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"I Claim Not to have Controlled Events": Abraham Lincoln and the Manipulation of Public Opinion in the Secession Crisis

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"I CLAIM NOT TO HAVE CONTROLLED EVENTS":
ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE MANIPULATION
OF PUBLIC OPINION IN THE SECESSION CRISIS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of American Studies

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

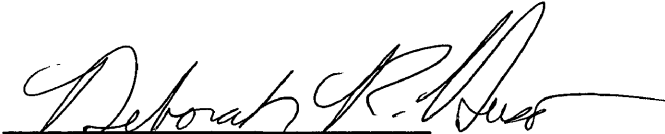
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1997

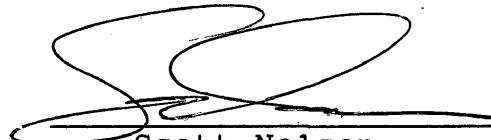
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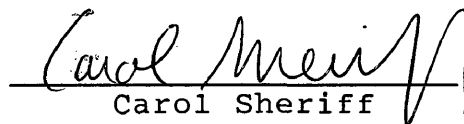
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ABSTRACT

Just prior to and following Abraham Lincoln's election to the Presidency on November 6, 1860, the United States was on the verge of dividing into two separate nations. Many Southerners were threatening secession in the event of Lincoln's election, fearing that if a Republican occupied the White House the existence of slavery and slavery's expansion into the western territories, in particular, would be endangered. In the months following Lincoln's election, American newspapers and the general populace clamored for Lincoln to speak or act in a manner that would stem the secession crisis and avert the horror of civil war. While some historians in the past have claimed that Lincoln did not anticipate civil war and failed to take secession threats seriously, Lincoln could not fail to be affected by public opinion. Nevertheless, he was unwilling to compromise on the issue of westward slavery expansion and was also unwilling to permit Southern states to secede unopposed. Consequently, he further aggravated Southern hostility to the North and the Republican party, specifically. But Lincoln was reluctant to accept sole responsibility for the secession crisis and the possibility of civil war, fearful of losing the public support he so desperately required in order to maintain federal authority throughout the country, even in the South. As newspapers and citizens accused Lincoln of inciting secession and provoking civil war, Lincoln counterattacked first with a policy of dignified silence and finally with potent rhetoric that emphasized that he was responsible for none of the nation's difficulties. He was but the servant and representative of the American people, not their leader; he performed their will, not his own. In this way, Lincoln endeavored to absolve himself of the responsibility for any armed conflict which might ensue and also maintained the much needed popular support of the Northern public.

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In August of 1858, Abraham Lincoln wrote,

In this age, and this country, public sentiment is every thing. With it, nothing can fail; against it, nothing can succeed. Whoever moulds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes, or pronounces judicial decisions. He makes possible the enforcement of these, else impossible.¹

Little did Lincoln realize, during the summer of 1858, how influential public opinion would become in his political life, particularly during the critical winter months of the secession crisis, and how he would be compelled not only to mold it in his favor, but to ensure that he himself did not outrun public sentiment in the pronouncement and implementation of his political policies. During the winter of 1860-61, Lincoln occupied the precarious position of President-elect while the United States was rapidly dividing along sectional lines. Many Southern Democrats were demanding constitutional protection of slavery and its expansion and threatening to withdraw from the Union should a Republican be elected to or be allowed to assume the American Presidency. Most Republicans and Northern Democrats were attempting to stem the crisis both through efforts at conciliation and through postures of aggression. Throughout this period, President-elect Lincoln endeavored to remain

¹Roy P. Basler, ed., The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 2:352-3.

above the fray, but with the constant public outcry for his views and the worsening of the sectional crisis, it was difficult for Lincoln to remain silent and inwardly composed.

After all, much of the crisis during that winter revolved around Lincoln's election to the Presidency. While running for the Senate in 1858, Lincoln had publicly proclaimed, in words now immortalized,

"A house divided against itself cannot stand."
I believe this government cannot endure permanently
half slave and half free.²

Southern fire-eaters grasped at these words and others like them in an effort to prove that Lincoln was not only anti-slavery in sentiment, but that he would make war upon the South in an effort to eradicate the "peculiar institution." Fearful of the safety of their livelihoods and domestic institutions, many Southern politicians threatened secession should Lincoln, or any Republican, occupy the White House. Under such circumstances and with constant pressure from newspapers, friends, and citizens, Lincoln felt an enormous responsibility weighing on him both as President-elect and later as President. With him lay the burden of

²Ibid., 2:461-2.

preserving the federal Union and the Republican party, as well as his own political reputation. As a result, Lincoln publicly endeavored to shift the responsibility for the secession crisis and any impending physical confrontation between North and South from his own shoulders to those of hothead Southerners and the American people as a whole. By so doing, he was able to assume, during the winter months of 1860-61, an often uncompromising posture toward the South while still appearing, at least publicly, to be patiently performing the will of the electorate.

Lincoln's behavior during the winter of 1860-61 has been pondered and analyzed by historians for decades. While most historians agree that Lincoln's election to the Presidency precipitated the spread of secessionist sentiment throughout the South, their opinions as to Lincoln's perception of the crisis and the motivating factors behind his reactions to it vary widely. David Potter and, more recently, Robert Bruce both claim that Lincoln failed to see the possibility of civil war erupting between North and South and severely underestimated the Southern secessionist temper. Under this interpretation, most of Lincoln's public pronouncements must be taken at face value. According to Potter and Bruce, when Lincoln declared he expected no bloodshed, he meant it. Conversely, other historians of

more extreme bent, such as Ludwell Johnson and George Forgie, assert that Lincoln expected war and even initiated it. In Johnson's view, Lincoln planned the Fort Sumter crisis, hoping that Southerners would fire on the federal stronghold, thus absolving the North of any blame for beginning a conflict and ensuring that the Northern public would unite and arm themselves against the aggressive Confederacy. In a less extravagant but certainly not less radical vein, Forgie argues that Lincoln inaugurated war between North and South in an unconscious effort to provide himself with the opportunity of becoming the nation's savior.³

Kenneth Stampp and Richard Current believe that Lincoln saw in the Fort Sumter crisis an avenue by which he could test federal authority in the South and, if it were resisted, see the role of aggressor placed on Southern hotheads rather than on the federal government. But they do not suggest, as Johnson does, that Lincoln planned the Fort Sumter crisis. They merely suggest that Lincoln saw in the crisis an opportunity to either call the Confederacy's bluff

³See David M. Potter, The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1976); David M. Potter, Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942); Robert V. Bruce, "The Shadow of a Coming War," in Lincoln, the War President: The Gettysburg Lectures, ed. Gabor S. Boritt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Ludwell H. Johnson, Division and Reunion: American 1848-1877 (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978); George B. Forgie, Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979).

or have the South, rather than the federal government, initiate a conflict. Either way, Lincoln would succeed in his ultimate goal--the enforcement of government authority. Scholars writing in the decades after Stamp and Current agree that Lincoln did indeed expect war, much as he may have hoped to avoid it and settle sectional differences peaceably. James McPherson, Robert Johannsen, and David Donald all claim that Lincoln had an immense faith in Southern unionism and, consequently, hoped to avert a sectional confrontation by appealing to that unionist sentiment. Nevertheless, they point out that Lincoln was unwilling to risk the ruin of the Republican Party or the destruction of federal authority to appease the South. He was prepared to remain firm in his views on slavery and its expansion into western territories and was willing to hazard civil war should the South fail to rally around the national standard.⁴

While historians like Stamp and Current present a more

⁴See Kenneth M. Stamp, And the War Came: The North and the Secession Crisis, 1860-1861 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950); Kenneth M. Stamp, "Lincoln and the Strategy of Defense in the Crisis of 1861," The Journal of Southern History 11 (August 1945): 297-233; Richard N. Current, Lincoln and the First Shot (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott and Co., 1963); James M. McPherson, Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Robert W. Johannsen, Lincoln, the South, and Slavery: The Political Dimension (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991); David Donald, Lincoln (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

than plausible analysis of Lincoln's motivations during the secession crisis, the crux of their arguments focuses mainly on the political and military implications of Lincoln's actions. Most scholars overlook, or at least downplay, the role Lincoln's efforts to shape his own public persona played during the crisis. But through a careful analysis of Lincoln's public pronouncements and private correspondence, as well as through an examination of the various media which influenced him, one can gain a more profound portrait of Lincoln the man and the politician and also understand how public opinion and public figures' endeavors to mold it shape history. Through an analysis of Lincoln's language during the secession crisis, it becomes evident that Lincoln was endeavoring to absolve himself and his party of responsibility for the crisis and the possibility of civil war. By gradually fashioning public sentiment in favor of his often uncompromising policies without openly stating what those policies would be, Lincoln was able to gather enough public support to ensure the government's ability to maintain its authority and to wage what might otherwise have been an unpopular war.

