

Transcription

"This Conference must act"

Mr. PRESIDENT, my heart is full! I cannot approach the great issues with which we are dealing with becoming coolness and deliberation! Sir, I love this Union. The man does not live who entertains a higher respect for this Government than I do. I know its history—I know how it was established. There is not an incident in its history that is not precious to me. I do not wish to survive its dissolution. My hand or voice was never raised against it. They never will be. The union is as dear to me as to any living man; and it would be pleasant, indeed, if my mind to-day could be as free from fear and anxiety about it, as the minds of other gentlemen appear to be. But, Sir, I cannot shut my eyes to events which are daily transpiring among a people who are excited and anxious, who are apprehensive that their rights are in danger—who are solicitous for—who will do as much to preserve their rights as any people. They must be calmed and quieted. It is useless now to tell them they have no cause for fear. They are looking to this Conference. This conference must act. If it does not, I almost fear to contemplate the prospect that will open before us.

Sir! this Conference has now been in session fifteen days. While I have felt reluctant to do any thing which should have the appearance of precipitating our action, of cutting off or limiting debate, I have all the time been pressed with this conviction; that if we are to save this country we must act speedily. I have been in constant communication with the people of Virginia since I have been here. I know that this feeling of apprehension which existed when I came away, has been constantly increasing in my State since; and even last night I received letters from members of the Convention now in session in Richmond; gentlemen who are as true to this Union as the needle to the pole informing me that every hour of *delay* in this Conferences was an hour of *danger*. . . .

I feared when the result was announced, that the late election in Virginia of the delegates to the Convention now in session, would be misapprehended and misunderstood at the North; that the North would regard it as a triumph of the Union sentiment in Virginia. In one sense it was such a triumph. The advocates of immediate and unconditional secession were defeated, were defeated by a heavy majority.



Transcription

But the members comprising that Convention represent the true feeling of the people who elected them, and they represent the present feeling of Virginia. The people of that State are full of anxiety. They fear that the new administration has designs which it will carry into execution, fatal to their rights and interests. They are for the Union, *provided* their rights can be secured; provided, they can have proper and honorable guarantees. It is useless to discuss now whether they are right or wrong. Such is the condition of affairs now, and it is too late to enter into the causes with produced it. We must deal with things as they are.

Citation: Excerpts from speech of George William Summers in the national Peace Conference in Washington, D.C., on February 19, 1861, printed in L. E. Chittenden, *A Report of the Debates and Proceedings in the Secret Sessions of the Conference Convention, for Proposing Amendments to the Constitution of the United States, Held at Washington, D.C., in February, A.D. 1861* (New York, 1864), 151, 153–154.