

No Reason to Cheer

Contributed by Bob Reagan
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O, pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth,
That I am meek and gentle with these butchers!
Thou art the ruins of the noblest man
That ever lived in the tide of times.
Woe to the hand that shed this costly blood!
Over thy wounds now do I prophesy,--
Which, like dumb mouths, do ope their ruby lips,
To beg the voice and utterance of my tongue--
A curse shall light upon the limbs of men;
Domestic fury and fierce civil strife
Shall cumber all the parts of Italy;
Blood and destruction shall be so in use
And dreadful objects so familiar
That mothers shall but smile when they behold
Their infants quarter'd with the hands of war;
All pity choked with custom of fell deeds:
And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge,
With Ate by his side come hot from hell,
Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice
Cry 'Havoc,' and let slip the dogs of war;
That this foul deed shall smell above the earth
With carrion men, groaning for burial.

- Julius Caesar, Act III, Scene 1

It does not take a great deal of imagination to convert Mark Antony's lamentation to an allegory whereby Abraham Lincoln mourns the dismemberment of the Union (Caesar) by the secessionist South (Brutus and the others). The prophecy was true enough: the dogs of war did slip, and there were over six hundred thousand carrion men buried before it was over. Shakespeare was a master of tragedy, and if that overused word ever is appropriately applied to a national collective, it certainly is to the American Civil War. A tragedy is a certain doom to one who is otherwise a paragon of nobility and rectitude, but possesses a tragic flaw of character that brings about that misfortune. The flaw in ancient Greek tragedy was hubris, precipitated by a latent fateful condition becoming manifest. Among Shakespearean flaws were the ambition of Macbeth, the jealousy of Othello, and the indecision of Hamlet. The tragic flaw of America, of course, was the system of chattel slavery, which came to be regarded as an economic and social necessity in the Southern states, but at the same time was an institution diametrically opposed to the Enlightenment ideals of the Nation's founding. It was, practically speaking, more than that. "Unrequited labor," in Lincoln's words, was incompatible with the free market capitalism that was emerging along with the rapid technological changes of the industrial revolution. There have been thousands - perhaps tens of thousands - of books written about the Civil War. With the coming of the sesquicentennial, there are certain to be many more. Historians, as well as others of all stripe, will continue to argue about the causes, the issues, and the legacies. Of course, the "ifs" - the counterfactual speculation - will be prominent, as they always are.

One of the "ifs" surrounds the series of events leading up to the attack on Fort Sumter 150 years ago, the attack itself, and the aftermath when the conflict became inevitable.

Beginning on December 20, 1860, and through the first week of February 1861, the six states of the lower South and Texas left the Union. By early April no other state had seceded, and it was not clear that others would. Unionist sentiment was strong in the upper South and border states, particularly in the Appalachian and Ozark highlands. Virginia assembled a convention to consider secession, but had actually rejected it - more than once. Various attempts were made to resolve the crisis, especially an effort by Kentucky Senator John Crittenden and an informal House Committee of Thirty-Three, who proposed to amend the Constitution - ironically, it would have been the 13th Amendment - to protect slavery where it existed. While maintaining the Union was central to Lincoln's and the Republican Party's purpose, there was sentiment in the North to let the secessionist states go in peace, at least so long as no organized violence had been directed at the Government. The history of warfare is replete with peoples who probably could have worked out their differences but for an improvident act of violence.

In the process of secession, the departing states had demanded possession of federal enclaves within their borders, and for the most part, those were surrendered. The exceptions were three forts on Florida islands, and Fort Sumter, located on an island in Charleston harbor.

Fort Sumter had potential strategic value in that its location could have blocked the entrance to Charleston, but its garrison, armament, and provisions at the time were inadequate for that task. Its primary value was symbolic; to the Union, it was United States government territory, and thus inviolate; to South Carolina and the new Confederacy, it was an affront to the independence and sovereignty the secessionist states were asserting. Symbols, of course, are ostensibly what wars are fought for, at least to those who have to do the fighting, and are not unimportant. Still, Sumter

posed no military threat to the port of Charleston, the state, or the Confederacy.

