

## Chapter Twenty-two

“You Can Have No Conflict Without Being Yourselves the Aggressors”:

The Fort Sumter Crisis (March-April 1861)

One of Lincoln’s greatest challenges was taming his secretary of state. “I can’t afford to let Seward take the first trick,” he told Nicolay in early March.<sup>1</sup> While struggling with the Fort Sumter dilemma, Lincoln had to keep the wily New Yorker, who presumed he would serve as the Grand Vizier of the administration, from taking not just the first trick but the entire rubber. Seward hoped to dominate Lincoln just as he had dominated President Zachary Taylor. Charles Francis Adams Jr., who knew and admired Seward, aptly described the Sage of Auburn’s frame of mind as he settled into his new position as secretary of state: “He thought Lincoln a clown, a clod, and planned to steer him by . . . indirection, subtle maneuvering, astute wriggling and plotting, crooked paths. He would be Prime Minister; he would seize the reins from a nerveless President; keep Lincoln separated from other Cabinet officers – [hold] as few Cabinet meetings as possible; overawe and browbeat Welles and Cameron – get the War Navy and State [departments] really under his own control.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John G. Nicolay and John Hay, Abraham Lincoln: A History (10 vols.; New York: Century, 1890), 3:371.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Francis Adams Jr. to Frederic Bancroft, n.p., 11 October 1911, copy, Allan Nevins Papers, Columbia University.

Seward evidently wished the motto of the administration to be, “The King reigns, but does not govern.”<sup>3</sup> He told a European diplomat that there “exists no great difference between an elected president of the United States and a hereditary monarch. The latter is called to the throne through the accident of birth, the former through the chances which make his election possible. The actual direction of public affairs belongs to the leader of the ruling party here just as in a hereditary principality.”<sup>4</sup> The New Yorker considered himself, not Lincoln, the “leader of the ruling party.” In his own eyes, he was a responsible, knowledgeable, veteran statesman who must guide the naïve, inexperienced Illinoisan toward sensible appointments and policies. Unlike Lincoln, he did not believe that the new administration had to carry out the Republicans’ Chicago platform. At a dinner given by Stephen A. Douglas in February 1861, Seward proposed a toast: “Away with all parties, all platforms, all previous committals, and whatever else will stand in the way of restoration of the American Union.”<sup>5</sup> That same month, Seward told former Kentucky Governor Charles S. Morehead: “if this whole matter is not satisfactorily settled within sixty days after I am seated in the saddle, and hold the reins firmly in my hand, I will give you my head for a football.”<sup>6</sup> Soon thereafter he crowed: “I have built up the Republican party; I have brought it to triumph; but its advent to power is accompanied by great difficulties & perils. I must save the party & save the Government

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<sup>3</sup> New York Tribune, 27 February 1861.

<sup>4</sup> Baron Rudolph Schleiden, minister to the U.S. from the Republic of Bremen, dispatch to his home government, Washington, 18 February 1861, copy, Carl Schurz Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>5</sup> Memorandum by John A. Campbell, n.d., in Henry G. Connor, John Archibald Campbell, Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court, 1853-1861 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1920), 116.

<sup>6</sup> Charles S. Morehead, speech delivered in Liverpool, England, on 9 October 1862, Liverpool Mercury, 13 October 1862, excerpted in David Rankin Barbee and Milledge L. Bonham Jr., eds., “Fort Sumter Again,” Mississippi Valley Historical Review 28 (1941): 66.

in its hands. To do this, war must be averted; the negro question must be dropped; the ‘irrepressible conflict’ ignored; & a Union party, to embrace the border slave States inaugurated. I have already whipped [Virginia Senators James M.] Mason & [R. M. T.] Hunter in their own State. I must crush out [Jefferson] Davis, [Robert] Toombs & their colleagues in sedition in their respective States. Saving the border States to the Union by moderation & justice, the people of the Cotton States, unwillingly led into secession, will rebel against their leaders & reconstruction will follow.”<sup>7</sup>

Charles Sumner, chairman of the senate foreign relations committee, warned Lincoln: “You must watch him [Seward] & overrule him!”<sup>8</sup> A prominent Indiana Republican feared that “Seward and his friends would create the impression that it was his administration! That will not do. The people must be made to understand from the start that Mr. Lincoln is the President in fact, as well as in name.”<sup>9</sup> To control the meddlesome, headstrong, mercurial secretary of state was a Herculean task for the president, eight years his junior and far less politically experienced. Seward naively thought that Southern disaffection could be overcome by clever intrigue and he optimistically declared that the Deep South “will be unable to exist for long as a separate confederation and will return to the Union sooner or later.”<sup>10</sup> He remarked insouciantly

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<sup>7</sup> John Forsyth and Martin J. Crawford to Robert Toombs, dispatch no. 3, Washington, 8 March 1861, copy, Confederate States of America Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Everett journal, 23 August 1861, Everett Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>9</sup> John D. Defrees to Jesse K. Dubois, Indianapolis, 12 November 1860, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>10</sup> Edouard de Stoeckl to Alexander Gortchakov, Washington, 9 April 1861, dispatch 20, photocopy, Principal Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russian Reproductions, Papers of the Foreign Copying Project, Library of Congress; Albert A. Woldman, Lincoln and the Russians (Cleveland: World, 1952), 49.

that “he & all his brothers & sisters seceded from home in early life but they all returned. So would the States.”<sup>11</sup>

#### THE FATEFUL DECISION TO RELIEVE FORT SUMTER

Lincoln wrestled hard with the Fort Sumter crisis. The day after the inauguration he was astounded not only by the news that Major Anderson had a mere six weeks’ worth of supplies left but even more amazed at a letter from General Scott stating that Anderson and his fellow officers “now see no alternative but a surrender, in some weeks, more or less, as they well know that we cannot send the third of the men (regulars) in several months, necessary to give them relief beyond a few weeks, if for a day. Evacuation seems almost inevitable, & in this view, our distinguished Chief Engineer (Brigadier [Joseph G.] Totten) concurs – if, indeed, the worn out garrison be not assaulted & carried in the present week.”<sup>12</sup> (In the two months since Anderson had shifted his base from Fort Moultrie to Fort Sumter, the South Carolinians had surrounded the latter with formidable batteries and were preparing an attack.) The obese, vain, aged general was retreating from his hard-line position of October, when he had urged the reinforcement of forts throughout the South, including those in Charleston harbor.<sup>13</sup> The day before Lincoln’s inaugural, he wrote Seward suggesting that it would be unwise, if not actually impossible, to subdue the South militarily and that it might be best for Lincoln either to endorse the

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Crawford, ed., William Howard Russell’s Civil War: Private Diary and Letters, 1861-1862 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 26.

<sup>12</sup> Remarks of Scott on a letter by Joseph Holt to Lincoln, Washington, 5 March 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>13</sup> Winfield Scott, “Views suggested by the imminent danger,” memorandum, 29 October 1860, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

Crittenden Compromise or else “Say to the seceded States, Wayward sisters, depart in peace!”<sup>14</sup>

Scott’s unsettling about-face was effected by Seward, who had long exercised great influence over the general. Throughout the winter the New Yorker had assiduously cultivated him.<sup>15</sup> Montgomery Blair thought that the general had “fallen into Mr. [Charles Francis] Adams’ error in regarding Mr. Seward as the head of the government, and for this reason surrendered his own better judgment to that of Mr. Seward.”<sup>16</sup>

In his effort to avert war, Seward worked to keep guns from being distributed to Unionists in the Border States. As soon as Lincoln was inaugurated, Maryland Unionists appealed for weapons but Seward thwarted them. Missouri Unionists encountered the same problem, but they managed to procure arms from Illinois. Similarly, when Seward frustrated the Unionists in western Virginia, Massachusetts Governor John A. Andrew provided weaponry from his state’s arsenal.<sup>17</sup>

On March 6, at Lincoln’s request, Scott briefed Welles, Cameron, Seward and other officials. They were astounded when the general reiterated what he had written to Lincoln. Welles and Cameron urged that the administration “take immediate and efficient measures to relieve and reinforce the garrison.” Scott did not express an opinion but pointed out that an earlier attempt to provision the fort had failed and that the batteries surrounding it were formidable. But, he acknowledged, the question was “one for naval

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<sup>14</sup> Scott to Seward, Washington, 3 March 1861, in John Bigelow, ed., Letters and Memorials of Samuel J. Tilden (2 vols.; New York: Harper, 1908), 1:156-57.

<sup>15</sup> Washington correspondence, 21 March, New York Herald, 22 March 1861; Frederic Bancroft, The Life of William H. Seward (2 vols.; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1900), 2:124.

<sup>16</sup> Montgomery Blair to Gideon Welles, Washington, 17 May 1873, Welles Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>17</sup> Montgomery Blair to Gideon Welles, Washington, 22 January 1874, Lincoln Collection, Yale University.

authorities to decide” and suggested that Welles consult with them.<sup>18</sup>

The following day, Lincoln met with this small group at the White House for an informal discussion. Scott and General Totten agreed that it would be impracticable to reinforce the fort. Relying partly on the counsel of Commander James H. Ward, who had studied the matter carefully, Welles and his adviser, Captain Silas Stringham, insisted that the navy could do so. The skeptical Seward offered many suggestions and raised several questions. No conclusions were reached.<sup>19</sup>

On March 9, the full cabinet convened to hear the bad news. “I was astonished to be informed that Fort Sumter must be evacuated,” Bates confided to his diary.<sup>20</sup> That same day, Lincoln asked Scott how long Fort Sumter could hold out, whether he could supply or reinforce the garrison within that time, and what additional means might be needed to accomplish that goal if present means were insufficient. He requested the general to put his answers in writing and to “exercise all possible vigilance for the maintenance of all the places within the military department of the United States; and to promptly call upon all the departments of the government for the means necessary to that end.”<sup>21</sup> Incredibly, Scott ignored that directive.<sup>22</sup> Three days later, the general replied that

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<sup>18</sup> Howard K. Beale and Alan W. Brownsword, eds., Diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy under Lincoln and Johnson (3 vols.; New York, W.W. Norton, 1960), 3-5; Gideon Welles, “Fort Sumter,” The Galaxy 10 (November 1870), in Albert Mordell, comp., Civil War and Reconstruction: Selected Essays by Gideon Welles (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1959), 40-42; John Niven, Gideon Welles, Lincoln’s Secretary of the Navy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 325.

<sup>19</sup> Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 6; Niven, Welles, 325.

<sup>20</sup> Howard K. Beale, ed., The Diary of Edward Bates, 1859-1866 (Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1930, vol. 4; Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1933), 177 (entry for 9 March 1861).

<sup>21</sup> Lincoln to Scott, Washington, 9 March 1861, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 4:279; Nicolay for Lincoln to Scott, Washington, 9 March 1861, in Michael Burlingame, ed., With Lincoln in the White House: Letters, Memoranda, and Other Writings of John G. Nicolay, 1860-1865 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 30.

he "should need a fleet of war vessels and transports, which, in the scattered disposition of the Navy (as understood) could not be collected in less than four months; 5000 additional regular troops, and 20.000 volunteers – that is, a force sufficient to take all the batteries, both in the harbor (including Fort Moultrie) as well as in the approach or outer bay. To raise, organize and discipline such an army (not to speak of necessary legislation by Congress not now in session) would require from six to eight months. As a practical military question, the time for succoring Fort Sumter, with any means at hand had passed away nearly a month ago. Since then, a surrender under assault, or from starvation, has been merely a question of time."<sup>23</sup> On March 11, Scott drafted an order instructing Anderson to evacuate the fort.<sup>24</sup>

Lincoln seriously thought of issuing such an order but hesitated to do so.<sup>25</sup> He may well have been tempted to accept Scott's advice. After all, the general spoke with great authority and the president had no military background. Scott's letter criticized the Buchanan administration for allowing the South Carolinians to surround Fort Sumter with artillery, and Lincoln could plausibly blame the necessity for removing the garrison on his predecessor. But if Lincoln did so think, he did not so act. Instead he asserted his leadership against both Scott and Seward.

Based on leaks, probably from Seward, newspapers reported that the administration would evacuate the fort, thereby touching off a firestorm of indignant

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<sup>22</sup> Nicolay and Hay, Lincoln, 4:22.

<sup>23</sup> Scott to Lincoln, Washington, 12 March 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>24</sup> Winfield Scott to Anderson, Washington, 11 March 1861, draft, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>25</sup> Draft of July 4 message to Congress, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

protest.<sup>26</sup> In Illinois, that rumor “cast gloom over all Republicans.”<sup>27</sup> Lincoln’s good friend William Butler expostulated, “death before disgrace.”<sup>28</sup> Another Republican leader in the Prairie State insisted that “it is of no use (however true it may be) to tell us, we can not keep or retake the public property at the South (‘hold, occupy, and possess.’) We can try. We can shed our treasure and blood in the defence and support of our principles and lawful rights as our Fathers did.” Thousands who had voted for Lincoln stood ready to “cheerfully shoulder their musket and hazard their all in this world in support of the principles for which we contended then. We have compromised and trucked long enough. War is bad. Civil war is worse, but if liberty and the right of the people to govern themselves was worth fighting for in the days of the Revolution, it is worth fighting for now.”<sup>29</sup> The radical abolitionist Parker Pillsbury thought that “the abandonment of Fort Sumner [sic] goes to show that indeed we have no government at all.”<sup>30</sup> According to the secretary of state, who thought the evacuation of the Charleston fort “inevitable,” the “violent remonstrances from the north and east against the abandonment of Fort Sumter, . . . alarmed the President and delayed a decision.”<sup>31</sup>

Montgomery Blair was so angry at the prospect of the removal of the Fort Sumter garrison that he prepared a letter of resignation. He described the cabinet discussions to

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<sup>26</sup> “Proposed Evacuation of Fort Sumter,” New York World, 12 March 1861; Washington correspondence, 10, 11 March, New York Tribune, 11, 12 March 1861; Allan Nevins, The War for the Union (4 vols.; New York: Scribner, 1959-71), 1:43; Stamp, And the War Came: The North and the Secession Crisis, 1860-1861 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), 267-70.

<sup>27</sup> Gustave Koerner to Lyman Trumbull, Belleville, 13 March 1861, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>28</sup> Butler to Trumbull, Springfield, 20 March 1861, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>29</sup> William B. Plato to Trumbull, Geneva, Kane County, Illinois, 29 March 1861, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>30</sup> Pillsbury to Francis Jackson, 13 March 1861, Garrison Papers, Boston Public Library.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Francis Adams diary, 12 March 1861, Adams Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.



his father, who, at the urging of some senators, called on the president to stiffen his backbone. The old man, with vivid memories of Andrew Jackson's forceful crushing of South Carolina's nullifiers in 1832-33, told Lincoln "that the surrender of Fort Sumter, was virtually a surrender of the Union unless under irresistible force – that compounding with treason was treason to the Govt." He added that such a craven move would "lose his Administration irrevocably the public confidence – that submission to secession would be a recognition of its constitutionality." Blair condemned Scott and Seward and warned that the president might be impeached if he followed their counsel. (Blair soon regretted his impetuosity, telling his son: "I may have said things that were impertinent & I am sorry I ventured on the errand.")<sup>32</sup>

Blair's views were held by many Northerners, including a Wall Street attorney who wrote that "one bold Jacksonian stroke of Lincoln would electrify the North & encourage the true friends of the country everywhere." But if "a part of the country is permitted to float off he & all his assistants in such a suicide will be damned to eternal infamy. We all have the most perfect confidence in him. We are willing to bear national disgrace & obloquy till he can turn out the traitors & fill the offices with true men. But no time must be frittered away."<sup>33</sup>

On March 13, at a caucus of Republican senators, it was proposed that they call on Lincoln to demand that Sumter be held. Ben Wade of Ohio said "he never much

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<sup>32</sup> Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 2:248; statement by Montgomery Blair, n.d., paraphrased in Samuel Wylie Crawford, Genesis of the Civil War: The Story of Sumter, 1860-1861 (New York: C. L. Webster, 1887), 364; Francis P. Blair Sr. to Martin Van Buren, Silver Spring, Maryland, 1 May 1861, Van Buren Papers, Library of Congress; William Ernest Smith, The Francis Preston Blair Family in Politics (2 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1933), 2:9-10; Francis P. Blair Sr. to Montgomery Blair, Silver Spring, 12 March 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress. This interview took place before March 12, not on March 29, as some historians have maintained.

<sup>33</sup> Dexter A. Hawkins to John Sherman, New York, 23 March 1861, Sherman Papers, Library of Congress.

believed in total depravity, but in these apostate times he begins to think it is true, and that the Republican party will furnish a striking example of it, being likely to be damned before it is fairly born.”<sup>34</sup> Though the proposal was turned down, word of it leaked to the press and may have affected Lincoln’s eventual decision to resist the advice of Scott and Seward.<sup>35</sup> At the end of the month, Trumbull introduced a resolution stating that it was the president’s duty to enforce the law in the seceded states, a move widely regarded “as a blow leveled at the administration, and intended to intimidate, and if possible force it to change its peace policy.”<sup>36</sup>

Montgomery Blair sought to convince the president that Sumter could be held despite the ring of South Carolina artillery surrounding it. On March 12, he summoned his brother-in-law, Gustavus Fox, a thirty-four-year-old former naval officer who had devised a plan to relieve the fort after consulting with George W. Blunt, an expert on Charleston harbor.<sup>37</sup> The previous month, that plan had won the endorsement of General Scott and other military men, but Buchanan refused to implement it lest he antagonize the newly-formed Confederate government. Fox called for troops and supplies to be carried to the bar of Charleston harbor by a large commercial vessel, then transferred to light, fast tugboats which would convey them to the fort under cover of darkness and with the

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<sup>34</sup> Washington correspondence by Sigma, 13 March, Cincinnati Commercial, 14 March 1861.

<sup>35</sup> Hans L. Trefousse, Benjamin Franklin Wade, Radical Republican from Ohio (New York: Twayne, 1963), 143-44.

<sup>36</sup> Washington correspondence, 28 March, New York Herald, 29 March 1861.

<sup>37</sup> Ari Hoogenboom, “Gustavus Fox and the Relief of Fort Sumter,” Civil War History 9 (1963): 383-97; Ari Hoogenboom, Fox of the Union Navy: A Biography of Gustavus Vasa Fox (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion (30 vols.; Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1894-1922), 4:256; Welles, “Fort Sumter,” in Gideon Welles, Civil War and Reconstruction: Selected Essays, comp. Albert Mordell, (New York: Twayne, 1959), 46; Robert Means Thompson and Richard Wainwright, eds., Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus Vasa Fox, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, 1861-1865 (2 vols.; New York: Printed for the Naval History Society by the De Vinne Press, 1918-19), 1:38.

protection of an accompanying warship.<sup>38</sup> The next day, Blair took the energetic, industrious, and self-assured Fox to White House, where he outlined his scheme to the president.<sup>39</sup>

(Lincoln came to like and admire Fox, a cheerful, buoyant raconteur whose wife's sister was married to Montgomery Blair. Fox thus had a close personal connection to the administration and enjoyed an entrée to the White House, which he often visited. In August 1861, he became assistant secretary of the navy and in effect served as chief of naval operations, working smoothly with Gideon Welles. Lincoln trusted his judgment and often consulted him.)

On the Ides of March, cabinet members assembled for a briefing by Fox. At the meeting, Generals Totten and Scott reiterated their previous objections. The president asked the secretaries to write answers to a simple question: "Assuming it to be possible to now provision Fort-Sumter, under all the circumstances, is it wise to attempt it?"<sup>40</sup> Most of them said it would be unwise to try to resupply the garrison. In a lengthy reply, Seward argued that such an effort would needlessly trigger a civil war, that it was militarily impracticable, that it would accomplish nothing worthwhile, that it would drive the Upper South and Border States into the Confederacy, that the nation could never be made whole again, that a policy of conciliation should be pursued, and that Sumter was militarily unimportant. But he would insist that import duties be collected by ships outside Southern ports, even if it might provoke hostilities. Seward closed melodramatically,

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<sup>38</sup> Crawford, Genesis of the Civil War, 249-51; Thompson and Wainwright, eds., Correspondence of Fox, 1:8-9.

