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## ADDRESS

OR

**Hon. Alexander H. Stephens,**

Before the General Assembly of the State of Georgia, February 23d, 1866.

Gentlemen of the Senate and House of Representatives:

I appear before you in answer to your call. This call, coming in the imposing form it does, and under the circumstances it does, requires a response from me. You have assigned to me a very high and very honorable and responsible position. This position you know I did not seek. Most willingly would I have avoided it, and nothing but an extraordinary sense of duty could have induced me to yield my own disinclinations and aversions to your wishes and judgment in the matter. For this unusual manifestation of esteem and confidence I return you my profound acknowledgments of gratitude. Of one thing only can I give you any assurance, and that is, if I shall be permitted to discharge the trusts thereby imposed, they will be discharged with a singleness of purpose to the public good. The great object with me now is to see a restoration, if possible, of peace, prosperity, and constitutional liberty in this once happy but now disturbed, agitated, and distracted country. To this end all my energies and efforts, to the extent of their powers, will be devoted.

You ask my views on the existing state of affairs, our duties at the present, and the prospects of the future. This is a task from which, under ordinary circumstances, I might very well shrink. He who ventures to speak and to give counsel and advice in times of peril or disaster assumes no enviable position. Far be that rashness from me which sometimes prompts the forward to rush in where angels might fear to tread. In responding therefore briefly to your inquiries, I feel, I trust, the full weight and magnitude of the subject. It involves the welfare of millions now living, and that of many more millions who are to come after us. I am also fully impressed with the consciousness of the inconceivably small effect of what I shall say upon the momentous results involved in the subject itself. It is with these feelings I offer my mite of counsel at your request, and in the outset of the undertaking, limited as it is intended to be to a few general ideas only. Well may I imitate an illustrious example, invoking aid from on High that I may say nothing on this occasion which may compromise the rights, the dignity, or best interests of my country. I mean specially the rights, honor, dignity, and best interests of the people of Georgia. With their suffering, their losses, their misfortunes, their bereavements, and their present utter prostration, my heart is in deepest sympathy. We have reached that point in our affairs in which the great question before us is to be or not to be; and if to be, how? Hope, ever springing in the human breast, prompts, even under the greatest calamities and adversities, never to despair. Adversity is a severe school, a terrible crucible, both for individuals and communities. We are now in this school, this crucible, and should bear in mind that it is never negative in its action, it is always positive, it is ever decided in its effects, one way or the other. It either makes better or worse; it either brings out unknown virtues, or arouses dormant virtues. In morals its tendency is to make saints or reprobates; in politics to make heroes or desperadoes. The first indication of its working for good, to which hope looks anxiously, is the manifestation of a full consciousness of its nature and extent, and the most promising grounds of hope for possible good from our present troubles, or of things with us getting better instead of worse, is the evident general realization on the part of our people of their present situation, of the evils now upon them, and of the greater ones still impending. These it is not my purpose to exaggerate, if I could; that would be useless; nor to lessen or extenuate; that would be worse than useless. All fully understand and realize them. They feel them. It is well they do.

