

Ronald C. White, Jr.:

The Eloquent President: A Portrait of Lincoln Through his Words

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Recent years have seen a virtual cottage industry devoted to books about Abraham Lincoln, an American President of undoubtedly perennial interest and relevance – perhaps especially so in a period of remarkable political uncertainty and division in the United States. As if in response to the contemporary American stage's paucity of great political eloquence, a significant number of these books have paid heed to Lincoln's skills and methods as a rhetorician and orator, including at least three monographs fully devoted to close textual and historical exegeses of individual Lincoln speeches: Garry Wills' *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), Howard Holzer's *Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech That Made Abraham Lincoln President* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), and Ronald C. White Jr.'s *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002). White, who is Professor Emeritus of American Intellectual and Religious History at San Francisco Theological Seminary and author and editor of six books on the intersection of Christianity and politics in American history, has now added to this a mostly lucid narrative exploration of the principle speeches Lincoln gave or wrote as President.

As its subtitle indicates, *The Eloquent President: A Portrait of Lincoln through his Words* is less scholarly exegesis than ekphrasis. White frankly claims to offer a book "aimed at the thoughtful general reader" (p. 430), which attempts to "see Lincoln's speeches as a string of pearls" (p. 224), each one accomplished in itself, yet all the more so when read in the context of the events to which each responded, as well as with a sense for the personal, political, and spiritual development in Lincoln, to which the full string gives testament. In these aims the book succeeds tolerably well. While it will not provide great sustenance to the scholar looking for sophisticated or strikingly new rhetorical interpretations of these speeches – such is Lincoln's evocative power that most rhetoric scholars reasonably well attuned to the history of the period could glean the bulk of White's observations by reading through those speeches themselves (they are helpfully included in a series of appendices, pp. 309-401) – the book presents a readable account of Lincoln's rhetorical presidency, with a particularly keen ear for contrapuntal locutions and developing themes. It would be particularly well suited to undergraduate and graduate students trying to gain a foothold in the widening landscape of rhetorical studies devoted to Lincoln, as it also includes a bibliographical essay of significant works about Lincoln's rhetoric (pp. 422-430). Probably of greatest scholarly interest are the appendices themselves, most of which were transcribed by the staff of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln project at Springfield, Illinois, showing (where possible) multiple versions of some speeches, as well as editorial changes made by Lincoln as each speech evolved, in some cases responding to suggestions by his Secretary of State, William H. Seward.

In his Prologue (pp. xix-xxiii), White sets out the overarching questions his book would address, the most central of which aim to discover the sources of Lincoln's eloquence and the trajectory of his development as a rhetorician. White cites Aristotle's *Rhetoric* as underlying his approach, arguing that Lincoln's rhetoric "embodies" the three artistic proofs of ethos, pathos, and logos (p. xxi). Of course, one could say this of a great many effective orators. There is no

evidence that Lincoln ever read Aristotle, as White readily admits (p. xxi), so the *Rhetoric* is a curious choice here, the more so in that White makes no use of other core concepts from Aristotelian rhetorical theory, several of which could be extremely useful in his reading of the speeches, such as the enthymeme, the *topoi*, or propriety (political and linguistic appropriateness is a conspicuous leitmotif in Lincoln's rhetoric). Aristotle is rarely revisited over the course of the book, and only once in the context of the *pisteis*, so both scholarly and general readers may be puzzled by the inclusion.

A more apt reference point would have been Hugh Blair, whose widely reprinted and excerpted rhetoric lectures Lincoln may well have known (Blair is cited in Samuel Kirkham's 1829 *English Grammar*, which we know Lincoln studied, even memorizing significant portions). The belletristic approach to rhetoric espoused by Blair, with its homage to Quintilian balanced alongside an enlightened appreciation for perspicuity and propriety, and informed by the tolerant ethos of Presbyterian moderatism, seems more germane than Aristotle to understanding Lincoln's rhetoric. One need not strain to hear the belletristic sensibility in one of the few systematic statements about the nature of rhetoric Lincoln ever publicly uttered. Surprisingly, White doesn't quote the passage, and since it is not well-enough known, it is worth reproducing here. Speaking on February 22, 1842, before the Springfield Washington Temperance Society on the occasion of George Washington's birthday, Lincoln astonished his audience with a speech that criticized the closed and unsympathetic fist of denunciation and damnation as a solution to the problem of "demon Intemperance", championing instead the sincere, sympathetic, eloquent open hand of what we would now call the recovering alcoholic:

When the conduct of men is designed to be influenced, *persuasion*, kind, unassuming persuasion, should ever be adopted. It is an old and a true maxim, that a "drop of honey catches more flies than a gallon of gall." So with men. If you would win a man to your cause, *first* convince him that you are his sincere friend. Therein is a drop of honey that catches his heart, which, say what he will, is the great highroad to his reason, and which, when once gained, you will find but little trouble in convincing his judgment of the justice of your cause, if indeed that cause really be a just one. On the contrary, assume to dictate to his judgment, or to command his action, or to mark him as one to be shunned and despised, and he will retreat within himself, close all the avenues to his head and his heart; and though your cause be naked truth itself, transformed to the heaviest lance, harder than steel, and sharper than steel can be made, and though you throw it with more than Herculean force and precision, you shall no more be able to pierce him, than to penetrate the hard shell of a tortoise with a rye straw. Such is man, and so *must* he be understood by those who would lead him, even to his own best interest.¹

This nice bit of theory, a page out of belletristic rhetoric, goes a good deal further than an oblique reference to Aristotle's proofs in explaining President Lincoln's tempering of some of his earlier, more lawyerly argumentation with ever greater doses of language designed to move the passions on the "great highroad to [...] reason", even while his abiding faith in a transcendent idea of justice deepened over time.

White mentions Kirkham (p. 103), and recognizes that Lincoln studied grammar in order to learn to speak and write (p. 104), but he misses the connection between systematic grammar and belletristic rhetoric: "The principles of rhetoric", Kirkham writes, "are principally based on those unfolded and illustrated in the science of grammar. Hence, an acquaintance with the latter, and, indeed, with the liberal arts, is a prerequisite to the study of rhetoric and belles-lettres".² To

¹ Abraham Lincoln, *Collected works*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), vol. 1, p. 274. Available online at <<http://www.hti.umich.edu/l/lincoln>>.

² Samuel Kirkham, *English Grammar in Familiar Lectures* (New York: R. Lockwood, 1829), p. 215.

that end Kirkham added to his *Grammar* an appendix on prosody (which White mentions, cf. p. 103) and also on rhetoric (which White neglects). Such inclusions were commonplace in nineteenth-century American grammar textbooks; it is therefore safe to say that one who learned 'grammar' as Lincoln did, had indeed also studied basic principles of rhetorical style. Kirkham includes a digest of principles of composition, advocating firm knowledge of subject matter as well as stylistic skills in perspicuity (consisting of purity, propriety, and precision), sentence structure (requiring unity, clearness, strength, and harmony) and ornament (for which Kirkham adduces a brief list of fourteen schemes and tropes). Why not assume that Lincoln memorized these formulae along with definitions of the parts of speech and rules of syntax? Throughout his analyses, White uses the term 'figure' in a loose way; one may regret that an author seeking to bring the importance of rhetoric before a wider reading audience did not advert to the terms and concepts of the art that even his subject most likely knew well.

Nevertheless, both scholarly and general readers will find White's broad account accessible and engaging. The author structures his portrait chronologically, devoting a chapter to each of eleven key rhetorical moments in Lincoln's presidency. He begins with the farewell address at Springfield of February 11, 1861, as the President-elect prepared to embark on an extended train journey to Washington. This first chapter, "With a Task Before Me Greater than...Washington" (pp. 3-22; each chapter is entitled with a quote from the text under consideration), introduces key traits that White finds "expanding" (p. 22) through Lincoln's presidential career: a reticence to speak without deliberate preparation, an intense interest in the sound of words and the rhythm of phrases, a penchant for parallel and antithetical structure, and, most significantly, a sincere, humble, and prayerful religiosity.

White's second chapter, "This, His Almost Chosen People" (pp. 23-61), then follows Lincoln's twelve-day trip to Washington, listening in on speeches he delivered along the way. That trip was itself remarkable and unprecedented; citizens then did not expect presidents to put on such a road show. It was also inauspicious, if not an outright disaster. Many found it unseemly, others badly done. Edward Everett, the famous orator who would later be bested by Lincoln at Gettysburg, found the speeches "ordinary" and "destitute", Lincoln "a person of very inferior cast of character" (p. 60). But Lincoln clearly felt it necessary to try and prove his mettle, particularly at that impending moment of national crisis. White notes that his secretary John Nicolay and assistant John Hay wrote in their posthumous history that the President "had no fondness for public display" yet valued "the importance of personal confidence and live sympathy" (p. 30) – yet another sure touch of belletristic character.

In chapter three ("The Mystic Chords of Memory", pp. 62-97) White takes up the well-known First Inaugural address, in which he shows Lincoln as a fine rhetorical and dialectical craftsman, working in consultation with Seward to construct a carefully argued and precisely worded speech that strategically placed the Union as antecedent to the nation. Particularly helpful is White's juxtaposition of excerpts from Seward's and Lincoln's texts in parallel columns, which makes it easy to see Lincoln's gift for verbal music and visual particularity (p. 90). Though not a new reading, White ably demonstrates Lincoln's lawyerly brilliance at placing the incipient war "in the larger context of the Constitution, his oath, and a shared history" (p. 87), noting insightfully that "[n]ever, before or since, has there been such congruence between a speech addressing the meaning of the oath and taking the oath" (p. 92).

