

Too often a narrative is passed from one person to the next until it becomes accepted as fact or “common knowledge.” In the society that we live in critical analysis is rarely applied, and so a notion that if scrutinized would be exposed as silly (or worse), instead becomes “fact.” Such is the case with the situation at Ft. Sumter in 1861. The narrative goes something like this- “The South fired the first shot, and thus instigated the war. The end.”

While it is true that the South did indeed fire first, there is a much deeper question to be answered. Namely, who committed the first act of hostility?

Fort Sumter was a US Federal military outpost situated in the entrance to Charleston Harbor. With the secession of the initial seven States which formed the Confederacy, the need for US troops to evacuate their posts on the grounds of what was now a foreign country was obvious. There were other outposts within Confederate territory, but attention centered on Fort Sumter.

Jefferson Davis, the newly sworn in President of the Confederacy, urged Governor Pickens of South Carolina to submit to the Confederate authorities regarding the Fort, and to take no unilateral action. Davis wished to avoid confrontation and, even though South Carolina had given the fort to the US government, he made known that he was willing to offer compensation for all garrisons and forts that were within the territories of the Confederacy, as well as to pay the share of debts left behind by the seceded States. As pointed out by Davis biographer, William J. Cooper, Davis stated that he eagerly desired “peace between those who though separated have many reasons to feel towards each other more than the friendship common among other nations.” The Southern States did not want war, and took every precaution to avoid instigating confrontation.

During the transition period from the Presidency of Buchanan to Lincoln, there had been two occurrences that had raised the ire of South Carolinians. First was the fact that Major Robert Anderson, who commanded the US troops at Sumter, had of his own discretion moved the troops from Ft Moultrie, an indefensible position, to Ft Sumter. He had done so without the direction of President Buchanan, and because the Carolinians were unaware of this, they received the information as a signal that the US intended to forcefully maintain possession of the Fort. Although they refrained from attacking the fort, this action by US troops was regarded as an act of war.

Second, President Buchanan had ordered a reinforcement of the Fort and the USS *Star of the West*, loaded with supplies and additional troops, set out for Charleston. Cooper says that Buchanan attempted to rescind the order, but it was too late. The ship was already underway so word of this never reached the command. As with the relocation of troops to Sumter from Moultrie, this attempted resupply was likewise received as a hostile act by the Carolinians whose forces fired warning shots at the vessel.

As the Confederate government was formed, and as Abraham Lincoln took office, correspondence between the two entities continued. William H. Seward, Lincoln’s Secretary of State, ostensibly acted as mediator between the Confederate government and the Lincoln administration. Cooper suggests that Seward had presumed to speak on behalf of Lincoln when no such authority had been delegated to him. In all probability, whether intentional or not, Seward was advancing a delaying action on behalf of the administration while a plan of action was formulated. Correspondence between the Confederate government and Seward went on for several weeks with Seward continually stalling and assuring the South that he was in favor of avoiding hostilities. Although he assured the Confederates that Sumter would be evacuated, he deflected any attempts by their officials to ascertain specifics or details.

South Carolinians were becoming more and more alarmed as the weeks went on, especially due to the fact that Lincoln had delivered in his First Inaugural Address what the seceded States regarded as a Declaration of War:

No State upon its own mere motion can lawfully get out of the Union; that resolves and ordinances to that effect are legally void, and that acts of violence within any State or States against the authority of the United States are insurrectionary or revolutionary, according to circumstances.

Lincoln had no intention of surrendering, or selling the forts to the Confederacy because doing so would have necessarily signaled to the world that he was recognizing the South’s independence and sovereignty.

He had stated further in his First Inaugural-

I therefore consider that in view of the Constitution and the laws, the Union is unbroken, and to the extent of my ability, I shall take care, as the Constitution itself expressly enjoins upon me, that the laws of the Union be

faithfully executed in all the States. Doing this I deem to be only a simple duty on my part, and I shall perform it so far as practicable unless my rightful masters, the American people, shall withhold the requisite means or in some authoritative manner direct the contrary. I trust this will not be regarded as a menace, but only as the declared purpose of the Union that it will constitutionally defend and maintain itself.

By “maintaining itself” he infers that the “geographical” and “political” union will be preserved. In other words, he is essentially admitting that the right of the South to choose its own form of government is secondary to the desires and authority of the central government in Washington, DC. So much for the principles embodied within the 1776 Declaration of Independence.

Lincoln continues-

In doing this there needs to be no bloodshed or violence, and there shall be none unless it be forced upon the national authority. 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.

Lincoln is clearly and overtly telling the South “rejoin the union, or be invaded and suffer violence, bloodshed and subjugation.” Moreover, he tells us why there will be an invasion: “to collect the duties and imposts” and to “possess the property and places belonging to the Government.”

