

## Speech at Macon, Georgia<sup>1</sup>

September 23, 1864

Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends and Fellow-Citizens: --

It would have gladdened my heart to have met you in prosperity instead of adversity - But friends are drawn together in adversity. The son of a Georgian, who fought through the first Revolution, I would be untrue to myself if I should forget the State in her day of peril.

What, though misfortune has befallen our arms from Decatur to Jonesboro', our cause is not lost. Sherman cannot keep up his long line of communication, and retreat sooner or later, he must. And when that day comes, the fate that befell the army of the French Empire and its retreat from Moscow will be repeated. Our cavalry and our people will harass and destroy his army as did the Cossacks that of Napoleon, and the Yankee General, like him will escape with only a body guard.

How can this be the most speedily effected? By the absentees of Hood's army returning to their posts And will they not? Can they see the banished exiles, can they hear the wail of their suffering country-women and children, and not come. By what influences they are made to stay away, it is not necessary to speak. If there is one who will stay away at this hour, he is unworthy of the name of a Georgian. To the women no appeal is necessary. They are like the Spartan mothers of old. I know of one who had lost all her sons, except one of eight years. She wrote me that she wanted me to reserve a place for him in the ranks. The venerable Gen. Polk, to whom I read the letter, knew that woman well, and said that it was characteristic of her. But I will not weary you by turning aside to relate the various incidents of giving up the last son to the cause of our country known to me. Wherever we go we find the heart and hands of our noble women enlisted. They are seen wherever the eye may fall, or step turn. They have one duty to perform - to buoy up the hearts of our people.

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<sup>1</sup> The Papers of Jefferson Davis, Volume 11, pp. 61-63. Transcribed from the Macon Telegraph, Sept. 24, 1864.

I know the deep disgrace felt by Georgia at our army falling back from Dalton to the interior of the State, but I was not of those who considered Atlanta lost when our army crossed the Chattahoochee. I resolved that it should not, and I then put a man in command who I knew would strike an honest and manly blow for the city, and many a Yankee's blood was made to nourish the soil before the prize was won.

It does not become us to revert to disaster. "Let the dead bury the dead." Let us with one arm and one effort endeavor to crush Sherman. I am going to the army to confer with our Generals. The end must be the defeat of our enemy It has been said that I abandoned Georgia to her fate. Shame upon such a falsehood. Where could the author have been when Walker, when Polk, and when Gen. Stephen D. Lee was sent to her assistance. Miserable man. The man who uttered this was a scoundrel. He was not a man to save our country.

If I knew that a General did not possess the right qualities to command, would I not be wrong if he was not removed? Why, when our army was falling back from Northern Georgia, I even heard that I had sent Bragg with pontoons to cross into Cuba. But we must be charitable.

The man who can speculate ought to be made to take up his musket When the war is over and our independence won, (and we will establish our independence,) who will be our aristocracy? I hope the limping soldier. To the young ladies I would say when choosing between an empty sleeve and the man who had remained at home and grown rich, always take the empty sleeve. Let the old men remain at home and make bread. But should they know of any young men keeping away from the service who cannot be made to go any other way, let them write to the Executive. I read all letters sent me from the people, but have not the time to reply to them.

You have not many men between 18 and 45 left. The boys - God bless the boys - are as rapidly as they become old enough going to the field. The city of Macon is filled with stores, sick and wounded. It must not be abandoned, when threatened, but when the enemy come, instead of calling upon Hood's army for

defence, the old men must fight, and when the enemy is driven beyond Chattanooga, they too can join in the general rejoicing.

Your prisoners are kept as a sort of Yankee capital. I have heard that one of their Generals said that their exchange would defeat Sherman. I have tried every means, conceded everything to effect an exchange to no purpose. Butler the Beast, with whom no Commissioner of Exchange, would hold intercourse, had published in the newspapers that: that if we would consent to the exchange of negroes, all difficulties might be removed. This is reported as an effort of his to get himself whitewashed by holding intercourse with gentlemen. If an exchange could be effected, I don't know but that I might be induced to recognise Butler. But in the future every effort will be given as far as possible to effect the end. We want our soldiers in the field, and we want the sick and wounded to return home.

It is not proper for me to speak of the number of men in the field. But this I will say, that two-thirds of our men are absent - some sick, some wounded, but most of them absent without leave. The man who repents and goes back to his commander voluntarily, at once appeals strongly to executive clemency. But suppose he stays away until the war is over and his comrades return home, when every man's history will be told, where will he shield himself? It is upon these reflections that I rely to make men return to their duty, but after conferring with our Generals at headquarters, if there be any other remedy it shall be applied.

I love my friends and I forgive my enemies. I have been asked to send reinforcements from Virginia to Georgia. In Virginia the disparity in numbers is just as great as it is in Georgia. Then I have been asked why the army sent to the Shenandoah Valley was not sent here? It was because an army of the enemy had penetrated that Valley to the very gates of Lynchburg, and Gen. Early was sent to drive them back. This he not only successfully did, but, crossing the Potomac, came well-nigh capturing Washington itself, and forced Grant to send two corps of his army to protect it. This the enemy denominated a raid. If so, Sherman's march into Georgia is a raid. What would prevent them now, if Early was withdrawn, penetrating down the valley and putting a complete cordon of men

around Richmond? I counselled with that great and grave soldier, Gen. Lee, upon all these points. My mind roamed over the whole field.

With this we can succeed. If one-half the men now absent without leave will return to duty, we can defeat the enemy. With that hope I am going to the front. I may not realize this hope, but I know there are men there who have looked death in the face too often to despond now. Let no one despond. Let no one distrust, and remember that if genius is the beau ideal, hope is the reality.

The President then alluded to the objects for which the meeting had assembled, and expressed the hope that the refugees and exiles would be well provided for.