<sup>39</sup> O. R. Navy, 4:256; Welles, "Fort Sumter," Mordell, comp., Civil War and Reconstruction, 46; Charles Oscar Paullin, "President Lincoln and the Navy," American Historical Review 14 (1909): 290.

<sup>40</sup> Lincoln to Seward, Washington, 15 March 1861, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 4:284.

saying: “If this counsel seems to be impassive and even unpatriotic, I console myself by the reflection that it is such as Chatham gave to his country under circumstances not widely different.”<sup>41</sup> (In 1775, William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham, had urged the British government to be forbearing in its dealings with the American colonies, then on the verge of revolt.)<sup>42</sup> Around this time, Seward reportedly said that “he would be thankful if he could feel sure they would not have to defend the capital by arms within six months.”<sup>43</sup>

Bates argued that provisioning the fort would be legal, physically possible, but imprudent; “It may indeed involve a point of honor or a point of pride, but I do not see any great national interest involved in the bare fact of holding the fort.” He feared that if war resulted, it would seem to the world as if the North had provoked it and would lead to unimaginably horrible slave uprisings. He would, however, take a tough stand against any attempt to block the mouth of the Mississippi River and make a show of resolve at the other forts remaining in Union hands, most notably Pickens in Florida.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Welles argued that even though a relief expedition like the one being contemplated might work, the North could be compelled to fire the opening shot and thereby become guilty of shedding the first blood.<sup>45</sup> Cameron said the administration should defer to the military men who denied the feasibility of resupplying the fort.<sup>46</sup> Smith maintained that an expedition should be sent to Charleston only if it were able to bring overwhelming force

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<sup>41</sup> Seward to Lincoln, Washington, 15 March 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>42</sup> On 20 January 1775, Lord Chatham delivered an “address to his Majesty for the immediate removal of his troops from Boston.”

<sup>43</sup> Montgomery Blair heard Seward say this. Henry Winter Davis to Samuel Francis Du Pont, [Washington], 24 March 1861, transcript, S. F. Du Pont Papers, Hagley Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.

<sup>44</sup> Bates to Lincoln, Washington, 15 March 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>45</sup> Welles to Lincoln, Washington, 15 March 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>46</sup> Cameron to Lincoln, Washington, 16 March 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

to bear. While it was important to uphold the honor and power of the government, there were other ways to achieve that end.<sup>47</sup> (Smith had been much more hawkish in January, when he told a friend that it would be “useless to humble ourselves in the dust before these traitors of South Carolina, for they insolently tell us that no compromise would be accepted by them.” If attempts to collect customs duties and enforce other federal laws brought on war, so be it, he had boldly insisted.)<sup>48</sup> Chase waffled, saying he would recommend provisioning the fort as long as it would not touch off a war, which the nation could ill afford. But such a war seemed to him unlikely.<sup>49</sup> (According to Montgomery Blair, Chase said: “Let the South go; it is not worth fighting for.”)<sup>50</sup>

Blair was the only cabinet secretary to favor the relief effort unconditionally. Secessionists were taking heart from Northern timidity and vacillation, he asserted; to continue an appeasement policy would only encourage them. On the other hand, to provision the fort, which was militarily possible in his view, would demoralize them and spark a Southern movement to reunite the country.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, many Southerners did doubt that the North would fight. “You may slap a Yankee in the face and he’ll go off and sue

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<sup>47</sup> Smith to Lincoln, Washington, 16 March 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>48</sup> Smith to Henry Vallette, 4 January 1861, Cincinnati Historical Society, quoted in Richard J. Thomas, “Caleb Blood Smith: Whig Orator and Politician, Lincoln’s Secretary of Interior” (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1969), 180-81.

<sup>49</sup> Chase to Lincoln, Washington, 16 March 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress. Cf. Chase to Alphonso Taft, Washington, 28 April 1861, John Niven, ed., The Salmon P. Chase Papers (5 vols.; Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1993-1998), 3:63-64, and Chase to Elihu Burritt, Washington, 6 October 1862, copy, Chase Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>50</sup> Montgomery Blair, speech at Clarksville, Maryland, 26 August 1865, Chicago Tribune, 1 September 1865.

<sup>51</sup> Blair to Lincoln, Washington, 15 March 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

you but he won't fight," said E. J. Arthur.<sup>52</sup> On the day that Mississippi seceded, an influential New Orleans editor, J. D. B. De Bow, predicted that if "there is a war, the North will make war on us, and the North cannot make war on us for three good reasons. First, she has no motive for war; her interests depend on peace with the South; she lives by her Southern trade, and she will submit to anything rather than lose it. Second, she has no means to make war except what she gets by preying on the South, and war would deprive her of all her resources. Third, she can get no men; her people are divided; half of them are ready to take our side already. If there is a war, it will be between two Northern factions, and blood may flow in the streets of New York and Philadelphia, but there will be no blood shed in the South."<sup>53</sup>

While mulling over his options, Lincoln urged the cabinet to avoid offending Southerners. According to Welles, "he was disinclined to hasty action, and wished time for the Administration to get in working order and its policy to be understood."<sup>54</sup> Despite advice from prominent military and civilian leaders, Lincoln hesitated to abandon Sumter. He knew that step would outrage the North, for as March dragged on, public opinion grew ever more discontent with the administration's "shilly shally, namby pamby course."<sup>55</sup> The president "must act soon, or forfeit his claim to our regard," declared

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<sup>52</sup> E. J. Arthur to Edward DeLeon, 18 February 1861, DeLeon Papers, University South Carolina, in Allan Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln (2 vols.; New York: Scribner, 1950), 2:335.

<sup>53</sup> John Fulton, ed., Memoirs of F. A. P. Barnard (New York: Macmillan, 1896), 272-74.

<sup>54</sup> Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 1;6.

<sup>55</sup> Washington correspondence by F., 31 March, New York Morning Express, 2 April 1861. See also "The Revenue Question and the Do Nothing Policy of the Administration," New York Herald, 28 March 1861; "The President and Fort Sumter" and "Has the Administration a Policy?" New York Daily News, 20, 29 March 1861; "Come to the Point!" New York Tribune, 3 April 1861; "Wanted – A Policy!" New York Times, 3 April 1861; "The White House Besieged," New York Daily News, 4 April 1861; Washington correspondence by Special, 28 March, 5 April, Cincinnati Commercial, 29 March, 6 April 1861; Detroit Free Press, 3 April 1861; Philadelphia Ledger, 23 March 1861; Stamp, And the War Came, 266-70;

young abolitionist Charles Russell Lowell.<sup>56</sup> Congressmen like Albert G. Porter of Indiana were starting to describe the president as “a timid indecisive man” who “lacks decision of character.”<sup>57</sup> Former Assistant Secretary of the Treasury William L. Hodge told a New York banker that the administration “is losing precious time by their shilly shally policy which is as much a mystery to us here [in Washington] as it must be to you.”<sup>58</sup> Lincoln’s friends in Illinois were growing “quite restless” as they observed “the do nothing policy of the Administration.”<sup>59</sup> Such a policy “is well enough for awhile, but it cannot answer much longer,” observed an Ohio journalist on March 29.<sup>60</sup>

Edwin M. Stanton was especially harsh in his criticism, complaining that there “is no settled principle or line of action – no token of any intelligent understanding by Lincoln, or the crew that govern him, of the state of the country, or the exigencies of the times. Bluster & Bravado alternate with timidity & despair – recklessness, and helplessness by turns rule the hour. What but disgrace & disaster can happen?” On March 19, he reported “that the administration not only have, as yet, no line of policy, but also believe that if never can have any – but will drift along, from day to day, without a compass.” A cabinet member told Stanton “that he knew nothing of the late appointments

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Patrick Michael Sowle, “The Conciliatory Republicans during the Winter of Secession” (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1963), 477-78.

<sup>56</sup> Charles Russell Lowell to his mother, Mt. Savage, 28 March 1861, in Edward Waldo Emerson, Life and Letters of Charles Russell Lowell, Captain Sixth United States Cavalry, Colonel Second Massachusetts Cavalry, Brigadier-General United States Volunteers (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1907), 196.

<sup>57</sup> Gayle Thornbrough et al., eds., The Diary of Calvin Fletcher (8 vols.; Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1972-1981), 7:81 (entry for 4 April 1861).

<sup>58</sup> William L. Hodge to John Austin Stevens, Washington, 5 April 1861, Stevens Papers, New-York Historical Society.

<sup>59</sup> William Jayne to Lyman Trumbull, Springfield, 4 April 1861, Trumbull Family Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

<sup>60</sup> Washington correspondence by Cyd, 29 March, Ohio State Journal (Columbus), 1 April 1861.

to England France etc. until he saw them announced in the papers as having been sent to the Senate.”<sup>61</sup>

A western member of Congress asked Lincoln if he would collect import revenues in Southern ports.

“If I can,” he replied.

“How about the forts? Will they be held?”

“If they can be.”

“But, under existing laws, do you believe the revenues can be collected?”

Lincoln “confessed that he did not see how it could be done.” His interlocutor “went away dissatisfied.”<sup>62</sup>

Even the president’s good friend David Davis said Lincoln “lacks will” and “yields to pressure.”<sup>63</sup> The New York Herald called the administration “imbecile and weak.”<sup>64</sup> The Washington States and Union scornfully called for action: “We want Mr. Lincoln to show his hand; we want him to let us know decidedly and unequivocally what he means to do. These are pressing times; everything is going to the devil at a break-neck speed, which must, before long, precipitate his own government in hopeless bankruptcy.

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<sup>61</sup> Stanton to John A. Dix, Washington 16, 19 March 1861, Dix Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>62</sup> Washington correspondence, 1 April, National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 6 April 1861.

<sup>63</sup> Henry Winter Davis to Samuel F. Du Pont, n.p., 21 March 1861, transcript, S. F. Du Pont Papers, Hagley Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.

<sup>64</sup> Washington correspondence, 6 April, New York Herald, 7 April 1861.



The people are clamoring for a policy.”<sup>65</sup> On April 7, William B. Allison of Iowa expressed fear that “our party and our country will go down together” if the administration did not adopt “a policy of some kind soon.”<sup>66</sup>

Voters in New England, where elections took place in the early spring, vigorously objected to any appeasement of the Confederacy. Pennsylvania Congressman John Covode reported after stumping New Hampshire “that the Republicans would have lost that State, if he and others who addressed the people had not urged that there was to be no withdrawal by the administration of United States troops from the Southern Forts now in possession [of the U.S.], and that the revenues were to be collected at all Southern ports, and the laws enforced in all the States.”<sup>67</sup> Meanwhile, Midwestern voters defeated Republicans in municipal elections because of the secessionists’ “continued unpunished defiance of the Federal authorities.”<sup>68</sup> A Cincinnati Republican told Lincoln that the party has “been beaten in our city election – the same in St. Louis – Cleveland – Rhode Island – Brooklyn – and lost two Members of Congress in Connecticut – all from the demoralization and discouraging affect produced by the apparent inaction and temperizing policy of the new Administration, and the impression that Fort Pickens was going to be given up also to the rebels!” He urged the president to “Hold Fort Pickens – re-enforce it to its full capacity.”<sup>69</sup> A Connecticut Republican leader reported that “the

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<sup>65</sup> Washington States and Union, 21 March 1861.

<sup>66</sup> William B. Allison to Samuel J. Kirkwood, Dubuque, 7 April 1861, Kirkwood Papers, Iowa Historical Society, Des Moines.

<sup>67</sup> Washington correspondence, 31 March, New York Morning Express, 2 April 1861. Elections that spring were also held in Connecticut and Rhode Island.

<sup>68</sup> Washington correspondence by Special, 5 April, Cincinnati Commercial, 6 April 1861.

<sup>69</sup> J. H. Jordan to Lincoln, Cincinnati, 4, 5 April 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

patriotic ardor of our friends . . . has been much dampened by the proposed withdrawal from Fort Sumpter, and the fear of a general back-down policy on the part of the Administration.”<sup>70</sup>

A “tired and disgusted” Benjamin Brown French complained that the “Administration seems to me to be playing ‘shilly shally,’ one day one way the next another way, & if this course is long persisted in all confidence will be lost, by every body, in Mr. Lincoln. I want him either way to say ‘War’ and let it come, or to back out honorably from Sumter & Pickens, & make the best of it. Not say, as he is now virtually saying, ‘My Republican friends, you have elected me, & now you must lie quietly down, and permit the Courageous & Chivalric South to spit on you, & walk over you, & kick you, and do just as they d[am]n please with you.’ This seems to be the policy in acts, if not in words.”<sup>71</sup> Letters poured into the Capitol and White House “demanding, in case Sumter falls, that something shall be done in another direction to show that we have a Government.”<sup>72</sup>

One obvious way to offset the evacuation of Sumter was to reinforce the only other major fort still in Union hands, Pickens off Pensacola, Florida. Bates had suggested that strategy privately, and some newspapers did so publicly.<sup>73</sup> To implement that plan, Lincoln on March 5 verbally instructed Scott to hold Pickens and the other Southern forts. When a week later the president discovered that nothing had been done, he

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<sup>70</sup> Mark Howard to Gideon Welles, Hartford, 28 March 1861, Welles Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>71</sup> Benjamin Brown French to his son Frank, Washington, 5 April 1861, French Family Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>72</sup> Washington correspondence, 15 March, New York Tribune, 20 March 1861.

<sup>73</sup> Washington correspondence, 8 April, National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 13 April 1861.

“thought it best to put himself on record” and “repeated the order in writing.”<sup>74</sup> In January, Buchanan had sent reinforcements to Fort Pickens, but after dispatching them the president agreed to an informal truce agreement whereby those troops would not be landed and in return the Confederates would not attack the fort or emplace artillery threatening it. Thus matters stood when Lincoln was inaugurated.<sup>75</sup> On March 12, in obedience to the new president’s instructions, Scott ordered those 200 troops to leave the U. S. S. Brooklyn and occupy the fort, supplementing the eighty-one men already there.<sup>76</sup>

To obtain more information before making up his mind about Sumter, Lincoln asked the wife of an officer stationed at the fort, Abner Doubleday, if she would show him her husband’s letters. In addition, he dispatched trouble shooters to Charleston. Fox suggested that he should visit that city to ascertain the feasibility of his plan and to consult with Anderson. After obtaining approval from the president and General Scott, he left on March 19, telling his wife that “our Uncle Abe Lincoln has taken a high esteem for me.”<sup>77</sup> Two days later, Lincoln asked his Illinois friend Stephen A. Hurlbut, a bibulous native of Charleston who had studied law with the eminent attorney and Unionist James L. Pettigru, to return to his home town and sample public opinion.<sup>78</sup> To

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<sup>74</sup> Lincoln told this to Montgomery Meigs in late March. Meigs diary, 31 March 1861, copy, Nicolay Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>75</sup> For an overview of events at Fort Pickens, see William Watson Davis, The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida (Studies in History, Economics, and Public Law, no. 131; New York: Columbia University, 1913), 97-122.

<sup>76</sup> Crawford, Genesis of the Civil War, 401-2.

<sup>77</sup> Fox to his wife Virginia, Washington, 19 March 1861, Fox Papers, New-York Historical Society.

<sup>78</sup> Stephen A. Hurlbut, interviewed by Nicolay, Washington, 4 May 1876, Michael Burlingame, ed., An Oral History of Abraham Lincoln: John G. Nicolay’s Interviews and Essays (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 62-64. On Hurlbut’s drinking to excess, see [J. Russell] Jones to E. B. Washburne, Kankakee, 12 July 1861, Washburne Papers, Library of Congress; Jeffrey N. Lash, A Politician Turned General: The Civil War Career of Stephen Augustus Hurlbut (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2003), 66-70.

accompany him as an informal bodyguard, the president dispatched Ward Hill Lamon, over the protest of Cameron.<sup>79</sup>

After three days speaking with several lawyers, merchants, working men, and transplanted Northerners, Hurlbut reported “that Separate Nationality is a fixed fact – that there is an unanimity of sentiment which is to my mind astonishing – that there is no attachment to the Union – that almost every one of those very men who in 1832 held military commissions under secret orders from Genl Jackson and were in fact ready to draw the sword in civil war for the Nation, are now as ready to take arms if necessary for the Southern Confederacy.” He expressed serious doubt “that any policy which may be adopted by this Government will prevent the possibility of armed collision,” and he was sure that “a ship known to contain only provisions for Sumpter would be stopped & refused admittance.” He did not say that such a ship would be fired upon or that its dispatch would provoke an attack on the fort. After hearing this, Lincoln had him repeat his findings to Seward, who “still insisted upon it that there was a strong Union party in the South which would stop the [secession] movement.” Hurlbut replied that “Fort Sumter at that time was commanded by batteries which had been erected without molestation, and that I was satisfied from my knowledge of the men that it was the intention to reduce the fort at all hazards.” He added that there “was no mistaking the entire unanimity and earnestness of the secession sentiment. There were hundreds of men delicately brought up, who never had done a day’s work in their lives, yet who were out there on those islands throwing up entrenchments.” After Hurlbut wrote up his report,

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<sup>79</sup> Ward Hill Lamon, Recollections of Abraham Lincoln, 1847-1865, ed. Dorothy Lamon Teillard (Washington, D.C.: by the Editor, 1911), 70-79; Crawford, Genesis of the Civil War, 373-75; Cameron interviewed by S. W. Crawford, Harrisburg, 29 July 1883, Crawford Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

Lincoln read it to the cabinet.<sup>80</sup> It clearly undermined whatever hope he may have entertained that the Deep South would voluntarily return. Seward's faith in a peaceful reconstruction seemed more and more chimerical; war appeared to be the only means to restore the Union. This report may well have convinced Lincoln that since war was inevitable, it therefore made sense to relieve Sumter and thus placate Northern hard-liners.

While Hurlbut was interviewing Charlestonians, Fox consulted with Anderson at Fort Sumter. Arriving in Charleston on March 21, he was allowed to visit the major, who predicted that his supplies would run out by April 15, that any attempt to provision or reinforce the garrison would precipitate a war, that it was too late, and that no relief vessels could get past the South Carolina defenses. Fox did not argue but closely observed the fort and surrounding waters. What he saw convinced him that his plan would work, and he so informed Lincoln upon his return. When the president asked if a competent senior naval officer would endorse his proposal, Fox cited Captain Silas Stringham, who came to the White House and assured Lincoln and Scott that both he and Commodore Charles Stewart thought Fox's plan eminently practicable.<sup>81</sup>

While the missions of Hurlbut and Fox yielded useful information, Lamon's provided harmful disinformation. The egotistical cavalier misled South Carolina Governor Francis Pickens and Major Anderson by assuring them, without any authorization, that the Sumter garrison would soon be removed. He explained to Pickens

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<sup>80</sup> Hurlbut, interviewed by Nicolay, Burlingame, ed., Oral History, 63-64; Stephen A. Hurlbut to Lincoln, n.p., 27 March 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress; Lash, Politician Turned General, 58-60.

<sup>81</sup> O. R. Navy, 4:247-48; Crawford, Genesis of the Civil War, 369-73; Fox to S. W. Crawford, Washington, 16 May 1882, Crawford Papers, Library of Congress.

that his mission was to facilitate the evacuation of the fort.<sup>82</sup> He also had a conversation with Anderson, after which he wrote Seward that he was “satisfied of the policy and propriety of immediately evacuating Fort Sumpter.”<sup>83</sup> (Why he would report to Seward is a mystery, since he was an old friend of Lincoln, who sent him on the mission.) Upon leaving town, Lamon told the governor he would return soon to help Anderson and his men withdraw.<sup>84</sup> Apropos of this episode, Cameron later asked incredulously: “How came the President to have so much faith in Lamon?” It was a good question.<sup>85</sup>

More misleading still was the conduct of Seward. In his frequent dealings with Upper South Unionists, he virtually told them that Sumter would be evacuated.<sup>86</sup> He did the same thing while acting as an intermediary between the administration and the three commissioners (Martin J. Crawford, John Forsyth, and André B. Roman) sent by the Confederate Government to demand formal recognition from Lincoln. Forbidden by Lincoln to officially receive those gentlemen, Seward employed go-betweens to negotiate with them. At first, William M. Gwin, who had just finished a term as senator from California, played that role but he grew suspicious of Seward, dropped out, and wrote Jefferson Davis a telegram stating that the appointment of Chase to the cabinet meant war. When Seward was shown it, he revised the text to read: “Notwithstanding Mr. Chase’s appointment, the policy of the Administration will be for peace and the amicable

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<sup>82</sup> F. W. Pickens to the editor of the Columbia, South Carolina, Guardian, Columbia, 3 August 1861, copied in the Richmond Examiner, 8 August 1861.