What was important about Sumter beyond its merely symbolic value was the effect of militarily defending it. Lincoln's expressed resolve to hold onto federal property was of utmost concern to the Upper South states still in the Union; sending federal troops to South Carolina would require their passage through Virginia and North Carolina. Conversely, after Lincoln's inauguration, rumors out of Washington that Sumter might be given up was seen as allaying that concern. Those rumors were a result, at least partly, of the new Secretary of State William Seward's clumsy, or cunningly devious, communications to the Confederate government.

Shortly after his inauguration on March 4, President Lincoln was made aware of dispatches from Major Robert Anderson, the commander at Fort Sumter, that the fort only had sufficient provisions for six weeks. Lincoln had to decide whether to abandon or re-supply the garrison. Seward expressed his belief that Sumter should not be reinforced because that was exactly the kind of act that would precipitate violence. Five of the seven cabinet members agreed, and so voted when polled. Lincoln remained undecided, mindful of the Virginia convention, which remained in session for possible reconsideration of its rejections. Lincoln considered agreeing to evacuate Sumter if the Virginia convention would dissolve, figuring that saving the state for the Union by giving up a fort was not a bad deal. That thought that did not go anywhere.

Meanwhile, in mid-March, Seward began communicating with Supreme Court Justice John Campbell, an Alabamian who had not yet left the Court, but acted as an intermediary between the administration and the commissioners Confederate President Jefferson Davis had sent to Washington. Seward, probably without Lincoln's authority, told Campbell that Fort Sumter would be evacuated. When this did not occur, Seward equivocated to Campbell first by saying that there were no plans to re-supply the fort, and then later, that the fort would not be re-supplied without advance notice to the South Carolina governor. On April 6, Lincoln signed an order dispatching a naval expedition to re-supply the fort. Seward again told Campbell that the government would fully keep faith regarding his previous communications as to Sumter, which Campbell reported to Davis. On April 8 an envoy in Columbia delivered a message to Governor Pickens to the effect that Fort Sumter would be re-supplied with provisions only, and if not resisted, no reinforcements, arms, or munitions would be delivered.

The Confederate cabinet assembled to discuss the events. Many believed Seward's series of mis-communications was intentional deception, and that there really was a plan to reinforce the fort, and even more. Some suggested an immediate attack on the fort, others cautioned restraint. Robert Toombs of Georgia, though one of the most ardent secessionists, cautioned Jefferson Davis: "Mr. President, at this time it is suicide, murder, and will lose us every friend in the North. You will wantonly strike a hornet's nest which extends from mountain to ocean, and legions now quiet will swarm out and sting us to death. It is unnecessary; it puts us in the wrong; it is fatal." Despite this prescient warning, Davis sent orders to General P.G.T. Beauregard to reduce the fort if he determined that the federal re-supply efforts were in earnest. On April 11, Beauregard sent two men to the fort demanding that his former West Point artillery instructor Anderson surrender, with honorable terms, including a salute to the flag. Anderson had no authority to do so, and refused.

And so, at 4:30 a.m. April 12, 1861, sixty-seven year old Edmund Ruffin, a Virginian and ardent secessionist, pulled the lanyard of a howitzer; the shot burst in the air over Fort Sumter. After a two day bombardment, during which no one on either side was killed, the fort surrendered. (After the surrender, a Union soldier was killed by a mishap during a final 50 gun salute to the flag.) Thus, the rush into the abyss of full blown war began. Lincoln immediately called for 75,000 volunteers from loyal states to serve to suppress the rebellion. Beginning with Virginia, the Upper South states seceded, and the die was cast. The ensuing havoc wracked the nation for four years, with the aftermath and ramifications lasting down to our own day.

As Major Anderson led his troops onto the relief ship, bearing the fort's tattered flag he vowed to be buried with, it is reported that the Confederate soldiers on shore stood silently with their heads bared. As it was to turn out, there was no reason to cheer.

Note: Sources for the foregoing included Mark Egnal, *Clash of Extremes* (2009); Nelson Lankford, *Cry Havoc: The Crooked Road to Civil War* (2007); and generally Shelby Foote, *The Civil War, A Narrative* (Volume I, Fort Sumter to Perryville) (1958), and numerous others.