

UNION INVIOLETE



Fifteen states had significant slave populations when Abraham Lincoln was elected president of the United States on November 6, 1860. One of these, South Carolina, seceded from the Union in late December; others appeared ready to follow early in the new year. To forestall this mass exit, various last-minute compromise proposals emerged in Congress, including the so-called Crittenden Plan. This plan called for two constitutional amendments, the first guaranteeing slavery forever in the states where it already existed, and the second dividing the territories between slavery and freedom. President-elect Lincoln had no objection to the first proposed amendment, but he was unalterably opposed to the second, which would have nullified the free-soil plank of the Republican Party. A territorial division, Lincoln wrote, would only encourage planter expansionism and thus "put us again on the highroad to a slave empire," and on this point "I am inflexible."

Taking this as their cue, five more states—Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana—seceded in January 1861. Texas followed on February 1. Seven states were therefore already gone, at least by their own declaration, as Lincoln prepared to deliver his inaugural address on March 4. The stakes were enormously high. Eight slave states, all in the strategically significant upper South, still remained in the Union. Should war begin, their allegiance would be invaluable and the inaugural address could help achieve that. Moreover, in the event of war, the North would have to unite behind the goals of the new president and his party. The address could articulate those unifying goals.

Lincoln believed his first inaugural address could be the most important speech of his life. Like most American politicians, he was a lawyer by trade, and the numerous legalistic formulations of the speech perhaps reflect this background. But the crisis Lincoln faced was fundamentally a constitutional—that is, a legalistic—crisis: Could a nation permit secessionist activity and remain a nation? What compromise with basic principles was possible before constitutional rights were destroyed? Because these were questions partly of constitutional law, Lincoln addressed them partly in legal language. But, as always in his great

speeches, he also relied on common sense, common sentiments of patriotism, and, particularly in his conclusion, common familiarity with the cadences of the single most popular work in nineteenth-century America—the King James Bible.

Born to a frontier farming family in Kentucky in 1809, Abraham Lincoln grew up in Indiana and Illinois. As a young man he worked as a farmer, rail-splitter, boatsman, and storekeeper before turning to law and politics. He was enormously successful as a lawyer and served several years in the Illinois legislature and one term in the House of Representatives. Largely a self-educated man, Lincoln read and reread such books as the Bible, Aesop's fables, the works of Shakespeare, and the poems of Robert Burns. He also developed great skill as a writer. In 1858, his debates with Stephen Douglas over slavery brought him national prominence and helped him win the Republican nomination for president in 1860. Although he made restoration of the Union his primary objective during the Civil War, in time he also made it clear that, eventually, it must be a Union without slavery. On April 14, 1865, while attending a performance at Ford's Theatre in Washington, he was shot by actor John Wilkes Booth, a Confederate sympathizer. Lincoln died the next morning.

Questions to Consider. In what ways did Lincoln try to reassure Southerners about his intentions? Could he have said more without compromising his principles? What was his basic operating principle in this crisis? What did Lincoln see as the "only substantial dispute" between North and South, and why did he think secession would only make this dispute worse? Was he right in thinking that "deliberate" would be better than "hurried"? To what impulse was Lincoln trying to appeal when he referred to "the better angels of our nature"?



First Inaugural Address (1861)

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

I 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 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,



The bombardment of Fort Sumter, May 4, 1861. The people of Charleston watched the bombing of Fort Sumter from the rooftops of their homes. (Library of Congress)

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.

In doing this there needs to be no bloodshed or violence, and there shall be none unless it be forced upon the national authority. The power confided to me will be used to hold, occupy, and possess the property and places belonging to the Government and to collect the duties and imposts; but beyond what may be necessary for these objects, there will be no invasion, no using of force against or among the people anywhere.

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. . . .

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 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 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 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 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 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 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.

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 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.