<sup>83</sup> Lamon to Seward, Charleston, 25 March 1861, Seward Papers, University of Rochester.

<sup>84</sup> Crawford, Genesis of the Civil War, 373-74; Baltimore Sun, 29 March 1861.

<sup>85</sup> Cameron, interviewed by Nicolay, 20 February 1875, Burlingame, ed., Oral History of Lincoln, 42.

<sup>86</sup> Daniel W. Crofts, Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 275-76.

settlement of all questions between the sections.” Gwin sent the revised message to Montgomery then departed Washington for the South, where he had been born and raised. Seward was thus communicating almost directly with the Confederate president without his own president’s authorization.

For a brief time, R. M. T. Hunter of Virginia replaced Gwin as Seward’s go-between, but soon U.S. Supreme Court Justice John A. Campbell of Alabama assumed that function. On March 13, when the commissioners demanded that the Confederacy be acknowledged as an independent nation, Seward, fearing that a blunt refusal would precipitate war, desperately tried to stall them. (Actually, they were bluffing; the Confederacy needed time to get organized – especially to install more batteries around Charleston harbor – and they were playing for that time.) Two days later Seward told Justice Campbell that the administration was going to withdraw the Sumter garrison within a week, which would cause a political uproar in the North; if in addition to that concession Lincoln were to recognize the Confederacy directly or indirectly, his administration would be ruined. Moreover, the administration would have to maintain the status quo at Fort Pickens in Florida.<sup>87</sup> When Campbell asked what he could write to Jefferson Davis, Seward replied: “You may say to him that before that letter reaches him: (How far is it to Montgomery?)”

“Three days.”

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<sup>87</sup> It is possible but highly unlikely that Lincoln authorized the secretary of state to make such a statement. He “emphatically” denied having done so. Washington correspondence, 14 April, New York Herald, 15 April 1861. More probably, Seward was gambling that the president would go along with the majority of the cabinet who opposed relieving Sumter. He had, after all, virtually telegraphed Jefferson Davis without Lincoln’s knowledge. Indicating no source for his information, James C. Welling, a friend of Seward and an editor of the Washington National Intelligencer, claimed that the New Yorker’s predictions and pledges were made “with the full knowledge of Mr. Lincoln.” The Nation, 4 December 1879.

“You may say to him that before that letter reaches him, the telegraph will have informed him that Sumter will have been evacuated.”

Based on his conversation with Seward, Campbell assured both Davis and the Confederate commissioners that he had “perfect confidence in the fact that Fort Sumter will be evacuated in the next five days.” He sent a copy of this letter to Seward, who did not correct him. (Technically, Seward had made a prediction, not a pledge; but Campbell’s language to the commissioners made it sound more like the latter than the former. If Seward had thought Campbell’s letter misrepresented him, he did tell the judge. Campbell had every reason to believe that Seward spoke for Lincoln.)<sup>88</sup> When five days had passed and the Sumter garrison still remained in place, the commissioners asked Campbell to find out what caused the delay. The judge consulted Seward, who assured him everything was all right and that he should come back tomorrow. When Campbell returned, the secretary “spoke of the prospect of maintaining the peace of the country as cheering. Spoke of [the] coercion proposition in the Senate with some ascerbity, and said in reference to the evacuation of Sumter that the resolution had been passed, and its execution committed to the President. That he did not know why it had not been executed. ‘That Mr. L. was not a man who regarded the same things important that you or I would, and if he did happen to consider a thing important, it would not for that reason be more likely to command his attention. That there was nothing in the delay that affected the integrity of the promise or denoted any intention not to comply.’” Seward also reassured Campbell that the administration would not alter the situation at Pickens.

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<sup>88</sup> Nevins, War for the Union, 1:51n; Ludwell H. Johnson, “Fort Sumter and Confederate Diplomacy,” Journal of Southern History 26 (1960): 459.



Campbell reported back to the commissioners that Sumter would be evacuated soon and that “no prejudicial movement to the South is contemplated as respects Fort Pickens.” (At that same time, Seward was telling William Howard Russell of the London Times that “nothing would be given up – nothing surrendered.”)<sup>89</sup>

As Lincoln struggled with the Sumter dilemma, he concluded that if he removed its garrison, he could justify it as a matter of military necessity while simultaneously asserting federal authority by reinforcing Fort Pickens. To take a hard line at Pickens would immunize him against charges that he had abandoned his inaugural pledge “to hold, occupy, and possess the property, and places belonging to the government.” If, however, Pickens were not available as an offset to the surrender of Sumter, the evacuation of the Charleston fort would be tantamount to a formal recognition of the Confederacy as an independent country. On the evening of March 30, in a discussion with three congressmen, he “gave it to be understood, in unmistakable terms, that even though the evacuation of Fort Sumter should be determined upon, the other forts yet in possession of federal troops will be held to the last. He furthermore hinted rather more plainly at the intention of the government to blockade the southern ports, and collect the revenue with men-of-war.”<sup>90</sup> He explained to Congress several weeks later that the

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<sup>89</sup> John A. Campbell, “Facts of History,” Southern Historical Society Papers 42 (1917): 31-34; David M. Potter, Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942), 342-49; Bancroft, Life of Seward, 2:107-17; Crawford, Genesis of the Civil War, 325-30. Seward had indirectly misled Campbell earlier. On March 4, the judge told Joseph Holt that he was going to resign from the supreme court because the inaugural meant war. Holt urged him not to do so, saying “in a manner which produced the impression that he was quoting Seward’s words: ‘that the inaugural had served its purpose and would never be heard of again as authority or indicating the policy for any purpose.’” In 1863, Campbell told this to Robert Garlick Hill Kean. Edward Younger, ed., Inside the Confederate Government: The Diary of Robert Garlick Hill Kean, Head of the Bureau of War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), 113 (entry for 22 October 1863).

<sup>90</sup> Washington correspondence by Special, 1 April, Cincinnati Commercial, 2 April 1861. Cf. Washington correspondence, 31 March, New York Herald, 1 April 1861.

reinforcement of Pickens “would be a clear indication of policy, and would better enable the country to accept the evacuation of Fort Sumter, as a military necessity.”<sup>91</sup>

Lincoln was right about Northern public opinion regarding the forts. From Maine, Neal Dow, a leading temperance advocate, wrote him that “the evacuation of Fort Sumpter will be fully approved by the entire body of Republicans in this State – and I doubt not in all the country. It is undoubtedly a Military necessity; and admits of no question as to its expediency. At first, the suggestion struck us unpleasantly, but when we learned the actual position of affairs, we saw that the measure is inevitable, and is a legacy of humiliation from the last administration, which cannot be declined. We hope no such necessity exists in the case of Fort Pickens.”<sup>92</sup> A wealthy New York Republican leader, William H. Aspinwall, told Lincoln: “The public mind is fully prepared for the evacuation of Fort Sumpter – as a military necessity entailed on the country by the late Administration – the hopes once entertained of its being relieved are dead – & buried. It will be hazardous to revive them on an uncertainty. The relief of Fort Pickens & any other feasible effort to hold what is tenable would in my opinion strengthen the Administration & give courage to the Union men at the South.”<sup>93</sup> Some “staunch Republicans” in Washington seemed reconciled to the abandonment of Sumter so long as it was “accompanied by the reinforcement of Fort Pickens, and a naval blockade of

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<sup>91</sup> Message to Congress, 4 July 1861, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 4:424.

<sup>92</sup> Neal Dow to Lincoln, Portland, Maine, 13 March 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>93</sup> William H. Aspinwall to Lincoln, New York, 31 March 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

Southern ports to collect the revenues of the Government.”<sup>94</sup> Similar word came from Illinois.<sup>95</sup>

The situation changed dramatically on March 28 at a White House state dinner, where Lincoln at first seemed in good spirits. When Attorney General Bates chided him for appointing a mediocre lawyer to a judgeship, the president said: “Come now, Bates, he's not half as bad as you think. Besides that, I must tell you, he did me a good turn long ago. When I took to the law, I was going to court one morning with some ten or twelve miles of bad road before me, and I had no horse. The judge overtook me in his wagon. ‘Hello, Lincoln! Are you not going to the courthouse? Come in and I'll give you a seat.’ Well, I got in, and the judge went on reading his papers. Presently the wagon struck a stump on one side of the road; then it hopped off to the other. I looked out, and I saw the driver was jerking from side to side in his seat; so says I, ‘Judge, I think your coachman has been taking a little drop too much this morning.’ ‘Well I declare, Lincoln,’ said he, ‘I should not wonder if you are right, for he has nearly upset me half a dozen of times since starting.’ So, putting his head out of the window, he shouted, ‘Why’ you infernal scoundrel, you are drunk!’ Upon which, pulling up his horses and turning round with great gravity, the coachman said, ‘By gorra! that's the first rightful decision you have given for the last twelvemonth.’”<sup>96</sup>

Lincoln’s mood change abruptly when Scott recommended that Sumter and Pickens be abandoned. Probably acting at the behest of Seward, the general expressed

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<sup>94</sup> Washington correspondence by Sigma, 13 March, Cincinnati Commercial, 14 March 1861.

<sup>95</sup> Richard J. Oglesby to Lyman Trumbull, Decatur, 24 March 1861, Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>96</sup> William Howard Russell, My Diary North and South (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1863), 24 (entry for 28 March 1861).

doubt “whether the voluntary evacuation of Fort Sumter alone would have a decisive effect upon the States now wavering between adherence to the Union and secession. It is known, indeed, that it would be charged to necessity, and the holding of Fort Pickens would be adduced in support of that view. Our Southern friends, however, are clear that the evacuation of both the forts would instantly soothe and give confidence to the eight remaining slaveholding States, and render their cordial adherence to this Union perpetual.”<sup>97</sup> Scott’s recommendation gave Lincoln “a cold shock.”<sup>98</sup>

Stunned by this development, Lincoln convened his cabinet the following day. “I never shall forget the President’s excitement,” Montgomery Blair wrote. In an “agitated manner,” Lincoln read Scott’s letter “which he seemed just to have received.” A “very oppressive silence” prevailed which was only broken when Blair remarked: “Mr President you can now see, that Gen[era]l Scott in advising the surrender of Fort Sumpter is playing the part of a politician not of a General, for as no one pretends that there is any military necessity for the surrender of Fort Pickens which he now says it is equally necessary to surrender, it is plain that he is governed by political reasons in both

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<sup>97</sup> Official Records of the War of the Rebellion, I, 1:200-1. It is not clear just when Scott urged the evacuation of both Sumter and Pickens. The published version of that undated document is enclosed in Cameron’s response of March 17 to Lincoln’s query. But Montgomery Blair recalled that Scott’s letter urging the evacuation of Pickens “was written on the day fixed for final action on the question, whether Sumpter sh<sup>d</sup> be surrendered,” that is, March 28. Montgomery Blair to S. W. Crawford, Washington, 6 May 1882, Crawford Papers, Library of Congress. It seems likely that Cameron had it when he wrote his March 16 memo on relieving Fort Sumter, for the secretary incorporated several of the general’s phrases in that document. Scott was probably influenced by the advice of his aide, E. D. Keyes, who pointed out several practical problems involved in any effort to relieve Fort Pickens. Conceivably Cameron, for unknown reasons, failed to bring the memo to the attention of the president until March 28. A. Howard Meneely, The War Department, 1861: A Study in Mobilization and Administration (New York Columbia University Press, 1928), 90-91. See also Kenneth P. Williams, Lincoln Finds a General: A Military Study of the Civil War (5 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1949-59), 1:387n52. It is possible that Scott delivered it to Lincoln on March 28, for he did visit that White House that night, but “was compelled to leave by indisposition.” Washington correspondence 29 March, 1 April, London Times, 16, 22 April 1861.

<sup>98</sup> Montgomery Meigs diary, 31 March 1861, copy, Nicolay Papers, Library of Congress.

recommendations.” As Blair recalled, “No answer could be made to this point & the President saw that he was being misled.” (Fort Pickens was a mile and a half offshore and much harder for the Confederates to attack than Fort Sumter. In addition, it was well supplied and protected by a Union fleet.) Lincoln’s confidence in Scott “was staggered,” and from then on the general’s influence with the president waned.<sup>99</sup> The credibility of Seward also suffered badly.

The thought then arose that Fort Sumter could perhaps be relieved after all; maybe Montgomery Blair and his brother-in-law Gustavus Fox were right, despite what Scott, Totten, and the other military men had argued. But if Sumter were to be resupplied, it would damage Lincoln’s credibility in the South, where newspapers as well as the commissioners proclaimed that he would abandon the fort. Seward’s misleading of the press and the commissioners would have deleterious consequences.

That night Lincoln did not sleep.<sup>100</sup> The next day, he confessed that he was “in the dumps,” and, according to Mary Lincoln, he “keeled over with [a] sick headache for the first time in years.”<sup>101</sup> At a noon cabinet meeting, he took Bates’s advice and had each department head write out yet another opinion about Sumter. The drama of the preceding night had changed Welles’s mind; he now recommended sending both provisions and troops to Sumter and notifying South Carolina authorities of the decision. “There is little

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<sup>99</sup> Montgomery Blair to Gideon Welles, Washington, 24 November 1870, Welles Papers, Connecticut Historical Society; same to same, Washington, 17 May 1873, Welles Papers, Library of Congress; same to same, Washington, 22 January 1874, Lincoln Collection, Yale University; Montgomery Blair to S. W. Crawford, Washington, 6 May 1882, Crawford Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>100</sup> Meigs diary, 31 March 1861, copy, Nicolay Papers Library of Congress.

<sup>101</sup> Lincoln spoke to a friend of Sam Ward about his depression; his wife mentioned his fainting to William H. Russell. Sam Ward to S. L. M. Barlow, Washington, 31 March 1861, Barlow Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

probability that this will be permitted if the opposing forces can prevent it,” Welles speculated, but “armed resistance to a peaceable attempt to send provisions to one of our own forts will justify the government in using all the power at its command, to reinforce the garrison and furnish the necessary supplies.” He also urged that “Fort Pickens and other places retained should be strengthened by additional troops, and, if possible made impregnable. The naval force in the gulf and on the southern coast should be increased.”<sup>102</sup> Similarly, Chase abandoned his earlier position and expressed himself in favor “of maintaining Fort Pickens and just as clearly in favor of provisioning Fort Sumter. If that attempt be resisted by military force Fort Sumter should, in my judgment, be reinforced.”<sup>103</sup> Blair stated that he had “no confidence” in Scott’s “judgment in the questions of the day— His political views control his judg[men]t – & his course as remarked on by the President shows that whilst no one will question his patriotism, the results are the same as if he was in fact traitorous.” Sumter “ought to be relieved without reference to Pickens or any other possession—S[outh] C[arolina] is the head & front of the rebellion & when that State is safely delivered from the authority of the U S it will strike a blow ag[ain]st our authority from which it will take us years of bloody strife to recover from.”<sup>104</sup> Bates favored reinforcing Pickens but straddled the Sumter issue: “As to fort Sumter – I think the time is come either to evacuate or relieve it.”<sup>105</sup> Seward had no allies except for Smith, who recommended the surrender of Sumter but not Pickens.

The secretary of the interior urged that the administration “adopt the most vigorous

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<sup>102</sup> Welles, opinion on Fort Sumter, 29 March 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>103</sup> Chase, opinion on Fort Sumter, 29 March 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>104</sup> Montgomery Blair to Lincoln, [Washington, March 1861], Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>105</sup> Bates, opinion on Fort Sumter, 29 March 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress; Beale, ed., Bates Diary, 180 (entry for 29 March 1861).

measures for the defense of the other Forts, and if we have the power I would blockade the Southern ports and enforce the collection of the revenue with all the powers of the Govt.”<sup>106</sup> (Remarkably, Cameron was out of town.)<sup>107</sup> So three favored relieving Sumter, two opposed it, one waffled, and one was absent.

When the press reported that Pickens would be evacuated, Congress and the public expressed outrage. As Republican lawmakers prepared to return home and face their constituents, they called on Lincoln to learn more about his policy. Ben Wade exclaimed, “Go on as you seem to be going. Give up fortress after fortress, and Jeff Davis will have you as prisoner of war in less than thirty days!” In response, Lincoln laughed. When the collection of revenues at Southern ports was mentioned, the president conceded that he was, as he put it, “green as a gourd,” and had turned the subject over “to his attorney, Seward.”<sup>108</sup> The White House mailbag bulged with protests. “We (the people of the West) have accepted of the evacuation of Fort Sumter as a military necessity,” a fellow Illinoisan wrote. “But you & your Cabinet cannot imagine our chagrin at the report of the probable evacuation of Fort Pickens and that a portion of your Cabinet with the Sec. of State at their head is in favour of peace and evacuation on almost any terms. It has taken us all aback.” This correspondent pled with the president: “in the name of reason and consistency don[’]t subject our country to another burning disgrace and shame in the shape of evacuating any of the Forts and defences without an effort to save them from that lawless rattlesnake crew that are not only wrenching State after State from our

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<sup>106</sup> Smith, opinion on Fort Sumter, 29 March 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>107</sup> Cameron left for Harrisburg on March 29 and was expected back on April 2. Washington correspondence, 29 March, New York Tribune, 30 March 1861.

<sup>108</sup> Washington correspondence, 3 April, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 6 April 1861.

Union but are cutting up States and establishing Capitols to suit their own infernal purposes and designs.”<sup>109</sup> An Ohio delegate to the Chicago Convention predicted that the “reinforcement of Fort Sumpter under existing circumstances, would secure to you an immortality of fame, which Washington might envy. The Surrender of Fort Pickens under any circumstances, will consign your name, and fame, to an ignominy, in comparison with which that of your immediate predecessor, will be tolerable, and Arnolds illustrious.”<sup>110</sup>

Disenchantment with the administration caused some electoral defeats in late March and early April. A Connecticut Republican leader reported that “the patriotic ardor of our friends . . . has been much dampened by the proposed withdrawal from Fort Sumpter, and the fear of a general back-down policy on the part of the Administration.”<sup>111</sup> A Cincinnati Republican told Lincoln that the party has “been beaten in our city election – the same in St. Louis – Cleveland – Rhode Island – Brooklyn – and lost two Members of Congress in Connecticut – all from the demoralization and discouraging affect produced by the apparent inaction and temperizing policy of the new Administration, and the impression that Fort Pickens was going to be given up also to the rebels!” He urged the president to “Hold Fort Pickens – re-enforce it to its full capacity.”<sup>112</sup>

In late March, when Lincoln received word that the U. S. S. Brooklyn had sailed from Pensacola to Key West for supplies, he wrongly assumed that the ship had taken

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<sup>109</sup> Joseph Blanchard to Lincoln, Elmira, Illinois, 28 March 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>110</sup> W. H. West to Lincoln, Bellefontaine, Ohio, 3 April 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>111</sup> Mark Howard to Gideon Welles, Hartford, 28 March 1861, Welles Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>112</sup> J. H. Jordan to Lincoln, Cincinnati, 4, 5 April 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.



with her the soldiers designated to reinforce Fort Pickens. In fact, those troops had been transferred to the U. S. S. Sabine, which remained on station at Pensacola. Unaware of this important datum, the president concluded that the March 12 order had “fizzled out.”<sup>113</sup> Therefore it was imperative to launch a new expedition to reinforce Pickens. In case that was not effected before the Sumter garrison ran out of food, it was also essential to prepare a relief expedition for the Charleston fort. So on March 29 the president ordered Fox to prepare a squadron for relieving Sumter but to make no “binding engagements.”<sup>114</sup> This did not represent a point of no return, for Lincoln and Fox both knew that if the relief of Sumter became necessary in order to vindicate the power of the government, swift action was necessary. By April 15, the garrison would be starved out; in order to get provisions to Charleston before then, an expedition would have to be organized immediately. If it turned out that Scott’s March 12 order to reinforce Pickens actually had been obeyed, or if the new Pickens expedition reached Pensacola before the Sumter garrison exhausted its food supply, then Fox’s mission could be scrubbed.<sup>115</sup>

That afternoon, Lincoln summoned Scott to the White House. In the course of their long conversation about the forts, Lincoln said (according to what the general told his military secretary the following day) that “Anderson had played us false” and predicted “that his administration would be broken up unless a more decided policy was adopted, and if General Scott could not carry out his views, some other person might.” He chided the Hero of Chapultepec for not promptly carrying out his directive of March 5

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<sup>113</sup> Meigs diary, 31 March 1861, copy, Nicolay Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>114</sup> Fox manuscript, Blair Papers, in Smith, Blair Family, 2:12.

