

# LINCOLN LORE

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## THE SPEECH THAT MADE LINCOLN WEEP

The Texas Centennial, which is being observed this year, offers the proper environment to present two brief excerpts from a long speech made by Alexander Stephens in Congress on February 2, 1848. Stephens later became Vice President of the Southern Confederacy.

The paragraphs selected from his address have been chosen because they seem to contain such expressions as would cause Lincoln to write the following note to William Herndon:

Washington, February 2, 1848.

Dear William: I just take my pen to say that Mr. Stephens, of Georgia, a little, slim, pale-faced, consumptive man, with a voice like Logan's, has just concluded the very best speech of one hour's length I ever heard. My old withered dry eyes are full of tears yet.

If he writes it out anything like he delivered it, our people shall see a good many copies of it.

Yours truly,

A. Lincoln.

### The War and Taxation—Mr. Stephens

"The attempt to cast the censure of this movement upon the head of that gallant old chief (Zachary Taylor) is an act of grossest injustice . . . It is akin to that spirit which kept him 'crippled' in the summer of 1846, on the Rio Grande, without the necessary means of transportation, and then found fault with his conduct at Monteery . . . It comes from the same spirit that sought to supplant him of his command by the appointment of a lieutenant general; that spirit that stripped him of the main body of his forces, and left him with a small handful of men, about five thousand only, and about five hundred of these regulars, the rest all volunteers, exposed on the frontier to an attack from Santa Anna . . ."

"But, sir, the same great spirit which marks his every act did not fail him on that occasion. The resources of a keen foresight and good judgment proved him to be not only equal, but superior, to the perils of the crisis. The ever memorable night of the 22d of February, Mr. Speaker, must have been one of the most intense suspense to that small Spartan band of devoted spirits who spent its sleepless watches resting on their arms. Contemplate them for a moment, anxiously waiting the coming dawn, when life, and fame, and everything dear to each, were to be determined by the fate of one day's bloody action. What emotions of apprehension must have moved in the breast of the most dauntless, when the music and exulting shouts of anticipated victory ever and anon arose from the immense hosts encamped in hostile array against them! But the presiding genius of our country was there; that guardian angel which, one hundred and fifteen years before, ruled the destiny of empires at the birth of Washington, was over and around that army, guarding the fortunes of her most favorite son; and the next day dawned but to witness one of the greatest achievements ever won by the valor of arms—a victory which, in the language of a resolution on your table, is unsurpassed in the military annals of the world. It is true, it cost us dearly; many gallant hearts poured out their life-blood on that eventful

day; some of them, known to members of this House, I may be permitted to name. There was a Yell, frank, bold, and generous; a McKee, one of Kentucky's most ardent, accomplished, and chivalrous sons; a Clay, with a heart as pure, stern, inflexible, and patriotic, as the great sire from whom he sprung; and a Hardin, Mr. Speaker, well known to you and to me, and many of those around me, and of whom, I take this occasion to say, I never knew a truer, a firmer, and nobler man. These men all fell in sustaining the flag of their country against the fearful odds brought against them on the field of Buena Vista. And it was here that gallant old officer, who bore our flag on that occasion, notwithstanding he was left with such a handful of men, gained such undying honors for himself and his country . . ."

"The honor of this country does not and cannot require us to force and compel the people of any other to sell theirs. I have, I trust, as high a regard for national honor as any man. It is the brightest gem in the chaplet of a nation's glory; and there is nothing of which I am prouder than the high character for honor this country has acquired throughout the civilized world—that code of honor which was established by Washington and the men of the Revolution, and which rests upon truth, justice, and honesty, which is the offspring of virtue and integrity, and which is seen in the length and breadth of our land, in all the evidences of art, and civilization, and moral advancement, and everything that tends to elevate, dignify, and enoble man. This is the honor of my admiration, and it is made of 'sterner,' purer, nobler 'stuff' than that aggressive and degrading, yea, odious principle now avowed of waging a war against a neighboring people to compel them to sell their country. Who is here so base as to be willing, under any circumstances, to sell his country? For myself, I can only say, if the last funeral pile of liberty were lighted, I would mount it and expire in its flames before I would be coerced by any power, however great and strong, to sell or surrender the land of my home, the place of my nativity, and the graves of my sires! Sir, the principle is not only dishonorable, but infamous. As the Representative upon this floor of a high-minded and honorable constituency, I repeat, that the principle of waging war against a neighboring people to compel them to sell their country, is not only dishonorable, but disgraceful and infamous. What! shall it be said that American honor aims at nothing higher than land—than the ground on which we tread? Do we look no higher, in our aspirations for honor, than do the soulless brutes? Shall we disavow the similitude of our Maker, and disgrace the very name of man? Tell it not to the world. Let not such an aspersion and reproach rest upon our name. I have heard of nations whose honor could be satisfied with gold—that glittering dust which is so precious in the eyes of some—but never did I expect to live to see the day when the Executive of this country should announce that our honor was such a loathsome, beastly thing, that it could not be satisfied with any achievements in arms, however brilliant and glorious, but must feed on earth—gross, vile dirt!—and require even a prostrate foe to be robbed of mountain rocks and desert plains!"