

God willing: Lincoln on the divine mystery

by [Ronald C. White](#) in the [March 8, 2005](#) issue

In September 1862, Union troops were soundly defeated by Confederate forces led by Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee at Manassas Junction, Virginia. The North called it the Second Battle of Bull Run. President Abraham Lincoln's somber mood afterward was recorded in a diary entry by Attorney General Edward Bates, who wrote that Lincoln "seemed wrung by the bitterest anguish—said he felt almost ready to hang himself."

Soon afterward Lincoln wrote out a private musing on a small piece of lined paper. He sought to discern the will of God among the cacophony of voices all around him after news of one of the most discouraging defeats of the war.

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect his purpose. I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.

Lincoln's brief contemplation remained unknown until after his death, when it was found by his secretary, John Hay, who gave it the title "Meditation on the Divine Will."

Behind Lincoln's public addresses were such notes to himself, building blocks of important speeches. Lincoln's habit was to write ideas on odd strips of paper and backs of envelopes. He deposited these notes in his tall hat or desk drawer for future retrieval.

Lincoln would turn ideas over and over in his mind in the course of months and even years. Only after he was satisfied that he had thought through his idea, chosen the right words to express its many dimensions, and polished the grammar of its expression was he ready to share it in public.

Lincoln describes here a God who acts in "quiet power." At first glance this was a curious way to portray a deity whom Lincoln usually referred to as the "Almighty." The God whom Lincoln had encountered in the revivalism of his youth was a noisy God. The God of Civil War jingoists, the God who was on "our side," was a strident God. But Lincoln points to a God whose quiet purposes were at work in the world.

This power of God, however quiet, was so commanding that "He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest." Lincoln, whose solitary purpose at the outset of the hostilities was to save the Union, now ascribed to God the singular might to save or obliterate his beloved Union.

At this point in his dialogue with himself Lincoln used the word "yet" twice: "Yet the contest began" and "Yet the contest proceeds." The use of the terse adverb helped Lincoln maintain the creative tension between divine action and human action.

Who, then, is this God of whom Lincoln speaks? Four times, Lincoln describes God as a God who wills. "The will of God prevails. . . . In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. . . . God wills this contest . . . and wills that it shall not end yet."

Lincoln's use of the word underscores the main point of his meditation—that God was the primary if quiet actor in the war.

But Lincoln offered no indication that God was on the side of the Union. Religion has become captive again and again to patriotism in times of war. Lincoln met religious patriots, both clergy and laity, regularly in his office. He was convinced that "God wills this war," but this conviction was balanced by his reluctance to equate God's will with the actions of either side. "In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party."

War, in any era, calls forth proponents who espouse the rightness of their cause with absolute certainty. The greatest demagoguery churned out by politicians has usually occurred in the midst of war. All of this makes Lincoln's honest wrestling with God's purposes the more remarkable.

The "Meditation on the Divine Will" is an intriguing example of Lincoln's humility. The reflection is suffused with his growing conviction that God was the primary actor in this war. But in an atmosphere charged with religious fervor and hyperpatriotism, Lincoln expressed his belief that God's purposes may not be able to be identified with either side.

Lincoln neither touted his own sagacity nor claimed that God was on his or the Union's side. He pondered how it was that God, as the unseen quiet actor in the war, was working out his will through human instruments.

Lincoln continued privately to work out his own understanding of the trajectory of God's will. Two and a half years later, his private musing would form the core of what he would come to believe was his finest speech, his Second Inaugural Address.