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SPEECH OF HON. JOHN J. CRITTENDEN,

AT LEXINGTON, KY.

To the People of the 7th Congressional District.

FELLOW CITIZENS—I desire to address you very briefly on subjects connected with our present national difficulties.—But it will not be necessary for me to attempt to retrace the history of the war.—It is written in the memory and engraved on the hearts of our people. I desire only to present to you some general views in relation to it, which will enable me better to explain and you better to understand the course which I have pursued as your representative for the last two years. During that whole period subjects of the deepest interest engaged all minds and hearts, from the fireside of the humblest citizen to the halls of Congress and the council chambers of the President. By a clear understanding of this course of your representative, you will be able to determine for yourselves the propriety of his views. I have endeavored to perform my duty with a heart faithful to your rights and your honor, but you shall be the judge of my success.

I have changed no opinion that I know of, during the varying circumstances and in the fearful necessities of this war.—Men may well change their opinions when circumstances change as they have done so often during the past two years; and he is not a wise man, nor an expedient one, who does not imply circumstances and guide himself by them to some extent, always, however, being true to principle. I saw the rise of this rebellion, but I could hardly realize the fact that civil war was to come in this form upon us, nor could you. The idea was strange to the American mind, that treason or rebellion, could exist against a government so free and popular as ours. Who was there, we thought, to rebel against the people? In all other revolutions it is the people who have revolted against the Government; but here, it would seem, there could be no civil war of revolt, unless it was against the people themselves. But so it was.—I did what I could to prevent it; and, if the proposition I offered had been accepted, I think I may say with confidence there would have been no war, and I should have had the satisfaction of believing that I had done something in the way of saving my country from its greatest calamity; but that honor was not reserved for me, nor that blessing for my country. The compromise was rejected; the rebellion and the war followed. It was a rebellion without just cause; so I then thought, and so I still think. The Administration up to that time, Mr. Lincoln, having been inaugurated, had done nothing of injustice to any section, or State, or individual. Throughout this great land no single individual could be pounted out, to whom the Government had done injustice; no man from whom the Government had taken property, or whose liberties had been encroached upon; nor no man who had been unjustly imprisoned.

Upon what, then, was the rebellion founded? Lincoln had been elected, and with him came into power those who had elected him, principally from those who favored abolition. Upon this single fact they founded an apprehension that the new President and new Administration, with the Congress elected, would use their power for the purpose of abolishing slavery and despoiling them of their rights. Upon this apprehension they set to work to involve their country in the certain calamities of this tragic war. Was a mere apprehension a sufficient ground for such a proceeding? Is war, with all its calamities, to be resorted to because men apprehend some danger may come upon them? There ought to be the most solid and convincing reasons, and a certainty of actual mischief, in order to justify such a resort to arms. It is one of terror and desolation, of vice and crime of every sort; and before a resort to such a remedy they ought to know that danger was positively certain and the remedy sure. Apprehension was not sufficient. It was simply the apprehension that Congress might, in the course of its legislative action, abolish the institution of slavery. What ground was there for such an apprehension? They could only imagine that it was the wish of a certain party to do what they feared. But that very party had engaged, in its platform upon which Lincoln was elected, that the constitutional provision in regard to the right of slavery in the slave States, should be recognized; that slavery should not be interfered with by Congress. Another thing that rendered this apprehension unreasonable is this: if they (Southern Senators) had retained their seats it would have been physically and mentally impossible for Lincoln and his friends in Congress, ever to have passed such a measure. [Applause.] Thus you see that, both constitutionally and naturally, there was an impossibility that the apprehension which they pretend to entertain, should be realized. No such danger could have approached them. But this apprehension was industriously circulated through the South, and the people were stirred up against the Government to such a high degree, that violence violence against it broke out, and from that day to this we have had the bloodiest this side dead and greatest of all wars—the most momentous in its consequences, for on the result of this war hangs the stability of the greatest Government the world has known. It involves, to a mighty extent, the destiny of mankind, the liberty and welfare of the human race.

