

Abraham Lincoln papers

Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address, Final Version¹, [March 1861]

¹ This is the final version of the First Inaugural Address, which was apparently Lincoln's delivery text when he read it at the Capitol on March 4, 1861. By this time, the text of the address had gone through many revisions, a process that is discussed in what follows.

His law partner, William H. Herndon, famously recalled Lincoln's earliest preparations. "Late in January Mr. Lincoln informed me that he was ready to begin the preparation of his inaugural address. He had, aside from his law books and the few gilded volumes that ornamented the centre-table in his parlor at home, comparatively no library. He never seemed to care to own or collect books. On the other hand I had a very respectable collection, and was adding to it every day. To my library Lincoln very frequently had access. When, therefore, he began on his inaugural speech he told me what works he intended to consult. I looked for a long list, but when he went over it I was greatly surprised. He asked me to furnish him with Henry Clay's great speech delivered in 1850; Andrew Jackson's proclamation against Nullification; and a copy of the Constitution. He afterwards called for Webster's reply to Hayne, a speech which he read when he lived at New Salem, and which he always regarded as the grandest specimen of American oratory. With these few 'volumes,' and no further sources of reference, he locked himself up in a room upstairs over a store across the street from the State House, and there, cut off from all communication and intrusion, he prepared the address." (William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life*, 1889, 3:478)

This valuable recollection of the first round of drafting does not tell the whole story, for Lincoln continued to revise his text until the time he delivered it. The first phase of the drafting, described by Herndon, was probably complete when Lincoln had the resulting text printed by the *Illinois State Journal*, the Springfield newspaper with which he had long been associated. Two copies of this eight-page printed draft, referred to here as First Printed Draft, survive: one is a pristine copy with no handwritten marks (see First Inaugural Address, First Printed Draft [January or February, 1861]; the other contains many handwritten changes, deletions, and rearranged passages (see First Inaugural Address, First Printed Draft, with Revisions in Lincoln's Hand [January or February, 1861]). Lincoln wrote across the top of the first page of both copies "First Edition."

Before he left Springfield for Washington on February 11, Lincoln had his revision of this text printed in a seven-page document (see First Inaugural Address, Second Printed Draft). Lincoln gave copies of this document to his friend Orville H. Browning and to his prospective Secretary of State, William H. Seward. Browning's comments are found in his letter to Lincoln of February 17, 1861 (q. v.), and

Lincoln ultimately adopted his principal suggestion. Seward's marked copy of the Second Printed Draft and his Suggested Changes sent to Lincoln are also in this collection. These notes make it possible to see that Lincoln made considerable use of Seward's suggestions in further revising his address, as is evident in two surviving copies: First Inaugural Address, Second Printed Draft, with Changes in Lincoln's Hand [February, 1861]; and First Inaugural Address, Final Version [March, 1861].

These documents in this collection enable us to follow the process of revision very closely and to observe Lincoln's struggle with the sensitive issues: how to treat secession, slavery, seizure of federal property, disunion, and the Constitution. Perhaps most central to the process of revision, as evidenced by most of Lincoln's changes, is the need to strike the right balance between firmness and conciliation.

It may be useful to list the principle documents relating to the composition and revision of the First Inaugural Address in this collection. These are:

1. A draft of the opening paragraph in Lincoln's hand. This is presumably the only surviving portion of Lincoln's earliest draft. See First Inaugural Address, Draft of Opening Paragraph [January, 1861].
2. The first printed draft, consisting of eight numbered pages, in its entirety. This presents the address in the form it had assumed, presumably after much drafting and revision, in late January or early February 1861, when Lincoln had it set up in type at the office of the *Illinois State Journal* in Springfield. This copy is a pristine version, without changes or editorial marking, that Lincoln has labeled "First Edition." See First Inaugural Address, First Printed Draft [January or February, 1861].
3. The first printed draft with changes in Lincoln's hand, deletions, and some paragraphs clipped and rearranged. This document is the same as no. 2 except that it bears Lincoln's handwritten alterations, some paragraphs have been clipped and pasted in a new arrangement, and three paragraphs have been removed. The paragraphs that were removed do not reappear in any subsequent versions of the address, but are found in the manuscript of a speech Lincoln prepared, but never gave, for Kentuckians (see Fragment of Speech to Kentuckians [February, 1861]). Lincoln has also labeled this document "First Edition." See First Inaugural Address, First Printed Draft, with Revisions in Lincoln's Hand [January or February, 1861].
4. The second printed draft, consisting of seven numbered pages, in its entirety, with line numbers in the hand of William H. Seward. Before he left Springfield on February 11, 1861, Lincoln had a second printing made of his address, incorporating the changes made on no. 3 above, plus other changes. This copy, which Lincoln gave to Seward, has only the line numbers written by Seward for reference and a few marks in Lincoln's hand; otherwise it is unrevised and shows the state of the address

