Abraham Lincoln papers

Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address, First Printed Draft, with Revisions in Lincoln's Hand¹, [January or February, 1861]

¹ Lincoln began working on his First Inaugural Address in late January, 1861. At some point, he had his working draft printed in Springfield. The present document is a reworking of this first printed draft, which Lincoln has labeled “First Edition.” Not only has the wording of this document been revised but parts of it have been cut out and other parts clipped and repositioned. For a complete, pristine copy of all eight pages of this printed draft, see First Inaugural Address, First Printed Draft [January or February, 1861]. For more information on the drafting of the First Inaugural, see the headnote to First Inaugural Address, Final Version [March, 1861].

In compliance with a custom as old as the government itself, I appear before you to address you briefly, and to take, in your presence, the oath prescribed by the Constitution of the United States, to be taken by the President “before he enters on the execution of his office.”

The more modern custom of electing a Chief Magistrate upon a previously declared platform of principles, supercedes, in a great measure, the necessity of repeating re-stating those principles, in an inaugural address. of this character. Upon the plainest grounds of good faith, one so elected, is not at liberty to shift his position. It is necessarily implied, if not expressed, that, in his judgment, the platform which he thus accepts, binds him to nothing either unconstitutional or inexpedient.

Having been so elected upon the Chicago Platform, and while I would repeat nothing in it, of aspersion or epithet, or question of motive against any man or party, I hold myself bound by duty, as well as impelled by inclination to follow, within the executive sphere, the principles therein declared. By no other course could I meet the reasonable expectations of the country.

I do not consider it necessary at present for me to say more than I have, in relation to those matters of administration, about which there is no special excitement.

Apprehension seems to exist among the people of the Southern States, that by the accession of a Republican Administration, their property, and their peace, and personal security, are to be endangered. There has never been any reasonable cause for such apprehension. Indeed, the most ample evidence to the contrary has all the while existed, and been open to their inspection. It is found in nearly all the published speeches of him who now addresses you. I do but quote from one of those speeches when I declare that“ I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the
institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so.”

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

2 Lincoln made this statement at least three times previously, at Ottawa and Quincy, Illinois, on August 21 and October 23, 1858, during his debates with Douglas, and at Columbus, Ohio, on September 16, 1859. See Collected Works, III, 16, 249, 402.

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


I now reiterate these sentiments: and in doing so, I only press upon the public attention the most conclusive evidence of which the case is susceptible, that the property, peace, and security, of no section are to be in anywise endangered by the now incoming Administration. I add too, that all the protection which, consistently with the Constitution and the laws, can be given, will be cheerfully given to all the States — as cheerfully to one section as to another.

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

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

4 The Constitution of the United States, Article IV, Section 2.

It is scarcely questioned that this provision was intended by those who made it, for the reclaiming of what we call fugitive slaves; and the intention of the law-giver is the law. All members of Congress swear their support to the whole Constitution — to this provision as much as to any other. To the
proposition, then, that slaves whose cases come within the terms of this clause, “shall be delivered up,” their oaths are unanimous. Now, if they would all begin make the effort in good temper, could they not, with something like nearly equal unanimity, frame and pass, a law, through by means of which to keep good that unanimous oath?

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

Again, in any law upon this subject, ought not all the safeguards of liberty known in human and civilized and humane jurisprudence to be introduced, so that a free man be not, in any case, surrendered as a slave?

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

It is now seventy-two years since the first inauguration of a President under our national Constitution. During the that period between then and now, fifteen different, and greatly distinguished citizens, have, in succession, administered the executive branch of the government. They have conducted it through many perils; and, on the whole, with great success. Yet, with all this scope for precedent, I now enter upon the same task for the brief constitutional term of four years, under great and peculiar difficulty. A disruption of the Federal Union is menaced; and, so far as can be on paper, is already effected. The particulars of what has been done are so familiar, and so fresh, that I need not to waste no any time in recounting them.

I hold, that in contemplation of universal law, and of the Constitution, the Union of these States is perpetual. Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national governments. It is safe to assert that no government proper, ever had a provision in its organic law for its own termination. Continue to execute all the express provisions of our national Constitution, and the Union will endure forever — it being impossible to destroy it, except by some action not provided for in the instrument itself.
Again, if the United States be not a government proper, but an association of States in the nature of contract merely, can it, as a contract, be peaceably unmade, by less than all the parties who made it? One party to a contract may violate it — break it, so to speak; but does it not require all to lawfully rescind it?

Descending from these general principles, we find the proposition that, in legal contemplation, the Union is perpetual, confirmed by the history of the Union itself. The Union is much older than the Constitution. It was formed in fact, by the Articles of Association in 1774. It was matured and continued by the Declaration of Independence in 1776. It was further matured, and expressly declared and pledged, to be perpetual, by the Articles of Confederation in 1778. And finally, in 1787, one of the declared objects for ordaining and establishing the Constitution, was "to form a more perfect union."

But if destruction of the Union, by one, or by a part only, of the States, be lawfully possible, the Union is less perfect than before, which contradicts the Constitution, and therefore is absurd.