<sup>115</sup> David M. Potter, The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861, completed and edited by Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 574.

to reinforce Pickens.<sup>116</sup>

The president was not alone in suspecting Anderson's loyalty. In October 1860, Colonel E. D. Keyes, who had served with Anderson on Scott's staff for four years, confided to his journal that "if hatred and contempt for the people of the North and East, and especially the latter, and a boundless partiality for the South, are qualifications for a successor in command to Colonel Gardner [at Charleston], few better than Major Anderson can be found among my acquaintances in the army."<sup>117</sup> In late February, when Anderson notified the war department that he was running short of supplies and recommended against reinforcing the garrison, Joseph Holt wrote Lincoln a biting review of the major's inconsistent conduct. Holt noted that Anderson had in late December claimed that he could hold out at Sumter for a long time and that reinforcements could be sent at the government's leisure. Anderson predicted that "we can command this Harbor as long as our government wishes to keep it." In January, he continued to forward optimistic reports, leading the war department to postpone any attempt to send reinforcements or supplies but simultaneously urging the major to notify it immediately if any were needed. A relief task force was assembled in New York to be dispatched when Anderson deemed it necessary. While the major described the progress of the construction of batteries by the South Carolinians, he never indicated that he felt endangered nor did he request more supplies. The war department understandably

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<sup>116</sup> Keyes, journal entries for March 29 and 31, 1861, E. D. Keyes, Fifty Years' Observations of Men and Events, Civil and Military (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1884), 378.

<sup>117</sup> Keyes, journal entry for 15 October 1860, Keyes, Fifty Years' Observations, 370.

inferred from Anderson's reports that all was well.<sup>118</sup> The knowledgeable journalist D. W. Bartlett sensibly asked: "Was not Major Anderson perfectly aware six weeks ago that the batteries which were being erected at every commanding point in Charleston harbor would soon render a reinforcement impossible?" If so, "why did he not complain of the military works which were intended to compass his destruction and warn his Government in time?" Evidence was mounting, said this journalist, "to show that Major Anderson has been playing a deep game for three months."<sup>119</sup> Lincoln found Anderson's volte-face so peculiar that he asked Holt if "any suspicion or doubt had ever arisen in his mind" about the major's loyalty. When Holt replied negatively, the president "expressed himself much gratified."<sup>120</sup>

Later, when hostilities seemed imminent, Anderson told General Lorenzo Thomas: "I frankly say that my heart is not in the war which I see is to be thus commenced."<sup>121</sup> He also informed Governor Pickens "my sympathies are entirely with the South."<sup>122</sup> When Gustavus Fox spoke with Anderson on March 21, he became instantly aware of the major's "Southern sympathies."<sup>123</sup> Montgomery Blair thought it suspicious that Anderson had not dismantled his flammable barracks and moved his men

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<sup>118</sup> Joseph Holt to Lincoln, Washington, 5 March 1861 Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress. Holt met with Lincoln the following day. Holt to S. W. Crawford, Washington 3 August 1885, Crawford Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>119</sup> Washington correspondence by D. W. B., 12 March, New York Tribune, 14 March 1861.

<sup>120</sup> Holt interviewed by Nicolay, Washington, 2 April 1874, in Burlingame, ed., Oral History, 72; Washington correspondence, 21 March, New York Herald, 22 March 1861.

<sup>121</sup> Anderson to Lorenzo Thomas, Fort Sumter, 8 April 1861, Official Records of the War of the Rebellion, I, 1:294.

<sup>122</sup> Anderson to Pickens, 17 December 1860, Crawford, Genesis of the Civil War, 111.

<sup>123</sup> Hoogenboom, "Fox and the Relief of Fort Sumter," 386, citing Crawford, Genesis of the Civil War, 371, and Crawford to Fox, 8, 11 May 1882, Fox Papers, New-York Historical Society.

into the casemates as an attack grew ever more likely.<sup>124</sup> (When the Confederates finally shelled the fort, the barracks were set afire by heated shot and explosive shells, which proved more efficacious than solid shot.) In May, John Hay confided to his diary that the “North has been strangely generous with that man [Anderson]. The red tape of military duty was all that bound his heart from its traitorous impulses.”<sup>125</sup> David Dixon Porter declared that once the true story of the Sumter crisis was written, “Anderson will not be recognized as one of the heroes of the war.”<sup>126</sup>

### SEWARD SABOTAGES THE EFFORT TO RELIEVE FORT SUMTER

The ever-resourceful Seward, observing his plans crumble, frantically tried to salvage the situation. While maintaining his opposition to the relief of Sumter, he now recommended that Lincoln “call in Capt. M. C. Meigs forthwith” and “at once and at every cost prepare for a war at Pensacola and Texas, to be taken however only as a consequence of maintaining the possession and authority of the United States.”<sup>127</sup> (In Texas, the Unionist governor Sam Houston was resisting the secessionists, but when Lincoln offered to send troops, he declined.)<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Montgomery Blair to Gideon Welles, Washington, 17 May 1873, Welles Papers, Library of Congress. Blair suggested that Anderson probably would have taken down the barracks if he had not been assured that the fort was to be evacuated soon. That message had been conveyed by Lamon, who seems to have been working closely with Seward.

<sup>125</sup> Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettliger, eds., Inside Lincoln’s White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 21 (entry for 9 May 1861).

<sup>126</sup> Porter, “Journal of Occurrences during the War of the Rebellion,” 1:81-82, Porter Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>127</sup> Seward, memo on Fort Sumter, 29 March 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>128</sup> Potter, Lincoln and His Party, 350-51; Official Records of the War of the Rebellion, I, 1:551-52; Billy D. Ledbetter, “Slavery, Fear, and Disunion in the Lone Star State: Texans Attitudes toward Secession and the Union, 1846-1861” (Ph.D. dissertation, North Texas State University, 1972), 239-76.

Seward's sudden concern for Fort Pickens was puzzling, since he had earlier shown little interest in that bastion; at the forefront of his mind on March 29 was the Sumter expedition. How could he explain to the Confederate commissioners and to Justice Campbell that his assurances about the evacuation of the Charleston fort were untrue? How could he maintain leadership in the administration, now that the president had overruled him, with the approval of a plurality of the cabinet? How could he prevent the outbreak of civil war? One way was to sabotage the Sumter expedition by stripping it of its key component, the warship Powhatan, which was to transport howitzers, armed launches, and hundreds of troops.<sup>129</sup> That vessel, it was understood, was the only one in the navy capable of carrying out the mission.<sup>130</sup> Perhaps Lincoln could be persuaded to send that vessel to Pensacola rather than Charleston. But Welles would probably want the Powhatan for the Sumter expedition. So the relief of Pickens must be undertaken without Welles' knowledge. But how? He could argue that the mission must be kept secret, for if word of it leaked out, the Confederates might attack Pickens before the ships arrived to protect it. (This possibility was not great, for several Union war vessels were already in the waters off Pensacola, and Confederate forces were too weak to seize the fort. The Powhatan's presence was unnecessary; it was not even needed to cover the transfer of troops from shipboard to the fort. That was done on April 12, five days before the Powhatan arrived at Pensacola.)<sup>131</sup> Therefore only Seward, the president, and officers in

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<sup>129</sup> Hoogenboom, "Fox and the Relief of Fort Sumter," 391, 394. Fox called this ship the most important element in the Sumter expedition. Welles, "Fort Sumter," in Mordell, comp., Civil War and Reconstruction, 81.

<sup>130</sup> Charles B. Boynton, The History of the Navy During the Rebellion (2 vols.; New York: D. Appleton, 1867-68), 1:299.

<sup>131</sup> Boynton, History of the Navy, 1:303-4; Grady McWhiney, Braxton Bragg and Confederate Defeat (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 161-69. The ships already in place at Pensacola included the

charge of the ships and troops should be informed. This highly irregular proceeding would certainly offend the secretaries of war and the navy, but Seward regarded them as ciphers. So the Sage of Auburn, desperately looking for a way to preserve his honor, his leadership position, and the peace, scrambled to implement this devious scheme. He would also try to convince the president to let him take charge of the administration.<sup>132</sup>

On March 29, Seward summoned his friend Captain Montgomery C. Meigs, an army engineer who was supervising the expansion of the Capitol and who had recently visited the forts at Pensacola, Key West, and Dry Tortugas, all in Florida.<sup>133</sup> Alluding to the infirm, seventy-five-year-old General Scott, the secretary explained to Meigs “that he thought the President ought to see some of the younger officers, and not consult only with men who, if war broke out, could not mount a horse.”<sup>134</sup> (All along, Seward had been using Scott as his authority in arguing that Sumter should be abandoned. Now, with Scott discredited, the secretary needed some other military man to lend credibility to his strategizing.) At the White House, Meigs confidently asserted that both Sumter and Pickens could be held. The danger in reinforcing the Florida fort was that Confederate

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Brooklyn, the St. Louis, the Wyandotte, and the Sabine. On them were several hundred troops ready to be transferred to Fort Pickens on short notice. Those ships also carried guns which could reply to any Confederate salvos or sink any Confederate boats attempting to ferry troops to Santa Rosa Island, on which the fort was located. Bragg had only 1116 men, whom he described as “raw volunteers, without officers, and without discipline, each man with an idea than he can whip the world, and believing that nothing is necessary but go . . . take Fort Pickens and all the Navy.” The fort “cannot be taken without a regular siege, and we have no means to carry that on.” Bragg to his wife, 11 March 1861, Grady McWhiney, “The Confederacy’s First Shot,” Civil War History 14 (1968): 8-9.

<sup>132</sup> Welles and Blair believed that Seward deliberately tried to sabotage the Sumter expedition. Welles, “Fort Sumter” and “Fort Pickens,” Mordell, comp., Civil War and Reconstruction, 36-113; Gideon Welles, Lincoln and Seward: Remarks upon the Memorial Address of Charles Francis Adams, on the late William H. Seward (New York: Sheldon, 1874), 64-69. Seward’s biographer, Frederic Bancroft, denied the charge.

<sup>133</sup> Frederick W. Seward, William H. Seward: An Autobiography from 1801 to 1834 with a Memoir of His Life and Selections from His Letters (3 vols.; New York: Derby and Miller, 1891), 2:534.

<sup>134</sup> Meigs to the editor of the New York Tribune, Washington, 14 September 1865, Philadelphia Press, 18 September 1865.

vessels might intercept boats ferrying troops across Pensacola Bay. But, he said, if a swift warship were sent there immediately, it could protect those boats from rebel attackers. (Here Seward's new plan was supported: send the Powhatan to Florida and thus make it unavailable for a mission to Sumter.) When Lincoln asked if Meigs would be willing to take command of forces in Florida, the captain protested that he could not give orders to his superiors stationed there. The president said he would investigate the matter and let him know soon if it might be possible to promote him quickly, as Seward suggested could be done. Scott, however, overruled the secretary, and Meigs agreed to go on the expedition as a subordinate.<sup>135</sup>

Lincoln ordered that an expedition sail to Florida as soon as possible. The next morning when Seward informed Scott of the president's directive, the general exclaimed: "the great Frederick [of Prussia] used to say that, 'when the King commands, nothing is impossible!' Sir, the President's orders shall be obeyed!"<sup>136</sup> Scott then consulted with his military secretary, Colonel E. D. Keyes, who argued that it would be extremely difficult to reinforce Fort Pickens. Scott directed him to share his thoughts with Seward. When the colonel pointed out the problems he had mentioned to Scott, Seward interrupted, saying "I don't care about the difficulties," and ordered him to fetch Meigs forthwith. Ten minutes later the captain and the colonel stood before Seward, who commanded them to devise a plan for reinforcing Pickens and present it at the White House no later than 3

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<sup>135</sup> Meigs diary, 29 March, 1 April 1861, copy, Nicolay Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>136</sup> Seward, Seward at Washington, 2:534.

p.m. The two officers hurriedly carried out their assignment but had insufficient time to run their draft past Scott.<sup>137</sup>

At the Executive Mansion, Meigs and Keyes read their proposals to Lincoln, who approved them despite his puzzlement at references to scarps, terreplains, barbettes, and the like. To command the ships involved, Meigs recommended a friend, Lieutenant David Dixon Porter, an ambitious, bold young officer who had distinguished himself seven years earlier on a mission to Cuba. “Gentlemen,” the president directed, “see General Scott, and carry your plans into execution without delay.” When they did so later that day, the general approved their scheme and wrote orders implementing it.<sup>138</sup>

Meanwhile, that same day, the Confederate commissioners called Justice Campbell’s attention a telegram from Governor Pickens complaining that Lamon had failed to honor his promise to return and arrange for the evacuation of Sumter. Two days later, Seward told Campbell “that the President was concerned at the contents of the telegram . . . that Colonel Lamon did not go to Charleston under any commission or authority from Mr. Lincoln, nor had he any power to pledge him by any promise or assurance; that Mr. Lincoln desired the Governor Pickens should be satisfied of this.” Seward then handed the judge a note stating that “the President may desire to supply Fort Sumter, but will not undertake to do so without first giving notice to Governor Pickens.” This represented a dramatic change in his earlier assurances to Campbell, who protested that if such a message were conveyed to Charleston, the authorities there would bombard Sumter immediately. Seward then consulted briefly with Lincoln and returned with a

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<sup>137</sup> Keyes, Fifty Years, 379-82, Keyes to Chase, New York, 2 June 1861, Chase Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>138</sup> Keyes, Fifty Years, 382-86; Meigs diary, 31 March 1861, copy, Nicolay Papers, Library of Congress.



modified version of a message for the South Carolina governor: “I am satisfied the Government will not undertake to supply Fort Sumter without giving notice to Governor Pickens.” This was still a far cry from what Campbell had been told previously. When the Alabamian asked if Lincoln really intended to supply Sumter, Seward replied: “No, I think not, it is a very irksome thing to him to evacuate it. His ears are open to everyone, and they fill his head with schemes for its supply. I do not think he will adopt any of them. There is no design to reinforce it.”<sup>139</sup> Clearly the secretary was deceiving the commissioners, unless he believed that he could sabotage the Sumter expedition and thereby thwart Lincoln.<sup>140</sup>

On April 1, Porter and Seward went over the plans to reinforce Pickens, plans which were to be carried out secretly. Porter suggested that Lincoln, not the secretary of the navy, issue a direct order to ready the Powhatan. At a conference with Porter, Meigs, and Seward, Lincoln approved these plans, though he felt uneasy about bypassing normal channels and having his secretary of state in effect act as secretary of the navy.

“But what will Uncle Gideon say?” he asked.

“I will make it all right with Mr. Welles,” Seward replied.

“This looks to me very much like the case of two fellows I once knew: one was a gambler, the other a preacher,” said the president. “They met in a stage, and the gambler induced the preacher to play poker, and the latter won all the gambler’s money. ‘It’s all because we have mistaken our trades,’ said the gambler; ‘you ought to have been a gambler and I a preacher, and, by ginger, I intend to turn the tables on you next Sunday

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<sup>139</sup> Campbell, “Facts of History,” 34-35.

<sup>140</sup> Bancroft, Seward, 2:148; Sowle, “Conciliatory Republicans,” 495-96.

and preach in your church,' which he did." The formal order instructed Porter to sail the Powhatan into Pensacola harbor and cover the reinforcement of the fort. It was, as Meigs put it, "extracted" from the president, who may well have been confused about three different warships with Indian names beginning with the letter P. While signing the various documents, Lincoln said: "Gentlemen I don't know anything of your army and navy rules only don't let me burn my fingers." When Porter suggested that the normal rules of the navy were being bent, the president remarked: "oh there's no difficulty about that[,] I expect Mr. Welles will blow up but I don't care. I think I can smooth the old fellow over."<sup>141</sup>

Because of the secrecy and haste involved, the plan quickly created a bureaucratic nightmare. The Powhatan was under the command of Captain Samuel Mercer, who received an order written by Porter and signed by Lincoln instructing him to turn the ship over to the lieutenant. On April 1, Welles, unaware of the Seward-Porter-Meigs-Lincoln scheme, ordered the Powhatan to be readied for duty as soon as possible. As if this were not sufficiently perplexing, another problem immediately emerged: How was the Pickens expedition to be paid for? Congress, now adjourned, had appropriated no money for such purposes which could be spent without going through the normal channels. The only recourse was the secret-service fund of the state department, which could be tapped with the approval of the president alone. So Lincoln authorized this unconventional funding arrangement, and Seward gave \$10,000 to Meigs, who distributed it to both Porter and

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<sup>141</sup> Porter, Incidents and Anecdotes of the Civil War (New York: D. Appleton, 1885), 15; statement by Porter, 25 March 1873, S.W. Crawford Papers, Library of Congress; David D. Porter, "Journal of Occurrences during the War of the Rebellion," 1:52-68, Porter Papers, Library of Congress. Porter's accounts of Lincoln's words differ; I have conflated them here.

Keyes. The latter was responsible for hiring a steamer in New York and overseeing the preparation of the other ships.<sup>142</sup>

Armed with his orders freshly signed by Lincoln, Porter left for New York on April 1. The next day, the acting commandant of the Brooklyn navy yard, Andrew H. Foote, hesitated to let the lieutenant have the Powhatan, for the previous afternoon Welles' order assigning that vessel to Fox had arrived. Moreover, it was highly irregular for a mere lieutenant to replace a full captain in command of an important warship; it was even more irregular for such an order to be issued by the president and not the secretary of the navy. Foote suspected a rebel plot to steal the ship, for he knew that Porter was friendly with pro-Southern naval officers. Perhaps Porter himself was a traitor! After some cajoling, the lieutenant persuaded Foote to honor Lincoln's directive and to maintain secrecy. The Powhatan was ready to sail by April 6.<sup>143</sup>

On April 1, Lincoln had Nicolay deliver to Welles copies of some of the documents he had that day approved, one of which seemed to undercut the secretary's authority. Indignantly, Welles called at the White House to protest this highly unorthodox proceeding. Lincoln, sensing his anger, asked: "What have I done wrong?" In addition to the orders regarding the Pickens expedition, Lincoln had signed instructions to Welles to post the home squadron (most of the navy) to Mexico; to reassign his trusted assistant, Captain Stringham, to Pensacola; and to replace Stringham with Captain Samuel Barron. Welles explained to Lincoln that Barron's loyalty was suspect and he could not work

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<sup>142</sup> Keyes, Fifty Years, 387-93; Meigs diary, 3 April 1861, copy, Nicolay Papers, Library of Congress; statement by Porter, 25 March 1873, S.W. Crawford Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>143</sup> Porter, Incidents and Anecdotes of the Civil War, 17-20; statement by Porter, 25 March 1873, S.W. Crawford Papers, Library of Congress; David D. Porter, "Journal of Occurrences during the War of the Rebellion," 1:67-83, Porter Papers, Library of Congress.

with such a man as his principal subordinate. (In fact, Barron soon thereafter joined the Confederate navy.) The restructuring of the department specified in Lincoln's directive would have put Barron virtually in charge of naval operations. Later Welles wrote that there "is not in the archives and history of the Government a record of such mischievous maladministration . . . as this secret scheme."<sup>144</sup> By way of explanation, Lincoln said that Seward "with two or three young men had been there through the day, on a matter which Mr. Seward had much at heart; that he had yielded to the project of Mr. Seward, but as it had involved considerable detail and he had his hands full, and more too, he had left Mr. Seward to prepare the necessary papers. These papers he had signed, some without reading, trusting entirely to Mr. Seward, for he could not undertake to read all the papers presented to him; and if he could not trust the Secretary of State, whom could he rely upon in a public matter that concerned us all?" Lincoln "seemed disinclined to disclose or dwell on the project," but told Welles that "he never would have signed that paper had he been aware of its contents, much of which had no connection with Mr. Seward's scheme." The president countermanded the order reassigning Stringham and Barron, but he did not fully inform Welles about the Pickens relief mission.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Welles, Lincoln and Seward, 55.