at the time Lincoln left for Washington. Lincoln gave a copy of this draft to Orville H. Browning in Indianapolis and Browning sent his reaction in a letter to Lincoln on February 17, which is in this collection. See First Inaugural Address, Second Printed Draft, with Line Numbers Added by William H. Seward [February, 1861].

5. William H. Seward's suggested changes to the First Inaugural Address. Sometime in February, Lincoln asked Seward for comments on his draft of the First Inaugural Address. Seward's numerous recommendations for changes in this document are keyed to the page and line numbers in item no. 4 above. See William H. Seward, Suggested Changes to First Inaugural Address [February, 1861].

6. The second printed draft, consisting of seven numbered pages, with Seward's suggested changes added in red ink. This is the same printed draft as item no. 4 above, but someone, presumably Lincoln's secretary John G. Nicolay, has marked in red ink changes recommended by Seward in item no. 5 above. See First Inaugural Address, Second Printed Draft, with Seward's Suggested Changes in Red Ink [February or March, 1861].

7. A suggested closing paragraph in the hand of Seward's son and secretary, Frederick W. Seward. Although this document is found in this collection and seems to have come from the office of William H. Seward, it bears little resemblance to the suggested closing paragraph in Seward's own hand in item no. 5 above that profoundly influenced Lincoln's final version. See William H. Seward?, Suggestions for a Closing Paragraph, First Inaugural Address [February, 1861].

8. The second printed draft, consisting of seven numbered pages, with changes in Lincoln's hand. Lincoln used this copy of the second printed draft to make a number of alterations in the text, most of which are based on Seward's recommendations in no. 5 above. See First Inaugural Address, Second Printed Draft, with Changes in Lincoln's Hand [February or March, 1861].

9. A trial passage for the closing paragraph in Lincoln's hand. On the back of Orville H. Browning's letter of February 17, Lincoln drafted a brief passage that reflects language recommended by Seward for the closing paragraph of the address. See verso of Browning to Lincoln, February 17, 1861.

10. The final version and reading copy of the First Inaugural Address. In this version of the second printed draft, Lincoln incorporated almost all of the changes he had made in item no. 8 above and made a number of additional changes, some of which were quite substantial and many of which were based on recommendations of Seward he had previously passed over in no. 8. See First Inaugural Address, Final Version [March, 1861].

The document that follows, which is the final version of the address, incorporates most of the revisions made previously to the Second Printed Draft, but for this revision Lincoln used a fresh copy of the seven-page draft, rather than the one he had previously marked up (See First Inaugural Address, Second Printed Draft, with Changes in Lincoln's Hand [February or March, 1861]).

In this version the additions, many of which were prompted by suggestions from Seward (See William H. Seward, Suggested Changes to First inaugural Address [February, 1861]; First Inaugural Address, Second Printed Draft, with Seward's Changes in Red Ink [February or March, 1861]), are written out large and clear, in some cases on separate slips. Moreover, to make room for some of his handwritten insertions, Lincoln cut his printed text into sections and pasted them onto a separate sheet, leaving a space for handwritten insertions. These things were apparently done with an eye toward reading the text more easily from the platform. And all of this suggests that these final changes were made at a point in time very close to the delivery date, March 4, 1861.

To enable the reader to follow Lincoln's final revisions and the extent to which they were influenced or affected by Seward's suggestions, page numbers are included, and all additions or substitutions have been noted. Stricken material, being plainly marked, is readily evident and has not been further noted. Unless otherwise identified, all changes that originated with Seward have been marked (Seward).

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In compliance with a custom as old as the government itself, I appear before you to address you briefly, and to take, in your presence, the oath prescribed by the Constitution of the United States, to be taken by the President "before he enters on the execution of his office."

