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source: K. Stampp, The Imperiled Union

Re: Lincoln and the Sumter Crisis

Notes the debate over Lincoln's intentions in provisioning Fort Sumter.

Charles Ramsdell's argument that Lincoln cynically maneuvered the South into firing the first shot in the Civil War.

David Potter responded that Lincoln tried to prevent hostilities and that the South's response to the expedition was a failure not a success of Lincoln's policy.

Stampp argues there is a third interpretation. Lincoln's ultimate position on Ft. Sumter he made clear early on. In short, there is no surprise or secret agenda Lincoln was following in dealing with the crisis. He was not maneuvering in the sense that he was not candid about his position on the question of the Union forts in the South.

Stampp notes that Lincoln had made clear his firm opposition to any compromise on the issue of slave expansionism. For example, the reasons why he urged his party in Congress to kill the Crittenden Compromise. . . .

Stampp
adds

He made clear as President-elect that (1) he would not interfere w/ slavery where it existed (2) that he would not menace the South (3) that he would enforce the Fugitive Slave Act. (4) He would tolerate the slave trade and slavery in the District of Columbia; (5) and he might even agree to New Mexico coming into the Union as a slave state. But he would not agree to the expansionism of the slave institution.

Host of reasons for failure to compromise on this issue. To "buy" peace through a compromise would only be to postpone the inevitable. That if the South were given the Missouri Line to the Pacific, for example, it would be only a matter of time before they insisted on Cuba or succession, etc. Understandably, any compromise would have likely killed off the Republican party. Like the Whig Party had "died of compromise."

Stampp's basic point is that Lincoln saw the situation clearly. Compromise was out. A Peaceful restoration of the Union by the majority loyalists was not a realistic alternative. And acquiescence in disunion was totally unacceptable to Lincoln. So that Lincoln saw when he entered office that resolution of the issue was only going to be by violence or war. Although he never expected it to be of the magnitude the war turned into. . . .

"In all probability Lincoln regarded neither the device of peaceful reconstruction nor coercion as a basic policy. From the traditional point of view of practical statesmanship the preservation of peace and the launching of a war are never the same objects of policy. . . . the more fundamental goal is to preserve, defend, or advance primary national interests. These interests are guarded by peaceful means when possible, but the use of force is never ruled out as a last resort."

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Lincoln's chief concern was the preservation of the Union, a national interest which he regarded as vital enough to take precedence over all other considerations. The maintenance of the Union was the paramount concern in the crisis. . . . even the EP was conceived and justified in this vein. It is pretty certain that Lincoln viewed the crisis from the outset in these terms. He would have liked a peaceful resolution of the crisis but the inner man believed that w/ the stakes involved that force was justified if necessary.

Stampff defines the policy he adopted of "masterly defense" as the basic strategy in dealing w/ the Sumter crisis. That he concluded to adopt this policy because it did take the initiative into using force out of his hands and place it in the hands of the secessionist. They would ultimately decided on the outcome.

The political context in which he decided on this strategy. (1)By March 1861 Northern opinion had fixed on the belief that the southern states had no right to secede. That the Union was perpetual. It was not necessary to convince most northerners that preservation of the Union was in the national interest. (2) The burden of direct action rested on the seceded states. Since they had seized federal forts and other property, in order to destroy the symbols of Union and federal authority. Lincoln's policy was not to send an army into the seceded South but simply to reclaim what northerners regarded was the right of the Federal Govt. to reclaim. (3)This left the South to accept the reprovisioning of the Forts and their reclamation--but in doing so to advertise the weakness of the Confederacy's bid for legitimacy, etc. Or to prevent the defensive actions of restoring federal authority or reclaiming what was the property of the North and enforce the laws, etc. which was the Constitutional obligation of a President . . . To do this would force the South to take the initiative.

Stampff insists here that Lincoln's decision to resupply Ft. Sumter after he learned of Major Anderson's plight. The gravity of the situation was not clear to him until he returned from the Inaugural Ball to learn of Anderson's decision to vacate the fort, etc. But Lincoln's decision was all part of his overall position on preservation of the Union and his obligation to act as President in the ways outlined by the Constitution. . . It was a logical extension of his determination to defend the Union even at the risk of war. This he made clear in his Inaugural Address and his speeches while president-elect.

When Lincoln sent his messenger Robert S. Chew to notify Governor Francis W. Pickens of So. Carolina that an attempt would be made to reprovision the fort without, however, throwing in men, arms, ammunition (this time any way) he knew that the situation was such that the Confederates would have to acquiesce or resist. In either case Lincoln would triumph. The Confederate attack on the Fort was a victory for Lincoln's defensive strategy. The moral burden of firing the first shot was on Jeff Davis' shoulders. This produced the kind of galvanizing event that united the North and stiffened its will to defeat the "rebellion." Sense that Lincoln was not surprised by the Confederacy's reaction; not was he disappointed.

Stampff on the other alternatives opened to the President:

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He could have allowed Sumter to fall and been satisfied to reinforce Ft. Pickens

He could have ordered Anderson to hold the fort and try to get necessary provisions from Charleston market.

In choosing to ^rerovision Sumter Lincoln knew he was likely choosing a course of war. But this was a risk he shared with many others., for his standards and statesmanship and concept of national interest ware those common to his age. . . The Union was worth fighting for. The growing impatience of the North and the widespread demand for action no doubt helped shape his ~~difficult~~ decision.

Southern leaders played a role in the Sumter crisis. The Confederacy could have silenced their guns. They were the one who got off the first shots/ Jeff Davis was sending a message to the border states and the undecided that it was not time to fish or cut bait. The Confederates chose war to submission