



“Gentlemen, I too am a Kentuckian”

“Who amongst you would not die by the proposition, that your candidate, being elected, should be inaugurated, solely on the conditions of the constitution, the laws, or not at all—What Kentuckian, worthy of his birth place, would not do this? Gentlemen, I too am a Kentuckian.”

--Abraham Lincoln, [February 1861], Notes for Speech to Kentuckians

In the months before and after Lincoln’s election to the presidency, and throughout the “secession winter,” numerous Southerners urged the president-elect to issue a public statement, or “manifesto,” to restate his conservative position on slavery, placate the South, and end the crisis. One anonymous letter, signed “All Kentucky,” pleaded, “can you not do, say, something to calm the

storm[?]” The “public mind,” wrote another, was “now in the Condition of a great mob” that will not “stop and think; nor will they, until you speak out.”

The substance of these requests differed little from what George D. Prentice, editor of the *Louisville Journal*, had asked of Lincoln days before the election. Ultimately, Lincoln’s response would remain unchanged as well. As Lincoln wrote in a draft response to Prentice (that he may never have sent): “I could not express my conservative views and intentions more clearly and strongly, than they are expressed in our platform, and in my many speeches already in print, and before the public.” Anything further was thus unnecessary, and would only promote “new misrepresentations” of his views. No public letter of the sort Prentice had in mind was ever published.

In late January/early February, 1861, as he prepared his First Inaugural address, the question was much on his mind, and Lincoln appears to have considered answering these Southerners by way of a speech to Kentuckians. A thorough reading of Lincoln’s speeches suggests that he never delivered these biting remarks, but in his notes we glimpse the moral indignation Lincoln intended when he wrote: “Gentlemen, I too am a Kentuckian.” The idea that a duly elected candidate must surrender his position and appease his opponents before assuming office tore at the heart of democratic principle. As he wrote in his second draft of notes (in which he omitted the reference to Kentuckians), “such a surrender would not be merely the ruin of a man, or a party; but, as a precedent, would be the ruin of the government itself.”

Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), by Preston Butler, August 13, 1860
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