



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on April 11, 2011

Fort Sumter: Dividing a Nation

Wars are seldom tidy, and often the unfinished business from one war provides the spark and tinder for the next. The forts that guarded Charleston Harbor in the latter half of the 19th century were part of a series of coastal defenses planned after the War of 1812 to protect all the principal seaports of the United States. Like most of the system, the forts in Charleston were still unfinished in 1861. Not long after the war with the British, America became preoccupied with battles within, as wars with Indian tribes continued through most of the century.



But by the 1850s, tensions had increased between the Northern and Southern states over slavery and its expansion into territories of the United States, and over tariffs that protected manufacturers in the industrial Northeast, but forced residents of the agrarian South to pay more for their consumer goods and to face retaliatory tariffs from other countries against Southern exports of cotton and tobacco. By the fall of 1860, South Carolina was determined it would not remain in a union presided over by Republican Abraham Lincoln of Illinois. On November 6, Lincoln prevailed in a four-way race with less than 40 percent of the popular vote. When the choice had been confirmed by the Electoral College, a convention in Charleston adopted on the 20th of December an *Ordinance of Secession*, repealing the state's ratification of the Constitution of the United States and declaring, "The union now subsisting between South Carolina and other States, under the name of the 'United States of America,' is hereby dissolved." Four days later, on Christmas Eve, South Carolina issued its *Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union*.

Among its grievances, the document noted the growing hostility in the Northern states to the institution of slavery and the lack of enforcement of the requirement, explicit in the Constitution as well as federal statutes, that escaped slaves be returned to their masters. Ironically, since the principle of nullification is most notably associated with that distinguished South Carolinian, John C. Calhoun, South Carolina now inveighed against those states that ignored or defied laws regarding fugitive slaves and had "enacted laws which either nullify the Acts of Congress or render useless any attempt to execute them."

The legality of secession had long been the subject of intense, but inconclusive, debate. The Constitution, though quite clear and specific on how states might join the union, is silent and unclear about whether or how a state may depart from it. Yet at the time of its ratification, there was widespread belief in both North and South that the states retained their sovereignty when freely delegating certain powers to the newly created federal government. Samuel Adams of Massachusetts asserted: "That each state retains its sovereignty, freedom and independence, and every power, jurisdiction and right which is not by this confederation expressly delegated to the United States." South Carolina's ratification included this provision: "This convention doth declare that no section or paragraph of the said Constitution warrants a construction that the states do not retain every power not expressly relinquished by them and vested in the general government of the Union." Virginia, in its



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ratification, insisted that “the powers granted under the Constitution, being derived from the people of the United States, may be resumed by them, whensoever the same shall be perverted to their injury or oppression, and that every power granted thereby remains with them, and at their will.”

Talk of secession began in Northern states during the War of 1812, when manufacturers and merchants in the Northeast, disgruntled at having their commerce interrupted by British blockades, vented their frustration over “Mr. Madison’s war.” In *The Natural Superiority of Southern Politicians* (1977), David Leon Chandler credited men of the South with the creation of the political doctrines that are the architecture of the Constitution, as well as “lesser but equally distinct American political institutions, such as the two-party system, the filibuster and the seniority-committee system which allows the Congress independence from the President and from party bosses.” Only one major American political invention, Chandler wrote, did not originate in the South: “That was the doctrine of Secession, which was created in New England universities and law schools.”

In the waning days of 1860, as South Carolina was moving toward secession and other states seemed likely to follow, lame-duck President James Buchanan, a Pennsylvanian, took a stand that effectively straddled the issue. States had no right to leave the Union, he declared in a December 3 address to Congress, but the federal government had no authority to stop them.

Fort Sumter: A Chess Piece

Union troops, meanwhile, were in tenuous command of harbor fortifications that included Castle Pinckney, on a small island at the mouth of the Cooper River; Fort Moultrie, barely visible from the mainland, on an island at the harbor entrance; and Fort Sumter, on an artificial island some three miles down the harbor. The Charleston forts had been the site of controversy and a source of trouble even before South Carolina had declared its independence. On November 7, 1860, the day after Lincoln won the election, Lieutenant Colonel John L. Gardner of the 1st United States Artillery Regiment, anticipating the coming secession, attempted to transfer ammunition stored in the city of Charleston to Fort Moultrie. A crowd thwarted the effort and President Buchanan, in a conciliatory effort, replaced Gardner, a Bostonian, with Major Robert Anderson, a Kentuckian of Virginia ancestry.

From Fort Moultrie, where most of his command was garrisoned, Anderson requested reinforcement in anticipation of an effort by South Carolinians to seize the harbor fortifications. Buchanan was reluctant to send more troops, lest South Carolina regard the reinforcement as an invasion of its sovereign territory and respond accordingly. Yet he could not surrender the fort without surrendering thereby to the proposition that the state had the right to leave the union and assume its independence, a proposition he denied. South Carolinians, for their part, resented the continued occupation, let alone reinforcement, of fortifications guarding their harbor by a nation they now regarded as a foreign power. The situation, if long continued, would make a joke of their claim to sovereignty and undermine their standing as “a free and independent state” among the nations of the world.