As a politician far from unanimously elected to the American Presidency, Lincoln undoubtedly felt the necessity of gathering as much public support as possible between his election and inauguration. His election was successful largely due to the rupture of the Democratic party. While

Lincoln received 180 electoral votes and 1,864,735 popular votes, 2,821,157 Americans voted against him, and he did not receive a single vote in ten Southern states. Many of those who did vote for Lincoln did so not because he opposed the expansion of slavery, but despite his position on slavery. Many voters' support of the Republican ticket was based on Lincoln's advocacy of popular issues such as the construction of a transcontinental railroad, free homesteads, and a protective tariff. Thus, the most controversial issue of the campaign--the question of expanding slavery into the western territories--was largely irrelevant to Lincoln's victory. As a result, while many Southerners proclaimed their states would secede from the Union if Lincoln were elected, few Americans were inclined to believe such threats at first. Southerners had threatened the same in 1856, in the event of John C. Fremont's election to the Presidency. Nevertheless, three Southern states took legislative action to prepare for secession in the event of Lincoln's election before his victory was even established, and within a month of November 6 and the Republican triumph, every state in the lower South had called secession conventions. It seemed that, in 1860, Southern advocates of secession were serious. But Republicans had nothing to gain by taking secession seriously if they wished their candidate to be elected and installed in the White House without incident. They did not wish the electorate to be frightened into voting for a

Democratic candidate, nor did they wish to incite Southern hotheads to further actions on behalf of disunion by displaying any genuine apprehension of secession or sectional conflict. Consequently, they patently dismissed the secession crisis as just one more instance of Southern bluster.⁵

But public opinion could not be entirely ignored. There were Republicans who considered secession a genuine menace and openly said so. Horace Greeley, Republican editor of the New York Daily Tribune, believed secessionists were serious in their threats, but he also felt that Lincoln's election was merely an excuse for a preconceived plan to withdraw from the Union. Some Southerners regarded secessionists in the same light. R.S. Donnell, a North Carolina politician, claimed that Southern fire-eaters deliberately caused a split in the Democratic party,

to insure the election of Mr. Lincoln, and thereby forge for themselves a grievance which would seem to justify them in the execution of the long-meditated designs of destroying the Union.

Charlottesville, Virginia's The Review agreed, observing,
 "The present election is not the cause with South Carolina;

⁵Potter, Impending Crisis, 431, 442-3; Potter, Lincoln, 2, 7-8, 189-90, 257; Donald, 256.

it is merely the occasion."⁶ Lincoln himself, in his Cooper Institute Address in February 1860, poked fun at Southerners who were inclined to claim Republican victory as an excuse for secession:

But you will not abide the election of a Republican President! In that supposed event, you say, you will destroy the Union; and then, you say, the great crime of having destroyed it will be upon us! That is cool. A highwayman holds a pistol to my ear, and mutters through his teeth, "Stand and deliver, or I shall kill you, and then you will be a murderer!"⁷

Yet there were Southerners who actually perceived Lincoln's election to the Presidency as a threat to their section of the country, firmly believing he would implement aggressive policies harmful to Southern social institutions. Henry L. Benning, a Georgia politician, proposed, "The election of Mr. Lincoln to the Presidency of the United

⁶Horace Greeley, Recollections of a Busy Life: Including Reminiscences of American Politics and Politicians, From the Opening of the Missouri Contest to the Downfall of Slavery (New York: J.B. Ford & Company, 1868), 394; Daily Tribune (New York), 12 November 1860; R.S. Donnell, A Voice From North Carolina--the Secessionists: Their Promises and Performances; The Condition into Which They Have Brought the Country; The Remedy, Etc. (New York: Anson D.F. Randolph, 1863), 9; Dwight Lowell Dumond, Southern Editorials on Secession (New York: The Century Company, 1932), 263.

⁷Basler, 3:547.

States means the abolition of slavery. . . ." Georgia's governor, Joseph E. Brown, asserted that Lincoln's election demonstrated an "avowed hostility to our rights" and "does in my opinion, afford ample cause to justify the South in withdrawing from a confederacy where her equality . . . can no longer be protected."⁸ Newspapers across the South made similar declarations with varying degrees of distemper. The Richmond Enquirer asserted that Republicans would gain ascendancy over the South through "the use of federal office, contracts, power and patronage" and that "in a few short years . . . the confiscation of negro property by emancipation" would result. The New Orleans Daily Bee claimed, on December 17, 1860, that Lincoln's election was "proof of a settled and immutable policy of aggression by the North towards the South. . . ."⁹

Several border state newspapers also expressed apprehension over Lincoln's election, though they were less concerned with Lincoln's political views than with the effect his election would have on advocates of secession.

⁸Henry L. Benning, "Henry L. Benning's Secessionist Speech, Monday Evening, November 19, 1860," in Secession Debated: Georgia's Showdown in 1860, ed. William W. Freehling and Craig L. Simpson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 117; Joseph E. Brown, "Joseph E. Brown's Secessionist Public Letter, December 7, 1860, from Milledgeville," in Freehling and Simpson, 148.

⁹Dumond, 141, 337; see also Daily Bee (New Orleans), 28 November 1860; Daily Crescent (New Orleans), 14 December 1860.

The Daily Nashville Patriot felt secession due to the election of a Republican President unjustifiable but, nevertheless, believed that "the attempt would be made" by Southern states in the event of Lincoln's election. George D. Prentice, editor of the Louisville, Kentucky, Daily Journal, wrote Lincoln on October 26, 1860, professing "the strongest confidence in your personal and political integrity," though he felt compelled, regardless, to oppose "your election because I greatly fear its influence upon the peace of the country."¹⁰

Some Northern papers, particularly those which had supported Senator Stephen A. Douglas in the Presidential election, blamed Lincoln's election for the secession crisis. The Cincinnati Daily Enquirer addressed Lincoln on February 10, 1861, noting the "great public gloom and distress which have settled upon the country in consequence of your election to the Presidency." The Providence Daily Post warned, four days after the Presidential election, that the nation was "standing on the brink of a fearful precipice."¹¹

¹⁰Dumond, 148; The Robert Todd Lincoln Papers of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln, 1790-1916, 194 Reels, Library of Congress, Reel 9, George D. Prentice to Lincoln, 26 October 1860.

¹¹Howard Cecil Perkins, ed., Northern Editorials on Secession, 2 Vols. (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc., 1942), 1:85, 268; see also Daily Post (Providence), 8 November 1860; Daily Illinois State Register (Springfield), 28 September 1860.

Lincoln was certainly aware of the crisis erupting around the issue of his election. He read newspapers and was in constant correspondence with political friends and national politicians, many of whom sent him newspaper clippings or forwarded other letters and Congressional news involving the secession outbreak. But not all the information Lincoln received anticipated crisis in the event of his election or inauguration. Alexander Stephens, a former Whig and political friend of Lincoln's, who would soon become the Confederacy's vice-president, declared before the Georgia legislature in November 1860,

I do not anticipate that Mr. Lincoln will do anything to jeopard[ize] our safety or security, whatever may be his spirit to do it; for he is bound by the constitutional checks which are thrown about him, which at this time render him powerless to do any great mischief.

Stephens forwarded this speech to Lincoln at the latter's request. President James Buchanan, in his annual message to Congress on December 3, 1860, declared that there was no right of secession under the Constitution and that "the election of any one of our fellow-citizens to the office of President does not of itself afford just cause for dissolving the Union. . . ." He pleaded with Southern fireaters to "wait for some overt and dangerous act on the part of the President elect before resorting to such a

remedy." With moral support even from his political foes and further assurances from newspapers, which blamed secession on Southern hotheads and referred to the majority of the South as unionist in sentiment, it would be easy for a man in Lincoln's position to grow consoled. Even his most potent rival for the Presidency, Stephen Douglas, assured Southerners that Lincoln could do no harm to Southern social institutions without the support of Congress and the American people as a whole.¹²

Some historians claim that Abraham Lincoln and his Republican cohorts were consoled by reports of Southern unionism and faith in the Southern capacity for bluster without action. Bruce proclaims, "Through the antebellum years most Americans, including Abraham Lincoln, would look away from the shadow of war until the substance was upon them."¹³ And the evidence leading to the conclusions that Republicans, particularly Lincoln, were inured to Southern

¹²Alexander H. Stephens, "Alexander H. Stephens's Unionist Speech, Wednesday Evening, November 14, 1860," in Freehling and Simpson, 56; U.S. Congress, Senate, Congressional Globe, 36th Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington: Office of John C. Rives, 1861), append., 1; Perkins, 1:96-7, 108-9; The Daily Picayune (New Orleans), 8 November 1860; The Kentucky Statesman (Lexington), 20 November 1860; Robert W. Johannsen, ed., The Letters of Stephen A. Douglas (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), 500-1.

