

■ The Cornerstone of the Confederacy

Date: March 21, 1861

Author: Stephens, Alexander H.

Genre: speech

“The new constitution has put at rest, forever, all the agitating questions relating to our peculiar institution—African slavery as it exists amongst us—the proper status of the negro in our form of civilization.”

Summary Overview

Many illustrious names are frequently mentioned in association with the Civil War—Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Jefferson Davis, and Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, for example—but rarely do they include that of Alexander Stephens, the vice president of the Confederate States of America. Stephens, a well-educated and highly regarded politician from Georgia, sat at the helm of the Southern states alongside President Davis. In this speech, given in Savannah, Georgia, in the weeks leading up to the start of the Civil War, Stephens explains the reasons for the secession of the Southern states and heatedly denounces the attempts of the United States government to deny their right to do so. Stephens presents an educated logic for the Confederacy’s stance, one that provides an intriguing perspective on the Southern states in the time immediately preceding the war.

Defining Moment

The extent to which slavery can be considered a cause of the Civil War has been a subject of much debate among historians and the public, and it seems likely that this debate will continue for the foreseeable future. Regardless of one’s stance in this ongoing debate, it seems reasonable to conclude that a conflict of such scope could not have been based on a single is-

sue. However, slavery undoubtedly played a significant role in the development of the conflict. Stephens was especially concerned with the issue of slavery within the Confederacy, which he addressed at length in his 1861 speech. He argues that “the new constitution” of the Confederacy “has put at rest, forever, all the agitating questions relating to [the] peculiar institution [of] African slavery,” thus reassuring his audience that the “peculiar institution” will remain in place. He was well aware that the members of his audience were concerned about this issue, regardless of whether they were slave owners themselves.

Stephens’s stance on those he termed “negro” is troubling to a twenty-first-century reader, but to him, it was logical. Slavery had been a part of many societies throughout history; it was, according to his speech, “a principle founded in nature.” He and his brethren within the Confederate government were merely upholding the continuation of this element of past societies, an element that need not be challenged because it was a practice sanctioned by the laws not only of nature but also of God. Stephens argues, “With us, all of the white race, however high or low, rich or poor, are equal in the eye of the law. Not so with the negro. Subordination is his place.” The Confederate vice president, like the others crafting the new nation, supported his beliefs with evidence from history and interpretations

of scientific and religious concepts. The Confederacy did not need to apologize or eradicate their practice of slavery because the North disapproved; God himself, according to Stephens's analysis, supported the new nation's claim to slavery.

Author Biography

Alexander Hamilton Stephens was born in Georgia on February 11, 1812, to Andrew and Margaret Stephens. His mother died not long after his birth, and when Stephens was a toddler, his father married Matilda Lindsay. Andrew and Matilda died within a short time of each other when Stephens was fourteen, leaving him to the care of various relatives. Stephens struggled with various ailments throughout his life and was widely known to be sickly; indeed, he is described as chronically ill on several occasions in American writer Margaret Mitchell's classic Civil War and Reconstruction novel *Gone with the Wind*. Despite these difficulties, Stephens pushed himself to attend Franklin College,

now part of the University of Georgia, and study law before moving on to the political arena.

While he held offices in Georgia's state government and later in the House of Representatives, Stephens is largely remembered for his services to the Confederate States of America. A man of contradictions, Stephens rallied for the preservation of states' rights yet was personally against slavery; he is said to have referred to the institution as an "abominable human tragedy" ("Alexander Stephens"). He was also originally against secession but ultimately determined it to be the best course of action. Stephens was appointed provisional vice president of the Confederacy in early 1861 and officially elected later that year, serving in the position until his arrest by Union forces in May of 1865.

Stephens returned to the US House of Representatives following the Civil War, serving in that capacity from 1873 to 1882. He was elected governor of Georgia in late 1882, but his term was cut short by his death on March 4, 1883, at the age of seventy-one.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

I was remarking that we are passing through one of the greatest revolutions in the annals of the world. Seven States have within the last three months thrown off an old government and formed a new. This revolution has been signally marked, up to this time, by the fact of its having been accomplished without the loss of a single drop of blood.

This new constitution, or form of government, constitutes the subject to which your attention will be partly invited. In reference to it, I make this first general remark: it amply secures all our ancient rights, franchises, and liberties. All the great principles of Magna Charta are retained in it. No citizen is deprived of life, liberty, or property, but by the judgment of his peers under the laws of the land. The great principle of religious liberty, which was the honor and pride of the old constitution, is still maintained and secured. All the essentials of the old constitution, which have endeared it to the hearts of the American people, have been preserved and perpetuated. Some changes have been made. Some of these I should have preferred not to have seen made; but other important changes do meet my cordial approbation. They form

great improvements upon the old constitution. So, taking the whole new constitution, I have no hesitancy in giving it as my judgment that it is decidedly better than the old. . . .

