he proposed an alternative constitutional amendment to be passed: “that in perpetuity would guarantee slavery against government interference in the states where it already existed” (167). Lincoln knew that if he gave the power to his political party, the South would remove them even

further. To win half of his country while keeping the other half on board, he had to offer the South an agreement that they would want to listen to. He needed his entire country to know that he is not the enemy. To voice this, he had to design a speech that only asked each member of the country to think rationally and step away from the two-sided predispositions. “Abraham Lincoln concentrated on shoring up his backing in the North without further alienating the South, where he was almost universally hated or feared (*The Election of 1860*). On his way to Washington for his Inauguration, Lincoln delivered a few shorter speeches and in one he denied, “recapture of seized federal property would count as ‘coercion’ of the south” and emphasized “their derivation from the Declaration of Independence” (Zarefsky 167). Lincoln hoped that his country would see the bigger picture in order to rehabilitate the durable construction of the government.

Lincoln had been working on this speech since his election and asked for suggestions from friends and closest political advisors (168). Some had nothing to contribute, while others like Lincoln’s fellow Illinois Republican Orville H. Browning did. “Browning proposed only one change. He would delete any reference to ‘reclaiming’ seized property...he thought that to proclaim that goal publicly in advance would make the federal government appear to be the aggressor . . . the difference in tone would be profound” (168). Browning’s advice became a greater motivation for Lincoln to understand the importance of masking an authoritative style in order to make friends with the South. Lincoln then gave his speech to his secretary of state, William Henry Seward. After Lincoln adopted nineteen of his proposed changes, and modified eight, “Seward changed the speech from a confrontational throwing down of the gauntlet to a nuanced address that both set forth the new president’s position and pleaded for time to heal

wounds, urging the dissatisfied to heed the calm voice of reason” (170). With Seward’s contribution and Lincoln’s own sixteen additional revisions (170); Lincoln understood the tone that he needed to hold in order to revive a constitution tied to a government that would last forever. Lincoln knew that his verbiage, religious references and legal language to persuade the South to remain in the Union would make him appear trustworthy.

This was probably one of the most anticipated speeches in American history because the temperate approach that Lincoln needed to take was extremely crucial. This milestone speech will always be remembered because “Lincoln’s success as a speaker was due largely to his ability to give back to the people their own thoughts” (Bauer 226). Robert Gunderson further explains: “Lincoln’s ambition was tempered by a pervasive modesty, perhaps the most clearly defined attribute of his style . . . A mystical determinism pervaded his thinking and enhanced his sense of humility. ‘I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me’” (275). He focused on cementing his support in the North without alienating the South, where there was hatred and disdain for this newly elected president. If a different president were in office, they might have had a more authoritative approach, however: “An early biographer, Josiah Holland, said that Lincoln ‘opened himself to men in different directions’” (Gunderson 275). Lincoln had the humility required to work with a divided audience. On this day Lincoln’s speech was an effort to answer the question of how this novel confederacy would look, while attempting to reach out and join both sides of the Union to avoid conflict. “The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet

swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature” (Lincoln 115). These were the closing words of President Abraham Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address. “Lincoln improved this line that Seward drafted replacing ‘the guardian angel of the nation’ with ‘the better angels of our nature’ conveying his belief that the solution to the secession crisis lay within the people themselves” (Zarefsky 168).

The history of Lincoln’s oratory proved his great reputation as a storyteller. “At times his illustrations . . . seemed to be not less important than the argument, which he always enforced with a certain intensity and manner of voice” (Gunderson 273). However, the subjects and situation that drove this speech forced his style in a different direction. Abraham Lincoln was known for the beauty of his speeches, especially, in his Second Inaugural Address and his Gettysburg Address, but none of his speeches was more prepared and scrutinized than this one. His First Inaugural Address is mostly about compromise, pacification and explanation of the legal issues as set forth in the Constitution. It addresses the issues of the current national crisis facing the nation, state secession, slavery, and the unification of the nation and reflected the events at the time he was elected.