¹³Potter, Lincoln, 9, 47; Potter, Impending Crisis, 516; Robert V. Bruce, "The Shadow of a Coming War," in Lincoln, the War President: The Gettysburg Lectures, ed. Gabor S. Boritt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 11, 18; Donald, 260; McPherson, Battle Cry, 239.

secession threats and never anticipated civil war are ample. Horace Greeley, a contemporary observer of and participant in the politics of the Civil War era, suggested,

It was not easy for Northern men, especially those who had never visited and sojourned at the South, to comprehend and realize the wide prevalence and intensity of anti-National sentiment and feeling in those localities whose social order, industry, and business, were entirely based on Slavery.¹⁴

Greeley's statement, though made in 1866, is exemplary of much popular sentiment at the time. Many newspapers referred to secession threats as "an empty sham" induced by "hot-headed fanatics." The Daily Pittsburgh Gazette declared, on November 14, 1860, that the menace of secession had "been the bugaboo of the South for thirty years," an avenue by which she could "scare the North into submission." The Boston Daily Atlas and Bee believed most Southerners were unionists "and laugh to scorn the treason and the nonsense of the braggarts and demagogues with whose presence and blatant bellowings they are now afflicted."¹⁵

Native northerners, in private correspondence, expressed similar sentiments. Carl Schurz, whom Lincoln

¹⁴Horace Greeley, The American Conflict: A History of the Great Rebellion in the United States of America, 1860-'66, 2 vols. (Hartford: O.D. Case & Company, 1866), 1:430.

¹⁵Perkins, 1:65, 88, 91.

would appoint Minister to Spain, wrote his wife on November 10, 1860, assuring her there was no reason for alarm in regard to the secession crisis. With time, he said, Southern passions would cool. Edward Bates, soon to be appointed Lincoln's attorney general, wrote in his diary on November 22, 1860, that he believed the secession crisis was "all brag and bluster," instigated by those "hoping thus to make a better compromise with the timid patriotism of their opponents." Charles Francis Adams, Jr., son of the Massachusetts Congressman of the same name, remarked, "the secession of a State is an event of hardly importance enough for a paragraph in a newspaper." And Lincoln's friend Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois told Congress in March,

after the new Administration goes into operation, and the people of the South see, by its acts, that it is resolved to maintain its authority, and, at the same time, to make no encroachments whatever upon the rights of the people of the South, the desire to secede will subside.¹⁶

Lincoln's personal letters reflect similar

¹⁶Joseph Schafer, ed., Intimate Letters of Carl Schurz, 1841-1869, vol. 30, Publications of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Collections (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1928), 232; Howard K. Beale, ed. The Diary of Edward Bates, 1859-1866, vol. 4, The Annual Report of the American Historical Association (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1933), 157; Charles Francis Adams, Charles Francis Adams, 1835-1915: An Autobiography (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916), 70-1; Congressional Globe 36.2, 383.

attitudes. A Republican supporter wrote him in November 1860, asserting, "With time & reflection will come peace & quiet, & this eternal game of brag will have been squarely met & fairly & finally beaten." Another such letter, written in December, declared that the talk of secession was "only political trickery to intimidate the republicans. . . ." ¹⁷

In fact, most of Lincoln's correspondence during the winter of 1860-61 revolved around the system of patronage--letters recommending individuals for government office and requests for federal appointments. By examining Lincoln's personal papers, it is possible to see how some historians might be led to believe that he and his fellow party members were little troubled by the secession crisis.

Many individuals who were close to Lincoln or who observed him on a regular basis believed that he felt no anxiety for the nation's future. Though not always the most reliable source, Lincoln's law partner, William Herndon, noted,

He apprehended no such grave danger to the Union as the mass of people supposed would result from the Southern threats, and said he could not in his heart believe that the South designed the overthrow of the Government.

Henry Villard, a correspondent for the New York Herald and Associated Press, who spent every day observing Lincoln in

¹⁷Lincoln Papers, Reel 10, H. Stanford to Lincoln, 15 November 1860; Reel 11, Jonas Hoch to Lincoln, 10 December 1860.

Springfield, Illinois, prior to his inauguration, supported this view, writing in early 1861, that Lincoln "had not lost faith in the preservation of peace between the North and the South" and certainly failed to anticipate that his most significant Presidential duty would be "the suppression of the most determined and sanguinary rebellion. . . ." ¹⁸

Lincoln himself apparently vocalized a belief that there would be no serious attempt to destroy the federal Union. An Ohio journalist who spoke with Lincoln at a Washington reception just prior to his inauguration claimed that when he asked the President-elect if he believed Southerners truly meant to secede from the Union, Lincoln replied whimsically, "They won't give up the [federal] offices. Were it believed that vacant places could be had at the North Pole, the road there would be lined with dead Virginians." Lincoln wrote to one of his supporters in the 1860 campaign, remarking, "The people of the South have too much of good sense, and good temper, to attempt the ruin of the government. . . ." Even after Lincoln was burned in effigy in Pensacola, Florida, Horace Greeley noted in his New York Daily Tribune on November 10, 1860, "I am told Mr. Lincoln considers the feeling at the South to be limited to

¹⁸William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, Herndon's Life of Lincoln, ed. Paul M. Angle (Cleveland: Fine Editions Press, 1949), 382; Henry Villard, Memoirs of Henry Villard, Journalist and Financier, 1835-1900, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1904), 1:146.

a very small number. . . ."19 As a result of such remarks, some historians have claimed that Lincoln was operating under a significant delusion, that he had "a complete misunderstanding of the Southern temper, and a complete misconception of the extent of the crisis."20

But to judge Lincoln's personal perception of the secession crisis based on the overt meanings of his public statements and private correspondence is inappropriate. Lincoln, as most scholars would have to agree, was a persuasive and often manipulative communicator, both publicly and privately. Like any astute politician, he knew that his public pronouncements would be closely monitored by the American people during the winter between his election and his inauguration. Consequently, he refrained from making any public statement of his views during the three months immediately following his election. He was fearful that any such statement would be perceived as evidence of anxiety on his part in regard to the secession crisis. He was also well aware of his own vulnerability as a politician still lacking an official position and therefore additionally

¹⁹Don Piatt, Memories of the Men Who Saved the Union (New York: Belford, Clarke & Company, 1887), 30; Basler, 4:95.

²⁰Potter, Lincoln, 245; Gabor S. Boritt, "'And the War Came'? Abraham Lincoln and the Question of Individual Responsibility," in Why the Civil War Came, ed. Gabor S. Boritt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 16.

lacking in the ability to enforce his views. As Lincoln himself was fond of observing to his friends and correspondents, his political views were accessible to anyone having the inclination to peruse his former speeches or to study the Republican party platform. Any restatement of those views might be misconstrued as weakness on Lincoln's part or might rob him of the dignity of his position.²¹

But Lincoln's silence was misconstrued, just as a public statement might have been had he issued one, demonstrating the anxiety of the general populace to know Lincoln's intentions toward Southern disunionists and also showing their quickness to blame the President-elect for the crisis and any resulting physical conflict. The Providence Daily Post wrote, in April 1861, well after Lincoln's inauguration and in response to his continuing silence and seeming inactivity, "We are to have civil war, if at all, because Abraham Lincoln loves a party better than he does his country." The Post accused him of clinging to an uncompromising Republican platform rather than working to conciliate the South and restore the Union. The paper urged him to give public assurance that he would not interfere

²¹Potter, Lincoln, 135; David Herbert Donald, Lincoln (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 259-60; Basler, 4:138.

with the institutions of the South.²² Lincoln received numerous letters from supporters and political opponents alike, encouraging him to make public his political intentions. John A. Gilmer, a North Carolina Congressman, pressed Lincoln to publicly announce what his policy would be as President in regard to the slavery and secession questions "which now so seriously distract the country." A gentleman from Baltimore, Maryland, urged the same, noting that "people are in such a fever as to be almost beyond the words of reason." Samuel D. Morgan of Nashville, Tennessee, wrote Lincoln, claiming that a public address on his part would do much "to avert the impending crisis,--and restore our country to its wonted prosperity--peace--and contentment. . . ." Robert S. Benton, a Mississippi native, warned Lincoln that the South would undoubtedly secede from the Union without an "assurance on your part that we are not to be prejudiced in our rights by you and your administration."²³

But many of Lincoln's political friends, despite the clamor of the public, were adamant in their view that Lincoln should remain silent until his installation as President. William Cullen Bryant, editor of the New York Evening Post, encouraged Lincoln to refrain from making a

²²Perkins, 2:711-2.

²³Lincoln Papers, Reel 11, John A. Gilmer to Lincoln,

public statement, insisting,

Such a declaration would be regarded as a concession to your political adversaries. They would consider it as something extorted by the violence of their attacks and would be encouraged to continue them.

