

Lincoln Becomes President

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On March 4, 1861, Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office and was inaugurated as the United States sixteenth president. Because of increasing hostility between North and South, the events of the day were much more tense than at a typical inauguration. Rumors swirled about the capital that Lincoln would be abducted or killed before he was able to take office. His safety during the day was entrusted to the U.S. Army under its aging commander, Winfield Scott.

As outgoing President James Buchanan and Lincoln rode down Pennsylvania Avenue from the Willard Hotel to the Capitol, they were surrounded by soldiers and sharpshooters on rooftops kept an eye out for unusual movement toward the carriage. The Capitol had an unfinished appearance. It was covered in scaffolding as the old copper and wooden dome was replaced with a much larger cast iron version.

After reaching the Capitol, the presidential party made their way to the Senate chamber where outgoing Vice President John Breckinridge made a few remarks and new Vice President Hannibal Hamlin was sworn in at around noon. The party now made their way to the front of the Capitol where long-time friend Senator Edward Baker introduced Lincoln to the crowd of roughly 25,000 spectators. According to another friend Carl Schurz "I saw Lincoln step forward to the desk upon which the Bible lay – his rugged face, appearing above all those around him, calm and sad." This same Bible would be used 148 years later in the inauguration of Barack Obama.

With many of those in the crowd and on the platform anticipating a fatal gunshot to ring out at any moment, Lincoln embarked on an eloquent and conciliatory speech. He reaffirmed that he had no desire to end slavery where it currently existed and believed that he had no legal right to do so. He reaffirmed that he believed in the rights of the States to control their own domestic institutions according to their judgment and that for armed forces to invade any state was a grave crime. He reaffirmed his believe in the Fugitive Slave Act, which required escaped slaves to be returned to those who laid claim to them.

After these olive branches to the South, Lincoln focused on a point about which he was not willing to compromise. He believed and stated that no state could lawfully leave the Union. He believed therefore that all ordinances of secession were null and void and that any acts of violence against United States forces or property were revolutionary. As he stated in the speech, “Plainly the central idea of secession is the very essence of anarchy.”

As Lincoln neared closing, he pleaded with Southerners to be friends and not enemies: “ In *your* hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in *mine*, is the momentous issue of civil war. The Government will not assail *you*. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. *You* have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the Government, while I shall have the most solemn one to "preserve, protect, and defend it."

After closing, Chief Justice Robert Taney administered the oath. Lincoln kissed the Bible and one observer noted that “The man looked like a man, and acted a man and a President.” Reviews of the speech were mixed, not surprising considering the confusing and contentious times in which it was delivered. Many Southerners viewed it as an act of war, concealed in pacific language while others were unsure whether speech meant war or peace.

The next day Lincoln named his Cabinet: Secretary of State William Seward, Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Chase, Secretary of War Simon Cameron, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, Attorney General Edward Bates and Secretary of the Interior Caleb Smith.

To the South, Texas was officially admitted to the Confederacy on March 2 and on the following day Brigadier General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard of the new Confederate States Army was assigned command of the Southern forces at Charleston, South Carolina. So March 1861 began with the number of seceded states growing and the newly inaugurated President asserting that the act of secession was illegal and revolutionary. Violence seemed inevitable.