Interesting, because in 1847 in relation to the secession of Texas from Mexico, Lincoln had recognized the principle upon which America’s War for Independence had been established:

Any people anywhere, being inclined and having the power, have the right to rise up, and shake off the existing government, and form a new one that suits them better. This is a most valuable – a most sacred right – a right, which we hope and believe, is to liberate the world.

But, faced with losing the “duties and imposts” afforded to the US government by virtue of the booming Southern economy, he was forcefully retracting his belief in this “most sacred right.

In addition to this, the adoption of the Confederate Constitution had made Southern ports a free trade zone that, unlike the North with its 47% tariff, would be obviously inviting to foreign commerce. This situation posed a serious threat to US commerce as Northern ports would have been avoided in favor of the lower Southern tariff. As we will see, Lincoln presumed it more beneficial to inaugurate war and invade the South than to take more economically competitive actions with regards to foreign trade. As Lincoln would reply to Colonel John B. Baldwin who had suggested that the South should be allowed to secede peacefully: “And open Charleston, etc as ports of entry, with their ten percent tariff. What, then, would become of my tariff?”

Again, Lincoln would not provide the audience to the Confederate Commissioners because it would have been regarded as an admission of Southern Independence. As is evidenced by his First Inaugural, he had no intention of letting the South go, and rather than seeking a method of peaceful co-existence and friendship with the South, he instead sought a means by which he could fulfill his stated goal of forcing the South to remain in the union.

When the South made attempts at peaceful secession, even going as far as offering to purchase forts in their own territory, they were stalled, ignored, or turned away by the new administration. In addition to all of this, they faced the situation wherein a military fort occupied by forces of this hostile government was sitting in a strategic location, a port of entry, within their own territory. The strategic problem this presented should be abundantly clear. Leaving the situation to remain as it was would have allowed this hostile country a point of embarkation for the invasion that Lincoln had expressed was eminent. Sumter provided no strategic purpose to the US, except in the event of an invasion of the South. The Confederate government was aware of this and understandably shaken by this fact. And yet, the only “official” word they were getting from US officials was delay and subterfuge.

On the other hand, Lincoln faced a problem. Major Anderson, who commanded the troops at Ft. Sumter, had advised Lincoln that he could not defend the Fort. While Lincoln was unwilling to abandon Sumter to the Confederacy, attempting to reinforce it with armed troops presented the potentiality of provoking other States to leave the union. He was especially concerned with the possibility that Virginia may secede.

If, as some allege, Lincoln felt any anguish over the Sumter issue, it was clearly related, not on how to peacefully settle the issue, but on how to act provocatively without appearing the aggressor.

Senator Orville Browning, a close friend and confidant of Lincoln’s, advised him:

In any conflict.....between the government and seceding States, it is very important that the traitors shall be the aggressors, and that they be kept constantly and palpably in the wrong. The first attempt.....to furnish supplies or reinforcements will induce aggression by South Carolina, and then the government will stand justified, before the entire country, in repelling that aggression, and retaking the forts.

In his book *Reassessing the Presidency*, John V. Denson relates that Lincoln called a cabinet meeting for March 15, 1861 and asked each member of his cabinet to submit in writing their view of what should be done with regards to Fort Sumter. Every member, except Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, voted against resupply and voiced their opposition to send reinforcements. Blair's wife was brother-in-law to Gustavous Fox, a Naval Officer who had submitted a reinforcement plan to the President. Blair believed the plan had merit and petitioned Lincoln to give it consideration.

For his part, Secretary of State Seward expressed the following in his written vote: "Suppose the expedition successful, we have then a garrison in Ft. Sumter that can defy assault for six months. What is it to do then? Is it to make war by opening its batteries and attempting to demolish the defenses of Charleston?I would not initiate war to regain a useless and unnecessary position on the soil of the seceding States."

The heads of States, and key people within the administration, were as aware as the Carolinians that Ft. Sumter was "useless" and "unnecessary" to the administration for any other purpose than to provoke and invade the seceded States.

Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, stated "By sending, or attempting to send provisions into Sumter, will not war be precipitated? It may be impossible to escape it under any course of policy that may be pursued, but I am not prepared to advise a course that would provoke hostilities."

As well, Generals Winfield Scott and Joseph G. Totten both opposed Fox's plan, with General Scott recommending immediate evacuation of the Fort. These men, and others in Lincoln's cabinet recognized that an attempt to re-provision Sumter would constitute an inauguration of war. Not to be dissuaded, Lincoln agreed to send Gustavous Fox to Charleston to survey the situation. He met directly with Anderson who told him that resupplying the fort would be impossible and that "it would be a provocative act to merely make the attempt." Denson explains that Ward Lamon and S.A. Hurlburt, who were appointed to accompany Fox to Charleston, met with Governor Pickens of South Carolina and reported back to Lincoln that "even sending supplies would cause the South to fire on the fort."

