Inaugural Address (March 4, 1853)

Franklin Pierce

My Countrymen:

It is a relief to feel that no heart but my own can know the personal regret and bitter sorrow over which I have been borne to a position so suitable for others rather than desirable for myself.

The circumstances under which I have been called for a limited period to preside over the destinies of the Republic fill me with a profound sense of responsibility, but with nothing like shrinking apprehension. I repair to the post assigned me not as to one sought, but in obedience to the unsolicited expression of your will, answerable only for a fearless, faithful, and diligent exercise of my best powers. I ought to be, and am, truly grateful for the rare manifestation of the nation's confidence; but this, so far from lightening my obligations, only adds to their weight. You have summoned me in my weakness; you must sustain me by your strength. When looking for the fulfillment of reasonable requirements, you will not be unmindful of the great changes which have occurred, even within the last quarter of a century, and the consequent augmentation and complexity of duties imposed in the administration both of your home and foreign affairs.

Whether the elements of inherent force in the Republic have kept pace with its unparalleled progression in territory, population, and wealth has been the subject of earnest thought and discussion on both sides of the ocean. Less than sixty-four years ago the Father of his Country made "the" then "recent accession of the important State of North Carolina to the Constitution of the United States" one of the subjects of his special congratulation. At that moment, however, when the agitation consequent upon the Revolutionary struggle had hardly subsided, when we were just emerging from the weakness and embarrassments of the Confederation, there was an evident consciousness of vigor equal to the great mission so wisely and bravely fulfilled by our fathers. It was not a presumptuous assurance, but a calm faith, springing from a clear view of the sources of power in a government constituted like ours. It is no paradox to say that although comparatively weak the new-born nation was intrinsically strong. Inconsiderable in population and apparent resources, it was upheld by a broad and intelligent comprehension of rights and an all-pervading purpose to maintain them, stronger than armaments. It came from the furnace of the Revolution, tempered to the necessities of the times. The thoughts of the men of that day were as practical as their sentiments were patriotic. They wasted no portion of their energies upon idle and delusive speculations, but with a firm and fearless step advanced beyond the governmental landmarks which had hitherto circumscribed the limits of human freedom and planted their standard, where it has stood against dangers which have threatened from abroad, and internal agitation, which has at times fearfully menaced at home. They proved themselves equal to the solution of the great problem, to understand which their minds had been illuminated by the dawning lights of the Revolution. The object sought was not a thing dreamed of; it was a thing realized. They had exhibited only the power to achieve, but, what all history affirms to be so much more unusual, the capacity to maintain. The oppressed throughout the world from that day to the present have turned their eyes hitherward, not to find those lights extinguished or to fear lest they should wane, but to be constantly cheered by their steady and increasing radiance.

In this our country has, in my judgment, thus far fulfilled its highest duty to suffering humanity. It has spoken and will continue to speak, not only by its words, but by its acts, the language of sympathy, encouragement, and hope to those who earnestly listen to tones which pronounce for the largest rational liberty. But after all, the most animating encouragement and potent appeal for freedom will be its own history--its trials and its triumphs. Preeminently, the power of our advocacy reposes in our example; but no example, be it remembered, can be powerful for lasting good, whatever apparent advantages may be gained, which is not based upon eternal principles of right and justice. Our fathers decided for themselves, both upon the hour to declare and the hour to strike. They were their own judges of the circumstances under which it became them to pledge to each other "their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor" for the acquisition of the priceless inheritance transmitted to us. The energy with which that great conflict was opened and, under the guidance of a manifest and beneficent Providence the uncomplaining endurance with which it was prosecuted to its consummation were only surpassed by the wisdom and patriotic spirit of concession which characterized all the counsels of the early fathers.

One of the most impressive evidences of that wisdom is to be found in the fact that the actual working of our system has dispelled a degree of solicitude which at the outset disturbed bold hearts and far-reaching intellects. The apprehension of dangers from extended territory, multiplied States, accumulated wealth, and augmented population has proved to be unfounded. The stars upon your banner have become nearly threefold their original number; your densely populated possessions skirt the shores of the two great oceans; and yet this vast increase of people and territory has not only shown itself compatible with the harmonious action of the States and Federal Government in their respective constitutional spheres, but has afforded an additional guaranty of the strength and integrity of both.