<sup>145</sup> Welles, "Fort Sumter," Mordell, comp., Civil War and Reconstruction, 57-61; Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 16-21. A biographer of Welles has expressed skepticism about Lincoln's failure to read and understand the documents prepared by Porter, Meigs, and Seward. He asserted that there were only six short documents (none longer than forty-two words) which any lawyer could easily comprehend in a short time. Niven, Welles, 613n11. But in fact the order that so upset Welles was a much longer document whose import was not immediately obvious to someone outside the navy department. That document appears in Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 1:16-17. On May 2, Fox wrote his wife: "Mr. Seward got up this Pensacola expedition and the Prest signed the orders in ignorance and unknown to the dept. The Prest offers every apology possible and will do so in writing. So do the depts. I shall get it all straight in justification of myself and to place the blow on the head of that timid [word erased] W. H. Seward. He who paralyzes every movement from abject fear." Thompson and Wainwright, eds., Correspondence of Fox, 1:42-43.

That Lincoln was harried on April 1 is clear. He was “so severely indisposed” that in the afternoon he declined to see any visitors and complained that he was “nearly exhausted by the constant pressure on him.”<sup>146</sup> Compounding that pressure, prominent New York merchants and bankers lobbied him to have the Morrill tariff repealed, arguing that it would ruin the country’s finances.<sup>147</sup> Lincoln expressed “apprehension that the treasury would soon be bankrupt” because the new tariff might not be enforceable in the South, and thus goods be brought into southern ports duty-free then transshipped north.<sup>148</sup> He was, however, “highly pleased” with the success of the first government loan under his administration, offered on April 2 and taken up rates more favorable than the previous one.<sup>149</sup>

Four days later, Seward and his son Frederick called on the navy secretary late at night with a telegram from Meigs and Porter asking for clarification of orders regarding the Powhatan, since confusion reigned at the Brooklyn navy yard. Seward demanded that Welles retract his order assigning that warship to Fox. Puzzled, Welles insisted that they consult the president immediately, even though the hour was late. En route to the White House, Seward “remarked that, old as he was, he had learned a lesson from this affair, and that was, he had better attend to his own business and confine his labors to his own Department.” (In fact, the meddlesome Seward continued to poach on the domains of his

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<sup>146</sup> Washington correspondence, 1 April, New York Times, 2 April 1861; Washington correspondence, 1 April, New York Herald, 2 April 1861.

<sup>147</sup> Washington correspondence by Special, 1 April, Cincinnati Commercial, 3 April 1861. Over 400 merchants visited Washington to recommend that a special session of Congress be called to modify the tariff. Washington correspondence, 29 March, Philadelphia Daily News, 30 March 1861.

<sup>148</sup> Washington correspondence, 28 March, New York Evening Post, 28 March 1861. Lincoln expressed his anxiety to a western member of Congress.

<sup>149</sup> Washington correspondence, 2 April, New York World, 3 April 1861; Washington correspondence, 2 April, Philadelphia Inquirer, 3 April 1861.

cabinet colleagues, much to their annoyance.)<sup>150</sup> Around midnight they arrived at the Executive Mansion, where Lincoln was still up. Surprised by the telegram from Meigs and Porter, the president suggested that he may have misunderstood which vessel would serve as flagship for the Sumter squadron, confusing the Pocahontas with the Powhatan. (Fox's squadron consisted of the Pawnee, the Pocahontas, the Powhatan, and the Harriet Lane.) The secretary quickly retrieved documents from his office indicating that Lincoln had authorized the assignment of the Powhatan to Fox. To set things aright, Lincoln told Seward "that the Powhatan must be restored to Mercer – that on no account must the Sumter expedition fail." Seward said he "thought it was now too late to correct the mistake" and that "he considered the other project the most important, and asked whether that would not be injured if the Powhatan was now withdrawn." Lincoln "would not discuss the subject, but was peremptory – said there was not the pressing necessity in the other case . . . . As regarded Sumter, however, not a day was to be lost – that the orders of the Secretary of the Navy must be carried out." When Seward opined that it might be too late to send a telegram to New York, Lincoln "was imperative that it should be done."<sup>151</sup>

Reluctantly Seward obeyed, sending Porter a telegram (which amazingly did not arrive until 3 p.m. the next day) ordering him to do as the president had instructed. Seward signed the message with his own name, not the president's. The frigate, which had already set sail, was overtaken and the message delivered to Porter, who refused to

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<sup>150</sup> Beale, ed., Welles Diary 1:133.

<sup>151</sup> Beale, ed., Welles Diary 1:24-25; Welles, "Fort Sumter," Mordell, comp., Civil War and Reconstruction, 66-67.

obey it because it bore the signature of the secretary of state, and he was operating on orders signed by the president.<sup>152</sup> The headstrong Meigs approved Porter's action.<sup>153</sup>

Whether Seward deliberately sabotaged the change in plans by signing his own name rather than the president's is not known for certain, but it seems likely.<sup>154</sup> He was probably trying to thwart the Sumter expedition, which he opposed fiercely. Calling Seward "that timid traitor" who "paralyzes every movement from abject fear," Fox accused him of "treachery" by "interfering with the other dep[artment]s as the last hope of preventing the reinforcing of Sumpter."<sup>155</sup> Gideon Welles always believed that "to save himself," Seward "detached the Powhatan from the expedition and sent her to Pensacola."<sup>156</sup> Without the Powhatan, Fox may not have been able to carry out his orders.<sup>157</sup>

On April 6, another Seward-inspired act threatening the Sumter expedition tends to confirm this suspicion. That day Seward's friend, James E. Harvey, the influential Washington correspondent of the Philadelphia North American, telegraphed a leading lawyer in South Carolina, Harvey's native state: "Positively determined not to withdraw

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<sup>152</sup> Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 1:23-26; Porter, Incidents and Anecdotes of the Civil War, 21-22; statement by Porter, 25 March 1873, S.W. Crawford Papers, Library of Congress; Porter, "Journal of Occurrences during the War of the Rebellion," 1:83-85, Porter Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>153</sup> Russell Frank Weigley, Quartermaster General of the Union Army: A Biography of M. C. Meigs (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 145.

<sup>154</sup> Bancroft, Life of Seward, 2:144; Sowle, "Conciliatory Republicans," 494-95; Williams, Lincoln Finds a General, 1:55; Montgomery Blair to Gideon Welles, Washington, 17 May 1873, Welles Papers, Library of Congress; Gideon Welles to Montgomery Blair, Hartford, 30 April 1873, Blair Family Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>155</sup> Thompson and Wainwright, eds., Correspondence of Fox, 1:33, 42-43; Fox to his wife, Washington, 2 May 1861, Fox Papers, New-York Historical Society.

<sup>156</sup> Welles to Montgomery Blair, Hartford, 30 April 1873, Blair Family Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>157</sup> For a different interpretation of these events, see the statement by Porter, 25 March 1873, S.W. Crawford Papers, Library of Congress, and David D. Porter, "Journal of Occurrences during the War of the Rebellion," 1:76-82, Porter Papers, Library of Congress.

Anderson. Supplies go immediately, supported by a naval force under Stringham if their landing be resisted. A Friend.”<sup>158</sup> This dispatch reached the Palmetto State before the messenger sent by the president did. Conceivably it could have induced the Confederates to attack Sumter before Fox’s task force arrived at Charleston providing extra firepower to supplement Anderson’s guns. Seward was aware of these telegrams and doubtless served as Harvey’s source of information.<sup>159</sup> Soon thereafter, Seward had Harvey appointed minister to Portugal. Later, when the senate wanted to investigate Harvey’s questionable conduct, the secretary of state blocked their plans.<sup>160</sup> Seward brushed off the incident, saying that Harvey merely “thought he was in honor bound” to do what he did and that he should not be punished “for a piece of folly that did no harm & intended no disloyalty.”<sup>161</sup>

Seward’s conduct in this matter was sharply criticized by Charles Francis Adams Jr., who found it “very difficult” to believe that “a man of Seward’s experience, quickness of perception, and aptitude in the use of agents, did not know what he was about when he gave that information to Harvey. He was not a fool . . . . It was not, on his part, ‘amazing carelessness.’ It was a designed plan.” Harvey’s act was “a crime,” for he was “just as much a spy within our lines as André was within the lines of Washington.”

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<sup>158</sup> “A Friend” [James E. Harvey] to A. G. Magrath, 6 April 1861, Official Records of the War of the Rebellion, I, 1:287; James E. Harvey to Lincoln, Washington, 21 May 1860, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>159</sup> Montgomery Blair to Gideon Welles, Washington, 17 May 1873, Welles Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>160</sup> Daniel W. Crofts, “James E. Harvey and the Secession Crisis,” Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 103 (April 1979): 177-95; Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 1, 32.

<sup>161</sup> John Bigelow diary, New York Public Library (entry for 3 July 1861); Seward to Weed, Washington, 25 June 1861, Weed Papers, University of Rochester; Lyman Trumbull to his wife, Washington, 14 July 1861, Trumbull Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield. See also Edward Everett journal, 23 August 1861, Everett Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.



The secretary of state “was using a spy within our lines to convey information to the enemy, in order to effect his own ulterior purposes, – to carry out at a critical moment a plan which had a distinct shape in his mind.”<sup>162</sup> According to John Hay, the government had in addition to the telegrams that Harvey sent to Carolina “oral and written evidence of Harvey’s complicity with the traitors. His most earnest defenders cannot rid him of the responsibility of so telegraphing the rebels that detection was for a time impossible. If his object was peace, he would have honorably used his own name.”<sup>163</sup>

Welles recalled that Lincoln “took upon himself the whole blame – said it was carelessness, heedlessness on his part – he ought to have been more careful and attentive,” and that “we were all new in the administration; that he permitted himself, with the best intentions, to be drawn into an impropriety without sufficient examination and reflection.” He assured the navy secretary that “he was confident no similar error would again occur.” This willingness to accept blame was characteristic of Lincoln. As Welles put it, the president “never shunned any responsibility and often declared that he, and not his Cabinet, was in fault for errors imputed to them, when I sometimes thought otherwise.”<sup>164</sup> Magnanimity was one of Lincoln’s most extraordinary qualities, one which was to serve him well over the coming years.

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<sup>162</sup> Charles Francis Adams Jr. to Frederic Bancroft, South Lincoln, Massachusetts, 26 November 1912, Bancroft Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>163</sup> Washington correspondence, 10 July, New York World, 12 July 1861, in Michael Burlingame, ed., Lincoln’s Journalist: John Hay’s Anonymous Writings for the Press, 1860-1864 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), 75.

75. Harvey protested that he had intended only to avoid bloodshed and had not engaged in concealment. Harvey to Edward McPherson, Lisbon, Portugal, 26 November 1861, McPherson Papers, Library of Congress. That explanation seems implausible in light of Harvey’s decision to sign the key telegram “A Friend.”

<sup>164</sup> Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 25; Welles, “Fort Sumter,” Mordell, comp., Civil War and Reconstruction, 68-69.

Welles also demonstrated magnanimity, for much as he resented Porter's conduct in the Powhatan fiasco, he, with Lincoln's approval, rapidly promoted the young officer in recognition of his obvious ability and talent.<sup>165</sup> Porter, perhaps recalling those April days in 1861, wrote many years later that Lincoln "was not a demonstrative man, so no one will ever know amid all the trials he underwent how much he had to contend with and how often he was called upon to sacrifice his own opinions to those of others who he felt did not know as much about matters at issue as he did himself. When he did surrender, it was always with a pleasant manner, winding up with a characteristic story."<sup>166</sup>

#### SEWARD'S OFFER TO TAKE OVER THE ADMINISTRATION

Meanwhile, Seward overplayed his hand once again. He had failed to learn from his earlier threatened withdrawal from the cabinet that Lincoln could not be intimidated. On April 1 he went even further, virtually offering to take over the administration. In a memorandum entitled "Some Thoughts for the President's Consideration," the frantic secretary of state rashly told Lincoln that the government, now four weeks old, had no foreign or domestic policy. The latter should be to "change the question before the public from one upon slavery, or about slavery, for a question upon union or disunion." This could be achieved by shifting the country's focus from Sumter (which the public associated with the issue of slavery) to Pickens (associated in the public mind with the issue of union). Therefore let Sumter be abandoned and Pickens reinforced. This rehash of his earlier policy recommendations probably did not surprise Lincoln.

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<sup>165</sup> Paullin, "Lincoln and the Navy," 297.

<sup>166</sup> Porter, Incidents and Anecdotes, 283.

The president was doubtless amazed, however, by Seward's foreign policy recommendations. Alluding to recent events on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, where Spain and France appeared to be maneuvering to reestablish colonial rule, the secretary urged Lincoln to "demand explanations" from those two European powers, "categorical at once." If they provided unsatisfactory answers, the president should "convene Congress and declare war against them."

On top of that eccentric counsel, Seward then hinted broadly that he would be glad to run the country: "whatever policy we adopt, there must be an energetic prosecution of it. . . . Either the President must do it himself, and be all the while active in it, or devolve it on some member of his cabinet. Once adopted, all debates must end, and all agree and abide." In case Lincoln did not catch his drift, Seward added: "It is not my special province, but I neither seek to evade nor to assume responsibility."<sup>167</sup>

Some commentators have argued that Seward did not mean what he said about declaring war in his memorandum, but much evidence suggests that he was in earnest, especially about fighting Spain, a much weaker foe than Britain or France.<sup>168</sup> It was an idea in the air; Stephen A. Douglas was advised that "the only way under which we could or can possibly hope to save our union from destruction is to bring about a war with some foreign foe."<sup>169</sup> The proposal to pick a fight was no spur-of-the-moment impulse of

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<sup>167</sup> Seward, Life of Seward, 2:535.

<sup>168</sup> Norman B. Ferris, "Lincoln and Seward in Civil War Diplomacy: Their Relationship at the Outset Reconsidered," Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association 12 (1991): 21-42; Norman B. Ferris, Desperate Diplomacy: William H. Seward's Foreign Policy, 1861 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 10-12; Kinley J. Brauer, "Seward's 'Foreign War Panacea': An Interpretation," New York History 55 (1974): 133-57.

<sup>169</sup> "A Douglas man" to Stephen A. Douglas, Petersburg, Virginia, 9 December 1860, Douglas Papers, University of Chicago.

Seward's; in December he had told a meeting of New Englanders that if the country were invaded by France, England, or Austria, "all the hills of South Carolina would pour forth their population for the rescue of New York."<sup>170</sup> The following month he made a similar statement to the German diplomat Rudolph Schleiden: "If the Lord would only give the United States an excuse for a war with England, France, or Spain, that would be the best means of reestablishing internal peace."<sup>171</sup> On another occasion he told Schleiden that "nothing would give so much pleasure as to see a European power interfere in favour of South Carolina," for then he "should 'pitch into' the European Power, and South Carolina and the seceding States would soon join him in doing so."<sup>172</sup> At a dinner party March 20, he had engaged in some saber-rattling at ministers from Great Britain, France, and Russia, demanding that they supply copies of instructions to their consuls in Southern ports. Lord Lyons, the British envoy, reported that Seward "went off into a defiance of Foreign nations, in a style of braggadocio which was formerly not uncommon with him, but which I have not heard before from him since he had been in office. Finding he was getting more and more violent and noisy, and saying things which it would be more convenient for me not to have heard, I took a natural opportunity of turning, as host, to speak to some of the ladies in the room."<sup>173</sup> In January, Lyons reported that the New Yorker viewed British-American relations as "good material to make political capital of"

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<sup>170</sup> Seward, speech in New York, 22 December 1860, in Frank Moore, ed., The Rebellion Record (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1861), 7.

<sup>171</sup> Seward made this statement on January 26. Ralph Haswell Lutz, "Rudolf Schleiden and the Visit to Richmond, April 25, 1861," Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1915, 210.

<sup>172</sup> Lord Lyons to John Russell, Washington, 4 February 1861, James J. Barnes and Patience P. Barnes, eds., Private and Confidential: Letters from British Ministers in Washington to the Foreign Secretaries in London, 1844-67 (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1993), 240.

<sup>173</sup> Lord Lyons to Lord John Russell, Washington, 26 March 1861, ibid., 244. Norman Ferris argues that Lyons, not Seward, lost his composure in this conversation.

and speculated that the incoming administration would be tempted “to endeavour to divert the Public excitement to a foreign quarrel.”<sup>174</sup> In later months, Seward’s diplomacy was so bellicose that European leaders came to regard him “as a dangerous parvenu.”<sup>175</sup> The Russian minister thought Seward “would not listen to any advice” because he was so haughty and vain, and Lyons said the secretary “has such unbounded confidence in his own sagacity and dexterity that nothing which can be said to him makes much impression.”<sup>176</sup> According to Charles Sumner, Lyons and his French counterpart, Henri Mercier, “had both been so repelled by Seward’s lofty tone with them, that they went to him as little as possible.”<sup>177</sup>

Lincoln had to calm Seward down. The president responded gently but firmly to Seward’s bizarre April 1 memorandum, writing out a reply which he may have delivered orally.<sup>178</sup> He assured his secretary of state that the administration did indeed have a domestic policy which was spelled out in his inaugural: “to hold, occupy and possess the forts, and all other property and places belonging to the government, and to collect the duties on imports.” Seward had approved that policy, and the two leaders were still in agreement except with regard to Sumter. Lincoln denied that the relief of Pickens would be viewed as a pro-Union gesture while the relief of Sumter would be seen as a pro-abolitionist gesture; they both were attempts to uphold the government’s integrity.

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<sup>174</sup> Lord Lyons to Lord John Russell, Washington, 7 January 1861, ibid., 239.

<sup>175</sup> Lynn M. Case and Warren F. Spencer, The United States and France: Civil War Diplomacy (Philadelphia; University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), 602.

<sup>176</sup> Ferris, Desperate Diplomacy, 20; Lord Lyons to Lord Russell, Washington, 12 February 1861, Barnes and Barnes, eds., Private and Confidential, 241.

<sup>177</sup> Edward Everett journal, 23 August 1861, Everett Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>178</sup> The document is in the Lincoln Papers, not the Seward Papers, which suggests that it may never have been sent.

