

THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

CLASSROOM | 9-12 Lessons :

THE GREAT CAUSE OF UNION

On Election Day, Abraham Lincoln had walked down to the courthouse in Springfield, Illinois, parting a crowd of supporters who had come to see him cast his vote. He did not think he should vote for himself, but otherwise checked off a straight Republican ticket. By midnight, through the benefits of the telegraph, he knew he would be the next president. Later he told friends and supporters who had worked to get him elected, “Well, boys, your troubles are over now, but mine have just begun.”¹ At the moment his troubles seemed far away. Early on the morning of February 11, 1861, several hundred devoted friends and supporters came to the station to bid him a fond farewell as he departed Springfield. The twelve-day train trip would take him through major cities of the East including Cincinnati, Cleveland, and New York, then finally to Philadelphia and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.² At each stop throngs of citizens came out to greet him. He was the first American president born west of the Appalachian Mountains, and people were curious. Even in small towns Lincoln came to the back of the railroad car and spoke a few words to the people who had gathered.³ Despite the friendly crowds in the northern cities, as Lincoln got closer to the time of his inauguration, he realized the Union was headed for a deep crisis. From the beginning, even in the few words he said to the crowds assembled along the route, Lincoln sent a clear message: the Union was to be preserved. As David Donald notes in *Lincoln*, “Repeatedly, he emphasized that the tumultuous welcome he received was not a personal tribute. He had been elected President . . . ‘by a mere accident, and not through any merit of mine’; he was ‘a mere instrument, an accidental instrument’ of the great cause of Union.”⁴

Yet somehow the crisis did seem directly related to this new Republican president. That previous fall, certain southern states had said that if a member of the “free-soil” Republicans got elected, they would secede from the Union. Though the Republicans affirmed the right of each state to control slavery within its own borders, the party had been founded on the idea of opposing the expansion of slavery into the territories. That a party founded on such a premise should now have a president in the national government was extremely threatening to most southerners. In ten states of the South, Lincoln’s name had not even appeared on the ballot. In South Carolina, in a special convention, that state made good on its threat and left the Union on December 20, 1860. By the time Lincoln was inaugurated, the whole lower tier of southern states had done the same, forming themselves into the Confederate States of America. They had taken possession of federal property within their borders, including

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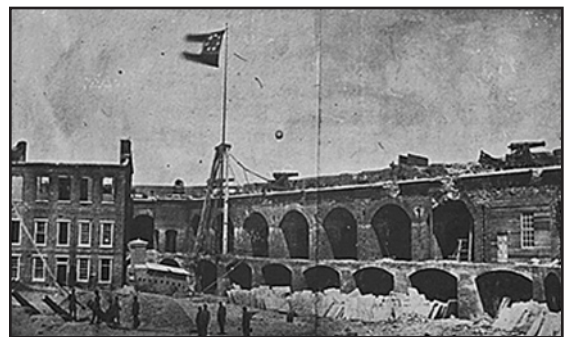
forts, arsenals, and offices. Efforts on the part of the departing President James Buchanan to get Congress to resolve the conflict through compromise amendments had failed.⁵ The closer Lincoln got to Washington, the more apparent the crisis seemed. By February 18, while the presidential party moved east, Lincoln heard the news that Jefferson Davis had been made president of the Confederacy. Meanwhile, by February 22, Pinkerton Detective Agents discovered a plot to assassinate Lincoln in Baltimore. Leaving the presidential train in Harrisburg he was spirited aboard a special single-car train, where he laid low for a dark ride through the city of Baltimore, with a derringer-wielding friend keeping watch. A soft hat pulled low on his face as a disguise, he arrived in the nation's capital in the early morning hours of February 23. It seemed ominous—a portent of things to come.⁶

Shall It Be Peace or the Sword?