This speech, among some of his others including his Second Inaugural, emphasized his strategic style application during this challenging time for the state. “Lincoln’s style is not always colorful or vivid . . . The First Inaugural contains no humor, no anecdotes, and little imagery for its audience . . . Instead this speech features balanced sentence structure, antithesis, and compelling rhythm” (274). His speech is primarily based on arguments of legal definition. He uses the definitions from the law and the

Constitution as a consubstantial bond in which all people can agree. He put himself into the rhetoric instead of simply being the narrator. He created an identification process where he and the audience were one in the same. He profiled his education, which would make him seem as a credible president to those who had a strong dislike for Northerners.

At such a crucial time to be the President of the United States, Lincoln attempts to remain calm, confident, and law abiding in his First Inaugural Address, but dedicates the speech's content to the crisis over secession and the issue of slavery. Lincoln, in his First Inaugural, expressed the notion that he meant the Southern states no harm, but any enlightened person knew how he felt about the issue of slavery, and that no rational man would allow for it to exist.

Motivation of the Speaker

Abraham Lincoln had been elected to the highest position in the country and this Inaugural speech served as his only tool to assist him in setting into motion his presidency. He had a goal to keep his beloved country united, and his own beliefs. However, Lincoln understood that his belief (to end slavery) would not be the appropriate focus for this fragile speech if he wanted to achieve his goal. He knew that his goal was to get the South to want to listen; and further, to put an end to the secession crisis. Lincoln asked his country to join him in the only way that all states could agree upon – rationally. Lincoln's First Inaugural Address "was not designed to coax the seceded states back into the Union . . . rather, he sought to define the situation so that, if war broke out, the seceders would be cast as the aggressors and the federal government as acting in self-defense" (Zarefsky 165). He applies a case of principle and definition in order to prove the impracticality of the actions of the South. He used his legal background to describe

the pitfalls of secession, which gave his audience a better grasp of how America's system worked, while allowing the Southerners to believe that he was upholding their constitutional rights as states to continue slavery. He uses this rational method hoping that the South will see that he is not trying to force them to unite. He would not interfere with slavery where it already existed, and pledged to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act, a key issue for those wishing to secede. It was less controversial to focus on the rule of law. His focus was that conflicts could be resolved better within the Union than as separate entities.

Lincoln's Vow to the Constitution

"I do not consider it necessary at present for me to discuss those matters of administration about which there is no special anxiety or excitement" (Lincoln 108). Lincoln began his Address pleasantly acknowledging his audience, then immediately addressed the current national crisis involving slavery. He stated: "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so" (109). Lincoln wanted to alleviate the fears of his fellow Americans that interfering with slavery was not on his political agenda; his goal was to unite the country. "*Resolved*: That the maintenance inviolate of the rights of the States, and especially the right of each State to order and control its own domestic institutions according to its own judgment exclusively, is essential to that balance of power on which the perfection and endurance of our political fabric depend; and we denounce the lawless invasion by armed force of the soil of any State or Territory, no matter what pretext, as among the gravest of crimes" (109). He promised to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act, which prescribed that escaped

slaves were required to be returned to their owners. By making it explicitly clear that he and the Congress would continue to enforce that law, he was speaking to the fears that those residing in the Southern states would not have their personal property or rights infringed upon by this new Republican president. He stated that he chose to “take the official oath to-day with no mental reservation and with no purpose to construe the Constitution or laws by any hyper-critical rules” (110). He soothed those living in the Southern states by stating that he will abide by the law, and appeasing the North’s argument with his pledge to uphold the laws as stated in the Constitution. He stated exactly what he thought but with the hope that Southerners would work out their issues without war. The issue of slavery created a great division in this country, and he knew that while supporting the South and their rights he also had to address the needs of those who lived in the North.

