

## “Better Angels”: Notes on a Phrase

By David Blankenhorn

Across our broad land, there’s a new birth of enthusiasm for the phrase “better angels.” At least four non-profit organizations, including one that I co-founded in 2016, are now called “Better Angels.” Two best-selling books from the 2010s, along with numerous others that aren’t best-sellers, feature the phrase in their titles. Two recent documentary films are called “Better Angels.” So is a 2019 song recorded by Barbra Streisand as well as a 2019 album and concert tour by two other recording artists. I’ve seen the phrase used as both a corporate slogan and as names of conferences. God help us, there’s now a beer called “Better Angels.” In our politics, members from both sides of the aisle seem increasingly to invoke the phrase.

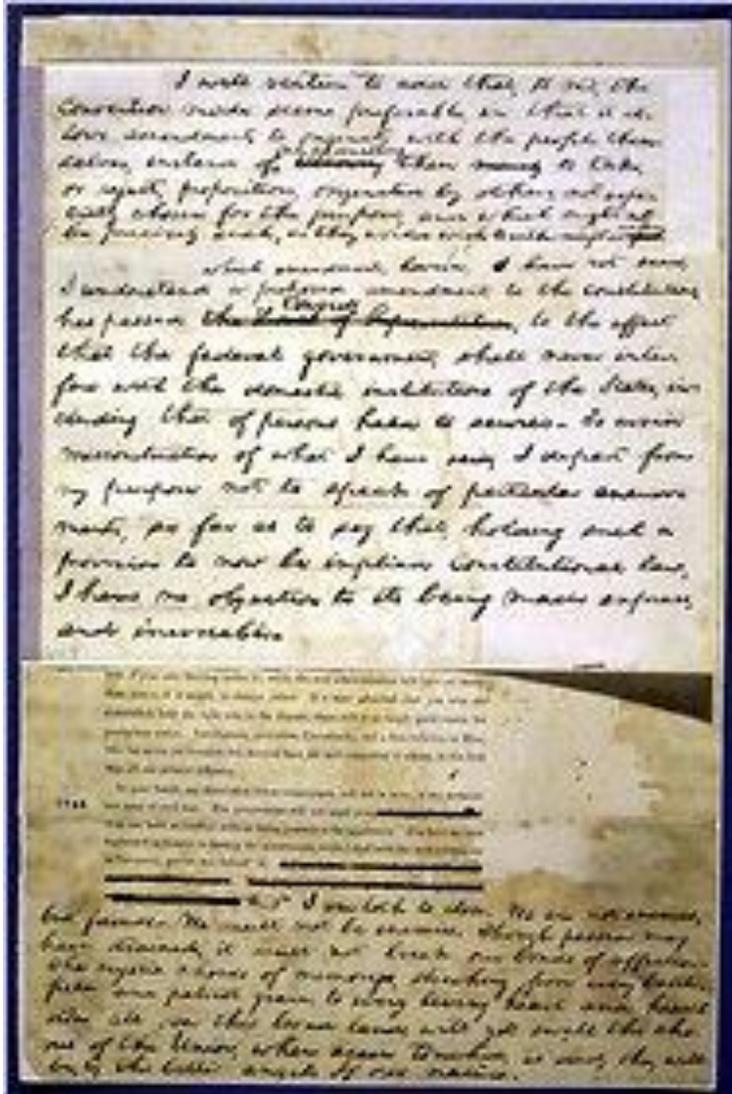
For the source of this trend, we can look generally to the ugliness of our current public conversation. The more our better angels flee us, the more we discuss them and wish for their return. And of course we can look particularly to Abraham Lincoln, who used the phrase so beautifully in his First Inaugural Address on March 4, 1861, on the eve of our Civil War.

*I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave to every living heart and hearth-stone, 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.*

Although Lincoln’s peroration is justly famous, Lincoln did not coin the phrase “better angels.” The phrase and its cognates have appeared in English literature since at least the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. To understand the phrase, and to deepen our understanding of Lincoln and his times, let’s examine the lineage and usages of this evocative term.

We know that Lincoln personally wrote the phrase into his speech. We even have a picture of it. We also know that William Seward, who would serve as Lincoln’s Secretary of State and arguably most important advisor, had originally suggested that Lincoln close his speech by calling upon the “the guardian angel of the nation” – a pietistic but stock phrase that would surely have been little noted and not long remembered.

