

# First Inaugural Address of Abraham Lincoln

Monday, March 4, 1861

1 Fellow-Citizens of the United States:

2 In compliance with a custom as old as the Government itself, I  
3 appear before you to address you briefly and to take in your  
4 presence the oath prescribed by the Constitution of the United States  
5 to be taken by the President before he enters on the execution of this  
6 office."

7 I do not consider it necessary at present for me to discuss those  
8 matters of administration about which there is no special anxiety or  
9 excitement.

10 Apprehension seems to exist among the people of the Southern  
11 States that by the accession of a Republican Administration their  
12 property and their peace and personal security are to be endangered.  
13 There has never been any reasonable cause for such apprehension.  
14 Indeed, the most ample evidence to the contrary has all the while  
15 existed and been open to their inspection. It is found in nearly all the  
16 published speeches of him who now addresses you. I do but quote  
17 from one of those speeches when I declare that--

18 I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the  
19 institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no  
20 lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so.

21 Those who nominated and elected me did so with full  
22 knowledge that I had made this and many similar declarations and  
23 had never recanted them; and more than this, they placed in the  
24 platform for my acceptance, and as a law to themselves and to me,  
25 the clear and emphatic resolution which I now read:

26           Resolved, That the maintenance inviolate of the rights of the  
27 States, and especially the right of each State to order and control its  
28 own domestic institutions according to its own judgment  
29 exclusively, is essential to that balance of power on which the  
30 perfection and endurance of our political fabric depend; and we  
31 denounce the lawless invasion by armed force of the soil of any  
32 State or Territory, no matter what pretext, as among the gravest of  
33 crimes.

34           I now reiterate these sentiments, and in doing so I only press  
35 upon the public attention the most conclusive evidence of which the  
36 case is susceptible that the property, peace, and security of no  
37 section are to be in any wise endangered by the now incoming  
38 Administration. I add, too, that all the protection which, consistently  
39 with the Constitution and the laws, can be given will be cheerfully  
40 given to all the States when lawfully demanded, for whatever cause--  
41 -as cheerfully to one section as to another.

42           There is much controversy about the delivering up of fugitives  
43 from service or labor. The clause I now read is as plainly written in  
44 the Constitution as any other of its provisions:

45           No person held to service or labor in one State, under the laws  
46 thereof, escaping into another, shall in consequence of any law or  
47 regulation therein be discharged from such service or labor, but shall  
48 be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labor  
49 may be due.

50           It is scarcely questioned that this provision was intended by  
51 those who made it for the reclaiming of what we call fugitive slaves;  
52 and the intention of the lawgiver is the law. All members of  
53 Congress swear their support to the whole Constitution--to this  
54 provision as much as to any other. To the proposition, then, that  
55 slaves whose cases come within the terms of this clause "shall be

56 delivered up" their oaths are unanimous. Now, if they would make  
57 the effort in good temper, could they not with nearly equal  
58 unanimity frame and pass a law by means of which to keep good  
59 that unanimous oath?

60         There is some difference of opinion whether this clause should  
61 be enforced by national or by State authority, but surely that  
62 difference is not a very material one. If the slave is to be  
63 surrendered, it can be of but little consequence to him or to others by  
64 which authority it is done. And should anyone in any case be  
65 content that his oath shall go unkept on a merely unsubstantial  
66 controversy as to how it shall be kept?

67         Again: In any law upon this subject ought not all the  
68 safeguards of liberty known in civilized and humane jurisprudence  
69 to be introduced, so that a free man be not in any case surrendered  
70 as a slave? And might it not be well at the same time to provide by  
71 law for the enforcement of that clause in the Constitution which  
72 guarantees that "the citizens of each State shall be entitled to all  
73 privileges and immunities of citizens in the several States"?

74         I take the official oath to-day with no mental reservations and  
75 with no purpose to construe the Constitution or laws by any  
76 hypercritical rules; and while I do not choose now to specify  
77 particular acts of Congress as proper to be enforced, I do suggest  
78 that it will be much safer for all, both in official and private stations,  
79 to conform to and abide by all those acts which stand unrepealed  
80 than to violate any of them trusting to find impunity in having them  
81 held to be unconstitutional.

