

American Disunion:

Abraham Lincoln and the Bloody Struggle to Find Common Ground

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When President Abraham Lincoln addressed the nation on March 4, 1861, he spoke to an American public approaching an unprecedented political brink with alarming rapidity and slowly tearing apart along the Mason-Dixon line. Lincoln's America was simultaneously convulsed by white supremacy, sectional culture clash, and a crisis of socioeconomic identity in an ever-changing global context. It was, in short, a politically polarized, hypocritical nation very much like the United States of today. Lincoln's messages of union and moderation would not be evident in the violent Civil War which followed his address, but those very scenes of gore served to retroactively underline the president's reframing of peaceful bipartisan, transcontinental politics as a critical lifeline for the republic – a sobering thought, indeed, from a man who witnessed firsthand its spectacular collapse.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the United States was no stranger to regional friction. Prior to the American Revolution, the coastal colonies boasted strong regional characters, deriving their singularity from their mixed indigenous, African, and European populations and

the distinct religions, languages, and politics contributed by each to their colony-wide dynamic. Geography, too, severed the colonies virtually in half, granting Southerners the mild climate and fertile topography necessary to build early tobacco and rice plantation empires, while rocky New England lent itself to smaller farms and seafaring trades. The newly liberated nation of the late eighteenth century seemed united only in its opposition to Great Britain – those strong personalities continued to trump nationalistic ardor even in the wake of patriotic triumph.

The United States, however, had endured unbroken until secession reared its ugly head in the 1800s, occasionally united ideologically but mostly out of necessity. A perfect storm of growing Southern economic dependence on slave labor, waves of abolitionist fervor in the North and in Europe, and the rickety road to western expansion continued to build sectional tension in the antebellum era, which saw slavery policy, then cultural institutions, and, finally, the two major political parties fray along the North-South border. During the fraught election of 1860, the political climate had rapidly deteriorated to the extent that Lincoln, the Republican candidate, was not on the ballot in several Southern states (Holzer). After his electoral victory, about a dozen Southern states which would form the Confederacy began to secede from the Union.

Abraham Lincoln, a Western Republican politician, emerged on to the national stage amidst this crisis. In the years which followed his historic election, he would lead the Union into a protracted war against its former members. Despite the passionate nature of his wartime term, his politically moderate leanings and devotion to eventual reunification pervaded his role in the Civil War and left definitive footprints on the era of Reconstruction which succeeded his untimely death. In his first inaugural address, he made an ultimately insufficient plea for bloodless reunification, for the preservation of a politically and sectionally diverse republic

which had, at its core, a few common national values and a dedication to the realization of the will of the people.

Lincoln's address has its merits: it makes a levelheaded case for cooperation in an era in which 'compromise' signified only unanimous political dissatisfaction and argues compellingly for peaceful disagreement as a hallmark of a functioning democracy. However, the insinuation that the issue of impending Civil War and, by extension, the issue of American slavery could be solved simply by ignoring their associated political tensions to create a façade of national cohesion is a blatant oversimplification. To argue that the path forward in this period was to embrace nationalism at the cost of turning a blind eye Southern plantation slavery overlooks vast human suffering and the undeniable significance of slavery in nineteenth century American politics, from the decades of disastrous compromises to the violence of Bleeding Kansas. It would be irresponsible, given the extent of Black disenfranchisement in American society at the time of Lincoln's inauguration to refer solely to "the better angels of our nature" and neglect the importance of pursuing justice for those afflicted by the opposite.

On January 6, 2021, in response to conspiracy theories about the results of a fair election, disillusioned rioters gathered at the Capitol. In the chaos of subsequent hours, bombs were discovered around D.C., hundreds of elected officials and the then-vice president were evacuated, crowds vandalized property, and several people died. For the first time, some 160 years after President Abraham Lincoln implored Americans to fight against the insidious forces of disunion, Confederate flags flew in the Capitol (Cramer). Two weeks later, another history-making political moderate, President Joe Biden, gave an inaugural speech which greatly resembled Lincoln's appeal to America's "bonds of affection," under similarly dire circumstances.

The recent insurrection at the United States Capitol marked the dissolution of a tenet of American democracy, the peaceful transfer of power. That violence and misinformation could permeate the halls of government is a profoundly unflattering reflection of the present state of American politics – and a potent illustration of the struggles faced by the divisive government of President Lincoln’s day. Respectful political relationships – including ideological disagreements – are an essential component of a functioning republic and adopting an outlook, like Lincoln’s, which centers on commonality, is imperative for a secure, united future.

#### Works Cited

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