The more modern custom of electing a Chief Magistrate upon a previously declared platform of principles, supercedes, in a great measure, the necessity of re-stating those principles in an address of this sort. Upon the plainest grounds of good faith, one so elected is not at liberty to shift his position. It is necessarily implied, if not expressed, that, in his judgment, the platform which he thus accepts, binds him to nothing either unconstitutional or inexpedient.

Having been so elected upon the Chicago Platform, and while I would repeat nothing in it, of aspersion or epithet or question of motive against any man or party, I hold myself bound by duty, as well as impelled by inclination to follow, within the executive sphere, the principles therein declared. By no other course could I meet the reasonable expectations of the country.

I do not consider it necessary at present for me to say more than I have, in relation to those matters of administration, about which there is no special excitement.²

2 The preceding three paragraphs have been eliminated by covering them with a pasted slip, on which Lincoln wrote a rewording of the third paragraph that varies only slightly from the revision he made in the previous version (See Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address, Second Printed Draft, with Changes in Lincoln's Hand [February or March, 1861]). In eliminating the second and third paragraphs, Lincoln was responding to suggestions made by William H. Seward.

I do not consider it necessary, at present, for me to discuss those matters of administration about which there is no special anxiety, or excitement.³

3 This sentence has been written in Lincoln's hand on a slip that is pasted over the second, third, and fourth paragraphs of the printed draft, and is a slight revision of the third paragraph.

Apprehension seems to exist among the people of the Southern States, that by the accession of a Republican Administration, their property, and their peace, and personal security, are to be endangered. There has never been any reasonable cause for such apprehension. Indeed, the most ample evidence to the contrary has all the while existed, and been open to their inspection. It is found in nearly all the published speeches of him who now addresses you. I do but quote from one of those speeches when I declare that "I 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."⁴ Those who nominated and elected me did so with full knowledge that I had made this, and many similar declarations, and had never recanted them. And more than this, they placed in the platform, for my acceptance, and as a law to themselves, and to me, the clear and emphatic resolution which I now read:

4 Lincoln made this statement at least three times previously, at Ottawa and Quincy, Illinois, on August 21 and October 23, 1858, during his debates with Douglas, and at Columbus, Ohio, on September 16, 1859. See *Collected Works*, III, 16, 249, 402.

"Resolved, That the maintenance inviolate of the rights of the States, and especially the right of each State to order and control its own domestic institutions according to its own judgment exclusively, is essential to that balance of power on which the perfection and endurance of our political fabric

depend; and we denounce the lawless invasion by armed force of the soil of any State or Territory, no matter under what pretext, as among the gravest of crimes.”⁵

⁵ See the 1860 Republican platform in Kirk H. Porter and Donald B. Johnson, *National Party Platforms: 1840-1972* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 32.

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I now reiterate these sentiments: and in doing 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 anywise endangered by the now incoming Administration. I add too, that all the protection which, consistently with the Constitution and the laws, can be given, will be cheerfully given to all the States when lawfully demanded, for whatever cause — as cheerfully to one section, as to another.⁶

⁶ “when lawfully demanded, for whatever cause —” has been added, reflecting the sense, but not the wording, of Seward's suggestion. Lincoln has also added a comma after “section”.

There is much controversy about the delivering up of fugitives from service or labor. The clause I now read is as plainly written in the Constitution as any other of its provisions:

“No person held to service or labor in one State, under the laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in consequence of any law or regulation therein, be discharged from such service or labor, but shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labor may be due.”⁷

⁷ *The Constitution of the United States*, Article IV, Section 2.

It is scarcely questioned that this provision was intended by those who made it, for the reclaiming of what we call fugitive slaves; and the intention of the law-giver is the law. All members of Congress swear their support to the whole Constitution — to this provision as much as to any other. To the proposition, then, that slaves whose cases come within the terms of this clause, “shall be delivered up,” their oaths are unanimous. Now, if they would make the effort in good temper, could they not, with nearly equal unanimity, frame and pass a law, by means of which to keep good that unanimous oath?

There is some difference of opinion whether this clause should be enforced by national or by state authority; but surely that difference is not a very material one. If the slave is to be surrendered, it can be of but little consequence to him, or to others, by which authority it is done. And should any one, in any case, be content that his oath shall go unkept, on a merely unsubstantial controversy as to *how* it shall be kept?

