

Alexander H. Stephens,
"The Honor of this Country"

Speech Before the United States House of Representatives,

2 February 1848

[Excerpts]

The honor of this country does not and cannot require us to force and compel the people of any other to sell theirs. I have, I trust, as high a regard for national honor as any man. It is the brightest gem in the chaplet of a nation's glory; and there is nothing of which I am prouder than the high character for honor this country has acquired throughout the civilized world -- that code of honor which was established by Washington and the men of the Revolution and which rests upon truth, justice, and honesty, which is the offspring of virtue and integrity, and which is seen in the length and breadth of our land, in all the evidences of art, and civilization, and moral advancement, and everything that tends to elevate, dignify, and ennoble man. This is the honor of my admiration, and it is made of "sterner," purer, nobler "stuff" than that aggressive and degrading, yea, odious principle now avowed of waging war against a neighboring people to compel them to sell their country. Who is here so base as to be willing, under any circumstances, to sell his country? For myself, I can only say, if the last funeral pile of liberty were lighted, I would mount it and expire in its flames before I would be coerced by any power however great and strong, to sell or surrender the land of my home, the place of my nativity, and the graves of my sires! Sir, the principle is not only dishonorable, but infamous.

As the Representative upon this floor of a high-minded and honorable constituency, I repeat, that the principle of waging war against a neighboring people to compel them to sell their country, is not only dishonorable, but disgraceful and infamous. What! shall it be said that American honor aims at nothing higher than land -- than the ground on which we tread? Do we look no higher, in our aspirations for honor, than do the soulless brutes? Shall we disavow the similitude of our Maker, and disgrace the very name of man? Tell it not to the world. Let not such an aspersion and reproach rest upon our name. I have heard of nations whose honor could be satisfied with gold -- that glittering dust which is so precious in the eyes of some -- but

never did I expect to live to see the day when the Executive of this country would announce that our honor was such a loathsome, beastly thing, that it could not be satisfied with any achievements in arms, however brilliant and glorious, but must feed on earth -- gross, vile dirt! -- and require even a prostrate foe to be robbed of mountain rocks and desert plains!

SOURCE: Excerpted and reprinted in Roy P. Basler, editor, *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1946), pages 215-216.