

Lincoln and the War's Larger Meaning

Developed for the Abraham Lincoln Association [link:
<http://abrahamlincolnnassociation.org/default.htm>]

by Richard Schwartz
Coordinator, Social Studies
Whippany Park High School
Whippany, New Jersey

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(All documents cited in these lesson plans are from the Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln accessed from the main page of the Abraham Lincoln Association web site)

Background: President Abraham Lincoln's most fateful decision came early in his presidency. Choosing to contest Confederate seizure of Fort Sumter, and then calling for 75,000 volunteers to quell the rebellion amounted to a declaration of war, albeit against people that Lincoln always considered his own countrymen. Four years later Lincoln looked back on the spring of 1861, Lincoln said in his Second Inaugural Address, given weeks before the war's end, "Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained."

This was an understatement. If the war began amid a carnival atmosphere of gaudy uniforms, glorious parades, the dedication of regimental flags sewn by the women of the localities from which units came, it quickly became something very different. Grief, pain, and suffering visited the homes of the over 600,000 dead, not to mention those wounded physically or emotionally. When Americans look at the casualties suffered by European armies fifty years later in the First World War, they usually shake their heads in wonder at the immensity of the slaughter. They would be well-reminded, however, that this nation had its Somme, its Tannenberg, its Caporetto at places such as Shiloh, Sharpsburg, and Cold Harbor. To put it another way, two of the better-known wars of the last century did not approach the Civil War death toll; about 350,000 Americans died in World War II; approximately 58,000 Americans perished in the Vietnam War.

As head of government, head of the political party that ran the war from Congress and the White House, and as commander-in-chief, Lincoln had the responsibility of explaining the war's meaning to a sometimes war-weary and oft-times divided people. In a democracy, wartime leaders must offer justification for the pain and suffering that war entails, or they risk a loss of public support, followed by defeat and disgrace. Lincoln understood this, and he often spoke eloquently of the war's "larger meaning." Some of his most memorable—and shortest—speeches sought to explain why it was necessary for the Union to fight and win "this terrible war."

In most of these speeches, Lincoln sought to uplift his audience. He exhorted them to continue to support this war to save the Union. Lincoln asserted that America had passed

two phases of a unique experiment in self-government—establishing and administering it—and as yet needed to prove that it could sustain such government during a concerted effort to overthrow it. He reminded them that America was unique, in that it was founded not around common blood or even soil, but around a set of principles, the first of which was the principle of human equality. And as a believer in “free labor ideology,” Lincoln contended that the war’s result would determine whether common people like himself would be able to continue to lift themselves up through effort and ingenuity (what we might now call “the American dream.”) Southern victory would represent *minority*, not *majority* rule and the probable extension of slavery further throughout the hemisphere. Those who gave their lives for the Union were thus doing noble work, for they died to stave off a result that Lincoln truly dreaded..

At the same time, Lincoln seems to have come to believe in what historian Allen Guelzo calls the “doctrine of necessity.” This led him to advance another, more sobering message to the American people, North and South. Lincoln’s religious faith, always a predicament to scholars, seems to have caused him to see God’s will in the terrible suffering endured by the American people from 1861 to 1865. Believing that an all-powerful God could halt the bloodletting at any time and award either side victory, Lincoln came to believe that God had given the American people “this terrible war, as the woe due to whom the offence came.” That offence was “American slavery,” (not merely *Southern* slavery; Lincoln implicated both the white North and the white South.) Seen this way, the war was a judgment handed down by a just God who saw both the need to eradicate slavery and to discipline those responsible for it.

It is noteworthy that the bulk of Lincoln’s speeches on the war took the former, exhortatory form, and that the speech which embodied the latter view was not delivered until the war’s final weeks. It might have been difficult to motivate Northerners to keep up the fight had Lincoln told the loyal citizens that this war was a judgment on them as much as on the white South. And he never gave up on the “exhortatory” speech, best embodied in the Gettysburg Address. Notice that in his Speech to the 166th Ohio Regiment in August 1864, he gives a trimmed-down version of this message.