His motivation was to pacify both sides that led to the division boundary. He wisely suggests that his people abide by the law where these slave acts stand “un-repealed” (110) until they can be held unconstitutional. This was his plan to end slavery. He asks for his nation’s trust, and his demeanor and unbiased approach in the discussion of these two monumental issues was serving to join the nation rather than to exacerbate the division that was evident as he took office. He was speaking to the fear and anxiety that had gripped the nation. He knew he could not further alienate the people of this nation by attempting to change any Constitutional policies as some had felt was his agenda. At this crucial time in history, Lincoln chose to calm and unify his divided constituents as an attempt to join this nation that he was honored to serve. “Abraham Lincoln knew that he must address the concerns of both sides in this divided and unhappy

nation. Lincoln merely expressed the ideas that were really in the air; “He did not, as a speaker, create them” (Bauer 227). Lincoln and his allies hoped that ultimately someday slavery would end, but there was no plan. His hope was based on the foundation that free labor was more prosperous and productive for any society. His speech was based on finding peaceful solutions for the realities of the times.

Lincoln Speaks on the Secession

He addresses those residing in the Southern states that this nation could withstand without those few states as part of the Union. This being true, Lincoln then proposes that these rebellious states are not relied on to carry out the forward moving needs of the present democracy. However, he alludes to the fact that if indeed these states were willing to rejoin this nation, Lincoln would vow not to make sure he would not use his power to change their policies or inherent rights to oppose his views. He promises, “Federal government shall never interfere with the domestic institutions of the states, including that of persons held to service” (Lincoln 114). He promised those who lived in the North, that under no circumstance would he place Southerners in high priority political positions, such as those delegated in the United States Postal Service. He did this to alleviate the fears of those on both sides of the issue and to honor each state with their natural rights to govern those who resided within their state lines. Lincoln also explains: “Where hostility to the United States, in any interior locality, shall be so great and so universal, as to prevent competent resident citizens from holding the Federal offices, there will be no attempt to force obnoxious strangers among the people for that object” (Lincoln 111). Abraham Lincoln spoke with a tone of reconciliation to those

states that were seen as rebellious. Lincoln's speech was praised in the North. The South took it as a challenge to go to war. The Civil War began the following month.

Lincoln's Rhetorical Strategy

Lincoln proclaimed that the articles as outlined in the Constitution would be followed therefore voting to enforce the current laws passed as they stood. In the beginning of the speech he attempts to calm their fears by assuring them that he was not going to drastically change laws, or force the Unions to reunite. Rhetorician, Alan Gross explains: "Lincoln's use of constitutive metaphors also suggests a normative standard for discourse aimed at the most inclusive publics: the need to find common ground in shared values, a shared sense of who we are and what we wish to become, as persons and as a people" (Gross 174). This touches on his use of identification used in his speech where he ties himself in with the audience. Lincoln's utilization of figures and tropes allows for a speech in which both sides are able to listen comfortably.

Lincoln's Use of Definition

Lincoln's Inaugural effectively addressed the issue of national sovereignty. His goal was to unite the nation, and mend the rift of these two opposing factions that would soon go to war. Every aspect of his speech concludes with his ultimate responsibility to defend the Constitution. He defends the Constitution by definition. Through the utilization of definition within his speech, he is confident that the entire Union would have to agree. He states: "It is seventy-two years since the first inauguration of a president under our national Constitution. During that period fifteen different and greatly distinguished citizens, have, in succession, administered the executive branch of the government. They have conducted it through many perils; and generally, with great

success” (Lincoln 110). Lincoln believed it was his duty to defend the perpetual Union that had been outlined by his Forefathers. He knew that the Constitution could be amended, however, the Union could not be broken. He enhances the tradition of the Constitution by defining what its tradition has brought and further, takes his audience back to a proud and triumphant time for the Union.