The President’s cabinet was, like his own mind, divided on the issue. The Southern members — Secretary of War John B. Floyd, a Virginian, along with Secretary of the Interior Jacob Thompson of Mississippi and Treasury Secretary Howell Cobb of Georgia — argued against reinforcement. Secretary of State Lewis Cass of Michigan and Attorney General Jeremiah Black of Pennsylvania countered that the nation must defend its property and reinforcements must be sent. Black reminded Buchanan there was already talk in some of the Northern states of impeachment of the President for doing nothing as the Union was being dissolved. Secretary of the Navy Isaac Toucey of Connecticut was, like Buchanan, undecided.



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The influential Senator Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, invited by Buchanan to help draft his address to Congress, suggested that if federal forts in the South remained in caretaker status, the state would respect federal property rights. An uneasy peace prevailed after Secretary Floyd secured a pledge from South Carolina Gov. William Gist that the national property would be safe and the state received in return a pledge from Floyd that the War Department would take no military action against South Carolina. Once South Carolina had adopted its *Ordinance of Secession*, however, new Governor Francis W. Pickens sent a letter to President Buchanan stating that a South Carolina garrison should be allowed to occupy Fort Sumter immediately.

On the night of December 26, just six days after South Carolina adopted its *Ordinance of Secession*, Anderson evacuated Fort Moultrie, which was vulnerable to attack from sand hills that were on the landward side of the fort and were easily accessible from shore. Anderson and his men spiked the guns at Moultrie and, with their women and children, rowed to Fort Sumter during the overnight of December 26-27. South Carolinians, who saw in Anderson's move an intention to defend the harbor against a Confederate takeover, interpreted it as a breach of what they understood to be a pledge not to change the status of the forts. While an angry crowd gathered at the Charleston battery, Governor Pickens took possession of the federal arsenal in Charleston, the post office, and an office of the U.S. Treasury. State troops took over Fort Moultrie and Castle Pinckney. Secretary of War Floyd quickly telegraphed a message to Anderson demanding to know why he had moved his garrison to Sumter. Commissioners from South Carolina formally demanded that Sumter be evacuated.

Instead, Buchanan made an effort to resupply the fort, sending a merchant ship, the *Star of the West*, rather than a military transport in an effort to be less provocative. But the ship was fired on by a battery from nearby Morris Island as it entered the harbor on the morning of January 9, 1861. The ship suffered a minor hit and turned back. Anderson, watching the attack from Sumter, chose not to fire his own guns in defense of the ship, since he had received no message from the War Department as to what he was expected to do after the rebuke from Floyd for having moved his troops to Sumter. Neither side was ready to regard the incident as the start of a war, but South Carolina then strengthened its batteries overlooking the approaches to the harbor, making it possible to stop any future effort to either reinforce or resupply the garrison without a major expedition of armed ships.

Meanwhile, other states had followed South Carolina into secession. On the very day the *Star of the West* was fired upon, Mississippi declared its independence from the United States. Florida seceded on the very next day and Alabama on the day following. Georgia was next on January 19, followed by Louisiana on January 26. Texas joined the exodus on February 1. When he learned of his state's decision, Jefferson Davis of Mississippi rose in the Senate and delivered a farewell address to his colleagues, citing as justification for his state's action, principles proclaimed 85 years earlier in the Declaration of Independence.

"Then Senators, we recur to the compact which binds us together; we recur to the principles on which our government was founded; and when you deny them, and when you deny to us the right to withdraw from a government which, thus perverted, threatens to be destructive of our rights, we but tread in the path of our fathers when we proclaim our independence, and take the hazard," he declared, finishing to a standing ovation in the Senate gallery.

Davis lingered in Washington before returning home, hoping to be arrested for treason so he could argue the right to secession in a court of law. He was left to return in peace to Mississippi, however, and remained there until he received a summons from a convention of Southern states in Montgomery,



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Alabama. Delegates from the (then) seven seceding states had chosen Davis as their President and made Montgomery the capital of the Provisional Confederate States of America.

Lincoln, however, upon taking office on March 4, insisted the Union was not broken. “No State, upon its own mere motion can lawfully get out of the union,” he declared. Acts of violence against the federal authority, he warned, would be regarded as “insurrectionary or revolutionary, according to the circumstance.” Citing his past statements and the Republican platform, he reiterated in his Inaugural Address the pledge that he would not interfere with the “domestic institutions” of the states and declared he had no power to do so. He went so far as to endorse a proposed constitutional amendment that would explicitly and permanently prohibit the federal government from interfering with the institution of slavery. But he insisted he would carry out his responsibility to “hold, occupy and possess the property and places belonging to the Government, and to collect the duties and imposts” at all American ports. But in carrying out those duties, “there needs be no bloodshed or violence; and there shall be none, unless it is forced upon the national authority,” Lincoln said.

In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict, without yourselves being the aggressor. You have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to “preserve, protect and defend” it.