As you and your students examine these speeches and writings, the question to ponder is this: *Did President Lincoln have a singular or a dual view of the Civil War’s ‘larger meaning?’ This was the bloodiest war in American history by far. To Lincoln, what was the point of all the violence? Do you agree with his view(s) of the war?*

Sample Lesson: Lincoln and the War’s Larger Meaning

Documents for this lesson

Document 1: Address to the New Jersey Senate, February 21, 1861

Document 2: Speech at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, February 22, 1861

Document 3: Meditation on the Divine Will, September, 1862

Document 4: Address at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, November 19, 1863

Document 5: Speech to the 166th Ohio Regiment, August 22, 1864

Document 6: Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865

Start-up Activity: As the students enter the classroom, present them with a handout which lays out the death toll for America's major wars. (You can find this information easily in an almanac.) Ask students to account for the disproportionate number of deaths that marked the Civil War. If possible, contrast the nation's population in 1860 (a little over 30 million) to that of modern-day America. Engage them in a brief discussion of what that sort of death toll might have meant in the lives of Americans of that time period. Especially early in the war, many units were drawn from specific localities; what did it mean when a regiment representing a given county, city, or handful of contiguous towns got badly shot up in a battle? What might this death toll have meant to a largely agrarian country? What would it have meant to married women? To single women? To children?

Then ask them what Lincoln's challenge would have been, given this death toll. Again, brainstorm. After a day such as September 17, when 25,000 Americans were killed or wounded at the Battle of Antietam, what would the American people want from their president? Steer the students toward the notion that Americans might expect their president to explain why this level of pain and suffering was necessary.

Document analysis:

a). Divide the students into two halves. Each student in group 1 should read Lincoln's speech to the New Jersey Senate; each student in group 2 should read his speech at Independence Hall. Then ask the students to draw upon these speeches as you discuss this question:

As of the winter of 1861, why would Lincoln have been willing to fight to save the Union?

Take student responses on this question, drawing on these two speeches. Remind students that both speeches were given prior to the outbreak of hostilities. Chalk up student responses.

b.) Then remind the students that by August, 1864, the war had reached levels of violence that no one had anticipated in 1861. Have all of the students read Lincoln's "Meditation on the Divine Will," and Lincoln's "Speech to the 166th Ohio Regiment." Then, pose this question:

By 1862, this war had become a very bloody thing indeed. Why not just save the lives and break it off, put an end to it? How would Lincoln answer that question?

Does Lincoln offer one single explanation as to why we can't just end it? Or does he offer two? If its two, how would you label, characterize, or describe them?

c.) Having established that Lincoln felt that we had to fight on because: 1) we needed to keep our nation and its principles alive; and 2) even if we wanted to stop it, God would end it when He was good and ready, turn to Lincoln's two most famous speeches.

First, read aloud the Gettysburg Address—it needs to be heard as well as read. You will probably enjoy reading it to your students. Ask the students two questions:

These “honored dead.” Who were they? Just the Yankees, or both the Yankees and the Rebels? Why do you say this? What in the speech tells you that he's honoring one or both?

Which view of the war does this speech belong to? The “keep alive the nation and its principles” approach, or the “God's will” approach? Why do you say this?

Then, have students read silently the Second Inaugural. Follow with a single question:

Which approach does Lincoln use in this speech? What passage most clearly indicates Lincoln's understanding of the war's larger meaning in this address? Why do you say this?

Bringing Closure: The students will have dealt with some heavy, abstract material here, so try to simplify it for them. On the chalkboard, make two large headings. On one side, write “The War as A Noble Struggle.” On the other side, write, “The War as God's Judgment.” Have the students note the names of the speeches and writings that belong under each heading. (Most will fit best under the “Noble Struggle.” The “Meditation on Divine Will” and the Second Inaugural fit most logically under the latter.)

Pose these two discussion questions. (If time allows, you may wish to allow students to “free-write responses to these, so as to enhance the quality of summary discussion.)

Lincoln seems to have seen the war as having had a dual meaning. Do you agree with him? Why or why not?

Assuming that Lincoln was right, how is this useful to us as students of the Civil War? Is it useful for us as students of the totality of American history? Is it useful for as citizens of the American nation today?