Abraham Lincoln delivered his inaugural address on March 4, 1861, standing in front of the unfinished U.S. Capitol. Though the audience was receptive, and the atmosphere heady, the new president clearly recognized the crisis that was before him. Perhaps never before had a president delivered inaugural remarks that were more directed to a specific audience or with a more pointed need to problem-solve. He got right to the issue at hand: some southern states were worried about a Republican administration doing damage to their property or their peace. He allayed their fears and stated, without equivocation, that he would do nothing to interfere with the institution of slavery where it lawfully existed. Then he spelled out a basic concept: the Union existed in “perpetuity” and could not be broken. Making the case that its permanence was confirmed by the history of the Union itself, he proceeded to give his listeners a history lesson. He said that the Union was even older than the Constitution, going back to the Articles of Association in 1774; it was continued by the Declaration of Independence in 1776; it further matured under the document agreed upon by thirteen states in 1778, the Articles of Confederation. Furthermore, it was “to form a more perfect Union” that the Constitution was written in 1787. For a state, or several states, to leave it would make it less perfect than before the Constitution, and that could not be allowed. It was his duty, he explained, to carry out the orders laid down for him by the Constitution that framed the Union.⁷



The White House as Lincoln knew it. Library of Congress



View of Fort Sumter on April 14, 1861 after its surrender by Major Robert Anderson. National Archives



Getting specific, Lincoln said he would use his constitutional power to “hold, occupy, and possess the property and places belonging to the government.” He further avowed that no one needed to fear bloodshed, unless it was “forced upon the government.” He beseeched the southern states to think about the consequences of their actions, explaining that the only true sovereign of a free people was “a majority, held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitations, and always changing easily with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments.” But after he beseeched, he made his position crystal clear: “secession is anarchy.” The people could amend the Constitution, or all of the states could decide the government no longer acted in their behalf and overthrow it through revolution. Short of that, a separation could not occur.⁸ Before Lincoln delivered his inaugural address, which he had written while back in Springfield, he asked several cabinet members to read it and comment, including his secretary of state, William Seward. Seward found it “too provocative.” He specifically thought Lincoln’s original ending—“Shall it be peace, or a sword”—was harsh. Seward felt it should be less “martial,” something of “calm and cheerful confidence.”⁹ Lincoln added a paragraph, and though the tone was almost tender, its language took the listener directly back to the history lesson that framed his essential point: the Union is unbroken.

I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. . . .

The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.¹⁰

To Hold and Occupy

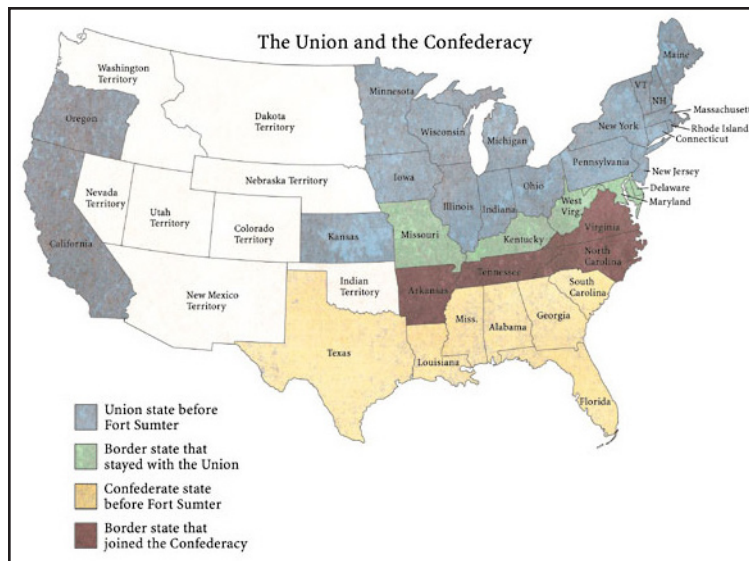
John Nicolay, President Lincoln’s private secretary, had written his fiancée on the morning of March 5. He was very excited about his new connection to the White House and rather proudly began to pen a letter on the snowy stationery with the heading “Executive Mansion.” He had written only one sentence, exclaiming about the wonderful inaugural festivities of the day before, when he was summoned to the president’s office. He didn’t return to the letter until midnight two days later.¹¹ For already a situation at Fort Sumter, South Carolina was forcing Nicolay’s boss, Abraham Lincoln, to test his resolve to “hold, occupy, and possess” federal property. That morning, the president found on his desk a report from Major Robert Anderson, commander at Fort Sumter. The federal installation was running short on provisions, and if it was not resupplied, Anderson would have to order the evacuation of the fort. Over the next weeks Lincoln consulted with his cabinet and thought carefully about what he should do. He understood that if he surrendered the fort, the South would never believe he intended to uphold the Union. Acting carefully, attempting to avoid armed conflict, he let the authorities in South Carolina know that he was “provisioning” the fort, as was his right. There would be no effort made to send troops or munitions unless the supply ships met with resistance. The new Confederate government in Charleston decided it would not bow tamely to federal authority and demanded Anderson’s surrender of the fort. When Anderson refused, the Confederates began bombarding the fort. Two days later, April 13, 1861, the Union commander surrendered the fort. The Civil War had begun.

