

**SPEECH OF MR. LINCOLN, OF
ILLINOIS, ON THE REFERENCE OF
THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE: IN THE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 14, 1848**

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Speech of Mr. Lincoln, of Illinois, on the Reference of the President's Message: In the House of Representatives, Wednesday, January 14, 1848 by Abraham Lincoln

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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1848.

SPEECH.

The House being in Committee of the Whole, proceeded to the consideration of the Annual Message of the President of the United States, and the resolutions referring the same to various appropriate Committees.

MR. LINCOLN, of Illinois, addressed the Committee as follows :

MR. CHAIRMAN :

Some, if not all, the gentlemen on the other side of the House, who have addressed the committee within the last two days, have spoken rather complainingly, if I have rightly understood them, of the vote given a week or ten days ago, declaring that the war with Mexico was unnecessarily and unconstitutionally commenced by the President. I admit that such a vote should not be given in mere party wantonness, and that the one given is justly censurable, if it have no other or better foundation. I am one of those who joined in that vote; and I did so under my best impression of the *truth* of the case. How I got this impression, and how it may possibly be removed, I will now try to show. When the war began, it was my opinion that all those who, because of knowing too *little*, or because of knowing too *much*, could not conscientiously approve the conduct of the President—in the beginning of it, should, nevertheless, as good citizens and patriots, remain silent on that point, at least till the war should be ended. Some leading democrats, including Ex President Van Buren, have taken this same view, as I understand them; and I adhered to it, and acted upon it, until since I took my seat here; and I think I should still adhere to it, were it not that the President and his friends will not allow it to be so. Besides, the continual effort of the President to argue every silent vote given for supplies into an endorsement of the justice and wisdom of his conduct, besides that singularly candid paragraph in his late message, in which he tells us that Congress, with great unanimity, only two in the Senate and fourteen in the House dissenting, had declared that “by the act of the Republic of Mexico a state of war exists between that Government and the United States;” when the same journals that informed him of this, also informed him that, when that declaration stood disconnected from the question of supplies, sixty-seven in the House, and not fourteen, merely, voted against it; besides this open attempt to prove, by telling the *truth*, what he could not prove by telling the *whole truth*, demanding of all who will not submit to be misrepresented, in justice to themselves, to speak out; besides all this, one of my colleagues, (Mr. RICHARDSON,) at a very early day in the session, brought in a set of resolutions, expressly endorsing the

original justice of the war on the part of the President. Upon these resolutions, when they shall be put on their passage, I shall be *compelled* to vote; so that I cannot be silent if I would. Seeing this, I went about preparing myself to give the vote understandingly, when it should come. I carefully examined the President's messages, to ascertain what he himself had said and proved upon the point. The result of this examination was to make the impression, that taking for true all the President states as facts, he falls far short of proving his justification; and that the President would have gone farther with his proof, if it had not been for the small matter, that the *truth* would not permit him. Under the impression thus made, I gave the vote before mentioned. I propose now to give, concisely, the process of the examination I made, and how I reached the conclusion I did. The President, in his first message of May, 1846, declares that the soil was *ours* on which hostilities were commenced by Mexico; and he repeats that declaration, almost in the same language, in each successive annual message; thus showing that he esteems that point a highly essential one. In the importance of that point, I entirely agree with the President. To my judgment, it is the *very point* upon which he should be justified or condemned. In his message of December, 1846, it seems to have occurred to him, as is certainly true, that title, ownership to soil, or any thing else, is not a simple fact, but is a conclusion following one or more simple facts; and, that it was incumbent upon him to present the facts from which he concluded the soil was ours, on which the first blood of the war was shed.

Accordingly, a little below the middle of page twelve, in the message last referred to, he enters upon that task, forming an issue and introducing testimony, extending the whole to a little below the middle of page fourteen. Now, I propose to try to show that the whole of this—issue and evidence—is, from beginning to end, the sheerest deception. The issue, as he presents it, is in these words: "But there are those who, conceding all this to be true, assume the ground that the true western boundary of Texas is the Nueces, instead of the Rio Grande; and that, therefore, in marching our army to the east bank of the latter river, we passed the Texan line, and invaded the territory of Mexico." Now this issue is made up of two affirmatives and no negative. The main deception of it is, that it assumes as true that *one* river or the *other* is necessarily the boundary, and cheats the superficial thinker entirely out of the idea, that *possibly* the boundary is somewhere *between* the two, and not actually at either. A further deception is, that it will let in *evidence* which a true issue would exclude. A true issue, made by the President, would be about as follows: "I say the soil was *ours* on which the first blood was shed; there are those who say it was not."

I now proceed to examine the President's evidence, as applicable to such an issue. When that evidence is analyzed, it is all included in the following propositions:

1. That the Rio Grande was the western boundary of Louisiana, as we purchased it of France in 1803.

2. That the republic of Texas always *claimed* the Rio Grande as her western boundary.

3. That, by various acts, she had claimed it *on paper*.

4. That Santa Anna, in his treaty with Texas, recognised the Rio Grande as her boundary.

5. That Texas *before*, and the United States *after* annexation, had *exercised* jurisdiction *beyond* the Nueces, *between* the two rivers.

6. That our Congress *understood* the boundary of Texas to extend beyond the Nueces.

Now for each of these in its turn:

His first item is, that the Rio Grande was the western boundary of Louisiana, as we purchased it of France in 1803; and, seeming to expect this to be disputed, he argues over the amount of nearly a page to prove it true; at the end of which he lets us know that, by the treaty of 1819, we sold to Spain the whole country, from the Rio Grande eastward to the Sabine. Now, admitting, for the present, that the Rio Grande was the boundary of Louisiana, what, under Heaven, had that to do with the *present* boundary between us and Mexico? How, Mr. Chairman, the line that once divided your land from mine can *still* be the boundary between us *after* I have sold my land to you, is, to me, beyond all comprehension. And how any man, with an honest purpose only of proving the truth, could ever have *thought* of introducing such a fact to prove such an issue, is equally incomprehensible. The outrage upon common *right*, of seizing as our own what we have once sold, merely because it *was* ours *before* we sold it, is only equalled by the outrage on common *sense* of any attempt to justify it. His next piece of evidence is, that "the republic of Texas always *claimed* this river (Rio Grande) as her western boundary." That is not true, in fact. Texas *has* claimed it, but she has not *always* claimed it. There is, at least, one distinguished exception. Her State constitution, the republic's most solemn and well considered act, that which may, without impropriety, be called her last will and testament, revoking all others, makes no such claim. But suppose she had *always* claimed it. Has not Mexico always claimed the contrary? So that there is but *claim* against *claim*, leaving nothing proved until we get back of the claims, and find which has the better *foundation*.

Though not in the order in which the President presents his evidence, I