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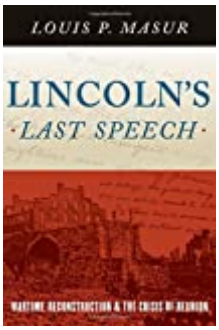

Louis P. Masur. *Lincoln's Last Speech: Wartime Reconstruction and the Crisis of Reunion.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. xv + 247 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-021839-3.

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Lincoln's Last Speech

Two days after the Confederate surrender at Appomattox, President Abraham Lincoln spoke from the balcony of the White House. It was not the victory speech the audience had gathered to hear. Although Lincoln complimented the armed forces, his focus was reconstruction. It is tempting to classify Louis P. Masurâs new book with the genre of books about Lincolnâs speeches. The most notable of these is Douglas L. Wilsonâs *Lincolnâs Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words* (2007). But Masur is less interested in textual analysis and more in the historical context of Lincolnâs April 11 speech.

Although Americans began speaking of reconstruction even before the firing on Fort Sumter, they did not agreeâhad not agreed by the time Lincoln diedâon what it entailed, how it would proceed, or even who would carry it out. Conservative northerners advocated a reconstruction that merely meant restoration of the southern states to their place in the Union. Radical Republicans, however, saw in reconstruction an opportunity for remaking the southern statesâ labor and social systems, that is, the abolition of slavery and the establishment of black rights. But such a thoroughgoing reconstruction entailed giving the federal government powers over the states that it had not previously possessed. Radicals thus constructed constitutional rationales for such authority: that the southern states were conquered provinces of the North or that they had committed a mass âstate suicideâ and reverted to the relationship of territories vis Ã vis the federal government. Lincoln dismissed these rationales as âpernicious abstractions.â He insisted that the Confederate states had never been out of the Union. But he also insisted on some measure of reconstruction of their political systems as well as the legitimacy of emancipation. The states had never been out of the Union, in Lincolnâs thinking, but many people in those states had been engaged in rebellion. Reconstruction thus necessitated giving Unionists power within those states and allowing them to shape the new state governments to be formed after the war.

Lincoln relied on the pardon power to restore white Southerners to the Union. Those who took a loyalty oath would be pardoned (with exceptions for certain classes of

Confederates such as high-ranking diplomatic, political, or military officials). When 10 percent had been restored to their political rights and property (except for slaves), they could elect a constitutional convention which would write a new state constitution. One of the noteworthy aspects of the April 11, 1865, speech was that Lincoln mentioned the possibility of suffrage for educated black men or black soldiers. Lincolnâs Ten Percent Plan, announced in his annual message in December 1862, had used only white Southerners to reconstitute the government of former Confederate states. Although emancipation was irrevocable, there was no provision for economic or political rights for freedpeople.

Masur details the split between the president and Congress over the authority to carry out reconstruction. When Lincoln spoke on April 11, he especially wanted to urge the readmission of Louisiana, reconstructed under his Ten Percent Plan. Congress, however, had refused to seat the representatives elected from that state. Although Lincoln acted as if reconstruction were the presidentâs purview, some congressmen argued that it was Congressâs authority to ensure that each state had a republican government. After Lincoln put forward his Ten Percent Plan, congressional Republicans crafted a different plan, the Wade-Davis bill, which required a stricter oath and a higher percentage, 50 percent, before a stateâs residents could rewrite their state constitutions, elect officeholders, and be restored to the Union. Congress did have the upper hand in the contest with the president, however, because only that body could admit its members. Lincoln could and did reconstruct statesâLouisiana and Arkansasâbut Congress possessed and used the power to refuse to seat their representatives. By the time Lincoln died, no southern state had been reconstructed.

Three days after his last speech, Lincoln went to the theater. Masurâs epilogue quickly summarizes the expectations surrounding his successor, Andrew Johnson, the former military governor of Tennessee, and his reconstruction policy. Under Johnson, the split between president and Congress over Reconstruction became an unbridgeable chasm. Masur wisely refrains from speculating too much on how Lincolnâs reconstruction policies might have evolved if he had lived, largely confining himself to quoting Frederick Douglass to the effect that Lincoln would have done more for the freedmen. This is an elegantly written, carefully argued book that sheds light on an understudied portion of Civil War and Reconstruction history.

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