Declaring war on European powers he dismissed, saying that the “news received yesterday in regard to St. Domingo certainly brings in a new item within range of our foreign policy; but up to that time we have been preparing circulars and instructions to ministers and the like, all in perfect harmony, without a suggestion that we had no foreign policy.” Seward’s bid to assume responsibility for making and implementing policy Lincoln handled tactfully: “if this must be done, I must do it. When a general line of policy is adopted, I apprehend there is no danger of its being changed without good reason, or continuing to be a subject of unnecessary debate; still upon points arising in its progress I wish, and I suppose I am entitled to have, the advice of all the Cabinet.”<sup>179</sup>

Many would have reacted to Seward’s haughty memo indignantly rather than magnanimously. Later in April, the president again demonstrated his forbearance toward Seward when informed by David Dudley Field that the Sage of Auburn and his friends had not only opposed his nomination at Chicago but also his election “until they found that he could be elected without them.” Lincoln “replied that he knew that, but had forgiven them.”<sup>180</sup>

Seward had originally planned to have his memorandum and Lincoln’s response, which he anticipated would be favorable, published in the New York Times. When the president rejected it, the secretary of state inspired attacks on the president in friendly journals including the Times, which on April 3 ran a blistering editorial, “Wanted – A

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<sup>179</sup> Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 4:317.

<sup>180</sup> Field said that this conversation took place in the presence of Chase, Seward, and Preston King. David Dudley Field to Gideon Welles, New York, 20 May 1873, Welles Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

Policy,” containing the arguments in Seward’s April 1 memo. Weed’s Albany Evening Journal published a similar piece.<sup>181</sup>

Lincoln acknowledged his reliance on Seward’s judgment about international affairs, though not in this instance. Soon after arriving in Washington, he told the New Yorker: “there is one part of my work that I shall have to leave largely to you. I shall have to depend upon you for taking care of these matters of foreign affairs, of which I know so little, and which I reckon you are familiar.”<sup>182</sup> When a caller offered advice on dealing with Great Britain, the president replied that “it does not so much signify what I think, you must persuade Seward to think as you do.”<sup>183</sup> In June, he told Carl Schurz “that he deplored having given so little attention to foreign affairs and being so dependent upon other people’s judgment, and that he felt the necessity of ‘studying up’ on the subject as much [as] his opportunities permitted him.”<sup>184</sup> To the minister representing Bremen, Lincoln confessed: “I don’t know anything about diplomacy. I will be very apt to make blunders.”<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> James B. Swain to John Hay, Sing Sing, New York, 21 February 1888, Nicolay-Hay Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield. See Patrick Sowle, “A Reappraisal of Seward’s Memorandum of April 1, 1861, to Lincoln,” Journal of Southern History 33 (1967): 235-39.

<sup>182</sup> Frederick Seward, Reminiscences of a War-Time Statesman and Diplomat, 1830-1915 (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1916), 147.

<sup>183</sup> Motley to his wife, Woodland Hill, 31 June 1861, George William Curtis, ed., The Correspondence of John Lothrop Motley (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1889), 1:394.

<sup>184</sup> Carl Schurz, The Reminiscences of Carl Schurz (3 vols.; New York: McClure, 1907-08), 2:242-43.

<sup>185</sup> Schleiden’s dispatch to his home government, Washington, 4 March 1861, copy, Carl Schurz Papers, Library of Congress.

Ironically, in April it was Lincoln who had to keep the bellicose Seward from making a diplomatic blunder. It would not be the only time he did so. The president regarded Spain's actions in Santo Domingo as a mere "speck."<sup>186</sup>

#### LINCOLN'S OFFER TO SWAP FORT SUMTER FOR VIRGINIA

While the Sumter expedition was being mounted in early April, Seward continued trying to control events. There was still time, for the point of no return had not yet been reached. Neither the governor of South Carolina nor Major Anderson had been notified, and Fox's ships had not left New York. Perhaps something at the last minute might prevent the outbreak of war. To that end, Seward urged the president to summon the leader of Virginia's Unionists, George W. Summers, who was spearheading the fight against secession at the Richmond convention. On April 1, the secretary telegraphed Summers stating that Lincoln "desires your attendance at Washington as soon as convenient." Summers, sensing a plot to lure him away from the Old Dominion's capital on the eve of a crucial vote, was skeptical.<sup>187</sup> On April 3, a messenger arrived from Washington with instructions from Lincoln to tell Summers: "I want to see him at once, for there is no time to be lost; what is to be done must be done quickly. . . . If Mr. Summers cannot come himself, let him send some friend of his, some Union man in whom he has confidence and who can confer freely with me."<sup>188</sup> A caucus of Unionist leaders in Richmond decided that John B. Baldwin, "one of the most determined, fearless

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<sup>186</sup> Lincoln said this on April 3. John A. Dahlgren, diary, copy, Nicolay Papers, Library of Congress (entry for 3 April 1861).

<sup>187</sup> Crofts, Reluctant Confederates, 301.

<sup>188</sup> Allan B. Magruder, "A Piece of Secret History: President Lincoln and the Virginia Convention of 1861," Atlantic Monthly 35 (April 1875): 439; Allan B. Magruder to Jeremiah S. Black, Baltimore, 27 July 1874, Black Papers, Library of Congress.



and pronounced Union men, then in Virginia,” should meet with Lincoln instead of Summers. Baldwin left immediately for Washington.<sup>189</sup>

Lincoln had established indirect contact with Baldwin through a mutual friend, Herring Chrisman, a Virginia-born attorney living in Abingdon, Illinois. In February, after Baldwin had been elected to the Virginia convention as one of the youngest delegates, he wrote to Chrisman “stating that the danger was great, and refusing to be responsible for the result in convention at all without an implicit declaration from Mr. Lincoln of a policy on which he could safely intrench [sic], giving him a cart blanche, without so much as a hint of what it should be.” Chrisman showed this missive to Lincoln, who, after reading it, said: “Tell them I will execute the fugitive slave law better than it has ever been. I can do that. Tell them I will protect slavery in the States where it exists. I can do that. Tell them they shall have all the offices south of Mason & Dixon’s line if they will take them. I will send nobody down there as long as they will execute the offices themselves.”<sup>190</sup>

On April 4, as the Virginia convention was voting 89-45 against secession, Baldwin reported to Seward, who escorted him to the White House. There a much-disputed conversation took place, described in two contradictory accounts, one by Baldwin and the other by a friend of his, John Minor Botts, who spoke with Lincoln the

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<sup>189</sup> Hugh W. Shepley to S. W. Crawford, Staunton, 23 July 1869, and Baldwin to S. W. Crawford, Staunton, 1 August 1869, Crawford Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond; Crofts, Reluctant Confederates, 301.

<sup>190</sup> Herring to the editor, Abingdon, Illinois, 22 October [1879], Chicago Tribune, n.d., clipping in the S. W. Crawford Papers, Virginia Historical Society. Chrisman (1823-1911), son of a wealthy slaveholder in Rock County, Virginia, served as the Commonwealth’s attorney for that county (1847-52), moved to Chicago in 1854, then to Knox County, Illinois, and finally to Pott County, Iowa.

following day.<sup>191</sup> Five years later Baldwin testified that Lincoln showed little enthusiasm for compromise and made no offer to withdraw the garrison from Fort Sumter if Virginia would disband her secession convention; at that same time Botts said the president had informed him he had told Baldwin he would do so. Botts also recalled Lincoln saying: “I have always been an Old-line Henry-Clay Whig, and if your Southern people will let me alone, I will administer this government as nearly upon the principles that he would have administered it as it is possible for one man to follow in the path of another.” Rhetorically he asked: “What do I want with war? I am no war man; I want peace more than any man in this country, and will make greater sacrifices to preserve it than any other man in the nation.”<sup>192</sup> Earlier he had told a visitor from the Deep South: “There will be no blood shed during my Administration if I can prevent it.”<sup>193</sup>

Lincoln may have deliberately misled Botts in describing his offer to Baldwin, but that seems out of character. Perhaps the president had intended to make the offer to Baldwin but did not do so for some reason. Or, as a Virginia historian speculated, Baldwin may have viewed Lincoln’s offer “as of little importance” because it was “not coupled with the assurance that the Federal Government had no intention of coercing the

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<sup>191</sup> John Minor Botts, The Great Rebellion: Its Secret History, Rise, Progress, and Disastrous Failure (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1866), 197-98, 201-2; Interview Between President Lincoln and Col. John B. Baldwin, April 4th, 1861 (Staunton: Spectator Job Office, 1866). For a discussion of the discrepancies between the two accounts, see Henry T. Shanks, The Secession Movement in Virginia, 1847-1861

(Richmond Garrett and Massie, 1934), 192-95. Botts’ account has several details wrong, but his reputation as a “relentlessly honest” man lends credibility to his version of events. William A. Link, Roots of Secession: Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 146. In addition, John F. Lewis of Rockingham, a delegate to the Virginia convention, testified that on April 17, Baldwin, in conversation with Botts and Lewis, acknowledged that Botts’s account of Lincoln’s offer to abandon Sumter and Baldwin’s rejection of it was accurate. See Lewis’s congressional testimony of February 1866 and his letters to Botts of 7 and 14 April 1866,

<sup>192</sup> Botts, Great Rebellion, 196.

<sup>193</sup> Washington correspondence, 13 March, Baltimore American, n.d., copied in the New York Times, 15 March 1861.

Cotton States.”<sup>194</sup> Baldwin may have told less than the full truth in his post-war accounts of Lincoln’s remarks; as a devoted Southern patriot who served in both the Confederacy’s army and its Congress, he could well have desired to make the president look belligerent instead of conciliatory and thus indirectly blame him for the outbreak of war. Or Baldwin may have believed that it was impossible to have the Virginia convention adjourn sine die at that point.<sup>195</sup> It is impossible to say. The only record resembling a contemporary report of Baldwin’s account of the interview was written by the chairman of the convention’s committee on federal relations, Robert Young Conrad. On April 6 he told his wife: “We hear directly from several gentlemen who have within one day or two called on Mr. Lincoln that he really does not know his own mind, is wavering in fact or (what is more likely) is unwilling to admit his weakness, for fear of being deserted by his party.”<sup>196</sup>

Much evidence supports the conclusion that Lincoln did offer to remove the Sumter garrison if the Virginia convention would adjourn sine die. He said that he had twice proposed to abandon Sumter if Virginia would remain in the Union. In October 1861, while reminiscing about the secession crisis, he mentioned the February meeting with Rives during which he proposed to swap Sumter for the Old Dominion. Then, said Lincoln, “he renewed the proposition to Summers [sic - in April, he spoke not to Summers but to Baldwin, who was sent in Summers’ place] but without any result.”

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<sup>194</sup> Beverly B. Munford to Frederic Bancroft, Richmond, 10 February 1910, Horace White Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

<sup>195</sup> Hugh W. Shepley to S. W. Crawford, Staunton, 23 July 1869, Crawford Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond.

<sup>196</sup> Robert Y. Conrad to E. W. P. Conrad, Richmond, 6 April 1861, “The Break-Up of a Nation: Robert Y. Conrad Letters at the Virginia Secession Convention,” Winchester-Frederick Historical Society Journal 8 (1994-95): 15-16.

According to John Hay's diary account of this conversation, the "President was most anxious to prevent bloodshed."<sup>197</sup> On January 9, 1863, George Plumer Smith of Philadelphia wrote to Hay saying: "A few days after the Convention at Richmond passed the ordinance of secession [on April 17], I accompanied a delegation from Western Virginia to Washington, to procure Arms for their defense at home.

"The President received us with much interest and kindness.

"During the interview, on my mentioning to him the fact that one of the Committee, Mr. [Campbell] Tarr, of Wellsburg – had been a member of the convention, Mr Lincoln spoke very freely of the attempts he had made to hold Virginia firm for the Union – and then, greatly to Mr Tarr's surprise mentioned, that amongst other influences, he had sent for Mr Baldwin, of Augusta Co. a member of the Convention, and had him in the White House with him alone – and told him, if they would pass resolutions of adherence to the Union, then adjourn and go home – he, the President, would take the responsibility, at the earliest proper time – to withdraw the troops from Fort Sumpter – and do all within the line of his duty to ward off collision.

"He then imposed strict silence upon us in regard to what he then had told us.

"Will you please now ask him whether what I state is correct, and whether he now cares about its becoming known."<sup>198</sup>

Hay replied: "I received your favor of yesterday this morning and at once laid the matter before the President. He directs me to state in reply that your statement is

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<sup>197</sup> Burlingame and Ettlinger, eds., Hay Diary, 28 (entry for 28 October 1861).

<sup>198</sup> George Plumer Smith to Hay, Philadelphia, 9 January 1863, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress. The delegation consisted of Adam Kuhn, David Fleming, Joseph Applegate, and Tarr.

substantially correct, but that for the present he still prefers that you withhold it from the public."<sup>199</sup>

Later Smith gave a fuller version of this interview, which took place on May 1. Lincoln, according to Smith, said: “As soon as I began to get the hang of things here, I felt that, if I could hold on to old Virginia and through her, the Border States, we might yet escape . . . civil war – and, therefore, without consulting anyone but Mr Seward, had him write to Judge Summers to come here on important business, of which he, Mr Seward, would inform him on his arrival – but it must be kept a secret from the public. Knowing something of Judge Summers’ timid character, we had requested that, if he could not come – he, or other Union men in the convention would choose a thorough Union man in his place, and they chose John B. Baldwin.” Seward “met Baldwin at the Boat, took him to his own house – and later in the evening brought him over here.” The two men spoke at length, with Lincoln urging his guest to do everything possible to save the Union. But, said the president, “I found him ‘very fishy’ on the matter.” So Lincoln then proposed to remove the troops from Sumter if the Virginia convention adjourned sine die.<sup>200</sup> Other members of the Virginia delegation confirmed the recollections of Smith and Tarr.<sup>201</sup> In addition, Lincoln told several others, including Francis Pierpont,

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<sup>199</sup> John Hay to George Plumer Smith, Washington, 10 January 1863, Burlingame, ed., At Lincoln’s Side, 30.

<sup>200</sup> Memorandum by Smith, dated Philadelphia, 5 March 1878, enclosed in Smith to Hay, Philadelphia, 9 March 1878, Nicolay Papers, Library of Congress. Smith’s cover letter is in the Nicolay-Hay Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

<sup>201</sup> Tarr to George P. Smith, Wheeling, 14 September 1865; Tarr to George P. Smith, near Wellsburg, 28 February 1878; Tarr to Nicolay, near Wellsburg, 11 April 1878; Tarr to Hay, Brunswick, Missouri, 26 March 1878, copies in the Nicolay Papers, Library of Congress; John Minor Botts’s reply to Baldwin, New York Times, 16 July 1866; Smith to Hay, Philadelphia, 9 March 1878, Nicolay-Hay Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield. In his letter of 9 March 1878, Smith reported that David Fleming of the delegation confirmed Smith’s account. In 1866, John Minor Botts, whose papers are not extant, claimed that he had letters alleging that Lincoln had told the same story about his interview with Baldwin to the

about his offer to Baldwin. According to Pierpont, Baldwin asked that both Forts Sumter and Pickens be abandoned. As the president had done with Rives, he recounted Aesop's fable about the lion and the maiden. "It is enough to give up my teeth," Lincoln insisted, "but the claws I must reserve for my own use."<sup>202</sup> Lincoln may have been misleading these men, or perhaps he misremembered what had happened; both of those possibilities, however, seem unlikely.

In late April, Kentucky Senator Garrett Davis called on the president, who "most distinctly" told him that when Baldwin "came here from the Virginia convention he had made the proposition to Mr. Baldwin and his colleagues distinctly that if the Virginia convention would adjourn without doing anything he would withdraw the troops from Fort Sumter."<sup>203</sup>

The day after Lincoln met with Baldwin, it was reported that he told callers "he exhibited to the South, in his course, a peaceful disposition in every way." But there "was no disposition in the South evinced to do other than take advantage of his forbearance."<sup>204</sup> He believed that his administration's "good intentions have been

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following men: Francis H. Pierpont, Congressman John S. Millson, Dr. Robert K. Stone of Washington, Garrett Davis, Robert A. Gray of Rockingham (brother-in-law of Baldwin), Campbell Tarr, and three other men in the company of Tarr (Applegate, Kuhn, and Tarr). Botts, Great Rebellion, 200-1. Among those letters were two from John A. Parker (dated Washington, 31 March 1866 and Oakland, 1 May 1866), which appeared in the New York Times, 16 July 1866. In addition, Joseph Applegate of the committee vouched for the accuracy of Botts's 1866 account. Applegate to John Hay, Wellsburg, West Virginia, 11 March 1878, copy, Nicolay Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>202</sup> Pierpont told this to Botts in 1866. New York Times, 16 July 1866.

<sup>203</sup> Congressional Globe, 40<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session, 1207 (17 February 1868). Davis also told John B. Baldwin that Lincoln had informed him that Baldwin had received such an offer. Baldwin commented that the "high character of Mr. Davis satisfies me that what he say must be true & I am therefore brought to the conclusion that Mr. Lincoln has made such a statement." Baldwin to S. W. Crawford, Staunton, 1 August 1869, S. W. Crawford Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond.

<sup>204</sup> Washington correspondence, 5 April, Philadelphia Inquirer, 6 April 1861.

misinterpreted, and the country, in the eyes of the world, is fast acquiring a reputation that it does not deserve.”<sup>205</sup>

Three years later, Fox recalled that Lincoln had sent for a Unionist member of the Virginia convention “and assured him that if that convention would adjourn, instead of staying in session menacing the Gov’t. that he would immediately direct Major Anderson to evacuate Fort Sumter.” When that offer proved unavailing, the president on April 4 “sent for me and told me that the expedition [to relieve Sumter] might go forward.”<sup>206</sup> That same day, Lincoln notified Anderson that a relief expedition was under way, but he did not inform Governor Pickens of this step, for that would represent the point of no return, and the president still wished to keep his options open as he awaited word from Florida.<sup>207</sup> Two days later, he learned to his consternation that Scott’s order of March 12 (to have the troops aboard the Brooklyn transferred to Fort Pickens) had been refused by Navy Captain Henry A. Adams, in command of the Union squadron off Pensacola. Adams, who had three sons serving in the Confederate military, told Secretary Welles that he was unwilling to obey orders from an army officer – especially orders that would violate the truce which had been in effect since January – and requested further instructions.<sup>208</sup> (This was peculiar, for the Confederates had already broken the truce in

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<sup>205</sup> Washington correspondence, 7 April, New York Herald, 8 April 1861.

<sup>206</sup> Memo enclosed in Fox to Benson J. Lossing, Washington, 7 September 1864, in an unidentified clipping, Lincoln Museum, Fort Wayne; Thompson and Wainwright, eds., Correspondence of Fox, 1:39.

<sup>207</sup> Cameron to Robert Anderson, Washington, 4 April 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress. Some historians think the point of no return was reached on March 29, when Lincoln ordered Fox to prepare to relieve Sumter. Others argue that it was April 4, when Anderson was notified and Fox given the final order to sail. But Fox did not depart until April 8. Lincoln knew he had breathing room as long as those ships were still in New York harbor and the telegraph lines were intact. On April 3, Fox wrote that his “expedition is ordered to be got ready, but I doubt if we shall get off. Delay, indecision, obstacles.” Thompson and Wainwright, eds., Correspondence of Fox, 1:19.

<sup>208</sup> Adams to Welles, on board the Sabine off Pensacola, 1 April 1861, Welles Papers, Library of Congress.

early March by augmenting their forces at Pensacola.)<sup>209</sup> The secretary, in consultation with Lincoln, immediately dispatched Navy Lieutenant John L. Worden to Pensacola with orders directing Adams to carry out Scott's March 12 directive.<sup>210</sup> Worden delivered the message on April 12, and the troops accordingly occupied Fort Pickens.<sup>211</sup>

Too late! There was insufficient time for the administration to learn this good news and then call off Fox's mission. Five days thereafter, Porter's ships arrived at Pensacola and significantly reinforced Pickens, which remained in Union hands throughout the war. Fox's squadron, shorn of the Powhatan, arrived at Charleston too late to defend Sumter.<sup>212</sup>

A month earlier, Major Anderson's message about his dwindling supplies had ruined Lincoln's original plan for dealing with secession. Now Captain Adams's refusal to obey orders wrecked his plan for solving the Sumter dilemma. He had hoped to follow the policy described in a New York Tribune editorial: "let them [the secessionists of the Deep South] severely alone – allow them to wear out the military ardor of their adherents in fruitless drillings and marches, and to exhaust the patience of their fellow-citizens by

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<sup>209</sup> In late January, the Buchanan administration had ordered the troops aboard the Brooklyn to remain on that ship rather than move to Fort Pickens; in return, the Florida state troops under Colonel William H. Chase agreed to refrain from attacking the fort and to stop constructing batteries aimed at it. In March, Braxton Bragg replaced Chase and resumed work on those batteries; he also enlarged the Confederate forces in Pensacola. Thus he violated the truce, releasing Adams from any obligation to abide by its terms. Adams chose to do so nonetheless. Edward C. Bearss, "Fort Pickens and the Secession Crisis: January-February 1861," Gulf Coast Historical Review 4 (1989): 22; Ernest F. Dibble, "War Averters: Seward, Mallory, and Fort Pickens," Florida Historical Quarterly 49 (1971): 236.