Allow me briefly to allude to some of these improvements. The question of building up class interests, or fostering one branch of industry to the prejudice of another under the exercise of the revenue power, which gave us so much trouble under the old constitution, is put at rest forever under the new. We allow the imposition of no duty with a view of giving advantage to one class of persons, in any trade or business, over those of another. All, under our system, stand upon the same broad principles of perfect equality. Honest labor and enterprise are left free and unrestricted in whatever pursuit they may be engaged. This old thorn of the tariff, which was the cause of so much irritation in the old body politic, is removed forever from the new.

Again, the subject of internal improvements, under the power of Congress to regulate commerce, is put at rest under our system. The power, claimed by construction under the old constitution, was at least a doubtful

one; it rested solely upon construction. We of the South, generally apart from considerations of constitutional principles, opposed its exercise upon grounds of its inexpediency and injustice. . . .

But not to be tedious in enumerating the numerous changes for the better, allow me to allude to one other though last, not least. The new constitution has put at rest, forever, all the agitating questions relating to our peculiar institution—African slavery as it exists amongst us—the proper status of the negro in our form of civilization. This was the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution. Jefferson in his forecast, had anticipated this, as the “rock upon which the old Union would split.” He was right. What was conjecture with him, is now a realized fact. But whether he fully comprehended the great truth upon which that rock stood and stands, may be doubted. The prevailing ideas entertained by him and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the formation of the old constitution, were 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. This idea, though not incorporated in the constitution, was the prevailing idea at that time. The constitution, it is true, secured every essential guarantee to the institution while it should last, and hence no argument can be justly urged against the constitutional guarantees thus secured, because of the common sentiment of the day. Those ideas, however, were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error. It was a sandy foundation, and the government built upon it fell when the “storm came and the wind blew.”

Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone 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. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth. This truth has been slow in the process of its development, like all other truths in the various departments of science. It has been so even amongst us. Many who

hear me, perhaps, can recollect well, that this truth was not generally admitted, even within their day. The errors of the past generation still clung to many as late as twenty years ago. Those at the North, who still cling to these errors, with a zeal above knowledge, we justly denominate fanatics. All fanaticism springs from an aberration of the mind—from a defect in reasoning. It is a species of insanity. One of the most striking characteristics of insanity, in many instances, is forming correct conclusions from fancied or erroneous premises; so with the anti-slavery fanatics. Their conclusions are right if their premises were. They assume that the negro is equal, and hence conclude that he is entitled to equal privileges and rights with the white man. If their premises were correct, their conclusions would be logical and just—but their premise being wrong, their whole argument fails. I recollect once of having heard a gentleman from one of the northern States, of great power and ability, announce in the House of Representatives, with imposing effect, that we of the South would be compelled, ultimately, to yield upon this subject of slavery, that it was as impossible to war successfully against a principle in politics, as it was in physics or mechanics. That the principle would ultimately prevail. That we, in maintaining slavery as it exists with us, were warring against a principle, a principle founded in nature, the principle of the equality of men. The reply I made to him was, that upon his own grounds, we should, ultimately, succeed, and that he and his associates, in this crusade against our institutions, would ultimately fail. The truth announced, that it was as impossible to war successfully against a principle in politics as it was in physics and mechanics, I admitted; but told him that it was he, and those acting with him, who were warring against a principle. They were attempting to make things equal which the Creator had made unequal. . . .

In the conflict thus far, success has been on our side, complete throughout the length and breadth of the Confederate States. It is upon this, as I have stated, our social fabric is firmly planted; and I cannot permit myself to doubt the ultimate success of a full recognition of this principle throughout the civilized and enlightened world.