Lincoln then addressed the issue of the state secession crisis through definition. Abraham Lincoln viewed the peaceful secession of the states as a violation of law and order. In order to express this statement, he invites his audience to look to the law which proves his continued strategy: to rely on definition in order for the divided states to agree that the entire Union remains on the same leveled playing field. Lincoln did not want to be a dictator. He wanted the definition within the Constitution to dictate. He argued: “I hold, that in contemplation of universal law, and of the Constitution, the Union of these States is perpetual. Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national governments” (Lincoln 110). Lincoln spoke to the sustainability of governments that last forever. Here he took a basic belief held by most men and outlined it so that it not only applies to his argument, but also serves as evidence in a sequence of the ideas that he developed. These discontented states had no legal or constitutional rights to withdraw from the Union. Lincoln viewed this as an act of rebellion, and vowed to keep the Union intact. But in order to do this he used words such as “contemplation” because he wanted the South to feel like they were not being addressed directly. For Lincoln, it was safer to make indirect statements about law than to make dictations based on the law. In his Address he argued, “. . . in view of the Constitution and the laws, the Union is unbroken; and, to the extent of my ability, I shall take care, as the Constitution itself

expressly enjoins upon me, that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all the States” (Lincoln 111). This argument was made in the defense of the Union. Lincoln uses the law and definitions within the Constitution as his reason for defending the Union rather than using his personal belief or opinion. This is the climax of his proposed argument. He made his claim. He gave the people an outline of what was going to happen that left little – if any room for argument. This made his speech both appealing and believable. “Suppose the southerners were right . . . that the Constitution was a contract among sovereign states. Granting this premise for the sake of argument, Lincoln observed that it is the nature of contracts that they can be unmade only by the consent of *all* the parties involved. Therefore, on the southerners’ own theory, Lincoln concluded, no state ‘on its own mere motion, can lawfully get out of the Union’” (Zarefsky 174). Once this argument was proven, Weaver further explains: “As Lincoln conceived the definition, it was not the duty of the chief magistrate to preside over the disintegration of the Union, but to carry on the executive office just as if no possibility of disintegration threatened” (Weaver 98). This argument of nature is brought up subtly as an allusion to be clearly interpreted by the audience as a confident assurance that Lincoln is supporting the Union and the way in which it was definitively created.

“Us vs. Them”

Although he begins his speech in a non-forceful way in order to ease the Southern state’s ears, he leaves no doubt about his beliefs. He states: “. . . there needs to be no bloodshed or violence; and there shall be none, unless it be forced upon the national authority” (Lincoln 111). Lincoln showed no reticence about calling secession “Insurrectionary or revolutionary” and about his determination to protect federal

property. “In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war” (Braden 264). Lincoln empowers the people of the Union in order for the South to place the responsibility on them, and not use him as a scapegoat. According to Zarefsky, “this was another seemingly reassuring statement that in fact was double edged. Who might incite violence if it is unnecessary? . . . Those whose position has been shown to be unwarranted and whose rhetoric is hyperbolic” (178). Lincoln’s view on state secession does not attack either side of this crisis directly, however, “Lincoln preemptively fixed responsibility for any violence that might ensue: the secessionists, not the government, would be the aggressor” (Zarefsky 175). He acknowledges that fact “that there are persons in one section, or another who seek to destroy the Union at all events, and are glad of any pretext to do it . . .” (Lincoln 111). Lincoln makes this accusation indirectly to maintain his balance between both sides.

He persuasively creates an antithesis and asks of his constituents: “To those, however, who really love the Union, may I not speak?” (111). With his use of power, he also alludes to his sense of unity by addressing the inherent love of this nation as a whole. “Each of these disordered forms of allegiance threatened the inseparable moral and fraternal bonds of liberty and Union that Lincoln’s reflective patriotism sought to preserve and perpetuate through a well-ordered love of country” (Fornieri 109). Lincoln then invites those who love the Union for all of the definitive and traditional reasons that he speaks of earlier, to listen to him. He addresses only those who wish to listen so the Southerners feel as though they have a choice while implying that there is only one rational option. This antithesis was placed in order to grab as many listeners from the South as he could before making his bigger statements.