But Lincoln scratched out Steward’s suggestion and replaced it in his own handwriting with a phrase saying that what the nation needed in its time of reckoning would not come from outside us, as in an angel guarding us from above, but instead from within us – something “better” in the “nature” of both northerners and southerners. In stating so poetically that profound idea, Lincoln in one phrase told us as much as any president before or since who we can be, and thus what America is.



The final page of Lincoln's First Inaugural Address, with the concluding paragraph written by hand. Library of Congress.

No one knows with certainty how Lincoln first encountered the phrase “better angels.” But based on available evidence, one possible source stands out as the most likely: William Shakespeare’s play, *Othello*, written about 1603. In the play, Othello has murdered his wife, Desdemona, accusing her of adultery. Her uncle, Gratiano, declares that it’s good that Desdemona’s father, Brabantio, is dead:

Poor Desdemona! I am glad thy father's dead:  
Thy match was mortal to him, and pure grief  
Shore his old thread in twain: did he live now,  
This sight would make him do a desperate turn,  
Yea, curse his **better angel** from his side,  
And fall to reprobation.

Three factors point to *Othello* as Lincoln's source. It's highly likely that Lincoln read the play. There's no positive evidence that he read any of the other English works published prior to 1861 that use the phrase. And as regards intended meaning, Lincoln uses the term exactly the way Shakespeare uses it.

For Shakespeare, as for Lincoln, "better angels" were neither individual people nor supernatural beings, but instead aspects of temperament. A "better angel," in this construal, is a composite of those praiseworthy traits within us that exist alongside of, and contest with, unworthy traits. In *Othello*, for example, we fear that Brabantio, in his "pure grief" at his daughter's murder, would "curse his better angel from his side" such that he would do deeds of "desperate turn" causing him to be damned by God ("fall to reprobation"). In one of his sonnets, written about 1599, Shakespeare similarly tells of us "two spirits" that are "both from me" – a "better angel" that is "right fair" and a "worser spirit" that "tempteth my better angel from my side" and thus "would corrupt my saint to be a devil."

For Lincoln, the "better angels of our nature" are those civic and patriotic qualities, shaped by shared memory, that permit us, even in times of national fracturing, to "swell the chorus of the Union." This conception of "better angels" as admirable aspects of temperament, or aspirations toward what is good, is likely the dominant meaning of the term in English and U.S. history.

Edward Bulwer-Lytton in about 1839, for example, prefigures Lincoln exactly when he yearns for "**the better angels of the human heart.**" Earlier, in 1715, in Nicholas Rowe's *The Tragedy of Lady Jane Gray*, we learned that we need "our **better Angels**" to help us participate in "Friendship's Hour and Friendship's Office":

*To come when Counsel and when Help [for others] is wanting,  
To share the Pain of every gnawing Care,  
To speak of Comfort in the Time of Trouble,  
To reach a Hand and save thee from Adversity.*

What are the "worser spirits" that our "better angels" strive to overcome? An essayist in *The London Magazine* in 1784 says:

*Away then, fear, despondency, and doubt,  
My **better angels** drive such traitors out.*

A British essayist in 1832 tells a tale:

*As he at once formed his decision to obey his **better angel**, his spirit, previously clogged by the dull, heavy weights of combined misery and despair, seemed now of ethereal lightness and buoyancy.*

In *The Golden Farmer*, from about 1832, Benjamin Webster says:

*You've proved my **better angels**. Ere I knew you, ay, and since, for a time, the vice of gain, either by honest or dishonest means, had taken possession of my breast to an almost miserly feeling; but your bright example has taught my heart to flow with better thoughts.*

In a sermon from 1837, the Rev. William Whewell warns his congregation:

*We not only refuse to listen to our **better angel**, but drive him from us with mocks and insults. We plunge willingly into the slough of selfishness, and refuse to pass onwards.*

In 1851, the Rev. Frederic D. Huntington preached a sermon in Cambridge, Massachusetts, following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act – a federal law which the anti-slavery Huntington fervently opposed, and which Lincoln, notwithstanding his opposition to slavery, supported in his Inaugural Address as a means of attempting to preserve the Union. Calling the law a “national sin,” Huntington warns of what he calls “the everlasting law”:

*With every wanton denial of our purer aspirations, those aspirations themselves grow faint. Resistance to **our better angels** drives those angels away.*

(While there's no evidence to prove it, it's certainly plausible to suspect that Lincoln might have read this sermon.)