Again, in any law upon this subject, ought not all the safeguards of liberty known in civilized and humane jurisprudence to be introduced, so that a free man be not, in any case, surrendered as a slave? And might it not be well, at the same time, to provide by law for the enforcement of that clause in the Constitution which guaranties that "The citizens of each State shall be entitled to all privileges and immunities of citizens in the several States"?⁸

⁸ This sentence has been added to the printed text.

I take the official oath to-day, with no mental reservations, and with no purpose to construe the Constitution or laws, by any hypercritical rules. And while I do not think proper choose now to specify particular acts of Congress as proper to be enforced, I do suggest, that it will be much safer for all, both in official and private stations, to conform to, and abide by, all those acts which stand unrepealed, than to violate any of them, trusting to find impunity in having them held to be unconstitutional.⁹

⁹ The word "choose" has been substituted for "think proper"; a comma has been added after the word "suggest".

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It is now seventy-two years since the first inauguration of a President under our national Constitution. During that period fifteen different and greatly distinguished citizens, have, in succession, administered the executive branch of the government. They have conducted it through many perils; and, on the whole, generally,¹⁰ with great success. Yet, with all this scope for precedent, I now enter upon the same task for the brief constitutional term of four years, under great and peculiar difficulty. A disruption of the Federal Union is menaced, and, so far as can be on paper, is already effected. The particulars of what has been done are so familiar, and so fresh, that I need not to waste any time in recounting them. heretofore only menaced, is now formidably attempted.¹¹

¹⁰ "generally" has been substituted for "on the whole" (Seward).

11 “heretofore only menaced, is now formidably attempted” has been substituted for the stricken passage that precedes it (Seward).

I hold, that in contemplation of universal law, and of the Constitution, the Union of these States is perpetual. Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national governments. It is safe to assert that no government proper, ever had a provision in its organic law for its own termination. Continue to execute all the express provisions of our national Constitution, and the Union will endure forever — it being impossible to destroy it, except by some action not provided for in the instrument itself.

Again, if the United States be not a government proper, but an association of States in the nature of contract merely, can it, as a contract, be peaceably unmade, by less than all the parties who made it? One party to a contract may violate it — break it, so to speak; but does it not require all to lawfully rescind it?

Descending from these general principles, we find the proposition that, in legal contemplation, the Union is perpetual, confirmed by the history of the Union itself. The Union is much older than the Constitution. It was formed in fact, by the Articles of Association in 1774. It was matured and continued by the Declaration of Independence in 1776. It was further matured and expressly declared and pledged, to be and the faith of all the then thirteen States expressly plighted and engaged that it should be perpetual, by the Articles of Confederation in 1778.¹² And finally, in 1787, one of the declared objects for ordaining and establishing the Constitution, was “*to form a more perfect union.*”

12 “and the faith of all the then thirteen States expressly plighted and engaged that it should be” has been substituted for the stricken matter that precedes it.

But if destruction of the Union, by one, or by a part only, of the States, be lawfully possible, the Union is *less* perfect than before, which contradicts the Constitution, and therefore is absurd. having lost the vital element of perpetuity—¹³

13 “having lost the vital element of perpetuity—” has been added to revise and complete the sentence.

It follows from these views that no State, upon its own mere motion, can lawfully get out of the Union, — that *resolves* and *ordinances* to that effect are legally nothing; void; and that acts of

violence, within and State or States, against the authority of the United States, are insurrectionary or treasonable revolutionary, according to circumstances.¹⁴

14 In this sentence “void” has been substituted for “nothing”, and “revolutionary” has been substituted for “treasonable” (Seward).

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I therefore consider that the Union is unbroken; and, to the extent of my ability, I shall take care that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all the States. I therefore consider that, in view of the constitution and the laws, the Union is unbroken; and, to the extent of my ability, I shall take care, as the constitution itself expressly enjoins upon me, that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all the states.¹⁵ Doing this I deem to be only a simple duty on my part; and I shall perform it, so far as practicable, unless my rightful masters, the American people, shall withhold the requisite means, or, in some tangible way authoritative manner,¹⁶ direct the contrary. I trust this will not be regarded as a menace, but only as the declared purpose of the Union that it *will* have its own, and *defend* itself. constitutionally defend, and maintain itself—¹⁷

15 On a slip covering the stricken sentence, Lincoln wrote out the revision that follows it. This incorporates two phrases suggested by William H. Seward: “in the view of the constitution and the laws,” and “as the constitution itself expressly enjoins upon me.”