Can these evils upon us, the absence of law, the want of protection and security of person and property, without which civilization cannot advance, be removed; or can those greater ones which threaten our very political existence be averted? These are the questions. It is true we have not the control of all the remedies. Even if these questions could be satisfactorily answered, our fortunes and destiny are not entirely in our own hands. Yet there are some things which we may, and can, and ought, in my judgment, to do, from which no harm can come, and from which some good may follow in bettering our present condition as States and communities, as well as individuals. When they have done the best they can, in view of surrounding circumstances, with all the lights they have before them, let results be what they may, they can at least enjoy the consolation—the no small recompense—that they have performed their duty, and have a conscience void of offence before God and man. This, if no more valuable result, will, I trust, attend the doing of what I propose. The first great duty, then, I would enjoin at this time, is the exercise of the simple, though difficult and trying, but nevertheless indispensable quality of patience. Patience requires of those afflicted to bear, and to suffer with fortitude whatever ills may befall them. This is often, and especially is it the case with us now, essential to their ultimate removal by any instrumentalities whatever. We are in the condition of a man with a dislocated limb or broken leg, and a very bad compound fracture at that. How it became broken should not be with him a question of so much importance as how it can be restored to health, vigor, and strength. This requires of him, as the highest duty to himself, to wait quietly and patiently in splints and bandages until nature resumes her active powers, until the vital functions perform their office. The knitting of the bones and the granulation of the flesh require time. Perfect quiet and repose, even under the severest pain, is necessary; it will not do to make too great haste to get well; an attempt to walk too soon will only make the matter worse. We must, or ought now, therefore, in a similar manner, to discipline ourselves to the same or like degree of patience. I know the anxiety and restlessness of the popular mind to be fully on our feet again; to walk abroad as we once did, to enjoy once more the free out-door air of Heaven, with the perfect use of all our limbs. I know how trying it is to be denied representation in Congress while we are paying our proportion of the taxes; how annoying it is to be even partially under military rule, and how injurious it is to the general interest and business of the country to be without post offices and mail communications, to say nothing of divers other matters on the long list of our present inconveniences and privations. All these, however, we must patiently bear and endure for a season. With quiet and repose we may get well, may get once more on our feet again. One thing is certain, that had humor, ill-temper, exhibited either in restlessness or grumbling, will not hasten it. Next to this another great duty we owe to ourselves is the exercise of a liberal spirit of forbearance amongst ourselves. The first step towards local or general harmony is the banishment from our breasts of every feeling and sentiment calculated to stir the discords of the past. Nothing could be more injurious or mischievous to the future of this country than the agitation at present of questions that divided the people anterior to or during the existence of the late war. On no occasion, and especially in the bestowment of office, ought such differences of opinion in the past ever to be mentioned either for or against any one otherwise equally entitled to confidence. These ideas or sentiments of other times and circumstances are not the germs from which hopeful organizations can now arise. Let all differences of opinion touching errors or supposed errors of the head or heart on the part of any in the past, growing out of these matters, be at once in the deep ocean of oblivion

forever buried. Let there be no crimination or recrimination on account of acts of other days—no canvassing of past conduct or motives. Great disasters are upon us and upon the whole country, and without inquiring how these originated, at whose door the fault should be laid, let us now, as common sharers of common misfortunes, on all occasions consult only as to the best means, under the circumstances as we find them, to secure the best ends toward future amelioration. Good government is what we want. This should be the leading desire and the controlling object with all, and I need not assure you if this can be obtained that our desolated fields, our towns and villages and cities, now in ruins, will soon, like the Phoenix, rise from their ashes, and all our waste places will again, at no distant day, blossom as the rose. This view should also be borne in mind, that whatever differences of opinion existed before the late fury of the war, they sprang mainly from differences as to the best means to be used, the best line of policy to be pursued to secure the great controlling object of all, which was good government. Whatever may be said of the loyalty or disloyalty of any in the late most lamentable conflict of arms, I think I may venture safely to say that there was, on the part of the great mass of the people of Georgia, and of the entire South, no disloyalty to the principle of the Constitution of the United States, to that system of representative government of delegated and limited powers, that establishment in a new phase on this continent of all the essentials of England's Magna Charta, for the protection and security of life, liberty, and property, with the additional recognition of the principle, as a fundamental truth, that all political power resides in the people. With us it was simply a question as to where our allegiance was due in the maintenance of these principles—which authority was paramount in the last resort, State or Federal. As for myself, I can affirm that no sentiment of disloyalty to these great principles of self-government, recognized and embodied in the Constitution of the United States, ever beat or throbbled in breast or heart of mine. To their maintenance my whole soul was ever enlisted, and to this end my whole life has heretofore been devoted, and will continue to be the rest of my days, God willing. In devotion to these principles I yield to no man living. This much I can say for myself. May I not say the same for you, and for the great mass of people of Georgia, and for the great mass of the people of the entire South? Whatever differences existed among us arose from differences as to the best and surest means of securing these great ends which was the object of all. It was with this view and this purpose that secession was tried. That has failed. Instead of bettering our condition, instead of establishing our liberties upon a surer foundation, we have, in the war that ensued, come well nigh losing the whole of the rich inheritance with which we set out. This is one of the sad realizations of the present. On this, too, we are but illustrating the teachings of history. Wars, and civil wars especially, always menace liberty—they seldom advance it, while they usually end in its entire overthrow and destruction. Ours stopped just short of such a catastrophe. Our only alternative now is either to give up all hopes of constitutional liberty or to retrace our steps and to look for its vindication and maintenance in the forums of reason and justice, instead of in the arena of arms; in the courts and halls of legislation, instead of on the fields of battle. I am frank and candid in telling you right here that our surest hopes, in my judgment, to these ends are in the restoration policy of the President of the United States. I have little hope for liberty, little hope for the success of the great American experiment of self-government, but in the success of the present efforts for restoration of the States to their former practical relations in a common Government under the Constitution of the United States. We are not without an encouraging example on this line in the history of