Lincoln took it upon himself to make sure his “dissatisfied fellow countrymen” would, indeed, be the aggressors. The Confederate states could not uphold their claims to sovereignty while allowing another sovereignty — the United States — to maintain forts and collect duties in their ports. Efforts by the Confederates to negotiate a purchase and transfer of the federal installations were rebuffed. The Union, since there was yet no income tax, depended heavily on the revenue derived from those duties. Yet in the early days of the secession, many Northerners, including Horace Greeley, the influential editor of the *New York Tribune*, were of a mind to “let the erring sisters go in peace.” Abolitionists like Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, and the poet John Greenleaf Whittier, argued against trying to enforce the kind of union “where one section is pinned to the residue by bayonets.” Northern businessmen, hoping to continue commerce with the Southern states, were loath to see their trade cut off by war.

“We fear the Southern madness may precipitate a bloody collision that all must deplore,” Greeley wrote in December of 1860. “But if ever ‘seven or eight States’ send agents to Washington to say, ‘We want to get out of the Union,’ we shall feel constrained by our devotion to Human Liberty to say, ‘Let them go!’ And we do not see how we could take the other side without coming in direct conflict with those Rights of Man which we hold paramount to all political arrangements, however convenient and advantageous.” A Methodist newspaper in Ohio was less optimistic over the prospects of a peaceful parting. “Civil war is as certain to follow secession as darkness to follow the going down of the sun,” the paper warned prophetically. “There are a thousand things to precipitate it.”

Shots Leading to War

Pro-Southern sentiment in the North began to wane somewhat after the *Star of the West* was fired on, and the near doubling of rates by the newly enacted Morrill Tariff, to take effect April 1, gave the government added incentive to hold onto its possessions in the Southern ports. Major Anderson believed it would take 20,000 men to defend Fort Sumter, troops Lincoln did not have. The President focused instead on the fact that the garrison was running low on supplies, including food. Tensions had reached the point where the Union soldiers could no longer buy provisions in Charleston. Lincoln informed Gov. Pickens he would attempt to provision the fort peacefully. “If such attempt not be



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resisted,” he said in his letter to the Governor, “no effort to throw in men, arms or ammunition will be made.”

When Confederate General Pierre G.T. Beauregard demanded the surrender of Sumter, Anderson informed him that he would be forced to evacuate by April 15 unless resupplied by then. But Beauregard chose not to wait, having received word that a Union ship carrying supplies for the fort and accompanied by the *Powhatan*, the Navy’s most powerful warship, was sailing for Charleston. The supply ship arrived without the escort, a fact most historians attribute to “official bungling.” Yet some believe the *Powhatan* was held back deliberately, so that the first shots of the war would be fired by the Confederate forces on a flotilla of unarmed ships, bringing food to hungry soldiers. The rebels, having “fired on bread,” would be seen clearly as the aggressors.

On April 11, Beauregard gave Anderson until the following 4 a.m. to surrender the fort and begin evacuation. At 4:30 a.m. on April 12, the bombardment of the fort began and continued for 34 hours. Lincoln’s supply ships were at the harbor, but absent the *Powhatan*, were unable to land. The guns at the fort returned fire with little effect. More than 4,000 rounds landed in and around the fort, and when Anderson finally surrendered, Sumter was in flames. Remarkably, none of its occupants was injured. One Confederate soldier was reported dead, a victim of his own misfiring cannon. Thus began the bloodiest conflict in U.S. history, a war that would claim more than 600,000 lives.

Lincoln immediately called on all the states to supply a total of 75,000 soldiers for three months to put down the “rebellion.” The call to arms pushed over the edge four states in the upper South that had not yet seceded. The request for men at arms to invade their neighboring states and make war against their fellow Southerners was repulsive to them. Gov. John Letcher of Virginia informed the President that since Lincoln had “chosen to inaugurate civil war,” he would send no troops from Old Dominion. Gov. Henry Massie Rector of Arkansas replied that the people of his state would “defend to the last extremity their honor, lives and property against Northern mendacity and usurpation.” Those two states, plus Tennessee and North Carolina, joined the Confederacy after the battle of Fort Sumter. Kentucky and Missouri remained in the Union, but emphatically declined to furnish troops. Wrote Gov. Claiborne Fox Jackson of Missouri: “Your requisition is illegal, unconstitutional, revolutionary, inhuman, diabolical and cannot be complied with.” In a word, “No!”

Congress was not in session when hostilities began, so Lincoln promptly called a special session — to meet three months later. In the meantime, he ran essentially a one-man government. “It was the President who decided that the firing on Fort Sumter would be treated as an act of war and that the government would make war to preserve the Union,” wrote Bruce Catton in his *Reflections on the Civil War*. “He committed the country to raising a large army and expanding the navy. He made commitments that Congress, when it finally met, could do nothing but -endorse.”

At Fort Sumter, where all had survived the hostile fire, the surrendering Union soldiers were permitted to depart unmolested. Before leaving, they fired a 50-gun salute to the Stars and Stripes before they struck the colors. A spark from a stray cartridge landed in a barrel of gunpowder, setting off an explosion that killed one soldier instantly and wounded four others, one of whom died not long after.

Somehow, it seems fitting that in the war of “a house divided against itself,” the first casualties were from “friendly fire.”

— Graphic of Fort Sumter: AP Images



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