16 “authoritative manner” has been substituted for “tangible way” (Seward).

17 “constitutionally defend, and maintain itself—” has been substituted for the stricken matter (Seward).

In doing this there needs to be no bloodshed or violence; and there shall be none, unless it be forced upon the national authority. All the power at my disposal will be used to reclaim the public property and places which have fallen; to hold, occupy and possess these, and all other property and places belonging to the government, and to collect the duties on imposts; but beyond what may be necessary for these objects, there will be no invasion of any State. 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 [on?] and imposts; but beyond what may be necessary for these objects, there will be no invasion — no using of force against, or among the people anywhere—¹⁸ Where hostility to the United States, in any interior locality, shall be so great and so universal, as to prevent

competent resident citizens from holding the Federal offices, there will be no attempt to force obnoxious strangers among the people for that object. While the strict legal right may exist in the government to enforce the exercise of these offices, the attempt to do so would be so irritating, and so nearly impracticable with all, that I deem it better to forego, for the time, the uses of such offices.

18 "All the power at my disposal will be" has been stricken, and the balance of this sentence as originally printed has been either covered over or cut out of the page and discarded. Lincoln substituted on a slip a long sentence commencing with a phrase suggested by Seward, "The power confided to me," ignoring the rest of his suggested wording, while following Orville H. Browning's advice to drop the references to "reclaiming" property that has "fallen." On the same slip, he pasted the printed text of the two sentences that follow, then added by hand the sentence beginning "The course here indicated." (Seward); See also Browning to Lincoln, February 17, 1861.

The mails, unless refused repelled,¹⁹ will continue to be furnished in all parts of the Union. So far as possible, the people everywhere shall have that sense of perfect security which is most favorable to calm thought and reflection. This course will be pursued until current experience shall show a modification or change to be proper. The course here indicated will be followed, unless current events, and experience, shall show a modification, or change, to be proper; and in every case and exigency, my best discretion will be exercised, according to circumstances actually existing, and with a view and a hope of a peaceful solution of the national troubles, and the restoration of paternal sympathies and, affections—²⁰

19 "repelled" has been substituted for "refused."

20 The deleted sentence "This course will be pursued . . ." has been cut out of the printed text and discarded. In its place Lincoln wrote out on the slip described above a substantial revision, which begins "The course here indicated."

That there are persons in one section, or another²¹ who seek to destroy the Union at all events, and are glad of any pretext to do it, I will neither affirm or deny; but if there be such, I need address no word to them. To those, however, who really love the Union, may I not speak?

21 "in one section, or another" has been added, which is very close to Seward's suggestion: "in one section as well as in the other."

Before entering upon so grave a matter as the destruction of our national Union, fabric, with all its benefits, its memories, and its hopes, would it not be wise to ascertain precisely why we do it? Will you hazard so desperate a step, while there is any possibility that any portion of the ills you fly from, have no real existence? Will you, while the certain ills you fly to, are greater than all the real ones you fly from? Will you risk the commission of so fearful a mistake?²²

²² "fabric, with all its benefits, its memories, and its hopes," has been substituted for "Union,". A comma has been after the word "from".

All profess to be content in the Union, if all constitutional rights can be maintained. Is it true, then, that any distinct²³ right, plainly written in the Constitution, has been denied? I think not. Happily the human mind is so constructed, constituted,²⁴ that no party can reach to the audacity of doing this. Think, if you can, of a single instance in

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which a plainly written provision of the Constitution has ever been denied. If, by the mere force of numbers, a majority should deprive a minority of any clearly written constitutional right, it might, in a moral point of view, justify revolution — certainly would, if such right were a vital one; — b. But such is not our case.²⁵ All the vital rights of minorities, and of individuals, are so plainly assured to them, by affirmations and negations, guaranties and prohibitions,²⁶ in the Constitution, that controversies never arise concerning them. But no organic law can ever be framed with a provision specifically applicable to every possible²⁷ question which may occur in practical administration. No foresight can anticipate, nor any document of reasonable length contain express provisions for all possible questions. Shall fugitives from labor be surrendered by national or by State authority? The Constitution does not expressly say. *May* Congress prohibit slavery in the territories? The Constitution does not expressly say. *Must* Congress protect slavery in the territories? The Constitution does not expressly say.

