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The Assertions of a Secessionist

Alexander H. Stephens

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THE
Assertions of a Secessionist.

From the Speech of A. H. STEPHENS, of Georgia,

November 14th, 1860.



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THE ASSERTIONS OF A SECESSIONIST.

From the Speech of A. H. STEPHENS, of Georgia.

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By force of sheer reiteration, thousands of ignorant and thoughtless people at the North, as well as in Europe, have been persuaded into the belief that the Government of the United States, and the loyal people who sustain it, were in some way responsible for the war which now, for nearly four years, has devastated the country; or, at least, that they might at any time honorably end it, and restore peace and tranquillity if they chose.

FELLOW-CITIZENS:—My object is not to stir up strife, but to allay it; not to appeal to your passions, but to your reason. Good governments can never be built up or sustained by the impulse of passion. I wish to address myself to your good sense, to your good judgment.

The first question that presents itself is, shall the people of the South 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 for any State to separate from the Union. It ought to stand by still and aid in maintaining the Constitution of the country. To make a point of resistance to the Government, to withdraw from it because a man has been constitutionally elected, puts 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 a 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—withdraw ourselves from it? Would we not be in the wrong? 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 on that account, the record would be made up hereafter against us.

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 the majority against him.

In the Senate he will also be powerless. There will be a majority of four against him. This, after the loss of Bigler, Fitch, and others, by the unfortunate dissensions of the National Democratic party in their States. Mr. Lincoln can not appoint an officer without the consent of the Senate—he cannot form a cabinet without the same consent.

My countrymen, I am not of those who believe this Union has been a curse up to this time. True men, men of integrity, entertain different views from me on this subject. I do not question their right to do so; I would not impugn their motives in so doing. Nor will I undertake to say that this Government of our fathers is perfect. There is nothing perfect in this world of a human origin.

But that this Government of our fathers, with all its defects, comes nearer the objects of all good governments than any other on the face of the earth is my settled conviction. Contrast it now with any on the face of the earth.

Compare, my friends, this Government with that of Spain, Mexico, the South American Republics, Germany, Ireland—are there any sons of that down-trodden nation here to-night?

I think that one of the evils that beset us is a surfeit of liberty, an exuberance of the priceless blessings for which we are ungrateful.

We listened to my honorable friend who addressed you last night (Mr. Toombs), as he recounted the evils of this Government.

The first was the fishing bounties, paid mostly to the sailors of New England. Our friend stated that forty-eight years of our Government was under the administration of Southern Presidents. Well, these fishing bounties began under the rule of a Southern President, I believe. No one of them, during the whole forty-eight years, ever set his Administration against the principle or policy of them. It is not for me to say whether it was a wise policy in the beginning; it probably was not, and I have nothing to say in its defence. But the reason given for it was to encourage our young men to go to sea and learn to manage ships. We had at the time but a small navy. It was thought best to encourage a class of our people to become acquainted with seafaring life, to become sailors—to man our naval ships. It requires practice to walk the deck of a ship, to pull the ropes, to furl the sails, to go aloft, to climb the mast; and it was thought, by offering this bounty, a nursery might be formed in which young men would become perfected in these arts, and it applied to one section of the country as well as to any other.

The result of this was, that in the war of 1812 our sailors, many of whom came from this nursery, were equal to any that England brought against us. At any rate, no small part of the glories of that war were gained by the veteran tars of America, and the object of these bounties was to foster that branch of the national defence. My opinion is, that whatever may have been the reason at first, this bounty ought to be discontinued—the reason for it, at first, no longer exists. A bill for this object did pass the Senate the last Congress I was in, to which my honor-

able friend contributed greatly, but it was not reached in the House of Representatives.

The next evil which my friend complained of was the Tariff. Well, let us look at that for a moment. About the time I commenced noticing public matters, this question was agitating the country almost as fearfully as the slave question now is. In 1832, when I was in college, South Carolina was ready to nullify or secede from the Union on this account. And what have we seen? The Tariff no longer distracts the public councils. Reason has triumphed! The present Tariff was voted for by Massachusetts and South Carolina. The lion and the lamb lay down together—every man in the Senate and House from Massachusetts and South Carolina, I think, voted for it, as did my honorable friend himself. And if it be true, to use the figure of speech of my honorable friend, that every man in the North that works in iron and brass and wood has his muscle strengthened by the protection of the Government, that stimulant was given by his vote, and I believe every other Southern man. So we ought not to complain of that.

Another matter of grievance alluded to by my honorable friend was the Navigation Laws. This policy was also commenced under the Administration of one of these Southern Presidents who ruled so well, and has been continued through all of them since. The gentleman's views of the policy of these laws and my own do not disagree. We occupied the same ground in relation to them in Congress. It is not my purpose to defend them now. But it is proper to state some matters connected with their origin.

