

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

CHAPTER XXXIV

The Beginnings of War

The cartoonist is the one who oftenest cuts into the heart of a political situation. Certainly nobody gave a better idea of Mr. Lincoln's position after he became President in 1861 than the man who drew the cartoon reprinted in this chapter - "Winding Off the Tangled Skein." Poor old Mr. Buchanan had left the Union in an unutterable tangle. He had had help. Nobody had helped him more than William H. Seward, the new Secretary of State - helped him by insisting on believing what he wanted to believe. Whatever supported his theory that the secessionists were at heart loyal and that under the benign influence of inaction and soothing words they would disband and come back seeking peace, Mr. Seward gathered. There was of course Union sentiment in the South, strong in certain sections but practically everywhere contingent on non-interference with the disunionists: Mr. Seward was in correspondence with Unionists in all the Southern cities. He accepted their testimony because it coincided with his policy and refused to weigh the other side of the case: - a common defect, and strangely enough, one common in ^{many} men whom we call great.

The cartoonist caught in his picture something of the deliberation with which Mr. Lincoln went to work straightening out the skein. It will be noticed that he puts an axe at the side, which

may or may not have been because of a suspicion that the quiet figure unraveling the tangled yarn was quite capable, if the worst came to the worst, of chopping off a head here and there. He needed both patience and an axe in the situation that came with the news of the evacuation of Ft. Sumter, for that meant war. On April 15 he called for 75,000 troops, state militia. So far as I know there is no outward sign at this time of any struggle in his mind at the thought of what that calling of the troops might mean - bloodshed and death.

How could this be? - a man so gentle as Lincoln? a man who could never hear a child cry without going to its relief - who would even dismount and put a fallen bird back into its nest rather than remember the distress of a mother bird? How could he face it?

must not
We forget that he had long included the eventuality of war in his argument against the extension of slavery. Six years before, back in 1854, in that perhaps greatest of all his speeches, where he crystalizes the emotion and thinking of all his life on the matter, he had warned that the repeal of the Missouri Compromise meant "blows and bloodshed." Throughout his struggle with the question there had been a dark and tragic vein, a premonition of disaster to come. What held him? What made him think now that better than yielding, as so many were crying in his ears to do, was war? There had to be something profound in the mind of this man who never shrank from a fact, never refused to look at suffering or ugliness or falsity, and had not from the beginning of his life - something very

great indeed to reconcile him when at last the thing he had always dimly foreseen was there, ~~to~~ the fact.

There is no question that there was a tremendous, an overpowering ideal, a vision so ~~appealing~~ in its beauty that for Lincoln it seemed little that men should suffer and die that it might be realized. It was nothing else than the vision of a state where men need not suffer and die because the fundamental needs of all men for freedom and a chance to work out their happiness would be satisfied. In what he did now there was no heat, no ambition, no desire to coerce - nothing but the fact that he must support what he believed to be the one method through which universal liberty would finally be attained and that was Unionism - the theory now so badly tangled.

His argument for resistance now that attack had forced it ran in this way: -

"This issue embraces more than the fate of these United States. It presents to the whole family of man the question whether a constitutional republic or democracy - a government of the people by the same people - can or cannot maintain its territorial integrity, against its own domestic foes. It presents the question whether discontented individuals too few in numbers to control administration according to organic law in any case, can always, upon the pretence made in this case, or on any other pretences or arbitrarily without any pretence, break up their government, and thus practically put an end to free government upon the earth. It forces us to ask: 'Is there in all republics this inherent and fatal weakness?' Must a government of necessity be too strong for the liberties of its own people, or too weak to maintain its own existence?"

Again and again you find him coming back to this argument, telling the country about it, for he realized that men must have, as

he must have, a basis for a great struggle and that they, like ~~he~~^{as he did}, needed to go over the argument often, reconvincing themselves that what they had undertaken was indeed right - inevitable.