Rodney Adams of Syracuse, New York, wrote Lincoln, "Our [Republican] platform is sufficiently explicit" to make a public address unnecessary. Another supporter from New York believed that "any Explanation as to your public policy would be mistaken for weakness & satisfy neither side. . . ." Henry Hardy of Washington agreed, urging "masterly inactivity" on Lincoln's part, as it would,

never do to let our opponents suppose, with any justice, that Weakness is a Republican failing.--Yielding to importunity, especially from Southern men, has been the bane & disgrace of the last two administrations.²⁴

Lincoln decided to follow the advice of his political friends and maintain silence during the months following his election. Henry Villard, the New York Herald correspondent

10 December 1860; Reel 10, C. DuPont Bird to Lincoln, 8 November 1860; Reel 10, Samuel D. Morgan to Lincoln, 2 November 1860; Reel 10, Robert S. Benton to Lincoln, 2 November 1860.

²⁴Ibid., Reel 10, William Cullen Bryant to Lincoln, 1 November 1860; Reel 10, Rodney L. Adams to Lincoln, 10 November 1860; Reel 10, H. Stanford to Lincoln, 15 November 1860; Henry Hardy to Richard Yates, 19 November 1860, enclosed in Yates to Lincoln, 3 December 1860.

who followed all of the President-elect's daily movements during that critical period, observed that whenever Lincoln was questioned about his views, he remained noncommittal. Villard noted, "He could not be got to say what he would do in the face of Southern secession, except that as President he should be sworn to maintain the Constitution. . . ." Lincoln justified this course of silence in a letter to former Senator Truman Smith of Connecticut on November 10, 1860:

I could say nothing which I have not already said, and which is in print, and open for the inspection of all. To press a repetition of this upon those who have listened, is useless; to press it upon those who have refused to listen, and still refuse, would be wanting in self-respect, and would have an appearance of sycophancy and timidity, which would invite the contempt of good men, and encourage the bad ones to clamor the more loudly.²⁵

But Lincoln's silent posture was not greeted cheerfully by all of his supporters or by all Republicans. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., complained during the winter of 1861, "Lincoln's attitude was wholly unknown. His every movement was jealously watched; his utterances closely followed."²⁶ The American press, which constantly endeavored to shape public opinion, was even more disturbed by Lincoln's seeming

²⁵Villard, Memoirs, 143-5; Basler, 4: 138.

²⁶Adams, 73-4.

passivity. George Gordon Bennett, editor of the New York Herald, wrote on January 12, 1861,

in the face of . . . alarming developments, what are the republican party doing to arrest the triumphant march of revolution? Nothing whatever, but, on the contrary, everything to stimulate it.

He added contemptuously, "Mr. Lincoln and the leaders [of the Republican party] are too busy dividing the spoils [of office] beforehand to pay much attention to passing events." Henry J. Raymond, Republican editor of the New York Times, was equally condemnatory, claiming, shortly after Lincoln's inauguration, that he could see "no indications of an administrative policy adequate to the emergency,--or, indeed, any policy beyond that of listless waiting to see what may 'turn up.'" Horace Greeley of the New York Daily Tribune urged, on April 3, 1861, that Lincoln and his seemingly quiet and inert administration "let this intolerable suspense and uncertainty cease!"²⁷

With the enormous clatter of the American public and the press, Lincoln could not avoid seeing that a national crisis was at hand, despite Robert Bruce's assertion that the President-elect failed to see "the shadow of a coming

²⁷Herald (New York), 12 January 1861; Times (New York), 3 April 1861; Daily Tribune (New York), 3 April 1861.

war." Lincoln felt the responsibility resting upon him as the man chosen to lead an already divided nation, yet to express publicly his anxiety over that responsibility would only worsen the crisis, providing his opponents with ample ammunition for further disturbing the peace of the country. Those who knew and observed Lincoln in a more intimate setting saw the strain upon his features and were occasionally privy to his confidence. Lincoln disclosed to his Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, his feelings after learning of his election to the Presidency in the early hours of the morning on November 7:

I went home [from the telegraph office], but not to get much sleep, for I then felt, as I never had before, the responsibility that was upon me. I began at once to feel that I needed support,--others to share with me the burden: This was on Wednesday morning, and before the sun went down I had made up my Cabinet.

Thurlow Weed, editor of the Albany Evening Journal, visited Lincoln in December 1860, and he, too, was aware of the strain upon the President-elect. He later wrote, "Mr. Lincoln, although manifestly gratified with his election, foresaw and appreciated the dangers which threatened the the safety both of the government and of the Union." He further observed that despite "the difficulties which surround him," Lincoln's manner was "so cheerful, that he

always seemed at ease and undisturbed."²⁸

While Lincoln may have remained outwardly calm, the nation's newspapers would not permit him to forget the immense responsibility weighing upon him. They addressed him, not as the leader of the Republican Party or the advocate of a particular set of policies, but as an individual, placing on his shoulders the nation's destiny. The St. Louis Daily Missouri Republican urged Lincoln, on November 21, 1860, to advocate repeal of the personal liberty laws in Northern states, which allowed citizens to evade enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, for if he failed to do so, "we see nothing but ruin and desolation to the whole country." The same newspaper pressed him, in January, to make efforts to restore national unity, declaring, "You, Mr. Lincoln, have it in your power to stop all this disorder and possible civil war--Upon you will rest the responsibility if it be not done." The Cincinnati Daily Enquirer addressed Lincoln in February, proclaiming that he possessed the power "for the preservation or destruction of the country, as you may see fit to use it." Henry J. Raymond of the New York Times proclaimed,

²⁸John T. Morse, ed., Diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy Under Lincoln and Johnson, 3 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), 1:82; Thurlow Weed, Autobiography of Thurlow Weed, ed. Harriet A. Weed (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1883), 603.

He [Lincoln] is no longer simply a private citizen, but is on his way to the assumption of duties and responsibilities more grave and momentous than have ever before devolved upon any of his predecessors.

In a similar vein, George Gordon Bennett of the New York Herald wrote, "To Abraham Lincoln now belongs the power of restoring or destroying the happy relations of peace and fraternity between the North and the South. . . ."29

During the final months of 1860, Lincoln was beset with personal letters, urging upon him a recognition of his responsibility to the country. Moses Brigham of Chicago, Illinois, wrote Lincoln on October 23, "'He who putteth down one and setteth up another' is about to lay a heavy responsibility upon you." Several days later, a gentleman from Charlottesville, Virginia, pressed Lincoln,

If you shall avert from us & from the country the horrors that now threaten us, the calamities of a war the parallel of which has never been known in all the tide of times, the blessings of our Creator will rest upon you. . . .

Carl Schurz told Lincoln, in November, "Yours, dear Sir, is the greatest mission that ever fell to the lot of mortal man. . . ." Kentuckians addressed the President-elect in December, noting, "It seems to us that you have more in your

²⁹Dumond, 261, 399; Perkins, 1:269; Times (New York), 13 February 1861; Herald (New York), 8 November 1860.

power than any one man in the Union." Illinois Congressman Elihu B. Washburne wrote his friend, "You will assume the reins of the government under the gravest responsibilities ever known in our history." And George G. Fogg, a member of the Republican National Committee, expressed his belief that Lincoln would have to employ "such an exertion of wise statesmanship, courage and patriotism as has never yet been demanded of an American President or of the American people."³⁰

While Lincoln persisted in maintaining his silence on all political questions during the first three months following his election, he was undoubtedly affected by the opinions of the American public and the belief of many of the nation's citizens that the responsibility for the country's future prosperity and peace lay with him. It was a tremendous burden for one man to assume, and Lincoln, despite the wisdom and initiative he would display throughout his Presidency, was unwilling to assume that responsibility alone. Lincoln had a great deal to risk in 1861. He was not among the most prominent members of his

³⁰Lincoln Papers, Reel 9, Moses Brigham to Lincoln, 23 October 1860; Reel 9, W.T. Early to Lincoln, 30 October 1860; Reel 10, Carl Schurz to Lincoln, 7 November 1860; Reel 11, "All Kentucky" (Louisville) to Lincoln, 2 December 1860; Reel 11, Elihu B. Washburne to Lincoln, 9 December; Reel 12, George G. Fogg to Lincoln, 13 December 1860.

party, having never held an office higher than that of a United States Congressman until his election to the Presidency. He was also the leader of a new political party, the lifeblood of which depended on the maintenance of anti-slavery policies, policies which naturally provoked white Southerners. Yet to disavow these policies, particularly opposition to the westward expansion of slavery, even to save the Union, would be to ruin his party and his personal integrity. Thus, for Lincoln, provocation of the Southern temper was unavoidable. When he first broke his silence in February 1861, during his twelve-day journey to Washington, it was not to present an avowal of his purposes as President-elect, but to transfer the weight of the present crisis and pending civil war from his own shoulders to those of the American people. His words during that journey are not the words of a man inured to Southern secession threats and unaware of the possibility of a physical confrontation between North and South. They are the words of a man attuned to the crisis and unwilling to confront that crisis alone.