82         It is seventy-two years since the first inauguration of a  
83 President under our National Constitution. During that period fifteen  
84 different and greatly distinguished citizens have in succession  
85 administered the executive branch of the Government. They have

86 conducted it through many perils, and generally with great success.  
87 Yet, with all this scope of precedent, I now enter upon the same task  
88 for the brief constitutional term of four years under great and  
89 peculiar difficulty. A disruption of the Federal Union, heretofore  
90 only menaced, is now formidably attempted.

91 I hold that in contemplation of universal law and of the  
92 Constitution the Union of these States is perpetual. Perpetuity is  
93 implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national  
94 governments. It is safe to assert that no government proper ever had  
95 a provision in its organic law for its own termination. Continue to  
96 execute all the express provisions of our National Constitution, and  
97 the Union will endure forever, it being impossible to destroy it  
98 except by some action not provided for in the instrument itself.

99 Again: If the United States be not a government proper, but an  
100 association of States in the nature of contract merely, can it, as  
101 a contract, be peaceably unmade by less than all the parties who  
102 made it? One party to a contract may violate it--break it, so to speak--  
103 -but does it not require all to lawfully rescind it?

104 Descending from these general principles, we find the  
105 proposition that in legal contemplation the Union is perpetual  
106 confirmed by the history of the Union itself. The Union is much  
107 older than the Constitution. It was formed, in fact, by the Articles of  
108 Association in 1774. It was matured and continued by the  
109 Declaration of Independence in 1776. It was further matured, and  
110 the faith of all the then thirteen States expressly plighted and  
111 engaged that it should be perpetual, by the Articles of Confederation  
112 in 1778. And finally, in 1787, one of the declared objects for  
113 ordaining and establishing the Constitution was "to form a more  
114 perfect Union."

115           But if destruction of the Union by one or by a part only of the  
116 States be lawfully possible, the Union is less perfect than before the  
117 Constitution, having lost the vital element of perpetuity.

118           It follows from these views that no State upon its own mere  
119 motion can lawfully get out of the Union; that resolves and  
120 ordinances to that effect are legally void, and that acts of violence  
121 within any State or States against the authority of the United States  
122 are insurrectionary or revolutionary, according to circumstances.

123           I therefore consider that in view of the Constitution and the  
124 laws the Union is unbroken, and to the extent of my ability, I shall  
125 take care, as the Constitution itself expressly enjoins upon me, that  
126 the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all the States. Doing  
127 this I deem to be only a simple duty on my part, and I shall perform  
128 it so far as practicable unless my rightful masters, the American  
129 people, shall withhold the requisite means or in some authoritative  
130 manner direct the contrary. I trust this will not be regarded as a  
131 menace, but only as the declared purpose of the Union that it will  
132 constitutionally defend and maintain itself.

133           In doing this there needs to be no bloodshed or violence, and  
134 there shall be none unless it be forced upon the national authority.  
135 The power confided to me will be used to hold, occupy, and possess  
136 the property and places belonging to the Government and to collect  
137 the duties and imposts; but beyond what may be necessary for these  
138 objects, there will be no invasion, no using of force against or  
139 among the people anywhere. Where hostility to the United States in  
140 any interior locality shall be so great and universal as to prevent  
141 competent resident citizens from holding the Federal offices, there  
142 will be no attempt to force obnoxious strangers among the people  
143 for that object. While the strict legal right may exist in the  
144 Government to enforce the exercise of these offices, the attempt to

145 do so would be so irritating and so nearly impracticable withal that I  
146 deem it better to forego for the time the uses of such offices.

147 The mails, unless repelled, will continue to be furnished in all  
148 parts of the Union. So far as possible the people everywhere shall  
149 have that sense of perfect security which is most favorable to calm  
150 thought and reflection. The course here indicated will be followed  
151 unless current events and experience shall show a modification or  
152 change to be proper, and in every case and exigency my best  
153 discretion will be exercised, according to circumstances actually  
154 existing and with a view and a hope of a peaceful solution of the  
155 national troubles and the restoration of fraternal sympathies and  
156 affections.

157 That there are persons in one section or another who seek to  
158 destroy the Union at all events and are glad of any pretext to do it I  
159 will neither affirm nor deny; but if there be such, I need address no  
160 word to them. To those, however, who really love the Union may I  
161 not speak?

162 Before entering upon so grave a matter as the destruction of  
163 our national fabric, with all its benefits, its memories, and its hopes,  
164 would it not be wise to ascertain precisely why we do it? Will you  
165 hazard so desperate a step while there is any possibility that any  
166 portion of the ills you fly from have no real existence? Will you,  
167 while the certain ills you fly to are greater than all the real ones you  
168 fly from, will you risk the commission of so fearful a mistake?