With an experience thus suggestive and cheering, the policy of my Administration will not be controlled by any timid forebodings of evil from expansion. Indeed, it is not to be disguised that our attitude as a nation and our position on the globe render the acquisition of certain possessions not within our jurisdiction eminently important for our protection, if not in the future essential for the preservation of the rights of commerce and the peace of the world. Should they be obtained, it will be
through no grasping spirit, but with a view to obvious national interest and security, and in a manner entirely consistent with
the strictest observance of national faith. We have nothing in our history or position to invite aggression; we have everything
to beckon us to the cultivation of relations of peace and amity with all nations. Purposes, therefore, at once just and pacific
will be significantly marked in the conduct of our foreign affairs. I intend that my Administration shall leave no blot upon our
fair record, and trust I may safely give the assurance that no act within the legitimate scope of my constitutional control will be
tolerated on the part of any portion of our citizens which can not challenge a ready justification before the tribunal of the
civilized world. An Administration would be unworthy of confidence at home or respect abroad should it cease to be
influenced by the conviction that no apparent advantage can be purchased at a price so dear as that of national wrong or
dishonor. It is not your privilege as a nation to speak of a distant past. The striking incidents of your history, replete with
instruction and furnishing abundant grounds for hopeful confidence, are comprised in a period comparatively brief. But if your
past is limited, your future is boundless. Its obligations throng the unexplored pathway of advancement, and will be limitless
as duration. Hence a sound and comprehensive policy should embrace not less the distant future than the urgent present.

The great objects of our pursuit as a people are best to be attained by peace, and are entirely consistent with the tranquility
and interests of the rest of mankind. With the neighboring nations upon which our continent we should cultivate kindly and fraternal
relations. We can desire nothing in regard to them so much as to see them consolidate their strength and pursue the paths of
prosperity and happiness. If in the course of their growth we should open new channels of trade and create additional facilities
for friendly intercourse, the benefits realized will be equal and mutual. Of the complicated European systems of national polity
we have heretofore been independent. From their wars, their tumults, and anxieties we have been, happily, almost entirely
exempt. Whilst these are confined to the nations which gave them existence, and within their legitimate jurisdiction, they can
not affect us except as they appeal to our sympathies in the cause of human freedom and universal advancement. But the vast
interests of commerce are common to all mankind, and the advantages of trade and international intercourse must always
present a noble field for the moral influence of a great people.

With these views firmly and honestly carried out, we have a right to expect, and shall under all circumstances require, prompt
reciprocity. The rights which belong to us as a nation are not alone to be regarded, but those which pertain to every citizen in
his individual capacity, at home and abroad, must be sacredly maintained. So long as he can discern every star in its place
upon that ensign, without wealth to purchase for him preferment or title to secure for him place, it will be his privilege, and
must be his acknowledged right, to stand unabashed even in the presence of princes, with a proud consciousness that he is
himself one of a nation of sovereigns and that he can not in legitimate pursuit wander so far from home that the agent whom
he shall leave behind in the place which I now occupy will not see that no rude hand of power or tyrannical passion is laid
upon him with impunity. He must realize that upon every sea and on every soil where our enterprise may rightfully seek the
protection of our flag American citizenship is an inviolable panoply for the security of American rights. And in this connection
it can hardly be necessary to reaffirm a principle which should now be regarded as fundamental. The rights, security, and
repose of this Confederacy reject the idea of interference or colonization on this side of the ocean by any foreign power
beyond present jurisdiction as utterly inadmissible.

The opportunities of observation furnished by my brief experience as a soldier confirmed in my own mind the opinion,
entertained and acted upon by others from the formation of the Government, that the maintenance of large standing armies in
the present jurisdiction as utterly inadmissible.
We have been carried in safety through a perilous crisis. Wise counsels, like those which gave us the Constitution, prevailed to uphold it. Let the period be remembered as an admonition, and not as an encouragement, in any section of the Union, to make experiments where experiments are fraught with such fearful hazard. Let it be impressed upon all hearts that, beautiful as our fabric is, no earthly power or wisdom could ever reunite its broken fragments. Standing, as I do, almost within view of the green slopes of Monticello, and, as it were, within reach of the tomb of Washington, with all the cherished memories of the past gathering around me like so many eloquent voices of exhortation from heaven, I can express no better hope for my country than that the kind Providence which smiled upon our fathers may enable their children to preserve the blessings they have inherited.