

Alexander H. Stephens' Speech to the Georgia Legislature

Nov. 14, 1860

This is the speech of United States Congressman and future Confederate Vice-President Alexander H. Stephens to the Georgia Legislature's special session to consider the question of calling a secession convention. Stephens, although he would eventually become Vice President of the Confederacy, opposed secession at that time. This speech is generally considered a response to the speech of Robert Toombs that had been given the night before.

Fellow Citizens: I appear before you tonight at the request of Members of the Legislature and others, to speak of matters of the deepest interest that can possibly concern us all, of an earthly character. There is nothing, no question or subject connected with this life, that concerns a free people so intimately as that of the Government under which they live. We are now, indeed, surrounded by evils. Never since I entered upon the public stage, has the country been so environed with difficulties and dangers that threatened the public peace and the very existence of our Institutions as now, I do not appear before you at my own instance. It is not to gratify any desire of my own that I am here. Had I consulted my personal ease and pleasure, I should not be before you; but believing that it is the duty of every good citizen, when called on, to give his counsels and views whenever the country is in danger, as to the best policy to be pursued, I am here. For these reasons, and these only, do I bespeak a calm, patient, and attentive hearing.

My object is not to stir up strife, but to allay it; not to appeal to your passions, but to your reason. Let us, therefore, reason together. It is not my purpose to say aught to wound the feelings of any individual who may be present; and if in the ardency with which I shall express my opinions, I shall say anything which may be deemed too strong, let it be set down to the zeal with which I advocate my own convictions. There is with me no intention to irritate or offend.

I do not, on this occasion, intend to enter into the history of the reasons or causes of the embarrassments which press so heavily upon us all at this time. In justice to myself, however, I must barely state upon this point that I do think much of it depended upon ourselves. The consternation that has come upon the people is the

result of a sectional election of a President of the United States, one whose opinions and avowed principles are in antagonism to our interests and rights, and we believe, if carried out, would subvert the Constitution under which we now live. But are we entirely blameless in this matter, my countrymen? I give it to you as my opinion, that but for the policy the Southern people pursued, this fearful result would not have occurred.

The first question that presents itself is, shall the people of Georgia secede from the Union in consequence of the election of Mr. Lincoln to the Presidency of the United States? My countrymen, I tell you frankly, candidly, and earnestly, that 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. It ought to stand by and aid still in maintaining the Constitution of the country. To make a point of resistance to the Government, to withdraw from it because any man has been elected, would put us in the wrong. We are pledged to maintain the Constitution. Many of us have sworn to support it. Can we, therefore, for the mere election of any man to the Presidency, and that, too, in accordance with the prescribed forms of the Constitution, make a point of resistance to the Government, without becoming the breakers of that sacred instrument ourselves, by withdrawing ourselves from it? Would we not be in the wrong? Whatever fate is to befall this country, let it never be laid to the charge of the people of the South, and especially the people of Georgia, that we were untrue to our national engagements. Let the fault and the wrong rest upon others. If all our hopes are to be blasted, if the Republic is to go down, let us be found to the last moment standing on the deck with the Constitution of the United States waving over our heads. (Applause.) Let the fanatics of the North break the Constitution, if such is their fell purpose. Let the responsibility be upon them. I shall speak presently more of their acts; but let not the South, let us not be the ones to commit the aggression. We went into the election with this people. The result was different from what we wished; but the election has been constitutionally held. Were we to make a point of resistance to the Government and go out of the Union merely on that account, the record would be made up hereafter against us.

But it is said Mr. Lincoln's policy and principles are against the Constitution, and that, if he carries them out, it will be destructive of our rights. Let us not anticipate a threatened evil. If he violates the Constitution, then will come our time to act. Do not let us break it because, forsooth, he may. If he does, that is the time for us to act. (Applause.) I think it would be injudicious and unwise to do this sooner. I do not anticipate that Mr. Lincoln will do anything, to jeopardize our safety or security, whatever may be his spirit to do it; for he is bound by the constitutional checks which

are thrown around him, which at this time render him powerless to do any great mischief. This shows the wisdom of our system. The President of the United States is no Emperor, no Dictator-- he is clothed with no absolute power. He can do nothing, unless he is backed by power in Congress. The House of Representatives is largely in a majority against him. In the very face and teeth of the majority of Electoral votes, which he has obtained in the Northern States, there have been large gains in the House of Representatives, to the Conservative Constitutional Party of the country, which I here will call the National Democratic Party, because that is the cognomen it has at the North. . . . In the present Congress, there were one hundred and thirteen Republicans, when it takes one hundred and seventeen to make a majority. The gains in the Democratic Party in Pennsylvania, Ohio, New Jersey, New York, Indiana, and other States, notwithstanding its distractions, have been enough to make a majority of near thirty, in the next House, against Mr. Lincoln. . . . Is this the time, then, to apprehend that Mr. Lincoln, with this large majority of the House of Representatives against him, can carry out any of this unconstitutional principles in that body?

In the Senate, he will also be powerless. There will be a majority of four against him. . . . Mr. Lincoln cannot appoint an officer without the consent of the Senate -- he cannot form a Cabinet without the same consent. . . . Then how can Mr. Lincoln obtain a Cabinet which would aid him, or allow him to violate the Constitution? Why, then, I say, should we disrupt the ties of this Union, when his hands are tied-- when he can do nothing against us?

I have heard it mooted, that no man in the State of Georgia, who is true to her interests, could hold office under Mr. Lincoln. But I ask, who appoints to office? Not the President alone; the Senate has to concur. No man can be appointed without the consent of the Senate. Should any man, then, refuse to hold office that was given him by a Democratic Senate? . . .

My honorable friend who addressed you last night [Mr. Toombs], and to whom I listened with the profoundest attention, asks if we would submit to Black Republican rule? I say to you and to him, as a Georgian, I would never submit to any Black Republican aggression upon our Constitutional rights.

I will never consent myself, as much as I admire this Union, for the glories of the past or the blessings of the present; as much as it has done for civilization; as much as the hopes of the world hang upon it; I would never submit to aggression upon my rights to maintain it longer; and if they cannot be maintained in the Union standing on the Georgia Platform, where I have stood from the time of its adoption, I would

be in favor of disrupting every tie which binds the States together. I will have equality for Georgia, and for the citizens of Georgia, in this Union, or I will look for new safeguards elsewhere. This is my position. The only question now is, can this be secured in the Union? That is what I am counseling with you tonight about. Can it be secured? In my judgment it may be, yet it may not be; but let us do all we can, so that in the future, if the worst comes, it may never be said we were negligent in doing our duty to the last.