It follows from these views that no State, upon its own mere motion, can lawfully get out of the Union, — that resolves and ordinances to that effect are legally nothing; and that acts of violence, within any State or States, against the author constitutional authority, of the United States. are insurrectionary, or treasonable, according to circumstances.

I therefore consider that the Union is unbroken; and, to the extent of my ability, I shall take care that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all the States. Doing this I deem to be only a simple duty on my part; and I shall perform it so far as practicable unless my rightful masters, the American people, shall withhold the requisite means, or, in some tangible way, direct the contrary. I trust this will not be regarded as a menace, but only as the declared purpose of the Union, that it will have its own, and defend itself.

In doing this there needs to be no bloodshed or violence; and there shall be none, unless it be forced upon the national authority. All the power at my disposal will be used to reclaim the public property and places which have fallen; to hold, occupy and possess these, and all other property and places belonging to the government, and to collect the duties on imports imposts; but, beyond what may be necessary for these, objects, there will be no invasion of any State. Where hostility to the government, in any interior locality shall be so great and so universal, as to forbid competent citizens of their own, to hold, and exercise the federal offices, there will be no attempt to force obnoxious strangers amongst them for that object. While the strict legal right, may exist in the government to enforce the execution exercise of the offices, under such circumstances, the attempt would be so
irratating, and so nearly impracticable, with all, that I deem it better to forego for the time, the uses of such offices—5

5 From “Where hostility to the government . . .” to the end of this sentence represents a handwritten insertion.

The mails, unless refused, will continue to be furnished in all parts of the Union. So far as possible, the people everywhere shall have that sense of perfect security which is most favorable to calm thought and reflection.*6 This course will be pursued, unless current experience shall show a modification, or change, to be ne proper—

6 This asterisk signifies where a handwritten sentence in the lower margin of the sheet (“This course will be pursued . . .”) is to be placed.

That there are persons who seek to destroy the Union at all events, and are glad of any pretext to do it, I will neither affirm or deny; but if there be such, I need address no word to them. To those, however, who really love the Union, may I not speak?

Before entering upon so grave a matter as the destruction of our national Union, fabric, would it not be wise to ascertain precisely why we do it? Will you hazard so desperate a step, while there is any possibility that any portion of the ills you fly from, have no real existence? Will you, while the certain ills you fly to, are greater than all the real ones you fly from? Will you risk the commission of so fearful a mistake?

All profess to be content in the Union, if all constitutional rights can be maintained. Is it true, then, that any right, plainly written in the Constitution, has been denied? I think not. Happily the human mind is so constructed, that no party can reach to the audacity of doing this. Think, if you can, of a single instance in which a plainly written provision of the Constitution has ever been denied. If, by the mere force of numbers, a majority should deprive a minority of any clearly written constitutional right, it might, in a moral point of view, justify revolution — certainly would, if such right were a vital one. — But such is not our case. All the vital rights of minorities, and of individuals, are so plainly assured to them, by affirmations and negations in the Constitution, that controversies never arise concerning them. But no organic law can ever be framed with a provision specifically applicable to every question which may occur in practical administration. No foresight can anticipate, nor any document of reasonable length contain express provisions for all possible questions. Shall fugitives from labor be surrendered by national or by State authority? The Constitution does not expressly
May Congress prohibit slavery in the territories? The Constitution does not expressly say. Must Congress protect slavery in the territories? The Constitution does not expressly say.

From questions of this class spring all our constitutional controversies, and we divide upon them into majorities and minorities. If the minority will not submit, the majority must, or the government must cease. There is no other alternative; for continuing the government, is submission on one side or the other. If a minority, in such case, will secede rather than submit, they make a precedent which, in turn, will divide and ruin them; for a minority of their own number will secede from them whenever a majority refuses to be controlled by such minority. For instance, why may not South Carolina, a year or two hence, arbitrarily, secede from a new Southern Confederacy, just as she now claims to secede from the present Union? Her people, and, indeed, all secession people, are now being educated to the precise temper of doing this. Is there such perfect identity of interests among the States to compose a Southern Union, as to produce harmony only, and prevent renewed secession? Will South Carolina be found lacking in either the restlessness or the ingenuity to pick a quarrel with Kentucky?

Plainly, the central idea of secession, is the essence of anarchy. A constitutional majority is the only true sovereign of a free people. Whoever rejects it, does, of necessity, fly to anarchy or to despotism. Unanimity is impossible; the rule of a minority, as a permanent arrangement, is wholly inadmissible; so that, rejecting the majority principle, anarchy or despotism in some form is all that is left.*7 I do not forget the position assumed by some, that constitutional questions are to be decided by the Supreme Court; nor do I question that such decisions must be binding, and conclusive, upon the parties to a suit, as to the subject of that suit. And, while it is obviously possible, that such decision may be erroneous in any given case; still the evil effect following it, being limited to the particular case, with the chances that it may be over-ruled, and never become a precedent for other cases, can better be borne, than could the greater evils of a different rule. But if the whole policy of the government upon vital questions, extending to the whole people, is to be irrevocably fixed by decisions of the Supreme Court, it is plain that the people will have ceased to be their own rulers, having turned their government over to the despotism of the few men composing the court. Nor is there, in this view, any assault upon the Court, or the judges— It is a duty from which they may not shrink, to decide cases, when properly brought before them; and, it is no fault of theirs, if others seek to turn their decisions to political purposes—