As I have stated, the truth of this principle may be slow in development, as all truths are and ever have been, in the various branches of science. It was so with the

principles announced by Galileo—it was so with Adam Smith and his principles of political economy. It was so with Harvey, and his theory of the circulation of the blood. It is stated that not a single one of the medical profession, living at the time of the announcement of the truths made by him, admitted them. Now, they are universally acknowledged. May we not, therefore, look with confidence to the ultimate universal acknowledgment of the truths upon which our system rests? It is the first government ever instituted upon the principles in strict conformity to nature, and the ordination of Providence, in furnishing the materials of human society. Many governments have been founded upon the principle of the subordination and serfdom of certain classes of the same race; such were and are in violation of the laws of nature. Our system commits no such violation of nature's laws. With us, all of the white race, however high or low, rich or poor, are equal in the eye of the law. Not so with the negro. Subordination is his place. He, by nature, or by the curse against Canaan, is fitted for that condition which he occupies in our system. The architect, in the construction of buildings, lays the foundation with the proper material—the granite; then comes the brick or the marble. The substratum of our society is made of the material fitted by nature for it, and by experience we know that it is best, not only for the superior, but for the inferior race, that it should be so. . . .

But to pass on: Some have propounded the inquiry whether it is practicable for us to go on with the confederacy without further accessions? Have we the means and ability to maintain nationality among the powers of the earth? On this point I would barely say, that as anxiously as we all have been, and are, for the border States, with institutions similar to ours, to join us, still we are abundantly able to maintain our position, even if they should ultimately make up their minds not to cast their destiny with us. That they ultimately will join us be compelled to do it is my confident belief; but we can get on very well without them, even if they should not. . . .

In point of material wealth and resources, we are greatly in advance of them. The taxable property of the Confederate States cannot be less than twenty-two hundred millions of dollars! . . . It is true, I believe I state but the common sentiment, when I declare my earnest desire that the border States should join us. The differ-

ences of opinion that existed among us anterior to secession, related more to the policy in securing that result by co-operation than from any difference upon the ultimate security we all looked to in common. . . .

But to return to the question of the future. What is to be the result of this revolution? Will every thing, commenced so well, continue as it has begun? In reply to this anxious inquiry, I can only say it all depends upon ourselves. A young man starting out in life on his majority, with health, talent, and ability, under a favoring Providence, may be said to be the architect of his own fortunes. His destinies are in his own hands. He may make for himself a name, of honor or dishonor, according to his own acts. If he plants himself upon truth, integrity, honor and uprightness, with industry, patience and energy, he cannot fail of success. So it is with us. We are a young republic, just entering upon the arena of nations; we will be the architects of our own fortunes. . . .

The process of disintegration in the old Union may be expected to go on with almost absolute certainty if we pursue the right course. We are now the nucleus of a growing power which, if we are true to ourselves, our destiny, and high mission, will become the controlling power on this continent. To what extent accessions will go on in the process of time, or where it will end, the future will determine. So far as it concerns States of the old Union, this process will be upon no such principles of reconstruction as now spoken of, but upon reorganization and new assimilation. Such are some of the glimpses of the future as I catch them.

But at first we must necessarily meet with the inconveniences and difficulties and embarrassments incident to all changes of government. These will be felt in our postal affairs and changes in the channel of trade. These inconveniences, it is to be hoped, will be but temporary, and must be borne with patience and forbearance.

As to whether we shall have war with our late confederates, or whether all matters of differences between us shall be amicably settled, I can only say that the prospect for a peaceful adjustment is better, so far as I am informed, than it has been. The prospect of war is, at least, not so threatening as it has been. The idea of coercion, shadowed forth in President Lincoln's inaugural, seems not to be followed up thus far so vigorously as was expected. Fort Sumter, it is believed, will soon

be evacuated. What course will be pursued toward Fort Pickens, and the other forts on the gulf, is not so well understood. It is to be greatly desired that all of them should be surrendered. Our object is peace, not only with the North, but with the world. All matters relating to the public property, public liabilities of the Union when we were members of it, we are ready and willing to adjust and settle upon the principles of right, equity, and good faith. War can be of no more benefit to the North than to us. Whether the intention of evacuating Fort Sumter is to be received as an evidence of a desire for a peaceful solution of our difficulties with the United States, or the result of necessity, I will not undertake to say. I would feign hope the former. Rumors are afloat, however, that it is the result of necessity. All I can say to you, therefore, on that point is, keep your armor bright and your powder dry.

The surest way to secure peace, is to show your ability to maintain your rights. The principles and position of the present administration of the United States—the Republican Party—present some puzzling questions. While it is a fixed principle with them never to allow the increase of a foot of slave territory, they seem to be equally determined not to part with an inch “of the accursed soil.” Notwithstanding their clamor against the

institution, they seemed to be equally opposed to getting more, or letting go what they have got. They were ready to fight on the accession of Texas, and are equally ready to fight now on her secession. Why is this? How can this strange paradox be accounted for? There seems to be but one rational solution—and that is, notwithstanding their professions of humanity, they are disinclined to give up the benefits they derive from slave labor. Their philanthropy yields to their interest. The idea of enforcing the laws, has but one object, and that is a collection of the taxes, raised by slave labor to swell the fund necessary to meet their heavy appropriations. The spoils is what they are after—though they come from the labor of the slave.