As Lincoln begins to address issues, he stylistically relies on maintaining a collective and equal point of view. Lincoln firmly addresses the issue that a separation between states is impossible. He speaks to the physical division which some wish to impose as. "We cannot remove our respective sections from each other, nor build an impassable wall between them" (Lincoln 113). These words emphasize the attempts to separate the nation. He chooses to use "we" to create a consubstantial bond to further his identification process with his audience. He compares the impracticality of the issue by using the analogy of a divorce between a husband and wife. Lincoln attempts to explain that it is easier to manage differences and conflict together through the use of effective communication. There is no wall that could be built high enough to block the presiding issues that filter from one state to the next. This line of attack would only hinder progress and create an even greater distance to travel for any type of accord.

Abraham Lincoln's main premise was to preserve the nation. His speech was finely crafted to ensure that people would know that he was not taking sides and had respect for all views. "This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their *constitutional* right of amending it, or their *revolutionary* right to dismember, or overthrow it" (Lincoln 113). Lincoln's placement of "they" instead of "you" makes it so this statement is not directly associated with the South. Whenever he makes a statement that is meant for the South to hear he makes sure that he is not being direct. The South feels under attack and, as a result, Lincoln understands that he cannot give them more reasons to build their defense. Lincoln realized that when one does not allow something to grow, extermination results. He also makes direct references to the "Constitution" and

by using his legal background he appeared official. His proclivity regarding the parameters of the Constitution and his understanding of the legal system make him seem wise, and more tolerant of both sides of this critical debate that was dividing his country.

Lincoln's Transparency

In order to invite the South to listen and get them to see “the slavery controversy as grounds for breaking up the Union” (Zarefsky 174), Lincoln stated: "One section of our country believes slavery is right and ought to be extended, while the other believes it is wrong and ought not to be extended. This is the only substantial dispute." Lincoln was stating “the existence of two opposite but symmetrical beliefs as a fact...he did not take sides” (Zarefsky 174-175). Lincoln explained in his opinion, how this disunion would only weaken the Fugitive Slave Law and revive the then-abolished foreign slave trade. He did this without giving his own opinion, however. He simply states the fact of the matter and hoped that the impracticality of the Union's divide would resonate with the South. He asked the people to understand that this “was the only thing disturbing sectional peace and tranquility” (175). His words encouraged patience by the people who had just elected him to this office. He acknowledged how the electorate had given him the right to exercise the duties of the presidency, and even pledged to support the notion of a new amendment to the Constitution, protecting slavery where it already existed. However, Lincoln knew this would not work; his hope was for the Union to realize this in all of his reasoning within the speech.

Marie Hochmuth, from the University of Illinois, studies the constituents of the rhetorical act and evaluates its use in a variety of ways. She references “the literary historian, Vernon L. Parrington. He writes of Lincoln: ‘Matter he judged to be of greater

significance than manner . . . Very likely his plainness of style was the result of deliberate restraint, in keeping with the simplicity of his nature' . . . It presupposes a clean division between matter and manner, as if thought and the manner of expressing it were completely separate entities” (Hochmuth 7). Hochmuth identifies Lincoln’s very intentional style of rhetoric. “Here rhetoric seems to be correlated with ‘manner,’ particularly with which is not plain” (7). The speech’s subject matter was evident to his audience. Lincoln understood that it was the manner in which he carried that matter that would make the difference. His authority, agenda, and beliefs could not be at the forefront of his words. Lincoln knew that the perspective of his countrymen in regards to his speech, and his willingness to compromise while standing steadfast behind the governing laws, was the only hope that could thwart a war. He was an educated man whose manner and simplistic style guided the unpretentious language used to address his fellow compatriots. His manner exuded transparency for his motives, which was to lay at the hands of his fellow Americans the power to unite the Union.

