

Explaining Secession

DOCUMENT 11.8 | JEFFERSON DAVIS, Inaugural Address 1861

Jefferson Davis (1808–1889) served as a senator from Mississippi before he was elected president of the Confederate States of America during the Civil War. He delivered his inaugural address on February 18, 1861.

... We have entered upon the career of independence, and it must be inflexibly pursued. Through many years of controversy, with our late associates, the Northern States, we have vainly endeavored to secure tranquillity, and to obtain respect for the rights to which we were entitled. As a necessity, not a choice, we have resorted to the remedy of separation; and henceforth, our energies must be directed to the conduct of our own affairs, and the perpetuity of the Confederacy which we have formed. If a just perception of mutual interest shall permit us, peaceably, to pursue our separate political career, my most earnest desire will have been fulfilled. But, if this be denied to us, and the integrity of our territory and jurisdiction be assailed, it will but remain for us, with firm resolve, to appeal to arms, and invoke the blessing of Providence on a just cause. . . .

Actuated solely by the desire to preserve our own rights and promote our own welfare, the separation of the Confederate States has been marked by no aggression upon others, and followed by no domestic convulsion. Our industrial pursuits have received no check—the cultivation of our fields has progressed as heretofore—and even should we be involved in war, there would be no considerable diminution in the production of the staples which have constituted our exports, and in which the commercial world has an interest scarcely less than our own. This common interest of the producer and consumer, can only be interrupted by exterior force, which should obstruct its transmission [of our staples] to foreign markets—a course of conduct which would be as unjust toward us as it would be detrimental to manufacturing and commercial interests abroad. Should reason guide the action of the Government from which we have separated, a policy so detrimental to the civilized world, the Northern States included, could not be dictated by even the strongest desire to inflict injury upon us; but if otherwise, a terrible responsibility will rest upon it, and the suffering of millions will bear testimony to the folly and wickedness of our aggressors. In the mean time, there will remain to us,

besides the ordinary means before suggested, the well-known resources for retaliation upon the commerce of an enemy.

De Bow's Review 5, no. 4 (April 1861): 482–483.

PRACTICING Historical Thinking

Identify: List the main points of Davis's inaugural address.

Analyze: What does Davis's final paragraph suggest about the Confederacy's position toward any action by the North? Explain.

Evaluate: Why does Davis refer to international support for Southern secession?

DOCUMENT 11.9

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, First Inaugural Address 1861

Abraham Lincoln delivered his first address to the nation as president of the United States on March 4, 1861. In it, he attempted to offer assurances to Southern policy leaders that the institution of slavery was protected where it already existed, but that he was obligated to protect the integrity of the union against succession.

I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so. . . .

There is much controversy about the delivering up of fugitives from service or labor. The clause I now read is as plainly written in the Constitution as any other of its provisions:

“No person held to service or labor in one State, under the laws thereof, escaping into another, shall in consequence of any law or regulation therein, be discharged from such service or labor, but shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labor may be due.”

It is scarcely questioned that this provision was intended by those who made it for the reclaiming of what we call fugitive slaves; and the intention of the law-giver is the law. All members of Congress swear their support to the whole Constitution—to this provision as much as any other. To the proposition, then, that slaves, whose cases come within the terms of this clause, “shall be delivered up,” their oaths are unanimous. Now, if they would make the effort in good temper, could they not, with nearly equal unanimity, frame and pass a law by means of which to keep good that unanimous oath? . . .

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. . . .

I, therefore, consider that, in view of the Constitution and the laws, the Union is unbroken, and, to the extent of my ability, I shall take care, as the Constitution itself expressly enjoins upon me, that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all the States. Doing this I deem to be only a simple duty on my part; and I shall perform it, so far as practicable, unless my rightful masters, the American people, shall withhold the requisite means, or, in some authoritative manner, direct the contrary. I trust this will not be regarded as a menace, but only as the declared purpose of the Union that it will constitutionally defend and maintain itself. . . .

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, as a permanent arrangement, is wholly inadmissible; so that, rejecting the majority principle, anarchy or despotism in some form is all that is left. . . .

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.”

I am loth [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.

The American Annual Cyclopaedia and Register of Important Events of the Year 1861 (New York: D. Appleton, 1864), 600–603.

PRACTICING Historical Thinking

Identify: What does Lincoln say that he will do about slavery?

Analyze: How does Lincoln address both Northern and Southern audiences in this speech?

Evaluate: What could be the “mystic chords of memory” that Lincoln invokes? Why does he end this speech by mentioning them?