

## A New Amendment and Hopes for Peace

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During the last week of January 1865, opening movements continued in General William T. Sherman's advance into South Carolina, while on the other side of the world the Confederate commerce raider C.S.S. *Shenandoah* arrived in Melbourne, Australia in preparation for its mission to attack United States whaling vessels in the northern Pacific. The most significant events of the week, however, related to the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment by the U.S. House of Representatives, and the political maneuvering taking place that would culminate early the following month with what became known as the Hampton Roads Peace Conference.

A proposed amendment to outlaw slavery and involuntary servitude within the United State had long been advocated by abolitionists and had gathered steam following the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation. In 1864 the amendment had passed the Senate but died in the House. Following his reelection in November, President Lincoln began to more forcefully pressure the House to adopt the measure. After heated debate and aided by an intense lobbying campaign from the administration, the House on January 31 approved the amendment, by a vote of 119 in favor, 56 opposed, and 8 members not voting. The document was then sent to the states for ratification. Illinois approved the measure in one day, but it was not until December 1865 that the required  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the states had ratified the amendment in order for it to become part of the Constitution. Thus a war that for most northerners had begun to preserve the Union had evolved into one to also end the South's "Peculiar Institution."

While debate over the proposed amendment took place, political machinations were also underway for a possible meeting between the warring sides to discuss peace. In late 1864, newspaper editor Horace Greeley had written to Francis Preston Blair, a former editor and

longtime presidential advisor, concerning the possibility of a negotiated settlement to the seemingly-endless war. Blair met with President Lincoln, who authorized him to travel through Confederate lines to Richmond, where he conferred with Jefferson Davis. Blair proposed a cease fire between the combatants, who might then work together to remove the French-supported government of Maximilian from Mexico. The Confederate president prepared a letter for Blair to take back to Washington, proposing the creation of a peace commission. While skeptical about a joint Mexican intervention, Lincoln nevertheless replied in his own letter, agreeing to meet with any commissioners appointed by Davis, “with the view of securing peace to the people of our one common country.”

Blair and Davis met for a second time and made another proposal to authorize Generals Lee and Grant to enter into direct negotiations for a cease fire. Though Lincoln rejected this second suggestion, Davis eventually accepted Lincoln’s original idea to meet with Confederate peace commissioners. After conferring with his cabinet, Davis on January 28 would appoint Vice President Alexander Stephens, Assistant Secretary of War R.M. T. Hunter, and former U.S. Supreme Court justice John A. Campbell as the southern representatives.

The trio traveled to Petersburg in order to enter Union lines. Lincoln had issued passes authorizing them to proceed, but there was still confusion over their validity until General Grant eventually allowed them to proceed to his headquarters at City Point and subsequently to Hampton Roads. Lincoln and Secretary of State William Seward would meet with them there on February 3 in what was the only serious attempt at negotiations between the two sides since the outbreak of the war. So, while political events had dominated the news of the week, the military operations that seemed more and more likely to lead to Union victory continued unabated.