If this small corpus is to be trusted, our “better angels” as evoked in our literature are primarily those inner traits guiding us toward friendship, unity, good conscience, and lightness and buoyancy of spirit, as they are simultaneously challenged and sometimes overcome by tendencies toward selfishness, divisiveness, fear, despondency, and heaviness and dullness of spirit.

There are exceptions to this usage. Sometimes in our literature a “better angel” is a person, usually a woman. The poet and dramatist Henry Jones in 1753 describes his “gracious Queen” as “My **better Angel**, and my Guardian Genius!” A poet in London in 1761 says: “WIVES our **better angels** are.” And lest we forget daughters, here is William Guthrie in 1754:

*Daughters, said he, thou hast acted like my **better Angel**.  
Henceforth I resign myself to your Conduct.*

Sometimes a “better angel” is, well, an angel. The historian Francis Newman in 1878 describes early Jewish proselytism:

*Special angels, perhaps evil spirits, were supposed to uphold the pagan dynasties, which fell when the invisible patron was overcome by **better angels**.*

But “better angels” as either individuals or as supernatural beings appear to be less common. The dominant conception, at least through 1861, and as clearly intended by Lincoln, is captured precisely by Charles Dickens in his 1841 novel, *Barnaby Rudge*:

*So do the shadows of our own desires stand between us and our **better angels**, and thus their brightness is eclipsed.*

For Lincoln, the “shadows of our desires” standing in 1861 between “us” and “our better angels” were fanaticism, fear, self-righteousness, and perhaps most of all, mistrust.

Nearly his entire address that day was an appeal for the restoration of trust. He speaks directly to southerners, seeking to reassure them that the government will not threaten their peace, property, or personal security. He insists that as president he cannot legally interfere with slavery in the southern states and has no desire to do so even if he could. He reiterates his support of the Fugitive Slave Law. He does refuse, as did most Republicans, and to the alarm of white southerners, to accept the Supreme Court’s pro-slavery *Dred Scott* decision as final, but even here Lincoln equivocates and avoids strong language. The tone throughout, according to the respected Lincoln scholars J. G. Randall and David Herbert Donald, “struck the note of gentle firmness and breathed the spirit of conciliation and of friendliness to the South.”

Citing law and history, Lincoln argues that the Union is perpetual, cannot consent to its own destruction, and therefore cannot be legally undone on the “mere motion” of one or a group of states. He says that, as a president sworn to uphold the law, he has no legal authority under the Constitution to “fix terms for the separation of the States.” He says that he trusts that this fact “will not be regarded as a menace” and that in carrying out his “simple duty” to defend and maintain the Union “there needs to be no bloodshed or violence, and there shall be done unless it is forced upon the national authority.”

Like a lawyer speaking to a jury, he suggests that separation would make the nation’s current problems worse, not better. He appeals to reason: “Physically speaking, we cannot separate.” He proposes that in a democracy the ultimate wisdom of the people can be trusted to prevail and he reminds those who would oppose his Administration that even bad governments have limited powers and limited terms of office. He says that both north and south “profess to be content with the Union, if all constitutional rights can be maintained,” and pledges again that these rights will be maintained. He pleads for calmness. He argues against a rush to action: “Nothing valuable can be lost by taking time.” He closes by appealing to “our bonds of affection” rooted in “the mystic chords of memory.” And finally, he promises that we will be “again touched” by “the better angels of our nature.”

In practical terms, the speech was a failure in nearly every respect. Hardly a southerner attended the inauguration ceremonies. Many southern newspapers, especially in the Deep South, simply ignored Lincoln’s address, and those which did notice the speech frequently mangled and misrepresented the text. Southern commentators commonly portrayed Lincoln as an untrustworthy hypocrite, claiming in the speech that he did not want civil war while

promising in the same speech to do exactly what would cause one. As an editorial in Milledgeville, Georgia, *Southern Federal Union* put it: “Mr. Lincoln talks with a forked tongue.” On Inauguration Day the *Richmond Examiner* called Lincoln “a beastly figure” whom “no one can hear with patience or look on without disgust” and the following day the *Richmond Enquirer* said that Lincoln’s address consisted of “the deliberate language of the fanatic.”

Lincoln took office as a beleaguered president, widely disliked and mistrusted in the country. Many in his own party viewed him as a crude, unreliable man. Many in the South viewed as a would-be despot, while many others in all parts of the country viewed him as a weakling who would be, or could be, controlled by others. The immediate result of his election was further to divide an already dangerously divided nation. His Inaugural Address did little to change any of these realities. Five weeks after the speech, Confederate forces fired upon Fort Sumter, South Carolina, and the war came.

