

Cornerstone Speech

(abridged)

Savannah; Georgia, March 21, 1861

Vice President CSA: Alexander H. Stephens

(1) But not to be tedious in enumerating the numerous changes for the better, allow me to allude to one other -- though last, not least. The new constitution has put at rest, *forever*, all the agitating questions relating to our peculiar institution -- African slavery as it exists amongst us -- the proper *status* of the negro in our form of civilization. This was the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution. Jefferson in his forecast, had anticipated this, as the "rock upon which the old Union would split." He was right. What was conjecture with him, is now a realized fact. But whether he fully comprehended the great truth upon which that rock *stood* and *stands*, may be doubted. The prevailing ideas entertained by him and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the formation of the old constitution, were that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in *principle*, socially, morally, and politically. It was an evil they knew not well how to deal with, but the general opinion of the men of that day was that, somehow or other in the order of Providence, the institution would be evanescent and pass away. This idea, though not incorporated in the constitution, was the prevailing idea at that time. The constitution, it is true, secured every essential guarantee to the institution while it should last, and hence no argument can be justly urged against the constitutional guarantees thus secured, because of the common sentiment of the day. Those ideas, however, were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error. It was a sandy foundation, and the government built upon it fell when the "storm came and the wind blew."

(2) Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner- stone rests upon the great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery -- subordination to the superior race -- is his natural and normal condition. [Applause.] This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth. This truth has been slow in the process of its development, like all other truths in the various departments of science. It has been so even amongst us. Many who hear me, perhaps, can recollect well, that this truth was not generally admitted, even within their day. The errors of the past generation still clung to many as late as twenty years ago. Those at the North, who still cling to these errors, with a zeal above knowledge, we justly denominate fanatics. All fanaticism springs from an aberration of the mind--from a defect in reasoning. It is a species of insanity. One of the most striking characteristics of insanity, in many instances, is forming correct conclusions from fancied or erroneous premises; so with the anti-slavery fanatics; their conclusions are right if their premises were. They assume that the negro is equal, and hence conclude that he is entitled to equal privileges and rights with the white man. If their premises were correct, their conclusions would be logical and just--but their premise being wrong, their whole argument fails. I recollect once of having heard a gentleman from one of the northern States, of great power and ability, announce in the House of Representatives, with imposing effect, that we of the South would be compelled, ultimately, to yield upon this subject of slavery, that it was as impossible to

war successfully against a principle in politics, as it was in physics or mechanics. That the principle would ultimately prevail. That we, in maintaining slavery as it exists with us, were warring against a principle, a principle founded in nature, the principle of the equality of men. The reply I made to him was, that upon his own grounds, we should, ultimately, succeed, and that he and his associates, in this crusade against our institutions, would ultimately fail. The truth announced, that it was as impossible to war successfully against a principle in politics as it was in physics and mechanics, I admitted; but told him that it was he, and those acting with him, who were warring against a principle. They were attempting to make things equal which the Creator had made unequal.

(3) In the conflict thus far, success has been on our side, complete throughout the length and breadth of the Confederate States. It is upon this, as I have stated, our social fabric is firmly planted; and I cannot permit myself to doubt the ultimate success of a full recognition of this principle throughout the civilized and enlightened world.

(4) As I have stated, the truth of this principle may be slow in development, as all truths are and ever have been, in the various branches of science. It was so with the principles announced by Galileo-it was so with Adam Smith and his principles of political economy. It was so with Harvey, and his theory of the circulation of the blood. It is stated that not a single one of the medical profession, living at the time of the announcement of the truths made by him, admitted them. Now, they are universally acknowledged. May we not, therefore, look with confidence to the ultimate universal acknowledgment of the truths upon which our system rests? It is the first government ever instituted upon the principles in strict conformity to nature, and the ordination of Providence, in furnishing the materials of human society. Many governments have been founded upon the principle of the subordination and serfdom of certain classes of the same race; such were and are in violation of the laws of nature. Our system commits no such violation of nature's laws. With us, all of the white race, however high or low, rich or poor, are equal in the eye of the law. Not so with the negro. Subordination is his place. He, by nature, or by the curse against Canaan, is fitted for that condition which he occupies in our system. The architect, in the construction of buildings, lays the foundation with the proper material-the granite; then comes the brick or the marble. The substratum of our society is made of the material fitted by nature for it, and by experience we know that it is best, not only for the superior, but for the inferior race, that it should be so. It is, indeed, in conformity with the ordinance of the Creator. It is not for us to inquire into the wisdom of his ordinances, or to question them. For his own purposes, he has made one race to differ from another, as he has made "one star to differ from another star in glory."

