

Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words

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Review

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Wilson, Douglas L. *Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words.*
Alfred A. Knopf, \$26.95 hardcover ISBN 9781400040396

What Abraham Lincoln Wrote and Spoke

America's sixteenth president set the standard for presidential composition and it has not been surpassed—even with the modern advent of the hired hand speechwriter or a speech writing team. Abraham Lincoln wrote the most famous speech in world history, the Gettysburg Address, which defined democracy for ordinary people. A year later he resurrected the largely forgotten example of the classical magnanimous political leader for the modern world in his phrase with malice toward none. Ironically, even fellow wordsmiths, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, failed to recognize Lincoln's talents during his lifetime, just as others often failed to appreciate his talent as the consummate democratic political leader.

To gain a window on his presidency and a key to his accomplishments, Douglas L. Wilson, co-director of the Lincoln Studies Center at Knox College and the author of the highly praised *Honor's Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln* (1998), uses his new book to focus on Lincoln's writing style. Though Wilson has little to add to how someone with a minimal elementary education could achieve eloquence, he suggests patterns in Lincoln's style that led him to emerge as a distinctly American writer.

So as to not overwhelm the reader, Wilson focuses on nine pieces of Lincoln's writing: (1) the Farewell Address at Springfield, Illinois (February 11, 1861); (2) the First Inaugural (March 4, 1861); (3) the Message to Congress in Special Session (July 4, 1861); (4) the Emancipation Proclamation (January 1, 1863); (5) the Letter to Horace Greeley (August 22, 1862); (6) the Letter to Erastus Corning and Others (June 12, 1863); (7) the Letter to James C. Conkling (August 26, 1863); (8) the Gettysburg Address (November 19, 1863); and (9) the Second Inaugural Address (March 4, 1865).

And what are the patterns? There are at least seven: (1) he wrote a lot; (2) he continually revised his speeches even after delivering them; (3) he wrote with a purpose and a particular audience in mind; (4) he continuously thought through issues, often writing ideas on scraps of paper when they occurred to him and literally putting them on file until he was ready to write in length; (5) he chose his words carefully to achieve a purpose, including trying to shape public opinion; (6) he avoided off-hand comments, preferring prepared remarks; (7) he wrote by ear and listened to the comments from others, especially William Seward, his secretary of state. These patterns often led to Lincoln's prose poetry when he was at his best.

Though the topic of this book may seem dull to many, the author makes it interesting through his own remarkable clarity as a writer. His insights on writing provide a window into Lincoln's thinking and his determination to make America's great experiment in self-government serve as a model for the rest of the world even during a civil war.

William D. Pederson, the American Studies Endowed Chair at Louisiana State University in Shreveport, is the author and editor of many books, most recently The FDR Years (2006), and The Great Presidential Triumvirate at Home and Abroad (2006).