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Lincoln on Secession

Soon after Abraham Lincoln was elected to the presidency in November 1860, seven southern states seceded from the Union. In March 1861, after he was inaugurated as the 16th President of the United States, four more followed.

The secessionists claimed that according to the Constitution every state had the right to leave the Union. Lincoln claimed that they did not have that right. He opposed secession for these reasons:

1. Physically the states cannot separate.
2. Secession is unlawful.
3. A government that allows secession will disintegrate into anarchy.
4. That Americans are not enemies, but friends.
5. Secession would destroy the world's only existing democracy, and prove for all time, to future Americans and to the world, that a government of the people cannot survive.

Lincoln may have thought the fifth point was the most important. If you traveled the earth in 1860, and visited every continent and every nation, you would have found many examples of monarchies, dictatorships, and other examples of authoritarian rule. But in the all the world, you would have found only one major democracy: The United States of America. Democracy had been attempted in one other nation in the eighteenth century - France. Unfortunately, that experiment in self-government deteriorated rapidly, as the citizens resorted more to the guillotine than to the ballot box. From the ashes of that experiment in self-government, rose a dictator who, after seizing control in France, attempted to conquer the continent of Europe.

Those who supported monarchies felt vindicated by the French disaster, but the United States experiment in self-government remained a thorn in their side. Those wishing for democracy could always point across the ocean and say, "It works there. Why can't we try it here"? In 1860 however, it appeared that the thorn had been removed. The monarchists were thrilled with the dissolution of the United States, and many even held parties celebrating the end of democracy.

Lincoln understood this well, and when he described his nation as "the world's last best hope," these were not idle words. Lincoln truly believed that if the war were lost, it would not only have been the end of his political career, or that of his party, or even the end of his nation. He believed that if the war were lost, it would have forever ended the hope of people everywhere for a democratic form of government.

Listed below are some of the comments that Lincoln made against secession.

[PHYSICALLY WE CANNOT SEPARATE \(/liho/historyculture/secession.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/secession.htm)

[SECESSION IS UNLAWFUL \(/liho/historyculture/secunlawful.htm\)](#)

[SECESSION EQUALS ANARCHY \(/liho/historyculture/secanarchy.htm\)](#)

[WE ARE FRIENDS \(/liho/historyculture/secfriends.htm\)](#)

[SECESSION WILL DESTROY DEMOCRACY \(/liho/historyculture/secdemocracy.htm\)](#)

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CONTACT THE PARK

Mailing Address:

413 S. 8th Street
Springfield, IL 62701

Phone:

(217) 492-4241
Hours are 8:30am-5:00pm, daily, except on
Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Years
Day, when the park is closed.



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