

Part 1A: Southern Views on the Secession Crisis

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Friday, Nov. 9, 1860: THE DEED'S DONE -- DISUNION THE REMEDY

The outrages which abolition fanaticism has continued year by year to heap upon the South, have at length culminated in the election of Abraham Lincoln and Hannibal Hamlin, avowed abolitionists, to the presidency and vice presidency -- both bigoted, unscrupulous and cold-blooded enemies of the peace and equality of the slaveholding states, and one of the pair strongly marked with the blood of his negro ancestry. . . . In view of the formal declaration, through the ballot box, of a purpose by the northern states to wield the vast machinery of the federal Government as now constituted, for destroying the liberties of the slaveholding states, it becomes their duty to dissolve their connection with it and establish a separate and independent government of their own.

Excerpts from Southern Secession Debates

South Carolina swiftly seceded from the Union immediately following Lincoln's election, but other southern states held fierce political debates over secession. Below are excerpts for arguments against secession from southerners.

Georgia: Representative Alexander Stephens

Shall the people of Georgia secede from the Union in consequence of the election of Mr. Lincoln to the Presidency of the United States?...I do not think that they ought. In my judgment, the election of no man, constitutionally chosen to that high office, is sufficient cause to justify any State to separate from the Union...We are pledged to maintain the Constitution....If he [Lincoln] violates the Constitution, then will come our time to act...I do not anticipate that Mr. Lincoln will do anything.. for he is bound by the constitutional checks which are thrown around him...

Speech delivered by North Carolina Rep. Thomas N. Crumpler, January 10, 1861:

...I think it must be admitted that we all told the people of North Carolina...we were for the Union, and that it was not to be broken up if Lincoln was elected. Is there any good reason why we should change our position?...The prospect for the full recognition of Southern rights is better now than it was at the time of Lincoln's election...The Governors of several Northern States, including New York and Pennsylvania, have recommended the faithful observance of all the laws intended for the protection of slave property and the return of fugitive slaves... Lincoln's administration is powerless to harm us...

Sam Houston, Governor of Texas, speech against secession, April 19, 1861

Let me tell you what is coming. After the sacrifice of countless millions of treasure and hundreds of thousands of lives, you may win Southern independence if God be not against you, but I doubt it....while I believe with you in the doctrine of states rights, the North is determined to preserve this Union... and what I fear is, they will overwhelm the South.

Alexander Stephens, **Cornerstone Speech**, 1861

Alexander H. Stephens (1812-1883), although originally opposed to secession, was elected vice-president of the Confederacy. After the war, he was a congressman and Governor of Georgia.

The new constitution [of the Confederate States of America] has put at rest, forever, all the agitating questions relating to our peculiar institution African slavery as it exists amongst us the proper status of the negro in our form of civilization. This was the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution. Jefferson in his forecast, had anticipated this, as the "rock upon which the old Union would split." He was right...

The prevailing ideas entertained by him and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the formation of the old constitution, were that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically...the general opinion of the men of that day was that, somehow or other in the order of Providence, the institution would be evanescent [fading] and pass away...The constitution, it is true, secured every essential guarantee to the institution [of slavery] while it should last...Those ideas...rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error...*they were attempting to make things equal which the Creator had made unequal.*

Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite ideas; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and normal condition...This truth has been slow in the process of its development, like all other truths in the various departments of science.

Part 1B: Northern Views on the Secession Crisis

James Buchanan, Fourth Annual Message to Congress, December 3, 1860

President James Buchanan, who was president when Lincoln was elected, gave his Fourth Annual Message to Congress after South Carolina had seceded from the Union. His speech was condemned by both the North and South.

...The election of any one of our fellow-citizens to the office of President does not of itself afford just cause for dissolving the Union...In order to justify a resort to revolutionary resistance, the Federal Government must be guilty of "a deliberate, palpable, and dangerous exercise" of powers not granted by the Constitution.

Reason, justice, a regard for the Constitution, all require that we shall wait for some overt and dangerous act on the part of the President elect before resorting to such a remedy [secession]....The right of the people of a single State to absolve themselves at will and without the consent of the other States is contrary to the principles of this government...

The Southern States, standing on the basis of the Constitution, have a right to demand the execution of the fugitive slave law in the States of the North. Should it be refused, then the Constitution...will have been willfully violated...In that event the injured States, after having first used all peaceful and constitutional means to obtain redress, would be justified in revolutionary resistance to the Government of the Union...In order to justify secession as a constitutional remedy, it must be on the principle that the Federal Government is a mere voluntary association of States, to be dissolved at pleasure by any one of the contracting parties...Such a principle is wholly inconsistent with the history as well as the character of the Federal Constitution.

***The Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, "What We Have at Stake in the Struggle," May 6, 1861**

This editorial from an Ohio newspaper was written after the Confederacy declared a state of war with the US.

The great conflict upon which we have now fully entered, is a struggle for the very existence of the United States Government...On the one side is an established and beneficent government, resting on the democratic principle of the will of the majority; on the other, is a disorganizing usurpation, resting on the ambition of a political faction, and deriving no authority whatever from the people...the doctrine of secession is anarchy...

A surrender to Secession is the suicide of government....If we succumb [give in] to secession now...our national government is gone...We shall never more have peace or public order at home—we shall never more lift our head among the nations of the earth...

If we succeed...We shall have preserved from swift destruction the best and freest Government the world has ever seen...The eyes of the world are upon us....That is the only real danger...another nasty compromise whereby everything is conceded and nothing secured will so thoroughly disgrace and humiliate us that we can never again raise our heads...