In the presence of these momentous consequences, I have endeavored to act in manner worthy of my constituents, and worthy of my country. Of course I was for the war. What war could be more just? Here was a rebellion raising its fratricidal hand against the Government—against the most peaceable, happy and prosperous people that the sun ever shone upon. In the midst of all our blessings, which were indative of Heaven's high favor, as though recognizing the divinity of free government, suddenly there arises, not a foreign enemy, not an alien, jealous of our own prosperity and greatness; but our own brethern arise, with arms in their hands, ready to tear us to pieces, and avowed their purpose to overthrow our Government and our liberties and set us adrift again upon the wide ocean of experiment. Where could we ever hope to find a better Government? Where could we ever hope to find men more competent to true to the people than those who made this Government of ours? Who is to supply, in these latter days, the place of Washington, the place of Madison, the place of Jefferson, the place of Chief Justice Marshall, the place of Alexander Hamilton? Who shall supply the places of these mighty intellects? Are the demagogues of the present equal to the task? They are ready to attempt it and believe that, if you would give them a chance, they could, before another morning's sun, produce a constitution and form of government much better than that of Washington and the many other great men of his time, who took weeks and months to make perfect the one we inherited from them.

Now, how could I, a native born Kentuckian, be otherwise than for the war to defend and preserve this glorious Government of ours against the rebellion? I was for the war, and have been a supporter of the war all the time. But I wanted to see nothing ignoble in this contest. I thought that a plain, straightforward, manly way, would be the best in putting down the rebellion. I wanted no indirection. I looked upon it as a national contest, and desired to see all party feeling abandoned. It was a war of defense on your part. God had given you an inheritance greater than any vouchsafed to any other nation; and should you basely surrender it without a struggle, saying to the rebels, "take it and do as you please with it." That would have been ignominious—the like of which never was heard of in history. It was for the preservation of our Government and our territory, and we should pursue it, regardless of cost and sacrifice. These were my sentiments, and I thought we should pursue the war as a national object, with no mean party scheming. I would have regarded any man who should attempt to divide the people on party questions as a malefactor, and treated him as such. Entertaining these views, yet with some apprehension that, in the shock of war, there might be some revival of ancient party feeling that would lead to the use of this war for other purposes than that for which alone it ought to be prosecuted, the effect of which would be to divide our people, I offered a resolution, for the purpose of clearly defining the object of the war, to the end that neither Whigs, Abolitionists nor Democrats should deviate from it for party purposes. Congress adopted this resolution by an unexampled majority. Thus the course of the war seemed to be marked out. It should not be prosecuted for the accomplishment of any sectional purpose, to subvert the interest of any State or the institutions of any of the States. They shall remain unmolested. The whole object of the war should be to re establish the Constitution and the Union. To this course Congress was pledged, and I thought that I had done a good thing. Neither Abolitionists, Democrats nor Whigs should trouble us with the introduction of any of their peculiar claims. We had the nation to fight for, and not party dogmas.

But, my resolution proved ineffective. My apprehensions that the shock of war might change the national feelings of Congress, were verified. Still, I was for the war. Notwithstanding the Confiscation Act, notwithstanding the Emancipation Proclamation and the emancipation laws, notwithstanding the policy of raising negro armies, and the talk about negro equality with white men as soldiers—and I voted against them all—notwithstanding their adoption, I have still advocated the prosecution of the war. While the rebellion was before me, while the great enemy of my country was before me, I was still for the war; without an armistice, regardless of foreign intervention—fighting all the time for a compromise, till all hope of it is put down. I was dissatisfied with the policy of the Administration. I thought it my duty to tell Congress and the Government that we thought these measures were impolitic and unconstitutional. But still, it was our duty to fight the rebellion; it was the greatest danger, and it was right in our faces. Our Constitution and laws might all be violated or suspended; it would be of no use to stop to talk. After the war is over, the people may, in their wisdom, correct the errors and repair the mischief, and prevent further encroachments on the Constitution and their rights. This is my opinion, and I am free to express it, as I feel free to express every other sentiment or conviction of my mind.

I am, therefore, for the prosecution of the war until it shall have accomplished its end. To the dissolution of this Union, I never will subscribe. I am an old man, and could scuffle out the few remaining days of my life without being compelled to sanction a proposition for the dismemberment of the Union; but, notwithstanding, from principle, for the perpetuation of free government, I would prosecute the war as long as there is a rebel in arms, threatening that Government, and threatening Kentucky especially. The rebel Government claims Kentucky as its own, because some of her recreant sons have gone into its service. Yes, the rebels say, we will have Kentucky anyhow, it isn't worth while for her to struggle. You have therefore, something more than a general interest in this war; you have a particular one. The South wants you; you have a rich country, and are prosperous; you can pay taxes; you are a soldier-like, fighting people, and if they can conquer you, you may be made to serve them well. What Kentuckian will not say, the war shall be prosecuted to the last extremity by those who were born in "the land of fair women and brave men? [Great Cheers.] I tell you, the rebellion never shall, never can subjugate you, if you are determined they shall not. [Applause.]

