

First Inaugural Speech (1861)

Abraham Lincoln

Historical Background

The Election of 1860 was probably the most important election in American history, but it was not necessarily experienced as such by the citizens involved. Thanks to the division of the Democratic Party into northern and southern factions, none of the candidates was able to run a truly national campaign. Abraham Lincoln (R) and Stephen Douglas (D) were only competitive in the North. Votes in the South were split primarily between John Bell (of the short-lived Constitutional Union Party) and John C. Breckinridge (D). While the Republican Platform was resolutely opposed to the expansion of slavery in the territories, Republicans denied that this policy would either be unconstitutional or endanger the union. Indeed, the normal pomp and pageantry of elections was in full swing, particularly in the North, with parades more common than substantive debates on the issues. Douglas was the only candidate who attempted to tour the nation, casting himself as the savior of the union. Despite this national campaign Douglas won only a single state. Lincoln received less than forty percent of the total votes cast, but his Republican platform resonated strongly in the North. Since the North was far more populous than the South, Lincoln easily won the Electoral College, becoming the 16th President. Responding to the victory of a Republican candidate for president, seven southern states seceded from the union.

Historical Significance

Abraham Lincoln approached Capitol Hill in March of 1861 to deliver his speech, having given no speeches or public pronouncements of any kind since his electoral victory in November. His primary audience was Southern unionists – who, as evidenced by the good showing of John Bell in states like Virginia, were more numerous than is often thought today. Lincoln argued that secession was null and void. He advanced a theory of the union's logical and political priority over the states, pointing out that the union dated to a time when the future states were still colonies of a foreign power. Nonetheless, his speech was the model of conciliation. He explained that he intended to take no action against slavery in the states where it existed and even pledged support for a constitutional amendment, the Corwin Amendment, which would have made slavery untouchable by the federal government *in perpetuity*. Despite an eloquent and extended section of the speech devoted to union and fraternity with the southern states, the speech fell on deaf ears; prominent papers in South Carolina went so far as to allege that his address showed a “brutal” hatred of the South.

Key Concepts and Learning Objectives

Concepts: a more perfect union; secession; right of revolution; process of constitutional amendment; causes of the Civil War; party platforms; Election of 1860; confederation; union; consolidated national government.

Learning objectives: On completion of this unit, students will be able to:

- Identify the major issues and candidates in the Election of 1860;
- identify major causes of the Civil War;
- describe Lincoln's attempts at conciliation toward the seceded states in the address;
- examine why those attempts at conciliation were rebuffed;
- analyze and evaluate Lincoln's argument for having the requisite powers to hold the union together, with force if necessary.

Questions to Explore

Why do you think that Lincoln's words failed to move the Southern audience he clearly meant to address?

The comparison of the quality of Lincoln's speech – which is often rated as one of the best inaugural speeches in American history – with its limited practical effect raises serious questions about the power of speech in the political arena. How important are political speeches for the act of governing? How does this relate to the fact that contemporary campaigns are often won or lost on the basis of the charisma of the candidate? What is the relationship between the characteristics needed to be a good candidate and those needed to be a good political leader? Can a speech like this be in any way judged a success even if it did not attain its immediate object?

Lincoln made a number of important concessions to the South, pledging not to interfere with slavery where it existed. He even promised to support a constitutional amendment which would make this pledge permanent and binding on all future presidents. Was this a reasonable concession to offer? Contemporary historians have revised the casualty figures of the Civil War upwards, guessing that almost three-quarters of a million Americans perished in the conflict. Does this affect your answer? Why or why not?

Lincoln's speech features a number of complex legal and logical arguments about the nature of American government. In plain historical terms there is of course something false about arguing that the union came before the states since many states were settled and established as colonies in the 1600s. If Lincoln is not making a historical argument when he argues that the union is "prior to" the states, what kind of argument is he making? Is it plausible? Is it persuasive? Why or why not?

Lincoln argues that principle of secession articulated by the new states of the Confederate States of America is equivalent to anarchy. Sketch an outline of this argument. Do you find it persuasive? Why or why not?

Arguments about the legitimacy of secession are not academic or historical. In the past ten years many nations have had secession crises. What abuse or injustice justifies the secession from a nation? Sketch Lincoln's argument to this question as well as your own, and explain any differences between the two with reference to both the Civil War and a contemporary conflict.

Comparison

Students may find some of the questions concerning southern reception of the address easier to answer in relation to other speeches given in 1861. Alexander Stephens, who would become the Vice President of the Confederate States, gave a speech within a month of Lincoln's entitled "The Cornerstone Speech." This speech presents what one might call the "Southern Nationalist" perspective on secession, justifying secession as the creation of a new nation – similar in content and form to the American Revolution. As a caution, this speech is one of the most racist speeches in the history of American public address.

See <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/cornerstone-speech/>