169 All profess to be content in the Union if all constitutional  
170 rights can be maintained. Is it true, then, that any right plainly  
171 written in the Constitution has been denied? I think not. Happily, the  
172 human mind is so constituted that no party can reach to the audacity  
173 of doing this. Think, if you can, of a single instance in which a  
174 plainly written provision of the Constitution has ever been denied. If

175 by the mere force of numbers a majority should deprive a minority  
176 of any clearly written constitutional right, it might in a moral point  
177 of view justify revolution; certainly would if such right were a vital  
178 one. But such is not our case. All the vital rights of minorities and of  
179 individuals are so plainly assured to them by affirmations and  
180 negations, guaranties and prohibitions, in the Constitution that  
181 controversies never arise concerning them. But no organic law can  
182 ever be framed with a provision specifically applicable to every  
183 question which may occur in practical administration. No foresight  
184 can anticipate nor any document of reasonable length contain  
185 express provisions for all possible questions. Shall fugitives from  
186 labor be surrendered by national or by State authority? The  
187 Constitution does not expressly say. May Congress prohibit slavery  
188 in the Territories? The Constitution does not expressly say. Must  
189 Congress protect slavery in the Territories? The Constitution does  
190 not expressly say.

191 From questions of this class spring all our constitutional  
192 controversies, and we divide upon them into majorities and  
193 minorities. If the minority will not acquiesce, the majority must, or  
194 the Government must cease. There is no other alternative, for  
195 continuing the Government is acquiescence on one side or the other.  
196 If a minority in such case will secede rather than acquiesce, they  
197 make a precedent which in turn will divide and ruin them, for a  
198 minority of their own will secede from them whenever a majority  
199 refuses to be controlled by such minority. For instance, why may not  
200 any portion of a new confederacy a year or two hence arbitrarily  
201 secede again, precisely as portions of the present Union now claim  
202 to secede from it? All who cherish disunion sentiments are now  
203 being educated to the exact temper of doing this.

204           Is there such perfect identity of interests among the States to  
205           compose a new union as to produce harmony only and prevent  
206           renewed secession?

207           Plainly the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy.  
208           A majority held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitations,  
209           and always changing easily with deliberate changes of popular  
210           opinions and sentiments, is the only true sovereign of a free people.  
211           Whoever rejects it does of necessity fly to anarchy or to despotism.  
212           Unanimity is impossible. The rule of a minority, as a permanent  
213           arrangement, is wholly inadmissible; so that, rejecting the majority  
214           principle, anarchy or despotism in some form is all that is left.

215           I do not forget the position assumed by some that  
216           constitutional questions are to be decided by the Supreme Court, nor  
217           do I deny that such decisions must be binding in any case upon the  
218           parties to a suit as to the object of that suit, while they are also  
219           entitled to very high respect and consideration in all parallel cases  
220           by all other departments of the Government. And while it is  
221           obviously possible that such decision may be erroneous in any given  
222           case, still the evil effect following it, being limited to that particular  
223           case, with the chance that it may be overruled and never become a  
224           precedent for other cases, can better be borne than could the evils of  
225           a different practice. At the same time, the candid citizen must  
226           confess that if the policy of the Government upon vital questions  
227           affecting the whole people is to be irrevocably fixed by decisions of  
228           the Supreme Court, the instant they are made in ordinary litigation  
229           between parties in personal actions the people will have ceased to be  
230           their own rulers, having to that extent practically resigned their  
231           Government into the hands of that eminent tribunal. Nor is there in  
232           this view any assault upon the court or the judges. It is a duty from  
233           which they may not shrink to decide cases properly brought before

234 them, and it is no fault of theirs if others seek to turn their decisions  
235 to political purposes.

236 One section of our country believes slavery is right and ought  
237 to be extended, while the other believes it is wrong and ought not to  
238 be extended. This is the only substantial dispute. The fugitive- slave  
239 clause of the Constitution and the law for the suppression of the  
240 foreign slave trade are each as well enforced, perhaps, as any law  
241 can ever be in a community where the moral sense of the people  
242 imperfectly supports the law itself. The great body of the people  
243 abide by the dry legal obligation in both cases, and a few break over  
244 in each. This, I think, can not be perfectly cured, and it would be  
245 worse in both cases after the separation of the sections than before.  
246 The foreign slave trade, now imperfectly suppressed, would be  
247 ultimately revived without restriction in one section, while fugitive  
248 slaves, now only partially surrendered, would not be surrendered at  
249 all by the other.