The city of Washington was a dreadful place in the days immediately following Sumpter. The city was largely Southern in its sympathies, and prophesies that troops would soon be marching across the Long Bridge from Virginia freely, were made and believed. Nobody knew whom to trust. Northern women and children were urged to leave at once, Mrs. Lincoln among them; but she flatly refused - much to her credit. Her place was beside the President. Shop keepers, heads of departments and clerks rushed out of their shops and offices and enlisted for the city's protection. Nobody has given us so good a picture as John Hay, Lincoln's young secretary, who, luckily, had so strong a literary sense that he had to get down the amazing movement in which he was living. He tells us that in three days after the President's call for troops, Senator Lane of Kansas, who had been through the border wars and therefore was looked upon as a tower of strength, had gotten together a helter-skelter regiment which was bivouaced in the East Room of the White House. "The Major made me his aide," he writes, "and I labored under some uncertainty as to whether I should speak to privates or not," - a doubt which everybody seems to have shared, at the start, except the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy.

The loyal were all tormented by visions of Lincoln's assassination, as they had been for months, and Hay gives a snappy

little picture of one of the most famous of the popular actresses of the period, ~~Lander~~ Jean Davenport, now Mrs. Col. Lander, coming to the White House at night to report suspicious words and acts that had come to her knowledge and which she had interpreted as a serious plot. It was a joyous experience for Hay who admits in his diary that he had been once stage struck by the fascinating Davenport. "The Ancient" as Hay affectionately called Lincoln, was in bed and did not see Mrs. Lander; and when he brought him the tale of his approaching assassination, he "quietly grinned". Nobody seems to have slept in those days, except the man untangling the skein.

And how anxieties pressed upon him! Among the hardest of all his days were those when rumors came that the 6th Massachusetts passing through Baltimore had been attacked. Lincoln's future determined insistence that in any military scheme, first of all Washington must be cared for, was born in these hours when it looked probable that Washington would fall. All he could do now was to walk the floor muttering, "Why don't they come? Why don't they come?"

At length they came. "Those who were in Washington April 25," Hay wrote later, "will never during their lives forget the event," and others came rapidly now - in fact one of the chief perplexities in Washington was to keep troops back until they could provide for them. It was not only the 75,000 militia he had called for which came; but troops raised by private individuals were almost forced on Lincoln. "C. Schurz", as Hay calls him, wanted to engage the Germans. The Western Governors wanted 300,000 men called,

even if they were never to be used - a kind of safety valve. There seemed to be a general feeling that every able bodied man should be under arms. The President had the satisfaction of knowing that Washington had defense, that at least it could not be taken without a stiff fight - the satisfaction, too, of seeing that every day things, in spite of the confusion, straightened out a little. Lincoln's faith was bolstered by the action of the North. It was obvious the people would save their government, if the government itself would do its part only indifferently well.

He took great joy in the arriving men, particularly a company of New York Zouaves that his young friend, Elmer Ellsworth commanded. Ellsworth as a youth had the passion for soldiering. He had wanted to go to West Point but had failed to get a commission. Going into business in Chicago he had used all his leisure in military studies, had organized there a company of Chicago Zouaves, which were so active in the campaign of 1860. He had come to Washington with Lincoln from Springfield, and he and the President had concocted there in March a scheme for reviving the State militia. There is an unsigned letter in Lincoln's handwriting, written in March of 1861 to Secretary of War Cameron, but never officially transmitted, detailing Ellsworth as he was then as "adjutant and inspector upon all militia affairs for the United States. He was to promote "a uniform system of organization, drill, equipment, etc of United States. Militia and to prepare a system of instruction for the militia to be distributed to the several States." Now that the war was on, Ellsworth had been made a Colonel and was in

command of the New York Fire Zouaves, who, when they reached Washington in April, were quartered in the House of Representatives.

They caught the imagination of the city on their arrival and held it by their bravery in putting out a fire which threatened the Willard Hotel. Ellsworth had ordered out 100 of them to help fight the fire, but the whole Company jumped out of the capitol windows, scaled the fence, broke into the Washington engine house and were hard at work before the city firemen were awake!