At points in the speech Lincoln did make assertions of power: “. . . beyond what may be necessary for these objects, there will be no invasion – no using a force against, or among the people anywhere” (Lincoln 111). Zarefsky identifies his tactic in sentence structure. “The structure of his sentence –not an assertion that he *would* use force for these purposes but a statement that he *would not* use force for other purposes – casts the statement as restrained and conciliatory. He enhanced this impression by maintaining a specific case in which he would *not* assert national sovereignty” (178). The purpose of this premise was to keep government balanced by establishing that his motives were not

to put troops on the ground or use other violent means against the South to abolish slavery. Lincoln had to maintain his strategy to keep the South calm.

Lincoln then moved to his closing statements. He metaphorically tells the South: "In *your* hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in *mine*, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail *you*. You can have no conflict, without being yourselves the aggressors. *You* have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while *I* shall have the most solemn one to 'preserve, protect and defend' it" (Lincoln 115). This issue as repeated throughout this Address, was not to preserve slavery, but the foundation of the Union. *Helium Network* writer, Shawna Blake explains: "Lincoln made it clear that any State that succeeded from the Union would be rendered as an enemy. His plan was a stroke of genius; insult the intelligence and the pride of the Southerners so that they would be the war instigators and therefore the reason for the fall of our country" (Blake 1). Lincoln was trying to reach the huge middle of society in his speech; he introduced himself as merely a man with a goal of unification and fairness. At that time in history Lincoln's audience were almost exclusively Christian, and the use of religious references made him seem extremely trustworthy, and an effective tool in convincing Southerners to stay with the Union.

The amazing quality of Lincoln's First Inaugural Address was his ability to logically and rationally to soothe a nation in crisis through the usage of definition, metaphor, and alliteration. "Lincoln's speeches, because they are called 'speeches' and because they occurred in 'rhetorical situations' confront us initially with our vague, general, customary expectations intact, but then—as a condition for even understanding them—they compel a reconstitution of our character as 'auditors'" (Bitzer 2). "We are

forced to a different perspective not only on the subjects of the discourses, but also on the transparency of the discourses—on their capacity to merge with their subjects and not to claim our attention independent of their subjects. An ultimate voice is one that has achieved transparency. What it says is so rightly said that we are conscious only of what is said and not of the saying” (Black 55). His speech gave the power to the people and this will remain one of the main earmarks of this riveting piece of history. “Lincoln so shaped his audiences that their credulity was tested only by the policies he advanced. Lincoln was to be believed because he did not ask to be believed. He asked for belief in impersonal propositions, not in himself” (Black 51).

Lincoln’s Emphasis on Identification

The end of the speech remained cool and calm while it vowed that the federal government would never initiate or be the source of any conflict. Lincoln continues with his method of definition throughout his entire speech in order to make any arguments with his audience still listening by the end. Weaver explains, “Since nothing can be defined until it is placed in a category and distinguished from its near relatives, it is obvious that definition involves the taking of a general view” (Weaver 108). With this general view, both the Union and the South could relate and agree.

His dream was that the two separate factions would be united as “One nation under God.” His closing paragraph speaks to his devotion to his constituents not as dogmatic leader but as their guide with all men retaining the importance of their belief systems. The ending paragraph is the most memorable part of the speech. It was handwritten, unlike the rest of the speech that was typeset. In ending he states, "I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion

may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature" (Lincoln 115). This was Lincoln's fondest hope for preserving the Union of the American states. On the advice of his friend Seward, he concluded his speech with a plea for temperance through identification. He truly believed every word that he spoke with the honesty that has been his identifying characteristic. The words in the last paragraph reveal the soul of Lincoln the man, not Lincoln the lawyer, now president. The words were written almost as a poem, filled with hope and belief in the nation and the innate goodness of its citizens. Lincoln's speech delivered, he took his oath, then kissed the Bible, and history was made.

