

# Unlikely friend

By Lewis E. Lehrman

On Feb. 18, 1861 the new leaders of the Confederacy were inaugurated in Montgomery. A wizened, prickly Alexander H. Stephens and a lean, proud Jefferson Davis took office as vice president and president of the Confederacy.

Two weeks later in Washington, President Lincoln spelled out in his inaugural address the political and constitutional crisis facing the country. He addressed his closing remarks to the South: "In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict, without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to 'preserve, protect, and defend' it."

Stephens and Lincoln had met after Lincoln came to Washington in December 1847 for his first and only congressional term. One Lincoln friend recalled that of Southerners with whom Lincoln differed on slavery, "Stephens... was his favorite." Less than two months after they met, Lincoln wrote his law partner: "I just take up my pen to say that Mr. Stephens, of Georgia, a little, slim, pale-faced, consumptive man ... has just concluded the very best speech of an 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."

Stephens later said of Lincoln: "I was as intimate with him as with any other man of that Congress except perhaps one ... Mr. Lincoln was warm-hearted; he was generous; he was magnanimous; he was most truly 'with malice toward none, with charity for all.'" The Georgia Whig recalled: "Mr. Lincoln ... always attracted the riveted attention of the House when he spoke; his manner of speech as well as thought was original. He had



no model. He was a man of strong convictions, and ... an earnest man."

Lincoln and Stephens, together with several other Whig Congressmen, were known as the "Young Indians" in their early support of the 1848 presidential candidacy of Gen. Zachary Taylor. Ironically, Taylor was a hero of the Mexican-American War, which both Stephens and Lincoln opposed. After Taylor was elected, Stephens claimed: "It was I ... who made him president."

Stephens never lacked for ego and in 1854 he would also claim to be the driving force in House passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Stephens gravitated to the Democratic leadership of Illinois Sen. Stephen A. Douglas, who drafted the Kansas-Nebraska legislation. In 1860, Stephens would support Douglas against Lincoln for president.

Seventeen days after Presi-

dent Lincoln's 1861 inauguration, Stephens spoke in Savannah, Ga. Lincoln's inaugural speech was crafted and reworked for public consumption in both the North and South, but Stephens' extemporaneous speech was designed only for a Southern audience. In his remarks, the new Confederate vice president downplayed states' rights and emphasized the rights of slaveowners and described racial inequality as the "cornerstone" of the Confederacy.

Stephens declared: "Our new government is founded ... 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. This, our new government, is the first in the history of the world, based upon this great physical and moral truth."

Stephens created a stark di-

viding line between the U.S. Constitution and that of the Confederacy. Lincoln scholar Harry V. Jaffa wrote of the Cornerstone speech that "no utterance of the time reveals more fully the inner truth about the impending conflict."

Stephens's ideas contrasted sharply with Lincoln's belief in the equality principle of the Declaration of Independence.

In February 1865, Stephens and Lincoln met once last time in an abortive peace conference at Hampton Roads, Va. A month later, Lincoln delivered his second inaugural address.

He declared that all knew slavery was somehow the cause of the Civil War, now near its end: "One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the Southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war."

Lincoln concluded: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan - to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."

That Lincoln bore no malice was affirmed when Stephens received a note that Lincoln had written months before his assassination. The president had paroled Stephens' nephew from a Union prison. Lincoln wrote to Stephens that he should arrange the parole of a Union "officer of the same rank, imprisoned at Richmond, whose physical condition most urgently requires his release."

Stephens recalled: "I almost wept when I saw it." By then, Richmond had fallen and President Lincoln was dead.

Lewis E. Lehrman is chairman of the Lincoln Institute ([www.abrahamlincoln.org](http://www.abrahamlincoln.org)) and author of "Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point."