

Untribal God: Lincoln's Second Inaugural

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 26, 2007](#) issue

Illinois claims Abraham Lincoln as a native son, because even though he was not born in the state, he settled in Springfield, which is where he practiced law, entered politics, married and raised his children. We Presbyterians like to claim him too, though he never formally joined a church and his parents were Separate Baptists. In Springfield he attended First Presbyterian Church—his wife was a member—and he appreciated the carefully reasoned sermons of the church's pastor, James Smith.

In Washington the Lincolns tried several churches and settled on New York Avenue Presbyterian, near the White House. The minister, Phineas Densmore Gurley, was a Princeton graduate who, like Smith, emphasized reason. Lincoln was put off by the emotionalism he witnessed as a youth in revivalistic religion. Gurley officiated at Willie Lincoln's funeral, was called to the bedside of the dying president, and preached Lincoln's funeral sermon.

Lincoln's self-education, his brilliant writing, his deep intellect, his facility with language are all amazing. My interest has led me to collect a number of books on Lincoln, including volumes by Carl Sandburg, David Herbert Donald, Garry Wills and Doris Kearns Goodwin, whose *Team of Rivals* focuses on the extraordinary group of leaders Lincoln assembled around him. James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* gives a compelling account of the Civil War and Lincoln's leadership, as does his *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*, which argues that Lincoln, with his vision of democracy, actually completed the creation of the nation that the founders began in 1776.

One of my favorites in this collection is Ronald C. White's *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural*, which offers a virtual exegesis of Lincoln's speech on April 10, 1865. Like the Gettysburg Address, it was a relatively brief speech in a day when public orators, particularly politicians, spoke for hours—only 703 words, 505 of one syllable. (What a model for preachers.)

Frederick Douglass said of the Second Inaugural: "The address sounded more like a sermon than a state paper." White cites Reinhold Niebuhr's comment: "Lincoln's religious convictions were superior in depth and purity to those held by the religious as well as the political leaders of the day."

The Second Inaugural contains Lincoln's notable words about the war: "Both sides read the same Bible," Lincoln said, "pray to the same God and each invokes His aid against the other. . . . The prayers of both could not be answered: that of neither has been answered fully." White says that Lincoln was "inveighing against a tribal God" who would take the side of one part against the other, "and building a case for an inclusive God."

I can't think of more relevant words in a time when religion is used for partisan political purposes. And I don't know a more noble or apt sentiment for our time than the one with which this president concluded: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive 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."