White's fourth chapter ("This is...a People's Contest", pp. 98-124) addresses the July 4, 1861 Message to Congress, which had been called to a special session by Lincoln after the siege of Fort Sumter in April. Americans now are accustomed to an annual 'State of the Union' message, but beginning with the presidency of Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809) and until that of Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921), presidential messages were 'delivered' as a written report and read aloud by a clerk. White shows that this document, issued after months of strategic silence designed to demonstrate the administration's resolve (though critics and partisans both thought

they spied a rudderless ship of state), was the product of painstaking labor by Lincoln, who consulted with Seward and others over a period of months to produce a text that was, against convention, in significant parts clearly imagined as an oration (p. 113). Lincoln reaffirmed the Union's perpetuity, but buttressed abstraction by writing for the ear and the eye, combining homely and high language in what White calls "a new kind of American communication" (p. 120). This idea is not new – it is best treated in Kenneth Cmiel's excellent *Democratic Eloquence* (New York: Morrow, 1990) and in Garry Wills' *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (cited above) – but White makes the point well, and makes a good case too that this 'speech' should be better known and more widely read as an eloquent elaboration of the Inaugural Address's arguments. Readers will be rewarded by taking White's advice and turning to the full text in the appendix (pp. 347-362), where they will find Lincoln ingeniously interpreting the events at Fort Sumter as in effect an argument replying to his Inaugural, yet one he in turn refutes by showing defenders of legitimate Southern "secession" to be guilty of "an insidious debauching of the public mind" via "ingenious sophism".

White follows this with two other lesser known rhetorical moments. Chapter five ("My Paramount Object in this Struggle", pp. 125-152) thus examines Lincoln's surprise public rebuttal to a critical open letter published by the influential newspaper publisher Horace Greeley. The letter, which appeared in Greeley's *Chicago Tribune* on August 20, 1861, had taken Lincoln to task for failing to enact emancipation. His pithy yet elegantly figured rebuttal, published in the *National Intelligencer* two days later, was framed with a charitable tone for Greeley's presumptive inferences (which Lincoln clearly found lacking), but it soundly refuted the letter's argument with a tightly constructed syllogistic response. White competently dissects the syllogism for readers not able to follow the reasoning Lincoln makes plain (pp. 147-148), but he neglects to address the way figuration (anaphora and epistrophe are prominent) propels the argument forward. Furthermore, the syllogism here is a *rhetorical* syllogism, which is to say an enthymeme, which leaves the audience to supply the conclusion. White either does not know the importance of the enthymeme to persuasion, or values it insufficiently as a critical tool.

Chapter six, "God Wills This Contest" (pp. 153-169), takes up Lincoln's "Meditation on the Divine Will", a private, strongly theological reflection most likely written in September, 1862, and discovered by Hay after his death. Why would this appear in a book about Lincoln's eloquence? White's worthwhile point is that it is a stunning example of Lincoln's inward dialogic rhetoric: after the disastrous Union defeat at the Second Battle of Bull Run, he composed a musing that wrestles with God's purposes, tentatively working out for himself (in language directly adumbrating the Second Inaugural) an acceptance that God had willed the War (p. 151). Against a recurrent grain in Lincoln scholarship pinning the President to a doctrine of fatalist necessity that had appealed to him as a young man, White convincingly argues that the Meditation exposes a Lincoln who believes in "a purposeful God who acts in history" (p. 161).

Lincoln's Annual Message to Congress of December 1, 1862, is the object of White's analysis in chapter seven ("We Cannot Escape History", pp. 170-189). As with the prior special message, White emphasizes the unusually oratorical qualities of the document, as Lincoln addressed multiple audiences on the subject of impending emancipation, which he had by now clearly seen as inseparable from saving the Union. The most probing observation, however, comes from David Zarefsky, who is quoted explaining that though the message entertains multiple points of view, including compensated emancipation, it in fact subverts that idea, "implicitly conceding the impracticality of what it explicitly proposes", thus clearing ground for Lincoln to offer "the more radical alternative" (p. 189).³ White holds with Zarefsky that Lincoln

³ Quoted from David Zarefsky, "Lincoln's 1862 Annual Message: A Paradigm of Rhetorical Leadership", *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 3:1 (2000), p. 5.

thus used his rhetoric to move his audience(s) to yield dogmatic positions and venture a new, as yet uncharted, course for the future.