Discussion

A Reaction from North Carolina and Why His Strategies were Ineffective

Lincoln understood that his First Inaugural Speech needed to pave the road for the Union's future, and nearly every sentence is aimed at placating the South. He thoroughly knew that the ideas reflected in his speech must calm the fears of the Southerners while clarifying his plan of action as president. Lincoln recognized that he had previously been demonized in the Southern press, and so he made every effort to seem as logical and restrained as conceivable. Although Lincoln thoughtfully and carefully created this speech for these reasons, he failed to consider his live audience. Associate Professor at the University of North Carolina, Bert Bradley justifies: "the South was not largely represented at the inaugural occasion. And the address when published in Southern

papers was incompletely presented and badly mangled. In a very large sense it did not reach the section of the country most vitally concerned” (Bradley 271). Although, Lincoln had a strategy that could have succeeded, his voice could not reach the South before the rhetoric in the message changed completely. Throughout his speech, Lincoln reassured the South in regards to his policy and constitutional law. But the largest reaction lied in the hands of the people behind the journalists, not the people behind the podium. Hochmuth additionally recognizes that “we must consider the function of *place*. Place, of course, is not merely a physical condition. It is also a metaphysical condition, an ideological environment” (11). Lincoln failed to consider this function’s effect in his situation. “Place conditions both the speaker’s method and the audience’s reaction” (Hochmuth 11). Lincoln’s method could have been more effective if his targeted audience had a heavier presence at the Inauguration. The ears of those he wished to touch were not present at the inauguration and the misaligned address that they received left his Southern citizens feeling alienated and threatened.

In Bradley’s study: “twenty-four newspapers from fourteen cities in all sections of North Carolina were included” (273). He chose to study North Carolina because it was one of the few Southern states that had not seceded. Among the twenty-four papers, “thirteen presented unfavorable reactions to the speech, six gave favorable reports, and five maintained various degrees of neutrality. Of the thirteen papers responding unfavorably, Bradley found that ten based their opposition on similar reasoning: “They argued that the speech indicated a coercive policy on Lincoln’s part because of two statements he had made” (276). First Lincoln explains that he would: “take care, that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all the States” and then went on further to

reiterate: the power confided in me will be used to hold, occupy and possess all the property and places belonging to the government and to collect the duties and imposts” (276).

The *North Carolinian*, published in Fayetteville, represents several editorials while stating: “These are plain words and unmistakable in their meaning . . . The man is blind to all reason and common sense, if he believes for one moment, that carrying out his policy will not produce civil war” (276). Furthermore, other newspapers wrote that Lincoln “had used the wrong strategy in vowing to collect the revenue” (278). The editor of the *North Carolinian* agreed and wrote:

Had Mr. Lincoln recommended any definite plan for the adjustment of these difficulties, there might have been some reason to believe, that an adjustment could be made. He has cautiously and studiously avoided any recommendation, except that of a general Convention of the people of the States, which under no circumstances can do us any good, but has in its power to sweep from the whole face of the slave States now in Confederacy, all of that specie of property. (278)

Many people wanted a plan from Lincoln. However, Lincoln knew that a plan would invite the South to pull the trigger on a war. What he did not foresee was the assumption that he engrained on many, by saying too little. Some in North Carolina feared that: “if Lincoln kept his promise, he would have to use force, and if he did so, he would be required to call on the states to provide troops” (278). North Carolina feared that they would have to battle against their fellow Southern states or concur to their ideals. This dual and conflicting allegiance was a core issue. Regardless, people knew that a war could be upon them based on the vague and inconclusive responses generated by Lincoln. Several of Bradley’s editorials “disagreed with Lincoln’s contention that the Union was perpetual, the premise from which Lincoln argued that a state had no right to secede” (279). The *Warrenton News*, from Raleigh’s *State Journal*, quoted that: “a conflict

between the Federal authorities and the seceding States becomes inevitable. The State-Rights men, North and South, will never accept or endorse the political maxim that the “Union is a Perpetuity,” – a political trap, which all may enter, but none may leave with life” (279).

