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What Biden's inaugural address may owe to 'David Copperfield'

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President Joe Biden's inaugural address included this description of the American spirit: "Through the Civil War, the Great Depression, World War, 9/11, through struggle, sacrifice, and setbacks, our 'better angels' have always prevailed."

The written text placed "better angels" in quotation marks for a good reason. That phrase came directly from Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address delivered 160 years ago. In his unsuccessful attempt to stave off the Civil War, Lincoln closed by saying: "The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

The creation of this last sentence has a fascinating history.

A month before the inauguration, Lincoln sent a draft of his address to William Seward, the New York senator who would go on to become Lincoln's Secretary of State. Seward wrote a memo to Lincoln suggesting changes to the text. In essence, Seward proposed this as the final sentence of the address: "The mystic chords which... pass through all the hearts and hearths... in this broad continent of ours will yet... again harmonize in their ancient music when touched... again by the [better angel] guardian angel of the nation." I have bracketed the phrase "better angel" to reflect the fact that Seward originally wrote those words, but then crossed them out and replaced them with "guardian angel of the nation."

Lincoln largely accepted Seward's ending, but made some key revisions. Interestingly, Lincoln adopted the "better angel" phrase that Seward rejected, but Lincoln changed it to "the better angels of our nature." And he transformed Seward's "mystic chords" into "mystic chords of memory." Although Seward improved Lincoln's draft, Lincoln made Seward's text even better.

Yet someone else may deserve credit — none other than one of the most celebrated novelists of the time, Charles Dickens.

In 1850, Dickens published his eighth novel, "David Copperfield." Take a look at this

passage from Chapter 60: “With the unerring instinct of her noble heart, she touched the CHORDS OF MY MEMORY so softly and harmoniously, that... I could listen to the sorrowful, distant music, and desire to shrink from nothing it awoke. How could I, when, blended with it all, was her dear self, the BETTER ANGEL OF MY LIFE?” (Emphasis added.)

Compare Dickens’ “chords of my memory” with Seward’s “mystic chords” and Lincoln’s “mystic chords of memory.” Then compare Dickens’ “better angel of my life” with Seward’s original “better angel” and Lincoln’s “better angels of our nature.”

Thus, two images that appear in consecutive sentences in “David Copperfield” both appear in the final sentence of Lincoln’s first inaugural.

Is it just a coincidence? Historians have no proof that Lincoln ever read Dickens.

However, Seward’s library was found to contain a copy of the 1850 edition of “David Copperfield” so it is highly likely that he had read the book before 1861.

The possible link from Biden to Lincoln to Seward to Dickens should remind us that politics does not exist in a vacuum. David Runciman, a professor of Politics and International Studies at the University of Cambridge, was once asked what book of political theory he would recommend to a government leader. He responded that rather than a book of theory, he would rather see a politician read the novels of Jane Austen. He believed literature could provide more insight into people and their problems than any volume of political science.

The possible impact of Charles Dickens on our latest inaugural address bears this out.

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