²³ Lincoln first inserted "distinct" (Seward), then struck it out.

²⁴ "constituted" has been substituted for "constructed".

²⁵ Lincoln changed "vital one; — but" to "vital one. But".

26 Lincoln added “guarranties and prohibitions,” (Seward).

27 Lincoln first added “possible” (Seward), but then struck it out.

From questions of this class spring all our constitutional controversies, and we divide upon them into majorities and minorities. If the minority will not submit acquiesce,²⁸ the majority must, or the government must cease. There is no other alternative; for continuing the government, is submission acquiescence²⁹ on one side or the other. If a minority, in such case, will secede rather than submit acquiesce,³⁰ they make a precedent which, in turn, will divide and ruin them; for a minority of their own number will secede from them,³¹ whenever a majority refuses to be controlled by such minority. For instance, why may not South Carolina, a year or two hence, arbitrarily, secede from a new Southern Confederacy, just as she now claims to secede from the present Union? Her people, and, indeed, all secession people, are now being educated to the precise temper of doing this.

³² For instance, why may not any portion of a new confederacy, a year or two hence, arbitrarily secede again, precisely as portions of the present Union now claim to secede from it. All who cherish disunion sentiments are now being educated to the exact temper of doing this. Is there such perfect identity of interests among the States to compose a Southern new³³ Union, as to produce harmony only, and prevent renewed secession?

28 “acquiesce” is substituted for “submit” (Seward).

29 “acquiescence” is substituted for “submission” (Seward).

30 “acquiesce” is substituted for “submit” (Seward).

31 Comma added.

32 In his previous draft (Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural, Second Printed Draft, with Changes in Lincoln's Hand [February or March, 1851]), Lincoln had revised this same passage to read “For instance, why may not any portion of a new Confederacy, a year or two hence, arbitrarily, secede again, just as the larger number now claim to secede from the present Union All who cherish secession ideas, are now being educated to the precise temper of doing this.” The newly revised version, which follows, has been written on a slip that extends the page so as to accommodate this and two additional handwritten revisions, interspersed between clippings of the printed text that have been pasted on the slip.

33 “new” has been substituted for “Southern”.

Plainly, the central idea of secession, is the essence of anarchy. A majority, held in restraint by constitutional checks, and limitations, and always changing easily, with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments, is the only true sovereign of a free people.³⁴ Whoever rejects it, does, of necessity, fly to anarchy or to despotism. Unanimity is impossible; the rule of a minority, as a permanent arrangement, is wholly inadmissible; so that, rejecting the majority principle, anarchy, or despotism in some form, is all that is left.³⁵

34 This sentence has been revised along the lines suggested by Seward, who wrote: “After the word ‘anarchy,’ strike out the next sentence and write A majority held in restraint by Constitutional checks and limitations and always changing easily with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments is &c.” See William H. Seward, Suggested Changes to First Inaugural Address [February, 1861].

35 Commas have been added after “anarchy” and “form”.

I do not forget the position assumed by some, that constitutional questions are to be decided by the Supreme Court; nor do I deny that such decisions must be binding in any case, upon the parties to a suit, as to the object of the that suit, while they are also entitled to a very high respect and consideration, in all paralel cases, by all other departments of the government—³⁶ And while it is obviously possible that such decision may be erroneous in any given case, still the evil effect following it, being limited to that particular case, with the chance that it may be over-ruled, and never become a precedent for other cases, can better be borne than

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could the greater evils of a different rule practice.³⁷ But if the policy of the government, upon vital questions affecting the whole people, is to be irrevocably fixed by decisions of the Supreme Court, it is plain that the people will have ceased to be their own rulers, having turned their government over to the despotism of the few life-officers composing the Court. Nor is there, in this view, any assault upon the Court or the judges. It is a duty from which they may not shrink, to decide cases properly brought before them; and it is no fault of theirs if others seek to turn their decisions to political purposes.

36 This sentence previously ended “the object of the suit.” In this draft, Lincoln changed the last phrase to “that suit” and added the language that follows, which was suggested by Seward.

