

Cotton Is King

A Speech by Louis T. Wigfall

Born in South Carolina, Louis T. Wigfall moved to Texas in 1846 and entered the Texas Congress in 1850. Elected to the U.S. Senate in 1859, Wigfall quickly became known for fiery speeches favoring secession. Like others, he thought Europe would come to the aid of the South in case of war. He made this speech on December 6, 1860. In March the following year, Texas seceded.

I say that cotton is king, and that he waves his scepter¹ not only over these thirty-three States, but over the island of Great Britain and over continental Europe. . . . There are five million people in Great Britain who live upon cotton. You may make a short crop of grain, and it will never affect them; but you may cram their granaries² to bursting, you may cram them until the corn actually is lifting the shingles from the roofs of their barns, and exhaust the supply of cotton for one week and all England is starving. . . .

We shall never again make less than five million bales. I know that Senators on the other side suppose that when “this glorious Union” is disrupted it will be in blood, and that our negroes will rise in insurrection. We understand it well enough to make the experiment, and I say to Senators upon that side that next year they will see the negroes working as quietly and as contentedly as if their masters were not leaving that country for a foreign land, as they did a few years ago when they were called upon to visit the Republic of Mexico [to fight in the War with Mexico]. We understand that question.

Five million bales of cotton, each bale worth fifty dollars at least—fifty-four dollars was the average price of cotton last year—give us an export of \$250,000,000 per annum, counting not rice, or tobacco, or any other article of produce. Two hundred and fifty million [dollars in] exports will bring into our own borders—not through Boston and New York and Philadelphia, but through our own ports—\$250,000,000 of imports; and forty per cent [tax] upon that puts into our treasury \$100,000,000. Twenty per cent gives us \$50,000,000. What tariff we shall adopt, as a war tariff, I expect to discuss in a few months, and in another Chamber.

You suppose that numbers constitute the strength of government in this day. I tell you that it is not

blood; it is the military chest;³ it is the almighty dollar. When you have lost your market; . . . will you go to direct taxation? Burn down a factory that yields ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five thousand dollars a year to its owner and he goes to the wall. Dismiss the operatives,⁴ stop the motion of his machinery, and he is as thoroughly broken as if his factory were burnt; for the time he is bankrupt.⁵

These are matters for your consideration. I know that you do not regard us as in earnest. I would save this Union if I could; but it is my deliberate impression that it cannot now be done. . . .

Your . . . conflict is. . . that this is a consolidated⁶ Government; that there are no States. . . . This is the fatal error. If you could have seen it in time much of this difficulty would have been avoided. We see and we know and we feel that you are administering⁷ this Government upon the idea that there is but one single State or nation, and that you, under these impressions, believe that you are responsible for the domestic institutions of all the other States.

Review Questions

1. What product will Great Britain “starve” without, according to Wigfall? Why?
2. Does Wigfall think the federal government or the states should have more power?

Critical Thinking

3. **Making Inferences** What does Wigfall mean by saying “cotton is king”?
4. **Identifying the Main Idea** What element did Wigfall think was most essential for winning a war, and where would the South get it?