7 The passage beginning at this point running to the end of the paragraph, was handwritten in the margin to be inserted at this point.
Some, if not all of the States which claim to have withdrawn from the Union, have declared the supposed grievances which impelled them to the separation. Most prominent among these is the charge, in substance, that the Republican party have *avowed* the purpose to destroy the property of the Southern people. With all due deference and respect, allow me to declare that the Republican party have made no such avowal. The Republican party of the nation have spoken but twice; and in both instances they expressly avowed what necessarily implies the exact contrary — in 1860, as already quoted in this discourse; and, in 1856, in their National Convention at Philadelphia, as I now read:

“*Resolved, That the maintenance of the principles promulgated in the Declaration of Independence, and embodied in the Federal Constitution, is essential to the preservation of Republican Institutions, and that the Federal Constitution, the rights of the States, and the Union of the States, shall be preserved.*” 8


In addition to this, I aver that, to my knowledge, no sub-division, or individual, of the Republican party has ever avowed, or entertained, a purpose to destroy or to interfere with the property of the Southern people. For myself, I can declare, with perfect certainty, that I have never avowed, or entertained any such purpose; and I have never used any expression intended to convey such a meaning. The supposed purpose, then, of one section to destroy the property of the other, has no real existence; and to break up the government for that imaginary cause, would be a most melancholy mistake--9

9 The last sentence in this paragraph was handwritten for insertion at this point.

The Republican party, as I understand, have avowed the purpose to prevent, if they can, the extension of slavery, under the national auspices; and upon this arises the only dispute between the sections.

One section 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. The fugitive slave clause of the Constitution, and the law for the suppression of the foreign slave trade, are each as well enforced, as any law can ever be in a community where the moral sense of the people is against the law itself. The great body of the people abide by the dry legal obligation in both cases, and a few break over in each. This, I think, cannot be perfectly cured; and it would be worse in both cases *after* the
separation of the sections, than before. The foreign slave trade, now imperfectly suppressed, would be revived without restriction, in one section; while fugitive slaves, now only partially surrendered, would not be surrendered at all, by the other.

Physically speaking, we cannot separate. We cannot remove our respective sections from each other, nor build an impassable wall between them. A husband and wife may be divorced, and go out of the presence, and beyond the reach of each other; but the different parts of our country cannot do this. They cannot but remain face to face; and intercourse, either amicable or hostile, must continue between them. Is it possible to make that intercourse more advantageous or satisfactory, after separation than before? Can aliens make treaties easier than friends can make laws? Can treaties be more faithfully enforced between aliens than laws can among friends? Suppose you go to war, you cannot fight always; and when, after much loss on both sides, and no gain on either, you cease fighting, the identical old questions, as to terms of intercourse, are again upon you.10

10 At this point, Lincoln has removed three paragraphs from the printed text. Clippings of these three printed paragraphs later were inserted in a speech Lincoln wrote, but never delivered. See First Inaugural Address, First Printed Draft, [January or February, 1861], and Fragment of Speech to Kentuckians, [February 1861]. The next four paragraphs have been clipped and pasted to effect a sequence different from that in which the text was first printed. Compare First Inaugural Address, First Printed Draft [January or February, 1861].

This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it, or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it. As I am not much impressed with the belief that the present Constitution can be improved, I make no recommendations of amendments. I am, rather, for the old ship, and the chart of the old pilots. If, however, the people desire a new, or an altered vessel, the matter is exclusively their own, and they can move in the premises, as well without as with an executive recommendation. I shall place no obstacle in the way of what may appear to be their wishes.

The Chief Magistrate derives all his authority from the people, and they have conferred none upon him to fix terms for the separation of the States. The people themselves can do this if they choose; but the executive, as such, has nothing to do with it. His duty is to administer the present government, as it came to his hands, and to transmit it, unimpaired by him, to his successor.

Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better or equal hope, in the world? In our present differences, is either party without faith in the
right? If the Almighty Ruler of nations, with his eternal truth and justice, be on our your side, or on yours, that truth and that justice will surely prevail, by the judgment of this great tribunal, the American people.

By the frame of the government under which we live, this same people have wisely given their public servants but little power for mischief; and have, with equal wisdom, provided for the return of that little to their own hands at very short intervals.

While the people remain patient, and true to themselves, no man, even in the presidential chair, by any extreme of wickedness or folly, can very seriously injure the government in the short space of four years.

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

In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you, unless you first assail it. You can have no conflict, without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to “preserve, protect, and defend” it You can forbear the assault upon it; I can not shrink from the defense of it. With you, and not with me, is the solemn question of“ Shall it be peace, or a sword?”