What a blow it was for Lincoln who loved this boy so well that he should be among the first to lose his life, and lose it in doing a thing over which he had worried.

From the southern windows of the White House Lincoln had watched with moody face for days the Confederate flag floating over Alexandria. He was not the only one that was made unhappy by the flag. May records that going into Nicolay's room one morning he found "C. Schurz and J. Lane" as he calls them. "Jim was at the window filling his soul with gall by steady telescopic contemplation of a secession flag impudently floating from a roof in Alexandria."

In May it was decided to occupy the Virginia bank of the Potomac from Arlington to Alexandria. Ellsworth was in the occupying force and in passing a hotel in Alexandria above which the Confederate flag floated, ordered it down. He was shot dead as he entered to see that his order was carried out. It was the first death to come close to the President, and it brought from him one of those beautiful letters of consolation which did much

to impress upon the country how tender was the heart of this man whom they were watching with anxious hearts, wondering whether or no he could anywhere approach the terrific task that had been set for him.

The confusion, born of troops pouring into Washington before barracks, commissary or arms and munition were ready, came on top of one of the most disgraceful conditions of confusion that the city had ever seen. The town had been infested from the day Lincoln arrived for the inauguration with what one of the newspaper correspondents called "the locusts" - an unbelievable swarm of office seekers which had settled down, prepared to eat their way, if necessary, into office. Mr. Lincoln had had ample warning in Springfield of their coming. When Carl Schurz visited him there in July of 1860 they talked over the phenomenon already menacing. "Men like you", he said to Schurz, "who have real merit and do the work are always too proud to ask for office. Those who do nothing are often the most clamorous for office, and very often get it for it seems the only way to get rid of them. But if I am elected they will find a tough customer to deal with, and you may depend upon that that I shall know how to distinguish deserving men from the drones," - something which Schurz never forgot, for after the election we find him speculating frequently in his letters to Mrs. Schurz as to the appointment he was to have.

Simply in numbers the applicants for office with whom

Mr. Lincoln had to deal in the early weeks of his administration were overwhelming - 20,000, one observer says - so many that they were obliged to seek living quarters out of town, and many carried their own food. They were of all sorts - Whigs, Democrats and radical reformers of every description. There was no Civil Service buffer between them and the President, and his lifelong habit of insisting that his door stand open to every comer now resulted in packing the halls as well as the approaches of the White House, so that those on official business found it difficult at times to get through the congestion to an appointment with the President.

Before the election, when the question of patronage had come up with Seward and Weed, he had laid it down in his letters that there should be fair play all around. But anything like fair play under the pressure was out of the question. It was simply a case of doing the best he could, and there is no doubt that as the situation grew more menacing his chief object was to use the patronage under his hand to strengthen the party behind him. It was only from that party that he could expect help in what had become his primary purpose, the saving of the Union. He was not going to be influenced about the fitness of a man, if he believed that it would hold together a cracking fragment of the organization. He found now that his period of waiting in Springfield, fatal as he felt it to have been to a prompt scotching of secession, had not been without its value. The correspondence and visitors who had besieged him, had

given him extensive and intimate knowledge of local situations. I take it that few men have gone into the Presidency knowing the insides of their party better than Lincoln. A man with a less insight into character, less willing to be fooled, less familiar with political intrigues and tricks, or less skillful in handling them - would not have drawn from the contacts what Lincoln did. The experience helped him enormously now in making his appointments.

Those who argue that Lincoln was of a hesitating and uncertain character at this period of his life, because it took him four weeks to find out whether or no he could get hold of a force to relieve Sumter, should remember not only the opposition and intrigue through which he had to work, but, too, the hateful, greedy and dangerous pressure of office seekers, which never lessened, day or night. Indeed, there was practically no one about him except it might be his loyal young secretaries, that did not bring more or less influence to bear upon him. Even Mrs. Lincoln was actively interesting herself in securing appointments for her friends.

