

Robert Toombs' Speech to the Georgia Legislature,

Nov. 13, 1860

In November, 1860, after Lincoln had been elected President, Governor Joe Brown of Georgia called the legislature into session to consider the question of calling a secession convention. The legislature heard from the leading Georgians of the day on the question. This is an edited version of the speech of Georgia Senator and future Confederate Secretary of State Robert Toombs, who, after a period of indecision, had become an outspoken secessionist.

GENTLEMEN OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY: I very much regret, in appearing before you at your request, to address you on the present state of the country, and the prospect before us, that I can bring you no good tidings. The stern, steady march of events has brought us in conflict with our non-slaveholding confederates upon the fundamental principles of our compact of Union. We have not sought this conflict; we have sought too long to avoid it; our forbearance has been construed into weakness, our magnanimity into fear, until the vindication of our manhood, as well as the defense of our rights, is required at our hands. The door of conciliation and compromise is finally closed by our adversaries, and it remains only to us to meet the conflict with the dignity and firmness of men worthy of freedom. . . .

I am asked, why do you demand action now? The question is both appropriate and important; it ought to be frankly met. The Abolitionists say you are raising a clamor because you were beaten in the election. The falsity of this statement needs no confirmation. Look to our past history for its refutation. Some excellent citizens and able men in Georgia say the election of any man constitutionally is no cause for a dissolution of the Union. That position is calculated only to mislead, and not to enlighten. It is not the issue. I say the election of Lincoln, with all of its surroundings, is sufficient. What is the significance of his election? It is the indorsement, by the non-slaveholding States, of all those acts of aggression upon our rights by all these States, legislatures, governors, judges, and people. He is elected by the perpetrators of these wrongs with the purpose and intent to aid and support them in wrongdoing.

Hitherto the Constitution has had on its side the Federal Executive, whose duty it is to execute the laws and Constitution against these malefactors. It has earnestly endeavored to discharge that duty. Relying upon its power and good faith to remedy these wrongs, we have listened to conservative counsels, trusting to time, to the

Federal Executive, and to a returning sense of justice in the North. The Executive has been faithful - the Federal judiciary have been faithful the President has appointed sound judges, sound marshals, and other subordinate officers to interpret and to execute the laws. With the best intentions, they have all failed - our property has been stolen, our people murdered; felons and assassins have found sanctuary in the arms of the party which elected Mr. Lincoln. The Executive power, the last bulwark of the Constitution to defend us against these enemies of the Constitution, has been swept away, and we now stand without a shield, with bare bosoms presented to our enemies, and we demand at your hands the sword for our defense, and if you will not give it to us, we will take it - take it by the divine right of self-defense, which governments neither give nor can take away. Therefore, redress for past and present wrongs demands resistance to the rule of Lincoln and his Abolition horde over us; he comes at their head to shield and protect them in the perpetration of these outrages upon us, and, what is more, he comes at their head to aid them in consummating their avowed purposes by the power of the Federal Government. Their main purpose, as indicated by all their acts of hostility to slavery, is its final and total abolition. His party declare it; their acts prove it. He has declared it; I accept his declaration. The battle of the irrepressible conflict has hitherto been fought on his side alone. We demand service in this war. Surely no one will deny that the election of Lincoln is the indorsement of the policy of those who elected him, and an indorsement of his own opinions. The opinions of those who elected him are to be found in their solemn acts under oath - in their State governments, indorsed by their constituents. To them I have already referred. They are also to be found in the votes of his supporters in Congress - also indorsed by the party, by their return. Their opinions are to be found in the speeches of Seward, and Sumner, and Lovejoy, and their associates and confederates in the two Houses of Congress. Since the promotion of Mr. Lincoln's party, all of them speak with one voice, and speak trumpet-tongued their fixed purpose to outlaw four thousand millions of our property in the Territories, and to put it under the ban of the empire in the States where it exists. They declare their purpose to war against slavery until there shall not be a slave in America, and until the African is elevated to a social and political equality with the white man. Lincoln indorses them and their principles, and in his own speeches declares the conflict irrepressible and enduring, until slavery is everywhere abolished.

Hitherto they have carried on this warfare by State action, by individual action, by appropriation, by the incendiary's torch and the poisoned bowl. They were compelled to adopt this method because the Federal executive and the Federal judiciary were against them. They will have possession of the Federal executive with its vast power, patronage, prestige of legality, its army, its navy, and its

revenue on the fourth of March next. Hitherto it has been on the side of the Constitution and the right; after the fourth of March it will be in the hands of your enemy. . . . Will you let him have it? (Cries of "No, no. Never.") Then strike while it is yet today.

Nothing but ruin will follow delay. The enemy on the fourth of March will intrench himself behind a quintuple wall of defense. Executive power, judiciary, (Mr. Seward has already proclaimed its reformation,) army, navy, and treasury. Twenty years of labor, and toil, and taxes all expended upon preparation, would not make up for the advantage your enemies would gain if the rising sun on the fifth of March should find you in the Union. Then strike while it is yet time.