<sup>210</sup> Welles to Adams, Washington, 6 April 1861, copy, Welles Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>211</sup> James Pickett Jones, "John L. Worden and the Fort Pickens Mission: The Confederacy's First Prisoner of War," Alabama Review 21 (1968): 113-20; James P. Jones, ed., "Lincoln's Courier: John L. Worden's Mission to Fort Pickens," Florida Historical Quarterly 41 (1962-63): 145-53.

<sup>212</sup> When Fox on the Baltic arrived at Charleston, the bombardment of the fort was already underway. He might have participated in the fight if the Powhatan had not been detached to form part of the Pickens expedition, or if the warship Pocahontas had rendezvoused with him as planned, or if the seas had not been so rough. Thompson and Wainwright, eds., Correspondence of Fox, 1:31-35; Fox's undated account of the expedition, ibid., 38-41.



the amount and frequency of their pecuniary exactions – and the fabric of their power will melt away like fog in the beams of a morning sun. Only give them enough rope, and they will speedily fulfill their destiny – the People, even of South Carolina, rejecting their sway as intolerable, and returning to the mild and paternal guardianship of the Union.”<sup>213</sup>

Lincoln’s faith in Southern Unionism remained strong. Ten weeks later he would tell Congress: “It may well be questioned whether there is, to-day, a majority of the legally qualified voters of any State, except perhaps South Carolina, in favor of disunion. There is much reason to believe that the Union men are the majority in many, if not in every other one, of the so-called seceded States. The contrary has not been demonstrated in any one of them. It is ventured to affirm this, even of Virginia and Tennessee.”<sup>214</sup>

#### THE POINT OF NO RETURN

At 6 p.m. on April 6, hours after learning of Captain Adams’s refusal to allow the reinforcement of Fort Pickens, Lincoln reluctantly sent the South Carolina governor word of Fox’s expedition, stating that “an attempt will be made to supply Fort Sumpter with provisions only, and that, if such attempt be not resisted, no effort to throw in men, arms, or supplies will be made, without further notice, or in case of an attack upon the Fort.”<sup>215</sup>

The last phrase meant that if the Confederates fired on Sumter, then an attempt would be made to reinforce it with men, arms, and supplies. The next day elements of Fox’s

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<sup>213</sup> “The Policy of Forbearance,” New York Tribune, 27 March 1861.

<sup>214</sup> Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 4:437.

<sup>215</sup> Niven, Welles, 338; Simon Cameron to Robert S. Chew, Washington, 6 April 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress. This was drafted by Lincoln and carried by Robert S. Chew of the State Department and Lieutenant Theodore Talbott, who delivered it to Governor Pickens on April 8. General Beauregard, who was present when the message was read to the governor, immediately alerted the Confederate authorities in Montgomery. Robert S. Chew to Lincoln, Charleston, 8 April 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

squadron left New York for Charleston. The die was finally cast, though Fox still thought on April 8 that the expedition might be called off.<sup>216</sup>

When Lincoln issued the order to Fox and sent the fateful message to Governor Pickens, he did so after consulting only with Welles, Fox, and Montgomery Blair. (In 1862, Lincoln said “that when he determined to give the rebels at Charleston notice of his purpose, the entire cabinet was against him.”)<sup>217</sup> Upon learning of this action later that evening, Seward expressed astonishment. “I want no more at this time of the Administration,” he told George Harrington of the treasury department. “We are not yet in a position to go to war. While we have been quietly engaged in recalling as far and as fast as possible our scattered naval and military forces, the Rebels have been engaged in their preparation for an attack on Fort Sumpter, and the circumstances are such that any attempt on our part to bring on a conflict in Charleston Harbor . . . would meet with defeat and promptly arrest every effort of the loyal men” in the Upper South and Border States.<sup>218</sup>

Meanwhile the Confederate commissioners were growing ever more alarmed as they read accounts of the fleet being outfitted in New York. On April 7, when Campbell relayed their concern to Seward, the secretary blandly reassured them: “Faith as to Sumter fully kept; wait and see.” The commissioners inferred that the task force was destined for Pickens, since Seward pointedly made no mention of that fort. After the

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<sup>216</sup> Virginia Fox diary, 8 April 1861, Levi Woodbury Papers, Library of Congress. This account of events follows closely that given by Lincoln in his July 4, 1861, message to Congress.

<sup>217</sup> Theodore Calvin Pease and James G. Randall, eds., The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning (2 vols.; Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1925-33), 1:563 (25 July 1862).

<sup>218</sup> “Fort Sumpter,” undated memorandum by George Harrington, Harrington Papers, Missouri Historical Society.

secretary of state formally turned down their renewed demand for recognition, they sent him a blistering letter and departed Washington.<sup>219</sup> Campbell also wrote Seward, declaring that the Confederate authorities felt themselves the victims of “systematic duplicity.”<sup>220</sup> Since the Sage of Auburn had repeatedly assured the judge that Sumter would be abandoned, this reaction was understandable.<sup>221</sup>

Lincoln could not be sure that his decision would precipitate a war, though he had good reason to believe that it might well do so. On January 9, the South Carolinians had fired on the Star of the West when it tried to relieve the fort, and on April 3 a small schooner flying the stars and stripes had been shelled as it entered Charleston harbor, which it mistook for Savannah.<sup>222</sup> But there was a remote chance that the Confederates would hesitate to fire on a ship conveying food to hungry men.<sup>223</sup> After all, the South Carolinians had not fired on Sumter when the Star of the West approached it. Such restraint seemed unlikely, however, for if Confederate authorities allowed the fort to be supplied, they would be humiliated and Unionism in the Upper South and Border States would be bolstered. By announcing that he was sending food rather than troops, Lincoln had masterfully put his opponents on the horns of a dilemma; both options were unpalatable. As the Union fleet sailed south, a journalist reported it was “conceded on all sides that it was a most happy stroke of policy on the part of the Government to make first an attempt to relieve Major Anderson with provisions simply, as the refusal of the

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<sup>219</sup> Campbell, “Facts of History,” 35-36; Crawford, Genesis of the Civil War, 340-43; Seward, Seward at Washington, 2:537-38.

<sup>220</sup> Campbell to Seward, Washington, 13 April 1861, Campbell, “Facts of History,” 38-41.

<sup>221</sup> Johnson, “Fort Sumter and Confederate Diplomacy,” 465.

<sup>222</sup> Crawford, Genesis of the Civil War, 375-80.

<sup>223</sup> Potter “Why the Republicans Rejected Both Compromise and Secession,” 104-5.

revolutionists to allow what must appear as a simple act of humanity, will not only fasten odium upon them in the eyes of the entire civilized world, but also greatly add to the moral strength of the true Government in the North, and to the Union sentiment in the Border Slave States.”<sup>224</sup> In the apt words of Lincoln’s private secretaries, when he “finally gave the order that the fleet should sail he was master of the situation; master of his Cabinet; master of the moral attitude and issues of the struggle; master of the public opinion which must arise out of the impending conflict; master if the rebels hesitated or repented, because they would thereby forfeit their prestige with the South; master if they persisted, for he would then command a united North.”<sup>225</sup>

A Democratic newspaper in Ohio argued that by sending the fleet to Charleston, Lincoln was “shrewdly inviting the secessionists to open the ball.”<sup>226</sup> A prominent New York Democrat, John L. O’Sullivan, saw “the cunning hand of the third rate village lawyer” at work. The president, Sullivan charged, had adroitly inveigled the South into firing the first shot in order to unite his party and to restore his sinking popularity.<sup>227</sup> In fact, Lincoln hoped to avoid, not provoke, bloodshed. If the Fort Pickens strategy had worked, he might have been able to do so; but it failed. By April 6, when the president sent his fateful message to the governor of South Carolina, he had exhausted every

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<sup>224</sup> Washington correspondence by Special, 11 April, Cincinnati Commercial, 12 April 1861.

<sup>225</sup> Nicolay and Hay, Lincoln, 4:62.

<sup>226</sup> Cleveland Plain Dealer, 9 April 1861, quoted in John Thomas Hubbell, “The Northern Democracy and the Crisis of Disunion, 1860-1861” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1969), 179.

<sup>227</sup> John L. O’Sullivan to Samuel J. Tilden, Lisbon, [Portugal], 1 August 1861, Tilden Papers, New York Public Library. Among the historians repeating that charge, the most notable was Charles W. Ramsdell, who cited a passage from Orville Browning’s diary to clinch his point. Ramsdell, “Lincoln and Fort Sumter,” Journal of Southern History 3 (1937): 259-88. On July 3, 1861, Lincoln told Browning “The plan succeeded. They attacked Sumter – it fell, and thus, did more service than it otherwise could.” The absence of quotation marks in the diary indicates that these words were Browning’s paraphrase, which may not accurately reflect what Lincoln said.

peaceful option short of acknowledging the legitimacy of secession or surrendering the basic principles of the Republican party. He probably believed that war might well come as a result of the attempt to provision Fort Sumter, though he did not want war. From Hurlbut he learned that relief ships would be fired on, but that did not necessarily mean that Sumter would also be shelled.<sup>228</sup> But if war were to come, he understandably wanted the odium for starting it to fall on the Confederates.<sup>229</sup> As he had said to the secessionists in his inaugural address: “In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you, unless you first assail it. You can have no conflict, without being yourselves the aggressors.” It was widely believed in the North that “if the Southern Confederacy initiates a war for the simple reason that this government has seen fit to reinforce one of its garrisons, the entire responsibility of the conflict will rest with it.”<sup>230</sup>

Lincoln may have shared Gustavus Fox’s view that relieving Sumter was “the most important peace measure,” for “its weakness provokes an attack” and “more men & provisions &c. would prevent it & perhaps prevent entirely a civil war.”<sup>231</sup> Even if war broke out, it might be brief and relatively bloodless.<sup>232</sup>

<sup>228</sup> Williams, Lincoln Finds a General, 1:56-57.

<sup>229</sup> Crofts, Reluctant Confederates, 416-17; Daniel Crofts, “Secession Winter: William Henry Seward and the Decision for War,” New York History 65 (1984): 230-37; Nevins, War for the Union, 1:74n; Randall, Lincoln the President, 1:342-50; James G. Randall, “Lincoln’s Sumter Dilemma,” in Randall, Lincoln the Liberal Statesman (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1948), 88-117; Richard N. Current, Lincoln and the First Shot (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1963), 182-199; Stamp, And the War Came, 284-86; David M. Potter, “Why the Republicans Rejected Both Compromise and Secession,” in George Harmon Knoles, ed., The Crisis of the Union, 1860-1861 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 90-106.

<sup>230</sup> Washington correspondence by B., 5 April, New York Evening Post, 6 April 1861

<sup>231</sup> Virginia Fox diary, 5 February 1861, Levi Woodbury Papers, Library of Congress. On this line of reasoning, see Potter, “Why the Republicans Rejected Both Compromise and Secession,” 99.

<sup>232</sup> Stamp, “Comment on ‘Why the Republicans Rejected Both Compromise and Secession,’” Knoles, ed., Crisis of the Union, 108-9.

As Porter and Fox steamed southward (they did not get underway till April 8), many Northerners took heart. A Connecticut Republican reported that “we all feel that Mr Lincoln has something of the Old Hickory about him. I hear on every hand . . . ‘Give the South (the rebels) a good thrashing.’”<sup>233</sup> A resident of the neighboring Empire State urged the president to “Give those South Carolina ruffians h–l. and we will support you.”<sup>234</sup> On April 11, when Lincoln asked John Minor Botts what remedy might cure secessionism, the Virginian replied: “Grape for the ranks and hemp for the leaders.”<sup>235</sup>

#### GIRDING FOR WAR

Lincoln received tenders of military assistance from Indiana Governor Oliver P. Morton, who proffered 6000 militia to enforce the laws; from an agent dispatched by John A. Andrew, governor of Massachusetts, who pledged that 2000 “picked troops ready for service” would be dispatched as soon as they were needed; from the governor of Rhode Island, who offered to defend Washington with “a Battery of light Artillery, 6 pr. Horses & men complete, and a force of 1000 men completely disciplined & equipped”; and from a patriotic New Yorker who wrote the president saying: “In the present crisis, and distracted state of the country, if your Honor wishes colored volunteers, you have only to signify by answering the above note at 70 E. 13 St. N.Y.C., with instructions, and the above will meet with prompt attention, whenever your honor wishes them.”<sup>236</sup> A Kansan proposed to raise 1000 men to combat the secessionists.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> George P. Bissell to Gideon Welles, Hartford, 9 April 1861, Welles Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

<sup>234</sup> Anonymous to Lincoln, New York, 10 April 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>235</sup> Washington correspondence, 11 April, Cincinnati Gazette, 12 April 1861.

<sup>236</sup> Kenneth M. Stampp, Indiana Politics During the Civil War (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1949), 70; Washington correspondence, 9 April, Philadelphia Inquirer, 10 April 1861; Henry Greenleaf

General Scott recommended that ten companies of militia be recruited to protect the capital, and on April 11, the District of Columbia Militia was mustered into the federal service.<sup>238</sup> (On April 1, Lincoln had asked Scott “to make short, comprehensive daily reports” about the status of the military.)<sup>239</sup>

On the fateful 6<sup>th</sup> of April, Lincoln met with the governors of Indiana, Maine, Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ohio, who had been summoned to the capital by Horace Greeley to urge a hard line against secessionists.<sup>240</sup> In addition, the president had invited Pennsylvania Governor Andrew G. Curtin to Washington, saying that the District seemed in danger of attack.<sup>241</sup> To help gird for such a possibility, Lincoln wanted troops from the Keystone State available. He urged Curtin to persuade his legislature to pass a bill providing for the reorganization of the state’s militia.<sup>242</sup> The governor agreed to do so, and promptly began drafting a message to the lawmakers in Harrisburg. On April 8, the president wrote him: “I think the necessity of being ready increases. Look to it.”<sup>243</sup> Three days later the legislators approved a bill appropriating \$500,000 for arming the

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Pearson, The Life of John A. Andrew, Governor of Massachusetts, 1861-1865 (2 vols.; Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1904), 1:173; William Sprague to Lincoln, Providence, 11 April 1861, and Levin Tilmon to Lincoln, New York, 8 April 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>237</sup> J. B. Stockton to Lincoln, Washington, 8 April 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>238</sup> Winfield Scott to Lincoln, Washington, 9 April 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress; Washington correspondence, 11 April, New York Times, 12 April 1861.

<sup>239</sup> Lincoln to Seward, Washington, 1 April 1861, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 4:316.

<sup>240</sup> Washington correspondence by “Caliph,” 8 April, Baltimore Sun, 9 April 1861; Washington correspondence, 7 April, New York Herald, 8 April 1861; William B. Hesseltine, Lincoln and the War Governors (New York: Knopf, 1948), 144.

<sup>241</sup> Curtin said he had received a letter from the president expressing the belief that the city was in danger of attack. Harrisburg correspondence, 9 April, New York Times, 10 April 1861. See also Hesseltine, Lincoln and the War Governors, 144-45.

<sup>242</sup> Harrisburg correspondence, 9 April, New York Times, 10 April 1861.

<sup>243</sup> Lincoln to Curtin, Washington, 8 April 1861, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 4:324.

state militia.<sup>244</sup> Lincoln urged several other governors to call up their militias and be prepared to defend the capital on a moment's notice. He predicted "that when the ball opened," Washington "will be the first [city] that will be attacked." He had been advised that he would have to take refuge in another city but insisted that he would remain in Washington "even if he had to be protected and surrounded by the military arm of the government."<sup>245</sup>

In the midst of all the excitement and anxiety, office seekers continued to pester Lincoln, who jocularly remarked on the morning of April 10 "that he would henceforth require all applicants to demonstrate their patriotism by serving three months at Forts Sumter and Pickens."<sup>246</sup> That evening, he more soberly told a caller that soon it would become clear "whether the revolutionists dare to fire upon an unarmed vessel sent to the rescue of our starving soldiers." With "a calmness of spirit" that contrasted sharply with the agitation around him, he "spoke very composedly" and seemed ready to abide by the consequences of his decision to provision Fort Sumter.<sup>247</sup> "I hope it may do some good," he said.<sup>248</sup>

## THE CONFEDERATE DECISION TO INAUGURATE WAR

A day earlier, Jefferson Davis and his cabinet had instructed the general in charge at Charleston, P. G. T. Beauregard, to insist upon the immediate surrender of Sumter; if

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<sup>244</sup> William A. Russell, "A Biography of Alexander K. McClure" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1953), 232.

<sup>245</sup> Washington correspondence, 10 April, New York Herald, 11 April 1861.

<sup>246</sup> Washington correspondence by Special, 10 April, Cincinnati Commercial, 11 April 1861.

<sup>247</sup> Washington correspondence by Special, 11 April, Cincinnati Commercial and New York Herald, 12 April 1861.

<sup>248</sup> On April 11, Lincoln told this to John A. Bingham. Bingham, "Abraham Lincoln," The Current (Chicago), 24 April 1886, 282.



Anderson declined, Beauregard was to reduce the fort. In authorizing the first shot, Davis rather than Lincoln seems to have been motivated by short term political considerations.<sup>249</sup> He desperately wanted the Upper South and Border States to join the Confederacy and could reasonably assume that once hostilities began, the eight Slave States not yet part of his government would join with the Deep South.<sup>250</sup> Other secessionists believed that to be the case. Former Congressman J. L. Pugh of Alabama explained in January, “I am oppressed by the apprehension that we are in great danger from the reconstructionists” (i.e., those who supported reunification of the country). Should the Republicans back the Crittenden Compromise, “the border states will present an unbroken front & my fear is we shall be overwhelmed.” That threat would disappear once fighting broke out. “Now pardon me for suggesting that South Carolina has the power of putting us beyond the reach of reconstruction by taking Fort Sumter at any cost.”<sup>251</sup> To a Charleston crowd, Virginia fire-eater Roger Pryor declared on April 10: “I assure you that just so certain as to-morrow’s sun will rise upon us, just so certain will Virginia be a member of the Southern Confederation. We will put her in if you but strike a blow.”<sup>252</sup> As a Bostonian told Seward, the “object of the Secessionists is to make the United States Government the aggressor, so that if Civil War ensues, it may not be charged on them. They have already been disappointed that they have no act of the

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<sup>249</sup> So argued George D. Prentice of the Louisville Daily Journal. Crofts, Reluctant Confederates, 337.

<sup>250</sup> Current, Lincoln and the First Shot, 199-201; McWhiney, “The Confederacy’s First Shot,” 5-14; McWhiney, Bragg, 1:167-69, 172-73; William J. Cooper, Jefferson Davis, American (New York: Knopf, 2000), 340; Johnson, “Fort Sumter and Confederate Diplomacy,” 441-77.

<sup>251</sup> J. L. Pugh to William Porcher Miles, 24 January 1861, quoted in William Barney, The Road to Secession: A New Perspective on the Old South (New York: Praeger, 1972), 196.

<sup>252</sup> New York Tribune, n.d., quoted in Mrs. Roger A. Pryor, My Day: Reminiscences of a Long Life (New York: Macmillan, 1909), 158-59.