One of the objects was to build up a commercial American marine by giving American bottoms the exclusive carrying trade between our own ports. This is a great arm of national power. This object was accomplished. We have now an amount of shipping, not only coastwise, but to foreign countries, which puts us in the front rank of the nations of the world. England can no longer be styled the Mistress of the Seas. What American is not proud of the result? Whether those laws should be continued is another question. But one thing is certain: no President, Northern or Southern, has ever yet recommended their repeal. And my friend's efforts to get them repealed were met with but little favor, North or South.

These, then, were the true main grievances or grounds of complaint against the general system of our Government and its workings—I mean the administration of the Federal Government.

Have we not at the South, as well as the North, grown great, prosperous, and happy under its operations? Has any part of the world ever shown such rapid progress in the development of wealth, and all the material resources of national power and greatness, as the Southern States have under the General Government, notwithstanding all its defects?

The great fact, that we have grown great and powerful under the Government as it exists—there is no conjecture or speculation about that; it stands out bold, high, and prominent, like your Stone Mountain, to which the gentleman alluded in illustrating home facts in his record.

What we would have lost in border wars without the Union, or what we have gained simply by the peace it has secured, no estimate can be made of. The influence of the Government on us is like that of the atmosphere around us. Its benefits are so silent and unseen that they are seldom thought of or appreciated.

Our institutions constitute the basis, the matrix, from which spring all our characteristics of developments and greatness. Look at Greece. There is the same fertile soil, the same blue sky, the same inlets and harbors, the same *Ægean*, the same Olympus; there is the same land where Homer sung, where Pericles spoke; it is in nature the same old Greece—but it is living Greece no more.

Descendants of the same people inhabit the country; yet what is the reason of this mighty difference? In the midst of present degradation we see the glorious fragments of ancient works of art—temples with ornaments and inscriptions that excite wonder and admiration—the remains of a once high order of civilization which have outlived the language they spoke—upon them all Ichabod is written—their glory has departed. Why is this so? I answer, their institutions have been destroyed.

The same may be said of Italy. Where is Rome, once the mistress of the world? There are the same seven hills now, the same soil, the same natural resources; nature is the same, but what a ruin of human greatness meets the eye of the traveller throughout the length and breadth of that most down-trodden land! Why have not the people of that Heaven-favored clime the spirit that animated their fathers? Why this sad difference?

It is the destruction of her institutions that has caused it; and my countrymen, if we shall in an evil hour rashly pull down and destroy those institutions which the patriotic band of our fathers labored so long and so hard to build up, and which have done so much for us and the world, who can venture the prediction that similar results will not ensue? Let us avoid it if we can. I trust the spirit is among us that will enable us to do it. Let us not rashly try the experiment, for, if it fails, as it did in Greece and Italy, and in the South American Republics, and in every other place wherever liberty is once destroyed, it may never be restored to us again.

There are defects in our government, errors in administration, and shortcomings of many kinds, but in spite of these defects and errors Georgia has grown to be a great state. Let us pause here a moment. In 1850 there was a great crisis, but not so fearful as this; for, of all I have ever passed through, this is the most perilous, and requires to be met with the greatest calmness and deliberation.

There were many among us in 1850 zealous to go at once out of the Union, to disrupt every tie that binds us together. Now, do you believe, had that policy been carried out at that time, we would have been the same great people that we are to-day? It may be that we would, but have you any assurance of that fact? Would you have made the same advancement, improvement, and progress in all that constitutes material wealth and prosperity that we have?

When I look around and see our prosperity in every thing, agriculture, commerce, art, science, and every department of education, physical and mental, as well as moral advancement, and our colleges, I think, in the face of such an exhibition, if we can, without the loss of power, or any essential right or interest, remain in the Union, it is our duty to ourselves and to posterity to—let us not too readily yield to this temptation—do so. Our first parents, the great progenitors of the human race, were not without a like temptation when in the garden of Eden. They were led to believe that their condition would be bettered—that their eyes would be opened—and that they would become as gods. They in an evil hour yielded—instead of becoming gods, they only saw their own nakedness.

I look upon this country, with our institutions, as the Eden of the world, the paradise of the universe.

In the Georgia State Convention, held in January, 1861, to determine the question of secession for that State, Mr. Stephens gave utterance to the following memorable words:

“ This step (of secession) once taken, can never be recalled ; and all the baleful and withering consequences that must follow, will rest on the convention for all coming time. When we and our posterity shall see our lovely South desolated by the demon of war, WHICH THIS ACT OF YOURS WILL INEVITABLY INVITE AND CALL FORTH ; when our green fields of waving harvest shall be trodden down by the murderous soldiery and fiery car of war sweeping over our land ; our temples of justice laid in ashes ; all the horrors and desolations of war upon us ; WHO BUT THIS CONVENTION WILL BE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR IT ? and who but him who shall have given his vote for this unwise and ill-timed measure, as I honestly think and believe, SHALL BE HELD TO STRICT ACCOUNT FOR THIS SUICIDAL ACT BY THE PRESENT GENERATION, AND PROBABLY CURSED AND EXECRATED BY POSTERITY FOR ALL COMING TIME, for the wide and desolating ruin that will inevitably follow this act you now propose to perpetrate ? Pause, I entreat you, and consider for a moment what reasons you can give that will even satisfy yourselves in calmer moments—what reasons you can give to your fellow-sufferers in the calamity that it will bring upon us. WHAT REASONS CAN YOU GIVE TO THE NATIONS OF THE EARTH TO JUSTIFY IT ? They will be the calm and deliberate judges in the case ; and what cause or one overt act can you name or point, on which to rest the plea of justification ? WHAT RIGHT HAS THE NORTH ASSAILED ? What interest of the South has been invaded ? What justice has been denied ? and what claim, founded in justice and right, has been withheld ? Can either of you to-day name one governmental act of wrong, deliberately and purposely done by the government of Washington, of which the South has a right to complain ? I challenge the answer. While, on the other hand, let me show the facts (and believe me, gentlemen, I am not here the advocate of the North ; but I am here the friend, the firm friend and lover of the South and her institutions, and for this reason I speak thus