37 Before deciding to rewrite this sentence and the balance of the paragraph to which it belongs, Lincoln substituted the word “practice” for “rule” (Seward).

The Republican party, as I understand, have avowed the purpose to prevent, if they can, the extension of slavery, under the national auspices; and upon this arises the only dispute between the sections.³⁸

38 This paragraph, and the portion of the preceding paragraph “could the evils . . . to political purposes,” were covered by the slip on which Lincoln wrote a revision. The revised passage, which follows, eliminated this paragraph entirely and incorporated three instances of wording suggested by Seward: “At the same time the candid citizen must confess that”; “made in the ordinary course of litigation between parties in personal actions”; “practically confided resigned their government to it into the heands of that eminent tribunal.”

could the evils of a different practice. At the same time the candid citizen must confess, that if the policy of the government, upon vital questions, affecting the whole people, is to be irrevocably fixed by decisions of the Supreme Court, the instant they are made, in ordinary litigation between parties, in personal actions, it is plain that the people will have ceased, to to be their own rulers, having, to that extent, practically resigned their government, into the hands of that eminent tribunal. Nor is there, in this view, any assault upon the Court, or the judges— It is a duty, from which they may not shrink, to decide cases properly brought before brought before them; and it is no fault of theirs, if others seek to turn their decisions to political purposes.

One section of our country³⁹ believes 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, perhaps⁴⁰ as any law can ever be in a community where the moral sense of the people is against imperfectly supports⁴¹ 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 before. The foreign slave trade, now imperfectly suppressed, would be ultimately⁴² revived without restriction, in one

section; while fugitive slaves, now only partially surrendered, would not be surrendered at all, by the other.

39 "of our country" added (Seward).

40 "perhaps" added (Seward).

41 "imperfectly supports" substituted for "is against" (Seward).

42 "ultimately" added (Seward).

Physically speaking, we cannot separate. We cannot remove our respective sections from each other, nor build an impassable wall between them. A husband and wife may be divorced, and go out of the presence, and beyond the reach of each other; but the different parts of our country cannot do this. They cannot but remain face to face; and intercourse, either amicable or hostile, must continue between them. Is it possible possible then⁴³ to make that intercourse more advantageous,⁴⁴ or more⁴⁵ satisfactory, *after* separation than *before*? Can aliens make treaties easier than friends can make laws? Can treaties be more faithfully enforced between aliens,⁴⁶ 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.

43 "possible then" added.

44 Comma added.

45 "more" added.

46 Comma added.

This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their *constitutional* right of amending it, or their *revolutionary* right to dismember, or overthrow [it.]⁴⁷ As I am not much impressed with the belief that the present Constitution can be I can not be ignorant of the fact that many worthy, and patriotic citizens are desirous that of having the national constitution shall be amended. While I make no recommendation of amendments, I fully recognize the rightful authority of the people over the whole subject, to be exercised in either of the modes prescribed in the instrument itself; and I

should, under existing circumstances, favor, rather than oppose, a fair opportunity being afforded the people to act upon it—

47 A comma has been added after the word “dismember”. The word “it” has been inadvertently covered, along with the partial sentence (completed on the next page) that follows, has been covered over by a slip on which Lincoln has written the replacement text, which begins “I can not be ignorant.”

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improved, I make no recommendations of amendments. I am, rather, for the old ship, and the chart of the old pilots. If, however, the people desire a new, or an altered vessel, the matter is exclusively their own, and they can move in the premises, as well without as with an executive recommendation. I shall place no obstacle in the way of what may appear to be their wishes.

I will venture to add that, to me, the Convention mode seems preferable, in that it allows amendments to originate with the people themselves, instead of allowing only permitting them merely to take, or reject, propositions, originated by others, not especially chosen for the purpose, and which might not be precisely such, as they would wish to either accept or reject. refuse.⁴⁸ I understand a proposed amendment to the constitution which amendment, however, I have not seen, has passed the House of Representatives Congress, to the effect that the federal government, shall never interfere with the domestic institutions of the States, including that of persons held to service—⁴⁹ To avoid misconstruction of what I have said, I depart from my purpose not to speak of particular amendments, so far as to say that, holding such a provision to now be implied Constitutional law, I have no objection to it's being made express, and irrevocable—

48 This sentence has been written by Lincoln on a slip that covered the deleted printed text. The two sentences that follow this one have been written on a separate slip, which was apparently attached to the first slip as an addendum.