Questions to be answered after reading:

The following questions are answer in paragraph 1.

1. What is the “peculiar institution” Stephens is referring to?
2. What is the "rock upon which the old Union would split."?
3. Stephens states that Thomas Jefferson and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the formation of the old Constitution, were of the opinion that the enslavement of the African was what?
4. The speaker feels that the ideas of the original Constitution were fundamentally wrong because they rested upon what assumption?

The following questions are answer in paragraph 2.

5. What is the cornerstone or great truth Stephens is referring to?
6. How does Stephens characterize those in the North that are opposed to slavery?
7. Why does Stephens feel that Northerners’ arguments against slavery are faulty?

The following questions are answer in paragraph 3.

8. How would you characterize Stephens’ attitude in this paragraph?

The following questions are answer in paragraph 4.

9. Why does Stephens feel that the audience can “look with confidence to the ultimate universal acknowledgment of the truths upon which our system rests”?
10. Stephens states that many governments have been founded upon what principle?
11. Stephens believes that all white people are what?
12. According to Stephens, who created the differences between the races?

Analysis and Opinion Questions:

13. How do you think most Southerners felt about Stephens’ attitude regarding African slavery? Explain
14. How do you think most Northerners felt about Stephens’ attitude regarding African slavery? Explain
15. In your opinion, does Stephens appear to be willing to compromise over the issue of slavery? Explain
16. How do you feel when you read the Cornerstone Speech? Explain

Writing Exercise:

Write a letter to Alexander Stephens in response to his Cornerstone Speech.
(minimum 200 words)

The Cornerstone Speech

Rationale:

This lesson will focus on the racial and political ideologies of Southerner slaveholders. The essence of this belief system was captured in the Cornerstone Speech of Alexander H. Stephens on March 21, 1861 in Savannah, Georgia. Stephens was a long time supporter of the expansion of slavery into the territories, favored secession and became the Vice President of the Confederate States of America. This lesson would be most effective if used after students have covered the secession crisis and the birth of the Confederate States of America, but prior to studying Fort Sumter and the commencement of hostilities between the North and South.

Objectives:

- 1) Analysis of a primary source document.
- 2) Identify points of the proslavery perspective in the slavery debate.
- 3) Identify bias and point of view.
- 4) Reading comprehension of nonfiction.
- 5) Writing of a persuasive letter.

Homework - Writing Exercise: Write a letter to Alexander Stephens in response to his Cornerstone Speech (minimum 200 words).

Content:

I. Before reading the Cornerstone Speech, students should be given the vocabulary words listed below, which may be presented in either a handout to accompany the Speech, and or written on a board or overhead.

enumerating - to ascertain the number of

tedious - tiresome because of length or dullness

erroneous - containing or characterized by error

serfdom - a member of a servile feudal class bound to the soil and subject to the will of his lord

subordination - to make subject or subservient, or to treat as of less value or importance

substratum - a layer beneath the surface soil

evanescent - tending to vanish like vapor

rupture - open hostility or war between nations

denominate - to give a name to

fanatic - marked by excessive enthusiasm and often intense uncritical devotion

II. After student have been familiarized with the necessary vocabulary, read speech out loud with class. During this guide reading, the teacher should stop and explain the more difficult points, as well as referencing vocabulary and objectives stated above. Then have divide into pairs. Each group of students will answer the 16 prepared questions on lined paper. Students should hand in their own work.

III. At the end of the lesson, once the all materials and work have been collected, each student should be given a quarter sheet of lined paper. On this paper, have them write one question they have regarding the Cornerstone Speech.

Materials:

Copy of Cornerstone Speech
Copy of post reading questions
Lined paper
Overhead of vocabulary words

Massachusetts Frameworks:

USI.7
USI.29
USI.35