plainly and faithfully for yours, mine, and every other man's interest, the words of truth and soberness), of which I wish you to judge, and I will only state facts which are clear and undeniable, and which now stand as records authentic in the history of our country. When we of the South demanded the slave trade, or the importation of Africans for the cultivation of our lands, did they not yield the right for twenty years? When we asked a three-fifths representation in Congress for our slaves, was it not granted? When we asked and demanded the return of any fugitive from justice, or the recovery of those persons owing labor or allegiance, was it not incorporated in the Constitution, and again ratified and strengthened by the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850? But do you reply that in many instances they have violated this compact, and have not been faithful to their engagements? As individual and local communities, they may have done so; but not by the sanction of government; for that has always been true to Southern interests. Again, gentlemen, look at another fact: when we have asked that more territory should be added, that we might spread the institution of slavery, have they not yielded to our demands in giving us Louisiana, Florida, and Texas, out of which four States have been carved, and ample territory for four more to be added in due time, if you, by this unwise and impolitic act, do not destroy this hope, and, perhaps, by it lose all, and have your last slave wrenched from you by stern military rule, as South America and Mexico were; or by the vindictive decree of a universal emancipation, which may reasonably be expected to follow. But, again, gentlemen, what have we to gain by this proposed change of our relation to the General Government? We have always had the control of it, and can yet, if we remain in it and are as united as we have been. We have had a majority of the Presidents chosen from the South, as well as the control and management of most of those chosen from the North. We have had sixty years of Southern Presidents to their twenty-four, thus controlling the executive department. So of the judges of the Supreme Court, we have had eighteen from the South, and but eleven from the North; although nearly four-fifths of the judicial business has arisen in the Free States, yet a majority of the Court has always been from the South. This we have required, so as to guard against any interpretation of the Constitution unfavorable to us. In like manner, we have been equally watchful to guard our interests in the legislative branch of government. In choosing the presiding presidents (*pro tem.*) of the Senate, we have had twenty-four to their eleven. Speakers of the house, we have had twenty-three, and they twelve. While the majority of the representatives, from their greater population, have always been from the North, yet we have so generally secured the Speaker, because he, to a greater extent, shapes and controls the legislation of the country. Nor have we had less control in every other department of the General Government. Attorney-Generals we have had fourteen, while the North have had but five. Foreign ministers we have had eighty-six and they but fifty-four. While three-fourths of the business which

demands diplomatic agents abroad is clearly from the Free States, from their greater commercial interests, yet we have had the principal embassies, so as to secure the world markets for our cotton, tobacco, and sugar, on the best possible terms. We have had a vast majority of the higher offices of both army and navy, while a larger proportion of the soldiers and sailors were drawn from the north. Equally so of clerks, auditors, and comptrollers filling the executive department, the records show for the last fifty years that of three thousand thus employed, we have had more than two-thirds of the same, while we have but one-third of the white population of the Republic. Again, look at another item, and one, be assured, in which we have a great and vital interest; it is that of revenue, or means of supporting government. From official documents we learn that a fraction over three-fourth of the revenue collected for the support of government has uniformly been raised from the North. Pause now while you can, gentlemen, and contemplate carefully and candidly these important items. Leaving out of view, for the present, the countless millions of dollars you must expend in a war with the North; with tens of thousands of your sons and brothers slain in battle, and offered up as sacrifices upon the altar of your ambition—and for what? we ask again. Is it for the overthrow of the American government, established by our common ancestry, cemented and built up by their sweat and blood, and founded on the broad principles of right, justice, and humanity? And, as such, I must declare here, as I have often done before, and which has been repeated by the greatest and wisest of statesmen and patriots in this and other lands, that it is the best and freest government—the most equal in its rights, the most just in its decisions, the most lenient in its measures, and the most aspiring in its principles to elevate the race of men, that the sun of heaven ever shone upon. Now, for you to attempt to overthrow such a government as this, under which we have lived for more than three-quarters of a century—in which we have gained our wealth, our standing as a nation, our domestic safety while the elements of peril are around us, with peace and tranquillity accompanied with unbounded prosperity and rights unassailed—is the height of *madness, folly, and wickedness*, to which I can neither lend my sanction nor my vote.”

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