

Secession and the Civil War

Interpreting Primary Sources

The leaders and oracles of the most powerful party in the United States have denounced us as tyrants and unprincipled heathens through the whole civilized world. they have preached it from their pulpits. They have declared it in the halls of Congress and in their newspapers. In their schoolhouses they have taught their children (who are to rule this Government in the next generation) to look upon the slaveholder as the especial disciple of the devil himself....They have established Abolition Societies...for the purpose of raising funds--first to send troops to Kansas to cut the throats of all the slaveholders there, and now to send emissaries among us to incite our slaves to rebellion against the authority of their masters....They have brought forth an open and avowed enemy to the most cherished and important institution of the South as candidate for election to the Chief Magistracy of this Government....And in every conceivable way, the whole Northern people, as mass, have shown a most implacable hostility to us and our most sacred rights; and this, too, without the slightest provocation on the part of the South....

All admit that an ultimate dissolution of the Union is inevitable, and we believe the crisis is not far off. Then let it come now; the better for the South that it should be today; she cannot afford to wait.

Charleston Mercury, 1860

The prevailing ideas entertained by...most of the leading statesmen at the time of the formation of the old Constitution was that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically. It was an evil they knew not well how to deal with, but the general opinion of the men of that day was that somehow or other, in the order of Providence, the institution would be evanescent and pass away.... Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests upon the great truth that the Negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery--subordination to the superior race--is his natural and normal condition.

Alexander Stephens of Georgia, 1861

The Constitution makes no provision for secession.... Constitutionally, there can be no such thing as secession of a State from the Union. But it does not follow that because a State cannot secede constitutionally, it is obliged under all circumstances to remain in the Union....If for any cause the Government...should become inimical to the rights and interests of the people, instead of affording protection to their persons and property, and securing the happiness and prosperity, to attain which it was established, it is the natural right of the people to change the Government regardless of Constitutions.

What then is the South to do? Suffer the compact which brought them into the Union to be violated with impunity, and without means of redress; submit to incursions into their territory and trespass upon their property by northern abolitionists?...Who expects, who desires the South to submit to all this?

Dubuque Herald, 1860

No state can legally leave the Union. What is called "the right of secession" has no existence. It means the right of revolution, which belongs to every people....If the revolution succeeds, history justifies them; if they fail, it condemns them, even while not condemning their motives of action....If South Carolina should rebel,--and secession is rebellion,--and if other states should join her, it would be the duty of the general government to compel them to observe the law....

Boston Daily Traveler, 1860

I hold that, in contemplation of universal law and of the Constitution, the Union of these States is perpetual....There needs to be no bloodshed or violence; and there shall be none, unless it be forced upon the national authority. The power confided to me will be used to hold, occupy, and possess the property and places belonging to the government, and to collect the duties and imports; but beyond what may be necessary for these objects, there will be no invasion, no using of force against or among the people anywhere....

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. 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.

President Lincoln's First Inaugural Address

The contest is really for empire on the side of the North, and for independence on that of the South, and in this respect we recognize an exact analogy between the North and the Government of George III, and the South and the Thirteen Revolted Provinces.

London Times, 1861

The Government liberates the enemy's slaves as it would the enemy's cattle, simply to weaken them in the coming conflict....The principle asserted is not that a human being cannot justly own another, but that he cannot own him unless he is loyal to the United States.

London Spectator on the Emancipation Proclamation