

Lincoln's Secession Crisis, and Ours

By Matthew Pinsker



WEDNESDAY, APRIL 27 • 4:30 P.M. • DENNY 317

Join the History department and the History Majors Committee for the 2021-22 Whitfield Bell Lecture. This year's lecture will be delivered by Matthew Pinsker, Professor of History and Pohanka Chair in American Civil War History.

Sponsored by the Department of History and the History Majors Committee

The Non-Interference Pledge

March 4, 1861

“I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so.”



US Capitol building, March 4, 1861

Defining Union

March 4, 1861

“Plainly the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy. A majority held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitations, and always changing easily with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments, is the only true sovereign of a free people. Whoever rejects it does of necessity fly to anarchy or to despotism. Unanimity is impossible.”



US Capitol building, March 4, 1861

Framing the War

May 7, 1861

“We must settle this question now, whether in a free government the minority have the right to break up the government whenever they choose. If we fail it will go far to prove the incapability of the people to govern themselves.”



John Nicolay, Abraham Lincoln, John Hay

Holding the Cards

May 7, 1861

“There may be one consideration used in stay of such final judgement, but that is not for us to use in advance. That is, that there exists in our case, an instance of a vast and far reaching disturbing element, which the history of no other free nation will probably ever present. That however is not for us to say at present. Taking the government as we found it, we will see if the majority can preserve it.”



John Nicolay, Abraham Lincoln, John Hay

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Then and Now

“I now have a high degree of confidence that we shall succeed, if we are not over-run with fraudulent votes to a greater extent than usual.”

--Abraham Lincoln to Norman Judd, November 20, 1858



Independent State Legislature Doctrine

Article I, Section 4

“The Times, Places and Manner of holding Elections for Senators and Representatives, ***shall be prescribed in each State by the Legislature*** thereof; but the Congress may at any time by Law make or alter such Regulations, except as to the Places of choosing Senators.”

Article II, Section 1

“Each State shall appoint, in such Manner ***as the Legislature thereof may direct***, a Number of Electors, equal to the whole Number of Senators and Representatives to which the State may be entitled in the Congress...”

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