While Lincoln, throughout his political career, had always expressed a strong love for the American government and its dependence on the will of the American people, his public addresses during his journey to Washington are replete with references to the wisdom and responsibility of

the American people and are repetitive in their insistence that the people, not the President, are responsible for the nation's course. On the first day of his journey, February 11, 1861, Lincoln addressed a crowd in Indianapolis, Indiana, where he claimed that "the salvation of this Union" rested on the American people. He declared,

In all trying positions in which I shall be placed, and doubtless I shall be placed in many trying ones, my reliance will be placed upon you and the people of the United States--and I wish you to remember now and forever, that it is your business, and not mine; that if the union of these States, and the liberties of this people, shall be lost, it is but little to any one man of fifty-two years of age, but a great deal to the thirty millions of people who inhabit these United States. . . .³¹

This was the first of many instances in which Lincoln deflected the interest and the burden of preserving the Union from himself to the American public. By noting how small an effect the Union's future would have on an aging individual like himself, he maintained that any actions he took to preserve it would be taken on behalf of the people's will, not his own. He thus absolved himself of responsibility for his own actions, proclaiming himself not the leader of the nation, but its servant and representative.

He repeated this point throughout his journey to Washington. He apparently felt the burden of the nation's

³¹Basler, 4:193-4.

peaceful preservation resting almost solely on his shoulders, as he seldom referred to the responsibility of the federal government as a whole, referring instead only to his own duties and obligations as President. In Cincinnati, on February 12, he promised Southerners that their property and interests would be protected under his administration as they always had been previously and that if that promise "shall not be made good, be assured, the fault shall not be mine." At Steubenville, Ohio, on February 14, Lincoln said, "The people have made me by electing me, the instrument to carry out" their wishes. And in Cleveland, a day later, he remarked, "It is with you, the people, to advance the great cause of the Union and the constitution, and not with any one man. It rests with you alone."³²

Despite his constant references to his reliance on the people, Lincoln was also sensible, and publicly so, of the significance of his position as President. When he addressed the legislature in Albany, New York, on February 18, he observed,

It is true that while I hold myself without mock modesty, the humblest of all individuals that have ever been elected to the Presidency, I have a more difficult task to perform than any of them.

³²Ibid., 4:197, 199, 207, 215.

But he still refused to perform that task without any semblance of public support and, as a result, remarked at Newark, New Jersey, on February 21,

With my own ability I cannot succeed, without the sustenance of Divine Providence, and of this great, free, happy, and intelligent people. Without these I cannot hope to succeed; with them I cannot fail.

With such words, Lincoln not only endeavored to involve the American public in the preservation of the Union, as his language overtly claims, but also endeavored to rally popular support for his own actions by giving those actions the semblance of being governed by the people's will, not his own. He claimed to act not as the nation's aggressive leader but as "an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people. . . ." ³³

Sensible of the responsibility weighing upon him and desirous of gathering public support about himself, Lincoln was unwilling to openly admit any expectation of civil war, for to do so would be to risk disillusioning the American public. Nevertheless, he perceived the possibility and deftly made the public perceive it as well without overtly claiming an anticipation of or responsibility for a sectional conflict. He said in his reply to Governor Andrew Curtin in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on February 22, "With my consent,

³³Ibid., 4:226, 234, 236.

or without my great displeasure, this country shall never witness the shedding of one drop of blood in fraternal strife." On the same day, he spoke before the Pennsylvania General Assembly:

I do most sincerely hope that we shall have no use for them [Pennsylvania troops]--that it will never become their duty to shed blood, and most especially never to shed fraternal blood. I promise that, (in so far as I may have the wisdom to direct,) if so painful a result shall in any wise be brought about, it shall be through no fault of mine.³⁴

Lincoln openly denied, in these statements, any desire or responsibility for a civil conflict. The mere fact that denial was necessary indicates that Lincoln not only expected war, but expected that he himself would bear the blame for it. Having won the Presidential election with the understanding that his victory ultimately led to the spread of secessionist sentiment, Lincoln could not fail to see his own complicity in the creation and perpetuation of the crisis, however unintentional that complicity was. Consequently, he attempted to absolve himself of responsibility for secession and conflict before it would become unavoidable, in a situation like the Fort Sumter crisis, for blame to be placed on someone.

In addition to disclaiming responsibility for the

³⁴Ibid., 4:243-5.

secession crisis and the threat of civil war, Lincoln also attempted to mitigate the nation's difficulties by asserting that no real crisis existed. Through reasoned arguments in the public addresses he gave en route to Washington, Lincoln endeavored to show his audiences that there was no cause for civil war in the prospect of his inauguration to the Presidency. Addressing the Ohio legislature on February 13, 1861, Lincoln admitted that Northerners and Southerners "entertain different views upon political questions, but nobody is suffering anything." At Steubenville, Ohio, the next day, Lincoln declared that Southerners must adhere to the rule of the majority, just as they always had previously and that to fail in this would be to defy the Constitution. "By your Constitution," he told his opponents, "you have another chance in four years." At Pittsburgh, Lincoln proclaimed, "There is really no crisis except an artificial one!" He emphasized further, "There is no crisis, excepting such a one as may be gotten up at any time by designing politicians."³⁵

Whether or not Lincoln actually believed that secession was a battle cry of a Southern minority is impossible to determine, but he did feel that secession and war were possible, whether instigated by an elite minority or not. Otherwise, he would not have felt the need to challenge and

³⁵Ibid., 4:204, 207, 211.

ultimately undermine the secessionist argument as he did in Cleveland on February 15, proclaiming,

In all parts of the nation there are differences of opinion and politics. There are differences even here. You did not all vote for the person who now addresses you. What is happening now will not hurt those who are further away from here. Have they not all their rights now as they ever have had? Do they not have their slaves returned now as ever? Have they not the same constitution that they have lived under for seventy odd years? Have they not a position as citizens of this common country, and have we any power to change that position. What then is the matter with them? Why all this excitement? Why all these complaints? As I said before, this crisis is all artificial. It has no foundation in facts.³⁶

Through a battery of rhetorical questions, Lincoln showed the secessionists' reactions to his election and prospective inauguration to be unreasonable while also maintaining his own innocence of having performed any truly provocative act toward Southerners. By formulating his argument through questions addressed to the audience rather than through declarative statements, Lincoln did not so much assert himself as he led his audience to adopt the views suggested by his inquiries. If the audience conceded, as Lincoln encouraged but did not compel them to do, that Southern rights were not being violated or even threatened, then Southern fire-eaters had no justification for secession. Consequently, if they persisted in their disunion plot, they

³⁶Ibid., 4:215-6.

did so of their own stubborn will, not as a result of Lincoln's or the federal government's hostility toward them.

But the crisis, despite what Lincoln perceived to be its irrational provocation, was real, and Lincoln took it seriously, often acting in a way that contradicted his public statements. When informed that a group of secessionist conspirators planned to assassinate him as he passed through Baltimore on his way to Washington, Lincoln was disturbed enough to agree, at his friends' urgings, to take a secret train through the Maryland city on February 23. Apparently, Lincoln and his companions felt secessionists were firm enough in their views to attempt assassination. Lincoln knew he would risk ridicule for the secret train ride, and, within a short time, the newspapers, particularly Southern ones, had grabbed up the story as proof of the President-elect's fearfulness and impotency. Jokes and songs such as "The Lincoln Doodle" were rampant in Southern papers, as demonstrative of Lincoln's fear of the secessionists. Lincoln came to regret the incident for the damage it incurred on his reputation. Instead of appearing as a firm and potent statesman, Lincoln seemed pathetic and effeminate in his endeavors to escape an assassination plot which many of his contemporaries felt to be a sham. ³⁷

³⁷Allan Pinkerton, The Spy of the Rebellion; Being A True History of the Spy System of the United States Army During the Late Rebellion, Revealing Many Secrets of the War

But despite Lincoln's apparent apprehension of Southern extremists, he was unwilling to be as ineffective as his predecessor, James Buchanan. Nevertheless, Lincoln did not desire war, much as he may have been accused of initiating it. He did attempt in various and generally covert ways to temper dissatisfied Southerners and inspire their unionism. Though he never bowed to the pressure to make a public statement of his political views prior to his journey to Washington, he did insert two paragraphs into a speech given by his friend Senator Lyman Trumbull. Lincoln attempted to be firm in his views, yet conciliatory to the Southern temper. Trumbull delivered the address on November 20, 1860, stating, in Lincoln's words,

I have labored in, and for, the Republican organization with entire confidence that whenever it shall be in my power, each and all of the States will be left in as complete control of their own affairs respectively, and at as perfect liberty to choose, and employ, their own means of protecting property, and preserving peace and order within their respective limits, as they have ever been under any administration. Those who have voted for Mr. Lincoln have expected, and still expect this. . . .

