

Abraham Lincoln

“First Inaugural Address” (1861)

5 *Lincoln delivered this address on March 4: South Carolina had already seceded after his election in November 1860, and the Confederate States of America had been created the previous month out of South Carolina with Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. Ask yourself the following questions: what does Lincoln hope to accomplish with this address? And to whom is Lincoln really addressing?*

Fellow-Citizens of the United States:

10 In compliance with a custom as old as the Government itself, I appear before you to address you briefly and to take in your presence the oath prescribed by the Constitution of the United States to be taken by the President "before he enters on the execution of this office." ...

15 I hold that in contemplation of universal law and of the Constitution the Union of these States is perpetual. Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national governments. It is safe to assert that no government proper ever had a provision in its organic law for its own termination. Continue to execute all the express provisions of our National Constitution, and the Union will endure forever, it being impossible to destroy it except by some action not provided for in the instrument itself.

20 Again: If the United States be not a government proper, but an association of States in the nature of contract merely, can it, as a contract, be peaceably unmade by less than all the parties who made it? One party to a contract may violate it—break it, so to speak—but does it not require all to lawfully rescind it?

25 Descending from these general principles, we find the proposition that in legal contemplation the Union is perpetual confirmed by the history of the Union itself. The Union is much older than the Constitution. It was formed, in fact, by the Articles of Association in 1774. It was matured and continued by the Declaration of Independence in 1776. It was further matured, and the faith of all the then thirteen States expressly plighted and engaged that it should be perpetual, by the Articles of Confederation in 1778. And finally, in 1787, one of the declared objects for ordaining and establishing the Constitution was "to form a more perfect Union."

30 But if destruction of the Union by one or by a part only of the States be lawfully possible, the Union is 'less' perfect than before the Constitution, having lost the vital element of perpetuity.

35 It follows from these views that no State upon its own mere motion can lawfully get out of the Union; that 'resolves' and 'ordinances' to that effect are legally void, and that acts of violence within any State or States against the authority of the United States are insurrectionary or revolutionary, according to circumstances. ...

If the minority will not acquiesce, the majority must, or the Government must cease. There is no other alternative, for continuing the Government is acquiescence on one side or the other. If a

minority in such case will secede rather than acquiesce, they make a precedent which in turn will divide and ruin them, for a minority of their own will secede from them whenever a majority
40 refuses to be controlled by such minority. For instance, why may not any portion of a new confederacy a year or two hence arbitrarily secede again, precisely as portions of the present Union now claim to secede from it? All who cherish disunion sentiments are now being educated to the exact temper of doing this.

Is there such perfect identity of interests among the States to compose a new union as to produce
45 harmony only and prevent renewed secession?

Plainly the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy. A majority held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitations, and always changing easily with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments, is the only true sovereign of a free people. Whoever rejects it does of necessity fly to anarchy or to despotism. Unanimity is impossible. The rule of a minority,
50 as a permanent arrangement, is wholly inadmissible; so that, rejecting the majority principle, anarchy or despotism in some form is all that is left. ...

One section of our country believes slavery is 'right' and ought to be extended, while the other believes it is 'wrong' and ought not to be extended. This is the only substantial dispute. The fugitive-slave clause of the Constitution and the law for the suppression of the foreign slave trade
55 are each as well enforced, perhaps, as any law can ever be in a community where the moral sense of the people imperfectly supports the law itself. The great body of the people abide by the dry legal obligation in both cases, and a few break over in each. This, I think, can not be perfectly cured, and it would be worse in both cases 'after' the separation of the sections than before. The foreign slave trade, now imperfectly suppressed, would be ultimately revived without restriction
60 in one section, while fugitive slaves, now only partially surrendered, would not be surrendered at all by the other.

Physically speaking, we can not separate. We can not remove our respective sections from each other nor build an impassable wall between them. A husband and wife may be divorced and go
65 out of the presence and beyond the reach of each other, but the different parts of our country can not do this. They can not but remain face to face, and intercourse, either amicable or hostile, must continue between them. Is it possible, then, to make that intercourse more advantageous or more satisfactory 'after' separation than 'before'? Can aliens make treaties easier than friends can make laws? Can treaties be more faithfully enforced between aliens than laws can among
70 friends? Suppose you go to war, you can not fight always; and when, after much loss on both sides and no gain on either, you cease fighting, the identical old questions, as to terms of intercourse, are again upon you. ...

My countrymen, one and all, think calmly and 'well' upon this whole subject. Nothing valuable can be lost by taking time. If there be an object to 'hurry' any of you in hot haste to a step which you would never take 'deliberately', that object will be frustrated by taking time; but no good
75 object can be frustrated by it. Such of you as are now dissatisfied still have the old Constitution unimpaired, and, on the sensitive point, the laws of your own framing under it; while the new Administration will have no immediate power, if it would, to change either. If it were admitted that you who are dissatisfied hold the right side in the dispute, there still is no single good reason

80 for precipitate action. Intelligence, patriotism, Christianity, and a firm reliance on Him who has
never yet forsaken this favored land are still competent to adjust in the best way all our present
difficulty.

85 In 'your' hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in 'mine', is the momentous issue of
civil war. The Government will not assail 'you'. You can have no conflict without being
yourselves the aggressors. 'You' have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the Government,
while I shall have the most solemn one to "preserve, protect, and defend it."

90 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 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.

Source: Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley,
The American Presidency Project/UC Santa Barbara
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25818> (accessed 5/12/16)