A BURKEAN ANALYSIS OF
LINCOLN'S SECOND INAUGURAL ADDRESS

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Lincoln's Second Inaugural address "... discloses a cluster of opinions which was certainly alien to the auditors of 1865 in its detachment from chauvinism, its historical perspective, and its pervasive sense of tragedy. Add to the list the tone of compassion in the speech and its rejection of retributive justice, and a universe begins to take shape."

How did Lincoln arrive at such a non-typical stance? Did his detachment come from a tendency of his personality? Was his compassion the result of increasing revulsion to the bloody carnage over which he reigned as Commander-in-Chief? The answers to these questions we may never know, but to the degree we approach them, we will probably do so through rhetorical analysis. Most Presidents act primarily via the rhetorical mode, so if the motivations for their actions are embedded within those actions it will be rhetorical analysis which will tease them out.

Of all contemporary rhetorical theorists, the name Kenneth Burke is most intimately associated with a concern for motive. For Burke, language is an act and an act is motivated. An analysis of a speaker's language, then, should "get at" the individual's impressions of reality, as "Much that we take as observations about 'reality' may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms." But those choices, we should remember, are made within particular circumstances. Burke's stress upon language, then, functions to restore to the text "... its value as activity and its meaning as a gesture and a response to a determinate situation."

We propose, therefore, to re-analyze Lincoln's Second Inaugural, using as our "terministic screen" Burke's pentad, his device for analyzing language as "symbolic action." Our goal is to determine why Lincoln, in this speech, was so "out of step" with his auditors.

At first glance, applying the Pentad results in an analysis which views Lincoln as the AGENT at the SCENE of his second inauguration. Through his speech (AGENCY) he equates (ACT) the plight of North and South in the midst of fighting the war. His PURPOSE was to pave the way for the eventual reunification of the North and South and an amicable reconstruction of the South.

Although these are aspects of the speech, the analysis appears too superficial. On closer inspection, we find a more appropriate analysis is triggered by the last sentence of the fourth paragraph, in which Lincoln has been equating the North and South: "The prayers of both could not be answered—that of neither has been answered fully." The question which naturally occurs at this point is, whose purpose could be completely fulfilled in this situation? That question is not asked outright, but is induced by that last portion of the sentence, which provides a smooth transition to the actual intent of Lincoln's speech. The transitional paragraph begins, "The Almighty has His own purposes"—and we have our answer: God is the AGENT. The Pentad can be drawn from that one entire paragraph to which Lincoln has been leading us throughout the address. The North and South are the AGENCIES in "this terrible war" (ACT) which God (AGENT) has
provided for the PURPOSE of abolishing slavery and punishing "those by whom the offense came." The SCENE is the United States in the throes of the Civil War.

Lincoln's chosen language directs attention to the points which would persuade his audience to a particular perception of the "reality" of the events at hand. This "reality" was that, although four years ago we thought two sets of agents with opposing purposes were following their respective courses of action, we now realize that they were actually mere agencies for a greater Power who possessed His own purpose. Although "both parties deprecated war," and each faction would fight the war for its own purpose, the war was actually fought for the Almighty's purpose. Being mortals, it is difficult to discern the Almighty's reason; nevertheless, Lincoln attempts to offer an interpretation.

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 any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him?

What can we do but the will of God? This war is out of our hands—we did not want it, although we would fight it for our own cause, but it comes as God's will. We hope that it ends quickly, especially since the cause of it has been abolished.

Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled up 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."

The rhetoric is geared to the perception of God as AGENT. In his opening statement and at other points in the beginning of the speech, Lincoln refers to a time four years ago on the occasion of his first inauguration. Reference is being made to a time when he was the AGENT (or thought he was); a time when "... a statement, somewhat in detail, of a course to be pursued, seemed fitting and proper." There is an anticipation in his opening paragraph that this is no longer the case. At this early point we assume that another statement laying out the "course to be pursued" would not be "fitting and proper" because the last one still has not been completed. But no, the reason is different—it would not be appropriate because the speaker no longer perceives himself as the AGENT.

The extensive use of the passive voice verb form indicates the type of role the President sees for himself. Also indicative of his role is the absence of references to himself as the doer of an action. If, as Burke says, "There is an implied sense of negativity in the ability to use words at all," then the concept of language as action implies that language can also indicate inaction. And inaction is exactly the course Lincoln announces in the Second Inaugural, the only course appropriate for an AGENCY, especially since the role of AGENT has been claimed by Another to whom it rightfully belongs.