Lincoln’s inaugural speech had stated the basic concept: the Union could not be broken. Despite Lincoln’s efforts to cajole and beseech, and the proposals of others in both governments to bring compromise, the South seemed determined to leave. Lincoln would be equally determined to keep that from happening. He saw his objective clearly: he would use the full panoply of his powers as the commander in chief to put down the rebellion, “the domestic insurrection.”



A Full Panoply of Powers

One day after Anderson surrendered, Lincoln stated that the ability of the government to execute the laws of the deep South had been obstructed by “combinations too powerful to be suppressed by the ordinary course of judicial proceedings,” and he called for the states to supply 75,000 militiamen to suppress the rebellion. The soldiers would serve for only ninety days because of a 1795 law that said a call-up could not last more than thirty days after the assembling of Congress. Lincoln had called the Congress into a special session to begin on July 4; thus the militiamen would be released by August 4.¹² Volunteers poured in, but not from the upper tier of southern states. “You can get no troops from North Carolina,” its governor said. By May 20 that state joined Virginia, Arkansas, and Tennessee, in leaving the Union; thus, eleven states had seceded, with the status of Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, and Missouri tenuous.¹³



It was one thing to call for volunteers, and another thing to get them to Washington. On April 19, when riots broke out as the Sixth Massachusetts marched through pro-secessionist Baltimore, four soldiers and nine civilians were killed.¹⁴ When the governor of Maryland wired the president not to route any more troops through Baltimore and sent a “peace delegation” to ask that no Union soldiers “pollute Maryland,” Lincoln did little to hide his indignation:

I have no desire to invade the South; but I must have troops to defend this Capital. Geographically it lies surrounded by the soil of Maryland; and mathematically the necessity exists that they should come over her territory. Our men are not moles, and can't dig under the earth; they are not birds, and can't fly through the air. There is no way but to march across, and that they must do. . . . Keep your rowdies in Baltimore and there will be no bloodshed. Go home and tell your people that if they will not attack us, we will not attack them; but if they do attack us, we will return it, and severely.¹⁵



Even more troubling than the riots in Baltimore was the possibility that Maryland, a slave state, might secede from the Union. Lincoln watched the situation carefully. When the Maryland legislature met on April 26, military leaders were ready to arrest secessionist leaders before they convened. The president told the military to hold back, but if it became necessary, the troops could resort to “the bombardment of their cities” and could suspend the writ of habeas corpus. Maryland remained loyal, but the Union General Benjamin Butler occupied Federal Hill, overlooking Baltimore, all the same.¹⁶