In what would become a recurring characteristic in Lincoln's ability at political maneuvering, following Browning's advice he chose a path that, while less hostile in outward appearances, he knew would be received as a threat by the Confederate government and its forces in Charleston. He chose to resupply the fort, not with ammunition and military supplies, but with food.

In the midst of all of this, General P.G.T. Beauregard, who had been placed in command of Confederate troops at Charleston sent an envoy to Major Anderson at Ft. Sumter to determine his intentions. Anderson conveyed the message that if he was not resupplied, he would have no choice but to abandon the fort. But, if resupplies were received, he would fight.

Jefferson Davis, and the entire South, would regard the actions of the Lincoln administration as a direct threat against the sovereignty and safety of their country, as well as a clear act of hostility. Recall that Lincoln had already stated that invasion of the Confederacy would be undertaken if necessary to secure the property of the Union, and to collect the imposts and tariffs. On the day of his inauguration he had already decided that the South would be forced back into the union, or face invasion. The only question in his mind was how to initiate the war, and his efforts to resupply Sumter were an attempt to maneuver the Confederacy into firing the first shot while simultaneously attempting to not appear as the aggressor. This was obvious to everyone on both sides.

Two of Lincoln's trusted secretaries, John G. Nicolay and John Hay, disclosed that: President Lincoln in deciding the Sumter question had adopted a simple but effective policy. To use his own words, he determined to 'send bread to Anderson'; if the rebels fired on that, they would not be able to convince the world that he had begun the civil war.

Of course, as Denson relates, unknown to most is the fact that in December of 1861, Anderson had informed President Buchanan that, due to his relationship with the Mayor of Charleston, as well as with the town merchants, he had access to all of the food necessary to keep his troops fed. Most accounts of Lincoln's "sending bread to Anderson" omit this fact. As well, it should be mentioned that this relationship only came to a halt with Lincoln's inaugural address which the South received as a threat of invasion.

Ships were dispatched to Sumter, and on April 12, 1861 Confederate troops, aware of the fleet en route to resupply the fort, were given the command to open fire.

After the fact, Lincoln on May 1, 1861 wrote to Gustavous Fox, who commanded the naval detachment charged with resupplying Sumter, the following:

You and I both anticipated that the cause of the country would be advanced by making the attempt to provision Fort Sumter, even if it should fail, and it is no small consolation now to feel that our anticipation is justified by the result.

In other words, he had successfully provoked war while, in his mind, maintaining the appearance of a non-aggressor.

To assume that the South, by firing the first shot, was the instigator of war is to ignore all of the hostile actions committed by the North up until that point. The South, with no military, no Navy and no treasury, did not want war. They took every available action to avoid hostility, but were delayed, stalled and lied over a period of several weeks. Even many in the North saw Lincoln's actions for what they were- a deliberate act of provocation. Senator Orville Browning noted in his diary that:

He (Lincoln) told me that the very first thing placed in his hands after his inauguration was a letter from Major Anderson announcing the impossibility of defending or relieving Sumter.... He himself conceived the idea, and proposed sending supplies, without an attempt to reinforce giving notice of the fact to Governor Pickens of S.C. The plan succeeded. They attacked Sumter – it fell, and thus, did more service than it otherwise could.

On April 16, 1861, *The Buffalo Daily Courier* published the following:

The affair at Fort Sumter, it seems to us, has been planned as a means by which the war feeling at the North should be intensified, and the administration thus receive popular support for its policy.... If the armament which lay outside the harbor, while the fort was being battered to pieces, had been designed for the relief of Major Anderson, it certainly would have made a show of fulfilling its mission. But it seems plain to us that no such design was had. The administration, virtually, to use a homely illustration, stood at Sumter like a boy with a chip on his shoulder, daring his antagonist to knock it off. The Carolinians have knocked off the chip. War is inaugurated, and the design of the administration accomplished.

Ludwell Johnson notes in his book North Against South that William Seward-

Led the (Confederate) commissioners to believe that he was the guiding force in the Lincoln administration. That they should not be alarmed at the inaugural; there would be no war. He persuaded them to defer any embarrassing demands for recognition in exchange for the evacuation of Ft Sumter within a few days. During most of March and the first week of April, Seward repeatedly promised that the forts would be given up. Lincoln almost certainly knew, in a general way, what Seward was telling the Confederates, although he took care to know nothing specifically or officially.

Lincoln knew that secession alone was not an act of war and was thus compelled by his own ambition to formulate a plan to initiate a subjugation of the South while simultaneously appearing as though he was waging a defense of the union.

In the face of the actual events, to suggest that the South in “firing the first shot” had initiated the conflict is an absurdity. Lincoln had stated from day one of his Presidency that he would invade. He held out the Corwin Amendment, which would have codified the protection of slavery in the US Constitution and prevented the US government from ever interfering with the institution, as an enticement for the seceded States to rejoin the union. Not a single State took the offer (which should tell us that the true motivation behind their departure was not slavery). Failing to draw these States back into the union with this offer, he decided on another means: force.