That as the admission of States by Congress under the constitution was an act of legislation, and in the nature of a contract or compact between the States admitted and the others admitting, why should not this contract or compact be regarded as of like character with all other civil contracts—liable to be rescinded by mutual agreement of both parties? The seceding States have rescinded it on their part, they have resumed their sovereignty. Why cannot the whole question be settled, if the north desire peace, simply by the Congress, in both branches, with the concurrence of the President, giving their consent to the separation, and a recognition of our independence?

GLOSSARY

Adam Smith: a Scottish philosopher (1723–90) best known for *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*

coercion: intimidation, pressure

Fort Pickens: a fort on Santa Rosa Island, off the coast of Pensacola, Florida

Fort Sumter: a fort in Charleston Harbor, on the South Carolina coast; the Confederate attack on the fort on April 12, 1861, marked the start of the Civil War

Galileo: Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), an Italian scientist who faced heavy criticism for his theory of heliocentrism

Harvey: William Harvey (1578–1657), an English doctor who was the first to document blood circulation through the body

Magna Charta: the Magna Carta; an English legal document written in 1215 that served as the precursor to many similar statutes, such as the charters formed by the American colonies

Providence: wisdom, fate, divine guidance

Seven States: the first seven states to secede from the United States: SC, MS, FL, AL, GA, LA, and TX

Document Analysis

This speech by Stephens, sometimes referred to as the Cornerstone Speech, is a fascinating historical document. Even on the first reading, it is highly evident that he conducted much research when composing it, specifically looking to Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence for inspiration. Because of this, it is highly advisable to read the Cornerstone Speech and the Declaration of Independence together. Stephens very carefully crafted his speech in order to outline all the reasons for the Confederacy's secession from the United States, and he also introduces the topic of historians and objectivity, a valuable lesson for any history student.

When researching any historical topic, it is all too easy to criticize the people and events under examination, especially given the amount of time elapsed since the event itself. There is also the danger of allowing oneself to become too emotionally involved in the subject under research. It is vital that historians remain objective in their analysis of historical events and individuals; otherwise, such research may become clouded. Sensitive subjects, such as the way in which Stephens describes African Americans and their restriction from freedom, indeed provoke heated opinions, but the historian must remain impartial to the topic discussed, reviewing all material and viewpoints so as to attain a deeper understanding of a situation.

When examining a historical document, one must keep its intended audience in mind, for if the audience and thus the context of the document is disregarded, it can be easy to misinterpret the writer's meaning. On the first read, the intended audience of Stephens's speech may easily be misunderstood. Stephens describes the reasons for the Southern states' secession from the United States and validates the practice of slavery within the new nation as in keeping with the laws of nature and God. As a Confederate leader speaking to an audience of Confederates, Stephens may be seen as preaching to the choir, so to speak. In light of his lengthy explanations and justifications of the Confederate cause, the speech could also be interpreted as propaganda directed toward the North, substantiating the Confederacy's cause as just and legal. But this speech was not for the North—Stephens did, after all, deliver it in his home state of Georgia—nor was Stephens simply speaking to people who already shared his views. Those living within the South had endured months of uncertainty and upheaval, and Stephens sought to calm their anxieties, assure them that their rights and

those of future generations were secured, and reassure the masses that the principles of the new nation were sound and just. He describes all the actions the Confederate leaders have undertaken to ensure that they have formed a just government, one that will care for its people and protect their rights and those of future generations. Stephens explains,

This new form of government, constitutes the subject to which your attention will be partly invited. . . . It amply secures all our ancient rights, franchises, and liberties. All the great principles of Magna Charta are retained in it. No citizen is deprived of life, liberty, or property, but by the judgment of his peers under the laws of the land.

Stephens emphatically states that the new lawmakers have seen everything through for the protection of the people and their industries.

From the beginning, Stephens wanted to impress that the first seven states seceded without bloodshed; he and the Confederacy desired that the United States let them go peacefully and believed that there was no need for war. However, Stephens makes it clear that although the original seven states had seceded without injury or loss of life, the Confederacy would not be afraid to engage in war to protect its way of life and its people. Stephens's speech implies that he and other lawmakers anticipated some degree of armed conflict if the situation called for it, but he notes that "the idea of coercion, shadowed forth in President Lincoln's inaugural, seems not to be followed up thus far so vigorously as was expected" and expresses his belief that Fort Sumter, a Union-controlled fort in South Carolina, "will soon be evacuated." His words are ironic in hindsight: Stephens delivered this speech on March 21, 1861, and shots were exchanged at Fort Sumter merely weeks later on April 12, thus sparking the Civil War.