the mother country, in the history of our ancestors, from whom we derive in great measure the principles to which we are so much devoted. The truest friends of liberty in England, once, in 1642, abandoned the forum of reason and appealed, as we did, to the sword, as the surest means, in their judgment, of advancing their cause. This was after they had made great progress under the lead of Coke, Hampden, Falkland, and others, in the advancement of liberal principles; many usurpations had been checked, many of the prerogatives of the Crown had been curtailed; the petition of right had been sanctioned, ship money had been abandoned, courts-martial had been done away with, habeas corpus had been re-established, high courts of commission and star chamber had been abolished. Many other great abuses of power had been corrected and other reforms established. But not satisfied with these, and not satisfied with the peaceful working of reason to go on in its natural sphere, the denial of the sovereignty of the Crown was pressed by the too ardent reformers upon Charles I. All else he had yielded; this he would not. The sword was appealed to to settle the question. A civil war was the result. Great courage and valor were displayed on both sides. Men of eminent virtue and patriotism fell in the sanguinary conflict. The King was deposed and executed. A commonwealth was proclaimed. But the end was the reduction of the people of England to a worse state of oppression than they had been in for centuries. They retraced their steps after nearly twenty years of exhaustion and blood, and the loss of the greater portion of the liberties enjoyed by them before. They, by almost unanimous consent, called for restoration. The restoration came. Charles II. ascended the throne, as unlimited a monarch as ever ruled the empire. Not a pledge was asked or a guaranty given, touching the concession of the royal prerogative that had been exacted and obtained from his father. The true friends of liberty, of reform, and of progress in government had become convinced that these were the offspring of peace and of enlightened reason, and not of passion nor of arms. The House of Commons and the House of Lords were henceforth the theaters of their operations, and not the fields of Newberry or Marston Moor. The result was that in less than thirty years all their ancient rights and privileges, which had been lost in the civil war, with new securities, were re-established in the ever-memorable settlement of 1668, which, for all practical purposes, may be looked upon as a bloodless revolution. Since that time England has made still further and more signal strides in reform and progress, but not one of these has been effected by resort to arms. Catholic emancipation was carried in Parliament after years of argument, against the most persistent opposition. Reason and justice ultimately prevailed. So with the removal of the disability of the Jews; so with the overthrow of the rotten-borough system; so with the extension of franchise; so with the modification of the corn laws and restrictions on commerce, opening the way to the establishment of the principles of free trade; and so with all the other great reforms by Parliament which have so distinguished English history for the last half century. May we not indulge hope, even in the alternative before us now, from this great example of restoration, if all but do as the friends of liberty there did? This is my hope, my only hope. It is founded on the virtue, intelligence, and patriotism of the American people. I have not lost my faith in the people, or in their capacity for self-government. But for these great essential qualities of human nature to be brought into active and efficient exercise for the fulfillment of patriotic hopes, it is essential that the passions of the day should subside, that the causes of these passions should not now be discussed, that the embers of the late strife shall not be stirred. Man, by nature, is ever prone to scan closely the errors and defects of his fellow-man, ever ready to rail at the mote in his brother's eye with-