

Chapter 313 – Lincoln Is Sworn In And Delivers His Inaugural Address



Dates:
March 4, 1861

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James Buchanan's Final Day In Office

Few men are as relieved by abandoning the White House as James Buchanan.

His political survival strategy has been transparent for months: namely to postpone open warfare in Charleston harbor until those he deems responsible for the sectional conflict – Lincoln and the Black Republicans – are left in charge.

In this sense he has succeeded, albeit not by his own making.

Instead the outcome rests in large part with Major Robert Anderson, operating with the flimsiest of direction from Washington, but preparing a formidable defense at Sumter and refusing to be drawn into an exchange back on January 9, 1861, when shots are fired at the *Star of the West*.

As luck would have it, Buchanan is also helped by the sudden formation of the Confederate States of America during that same week. This removes the burden for action from the volatile Governor Pickens in Charleston and hands it to Jefferson Davis in Montgomery. His experienced military mind recognizes the need for the South to avoid all fighting until it has its militias and armaments and command and control structures in place.

Thus Buchanan can claim that a civil war has been avoided on his watch.

But he is quite certain that the reprieve will be short-lived. On inauguration day, March 4, he is in the capitol building signing documents when Secretary of War arrives with a message from Major Anderson saying that his supplies are running out and requesting 20,000 troops to subdue the local militias.

With that news in hand, James Buchanan enters his carriage to pick up Lincoln and head to the swearing in ceremonies. His purported words to his successor ring true:

If you are as happy entering the White House as I shall feel returning to Wheatland (his home), you are a happy man indeed.

Date: March 4, 1861

Abraham Lincoln Delivers His Inaugural Address



Lincoln Delivering His First Inaugural Address

According to custom at the time, Lincoln offers his inaugural address to a crowd of some 30,000 prior to being sworn in. He is introduced by his close friend, Edward Baker, who lends his name to the president's deceased son, "Eddie," and who will himself die in combat early in the war.

Before speaking Lincoln dons his steel-rimmed spectacles and gratefully hands his stovepipe hat off to a gracious Stephen Douglas as he moves to the podium.

In characteristic fashion, he goes right to the central issue most on the minds of his audience. The South, he says, has no cause to feel endangered by a Republican administration.

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.

To demonstrate this he offer a series of assurances:

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....

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...our political fabric depend(s)...

We denounce the lawless invasion by armed force of the soil of any State or Territory, no matter what pretext, as among the gravest of crimes.

Persons held to service or labor in one State, under the laws thereof, escaping into another, shall...be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labor may be due.

After vowing to fairly uphold the laws of the Constitution, he declares the Union of the states is perpetual and functions like a contract which cannot be broken by any one party absent the consent of the rest.

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.

If the United States be...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?

In turn, he will consider any act of violence by a State against the authority of the Union qualifies as illegal insurrection and will oppose it.

It follows from these views...that acts of violence within any State or States against the authority of the United States are insurrectionary or revolutionary, according to circumstances.

I therefore...shall take care, as the Constitution itself expressly enjoins upon me, that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all the States,

The opposition need not involve bloodshed or invasion, as long as federal property remains in its hands and all duties on imports are properly collected.

In doing this there needs to be no bloodshed or violence, and there shall be none unless it be forced upon the national authority. 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 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

Lincoln asks why the current crisis exists.

That there are persons in one section or another who seek to destroy the Union at all events and are glad of any pretext to do it I will neither affirm nor 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?

Before entering upon so grave a matter as the destruction of our national fabric, with all its benefits, its memories, and its hopes, would it not be wise to ascertain precisely why we do it?

He asserts that it is not because any laws in the Constitution are being broken.

Is it true, then, that any right plainly written in the Constitution has been denied? I think not.

However, the words of the Constitution cannot be definitive on all issues, and, when that is the case, the government must rely on “majority rules” in order to function.

No foresight can anticipate nor any document of reasonable length contain express provisions for all possible questions. ...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.

From questions of this class spring all our constitutional controversies, and we divide upon them into majorities and minorities. If the minority will not acquiesce, the majority must, or the Government must cease.

If the principle of majority rule breaks down it leads to secession and anarchy, which only feeds on itself as other minorities find reasons to rebel.

Plainly the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy...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?

The present conflict is over an instance of majority rules, in this case with one side arguing against the morality and extension of slavery, the other holding the opposite position.

One section of our country 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.

Lincoln continues to reject *Dred Scott* as the answer, and sees no perfect solution to the dispute. But he is certain it will only get worse if a futile attempt is made to divide one nation in two. He says that separation is possible in marriage, but not within nations where the two sides must continue “face to face” and find ways to settle future issues affecting both.

This, I think, cannot be perfectly cured, and it would be worse in both cases after the separation of the sections than before....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.

Despite his personal objection to slavery, he offers a concession to the South, promising to support the “Corwin Amendment” should it ever get ratified (indeed a very long shot).

I understand a proposed amendment to the Constitution--which amendment, however, I have not seen--has passed 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...I have no objection to its being made express and irrevocable.

The peroration comes as a series of pleas to his fellow citizens in the South. He asks first for time to think calmly about the whole subject.

My countrymen, one and all, think calmly and well upon this whole subject. Nothing valuable can be lost by taking time.

He asks that patriotism and Christian values inform their decisions.

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.

He directly mentions the “issue of civil war” and assures Southerners that “the Government will not assail you.”

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

While “loath to close,” his ending is a poetic appeal to the shared good will of his fellow Americans that he hopes will yet insure peace.

I am loath 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.

The speech is brief, lasting roughly a half hour, and it is marked by subdued reactions from the audience. After it is over, 83 year old Chief Justice Roger Taney, whose *Dred Scott* ruling he has again questioned, administers the oath of office to the new President.

I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my Ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.

Sidebar: Washington DC At Lincoln's Inauguration

Washington City on March 4, 1861, is a metaphor for a nation whose destiny suddenly feels uncompleted and once again fearful of collapse, this time from within its own borders.

As first world capitals go, it remains a physically primitive city. Most streets are left unpaved and turn into mud-holes whenever rain strikes. Sanitation systems are lacking and raw sewage is dumped daily into the Potomac River, polluting the drinking water. Buildings are constructed largely from wood, not bricks, and efforts at architectural grandeur are frustrating. The Capitol building lacks its dome topped by Lady Liberty; scaffolding mars the Treasury; the red brick Smithsonian is an isolated eyesore along the swampy mall; and the glorious obelisk to honor George Washington is still chopped off at the waist, owing to a lack of construction funds.

The city population stands at just over 61,000 people in 1860, the 14th largest city in the nation, but still tiny relative to the prior capitals in New York (813,000) and Philadelphia (565,000). Its residents are a nomadic lot, packing it during the winter-centric congressional sessions and emptying out during the unbearably hot summers.

In its cultural beliefs and practices it is a decidedly Southern city, right down to the buying and selling slaves within sight of the principal government offices.

On March 4, 1860 it is also an occupied city.

Old General Winfield Scott sees to that outcome by importing armed troops to monitor the parade routes and the Capitol. He is already preparing for a civil war to come, but fully intends to keep the palpable fear and anger in the city under control for an orderly transfer of power.