The morning of March 4, 1865 was dreary and dismal in the nation’s capital. Torrential rains flooded the city, and the largely unpaved streets were clogged with several inches of mud. The city was encased in a gloomy, thick fog that for a while refused to lift. Howling winds started to whip through the streets with enough force to rip down tree limbs. There was an overwhelming military presence of federal soldiers, who roamed the city and monitored every major thoroughfare to dissuade a rumored Confederate plan to assassinate the president. Unseen sharpshooters stationed themselves on the roofs and in the windows around the Capitol building. It was a melancholy and inauspicious start for President Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address.

The dull weather did nothing to keep tens of thousands of spectators away from the event. The Baltimore & Ohio railroad depot was flooded with arriving passengers. People emerged from overcrowded hotel lobbies or firehouses where they had slept on cots or the floor. Hundreds of wounded amputee soldiers slowly hobbled through the mud toward the Capitol on their crutches. One man, a young actor named John Wilkes Booth, who was hatching a plan to abduct the president and hold him hostage for the Confederacy, walked to the Capitol. He eventually pushed his way through the throng to within thirty feet of the president.

A late-morning inaugural parade down Pennsylvania Avenue lifted the depressed atmosphere somewhat. Before he took the oath of office early in the day, Vice President Andrew Johnson embarrassed himself with a drunken speech to a small crowd within the confines of the Senate chamber, prompting President Lincoln to say, “Do not let Johnson speak outside.” The outdoor festivities continued as planned as the rain had stopped.

In November 1864, Republican incumbent president Abraham Lincoln defeated his Democratic Party rival, General George McClellan, in the presidential election. In the coming months, Union armies would score huge victories as General William Sherman had cut a swath of destruction through the South, and General Ulysses Grant chased and finally defeated General Robert E. Lee. With the ghastly war that had killed more than 600,000 Americans winding down, President Lincoln and Congress fought over how the population would be brought together again and the Union reunited. In his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln offered a message of reconciliation and respect for the vanquished foe. It was one of his last speeches as Lincoln was assassinated five weeks later.
At the appointed time, the gaunt, six-foot-four Lincoln rose, put on his steel-rimmed glasses, and stepped up to a small iron table with a short speech in his left hand. At that moment, the clouds parted to reveal an azure sky and sunlight. Everyone’s mood instantly lifted as Lincoln began his speech, though as observer Frederick Douglass noted, the mood was still “quiet, earnest, and solemn” because of the nature of Lincoln's speech, which “sounded more like a sermon” than an Inaugural Address.

Lincoln was the first president to be re-elected for a second term since Andrew Jackson, and a Union victory spelling the end of the tragic war was nearly within grasp. He could have triumphantly persecuted the Confederacy with vengeance. Lincoln's address, however, magnanimously offered reconciliation and respect for the defeated enemy.

Many people in the huge audience expected the president to cast blame on the South for the Civil War. However, Lincoln began the speech surveying the causes of the war, asserting, “All dreaded it – all sought to avert it . . . Both parties deprecated war.” He did not blame the South for the great calamity that had claimed more than 600,000 American lives. Rather, he only obliquely referred to any southern responsibility for starting the war when he stated that, “one of them would make war, rather than let the nation survive, and the other would accept war rather than let it perish. And the war came.” Neither side, he continued, anticipated the magnitude or long duration of the war, and neither side could be blamed that it was so destructive.

Lincoln squarely declared that slavery was the cause of the war. Nevertheless, although slaveholding in 1865 was restricted almost entirely to the South, he called slavery a national sin, not a sectional one. Lincoln saw the war as God’s punishment on both sides for the great moral wrong and shared sin of slavery. “If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come . . . He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war.” The war was a dreadful payment for “the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil . . . and every drop of blood drawn with the lash.”

Lincoln’s conciliatory language included noting the shared religious outlook of Northerners and Southerners. Both sides were primarily composed of Christians who “read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other.” However, Lincoln cautioned northerners not to think that the impending victory was a signal of divine favor. Both suffered in the tragedy, and “The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.” Lincoln invoked the biblical Sermon on the Mount, a passage rooted in mercy and grace, as he counseled all Americans, “Let us judge not that we be not judged.” His message was fundamentally one of forgiveness and respect.

Lincoln concluded with a final appeal for magnanimity as the war came to a close and the nation sought to renew the bonds of union. He believed that the people needed to act “with malice toward none; with charity for all” in order “to bind up the nation’s wounds.”
called on all Americans to “cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.”

With those final words, Lincoln completed his 703-word speech. The address had only lasted some six minutes, but had profoundly communicated the virtue of respect. Many in the audience were disappointed that the address did not outline a path of punishment for the South. However, Lincoln’s wisdom in striving for a course of forgiveness and unity has stood the test of time, and the address remains one of the greatest speeches in American history.

At a White House reception, Frederick Douglass barely made it through the front door and the immense crowd because of the color of his skin. Lincoln saw the former slave and asked him what he thought of the speech. After a silent moment to consider, Douglass replied, “Mr. Lincoln, that was a sacred effort.” When Douglass later honored Lincoln after his death, he praised the speech, stating the president “was willing to let justice have its course.” It was a humane and respectful justice.