

DEBATE OVER SECESSION IN GEORGIA AND THE ROLE OF ALEXANDER STEPHENS

After Lincoln's election, talk of **secession** (the act of pulling out of the Union) and war swirled around every barbecue, quilting bee, and picnic. Wherever Georgians gathered in a group, passionate debates took place. For eighty-four years, the nation had lived with the concept of a union of all states. Now southerners had to deal with questions over the conflict between states' rights and Union rights. Could they believe in the concept of the Union while maintaining a state's right to pass laws for the good of that state rather than to accept laws forced on it by the federal government? There was no easy answer to the question. Georgians were, for the most part, for the Union; however, they were even more strongly for states' rights. Now they were suddenly forced to make a choice, and many households in Georgia found themselves in the midst of a bitter split.

Immediately after the election of Abraham Lincoln as president, Georgia Governor Joseph E. Brown called a legislative session to determine whether a special convention should be held to decide the question of secession. The special session could also suggest that Georgia bide its time and see what South Carolina did. The legislative chamber was buzzing with activity as arguments resounded off the walls and memos and notes were passed back and forth. Speakers rose in quick succession to argue their views. Alexander Stephens of Crawfordville was especially stirring with his arguments against seceding.

"The first question that presents itself is, shall the people of Georgia secede from the Union in consequence of the election of Mr. Lincoln to the Presidency of the United States. My countrymen, I tell you frankly, candidly, and earnestly, that I do not think they ought. In my judgment, the election of no man, constitutionally chosen to that high office, is sufficient cause to justify any State to separate from the Union. It ought to stand by and aid still in maintaining the Constitution of the country. . . .

Whatever fate is to befall this country, let it never be laid to the charge of the people of the South, and especially the people of Georgia, that we were untrue to our national engagements. Let the fault and the wrong rest upon others. If all our hopes are to be blasted, if the Republic is to go down, let us be found to the last moment standing on the deck with the Constitution of the United States waving over heads."

Stephens's speech was interrupted many times by Robert Toombs, who along with Thomas Cobb, strongly supported immediate secession. Other conservative legislators, however, loudly applauded Stephens's pleas for caution. But his eloquence was no match for the fiery leadership of Toombs, Cobb, and Governor Brown. On November 21, 1860, Governor Brown called for a secession convention. Later, after Georgia joined the Confederacy, Alexander Stephens became its vice president.

1. Define “secession.”

2. How were Georgians conflicted over the issue of state’s rights?

3. Despite Alexander Stephen’s pleas, who called for immediate secession?

HENRY MCNEAL TURNER AND BLACK LEGISLATORS

In 1867, African Americans voted for the first time in Georgia. In 1868, they helped elect a Republican governor. They also helped elect twenty-nine African Americans to the Georgia house of representatives and three African Americans to the Georgia senate. Some of those elected were Tunis G. Campbell, Jr., Henry McNeal Turner, and Aaron A. Bradley. However, all of these men were expelled in September 1868 on the grounds that although the constitution had given them the right to vote, it did not specifically give them the right to hold political office.

During Reconstruction, African Americans formed the largest group of southern Republicans, and thousands voted in the new elections to help keep Republicans in power. By the same token, Republican carpetbaggers, along with some agents and many volunteers of the Freedmen's Bureau, worked hard to make African Americans part of the political scene.

Realizing **political empowerment** (the ability to bring about change) for the first time, thousands joined the Union League, which had become the freedmen's political organization. From church meetings to picnics and family gatherings, politics became "the" topic of discussion and debate.

1. What happened in Georgia's government in 1868?

2. Why did black legislators like Henry McNeal Turner get expelled from holding office?

3. What was the political party of the carpetbaggers and Freedman's Bureau?