

Jefferson Davis

ON RETIRING FROM THE SENATE ¹.

January 21, 1861 (In the Senate)

I rise, Mr. President, for the purpose of announcing to the Senate that...the state of Mississippi, [by her people in an assembled convention], has declared her separation from the United States. Under these circumstances, of course my functions [as a Senator] are terminated [in the Senate]. It has seemed to me proper, however, that I should appear in the Senate to announce that fact to my associates, and I will say but very little more.

“THE STATES ARE SOVEREIGN”

It is known to senators who have served with me here, that I have for many years advocated, as an essential attribute of state sovereignty (*highest authority*), the right of a State to secede from the Union. Therefore, if I had not believed there was justifiable cause [to secede]; if I had thought that Mississippi was acting without sufficient provocation (*action or speech that makes someone angry*), or without an existing necessity, I should still, under [this] theory of the government, because of my allegiance to the state of which I am a citizen, have been bound by her action [to leave]. I, however...do think she has justifiable cause, and I approve of [Mississippi's] act. I conferred (*spoke*) with her people before that act was taken, counseled (*give advice*) them then that if the state of things which they apprehended (*perceived*) should exist when the convention met, they should take the action which they have now adopted.

I hope none who hear me will [confuse] this expression of mine with the advocacy [*support/promotion*] of the right of a state to remain in the Union, and to disregard

its constitutional obligations by the nullification of the law. Such is not my theory. Nullification and secession, so often confounded, are indeed antagonistic (*opposing*) principles. Nullification...is only...justified when the [government] has violated [its] constitutional obligation, and a state...denies the right of the [government] to act, and appeals (*make an urgent request*) to the other states of the Union for a decision; but when the states themselves, and when the people of the states, have so acted as to convince us that they will not regard our constitutional rights, then...arises the doctrine of secession.

[John C. Calhoun] advocated the doctrine of nullification, because it preserved the Union. It was because of his deep-seated attachment to the Union, his determination to find some remedy for existing ills short of a severance of the ties which bound South Carolina to the other states, that Mr. Calhoun advocated the doctrine of nullification, which he proclaimed to be peaceful, to be within the limits of state power, not to disturb the Union, but only to be a means of bringing the [government] before the tribunal of the states for their judgment.

Secession...is to be justified upon the basis that the states are sovereign.

"I CONCUR IN THE ACTION OF ... MISSISSIPPI"

I therefore say I concur (*agree*) in the action of the people of Mississippi, believing it to be necessary and proper, and should have been bound by their action if my belief had been otherwise. It is by this confounding (*confusion*) of nullification and secession that the name of [Jackson] has been invoked (*referred to*) to justify coercion (*forcing someone to do something through threat*) against a seceded state. The phrase "to execute the laws," was an expression which General Jackson applied to the case of a state refusing to obey the laws while yet a member of the Union. That is not the case which is now presented. The laws are to be executed over the United States, and upon the people of the United States. They have no relation to any foreign country. You may make war on a foreign state. If it be the

purpose of gentlemen, they may make war against a state which has withdrawn from the Union; but there are no laws of the United States to be executed within the limits of a seceded state. A state finding herself in the condition [of] Mississippi...surrenders all the benefits (and they are known to be many), deprives herself of the advantages (they are known to be great), severs all the ties of affection (and they are close and enduring), which have bound her to the Union; and thus divesting (*deprive of*) herself of every benefit, taking upon herself every burden, she claims to be exempt from any power to execute the laws of the United States within her limits.

[It] has been a belief that we are to be deprived in the Union of the rights which our fathers bequeathed (*left*) to us, which has brought Mississippi into her present decision. She has heard...the theory that all men are created free and equal, and this made the basis of an attack upon her social institutions; and the sacred Declaration of Independence has been invoked to maintain the position of the equality of the races. That Declaration of Independence is to be construed (*interpreted*) by the circumstances and purposes for which it was made. The communities were declaring their independence; the people of those communities were asserting that no man was born-to use the language of Mr. Jefferson—booted and spurred to ride over the rest of mankind; that men were created equal—meaning the men of the political community; that there was no divine right to rule; that no man inherited the right to govern; that there were no classes by which power...descended to families, but that all stations were equally within the grasp of each member of the body-politic. These were the great principles they announced; these were the purposes for which they made their declaration. They have no reference to the slave; else, how happened it that among the items of arraignment made against George III was that he endeavored (*try hard to do something*) to do just what the North has been endeavoring of late to do--to stir up insurrection among our slaves? Had the Declaration announced that the negroes were free and equal, how was the prince (*King George III*) to be arraigned for stirring up

insurrection among them? And how was this to be enumerated among the high crimes which caused the colonies to sever their connection with the mother country? When our Constitution was formed, the same idea was rendered more palpable, for there we find provision made for that very class of persons as property; they were not put upon the footing of equality with white men-not even upon that of paupers and convicts; but, so far as representation was concerned, were discriminated against as a lower caste, only to be represented in the numerical proportion of three-fifths.

"WHEN YOU DENY US THE RIGHT TO *WITHDRAW*"

Then, senators, we recur (*come back to*) to the compact which binds us together; we recur to the principles upon which our government was founded; and when you deny them, and when you deny to us the right to withdraw from a government which...threatens to be destructive of our rights, we [follow] in the path of our fathers when we proclaim our independence, and take the hazard. This is done not in hostility to others, not to injure any section of the country, not even for our own pecuniary (*monetary*) benefit; but from the...motive of defending and protecting the rights we inherited, and which it is our sacred duty to transmit...to our children.

I find in myself, perhaps, a type of the general feeling of my constituents towards yours. I am sure I feel no hostility to you, senators from the North. I am sure there is not one of you, whatever sharp discussion there may have been between us, to whom I cannot now say, in the presence of my God, I wish you well; and such, I am sure, is the feeling of the people whom I represent towards those whom you represent. I therefore feel that I but express their desire when I say I hope, and they hope, for peaceful relations with you, though we must part. They may be mutually beneficial to us in the future, as they have been in the past, if you so will it. The reverse may bring disaster on every portion of the country; and if you will have it thus, we will invoke the God of our fathers, who delivered them from the power of

the lion, to protect us from the ravages of the bear; and thus, putting our trust in God, and in our own firm hearts and strong arms, we will vindicate the right as best we may.

In the course of my service here, associated at different times with a great variety of senators, I see now around me some with whom I have served long; there have been points of collision; but whatever of offense there has been to me, I leave here; I carry with me no hostile remembrance. Whatever offense I have given which has not been redressed, or for which satisfaction has not been demanded, I have, senators, in this hour of our parting, to offer you my apology for any pain which, in heat of discussion, I have inflicted. I go hence unencumbered *of* the remembrance of any injury received, and having discharged the duty of making the only reparation in my power for any injury offered. Mr. President, and senators, having made the announcement which the occasion seemed to me to require, it only remains for me to bid you a final adieu.