The speech was not well received, but neither were any of Lincoln's other efforts at conciliation. During the

Hitherto Not Made Public (Hartford, CT: M.A. Winter & Hatch, 1883; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 94-8 (page references are to reprint edition); Villard, Memoirs, 1:152; Southern Confederacy (Atlanta), 6 March 1861.

secession winter, the Senate formed a Committee of Thirteen and the House, a Committee of Thirty-three, each of which was to review compromises in an effort to settle the slavery questions, particularly that of slavery's expansion westward, and thus settle the secession crisis. Lincoln composed three resolutions to be introduced by Senator William Seward of New York, a member of the Committee of Thirteen, in which he called for enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, repeal of all state laws in conflict with it, and the preservation of the Union. Thinking the resolutions too controversial, Seward and his colleagues refrained from introducing them.³⁸

Lincoln made further efforts at conciliation in his First Inaugural Address, largely at the urging of Seward, now his Secretary of State appointee, who found Lincoln's original draft far too militant. First, Lincoln attempted to reason with wayward Southerners, observing,

If a minority . . . will secede rather than acquiesce, they make a precedent which, in turn, will divide and ruin them; for a minority of their own will secede from them, whenever a majority refuse to be controlled by such minority.

He continued, "Plainly, the central idea of secession, is

³⁸Basler, 4:14; Potter, Lincoln, 90-1, 105; Mario R. DiNunzio, "Secession Winter: Lyman Trumbull and the Crisis in Congress," Capitol Studies 1.2 (1972): 33-4.

the essence of anarchy." He further stated that the federal government would refrain from forcing Republican appointees into Southern federal offices, that he would seek to hold only the Southern forts currently in federal possession, and that he would continue the federal mails. He noted how commerce would be disrupted by secession, asking, "Can aliens make treaties easier than friends can make laws?" Lincoln closed with a paragraph proposed by Seward but masterfully rewritten by himself, for the first time referring to the South not as "they," but including them as "we." He declared,

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union; when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.³⁹

Some newspapers, mostly Northern ones, received Lincoln's Inaugural Address with favor, perceiving it as a message of peace and compromise. The Jersey City American Standard remarked on the day following the inauguration,

we think it was hardly possible for Mr. Lincoln to speak with more mildness and less decision than he has done in his inaugural. And if what he has said in reference to his duty to maintain and defend the Union had been

³⁹Basler, 4:267-71.

uttered by any other than a Republican President .
it would fail to excite any alarm.

And, remarkably, a few Southern unionist papers expressed similar views. Raleigh's North Carolina Standard said of the address, "It is not a war message. . . . It is not unfriendly to the South. It deprecates war, and bloodshed, and pleads for the Union." Brownlow's Knoxville Whig agreed, proclaiming on March 9,

We endorse the entire Address, as one of the best papers of the kind we have seen and we commend it for its temperance and conservatism. It is peace-loving and conservative in its recommendations and eminently firm in its nationality of sentiment.⁴⁰

Despite these commendations, Lincoln's attitude toward the South was, for the most part, far from conciliatory and unavoidably hazardous to the maintenance of national peace. Lincoln was willing to see personal liberty laws in the North repealed if they were found to be in conflict with the Fugitive Slave Law, and he even entertained the idea of allowing slavery into the New Mexico territory, knowing well that the region's climate and situation would never support the institution. But he did not favor compromise on the most vital issues, namely the question of extending slavery into

⁴⁰Perkins, 2:626; Dumond, 478-9; Brownlow's Knoxville Whig, 9 March 1861.

western territories that would support it and the perpetual protection of slavery where it did exist through a Constitutional amendment. As David Potter observes, by endeavoring to avoid compromise, "He did not move as the champion of democracy, but as a partisan leader." This is not to say Lincoln failed to work for the best interests of the country, for, undoubtedly, he felt the Republican platform expressed the country's best interests. But, as Kenneth Stampp points out, Lincoln remained hostile to compromise because he feared destroying the platform upon which the Republican party had been founded, a platform particularly reflective of his own personal ideals, and did not wish to ruin the prestige of his own administration.⁴¹

Yet by assuming a militant stance against concession to the South through his failure to support Congressional compromise or to offer any serious compromises himself, Lincoln risked censure not only from Southerners, but from Northern Democrats and peace-loving Republicans as well. The Cincinnati Daily Enquirer, a Democratic newspaper, addressed Lincoln on February 10, 1861,

if you stand out against compromise, you will fill a

⁴¹Donald, 269; Potter, Lincoln, 200; Kenneth M. Stampp, "Lincoln and the Strategy of Defense in the Crisis of 1861," The Journal of Southern History 11 (August 1945): 300; Kenneth M. Stampp, And the War Came: The North and the Secession Crisis, 1860-1861 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), 186.

most dark and unenviable place in American annals, and it will be universally admitted that you have inflicted the fatal stab that destroyed the finest Government the world ever saw. . . .

On April 12, the Hartford Daily Courant, a paper which had supported Lincoln's election, claimed that "Public opinion in the North seems to be gradually settling down in favor of the recognition of the New Confederacy," adding, "The thought of a bloody and protracted civil war . . . is abhorrent to all. . . ." ⁴² Senator Stephen Douglas wrote some of his supporters that he believed Republicans desired and were fomenting disunion in order to obtain a Republican majority in the Senate, whereby they could approve all of Lincoln's political appointments. ⁴³

But there were many Republicans who supported Lincoln's uncompromising stance. Senator Lyman Trumbull wrote Lincoln, on December 9, 1860,

It seems to me that for Republicans to take steps towards getting up committees or proposing new compromises is an admission that to conduct the government on the principles on which we carried the election is wrong.

Trumbull later declared before the Senate just prior to Lincoln's inauguration, "So far as it can be done: I am for

⁴²Perkins, 1:270, 377.

⁴³Johannsen, Stephen A. Douglas, 504-5.

executing the laws; and I am for coercion." He explained, "I am for settling, in the first place, the question whether we have a Government before making compromises which leave us as powerless as before."⁴⁴ Carl Schurz, another Republican who was against secession and anticipated war, wrote his wife on February 7, 1861, "Let Lincoln once be inaugerrated [sic] and things will look different. Talk will end and action begin." Lincoln himself justified his uncompromising stance in a letter to Pennsylvania Congressman James T. Hale in January 1861, asserting that Southerners who threatened disunion,

are either attempting to play upon us, or they are in dead earnest. Either way, if we surrender, it is the end of us, and of the government. They will repeat the experiment ad libitum. A year will not pass, till we shall have to take Cuba as a condition upon which they will stay in the Union.⁴⁵

Lincoln felt the Union could not be maintained, whether secession was successful or not, if its maintenance were based on surrendering the Constitutional rights of the majority to minority interests. Thus, he was willing to risk civil war in his efforts to remain firm, even if he would not publicly admit his willingness to accept such a

⁴⁴Lincoln Papers, Reel 11, Lyman Trumbull to Lincoln, 9 December 1860; Congressional Globe 36.2, 1382.

⁴⁵Schafer, 246; Basler, 4:172.

hazard.

Throughout the winter of 1860-61, Lincoln maintained a constant correspondence with political friends in Congress, urging them to refrain from compromising on the essential points of the Republican platform, showing that however much he professed to the American public his willingness to perform their will, he possessed and intended to implement his own agenda. On December 10, 1860, he wrote Trumbull,

Let there be no compromise on the question of extending slavery. If there be, all our labor is lost, and, ere long must be done again. . . . Stand firm. The tug has to come, & better now, than any time hereafter.

He pressed the same words upon Congressman William Kellogg of Illinois the following day. While he may not have been contemplating war when he made such militant statements, he certainly invited the possibility. Two days later, he wrote Congressman Elihu B. Washburne, "On that point [opposition to slavery extension] hold firm as with a chain of steel." Lincoln was even more explicit about his views when writing Senator William Seward on February 1, 1861:

I say now, however, as I have all the while said, that on the territorial question--that is, the question of extending slavery under the national auspices,--I am inflexible. I am for no compromise which assists or permits the extension of the institution on soil owned by the nation.

Lincoln told New Jersey's General Assembly on February 21, "The man does not live who is more devoted to peace than I am. None who would do more to preserve it. But it may be necessary to put the foot down firmly." After a succession of wild cheers from the audience, he continued, once again demonstrating his reluctance to assume alone the responsibility for secession and war, "And if I do my duty, and do right, you will sustain me, will you not?" The crowd replied enthusiastically, "Yes, Yes, We will."⁴⁶

But Lincoln was not so enthusiastically supported by everyone. During the campaign of 1860, neither Lincoln nor his supporters campaigned in the South, and he was not even on the Presidential ticket in many Southern states. While Lincoln, primarily at the urging of William Seward and Thurlow Weed, contemplated offering cabinet posts to Southerners, including Alexander Stephens of Georgia and John Gilmer of North Carolina, his offers or intimations of offers were refused, and, perhaps for Lincoln, the refusals were not particularly disappointing. His original cabinet list, made the day after his election, consisted entirely of Northern Republicans. He did appoint Edward Bates of Missouri and Montgomery Blair of Maryland to his cabinet, but both were border state Republicans and considered by many Southerners to be "as bad as Seward and [Salmon P.]

⁴⁶Basler, 4:149-51, 183, 237.