To ensure that volunteers could get to Washington, on April 27 Lincoln did authorize the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus along the route to Washington from Philadelphia. As biographer David Donald explains in *Lincoln*, “This meant that the military authorities could make summary arrests of persons thought to be aiding the confederacy or attempting to overthrow the government. They could be detained indefinitely without judicial hearing and without indictment, and the arresting officer was not obliged to release them when a judge issued a writ of habeas corpus.”¹⁷ One man arrested as aiding the Confederacy was a lieutenant in a secessionist drill company, John Merryman. Merryman got a writ of habeas corpus that stated that he should be tried in a regular court or set free. The arresting officer, using Lincoln’s orders, refused to accept the writ. Chief Justice Roger Taney ruled eventually that the chief executive [Lincoln] had acted unlawfully, and warned Lincoln that if such practices continued “the people of the United States are no longer living under a government of laws.” Lincoln’s response was to ignore the ruling and continue the suspension of the writ.¹⁸

Of equal importance to the Union was the president’s birth state of Kentucky, with its Ohio River connection to the vital Mississippi. Lincoln reportedly had said that he hoped to have God on his side, but he *had* to have Kentucky.¹⁹ Though a slave state, it had strong pro-Union elements as shown in the past leadership of Henry Clay. Here Lincoln used the politics of restraint to keep that state within the Union. When Kentuckians declared themselves “neutral” in this conflict, but “with the Union,” Lincoln made sure he avoided confrontations. Though he reiterated his right to “march the United States troops into and over any and every State, if Kentucky made no demonstration of force against the United States, he would not molest her.”²⁰

As a means of weakening the ability of the southern states to supply itself, on April 19 Lincoln established a naval blockade of the Confederate coast.²¹ By May 1861, Lincoln realized that the Union was in for a longer war than the ninety-day volunteers of the first call-up could handle. Accordingly, he authorized an increase in the size of the regular army, which numbered about 16,000 at the start of hostilities. Without authorization from Congress, he called up 42,000 volunteers to serve for three years in the national service. In this way, he assured that when the three-month militiamen were released, he would still have an army. Further, he told the commandants of the navy yards in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia to purchase and arm five steamships so water communication could be preserved between these cities and the nation’s capital.²² Early in May, Lincoln ordered the federal treasury, without specific authorization, to provide the army and navy an advance of \$2 million to buy the necessary provisions for conducting the war.²³



Necessary Steps

It was July 4, 1861, in the capital city, and Lincoln took the time to review the most recently arrived militia companies. A high wooden stand had been built against the iron fence on the north side of the White House, so he could watch the dazzling military array. Thousands of soldiers marched by, but Lincoln did not need this cadenced display to remind him there was a crisis at hand. Already, Union soldiers had been sleeping on the carpet in the East Room, prompting the president's secretary, John Nicolay, to say, "The White House has turned into a barrack." Indeed, the hotels were full, and troops were bivouacked in the unfinished U.S. Capitol, baking bread in the basement, and drying laundry on the terraces.²⁴ Now the special session of the Congress had convened, and Nicolay carried the president's message to the Capitol that same Independence Day. In the message, Lincoln defended his actions of the spring and early summer as those of a chief executive who had seen to it that the office was "faithfully executed." He reviewed how carefully he had outlined in his inaugural address the choices of the hostile states. He listed the steps he had taken to avoid a conflict, even allowing the insurrectionaries to remain in the forts they had seized so long as those still held by the federals could be provisioned. However, he stated, the hostile forces had taken aggressive action at Fort Sumter, with the object of driving out the Union and forcing its dissolution. This he could not permit, and so he had taken necessary action.²⁵



Abraham Lincoln talks to an officer at dusk in 1863. Painting by Tom Freeman, 1998

