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Re: Sumter Crisis

Source: Donald, Lincoln, Chpt. 10

Lincoln agreed with the right of revolution but only on moral grounds and not legal. The cause had to be justifiable and the South's case was not in his mind.

For Lincoln the Union was older than the Constitution. (He grew to have reservations about the Constitution. See reaction to the Dred Scott case and the reading of that case and what it meant to the Republican party.) Lincoln's search for stability in his country where mob action and turbulence was a fact of life left him hanging on law, etc. He finally reverts to the Declaration and its promise of liberty for all as the secular religion of his universe.

He counted on the strength of Unionism in the South. In this Donald notes he was self-deceived because he did not know the realities of the South as men in his Cabinet did.

Advisers pressed to accept minor concessions to strengthen the cooperationist elements in the South. Lincoln would agree to allowing New Mexico to enter the Union without a prohibition against slavery (that is the possible breach in the policy of containment). Other guarantees such as defense of the Fugitive Slave Act, declaring the Personal Liberty Laws of the northern states unconstitutional; guarantees to not to interfere with the interstate slave trade or slavery in the D of C. He had already spoke on these last two promises but was willing to recapitulate.

He stood firm on no further extension of slavery in the territories. Mentioned here was his killing dead the Crittenden Compromise.

Donald gives a pretty good detailed account of the crisis. The division of the Cabinet. Then comes General Scott's recommendation to surrender Sumter and Pickens. The General's assay that it would take 25,000 troops to take and hold the fort when the US regular army had only 16,000 in its ranks and most of these were on the frontier.

As the crisis matured Lincoln polled the Cabinet. Most were for the attempt to provision Sumter. This was policy as Lincoln had expressed in his inaugural that he would hold, occupy, recover all federal installations, etc.

Donald makes that point that a swap of Sumter for Virginia's declaration of loyalty to the Union would have been a thinkable arrangement.

No question but when Lincoln agrees to send a provisioning fleet he was certain that it would ignite a war. He had sent Hulbert to Charleston to feel out the popular mood and he reported back that there was no unionist sentiment about and

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Source: Donald, p. 2

that a Union fleet would provoke a military response.

Donald gives attention to the two projects that were ongoing at the same time. The provisioning of Sumter and the sending of a fleet and reinforcements to Ft. Pickens off of the Florida coast.

Suggesting here the possibility of using Pickens to assert Union and the follow through of Lincoln's inaugural pledge. That he could not be accused of having no policy if he went ahead with Pickens and let Sumter go.

Donald comes down on the Sumter thing and the first shot. Lincoln did not want to be blamed for starting a fratricidal war; let that be on the head of Richmond. He could not surrender the forts believing that this would lead to a dissolution of the Union.

So the provisioning of Sumter went forward with the certain outcome of war expected by Lincoln. Sumter even if provisioned was a loss to the Union. There was no way the fort could have been maintained against the determined govt. in So. Carolina.

But Sumter did have a moral or symbolic purpose even if its military value was already compromised.