

Our Better Angels  
Posted On:December 31, 1969

Abraham Lincoln in his first Inaugural Address, on Monday, March 4, 1861, delivered a speech as he was sworn in to office. His election created a huge crisis in which the Southern States created a Confederacy, a rival nation, and declared war. The issue was supposedly "States' Rights," but the rights that the Confederacy demanded were the rights of White people to enslave Black people.

From its beginnings, the United States wrestled with this issue. How could we believe in liberty for all (our claim) while we held human beings in bondage? In the compromise that determined how population would be counted for representation in Congress, each Black was counted as three-fifths of a person.

During the French Revolution of 1789, the revolutionary government emancipated all slaves in their overseas plantations. They did it because it was right. But shortly thereafter, Napoleon became Emperor and one of his first acts was to reestablish plantation slavery. His motives were economic and political.

Despite this, world currents were making slavery a shameful institution and several nations finally addressed it. In England, Quakers waged a half-century of persuasion which culminated in Parliament finally abolishing slavery. Slavery was never a domestic institution in England; it was an economic practice of overseas plantation owners and shipping companies. Parliament reluctantly voted for emancipation, despite the protests of some powerful men. It was the right thing to do.

Even in autocratic and repressive Russia, the surprisingly enlightened Tsar Alexander II in 1861 ended serfdom, a variety of slavery. He heeded his better angels. Those with no such angels assassinated him.

My reason for resurrecting this history is what Lincoln said in his First Inaugural, a speech that is relevant to our country today. "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 will swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature." This was his appeal to the South, an appeal rejected by them as they pursued a policy that certainly came from the opposite of the better angels of our nature.

We are a strange country with a history that is a checkerboard of our better and worse angels. We attempted to exterminate the Native American tribes in our quest to settle all land between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. We postponed the issue of slavery until it nearly split us in half. Our post-Civil War years were characterized by exploitation of new immigrants and revoking the efforts to integrate former slaves.

The Chinese who came to build our railroad system were hunted down and murdered or deported. We became a country of robber barons and a miserable working class. But our good fortune was the growth of an upright and decent Middle Class and a president in 1901, Theodore Roosevelt, who revived the process of "doing the right thing," promoting our better angels.

He took on the robber barons, addressed the environmental despoiling of the country, established the first National Parks (unique in the world), and was tireless in promoting our better natures.

We have had, since then, a succession of elected presidents who have alternated between promoting our better or worse natures during their administrations. From the moral low of the 1920s, characterized by untrammelled greed and a rampant Ku Klux Klan with a culture of hatred, we rose to a high during World War II, when we saved the world from Hitler's ugly rule.

We became one of two superpowers after that war and presided over a global order that protected free trade, fed the starving, and absorbed hordes of refugees who made this a better country. We became a model of what a good nation-state should be, in contrast to our opponent, the Communist Soviet Union, a society notable only for a nuclear arsenal and a ghastly system of imprisoning dissenters. They built walls to keep their people from leaving.

Today, our better angels are under threat. We need to revisit that Lincoln Inaugural if our republic is to survive.

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