

**THE**

**SEVEN-DAY**

**SCHOLAR**

*The*

Civil War

**EXPLORING HISTORY ONE WEEK AT A TIME**

**DENNIS GAFFNEY AND**  
**PETER GAFFNEY**

# THE GUN IS FIRED— FORT SUMTER

## WEEK 7

### WHAT TO DO WITH FORT SUMTER— LINCOLN'S HARD CHOICES

Upon his election, Lincoln wanted time to organize his cabinet and to convince the secessionists that he wanted peace, not war. But on the morning after his inauguration, the first thing placed in his hands was a dispatch from Major Robert Anderson, commander of the Union garrison in Charleston Harbor. His supplies, he told Lincoln, would run out in a few weeks.

All of Lincoln's options were fraught with potential disaster. He could send all the soldiers and ships at his disposal and shoot his way into the bay to reinforce Anderson, but this would probably cause secession of the border states and perhaps saddle the president with the responsibility of starting a civil war. If this weren't deterrent enough, General Winfield Scott told him that reinforcing the fort, given the military buildup in the bay, would take 25,000 men and an armada—at a time when the navy was feeble and the entire United States Army comprised 16,000 ill-prepared soldiers.

Scott saw “no alternative but a surrender” of the fort. The secretaries of war and navy agreed. William Seward, Lincoln's secretary of state, argued that it would be a conciliatory move that would keep the border states with the Union. On March 15, five of seven of his cabinet members urged Lincoln to order an evacuation, and the Baltimore *American* thought the decision had been made, writing, “The cabinet has ordered the withdrawal of Major Anderson from Fort Sumter.”

But Lincoln balked. To yield the fort would be to give up his pledge to “hold, occupy and possess” U.S. property. And it would alienate the Republicans who elected him, divide Northerners, and give implicit recognition to the Confederacy. That could lead England and France to recognize the Confederacy and even ally with it in a war. Montgomery Blair, Lincoln's postmaster general, said that giving up the fort was as good as giving up the Union.

For six weeks Lincoln agonized over what to do. Many days he was plagued by migraines; many

nights he got little or no sleep. Meanwhile, one of Lincoln's cabinet members sent surreptitious notes to the Confederacy, telling them, reassuring them, nearly promising them, that the fort would be surrendered.

### **WILLIAM SEWARD CHALLENGES LINCOLN'S AUTHORITY**

William Seward, Lincoln's secretary of state and a former Republican rival, told Lincoln that Fort Sumter should be given up as a gesture of good will to Southern states still in the Union. When Lincoln hesitated, Seward took it upon himself to secretly inform Southern leaders that the North would let the island fort go. One North Carolinian politician wrote to Seward, saying, "Unionists look to yourself, and only to you Sir, as a member of the Cabinet—to *save the country*." Seward's insubordination was based on his assumption that he knew better than the president. Seward was so confident with his view that he leaked the story to the press, which reported the development during Lincoln's first week in office.

On March 28, General Scott again urged Lincoln to abandon Fort Sumter and Fort Pickens, a federal fort in Florida. But this time he gave political instead of military reasons, arguing these evacuations "would instantly soothe and give confidence to the eight remaining slave-holding states, and render their cordial adherence to this Union perpetual." Lincoln's cabinet, now doubting Scott's earlier argument that it was militarily impossible to fortify Fort Sumter, reversed itself, with a majority recommending reinforcement.

But not Seward. On April 1, he sent an extraordinary memo to Lincoln, titled "Some Thoughts for the President's Consideration." In addition to urging again that Fort Sumter be abandoned, he suggested that attention be deflected from the crisis by having the U.S. "demand explanations" from Spain and France for their meddling in Santo Domingo and Mexico. If their explanations didn't satisfy, he recommended declaring war on these countries to unite the North and South against a foreign enemy. He was urging a foreign war rather than a civil war to achieve Union. "Whatever policy we adopt," Seward wrote, "it must be somebody's business to pursue and direct it incessantly." He no doubt considered himself that somebody.

The next day, Lincoln wrote a firm note to Seward, ignoring his suggestion to provoke a war with foreign powers. He also wrote that he had pledged to hold, occupy, and possess federal property, and that included Fort Sumter. And whatever policy was pursued, Lincoln made clear, "*I must do it.*"

### **CONFEDERATES DECIDE TO ATTACK FORT SUMTER**

President Lincoln rejected the two options his aides had offered regarding Fort Sumter: abandon the

fort to appease the South, or resupply it with warships, which could be seen as an act of war. Lincoln chose a creative third option, and on April 8 a message was sent to South Carolina's governor Francis Pickens: *"to expect 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 ammunition will be made without further notice, or in case of an attack upon the Fort."*

It was a subtle move: Lincoln would supply the symbolic fort and try to keep it in Northern hands longer, but he would avoid the responsibility of starting a war. In Montgomery, Jefferson Davis and his cabinet chewed over possible responses. Curiously, Robert Toombs, the Southern planter who had pushed for secession, urged caution. "Mr. President," said the Confederate secretary of state, "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."

Davis and the others saw it otherwise. "The gage is thrown down," said the *Charleston Mercury* after hearing about Lincoln's decision to resupply Fort Sumter, "and we accept the challenge. We will meet the invader, and God and Battle must decide the issue between the hirelings of Abolition hate and Northern tyranny, and the people of South Carolina defending their freedom and their homes." On April 10, the Davis administration sent a message to Pierre Gustave Beauregard, who oversaw Confederate forces in the bay, to demand the fort's evacuation, "and if this is refused proceed, in such manner as you may determine, to reduce it."

Major Robert Anderson, the fort's commander, rejected the request, yet thanked Beauregard for the "fair, manly and courteous terms proposed. . . ."

