

# 160 years since the attack on Fort Sumter: The beginning of the American Civil War

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At 4:30 in the morning on April 12, 1861, the South Carolina militia lobbed a 10-inch mortar over Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. The first shot of the Civil War was a signal for a bombardment. After 33 hours and several thousand more shells, the beleaguered federal garrison at Fort Sumter surrendered to forces of the new slave republic, the Confederate States of America.

The Civil War raged on for four more years, until the surrender of Confederate forces under Robert E. Lee to Ulysses S. Grant on April 9, 1865 at Appomattox Court House in Virginia. In between, some 750,000 Americans died in the fighting, according to the best estimates.

No American in April 1861 foresaw that the war would be so violent and have such revolutionary consequences. Pressures building in American society since the revolution of 1776 were unleashed on the battlefields of the Civil War with terrible force. The society that emerged from the carnage was soon transformed beyond recognition. The war destroyed chattel slavery and the slaveholding class that had ruled the South for 250 years. In destroying slavery, the Civil War upheld the American Revolution's proposition that all men are created equal. For all his purported conservatism, in freeing the slaves, Lincoln initiated the expropriation of private property on a scale not equaled until the 1917 October Revolution.

Karl Marx, who followed the Civil War closely as a newspaper correspondent, predicted that it would usher in a new era of class struggle. Much like "the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class," Marx wrote Lincoln in congratulation on his 1864 reelection, "so the American Antislavery War will do for the working classes." Marx's prognosis was quickly vindicated. Working class struggle soon "ran from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California, with the seven-league boots of a locomotive," as he wrote in *Capital*.

That Fort Sumter should have been the trigger event for all of this was itself the outcome of an unpredicted chain of events. Located next to Charleston, the citadel of fire-eating, pro-slavery secessionism, Sumter was part of a constellation of lightly guarded federal bases and arsenals scattered across the South and the border states that had become the focal point of preparations for war. In the period before the war, secessionists concentrated on taking, by hook or crook, federal positions. This was the great hope of the South. Its cash crop agriculture was bound to the "workshop of the world," British industrial capitalism. It did little manufacturing and could produce very little of its own war *materiel*.

The secessionists were all but openly aided by the outgoing American president, James Buchanan of Pennsylvania. During the long, four-month interregnum between Abraham Lincoln's November 6, 1860 presidential victory and his March 4, 1861 inauguration, Buchanan scarcely lifted a finger while southern forces seized federal installations—and with them rifles, artillery, ordnance, and even naval vessels.

Like his predecessor, Franklin Pierce of Vermont, Buchanan was a "doughface," the derogatory term for northern Democrats subservient to

southern interests. Together with their two-party system rivals, the so-called "Cotton Whigs," the Democrats had for decades held the fulcrum of American politics, which teetered on the endless compromises designed to appease the slaveholding oligarchy. Yet all the concessions dating back to the Missouri Compromise of 1820 had only delayed "the irrepressible conflict" over slavery, which always returned at a more intense level.

With southern forces in open rebellion, Buchanan blamed the North for southern secession. In his State of the Union Address of December 1860, he demanded that the northerners contemplate seizing Cuba from Spain so slavery could grow, abandon personal liberty laws against the Fugitive Slave Act, and even stop criticizing slavery. If northerners did not do these things, the South would "be justified" in secession. As historian James McPherson dryly notes, Buchanan "stopped short [only] of asking the Republican Party to dissolve." Buchanan's abject groveling only emboldened the secessionists.

Lincoln and the new Republican Party represented something different from the compromising *status quo ante*—even, as the course of events proved, something truly revolutionary. Lincoln was intransigently opposed to the further extension of slavery. To be sure, in his First Inaugural address, he reiterated his position "found in nearly all the published speeches of him who now addresses you [that] I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists." But Lincoln refused to budge on the Republican Party platform's insistence that the Constitution did not allow the expansion of slavery into the territories.

This was a red line for the southern ruling class. It viewed as an existential threat the economic and population growth of northern capitalism and its legions of "mudsills and greasy mechanics," as South Carolina Senator James Henry Hammond derisively called northern workers. Hammond and his co-thinkers were not mistaken in their estimation that northern society posed a revolutionary threat. The Republican Party fused northern society through antislavery politics. Lincoln was an antislavery politician whose stated aim was the gradual withering away of human bondage, which he believed to have been the common position of the Founding Fathers. And had he not said in his famous House Divided speech:

I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery, will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new—North as well as South.

It was indeed in response to Lincoln's election that the deep southern states seceded one by one over the long winter of 1860-1861: South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas. Their declarations of independence left no doubt as to their motives. They seceded rather than stay in "this new union with Lincoln Black Republicans" and in order to defend "slavery under our old constitutional bond of union," as the delegates to Mississippi's secession convention put it. And, whereas the Constitution of 1789 had studiously avoided the word "slavery," the Confederate Constitution invoked it ten times in a bid to make the barbaric institution permanent. Thomas Jefferson and the other founders had been wrong, Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens explained in his inaugural address. "They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races," he said. "This was an error." Stephens continued:

Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition.