While admitting it was "possibly illegal," he defended his call-up of troops for a three-month period, saying it was ventured upon because of "what appeared to be a popular demand and a public necessity." Further, he had his reasons for suspending the writ of habeas corpus, pointing out that the laws of the nation were being resisted "in nearly one-third of the States." He addressed the question of who should be allowed to suspend the writ and noted that the "Constitution itself is silent as to which or who is to exercise the power"—Congress or the chief executive. But, he asserted, the Constitution was clear when it stated that it could be suspended in a "dangerous emergency," and this rebellion qualified as just such an emergency.²⁶

During this address, Lincoln mentioned that he had instituted the blockade of "insurrectionary districts." Some believed that this naval blockade flew in the face of Lincoln's definition of the conflict as a "domestic insurrection." Some said that a blockade was between belligerent powers, "warring nations." Lincoln defended it, since he was convinced that if he had just closed the ports, the order would have been constantly tested by European powers and would have eventually led to a conflict with them. Thaddeus Stevens, a Pennsylvania Republican, said it was an absurdity, since "we are," in essence, "blockading ourselves."²⁷ Lincoln ignored the "absurdity" and the blockade remained throughout the war.



When Lincoln's special message was read to the Congress on July 5, his words fell on friendly ears; after all, southern senators and representatives were gone. First, the legislatures went beyond what Lincoln asked to further conduct the war. He had requested \$400 million and 400,000 military personnel; Congress appropriated \$500 million to put 500,000 men in the field.²⁸ It also approved retroactively virtually every action Lincoln had taken. The only dissent came from both Democrats and Republicans who were disturbed about his suspension of the writ of habeas corpus.

Lincoln was not finished with suspending the writ of habeas corpus. He did this repeatedly in areas where secession seemed likely, and thousands were arrested under its terms. David Donald states in *Lincoln*, "Most of the persons so arrested were spies, smugglers, blockade-runners, carriers of contraband goods, and foreign nationals; only a few were truly political prisoners. . . . It was nevertheless clear from Lincoln's first message to Congress that devotion to civil liberties was not the primary concern of his administration."²⁹ In May 1863, he heard that Clement Vallandigham, a pro-peace Copperhead who had urged soldiers to desert and had threatened to form a "Peace Democracy" in the western states, had been arrested by military officials. When a judge denied Vallandigham's motion for a writ of habeas corpus, Lincoln said the news was worth "three victories in the field." Lincoln explained later, "Must I shoot a simple-minded soldier boy who deserts, while I must not touch a hair of a wiley agitator who induces him to desert? I think . . . to silence the agitator, and save the boy, is not only constitutional, but . . . a great mercy."³⁰

So-Called Seceders

Garry Wills, in *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, points out that from Lincoln's perspective, the suspending of the writ of habeas corpus in the North was no different from repressing the armed insurrection in the South. As Wills notes, "Northerners and Southerners were equally citizens, and support for the insurrection was the same crime no matter where it occurred."³¹ In wartime, Wills added, internal supporters of the enemy are traitors. Lincoln would not use that term in talking about northern supporters of insurrection and rarely when referring to southerners. He would not even call southerners "seceders" without putting the phrase "so-called" in front of it. At the end of the war, he was quick to pardon both southerners and northerners because they were in the same basic category: citizens! It was only a matter of time, to Lincoln's thinking, that all states would be restored to "their proper practical relation."³²

The Great Emancipator

It is true that Lincoln was severe, Wills says "even ruthless," in putting down the insurrection.³³ The president's desire was to quickly end this disturbance to "domestic tranquility" so the nation could return to productive work. As it turned out, it would not be quick. Though Lincoln's actions in the first year of his presidency sent a clear message to southerners that the condition of Union was non-negotiable, they had not yet come face to face with this president's most dramatic vehicle for ending the crisis. On January 1, 1863, Lincoln would use his powers as commander in chief to begin the long process of freeing the slaves. It was for this act, rather than any bold moves to end a domestic rebellion, that would gain him the title for which he would be most remembered. As every schoolchild of the nation knows, Abraham Lincoln, sixteenth president of the United States, was the Great Emancipator of the slaves.

