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Did the South Have the Right to Secede?

When Abraham Lincoln began his first term as president on March 4, 1861, seven Southern states had already voted to secede from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America.

The Confederacy's president, Jefferson Davis, had taken office earlier, on February 18, 1861. Each man's inauguration address presented a different view on whether any state had the right to secede.

SS.8.A.1.1, SS.8.A.1.6, SS.8.A.1.7

YES

Our present position . . . illustrates the American idea that government rests upon the consent of the governed, and that it is the right of the people to alter or abolish a government whenever it becomes destructive of the ends for which it was established. The declared purpose of the compact of Union from which we have withdrawn was to 'establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, to provide for the common defence, to promote the general welfare, and to secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity'; and when in the judgment of the sovereign States now comprising this Confederacy it [no longer meets] the purposes for which it was ordained, and ceased to answer the ends for which it was established, a peaceful appeal to the ballot box declared that, so far as they are concerned, the government created by that compact should cease to exist. In this they merely asserted a right which the Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1776, defined to be inalienable."

—Jefferson Davis

NO

The [president] derives all his authority from the people, and they have referred none upon him to fix terms for the separation of the States. The people themselves can do this if also they choose, but the executive as such has nothing to do with it. His duty is to administer the present government as it came to his hands and to transmit it unimpaired by him to his successor. . .

. . . The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

—Abraham Lincoln