The year 1861 was an important year for a phrase we now remember and revere. It was not a good year, at least insofar as Lincoln intended the term, for the better angels of our nature.

*David Blankenhorn is president of Better Angels, a citizens’ organization working to unify America. The views expressed here are his own. Learn about Better Angels at [www.better-angels.org](http://www.better-angels.org). Follow David on Twitter @Blankenhorn3.*

## Notes

*members from both sides of the aisle seem increasingly to invoke the phrase*

- Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), Farewell Address to the U.S. Senate, December 12, 2018:  
*If there were ever a time in our history to heed the **better angels of our nature**, I think it’s now. How can we answer Lincoln’s call to our **better angels**?*
- Former California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger (R), May 12, 2018:  
*We must stretch for our **better angels** instead of falling toward our lowest instincts.*
- Former President Barack Obama, September 7, 2018:  
*Our antibodies kick in, and people of goodwill from across the political spectrum call out the bigots and the fear mongers, and work to compromise and get things done and promote the **better angels of our nature**.*
- Vice President Joe Biden (D), speaking in Sydney, Australia, July 20, 2016:  
*The **better angels** in America will prevail. So at a time like this, in the face of xenophobia and demagoguery and what is being trumpeted around the world, we have to remember who we are as Australians and Americans and reflect our best selves back to the world.*

*We know that Lincoln personally wrote the phrase into his speech*

William Safire, “First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861,” in Harold Holzer and Joshua Wolf Shenk (eds.), *In Lincoln’s Hand: His Original Manuscripts with Commentary by Distinguished Americans* (New York: Bantam Books, 2009). Ronald C. White, Jr., “Honest Abe Reminds Us of the Power of Words,” *National Public Radio (NPR)*, posted March 4, 2017.

*it's highly likely that Lincoln read the play*

Robert Bray, "What Abraham Lincoln Read – An Evaluative and Annotated List," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 28, no. 2 (2007), 74.

*no positive evidence that he read any of the other significant English works*

Bray, *ibid.*

*Shakespeare similarly tells of us "two spirits" that are "both from me"*

Sonnet 144: "Two loves I have of comfort and despair."

*Edward Bulwer-Lytton in about 1839*

Edward Bulwer-Lytton, "Cromwell's Dream," by 1839.

*essayist in The London Magazine in 1784*

Mrs. Batire, "Epilogue to Dr. Stratford's 'Tragedy of Lord Russell'", *London Magazine*, September 1784.

*A British essayist in 1832 tells his tale*

G. Henderson (ed.), *The ladies cabinet of fashion, music and romance* 6 (1832), 181.

*the Rev. Frederic D. Huntington preached a sermon*

F. D. Huntington, "National Retribution and the National Sin," in *Sermons for the People* (Boston, 1857), 424.

*"My better Angel, and my Guardian Genius!"*

Henry Jones, *The Earl of Essex*, 1753.

*A poet in London in 1761*

"Song. By a Gentleman in London. Addressed to his Wife in the Country," *The Scots Magazine* 23 (April 1761).

*Daughters, said he, thou hast acted like my better Angel*

William Guthrie, *Friends: A Sentimental History. Describing Love as a Virtue, as Well as a Passion*, 1754.

*Francis Newman in 1878 describes early Jewish proselytism*

Francis W. Newman, "On Jewish Proselytism Before the War of Titus," *Living Age* 137, no. 1777 (July 6, 1878), 42.

*struck the note of gentle firmness and breathed the spirit of conciliation and of friendliness to the South*

J. G. Randall and David Donald, *The Civil War and Reconstruction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1961), 164.

*In practical terms, the speech was a failure in nearly every respect. Hardly a southerner actually attended the inauguration ceremonies*

Marie Hochmuth Nichols, "Lincoln's First Inaugural Address," in J. Jeffery Auer (ed.), *Antislavery and Disunion, 1858-1861: Studies in the Rhetoric of Compromise and Conflict* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1968).

*Mr. Lincoln talks with a forked tongue*

"Mr. Lincoln's Inaugural Address," (Midgeville, GA) *Southern Federal Union*, March 12, 1861.

*"a beastly figure" whom "no one can hear with patience or look on without disgust"*

Editorial reprinted in *Richmond Examiner During the War; or, The Writings of John M. Daniel* (New York: Printed for the Author, 1868), 6.

*"the deliberate language of the fanatic"*

Cited in Nichols, 410.

*widely disliked and mistrusted in the country*

Randall and Donald, 163.