We find it significant that in a piece of only six paragraphs, four are devoted to stating the conditions of the situation. This is an important aspect of the speech since it demonstrates the care taken to set the stage and to prepare the audience for the introduction of another AGENT. These conditions are presented in a logical order which leads us smoothly into the transition, which is the crux of the oration. This occasion is compared to that of four years ago and, since all the issues have been publicly discussed and the audience is aware of them, there is no reason to discuss them again. Indicative of Lincoln's relinquishment of power as AGENT is his proclamation: "With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured." Neither a predic-
tion nor a course of action nor a morale booster is offered. This does not have the ring of an inaugural speech of a man who is retaining the reins of authority and the obligation for an entire nation in the midst of a civil war. This is no inflammatory speech to spur the citizenry on to win the war. A purposeful choice of inaction has been made.

Although he deems it unnecessary to speak of the issues, Lincoln does indeed call attention to them. He does so without naming or directly accusing the South. He mentions that slavery was exclusively a characteristic of the South and that it “was, somehow, the cause of war.” “Somehow” is a deliberately cautious term. The intention here is to diminish the role of the South in causing the war. No accusing finger is pointed since both sides attempted to win their ends through peaceful means, but each was willing to wage war if those proved unsuccessful.

Lincoln painstakingly equates the plight of the North and the South in an effort to dispel feelings of hostility.

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.

This is the reason for attributing the war to God. (As a handi-work of His design, no side need bear the blame.) Anyone who believes in Him and “... those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him” will accept the war as His will. Therefore, we, as His AGENCIES, will fight this war as long as He sees fit, as retribution for “the offense.” As AGENCIES:

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.

Although Lincoln indicated that he dared not predict the outcome of the war, there is a strong intimation here that a Union victory is inevitable. With this in mind, the words “With malice toward none” express the essence of the entire address. Feelings of animosity are natural between opposing AGENTS, but AGENCIES can not be held responsible. Through a skillful rhetorical maneuvering, he has directed attention and energies away from a conflict of Northern AGENTS against Southern AGENTS and has positioned God at the focal point. The war, strange as it may seem, was God’s will and both sides must bear it even without understanding how a just God could let it drag on. But once peace arrives, as it eventually must, we all know how God wants us to treat each other: not with malice, but with charity. As AGENCIES, in war and peace, we can do no better than fulfill the desires and purposes of the AGENT, the Prime Mover, and thus deserve a “just and lasting peace.”

And now we know, do we not, why the Second Inaugural, although today considered a rhetorical masterpiece, was unpersuasive in 1865: his auditors were unwilling to accept the “reality” that pictured them as AGENCIES rather than AGENTS, unable to adjust away from the hatred and malice of wartime toward the love and charity of a Christian peacetime. Lincoln, with his call for compassion, was not just ahead of his time; unfortunately, he was ahead of all times.
NOTES

PRESIDENTIAL POWER: THE FOUNDERS’ INTENTION AS A PROBLEM OF KNOWLEDGE

by

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Abstract

The Vietnam War, Watergate, impeachment proceedings and the resignation of President Nixon have reinforced the contention that an excess of presidential power is a constitutional problem. The cure for this constitutional excess is often said to be "back to the Constitution," meaning usually the original understanding, of presidential power. I shall present here a contrary view stressing obstacles to the recovery of the original understanding, including the idea of an organic or living Constitution; the scholarly critique of the Founders' intention; the difficulty of finding a uniform intention in the *Federalist*; and the inconsistencies of Madison and Hamilton, key founders and commentators on the Presidency. I shall also consider the importance and justification of the Founders' intention as a method of constitutional inquiry. The resort to the Founders' intention by political scientists, historians and law teachers has important consequences for the way American constitutional development is studied. Formidable obstacles, I argue, make the recovery of the original understanding as problematical and difficult as it seems to be important.

The Vietnam War, Watergate, impeachment proceedings and the resignation of President Nixon have reinforced the contention that an excess of presidential power is a constitutional problem. A number of recent works rest in varying degrees on the assumption that the cure for this constitutional excess is "back to the Constitution," meaning usually the original understanding of presidential power. The authors who espouse the original understanding tend to assume that the Founders' intention is of current importance in determining presidential power under the Constitution, and that the sole or chief purpose of constitutional inquiry is to reveal the intent of the lawgivers. For present purposes Founders are delegate-signers at the Federal Convention and non-signing delegates who importantly shaped the Constitution's content. Their intention denotes their short range objectives, long range purposes and understanding of principles, values and specific clauses of the Constitution.

Even scholars outside of constitutional studies beckon us towards the Founders. To Robert Dahl it is "questionable whether the best political scientists, or for that matter, citizens drawn from any source, have the knowledge and skills to excel the performance of the framers." Clearly Dahl ranks the Founders' knowledge and skills above those of the political scientists whose justifications of