49 A proposed Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, affirming the right of states to regulate slavery within their limits, had barely passed both Houses of Congress. It had passed the Senate just hours before Lincoln's inauguration.

The Chief Magistrate derives all his authority from the people, and they have conferred none upon him to fix terms for the separation of the States. The people themselves can do this also⁵⁰ if they

choose; but the executive, as such, has nothing to do with it. His duty is to administer the present government, as it came to his hands, and to transmit it, unimpaired by him, to his successor.

50 “also” has been added.

Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better, or equal hope, in the world?⁵¹ In our present differences, is either party without faith of being⁵² in the right? If the Almighty Ruler of nations, with his eternal truth and justice, be on our side, or on yours, on your side of the North, or on yours of the South,⁵³ that truth, and that justice, will surely prevail, by the judgment of this great tribunal, the American people.

51 A comma has been added after the word “better”.

52 “of being” has been added.

53 “on your side of the North, or on yours of the South,” has been substituted for “our side, or on yours”.

By the frame of the government under which we live, this same people have wisely given their public servants but little power for mischief: and have, with equal wisdom, provided for the return of that little to their own hands at very short intervals.

While the people remain patient, and true to themselves, no man, even in the presidential chair retain their virtue, and vigilance, no administration can,⁵⁴ by any extreme of wickedness or folly, can very seriously injure the government,⁵⁵ in the short space of four years.

54 “retain their virtue, and vigilance, no administration can,” has been substituted for “remain patient, and true to themselves, no man, even in the presidential chair” (Seward).

55 A comma has been added after the word “government”.

My countrymen, one and all, take *time* and think think calmly and⁵⁶ *well*, upon this whole subject. Nothing valuable can be lost by taking time. Nothing worth preserving is either breaking or burning.⁵⁷ If there be an object to *hurry* any of you, in hot haste, to a step which you would never take *deliberately*, that object will be frustrated by taking time; but no good object can be frustrated by it. Such of you as are now dissatisfied, still have the old Constitution unimpaired, and, on the sensitive

point, the laws of your own framing under it; while the new administration will have no immediate power, if it would, to change either. If it were admitted that you who are dissatisfied, hold the right side in the dispute, there still is no single good reason for precipitate action. Intelligence, patriotism, Christianity, and a firm reliance on Him, who has never yet forsaken this favored land, are still competent to adjust, in the best way, all our present difficulty.

56 “think calmly and” has been substituted for “take *time* and think” (Seward).

57 The deletion of these words was urged by Seward.

In *your* hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in *mine*, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail *you*. unless you *first* assail it.⁵⁸ You can have no conflict, without being yourselves 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. *You* can forbear, the assault upon it; *I* can *not* shrink from the *defense* of it. With *you*, and not with *me*, is the solemn question of “Shall it be peace, or a sword?”⁵⁹

58 The deletion of these words was urged by Seward.

59 The decision to remove the challenge from the original conclusion in favor of conciliation seems clearly to have been influenced by Seward's admonitions, including a recommendation to delete these two sentences.

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 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.⁶⁰

60 The presence of a pointing hand, characteristically drawn by Lincoln, seems to indicate that the handwritten addition “I am loth to close . . .” was intended as a separate paragraph.

Lincoln's indebtedness to, and masterful transformation of, Seward's suggested closing paragraph have long been recognized. Seward's text is as follows: “I close. We are not we must not be aliens or enemies but countrymen fellow countrymen and brethren. Although passion has strained our bonds of affection too hardly they must not be broken — they will not, I am sure they will not be broken. The mystic chords which proceeding from every ba so many battle fields and patriot so many patriot

graves bind pass through all the hearts and hearths all the hearths in this broad continent of ours will yet harmon again harmonize in their ancient music when touched as they surely breathed upon again by the better angel guardian angel of the nation". See William H. Seward, Suggested Changes to First Inaugural Address [February, 1861].

That Lincoln took time to ponder the advice of both Browning and Seward before writing out his closing paragraph is suggested by the phrasing of what he wrote on the back of Browning's letter of February 17: "Americans, all, we are not enemies, but friends— We have sacred ties of affection which, though strained by passions, let us hope can never be broken".