250 Physically speaking, we can not separate. We can not remove  
251 our respective sections from each other nor build an impassable wall  
252 between them. A husband and wife may be divorced and go out of  
253 the presence and beyond the reach of each other, but the different  
254 parts of our country can not do this. They can not but remain face to  
255 face, and intercourse, either amicable or hostile, must continue  
256 between them. Is it possible, then, to make that intercourse more  
257 advantageous or more satisfactory after separation than before? Can  
258 aliens make treaties easier than friends can make laws? Can treaties  
259 be more faithfully enforced between aliens than laws can among  
260 friends? Suppose you go to war, you can not fight always; and  
261 when, after much loss on both sides and no gain on either, you cease  
262 fighting, the identical old questions, as to terms of intercourse, are  
263 again upon you.

264           This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who  
265 inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing  
266 Government, they can exercise their constitutional right of  
267 amending it or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow  
268 it. I can not be ignorant of the fact that many worthy and patriotic  
269 citizens are desirous of having the National Constitution amended.  
270 While I make no recommendation of amendments, I fully recognize  
271 the rightful authority of the people over the whole subject, to be  
272 exercised in either of the modes prescribed in the instrument itself;  
273 and I should, under existing circumstances, favor rather than oppose  
274 a fair opportunity being afforded the people to act upon it. I will  
275 venture to add that to me the convention mode seems preferable, in  
276 that it allows amendments to originate with the people themselves,  
277 instead of only permitting them to take or reject propositions  
278 originated by others, not especially chosen for the purpose, and  
279 which might not be precisely such as they would wish to either  
280 accept or refuse. I understand a proposed amendment to the  
281 Constitution--which amendment, however, I have not seen--has  
282 passed Congress, to the effect that the Federal Government shall  
283 never interfere with the domestic institutions of the States, including  
284 that of persons held to service. To avoid misconstruction of what I  
285 have said, I depart from my purpose not to speak of particular  
286 amendments so far as to say that, holding such a provision to now be  
287 implied constitutional law, I have no objection to its being made  
288 express and irrevocable.

289           The Chief Magistrate derives all his authority from the people,  
290 and they have referred none upon him to fix terms for the separation  
291 of the States. The people themselves can do this if also they choose,  
292 but the Executive as such has nothing to do with it. His duty is to  
293 administer the present Government as it came to his hands and to  
294 transmit it unimpaired by him to his successor.

295           Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate  
296 justice of the people? Is there any better or equal hope in the world?  
297 In our present differences, is either party without faith of being in  
298 the right? If the Almighty Ruler of Nations, with His eternal truth  
299 and justice, be on your side of the North, or on yours of the South,  
300 that truth and that justice will surely prevail by the judgment of this  
301 great tribunal of the American people.

302           By the frame of the Government under which we live this  
303 same people have wisely given their public servants but little power  
304 for mischief, and have with equal wisdom provided for the return of  
305 that little to their own hands at very short intervals. While the people  
306 retain their virtue and vigilance no Administration by any extreme  
307 of wickedness or folly can very seriously injure the Government in  
308 the short space of four years.

309           My countrymen, one and all, think calmly and well upon this  
310 whole subject. Nothing valuable can be lost by taking time. If there  
311 be an object to hurry any of you in hot haste to a step which you  
312 would never take deliberately, that object will be frustrated by  
313 taking time; but no good object can be frustrated by it. Such of you  
314 as are now dissatisfied still have the old Constitution unimpaired,  
315 and, on the sensitive point, the laws of your own framing under it;  
316 while the new Administration will have no immediate power, if it  
317 would, to change either. If it were admitted that you who are  
318 dissatisfied hold the right side in the dispute, there still is no single  
319 good reason for precipitate action. Intelligence, patriotism,  
320 Christianity, and a firm reliance on Him who has never yet forsaken  
321 this favored land are still competent to adjust in the best way all our  
322 present difficulty.

323           In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in  
324 mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The Government will not  
325 assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the

326 aggressors. You have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the  
327 Government, while I shall have the most solemn one to "preserve,  
328 protect, and defend it."

329 I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must  
330 not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break  
331 our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching  
332 from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and  
333 hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the  
334 Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better  
335 angels of our nature.