Letter to Abraham Lincoln from the New York Republicans, January 1861

Conservative members of the New York Republican Party, many of whom had business interests and connections in the North, wrote this letter to Lincoln, urging compromise to prevent more southern states from seceding.

....Many of those who voted with the Republican party at the late election did so with no view of pronouncing definitely upon the question of Slavery in the territories...This class of men shudder at the thought of risking the advantages of the Union...in our judgment our duty to our common Government imperatively demands some compromise of the territorial question... should be made without delay...[or] the remaining Slave states will join their Southern Bretheren before your inauguration..

Part 2: Secession

Excerpts from the secession documents of southern states (their justifications for secession)

Mississippi: Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery-- the greatest material interest of the world. Its labor supplies the product which constitutes by far the largest and most important portions of commerce of the earth... These products have become necessities of the world, and a blow at slavery is a blow at commerce and civilization...There was no choice left us but either submission to the mandates of abolition, or a dissolution of the Union, whose principles had been subverted to work out our ruin.

Texas: The servitude of the African race, as existing in these States, is mutually beneficial to both bond and free, and is abundantly authorized and justified by the experience of mankind, and the revealed will of the Almighty Creator, as recognized by all Christian nations...The controlling majority of the Federal Government has excluded the citizens of the Southern States from all the immense territory owned in common by all the States on the Pacific Ocean, for the avowed purpose of acquiring sufficient power in the common government to use it as a means of destroying the institutions of Texas and her sister slaveholding States...The States of Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Wisconsin, Michigan and Iowa, by solemn legislative enactments, have deliberately, directly or indirectly violated the the fugitive slave clause of the federal constitution, violating the sacred compact between the states...Texas has no alternative but to remain in an isolated connection with the North, or unite her destinies with the South

South Carolina: Those [Union] States have assumed the right of deciding upon the propriety of our domestic institutions; and have denied the rights of property established in fifteen of the States and recognized by the Constitution; they have denounced as sinful the institution of slavery; they have permitted open establishment among them of societies, whose avowed object is to disturb the peace and...property of the citizens of other States...14 of the states...have refused to fulfill their constitutional obligations.

Georgia: For the last ten years we have had numerous and serious causes of complaint against our non-slave-holding confederate States with reference to the subject of African slavery. They have endeavored to weaken our security, to disturb our domestic peace and tranquility, and persistently refused to comply with their express constitutional obligations to us in reference to that property, and by the use of their power in the Federal Government have striven to deprive us of an equal enjoyment of the common Territories of the Republic....their avowed purpose is to subvert our society and subject us not only to the loss of our property but the destruction of ourselves, our wives, and our children, and the desolation of our homes, our altars, and our firesides.

Part 3: Attempts at Compromise

1. The Crittenden Compromise

In December 1860, Senator Crittenden of Kentucky proposed a compromise of 6 constitutional amendments intended to resolve the secessionist crisis. It included:

1. The Missouri Compromise line would be reinstated and extended to the Pacific.
2. Congress was forbidden to abolish slavery in places under its jurisdiction within a slave state such as a military post.
3. Congress could not abolish slavery in the District of Columbia as long as slavery existed in the adjoining states of Virginia and Maryland and without the consent of the District's inhabitants. Compensation would be given to owners who opposed abolition.
4. Congress could not prohibit or interfere with the interstate slave trade.
5. Congress could sue counties that obstructed the fugitive slave law and would provide compensation to owners whose slaves were freed. Individuals who refused to return fugitive slaves could also be sued.
6. No future amendment of the Constitution could change these amendments or authorize or empower Congress to interfere with slavery within any slave state

President-elect Lincoln refused to support the Crittenden Compromise and it was rejected in both the House and Senate.

2. The Peace Conference of 1861 (*Lincoln will not officially begin his presidency until March)

In February 1861, 131 American politicians met in Washington, DC in a final attempt to resolve the secession crisis. The amendments proposed were the following:

1. Extend the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific: territories above the line would prohibit slavery; those below the line would allow it.
2. No new territory could be acquired without the approval of a majority of free AND slave states
3. Congress could never pass a law or amendment allowing the federal government to regulate or abolish slavery
4. Neither states nor Congress can pass laws interfering with the Fugitive Slave Law or the return of fugitive slaves
5. The international slave trade was permanently prohibited (it had been outlawed in 1807, but an illegal trade still occurred)
6. No changes could be made to these amendments without the consent of all states

In failing to limit the expansion of slavery to all new territories, the compromise failed to satisfy hardline Republicans. In failing to protect slavery in all territories, the compromise failed to address the issue that had divided the Democratic Party into northern and southern factions in the 1860 presidential elections. It failed to pass the Senate.

3. The Other 13th amendment (aka Corwin Amendment)

On March 2, 1861, two days before leaving office, Buchanan endorsed an amendment to the Constitution that had been approved by the Senate and the House of Representatives just weeks before South Carolina seceded. It read:

“Article XII. No amendment shall be made to the Constitution which will authorize or give to Congress the power to abolish or interfere, within any State, with the domestic institutions, including that of persons held to labor or service by the laws of said State.”

Lincoln, faced with the options of using force against the Confederacy, formally recognizing their independence, or attempting to peacefully bring them back to the Union, addressed the proposed amendment in his inaugural address:

“I understand a proposed amendment to the Constitution . . . has passed Congress, to the effect that the Federal Government shall never interfere with the domestic institutions of the States, including that of persons held to service. . . . I have no objection to its being made express and irrevocable.”

The amendment passed the House and Senate, but only Ohio, Maryland and Illinois ratified it before the war interrupted the ratification process. By the end of the Civil War, a completely different 13th Amendment abolishing slavery would be ratified.