Chase." Thurlow Weed suggested, in his autobiography, that Lincoln refrained from inviting Southerners into his cabinet because he feared they might prove disloyal if their states seceded.⁴⁷ While such may have been the case, Lincoln's choice of cabinet officers makes all the more manifest his uncompromising stance. All his cabinet members were Republicans, and while they came from varying backgrounds and often entertained different political views, not one of them represented the pro-slavery South or her views. Thus, Lincoln was not particularly inclined to include non-Republican politicians in his cabinet, regardless of the urgings of concession-oriented Republicans and still loyal Southerners.

While Lincoln may not have desired war, his actions were not always conducive to preventing it, but, as Kenneth Stampp points out, he was painstaking in his efforts to absolve himself from guilt should a conflict between North and South erupt. Lincoln demanded the maintenance of federal authority across the whole country, North as well as South, and, in so doing,

he calculated the possible necessity of coercion to maintain the Union. Whether or not the chance of protracted civil war was part of his calculated risk

⁴⁷Potter, Impending Crisis, 439; Potter, Lincoln, 153; Weekly Progress (New Bern, North Carolina), 12 March 1861; Weed, 611.

there is no way of knowing. If it were, he was doubtless comforted by the belief that the responsibility would be upon those who resisted the performance of his simple duty as chief executive.

As Stampf further observes, Lincoln's strategy in regard to Southern secessionism was one of defense. He promised Southerners, "There will be no blood shed unless it be forced upon the Government. The Government will not use force unless force is used against it."⁴⁸

Lincoln undoubtedly expected a conflict of some form if secessionists persisted in their defiance of federal authority, as the first draft of his Inaugural Address attests. In the original, Lincoln closed by addressing the South, "With you, and not with me, is the solemn question of 'Shall it be peace, or a sword?'" Seward later convinced Lincoln to omit this phrase and speak in more conciliatory terms, which Lincoln did, but he still proclaimed, in his final draft of the Inaugural,

The power confided to me will be used to hold, occupy, and possess the property, and places belonging to the government, and to collect the duties and imposts; but beyond what may be necessary for these objects, there will be no invasion--no using of force against, or among the people anywhere.

⁴⁸Stampf, And the War Came, 187, 190-2; Stampf, "Strategy of Defense," 325; Basler, 4:241.

Lincoln was still making demands on behalf of government authority, whether in an effort to preserve the Union with federal authority intact or in an effort to justify any aggressive measures he might feel compelled to take is impossible to judge. But he did remark to Southerners toward the close of the address,

In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict, without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to "preserve, protect and defend" it.

With these constant emphasized references to "you," "I," and "mine," it is evident that Lincoln was shaping his language to distinguish between his own obligation to uphold federal authority and the responsibility of Southerners to prevent civil war by accepting those obligations. He was eager to see conflict, if any should result, blamed on disunionists, not himself. Lincoln portrayed himself as the government's defender, not its director. In conversation with a New Jersey delegate just prior to the inauguration, Lincoln further justified the maintenance of federal authority, regardless of consequences, saying, "In a choice of evils, war may not always be the worst. Still I would do all in my power to avert it, except to neglect a Constitutional

duty."⁴⁹ In light of Lincoln's reverence for the Constitution, he undoubtedly felt firm action on the part of the federal government to be his sworn duty, but he also knew that to fulfill that duty risked an invitation to war. He knew as well that, as the nation's commander-in-chief, he was ultimately answerable for the government's course, however much he publicly denied responsibility.

Yet many of Lincoln's supporters anticipated war and even welcomed it rather than see the South destroy the Union. Indiana's militant governor, Oliver P. Morton, declared, as early as November 1860,

Shall we now surrender the nation without a struggle and let the Union go with merely a few hard words? Shall we encourage faint-hearted traitors to pursue their treason, by advising them in advance that it would be safe and successful? If it was worth a bloody struggle to establish this nation, it is worth one to preserve it. . . .

Henry Adams wrote to his brother Charles in January 1861,

If Major [Robert] Anderson [commanding Fort Sumter] and his whole command were all murdered in cold blood, it would be an excellent thing for the country, much as I should regret it on the part of those individuals.

⁴⁹Lincoln Papers, Reel 18, draft of Inaugural Address, 4 March 1861; Basler, 4: 261, 266, 271; L.E. Chittenden, Recollections of President Lincoln and His Administration (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1891), 76.

William T. Sherman, who would become an officer in the federal army, wrote his wife with less flippancy and more regret, "In case Lincoln is elected, they say South Carolina will secede and that the Southern States will not see her forced back." He concluded, "Secession must result in civil war, anarchy and ruin to our present form of government. . . ."50

Many northern and Republican newspapers anticipated war as well and supported Lincoln in his efforts to maintain federal authority in the South, no matter the means. The Springfield Daily Illinois State Journal, a newspaper often believed to be, by many of Lincoln's contemporaries, the President-elect's mouthpiece, declared, on December 20, 1860,

Let the secessionists understand it . . . that the Republican party, that the great North, aided by hundreds of thousands of patriotic men in the slave States, have determined to preserve the Union peaceably if they can, forcibly if they must.

The Columbus Daily Ohio State Journal proclaimed on January 15, 1861, "The United States Government is assaulted by a

⁵⁰William M. French, Life, Speeches, State Papers and Public Services of Gov. Oliver P. Morton (Indianapolis: S.L. Marrow & Company, n.d.), 129-30; J.C. Levenson, Ernest Samuels, Charles Vandersee, and Viola Hopkins Winner, ed., The Letters of Henry Adams, 6 vols. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1982), 1:224; M.A. DeWolfe Howe, ed., Home Letters of General Sherman (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 180.

horde of disunion traitors, and is, or soon will be, compelled to act on the defensive, or surrender at discretion." The New York Times praised Lincoln's Inaugural Address and his intent to "hold, occupy and possess the property and places belonging to the Government," insisting that it was the duty of the federal government to maintain its national authority and that if war resulted, the blame must rest with secessionists. Horace Greeley expressed the same sentiment in the New York Daily Tribune on March 6, observing,

The duty of the head of the Government itself is so self-evident a truth that the truth of the corollary is no less so--that those will be guilty of commencing civil war, if any shall arise, who shall attempt to hinder the Federal Government from occupying its own property.⁵¹

But public sentiment was not so supportive of Lincoln in all portions of the country, and many believed, despite Lincoln's own protestations and the protestations of partisan newspapers, that if war erupted, Lincoln would be its initiator. Senator Thomas Clingman of North Carolina, before Congress on December 4, 1860, referred to Lincoln as "a dangerous man." He accused the President-elect of avowing "the principle that is known as the 'irrepressible

⁵¹perkins, 1:122, 215; Times (New York), 5 March 1861; Daily Tribune (New York), 6 March 1861.

conflict.'" Clingman added, "He declares that it is the purpose of the North to make war upon my section until its social system has been destroyed. . . ." Some newspapers were equally certain that Lincoln's intention was to incite civil war. The Boston Post, a Democratic newspaper, declared that if the South refused to acquiesce to Republican terms of government, Lincoln and his party "are ready to let loose upon her the clamor of civil war and imbue their hands in fraternal blood. . . ." The Louisville Daily Courier remarked, "Enough is already known to leave no doubt as to Mr. Lincoln's intentions; and Heaven alone can avert war, immediately after the 4th of March [inauguration day]," and The Detroit Free Press asserted that if a sectional war erupted, "let the world be made aware that the responsibility therfor [sic] should rest entirely upon the shoulders of the republican party." The Nashville Union and American called Lincoln's Inaugural Address "a declaration of war against the seceded states."⁵²

Despite these criticisms and criticisms from his own party that he was not acting quickly and decisively enough,

⁵²Congressional Globe 36.2, 3; Perkins, 1:41, 250, 356; Union and American (Nashville), 5 March 1861; Daily Dispatch (Richmond), 5 March 1861; Federal Union (Milledgeville), 12 March 1861; see also Daily Whig (Richmond), 6 March 1861; Daily Missouri Republican (St. Louis) 14 January 1861; Daily Nashville Patriot, 16 February 1861; Weekly Progress (New Bern, North Carolina), 5 March 1861; Enquirer (Richmond), 5 March 1861; Atlas and Argus (Albany), 5 March 1861.

