



## The Patriot-News

### A TALL ORDER

%%headline%%Obama's challenges are many, but Lincoln's were even bigger

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Barack Obama is hardly the first president to take office at a time of national crisis. No one confronted a greater crisis than Abraham Lincoln, who watched the South secede in the four months between his election in 1860 and his inauguration on March 4, 1861.

On Feb. 22, 1861, on the way to Washington to take his oath of office, Lincoln stopped in Harrisburg and Philadelphia.

Lincoln was keenly aware of the anniversary of George Washington's birth and the history of America's founding. Standing in front of Independence Hall in Philadelphia, the president-elect said: "I have often pondered over the dangers which were incurred by the men who assembled here and adopted that Declaration of Independence ... I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the mother land; but something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that all should have an equal chance. This is the sentiment embodied in that Declaration of Independence."

The former Illinois congressman stood at attention as the country's new flag was raised. Only a month earlier, the admission of Kansas necessitated adding a 34th star to the flag. It was the future of Kansas, the future of slavery in Kansas, and the preservation of the equality principle of the Declaration of Independence that had brought Lincoln, a lawyer in Springfield, Ill., back into politics in 1854. It was the struggle over slavery in "Bleeding Kansas" that had preoccupied the nation thereafter and led to Lincoln's election as president over longtime Illinois rival Stephen A. Douglas.

Leaving Springfield, Lincoln had told his neighbors: "A duty devolves upon me which is, perhaps, greater than that which has devolved upon any other man since the days of Washington. He never would have succeeded except for the aid of Divine Providence, upon which he at all times relied."

Lincoln well understood the new dangers facing the American republic. Seven Southern states had seceded by the time he became president. Lincoln had also received multiple reports about a conspiracy to assassinate him when he passed through Baltimore. Arriving in Harrisburg, Lincoln insisted that his support was the American people under God: "I feel that, under God, in the strength of the arms and wisdom of the heads of these masses, after all, must be my support. As I have often had occasion to say, I repeat to you - I am quite sure I do not deceive myself when I tell you I bring to the work an honest heart; I dare not tell you that I bring a head sufficient for it. If my own strength should fail, I shall at least fall back upon these masses, who, I think, under any circumstances will not fail."

While Lincoln met with government officials and residents of Harrisburg, his friends arranged to get him safely to the nation's capital. Early that evening, Lincoln slipped out of a hotel reception and boarded a special train in Harrisburg to take him back to Philadelphia. To ensure the secrecy of his travels, telegraph lines to Harrisburg were cut.

At Philadelphia, Lincoln transferred to the regular 11 p.m. train to Washington. He got through Baltimore

without incident -- save for a local drunk awakening the passengers by yelling repeatedly: "Captain, it's four o'clock!"

When Lincoln arrived at the Washington train station, an Illinois politician surprised Lincoln and his bodyguards.

Lincoln reacted quickly to prevent them from knocking down the welcoming congressman. Shortly thereafter, Lincoln wired his wife in Harrisburg that he had arrived safely in Washington.

He checked into Willard's Hotel, where New York Sen. William H. Seward met him and escorted him the few blocks to the White House. Elsewhere in the hotel, a North-South peace conference was meeting -- trying unsuccessfully to forestall the nation's dissolution. Over the next eight days, Lincoln remained firm -- as he had been since 1854 -- that slavery would not be extended and secession would not be permitted.

At the end of his first inaugural address, Lincoln would appeal -- as Barack Obama has done, using Lincoln's words repeatedly -- to the "better angels" of America's nature. Two years later, Lincoln gave his famed "Gettysburg Address" -- the 145th anniversary of which was observed Wednesday -- and by 1865 it was clear that the Union would survive and slavery would be abolished.

The better angels of America would prevail. So, with the national crisis near an end, Lincoln concluded his second inaugural address: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan -- to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."

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