

## Lincoln on Presidential Reconstruction

(Lincoln's Last Public Address<sup>1</sup>, April 11, 1865--two days after the surrender of Confederate General Robert E. Lee's army)

*What does Lincoln think about the question of the official status of the rebel states?*

... I have purposely forbore any public expression upon it. As appears to me that question has not been, nor yet is, a practically material one, and that any discussion of it, while it thus remains practically immaterial, could have no effect other than the mischievous one of dividing our friends. As yet, whatever it may hereafter become, that question is bad, as the basis of a controversy, and good for nothing at all—a merely pernicious abstraction.

We all agree that the seceded States, so called, are out of their proper relation with the Union; and that the sole object of the government, civil and military, in regard to those States is to again get them into that proper practical relation. I believe it is not only possible, but in fact, easier to do this, without deciding, or even considering, whether these States have ever been out of the Union, than with it.

*What are the two defects Lincoln admits for the new government of Louisiana?*

The amount of constituency, so to speak, on which the new Louisiana government rests, would be more satisfactory to all, if it contained fifty, thirty, or even twenty thousand, instead of only about twelve thousand, as it does. It is also unsatisfactory to some that the elective franchise is not given to the colored man. I would myself prefer that it were now conferred on the very intelligent, and on those who serve our cause as soldiers. Still the question is not whether the Louisiana government, as it stands, is quite all that is desirable. The question is, "Will it be wiser to take it as it is, and help to improve it; or to reject, and disperse it?" "Can Louisiana be brought into proper practical relation with the Union sooner by sustaining, or by discarding her new State government?"

*What good things does Lincoln say the government of Louisiana has done? What does he see happening, if the Radical Republicans get their way, with their plan of reconstruction?*

Some twelve thousand voters in the heretofore slave-state of Louisiana have sworn allegiance to the Union, assumed to be the rightful political power of the State, held elections, organized a State government, adopted a free-state constitution, giving the benefit of public schools equally to black and white, and empowering the Legislature to confer the elective franchise upon the colored man. Their Legislature has already voted to ratify the constitutional amendment recently passed by Congress, abolishing slavery throughout the nation. These twelve thousand persons are thus fully committed to the Union, and to perpetual freedom in the state—

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/last.htm>

committed to the very things, and nearly all the things the nation wants—and they ask the nations recognition and its assistance to make good their committal. Now, if we reject, and spurn them, we do our utmost to disorganize and disperse them. We in effect say to the white men “You are worthless, or worse—we will neither help you, nor be helped by you.” To the blacks we say “This cup of liberty which these, your old masters, hold to your lips, we will dash from you, and leave you to the chances of gathering the spilled and scattered contents in some vague and undefined when, where, and how.” If this course, discouraging and paralyzing both white and black, has any tendency to bring Louisiana into proper practical relations with the Union, I have, so far, been unable to perceive it. If, on the contrary, we recognize, and sustain the new government of Louisiana the converse of all this is made true. We encourage the hearts, and nerve the arms of the twelve thousand to adhere to their work, and argue for it, and proselyte for it, and fight for it, and feed it, and grow it, and ripen it to a complete success. The colored man too, in seeing all united for him, is inspired with vigilance, and energy, and daring, to the same end. Grant that he desires the elective franchise, will he not attain it sooner by saving the already advanced steps toward it, than by running backward over them? Concede that the new government of Louisiana is only to what it should be as the egg is to the fowl, we shall sooner have the fowl by hatching the egg than by smashing it.

## Thaddeus Stevens on Reconstruction<sup>2</sup>

*Stevens plays the devil’s advocate, assuming for purposes of argument that Lincoln’s position (that the rebel states never left the Union) is the correct one. What conclusion does he then arrive at?*

...Where is the warrant in the constitution for such sovereign power, much less the Executive, to intermeddle with the domestic institutions of a State, mould its laws, and regulate the elective franchise? It would be rank, dangerous and deplorable usurpation. In reconstruction, therefore, no reform can be effected in the Southern States if they have never left the Union. But reformation must be effected; the foundation of their institutions, both political, municipal and social, must be broken up and relaid, or all our blood and treasure have been spent in vain. This can only be done by treating and holding them as a conquered people. Then all things which we can desire to do, follow with logical and legitimate authority.

### Proposals to Confiscate Southern Land

*Whose land does Stevens advocate seizing? How much? For what use?*

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<sup>2</sup> Thaddeus Stevens was a member of the House for 13 years, until his death at the age of 76, in 1868. He became a leader of the group known as the Radical Republicans, who supported harsh measures against the rebel South. These are excerpts from a speech he gave at Lancaster, Pennsylvania, on Sept. 6, 1865. The text was excerpted from *The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens: Volume 2* (April 1865-August 1868).

But we propose to confiscate all the estate[s] of every rebel belligerent whose estate was worth \$10,000, or whose land exceeded two hundred acres in quantity. Policy if not justice would require that the poor, the ignorant, and the coerced should be forgiven. They followed the example and teachings of their wealthy and intelligent neighbors. The rebellion would never have originated with them....The proportion of those exempt compared with the punished would be I believe about nine tenths.

There are about [four] millions of freedmen in the South. By thus forfeiting the estates of the leading rebels, the [Union] government would have 394,000,000 of acres,... and yet nine-tenths of the people would remain untouched. Divide this land into convenient farms. Give, if you please, forty acres to each adult male freed man. Suppose there are one million of them. That would require 40,000,000 of acres, which, deducted from 394,000,000, leaves three hundred and fifty-four millions of acres for sale. Divide it into suitable farms, and sell it to the highest bidders. I think it,... would average at least ten dollars per acre. That would produce \$3,540,000,000--three billions five hundred and forty millions of dollars.

Let that be applied as follows to wit:

1. Invest \$300,000,000 in six per cent government bonds, and add the Interest semi-annually to the pensions of those who have become entitled by this villainous war.
2. Appropriate \$200,000,000 to pay the damages done to loyal men, North and South, by the rebellion.
3. Pay the residue, being \$3,040,000,000 towards the payment of the National debt....

*What does Stevens say about Lincoln's leniency toward the South? What does he say will happen if the Reconstructionists fail?*

....This doctrine of Restoration shocks me. We have a duty to perform which our fathers were incapable of, which will be required at our hands by God and our Country. When our ancestors found a "more perfect Union" necessary, they found it impossible to agree upon a Constitution without tolerating, nay, guaranteeing, Slavery. They were obliged to acquiesce, trusting to time to work a speedy cure, in which they were disappointed. They had some excuse, some justification. But we can have none if we do not thoroughly eradicate Slavery and render it forever impossible in this republic. The Slave power made war upon the nation. They declared the "more perfect Union" dissolved--solemnly declared themselves a foreign nation, alien to this republic; for four years were in fact what they claimed to be.... If we do not make those institutions fit to last through generations of freemen, a heavy curse will be on us.