Lincoln, during the first month of his Presidency, was constantly evaluating and re-evaluating the secession crisis, particularly the controversy surrounding Fort Sumter. South Carolinians were demanding that Fort Sumter be evacuated, and some Northerners, Democrats and Republicans alike, urged the same, hoping thus to avoid the outbreak of war. But Lincoln was not so quick to concede to Southerners or to follow the popular tide of Northern public opinion. When polled in mid-March, most of Lincoln's cabinet members, save his postmaster general, Montgomery Blair, and his secretary of the treasury, Salmon Chase, advocated evacuation of Fort Sumter. But Lincoln was not too eager to follow their advice. There is evidence of Lincoln's desire to hold the fort as early as March 9, when he wrote a letter to General Winfield Scott, bombarding the old gentleman with questions as to how long Fort Sumter could be held and how and when it might be resupplied or reinforced. Though Scott expressed grave doubts as to the feasibility of holding the fort, Lincoln was not to be easily dissuaded.⁵³

On March 15, Lincoln requested written responses from each of his cabinet members as to their opinions on whether or not Fort Sumter ought to be held, assuming it militarily possible to hold it. Edward Bates, his attorney general, was

⁵³Potter, Lincoln, 360; Basler, 4:279.

against reinforcement, not wishing "to do any act, which may have the semblance before the world of beginning a civil war. . . ." Seward agreed with Bates, fearing that resupplying and maintaining the fort would strain the loyalty of the border states. Gideon Welles, Simon Cameron, and Caleb Smith were also in favor of evacuating the fort, all of them apprehensive of war or, at the very least, disillusioning the American public. But Salmon Chase and Montgomery Blair both believed it was the right and duty of the federal government to reinforce Fort Sumter. Blair feared the administration would appear weak if it failed to provision the fort and would thus incite the rebels to more contentious behavior.⁵⁴

Yet in late March, the situation altered. On March 28, the Senate resolved, under the influence of Senator Lyman Trumbull, that it was the President's sworn duty to protect public property. Lincoln now had the support of a largely Republican Congress if he wished to hold Fort Sumter and the equally significant Fort Pickens off the Gulf Coast of Florida. But on the evening of March 28, General Scott recommended to the President that both forts be abandoned. Lincoln immediately called his cabinet together and found

⁵⁴Lincoln Papers, Reel 18, Edward Bates to Lincoln, 5 March 1861; Reel 18, William Seward to Lincoln, 15 March 1861; Reel 18, Gideon Welles to Lincoln, 15 March 1861; Reel 18, Simon Cameron to Lincoln, 16 March 1861; Reel 18, Caleb Smith to Lincoln, 16 March 1861; Reel 18, Salmon Chase to Lincoln 16 March 1861; Reel 18, Montgomery Blair to Lincoln, 15 March 1861.

that all, save Seward and Smith, favored resupplying Fort Sumter and reinforcing Fort Pickens. Seward's lack of support no doubt resulted from his secret promises to Southern representatives that Fort Sumter would soon be evacuated. Though Lincoln had the support of both his cabinet and Congress, his secretaries noted that he slept little the night of March 28. Nevertheless, on the following day, he announced to his cabinet that both Fort Sumter and Fort Pickens would be maintained and reinforced.⁵⁵

Lincoln's decision to reinforce Fort Sumter was not an intentional step toward war. After all, Lincoln notified South Carolina's governor, Francis Pickens, that the fort would be relieved with supplies only, not with additional troops. By attempting to provision the fort, Lincoln was asserting federal authority without giving suitable provocation for aggression on the part of Southerners. As Lincoln's two private secretaries observed, the President's policy was to "send bread to Anderson," for "if the rebels fired on that, they would not be able to convince the world that he [Lincoln] had begun civil war." When the

⁵⁵Potter, Lincoln, 360-1; Allan Nevins, The War for the Union, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), 54-6; Earl Schenck Miers, ed., Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 3 vols. (Washington: Sesquicentennial Commission, 1960), 2:31; John G. Nicolay and John Hay, Abraham Lincoln: A History, 10 vols. (New York: The Century Company, 1890), 3:394-5.

Confederates did fire upon Fort Sumter on April 12, they were degraded in the eyes of the Northern public not just because they "fired on bread" but also because they assaulted the fort when they had received word from Major Anderson that he would evacuate the fort on April 15, for want of supplies.⁵⁶ Consequently, Lincoln was able to assert and ultimately preserve federal authority and win the war for public sentiment, at least in the North. The blame for the conflict's inauguration fell on Southerners, not on the federal government and not on Lincoln. The Indianapolis Daily Journal remarked on April 11, referring to the secessionists, "If the war comes let it fall on the heads of those who made it, whose selfish ambition and headlong folly would be content with nothing else." The Boston Evening Transcript gave Lincoln full support, declaring on April 13,

The usurping authorities at Montgomery have begun a war against the United States by bombarding Fort Sumter. . . . The Government of the United States has now to put forth its whole force, and prove itself a government not to be defied and outraged with impunity. Every vigorous measure it takes to sustain the honor and assert the power of the country will meet with the hearty cooperation of a loyal and patriotic people.⁵⁷

⁵⁶Potter, Lincoln, 373; Nicolay and Hay, 4:44; Robert M. Thompson and Richard Wainwright, ed., Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus Vasa Fox, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, 1861-1865, 2 vols. (New York: DeVinne Press, 1920), 1:34-5.

⁵⁷Perkins, 2:706; Evening Transcript (Boston), 13 April 1861.

Lincoln was roundly abused in the South for attempting to send provisions to Fort Sumter. He was even condemned by some Northerners for his action. The Jersey City American Standard claimed that the Fort Sumter relief expedition "is a mere decoy to draw the first fire from the people of the South, which act by the predetermination of the government is to be the pretext for letting loose the horrors of war." The Richmond Daily Dispatch exaggerated the extent of the relief expedition, claiming,

It will be seen that, under the military compulsion of the immense fleet and army which the Black Republican President has sent to subjugate Charleston, the Carolina forces have been forced, in self-defence, to attempt the reduction of that fort. . . .

The Atlanta Southern Confederacy declared, "The issue of war has been forced upon us." New Orleans' The Daily Picayune remarked in reference to the firing upon Fort Sumter, "The responsibility for the act, and for all its consequences, belongs, beyond a question, to the Government at Washington." Even Alexander Stephens, Lincoln's old friend from their days as Whig Congressmen, maintained,

He [Lincoln] held that the Federal Government did possess the Constitutional Power to maintain the Union of States by force, and it was in the maintenance of these views, the war was inaugurated by him⁵⁸

⁵⁸Perkins, 2:707; Daily Dispatch (Richmond), 13 April

Few contemporary historians will suggest that Lincoln's decision to relieve Fort Sumter was a ploy on his part to invite war, while ensuring that the blame lay with Southerners. Indeed, Orville H. Browning, Lincoln's close friend and confidant during his White House years, said that Lincoln "agreed with me that far less evil & bloodshed would result from an effort to maintain the Union and the Constitution, than from disruption and the formation of two confederacies."⁵⁹ But Lincoln never could have anticipated a four-year-long civil war resulting in the deaths of over half a million Americans. He certainly would not have wanted such a war in 1861. Yet while Lincoln did not expect the excessive bloodshed that ultimately resulted from the secession crisis, he did anticipate a conflict, as his words and actions during the winter of 1860-61 attest. Lincoln was determined to maintain the federal union and to maintain it without making concessions to the South on the question of extending slavery into western territories. He was, perhaps, wrong when he told Congress in July 1861, "No compromise, by public servants, could, in this case, be a

1861; Southern Confederacy (Atlanta), 14 April 1861; The Daily Picayune (New Orleans), 13 April 1861; Alexander H. Stephens, A Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States: Its Causes, Character, Conduct and Results, 2 vols (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1870), 2:34.

⁵⁹Theodore Calvin Pease and James G. Randall, ed., The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning, 2 vols. (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Society, 1925), 1:453.

cure," but he was, no doubt, accurate when he claimed, in the same address,

no popular government can long survive a marked precedent, that those who carry an election, can only save the government from immediate destruction, by giving up the main point, upon which the people gave the election.⁶⁰

By refusing to compromise and risking the Union's destruction, Lincoln ultimately saved it.

But he was unwilling to face responsibility for preserving or destroying the Union alone. He needed the popular support of the American people in order to implement his policies effectively. If war resulted from the test of federal authority at Fort Sumter, as it ultimately did, Lincoln required public and Congressional backing to sustain government authority and to wage war against Southern belligerents. But he also needed public approbation of his policies to ensure that his generally inflexible stance toward secessionists would not be perceived as an intentional and unpopular move toward civil war. Consequently, he employed skillful rhetoric in his public statements, affirming that the people, not the President, directed the nation's course and that if civil war resulted, the responsibility would lie with Southerners who preferred

⁶⁰Basler, 4:440.

conflict to the preservation of federal authority. He constantly reiterated to the American public that "The Chief Magistrate derives all his authority from the people," thus ensuring that his policies would be perceived as popularly directed, even if they were not. Through the manipulation of language, Lincoln was able to direct public opinion, rather than be directed by it. In the instance of the Fort Sumter crisis, the people were largely unaware of Lincoln's intentions and plans beyond his vague proposal, in his inaugural, "to hold, occupy, and possess" federal property, and such would be the case through most of his Presidency. A majority of the American people did not demand emancipation or the enlistment of black soldiers, but Lincoln initiated both and did so, professing all the while, "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me." This statement, uttered in 1864, demonstrated a continuing tendency, on Lincoln's part, to project responsibility away from himself and onto someone or something else, be it the American people or, as he would declare later in his Presidency, a supreme being. To say, as Lincoln said in his Second Inaugural Address, that "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether" was to escape judgment himself.⁶¹

⁶¹Ibid., 4:270, 7:282, 8:333.

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