Lincoln entered office in a complicated and explosive situation. Some in the North entertained desperate hopes of a last-ditch deal to avoid civil war. Among them was Lincoln's own secretary of state, William Seward, who devised a secret plan, quickly rejected by Lincoln, to provoke war with France or Spain in order to promote national unity. But Southern demands had become extreme. "Compromise" now entailed Lincoln disavowing the entire platform on which he had been elected, and even supporting a revision to the Constitution that would guarantee slavery in perpetuity.

Lincoln held firm. He addressed the burning issue of federal property, enunciating a policy that he would "hold, occupy, and possess" it. But he studiously avoided any threat of military attack. The onus was on the South. "In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war," Lincoln said to the seceded states. "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.'"

The morning after giving this First Inaugural, on March 5, 1861, Lincoln entered his office for the first time to find waiting on his desk "a dispatch from Major Robert Anderson, commander of the Union garrison at Fort Sumter," as McPherson observes. "Anderson reported that his supplies would last only a few more weeks. Time was running out."

As was the case during several more key instances during the Civil War, Lincoln proved himself to be a master politician. He publicly announced his intention to resupply Fort Sumter in a letter to South Carolina Governor Francis Pickens. The Union flotilla would not fire unless fired upon, and reinforcements would remain aboard the ships. Lincoln had maneuvered Jefferson Davis into a corner. If Davis allowed resupply, Fort Sumter could hold out indefinitely. If he attacked, it would be the South that struck the first blow. Yet Davis' constituency among the great slaveholders demanded war. "Unless you sprinkle blood in the face of the people of Alabama, they will be back in the old Union in less than ten days!" as one Mobile warmonger put it. Davis ordered the attack on April 12, and Sumter fell the next day. It would not be recaptured until Union General William Tecumseh Sherman's "Carolina Campaign" forced the abandonment of Charleston in February 1865.

Lincoln responded on April 15 with a call for 75,000 volunteers for three-months service to put down what he called from that day forward a rebellion. Soldiers had to be provided by the governors. There was no

standing army to speak of: a mere 16,000 soldiers—most at distant forts, a "few men keeping watch on the Indians" Engels later observed—and certainly nothing to approach the dimensions of the military Leviathan that devours over half the American discretionary budget today.

The volunteers flooded in response to Lincoln's call. They mustered into regiments that were numbered by the order in which they filled. So the Minnesota 1st was the first to respond from that state. It saw action at Malvern Hill, Antietam, Fredericksburg, and both battles of Bull Run, before suffering perhaps 80 percent casualties in a suicidal bid to preserve Union victory at Gettysburg in 1863. These early enlistees were some of the most politically minded soldiers. Many never returned home again.

While Fort Sumter galvanized the North—even Lincoln's bitter Illinois rival, Steven Douglas, swore vengeance on the "traitors"—the telegrams from the border state and upper South governors of states that had not yet seceded could not have cheered Lincoln. Kentucky "will furnish no troops for the wicked purpose of subduing her sister Southern States," its governor wrote. Tennessee's governor said it "will not furnish a single man... but fifty thousand if necessary for the defense our rights and those of our Southern brothers." And Missouri's governor insisted, "Your requisition is illegal, unconstitutional, revolutionary, inhuman." Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas followed the deep southern states out after Fort Sumter.

Lincoln's slow embrace of wartime emancipation had been largely predicated on winning unionist support in the South and on holding the border states. But the course of the war proved to Lincoln that, as he later put it, "we must free the slaves or be ourselves subdued." Lincoln's intransigence, in the weeks leading up to Fort Sumter and onward, developed ever more clearly as the crisis deepened. Ultimately Lincoln joined Frederick Douglass' conclusion that "war for the destruction of liberty must be met with war for the destruction of slavery." He would strike directly at the roots of the southern oligarchy—slavery—transforming the Civil War into the Second American Revolution.

Lincoln's intransigence in the face of an implacable opponent is one of the key lessons offered by the Civil War.

Like Lincoln, we live in a time of irreconcilable conflict. This year saw the ranks of America's billionaires swell to 660, and their unfathomable *combined wealth grew to \$4.1 trillion*, an increase of 36 percent. The riches piled up proportionally to the dead among working class Americans whose lives were taken by the COVID-19 pandemic. This death toll is approaching 600,000—a number reminiscent of the Civil War concentrated in one year—though the real number of "excess deaths," not to mention the incalculable suffering for those who have survived, is far higher. The American oligarchy brooks no limitation on its moneymaking, lives be damned.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise then that the 160th anniversary of the attack on Fort Sumter has come and gone in the United States virtually without comment in the media, in spite of—or perhaps precisely because—the last election was held under conditions eerily reminiscent of 1860.

The American ruling class of 2021 must look with discomfort on the fate of its forebears in the southern plantation oligarchy. It is said of those who lived through the astonishing changes brought on by the Civil War that they could not have imagined in 1861 the world of 1871. Given the crisis of present-day American capitalism, can it be assumed that the same won't be said of 2031 from the vantage point of 2021?



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