Government of which they can really complain, or upon which they can rouse the people of the border States to join them. They are looking to Fort Sumpter for such an act. They do not wish to attack it first – but if they could, by their batteries, intercept a reinforcement of supplies, and thereby call out a response from the guns of Major Anderson, they would have what they would call an affirmative act of aggression on the part of the United States, and would so make their people believe.”<sup>253</sup> As the fleet sailed toward Charleston, the Indianapolis Journal editorialized that “the seceding States are determined to have war; because they believe a war will drive to their support the border slave States, and unite them all in a great Southern Confederacy. A policy of peace is to them a policy of destruction. It encourages the growth of a reactionary feeling. It takes out of the way all the pride and resentment which could keep the people from feeling the weight of taxation, and the distress of their isolated condition. It forces them to reason, and to look at the consequences of their conduct. A war buries all these considerations in the fury and glory of battle, and the parade and pomp of arms.”<sup>254</sup>

Six weeks after the fall of Sumter, Joseph Holt of Kentucky wrote that the Confederate leadership “sought the clash of arms and the effusion of blood as an instrument for impressing the Border States.”<sup>255</sup> William Howard Russell of the London Times offered a similar analysis of the Confederate leaders: “When they thought that the time was ripe for exciting the border States and dragging them into it, they fired upon

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<sup>253</sup> Richard N. Current, The Lincoln Nobody Knows (New York, McGraw-Hill [1958] 112.

<sup>254</sup> Indianapolis Journal, 11 April 1861.

<sup>255</sup> Joseph Holt, Letter from the Hon. Joseph Holt, Upon the Policy of the General Government, the Pending Revolution, Its objects, Its Probable results If Successful, and the Duty of Kentucky in the Crisis (Washington: Henry Polkinhorn, 1861), 5.

Fort Sumter.”<sup>256</sup> Upon hearing the news of the bombardment, a leading Unionist member of the Virginia secession convention wondered if the South Carolinians “have really begun the war without necessity, in order to compel us to take part.”<sup>257</sup>

While Davis wanted to maneuver the North into firing the first shot at Sumter, he was nonetheless willing to start the war at Fort Pickens. On February 3, he authorized the Confederate commander at Pensacola, his old friend Braxton Bragg, to fire on that bastion, provided that he could capture it quickly: “There would be to us an advantage in so placing them [i.e., the Lincoln administration] that an attack by them would be a necessity, but when we are ready to relieve our territory and jurisdiction of the presence of a foreign garrison that advantage is overbalanced by other considerations.”<sup>258</sup> Davis did not identify those “other considerations,” but one was doubtless the likelihood that Slave States north of the Confederacy would join it. (The war would probably have started at Fort Pickens if Bragg had felt more confident of his ability to carry it.) A Memphis newspaper anticipated that Davis might launch an attack “for the mere purpose of solidifying the revolution which has been precipitated” by “dragging into it the ‘Border States.’”<sup>259</sup> Similarly, a correspondent for the New York Times speculated that “the necessity of excitement to sustain the secession movement may compel Mr. Davis

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<sup>256</sup> Washington correspondence, 8 May, London Times, 22 May 1861.

<sup>257</sup> Robert Y. Conrad to his wife, Richmond, 13 April 1861, “Conrad Letters at the Virginia Secession Convention,” 18.

<sup>258</sup> Davis to Bragg, Montgomery, 3 April 1861, Lynda Laswell Crist and Mary Seaton Dix, eds., The Papers of Jefferson Davis (11 vols.; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991-2003), 7:85.

<sup>259</sup> Memphis Bulletin, 8 March 1861.

either to assent to an open demonstration against the United States, or permit it to take place without opposition on his part.”<sup>260</sup>

The need to stoke the secessionist fires was real. In Alabama, the editor of the Mobile Mercury warned that the Confederacy “is sinking into a fatal apathy, and the spirit and even the patriotism of the people is oozing out under this do-nothing policy. If something is not done pretty soon, decisive, either evacuation or expulsion [of the Sumter garrison], the whole country [i.e., the Confederacy] will become so disgusted with the sham of southern independence that the first chance the people get at a popular election they will turn the whole movement topsy-turvy so bad that it never on earth can be righted again.”<sup>261</sup> Another Alabamian, James G. Gilchrist, exclaimed to the Confederate secretary of war: “Sir, unless you sprinkle blood in the face of the people of Alabama they will be back in the old Union in less than ten days!”<sup>262</sup>

On April 10, ex-senator Louis Wigfall of Texas telegraphed Davis from Charleston urging that the Confederates “take Fort Sumter before we have to fight the fleet and the fort. General Beauregard will not act without your order. Let me suggest to you to send the order to him to begin the attack as soon as he is ready. Virginia is excited by the preparations, and a bold stroke on our side will complete her purposes. Policy and prudence are urgent upon us to begin at once.”<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Washington correspondence, 7 April, New York Times, 8 April 1861.

<sup>261</sup> Current, Lincoln and the First Shot, 134.

<sup>262</sup> Jeremiah Clemens, speech in Huntsville, Alabama, 13 March 1864, in Edward McPherson, Political History of the United States of America During the Great Rebellion (Washington: Philp & Solomons, 1865), 112-13.

<sup>263</sup> Current, Lincoln and the First Shot, 150-51.

Dissenting was the Confederate Secretary of State, Robert Toombs, who warned Davis against an attack on Sumter. He maintained that “at this time it is suicide, murder, and will lose us every friend at the North. You will wantonly strike a hornet’s nest which extends from mountains to ocean, and legions, now quiet, will swarm out and sting us to death. It is unnecessary; it puts us in the wrong; it is fatal.” Firing on that fort, he said, “will inaugurate a civil war greater than any the world has yet seen.”<sup>264</sup> (Toombs had been advised by Confederate commissioners in Washington that an attack on Sumter would make the South appear “guilty of the unnecessary shedding of blood, & it would tend to concentrate public opinion at the North in favor of their government.”)<sup>265</sup>

In early April, Davis received similar counsel from Richard Lathers, a South Carolinian then living in New York, who predicted that “Civil war for the destruction of the Union, will unite every man at the North, irrespective of party or affiliation, in support of his government and the flag of his country. If conciliation now fails to protect the Union, the coldest man of the North will lay aside enterprises and profitable industry, and will fill the armies in defense of the supremacy of the government and its laws.”<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Pleasant A. Stovall, Robert Toombs: Statesman, Speaker, Soldier, Sage (New York: Cassell, 1892), 226; L. P. Walker to S. W. Crawford, n.p., n.d., in Crawford, Genesis of the Civil War, 421. Some doubt Stovall’s dramatic account of Toombs’s words, but since it jibes with the recollections of an eyewitness, Confederate Secretary of War Walker, it seems plausible.

<sup>265</sup> Crawford and Roman to Toombs, Washington, 1 April 1861, copy of a telegram, Confederate States of America Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>266</sup> Lathers, “Address delivered to Jefferson Davis at Montgomery, 1861, one week before the firing on Fort Sumter,” Richard Lathers Papers, Library of Congress. In his autobiography, Lathers said he told Davis that there “will be no compromise with Secession if war is forced upon the North. I know the people there thoroughly. The love of the Union is a deep sentiment with them.” He urged Davis not to “be deceived by the indignant and rather hasty threats made by our Northern Democrats, because of attempted infringements of Southern rights. . . . The first armed demonstration against the integrity of the Union or the dignity of the flag will find these antagonistic partisans enrolled in the same patriotic ranks for the defense of both. . . . Civil war for the destruction of the Union will bring every man at the North, irrespective of his party or sectional affiliations, to the support of the government and the flag of his country.” Alvan F. Sanborn, ed., Reminiscences of Richard Lathers: Sixty Years of a Busy Life in South

Simon Bolivar Buckner of Kentucky made a like prophesy to the governor of his state: “If the south should aggress it will unite public sentiment at the north against them and civil war will ensue.”<sup>267</sup>

Ignoring such advice, Davis made his fateful decision of April 10, even though there was no practical military reason for shelling Sumter. As he himself had pointed out in January, the “little garrison in its present position presses on nothing but a point of pride.”<sup>268</sup> The attack on Sumter proved to be a major blunder, for it outraged and unified the North while dampening pro-Confederate sympathy in the Border States. If those states (Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri, and Delaware) had made common cause with their Southern sisters, Davis’s government might well have won the war.<sup>269</sup> It is impossible to know exactly why the Confederate president made such a costly mistake. Because of Seward’s “systematic duplicity” in dealing with the Confederate commissioners, and because of the numerous press reports indicating that Sumter would be evacuated, Davis mistrusted the Lincoln administration and its declarations of peaceful intent. News that Northern warships were fitting out for unknown destinations probably intensified his

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Carolina, Massachusetts and New York (New York: Grafton Press, 1907), 160-62. For a different view of Davis’s motivation, see Johnson, “Fort Sumter and Confederate Diplomacy,” 441-77. Johnson ignored Lathers’s remarks as well as Pryor’s speech and expressed doubt about Toombs’s remarks and Clemens’s speech. He also failed to consider that Davis’s orders to Bragg would have begun war at Fort Pickens if Bragg had felt confident that he could capture that bastion.

<sup>267</sup> Simon Bolivar Buckner to Beriah Magoffin, 8 March 1861, quoted in Charles Royster, “Fort Sumter: At Last the War,” in Gabor S. Boritt, ed., Why the Civil War Came (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 210.

<sup>268</sup> Rowland Dunbar, ed., Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist: His Letters, Papers and Speeches (10 vols.; Jackson, Miss.: Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1923), 5:40.

<sup>269</sup> John Y. Simon, “Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, and Fort Sumter,” in George L. Painter, ed., Abraham Lincoln and the Crucible of War: Papers from the Sixth Annual Lincoln Colloquium, October 26, 1991 (Springfield; Lincoln National Home Historic Site, 1992), 31.

suspicion.<sup>270</sup> Davis may also have been motivated by pique and wounded pride; hypersensitive about his honor, he probably felt offended by Lincoln's failure to recognize his government. Instead of notifying the Confederate authorities (i.e., Davis) of his intention to resupply Sumter, Lincoln had alerted the governor of South Carolina. More significant, perhaps, was Davis's evident misreading of public opinion in the Border States and the North. Lincoln has been criticized for underestimating the strength of Southern disunionism, but insofar as the Civil War resulted from a misunderstanding of popular sentiment, Davis was at least as culpable as Lincoln. If the Confederate leader had been more sensitive to the political climate in the Border States, he could have allowed Fort Sumter to be resupplied and waited for an occasion when slavery rather than Union was perceived to be the central issue dividing the sections. One historian sensibly suggested that Davis "might himself have sent a cargo of provisions to Anderson and invited him to remain in Sumter as a guest of the Confederacy – pending the settlement of certain diplomatic questions between two Governments which were not at war."<sup>271</sup> As it was, Davis's decision to fire on the flag at Charleston antagonized potential allies whose support might have enabled the Confederacy to win its independence.<sup>272</sup>

On April 12, at 4:30 a.m., the attack began. After valiantly resisting for a day and a half, the Sumter garrison surrendered. Remarkably, though thousands of rounds were

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<sup>270</sup> Johnson, "Fort Sumter and Confederate Diplomacy," 449, 472-74.

<sup>271</sup> Colin R. Ballard, The Military Genius of Abraham Lincoln: An Essay (London, Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1926), 36. As Don E. Fehrenbacher noted, however, "in the setting of feverish excitement and bitter suspicion, perhaps acceptance [of a relief expedition to Sumter] would have been impossible, even if Jefferson Davis and his cabinet had resolved upon it." Don E. Fehrenbacher, "Lincoln's Wartime Leadership: The First Hundred Days," Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association 9 (1987): 7.

<sup>272</sup> Simon, "Lincoln, Davis, and Fort Sumter," 30.

fired, no one was killed during the bombardment, which touched off the bloodiest war in American history.<sup>273</sup>

As Gustavus Fox transported the Sumter garrison to New York, he told Anderson “how anxious the Pres<sup>t</sup> was that they (S[outh] C[arolina]) should stand before the civilized world as having fired upon bread.”<sup>274</sup> Alluding to this important point, Lincoln wrote Fox on May 1: “You and I both anticipated that the cause of the country would be advanced by making the attempt to provision Fort Sumter, even if it should fail; and it is no small consolation now to feel that our anticipation is justified by the result.”<sup>275</sup> In a draft of his July 4 message to Congress, Lincoln summarized the reasoning behind his decision: “I believed . . . that to [withdraw the Sumter garrison] . . . would be utterly ruinous – that the necessity under which it was to be done, would not be fully understood – that, by many, it would be construed as a part of a voluntary policy – that, at home, it would discourage the friends of the Union, embolden it’s foes, and insure to the latter a recognition abroad – that, in fact, it would be our national destruction consummated.”<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Two Union soldiers were killed inadvertently during the surrender ceremony when a cannon exploded while firing a salute as the flag was lowered.

<sup>274</sup> Fox to Montgomery Blair, at sea, 17 April 1861, Thompson and Wainwright, eds., Correspondence of Fox, 1:34-35.

<sup>275</sup> Draft, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>276</sup> Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln 4:424. Some historians deny Lincoln’s explanation of his thinking as spelled out in this message. Current, Lincoln and the First Shot, 196-99; Stampp, And the War Came, 180, 282-86. Their arguments are ingenious but unconvincing. See Potter, Lincoln and His Party, preface to 1962 edition, reprinted in the 1995 edition, xlvi-xlvi, and Niven, Welles, 331-38. If Lincoln had been willing to evacuate Sumter in return for Virginia’s agreement to disband its secession convention, it seems plausible that he would have been willing to evacuate that fort (which was by April militarily indefensible) if he could assert the integrity of the government by reinforcing Pickens. Stampp does not even mention Lincoln’s meetings with Baldwin and Botts and states that it was “highly unlikely” that he made an offer to the Virginia Unionists in February. Nor does Stampp deal with the testimony of Hay’s diary or any of the other sources. Stampp, And the War Came, 275. Current dismisses the offer to Rives as a joke and does not mention the offer to Baldwin or Botts’ account of that offer. Neither historian deals with Hay’s letter to George Plumer Smith or with the reminiscences of Campbell Tarr, Gustavus Fox, or Garrett Davis. In weighing the testimony of Botts and Baldwin, Daniel Crofts suggests the former had an



Lincoln had not permitted Seward to take the first trick, nor had he let the Confederates corner him. It was a masterful exercise of leadership. In June, Seward told his wife, “Executive skill and vigor are rare qualities. The President is the best of us.” (But the secretary of state also thought Lincoln needed “constant and assiduous

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ulterior motive for discrediting the latter. But Smith, Tarr, Fox, Pierpont, Stone, Millson, Gray, and Davis had no such motive. Perhaps Lincoln misled all those gentlemen, but that seems out of character.

It is hard to believe that Lincoln deliberately misled Congress or that he misremembered such significant events a mere ten weeks after their occurrence. Critics of Lincoln have argued that no contemporary evidence shows that the president linked the Sumter and Pickens expeditions. But on the evening of March 30, in a discussion with three congressmen, he “gave it to be understood, in unmistakable terms, that even though the evacuation of Fort Sumter should be determined upon, the other forts yet in possession of federal troops will be held to the last. He furthermore hinted rather more plainly at the intention of the government to blockade the southern ports, and collect the revenue with men-of-war.” Washington correspondence by Special, 1 April, Cincinnati Commercial, 2 April 1861. A Washington correspondent for the New York Times wrote on April 7 that Lincoln would abandon Sumter because “the Fort could not be reinforced without a bloody conflict, which would serve to alienate the Border States, and destroy all hope of Union between the North and South. The abandonment of the position will not be a recognition of secession, either in purpose or in fact. The possession of Fort Pickens will probably be retained, simply because it is practicable without raising additional military force, and with no great risk of a collision. It is the great superiority of position which the rebels have at Charleston that makes the danger of collision so imminent. But at Fort Pickens no such advantage emboldens them to attack the Government forces. For these reasons, it is probable that the latter post will be reinforced, and the former abandoned.” Washington correspondence by Observer, 7 April, New York Times, 9 April 1861. On March 29, William H. Russell reported that the administration seemed “resolved to make a stand at Fort Pickens, notwithstanding the advice of Mr. Douglas to give it up.” Washington correspondence, 29 March, London Times, 16 April 1861.

One problem with Lincoln’s version is that he evidently received word about the miscarriage of his March 12 order regarding Fort Pickens in the afternoon of April 6, but that morning James E. Harvey sent a telegram to South Carolina advising that the order had been given to relieve Sumter. (The text read: “Positively determined not to withdraw Anderson. Supplies go immediately, supported by a naval force under Stringham, if their landing be resisted.” If Harvey knew of the order to Fox in the morning, and if Welles’s diary-memoir is accurate, then Lincoln’s version of events is inaccurate. Daniel W. Crofts, “James E. Harvey and the Secession Crisis,” Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 103 (1976): 190n28. But the evidence establishing the sequence of events that day is not definitive. The original of Harvey’s telegram is not extant. A copy read into the Congressional Globe in August 1861 and the version in the Official Records do not indicate a time of day, though an endorsement dated April 8 indicates that it was sent on the morning of April 6. Gideon Welles, writing more than a year after the event, placed the arrival of the news from Pensacola around 3 p.m.

But even assuming that the timing of events is accurate as given in these sources, it does not prove that Lincoln’s version of events was inaccurate. It is conceivable that Harvey’s dispatch may have been based on Lincoln’s preliminary order of April 4 to Fox rather than his go-ahead order given two days later. It is more likely that Harvey was simply guessing, for he stated that Stringham, not Fox, was in charge of the naval force. Earlier he had sent telegrams to South Carolina with inaccurate information about administration actions, based presumably on guesses. For example, on March 11 he wrote: “Orders issued for withdrawal of Anderson’s command.” Thus the timing of Harvey’s telegram does not seem to invalidate Lincoln’s version of events.

cooperation.” Seward provided advice to Lincoln in frequent conferences and regular late afternoon carriage rides.)<sup>277</sup> Later that year, he declared to a close friend “that of all the men he knew, there was no one in the United States so well fitted to carry the country safely through the struggles as Mr. Lincoln.”<sup>278</sup> The following year called Lincoln “wise and practical” and in 1863 told fellow guests at a dinner party that the president was “the best and wisest man he has ever known” and repeatedly “compared Mr. Lincoln’s task to our Saviour’s and Mr. Lincoln to the Lord.”<sup>279</sup> In 1864, Seward called Lincoln’s decision to relieve Sumter “the central and crowning act of the Administration,” the one “which determined . . . that Republican institutions were worth fighting for.” It meant “the preservation of the Union and in that, the saving of popular government for the world.”<sup>280</sup>

In March 1865, Lincoln succinctly analyzed the outbreak of hostilities: “Both parties deprecated war, but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would accept war rather than let it perish, and the war came.”<sup>281</sup> Lincoln may have been willing to accept war because he believed, as he told Orville H.

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<sup>277</sup> Seward to his wife, Washington, 5 June 1861, Seward, Seward at Washington, 2:590; Mrs. Seward to her sister, [Washington], n.d., ibid., 610.

<sup>278</sup> Seward to Weed, Washington, 1 April 1862, Weed Papers, University of Rochester; Boston Transcript, n.d., copied in the Home Journal, n.d., copied in the Missouri Democrat (St. Louis), 23 September 1861.

<sup>279</sup> Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, eds., Diary of George Templeton Strong (4 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1952), 3:292 (entry for 28 January 1863); Henry W. Bellows to his wife, Washington, 23 April 1863, Bellows Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society; Bellows quoting Seward, in Francis B. Carpenter, The Inner Life of Abraham Lincoln: Six Months at the White House (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1867), 81.

<sup>280</sup> Seward’s remarks paraphrased by John Hay, Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 211-12 (entry for 24 June 1864).

<sup>281</sup> Second inaugural address, Basler, ed. Collected Works of Lincoln, 8:332.

Browning, “far less evil & bloodshed would result from an effort to maintain the Union and the Constitution, than from disruption and the formation of two confederacies[.]”<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 1:453 (9 February 1861).