

Lincoln Ponders Fort Sumter

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As Abraham Lincoln assumed the presidency, he knew that he had to come to grips with the situation in Charleston, South Carolina. Commanding officer Major Robert Anderson had filed a dispatch to Washington indicating that provisions for his men in Fort Sumter would not last more than a few weeks longer. Lincoln showed the dispatch to his highest ranking general Winfield Scott and Scott's comment was "I now see no alternative but to surrender." This was highly disappointing to Lincoln who had hoped to have a more extended time period in which to deal with the Fort Sumter issue. Surrender of the fort in his first month would be a crushing humiliation.

Lincoln was also concerned about the plight of the men under Adam Slemmer in Fort Pickens at Pensacola, Florida. These men, however, had the advantage of a sizeable force of men waiting nearby at the mouth of the bay. These men had been sent down by President Buchanan in January but were held back in the uneasy truce that followed. Lincoln ordered that these reinforcements immediately be landed at Fort Pickens to reinforce Slemmer's men. His thinking was that if Fort Sumter fell, his administration could still look upon Fort Pickens as a source of strength.

Strangely enough, Henry Adams, the commander of the fleet in Pensacola Bay, refused the order. He assumed that the new administration in Washington was unaware of the truce that had been negotiated in January. The word of Adams's refusal did not reach Lincoln for quite

some time so as he continued to ponder Fort Sumter's situation he was under the mistaken impression that Fort Pickens had been secured.

When Lincoln met with his cabinet for the first time in the second week of March 1861 he informed them that it appeared that Sumter must be evacuated. This was a shock to several members of the cabinet, who were not aware of the severity of the situation. Word quickly reached Charleston that the administration was leaning toward evacuation of the troops and this was cause for great joy in the city. It seemed they had won a victory without firing a shot.

Still, Lincoln was not convinced. On March 15, he sent each member of his cabinet the following question: "Assuming it is possible to now provision Fort Sumter, under all circumstances is it wise to attempt it?" Each cabinet member responded in writing to the question, Secretary of War Simon Cameron was firmly opposed to any attempts to resupply the fort. He believed that the attempt was likely to fail and be an embarrassment to Lincoln and even if it succeeded it would need to be repeated in a few months. Most others in the cabinet agreed with Cameron, but Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Chase and Postmaster General Montgomery Blair felt that not resupplying the fort would empower the secessionists and make them see Lincoln and his team as weak. These opposing viewpoints gave Lincoln pause.

While Southerners became convinced that Sumter would soon be evacuated, Lincoln continued to ponder. Blair's brother-in-law, Gustavus Fox, a businessman and former naval officer, submitted an idea that impressed Blair and subsequently Winfield Scott. Fox believed that the failure of the *Star of the West* to resupply Sumter in January was due to using too large a boat in the harbor's narrow channels. Fox believed that the solution to the problem was to have small and fast boats resupply the fort at night. With protection from the fleet at the mouth of the

harbor and Sumter's guns, Fox believed these small boats could easily slip through the land based fire power of the secessionists. By March 19, Lincoln had decided to send Fox on a reconnaissance mission to Sumter to see if the plan would work.