Bradley’s findings suggest that many Southern states felt the speech to be sugar coated. The State Journal anticipated and predicted it to be: “deceptive. It coats with the semblance of peace and friendship what smells of gore and hate. It is in short, such a declaration of sentiments as should and will bring every Southern man to his feet” (279). Although North Carolina had not seceded, they too felt that this speech was “incompletely presented” (279).

Why the Speech Failed

Lincoln’s speech had a more immense duty to fill than one of a traditional American Public Address. Once this speech was given, many journalists, rhetoricians, and orators have pointed to its reasons for failing. Stephen Lucas summarizes this textual analysis.

“Some scholars detected a conservative bias in the values of civility, rationality, and decorum underlying traditional concepts of oratory. Such values, they claimed, were in fact “masks for the preservation of injustice” – ideological weapons used by elites who, “having already a share in power, have the leisure to aestheticize and moralize rhetoric, to demand elegant style and the display of a civil, friendly, reasonable ethos.” Set against this backdrop, the model of the great orator standing heroically at the crossroads of history in the finest tradition of the human spirit seemed hopelessly romantic and outmoded” (Lucas 243).

Although Lincoln’s Address was written carefully and although he did succeed in terms of his “display of a civil, friendly, and reasonable ethos,” his communication strategy was not appropriate at a time like this for the Union. After Lincoln gave his speech, the *Atlanta Confederacy* published: “It is a medley of ignorance, sanctimonious cant and

tender – footed bullyism . . . Seriously, the future is ominous. We are dealing first with men who hate us bitterly . . .” (*Contemporary Opinions of Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address*). “The Union needed a consensus from Lincoln in order for that speech to have served any great purpose. Lucas adds: “it is hard to find even a glimmer of interest in confrontation as a communication strategy. Alienation is out, consensus is in, and the methods of managing consensus . . .” (243). The *Charleston News* in South Carolina further noted: “It breathes both peace and war . . . smooth and oily words . . . destitute of all statesmanlike views, and deeply impregnated with the intolerance of a partisan” (*Contemporary Opinions of Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address*). Lincoln created a speech that would only reassure the Union of their prior knowledge in order to avoid speaking of consequences that he would have to enact. He not only needed to address the secession crisis in a rational point of view (as he did) but he needed to address a compromise and how it was going to be maintained throughout the Union. Either way, part of the Union would disagree. But it is more effective for that part of the Union to have an understanding of a plan than to have no new understanding at all. The speech was well written and extremely patriotic, however, this was not the key to success at the time in which the address was given.

Conclusion

Based on Lincoln’s history as a writer and speaker, it is safe to say that he has the ability to write an effective speech. But “one of the major weaknesses of traditional scholarship in public address has been its inclination to get so caught up in the minutiae of a speaker’s background, education, personality, and career as to all but ignore his discourse” (Lucas 245). Lincoln’s discourse worked for him, but it did not for his

audience. The durability was short lived. This speech may not have caused uproar as Lincoln gave it, however due to his linguistic style and subtle cues of rationality, he left the Union feeling just as divided as they felt prior to his words.

The last paragraph of Abraham Lincoln's speech is a conciliatory ending, but the true words of steel come above these writings and outline his linguistic undercurrents.

Abraham Lincoln's rhetorical dynamics in his First Inaugural Address was in effect a declaration of war to all secessionists. In his own words he states that secession is a cause for war or conflict. He uses this dialogue under the tutelage that as president, he now has no choice because of the Constitution. There was no negotiating from the Union side; this address then became the dogma of the moment, in his words. Lincoln concludes, "In *your* hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in *mine*, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail *you*. You can have no conflict, without being yourselves the aggressors. *You* have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while *I* shall have the most solemn one to 'preserve, protect, and defend it'" (Lincoln 115).

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