At dawn on April 12, 1861, South Carolinian Mary Chesnut, wife of U.S. Senator James Chesnut, was awakened early the next morning by the booming of Confederate cannons—"I sprang out of bed," she wrote in her diary, "and on my knees, prostrate, I prayed as I have never prayed before."

Anderson surrendered a little more than a day after the bombardment began. On April 15, Lincoln issued a proclamation calling for 75,000 volunteers to put down the insurrection. Virginia seceded on April 17; Arkansas on May 6; North Carolina on May 20; and Tennessee on June 8.

### **WAS IT FORT SUMTER— OR LINCOLN'S CALL FOR RECRUITS— THAT LED TO SECESSION OF THE UPPER SOUTH STATES?**

Cornelia Peake McDonald, the Virginian mother and diarist, spoke for many Southerners when she said it was not the guns of Fort Sumter but Lincoln's call for troops the day after that prompted the secession of Virginia and other states in the Upper South:

*The Virginia Convention had been sitting for weeks in sad deliberation; for there were many of the best and truest men in it who thought secession fatal to the Southern interests, and had seen with sorrow the hasty action of South Carolina and the Gulf States. . . . The moderate men in the Convention and in the whole country hoped for peace, and opposed extreme measures; but when Lincoln's proclamation came, calling on Virginia to contribute her quota of 75,000 men, necessary to "put down the rebellion of the other states," what a change! Those who had been calm and moderate were now furiously indignant to the insult to Virginia. Not a dissenting voice was raised when the ordinance was passed that took her out of the company of the states which were ruled by the vulgar rail-splitter . . . who had the insolence to call on her for aid in crushing the sovereign states which had only acted as she believed she had the right to do. Some days before the proclamation was known, some friends requested me to go to Mr. Sherrard's to assist in making a Confederate flag . . . and as we were cutting out the white and red stripes Judge Parker came, and . . . begged us to relinquish the idea of making it, as there was a danger of an attack on the bank building . . . as the mechanics and trades-people were so opposed to secession that it would enrage them if they knew a flag was being made. We put it away, but at the end of a week, when the odious proclamation had decided Virginia's course, a change had come over the feelings of all classes; and the flag was brought out, and triumphantly unfurled to the sound of ringing of bells that announced the secession of Virginia.*

### **DID LINCOLN PROVOKE THE SOUTH?**

Did Lincoln intend to provoke war when he decided to provision Fort Sumter? Historians have debated that question ever since the day cannons boomed in Charleston Harbor in April 1861. In 1937, Professor Charles W. Ramsdell forwarded an argument long repeated in the South that Lincoln deliberately manipulated the Confederacy into firing the first shot.

"Lincoln," he stated, "having decided that there was no other way than war for the salvation of his administration, his party, and the Union, maneuvered the confederates into firing the first shot in order that they, rather than he, should take the blame of beginning bloodshed." The argument was not much different from the one made by Jefferson Davis in his 1881 book, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*. "He who makes the assault is not necessarily he who strikes the first blow or fires the first gun." Regarding Lincoln's decision to resupply Fort Sumter, he wrote: "To have awaited further strengthening of their position by land and naval forces, with hostile purpose now declared, would have been as unwise as it would be to hesitate to strike down the arm of the assailant, who levels a deadly weapon at one's breast, until he has actually fired."

In their ten-volume history of Lincoln, Lincoln's private secretaries John G. Nicolay and John Hay wrote that Lincoln knew just what he was doing when he ordered Fort Sumter to be resupplied. "[H]e was master of the situation . . ." they wrote, "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." Heads, Lincoln wins; tails, Jefferson Davis loses. He was, they argued, "looking through and beyond the Sumter expedition to the now inevitable rebel attack and the response of an awakened and united North."

It's fair to say that both Lincoln and Davis wanted peace, but on their own terms. Lincoln wanted peace with one united country. Davis wanted peace between two separate countries. "Both parties deprecated war," Lincoln later said, "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."

### **CHOOSING SIDES—ROBERT E. LEE JOINS THE CONFEDERACY**

At the time Fort Sumter exploded, Robert E. Lee was fifty-four years old. He was the son of a Revolutionary War hero, and finished second in his class in West Point in 1829. He'd spent his entire life in the U.S. Army, and served admirably in the Mexican War, and as a superintendent of West Point. General Winfield Scott, the old general-in-chief of the Union army and a fellow Virginian, was convinced that Lee was the finest officer in the army. The Tennessee soldier Sam Watkins would see Lee in his camp later in the war and describe him as many saw him: "His whole make-up of form and person, looks and manner had a kind of gentle and soothing magnetism about it that drew every one to him and made them love, respect, and honor him."

At General Scott's urging, President Lincoln offered Lee field command of the Union army on April 18, 1861. On the same day, Lee learned that Virginia had seceded. Like many other Southern officers, he found his allegiance to his state stronger than his allegiance to his country. "I cannot raise my hand against my birthplace, my home, my children," Lee wrote a friend from the North.

"You have made the greatest mistake of your life," General Scott, a friend to Lee, told him, "but I feared it would be so."

As Virginia left the Union, Richmond became the new capital of the Confederacy, a nod to Virginia's primacy. Little did Virginians know that the choice would make the hundred-mile swath between their capital and Washington, one of the bloodiest battlefields in modern warfare.

After Virginia seceded, so, too, did Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee. These states would supply many of the Confederate commanders, such as Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, Joseph E. Johnston, Jeb Stuart, Albert Johnston, John Bell Hood, and Nathan Bedford Forrest.

But the North had more men and resources. The South had just half the mileage of railroad track as the North; it produced one-quarter the number of manufactured goods as the Northern states. The North had 22 million people; the Confederacy just 9 million, and nearly 4 million of them were slaves.