**Lincoln’s Secession Strategy**

“The central idea of secession, is the essence of anarchy” –Abraham Lincoln

When Lincoln took office on March 4th, 1861 the United States was on the verge of a civil war. The mere election of a Republican infuriated many of the Southern states and seven had seceded by the time Lincoln took office. Sectionalism had long been an issue in the young United States and by 1861 it had come to a boiling point. Lincoln’s first inaugural address had great significance as it laid out the strategy he would use throughout his presidency when it came to the south and it also put pressure on the South to make a move towards war if they wanted to secede.

During the speech Lincoln laid out a firm strategy of how he would handle secession. A strategy that Lincoln would closely follow throughout his Presidency. Lincoln started his speech by addressing what he believed was the unlawfulness of secession. Addressed directly to the seven seceded states Lincoln said that their attempt at secession was legally void and any action against the United States would be considered insurrectionary.[[1]](#footnote-1) The subtext suggest that Lincoln is attempting to rally the north together around the idea of protecting the constitution and in Lincoln’s view a constitution that does not allow for secession by any state. If there was going to be a war Lincoln needed the north to unite around a common cause and the cause he chose was to protect the legality of the constitution of the United States. Lincoln stated that his oath was to protect the United States and that he would do just that unless his “masters”, the American people, wanted him to change course. This line showed that Lincoln was going to hold his ground and also acted as a rally cry for the North.

During Lincoln’s first inaugural address he did not clearly show how he personally felt about slavery but he did make clear that he believed if the country were to divide, it would reopen the international slave trade and extend slavery. Although Lincoln did not say we cannot allow this to happen the subtext suggest that he believed slavery needed to fizzle out. When writing about emancipation historian Eric Foner wrote, “there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Lincoln’s statement in 1864 that he had always believed slavery to be wrong.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Not only did Lincoln believe slavery to be wrong he worked to eliminate it long before the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Historian James Oaks argued that the first confiscation act is evidence that Lincoln and Congress were working towards eliminating slavery early in the war.[[3]](#footnote-3) In the speech Lincoln asked that the American people to take their time and think about secession and slavery calmly.[[4]](#footnote-4) Lincoln used his own advice to think calmly and take time throughout his presidency. This was seen in his patience to issue the Emancipation Proclamation until after a strategic victory as well as his patience to stay the course after issuing the proclamation. Foner wrote that during potential peace talks some urged Lincoln to rescind the Emancipation Proclamation but Lincoln refused.[[5]](#footnote-5) Lincoln had set a platform to work off of in his first inaugural address and he stayed the course throughout his presidency. Lincoln’s conditions of surrender at the end of the war shows how Lincoln took time to think clearly and stayed consistent with his platform throughout his presidency.

The second significant part of Lincoln’s first inaugural address was that it put pressure on the South to make the first move towards war. In order for the North to be united it was important that the South provoked the war. Lincoln first addressed the idea of democracy and the will of the people. Lincoln stated, “plainly, the central idea of secession, is the essence of anarchy,”[[6]](#footnote-6) Lincoln called the rule of the minority, referring to the South, inadmissible. In other words, the majority had spoken by electing a Republican and that did not give the minority the right to secede. After Lincoln issued his call to follow the constitution and asked citizens to think calmly on the matter he directly addressed the South. Lincoln stated, “In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war.”[[7]](#footnote-7) A few weeks after this speech Lincoln was tested on this very statement. Union troops at Fort Sumter were short on provisions. Sending troops or ammunition might have been seen as an act of war. Therefor Lincoln stuck to his platform laid out in the inauguration and informed the South Carolina Governor that he was sending only food and clothing for starving troops. This kept the pressure on the South to make the first act of war which they did on April 12, 1861 at Fort Sumter.

Abraham Lincoln’s first inaugural address came at a time of great turmoil in the country. The speech was significant because it laid out a Lincoln’s clear interpretation of the constitution, his plan to deal with secession, and showed a glimpse into his thoughts on slavery. Lincoln would stick to the ideals laid out in the address throughout his presidency. He did not believe secession was constitutional and he stayed the course throughout the war to make sure the union prevailed. He addressed the Southern states and told them that he would not bring war unless the south provoked a war. A month later he refused to arm Fort Sumter with more than food and clothing. He worked throughout his presidency to eliminate slavery with the first Confiscation Act, the Emancipation Proclamation and finally the 13th Amendment. By reading Lincoln’s first inaugural address a reader can grasp a clear platform that Lincoln would abide by throughout his presidency.

Works Cited

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3. Oaks, James, “Forever Free,” New York Times / Disunion, January 7, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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5. Foner, Eric, “The Emancipation of Abe Lincoln,” New York Times, December 31, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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7. Lincoln, Abraham, First Inaugural Address. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)