

Southern Response to Lincoln's Election

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The election of Abraham Lincoln as 16th president of the United States on November 6, 1860 set off a chain of events in the southern United States that accelerated the nation toward a civil war. Tensions that had been building for months or years began to evolve into action.

In Charleston, South Carolina, US Army Lt. Col J.C. Gardiner, was in command of the troops stationed at Fort Moultrie, the main post of defense for the city. Because of the growing unrest in the city and state, Gardiner recommended on November 8 moving his troops to another site farther from the city. Five-side Fort Sumter sat in Charleston harbor and represented a far more easily defended bastion than did Moultrie.

The very next day, John Winsmith of the South Carolina General Assembly introduced a resolution to that state's House of Representatives. The resolution was titled "A Resolution to Call the Election of Abraham Lincoln as US President a Hostile Act" and directly addressed southern concerns over Lincoln rising to power. The resolution stated that "said election has been based upon principles of open and avowed hostility to the social organization and peculiar interests of the slaveholding states of this Confederacy." The resolution resulted in a call for a convention to be held in South Carolina on December 17 to determine if the state should remain in the United States or secede from the union.

On November 10, Senator James Chesnut of South Carolina became the first senator to resign from the United States Senate. Although relatively moderate in his views, Chesnut didn't believe he could remain in the Senate with Lincoln as president (He was expelled from the

Senate in absentia during 1861). The next day, his fellow South Carolina Senator James Hammond also resigned. Hammond was a fervent defender of slavery and state's rights and was well known at the time for his 1858 speech to the Senate in which he declared that "Cotton was King".

On November 15, 1860 Gardiner was relieved of command at Fort Moultrie by Major Robert Anderson. Anderson agreed with Gardiner's idea to move the men to the safer Fort Sumter but remained in Fort Moultrie to await coming events.

Meanwhile, other southern states were watching South Carolina closely and contemplating their own courses. At a public meeting on November 9 in Macon, Georgia, several politicians pledged their state to follow South Carolina out of the Union. On November 13, Senator Robert Toombs announced before the Georgia legislature in Milledgeville that he would resign from the Senate when his term ended in January 1861. Fellow Georgian Alexander Stephens, who had served beside Toombs in Congress for many years, made a call for moderation, believing that the problems facing the nation could be solved without secession.

Many northern politicians believed that southern overtures toward secession were a bluff. Tired from the endless compromises with the defenders of slavery, they were willing to call the bluff and so South Carolina and Georgia and several other states moved forward toward conventions that would call the question on secession. Lincoln said "The tug has to come and better now than any time hereafter". He added that "My opinion is that no state can, in any way lawfully, get out of the Union, without the consent of the others; and that it is the duty of the President and other government functionaries, to run the machine as it is."

Lincoln greeted many visitors and well wishers in the days after the election. To one group, he made the prophetic remark: "Well boys, your troubles are over now but mine are just beginning". During the next four and half years, Lincoln and the nation would see troubles that few could imagine in November of 1860.