

# Waiting for the Shooting to

## DAYS OF DEFIANCE Sumter, Secession, and the Coming of the Civil War

By Maury Klein  
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By Edwin M. Yoder Jr.

**W**E TEND to forget that this country, like Europe after the rape of Poland in 1939, had its own *drole de guerre* or "phony war." It was waged, by word and intrigue, in the five months between Abraham Lincoln's election in November 1860 and the firing on Fort Sumter the following April. And it also

was the calm prelude to a calamity.

In most accounts, this troubled interim tends to be squeezed to the vanishing point between the spectacular events that preceded and followed it—as if it had been a slippery slope on which would-be peacemakers were fated from the first to find no footing. Was it?

That old but always interesting question is addressed by Maury Klein's splendid new book, *Days of Defiance*. Certainly, ultras both north and south thought the die had been cast by Lincoln's election itself. To them, his victory signaled an approaching assault on slavery itself, the practice and institution, not merely its extension. Had he not declared that a house divided could not

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stand? Salmon P. Chase, who would serve Lincoln as both Treasury secretary and chief justice, hailed the 1860 election as "the overthrow of the slave power." The slaveocrats, in Charleston and elsewhere, agreed.

Spooked by this perhaps imaginary danger, South Carolina, Florida, Alabama and other states quickly seceded. Even the more moderate border states trembled on the brink. The ensuing interregnum—presidents elected in November were not installed until March—left a tense "secession winter" to be presided over by the lame-duck president James Buchanan. What the nation needed, Buchanan's detractors grumbled, was a reincarnated Andrew Jack-

son; Old Buck was scarcely that.

*Days of Defiance* joins earlier works by David Potter and Richard Current among classic accounts of the five months in which the union collapsed in a fraternal quarrel that would ultimately cost more than half a million lives. Klein has a gift of characterization; his portraits live and breathe. He also has structured his narrative artfully, showing events from perspectives both geographical (the quadrangle, Washington-Charleston-Montgomery-Pensacola)—Continued on page 14

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# Days of Defiance

Continued from page 3

and personal (not only through the usual eyes of Lincoln, Davis and Seward but through those of many minor players). Klein frames his story from the diaries and dispatches of the visiting London Times correspondent William Howard Russell, whose coverage of the Crimean War six years earlier had made him the most celebrated reporter in the English-speaking world and guaranteed him entree to official circles both north and south.

And there were the issues, of course. The secessionists, with more than a foot out the door, demanded, in any case, an ironclad constitutional status for slavery that would render their "property" legally untouchable wherever the American flag few or might fly in the future. They would not settle for less. The rash Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 (seconded by the Supreme Court's *Dred Scott* decision three years later) had erased the Missouri Compromise line and opened the door to slavery north of 36 degrees north latitude. The fire-eaters thought it good riddance.

Meanwhile, abolitionists considered slavery a moral abomination and demanded its immediate extirpation at any cost. Buffeted by these crosswinds, Congress had degenerated into a windy forum in which rival ideologues consumed one another, and the middle ground as well. By 1860 both

the Whigs and Democrats had splintered into sectional factions, none of which commanded a national consensus, making way for the Republicans, the first sectional party to win the presidency. In this setting, as Klein writes, "negotiation could not succeed because there was nothing to negotiate." Still, the dread of war did concentrate minds in the wavering border states, which correctly feared that if war came they would be the major battleground.

In the absence of real grounds for compromise, the nations' gaze became obsessively fixed on a mini-drama that epitomized the crisis: the precarious situation of a small, undersupplied and vulnerable federal garrison, led by Maj. Robert Anderson, at Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor. Much of *Days of Defiance* is a nearly hour-by-hour account of the bumbling comedy of errors in which the fate of Maj. Anderson's 60 troops played itself out.

IT IS A VIRTUE of this book that Klein attempts a modest rehabilitation of James Buchanan. The 15th president is usually portrayed as a weak, dithering incompetent, bullied by the views of Southern friends in the Cabinet, vacillating while the secessionists dragged the nation into disunion. Klein shows how narrow Buchanan's options were and how earnestly Buchanan labored in his plodding

way to stand by unionist interests—he was no dixified quisling. He shows, by the same token, that Lincoln's later handling of the same options was not strikingly better. Indeed, the difference between the two presidents (Lincoln, we must remember, was scorned by smart opinion in the East as a hopeless bumpkin) was only to emerge later, and gradually, in the crucible of war. Certainly Buchanan lacked Lincoln's scope, intellect and subtlety. He was a high-minded legalist who assumed that a contract could restrain angry men blinded by pride, passion and prejudice—a representative American diplomatic delusion, as George F. Kennan has argued. And Buchanan had been a diplomat.

Klein leads us to no grand conclusions, but the story speaks for itself and points us to a familiar, if always controversial, conclusion about America's phony war. It was, as Seward was the first to say, an "irrepressible conflict." It remained for Lincoln to give the earliest and clearest account of how it ended: "Both parties," he said in his second inaugural address, "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." The final months of its coming make a riveting story, and Klein has retold it surpassingly well. ■