Now, it is proposed by some, in their anger against the Government, for violating its pledge in that resolution to which I have referred, to resist it—by what? By refusing to fight the rebellion—by refusing to give money or men for the prosecution of the war? Will that better the matter? Will that course save you, and save the glorious country and Government? If you offer no resistance, you surrender to it, and lose your manhood. But if you fight it out, we can easily repair all the damage which the people, in their judgment, may think has been committed on the Constitution and the laws. I hope to live to see this done. I hope to see it done in a manner worthy of a great nation—not by a mob, or with any violence. I want to see it done in accordance with those forms of law that will give it dignity hereafter. A wise man must regulate and reconcile his duties, and discharge them all in the best order he can. Admit that it is our duty to see that these encroachments upon our liberties are corrected, that no bad precedents may be left for justifying future encroachments. That is one duty. But here is the rebellion, with the sword uplifted; is it not our duty to save our country first, and then turn around and save the Constitution? [Great applause.] The measures to which I have alluded are obnoxious, but the rebellion is more so. [Still great applause.]

My countrymen, the great issue, and the greatest issue that the events of this world ever brought about, is the preservation of the country entire. You have the greatest country and the greatest government the world ever saw in a country, springing up in a manner that astonishes and awes the civilized world; and to put down this rebellion is necessary to its preservation. Shall we do it? Shall we, the sons of revolutionary sires, shrink from a war, even with our own brethren, when it is necessary in order to maintain our rights, our liberties, and our country? I want to make no opposition to these measures, obnoxious as they are, inconsistent with my hostility and determination to overthrow the rebellion. That comes first, and must receive immediate attention. I am not a man that has ever indulged in clamors and seditious policy; I am not a man to give way to virulent, personal feeling; I have never forgotten proper decorum towards those in authority. The President I believe to be a man a well meaning and excellent man; and it is not by denouncing his views, it is not by the language of passion and reproach that errors in public affairs can be righted, and the Government conducted successfully. Neither on this nor any other occasion has it been my habit to make an outcry and clamor; but when usurpations of power are made dangerous, and when encroachment upon my liberty and the liberty of my constituents, and upon the Constitution intended to guard the liberties of us all, are made, I would have every man have spirit enough to declare his opinions and offer his protests. Without this freedom of speech there can be no lasting liberty; the Republic cannot exist. If every man should close his lips, and not venture even a word against violated rights, who could maintain a free Government? Nobody. A people who cannot discuss the public measures of the nation, and apply the necessary rebuke to secure correction of wrongs, can not be a free people, and do not deserve to be. But it is not necessary that it be done with passion. You are a portion of the people of the United States; act in a manner becoming your high character. Sedition does not become it; clamor does not become it. Action, at the proper time, and in the proper manner, according to legal and constitutional provision, is what we want, and what the world has a right to expect.

The question now before us is simply this: Are you for the country and the Government? I am. As for the little party scheming about emancipation and negro equality, I am opposed to it. But still I am for the war, since the war is clearly necessary to save the country and the Constitution, in which and under which alone these errors can be corrected. This war was unexpected; it was a new subject for the thoughts of our people.—Who could see his way clear through this night of storm? The wisest man could only feel, and cautiously plan, and advance step by step. He had a Union to save, and it became him to move cautiously; and he who, under such circumstances, would give way to his own personal presumption and folly, and endeavor to make use of the great catastrophe to accomplish little party or sectional purposes, comes far short of his duty. I have endeavored to avoid this weakness; how far I have succeeded, you, my friends must be the judges.

I have no anxiety about returning to Congress. I would not sacrifice a hair's breadth of any of the opinions I have given you for a dozen seats in Congress. I am too much of a Kentuckian, and have seen too much of Congress for that. In pursuance of these principles, I voted against the bill for enrolling the militia. When it was called up on its passage, I asked, is it the intention of this bill to require that the slaves of my constituents shall be enrolled in the militia, and that free negroes shall thus be enrolled also? It seems to be the intention of the amendment provisions [illegible] slaves shall [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]