

# Abraham Lincoln's fateful address

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By Eric Foner

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It was a peculiarity of 19th-century American politics that four months elapsed between a president's election in November and his inauguration on March 4 (today, the inauguration is Jan. 20). As the seven states stretching from South Carolina to Texas declared their independence and formed a new nation, the Confederate States of America, president-elect Abraham Lincoln remained silent—although, privately, he advised Republicans in Congress to make no concessions on the key point of political contention: the expansion of slavery into the Western territories.

Not until February 1861, when he embarked on a circuitous 2,000-mile train journey from Illinois to Washington, did Lincoln make brief speeches. But they did little to clarify his intentions.

Thus, Lincoln's inaugural address was the most momentous in the nation's history. Addressing a crowd of 50,000, in a voice described by a reporter as "clear and emphatic," Lincoln went to great lengths to allay Southern fears that his administration would endanger the South's property in slaves and attempted to rally Northerners and Southern unionists to the support of national authority.

The heart of Lincoln's address consisted of a lengthy repudiation of the right of secession and an affirmation of national sovereignty and majority rule. Lincoln insisted that the nation had been created by the American people, not the states, and that no state could unilaterally dissolve it. Lincoln couched his argument as a defense of a basic principle of democracy—that the minority must acquiesce in the rule of the majority. Secession was not only illegal, but would lead to an endless splintering of authority as disgruntled minorities seceded from polities they deemed oppressive.

"Plainly, the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy."

Lincoln insisted at the outset that he had neither power nor inclination to interfere with slavery where it already existed. Yet, when he identified the central issue of the controversy, he declared:

"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."

On this issue he remained unwilling to compromise, though the address closed with an eloquent appeal for reconciliation:

"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."

Reactions to the speech reflected the deep national divide. Northerners of all parties praised its appeals to national unity. But if Lincoln thought his address would persuade secessionists to abandon their ways, he was sorely disappointed. To Confederates and their supporters, the speech amounted to a decision for confrontation.

The black abolitionist Frederick Douglass, meanwhile, chided Lincoln for failing to take a forthright antislavery position. But, he added, while Lincoln complained that his intentions had been misunderstood in the South, the real problem was that “the slaveholders” understood him all too well. Secessionists knew that, with his election, “the power of slavery” in the federal government had been broken. Lincoln’s election, without a single vote in most of the southern states, indicated that the North now constituted a self-conscious national majority. Here, Douglass suggested, lay the real cause of secession. In his closing remarks, Lincoln said:

“In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war.”

Within a month, the Confederacy chose war.