

Kennedy's Plan Recalls Seward's

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THERE ARE intriguing likenesses and differences between the peace commission proposed by Robert Kennedy in the spring of 1968, to advise President Johnson, and the proposals that William Seward made to Abraham Lincoln in the spring of 1861.

The proposals are alike in that they amounted to an invitation to the President to acknowledge the bankruptcy of his own policies and consent to the appointment of others to carry on for him.

The incident differs in the position of the proposers and the temperament of the two Presidents. Seward was the head of a peace faction in the Lincoln Cabinet, and a man who had been disappointed in his effort to be President, instead of a dissident Senator still nurturing hopes of the Presidency. But the two proposers, nonetheless, resemble each other in their contempt for the President, their deep belief in their own intellectual equipment for the job, and their low estimate of the gifts of the sitting President.

The way the proposals were handled by the two Administrations also differed in an interesting way. President Lincoln quietly pocketed the insulting Seward memorandum and kept Seward in the Government. President Johnson did not manage his dissenter as well—but, he had to deal with a more difficult and more ambitious dissenter.

AT THE TIME of the Seward proposal, the Secretary of State was widely regarded as the chief power in the Lincoln Government. He had been busy negotiating, sometimes without the President's knowledge, to obtain the evacuation of Fort Sumter, without firing a shot. There was a peace faction and a war faction in the Lincoln Cabinet and many were confident that the peace faction that Seward headed would prevail. As the historian Rhodes points out, this was the view obtained by Confederate intelligence.

On April 1, Seward submitted to President Lincoln his celebrated proposals. His memorandum was entitled, "Thoughts for the President's Consideration." He wrote: "We are at the end of a month's administration and yet without a policy, either domestic or foreign." He went on to propose plans for avoiding

the war by shifting emphasis from slavery to the preservation of the Union. He urged the evacuation of Sumter. Then he suggested a very provocative foreign policy against Great Britain, Spain, France and Russia. Then he concluded:

"But whatever policy we adopt there must be an energetic prosecution of it Either the President must do it himself . . . or devolve it on some member of his Cabinet. It is not my especial province. But I neither seek to evade nor assume responsibility."

Rhodes summarizes the episode in these words:

"The President's reply showed Seward that Lincoln was determined to be the master; yet he argued kindly the question of domestic affairs, ignored with rare consideration the wild foreign policy suggested, and with magnanimity kept secret this correspondence."

Lincoln's reply went back the same day he received his Secretary's paper, a reply written by a "hand of iron in the glove of velvet." Agreeing that there must be an energetic prosecution of whatever policy had been adopted, the President told Seward that "I must do it."

Nicolay and Hay quote President Lincoln's skillful response to this incredible proposal from Seward. Then they conclude: "So far as is known, the affair never reached the knowledge of any other member of the Cabinet, or even the most intimate of the President's friends; nor was it probably ever again alluded to by either Lincoln or Seward."

Seward stayed in the Cabinet to serve, as Nicolay and Hay report, not only with loyalty but with "sincere and devoted personal attachment." And Lincoln "dismissed the incident from his thought with that grand and characteristic charity which sought only to cherish the virtues of men—which readily recognized the strength and acknowledged the service of his Secretary."

IF SENATOR Robert Kennedy read enough history, the Seward precedent might have kept him from making a proposal inviting the President to relinquish his chief powers to others. And if the President, who so often compares his plight to that of Lincoln, had read his Lincoln more carefully he might have more closely imitated the Civil War President's more successful tactic for dealing with a misguided proposal.