

## **Lincoln Resupplies Fort Sumter** **<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

On March 27, 1861, Lincoln once again brought his cabinet together to ask them whether Fort Sumter should be resupplied. He had been tormented since the inauguration by what seemed to be a no-win decision. If Sumter was abandoned, his administration would be humiliated and the secessionists would be emboldened. If Sumter was resupplied, there was an excellent chance that immediate civil war would be the result. As he said later in the year: “Of all the trials I have had since I came here, none begin to compare with those I had between the inauguration and the fall of Fort Sumter. They were so great that could I have anticipated them, I would not have believed it possible to survive them.”

Lincoln was anxious to keep those slave-holding states that had not yet sided with the Confederacy from seceding. Like his predecessor, James Buchanan, Lincoln was intent on keeping neighboring Virginia in the Union. If evacuating Sumter would do the trick, then Lincoln thought it might be a fair trade. However, on the evening of March 26, Lincoln had received a memorandum from his general-in-chief, Winfield Scott. Scott advised that not only must Fort Sumter be abandoned to stop the chain of secession, but also Fort Pickens in Pensacola. Cabinet member Montgomery Blair, who had been strongly in favor of resupplying Fort Sumter in Lincoln’s first called vote on March 15, said angrily that Scott was playing “politician and not General.”

During the cabinet meeting on March 27, Lincoln discussed Scott’s memorandum and the intelligence gathered by Gustavus Fox during his visit to Sumter the week before. After listening to all the evidence, a majority of the cabinet members now advised Lincoln that both Fort Sumter

and Fort Pickens resupplied. Lincoln agreed with this consensus and there is historical evidence that he had made up his mind to resupply before calling the cabinet together.

The most vocal opponent to resupply was Secretary of State William Seward. Seward firmly believed that evacuating Sumter would not only stop Virginia and other states from seceding but would entice the states already in the Confederacy to return to the Union. In fact, Seward was so convinced that evacuation was imminent that he had conveyed messages to this effect to several people in the Confederacy. Thus, Lincoln's decision to resupply the forts was a serious loss of face for Seward.

On April 1, Seward wrote a letter to Lincoln stressing that Sumter should be abandoned. To do so would keep the peace and by simultaneously resupplying Fort Pickens he could save face for the administration. He also suggested that Lincoln change the focus of public opinion by asking a variety of foreign countries to explain their threats to intervene in the American situation. If Great Britain, Spain, France or Russia could not explain their actions in a satisfactory way, then Lincoln should immediately declare war upon the offending nation.

Apparently Lincoln responded in person to Seward regarding this bizarre memorandum and let him know that he was going to do things his way. Lincoln charged Gustavus Fox with making a detailed plan of ships, men and supplies that would be needed for the resupply effort. Fox got to work with the goal of starting his mission before the week was over.