Stephens goes on to discuss the institution of slavery, noting that the new constitution of the Confederacy, unlike that of the United States, eliminated any questions about the morality or legality of the practice. He explains that objections to slavery are based "upon the assumption of the equality of races," which he characterizes as "fundamentally wrong." Stephens argues that African Americans are naturally suited to be slaves, and thus slavery is consistent with the laws of both nature and God. Of course, it would be unwise to assume that

all Southerners, or even all members of Stephens's audience, either owned slaves or wholeheartedly approved of slavery. Likewise, not all Northerners were abolitionists or devoid of racism toward African Americans—indeed, slavery remained legal in some Union border states until 1865. Many soldiers fought for their respective countries without thoughts to either the justice or the injustice of slavery.

Though part of the faction that broke away from the United States, Stephens greatly admired the work and writings of the founders of that country, particularly Thomas Jefferson, who was, coincidentally, also a Southerner and a slave owner. Stephens's speech, which begins by noting that seven states have "thrown off an old government and formed a new" one and listing their reasons for secession, is clearly modeled in part after the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration opens:

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

Stephens, who also cites the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God," took Jefferson's words to heart, weaving them into the fabric of his speech and thereby giving the Confederacy's decision a greater sense of authority and justification.

Looking ahead to future generations, the Declaration of Independence assures US citizens that it is their right to remain vigilant regarding how their government treats them and notes that they have a responsibility to safeguard their protection, even if that means forming another nation:

But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.

In Stephens's view, the Confederate States, in breaking away from the United States, were following Jefferson's advisement to the letter; it was their duty to break from the Union to preserve their way of life. The Founding Fathers thus validated the South's decision, and one of the United States' most revered documents itself granted the Southern states the right to secede.

As vice president of the Confederate States of America, Stephens sought to reassure his constituents that their rights were secured under the new government; that their principles, including the right the hold one race above another, were consistent with both the laws of nature and God's laws; and that the step to break away from the United States was one sanctioned by the Founding Fathers themselves. Despite his efforts, the speech did little to decrease tensions, and the following month saw the beginning of several devastating years of war.

Stephens's speech, including his discussion of slavery, sparked much debate at the time and was the focus of significant criticism. In *Recollections of Alexander H. Stephens*, a memoir written while Stephens was imprisoned in Massachusetts's Fort Warren in 1865, he attempts to clarify the statements in his 1861 speech. He does not state what specific provocations elicited his response, although he infers that reporters had misrepresented his statements, but he nonetheless indicates that he felt a response to be necessary. In his discussion of his speech, he defends his beliefs regarding the separation of the races and the inferiority of African Americans, again citing religion in support of his argument:

The relation of the black to the white race, or the proper status of the coloured population amongst us, was a question now of vastly more importance than when the old Constitution was formed. The order of subordination was nature's great law; philosophy taught that order as the normal condition of the African amongst European races. (173)

He also addresses his insistence that African Americans were much better cared for in the 1860s than during his own youth in the 1820s. There is a degree of belligerence in his tone, which raises further questions regarding what exactly led him to compose this heated clarification.

Essential Themes

Stephens devotes a significant portion of his speech to the issue of the separation of the races, and he implies that the North's stance on slavery is based in part on a misinterpretation of the statement in the Declaration of Independence that all men are equal. This interpretation, Stephens argues, is inherently wrong:

[Northerners] assume that the negro is equal, and hence conclude that he is entitled to equal privileges and rights with the white man. If their premises were correct, their conclusions would be logical and just—but their premise being wrong, their whole argument fails.

His references to nature and religion are thereby employed as evidence of the irrationality of the North's viewpoint. Stephens even goes so far as to refer to Northerners who believed in the equality of the races as “fanatics” who basely ignored the truth presented to them.

Stephens does note that the problems of slavery—those that led to the creation of the Confederacy—were anticipated by Jefferson, who had identified the institution as the “rock upon which the old Union would split.” While Jefferson was ultimately correct, at the same time, the government he envisioned was one in which the state governments had a stronger voice than the federal government—a system in which the development of factions among the states was almost inevitable. In his speech in Savannah, Stephens sought to appeal to those who thought the Declaration of Independence had been misinterpreted by the United States government, reassuring them that all such matters would be corrected in the new Confederate nation.

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