Chapter eight, “You Say You Will Not Fight to Free Negroes” (pp. 190-222), makes timely reading, as we encounter a President invited to speak to an audience of partisans who yet remained unsure of the course of the War and of emancipation in particular. In September of 1863, Lincoln was too bound to duties in Washington to make the trip to Springfield to address what promised to be an enormous rally of Union supporters, but he seized the opportunity to send a message in the form of a letter which was read aloud before a massive crowd. It is probably the most pathos-laden of any of Lincoln’s rhetorical efforts – still logically ordered, but now with a much freer reign given to emotion and moving, vivid description. Rather than merely ‘rally his base’ (as we commonly say today), however, the President risked a remarkable openness to dialogue, validating both opponents’ questions and opponents themselves. While White occasionally belabors that which is equally artful and clear in Lincoln’s words, his reading of the letter as marking Lincoln’s full maturity as a rhetorician – that is as a speaker *and* a listener – is apt and insightful.

The Gettysburg Address, which is the subject of chapter nine (“This Nation, Under God, Shall Have a New Birth of Freedom,” pp. 223-259), is probably the most written-about, and surely the best-known, speech in the canon of American political rhetoric. White’s treatment retells the circumstances of the event in excellent detail, with analysis focused on contextualizing the speech within the trajectory of Lincoln’s development thus far. Word-by-word and phrase-by-phrase commentary emphasize Lincoln’s biblical language and cadences as well as his Anglo-Saxon diction as key to understanding the address. It is disappointing, however, that White does not engage Garry Wills’ masterfully penetrating interpretation of the Address. Instead, the best insight of the chapter comes from Edwin Black, who is quoted as holding Lincoln’s greatest instance of rhetorical to be his disappearance: “In place of his vanished ego, he proposes a set of principles of which he became the personification” (p. 255).⁴ White adds nuance to Black’s point, though, by showing readers a Lincoln less “vanished” than merged with and embodying the matrix of kairotic elements.

White’s penultimate case study in chapter ten (“I Claim Not to Have Controlled Events,” pp. 260-276) addresses a ‘speech’ far less familiar than the one preceding or following: in an official visit with Thomas E. Bramlette, the governor of Kentucky, who had come to the White House in March of 1864 to express disquiet over the recruitment of black soldiers, Lincoln delivered what he called “a little speech” (p. 261). It so moved the Kentuckian that he returned to ask Lincoln to write it out. Lincoln replied with a letter, quickly published in Kentucky and elsewhere, defending his actions by expressing his own struggle to balance his personal abhorrence of slavery with his Constitutional duties. Most fascinating is a coda to the letter, adding “a word which was not in the verbal conversation” (p. 271), wherein Lincoln self-deprecatingly offers “no compliment to my own sagacity” nor any “claim to have controlled events” (ibid.). White shows how these negations work to create a vacuum that could be filled but in one way: namely, with Lincoln averring that “God alone can claim it” (p. 273). Both the language and theological thrust of the Second Inaugural are evident here, and White convincingly puts to rest claims about Lincoln’s “essential passivity” (ibid., quoting a phrase from David H. Donald’s acclaimed Lincoln biography⁵). In view of White’s analysis, it must be allowed that any passivity was a strategic move with the active rhetorical aim of disclosing “God’s activity in History” (p. 275).

⁴ Edwin Black, “The Ultimate Voice of Lincoln”, *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 3:1 (2000), pp. 49-50.

⁵ David H. Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 10.

By the time readers reach White's final "pearl", they may sense an inaptness to the metaphor. The reply to Horace Greeley, the Meditation, and the "little speech" are pearls, but the Second Inaugural is something of transcendent fineness. The eleventh and final chapter, "With Malice Toward None; with Charity for All" (pp. 277-303), reprises many of the themes of White's earlier monograph on this speech, but now with the benefit of his rich textual and historical foray into meanings and strategies behind the ten earlier rhetorical moments examined in the book. The Second Inaugural marks the full florescence of Lincoln's wisdom and skill, and White lucidly depicts the work of a rhetorical theologian reflecting publicly on the limitations of human opinion and action before Divine power. In White's analysis, the speech appears as the logical culmination of a series of trials – political, military, personal, and rhetorical – through which Lincoln indeed emerged as "The Eloquent President". Readers reflecting on the Second Inaugural at the end of White's "string of pearls" will be apt to concur with the author that "Lincoln was the best commentator on Lincoln" (p. 303), not only in his own reflexive comments, but in the contrapuntalism of his rhetorical oeuvre as President. The value of White's narrative is in making it easier to see how this is the case. In a brief Epilogue (pp. 305-308), White laments that it is not something that can be said about contemporary presidents, but he holds out hope that the "strangely contemporary" (p. 308) rhetoric of Abraham Lincoln will inspire Americans and others to define their own times through the power of eloquence.

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