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## 1861 - Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address

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Abraham Lincoln

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Anthony, Edward, Contributor, and Mathew B Brady. President Abraham Lincoln. United States of America Illinois, 1860. [New York: Edward Anthony, to 1876] Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021669449/>.

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*In his First Inaugural Address, Lincoln made sentimental, legal, and practical arguments against Confederate secession. The speech made clear Lincoln's desire to avoid war, and also provides evidence that Lincoln was not committed to the immediate destruction of slavery.*

Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address

I have no 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.

..

, , , 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 any wise endangered by the now in common Administration. I add, too, that all the property, peace, and security of no section are to be in any wise endangered by the incoming Administration. I add, too, that all the protection which, consistently with the Constitution and the laws, can be given, which be cheerfully given to all the States when lawfully demanded, for whatever cause-- as cheerfully to one section as another...

\*\*\*\*

One section of our country believes that 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, perhaps, as any law can never be in a community where the moral sense of the people imperfectly supports 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

## 1861 - Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address

before. The foreign slave trade, now imperfectly suppressed, would be ultimately 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 built an impassible wall between them. A husband and wife may be divorced, and go out of the presence and out of the reach of each other, but the different parts of our country cannot do this. They can not but remain face to face, and intercourse either amicable or hostile, must continue between them. Is it possible, then, to make that intercourse more advantageous or more 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.

\*\*\*\*

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

I am loth to close. 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 battle-field and patriot grave to every living heart and hearth-stone, all over this broad land, we yet swelled the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

*Abraham Lincoln, “First Inaugural Address,” March 4, 1861.*  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-9687>.

1861 - Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address



Ritchie, Alexander Hay, Engraver, and F. B. Carpenter. The first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation before the cabinet / painted by F.B. Carpenter ; engraved by A.H. Ritchie. United States, ca. 1866. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/96521764/>.