The necessity of creating a fighting force in Washington, small though he conceived that force would be at the start, magnified and intensified the confusion and pressure under which he had been living to mammoth proportions. He wanted a small army; the North wanted a huge one, and now came from all quarters the demand to be allowed to raise, train and equip and bring on to Washington bodies of men. It looked as if every Republican politician in the North expected to be a general or a colonel. The appointing of these

officers rested finally on Mr. Lincoln. Added to the impossible situation in the Civil service, he had a responsibility upon him which was utterly beyond human capacity to discharge without mistakes. The best that he could hope in officering the new army was that he might get the ablest and most trustworthy men for the top notch positions, as he had tried to do in selecting his cabinet-find people to whom he could commit responsibility, certain that they would discharge it frankly, honestly and to the best of their ability, and would have always as their main purpose the strengthening of the main purpose of the administration.

The chief business so far in his administration had been sifting, selecting, appraising men, and as he studied and judged them, the country studied and judged him. Mr. Lincoln was under the closest popular scrutiny now. What kind of a man was this to whom they had committed their fate? Certain early impressions of Lincoln persisted through the war, to the end; he was merely a Merryman. His stories, his quips, the humorous turn to his phrases, constantly dropped into groups where nerves were tense with anxiety, earned him the reputation. Those who sneered at, or bewailed his fun had not learned what Lincoln well knew - that tension is most dangerous to mental and spiritual rectitude and efficiency. He knew how tension narrowed men, closed their eyes to all but one brilliant spot, steeled hearts and minds beyond understanding. He knew himself well enough to know that he could not work in an atmosphere of tension, and he broke it wherever he could. There was

about
 a story that went up and down the first reception at the White House in March, when the Attorney-General, flushed and indignant over something, was talking severely and excitedly to a group of guests. It was not the social solecism, it was the bad politics that Lincoln scented, and told a story which stopped the Attorney-General and set everybody to laughing, and broke up the excited group. We know now that this "Merryman" not only constantly changed dangerous subjects by his humor, but settled questions - he would tell a story of a logic which was invincible, left nothing to say. And they were soon to learn, too, that he handled his wit professionally, like a rapier - thrust it into pretensions and whining and delays. It was finally one of the most powerful swords wielded in the Civil War. But now the country was bewildered by the exhibit of a story-telling, joking President.

Official Washington, so large a part of whose energy and attention is always given to preserving personal dignity, taking its revenge for having to wait on those above in rank by insisting that those below are properly deferential, could not make out this man who did so many of his own errands. I have before me a personal letter from Gen. W. B. Wilson, written many years ago, telling of Mr. Lincoln's use of the first military telegraph office. It was up a single flight of stairs in the old War Department building on 17 St., just south of Pennsylvania Avenue. "Everybody at first dropped in without challenge," Gen. Wilson writes, "The Prince de Joinville, Philip and Robert d'Orleans, 'Bull Run' Russell,

Anthony Trollope, and marvelled at the extreme democracy of that little room". Mr. Lincoln was a constant visitor. The operators were boys to him, and their only salute was "Good morning, Mr. Lincoln." All of that was to change under a later régime, but in these first days people marvelled to see the President running across the lawn, perhaps in carpet slippers, to look over the telegrams and perhaps have a wire talk with somebody somewhere, - or see him challenging a messenger who had come for him and whom he was accompanying, to a running match, a game of stone pushing or pebble throwing!

Gen. Schuyler Hamilton used to tell an excellent tale of Mr. Lincoln's habit of doing things for himself in those early days. General Hamilton was military secretary to Gen. Scott at the time, and one afternoon in June the President came unannounced into the office of the General-in-Chief. It was very hot and he was dusty, perspiring and worn. Of course there was a hasty effort to find out what they could do for him. "It is a great thing to be an office holder," Gen. Hamilton reports him as saying, "since nine o'clock this morning I have been trying my best to get an audience with some clerk in the Pension office and without success. I have been upstairs and downstairs, from the ground floor to the attic half a dozen times, and I am fagged out." The shock to official dignity of such a confession as that must have been great. Gen. Scott gently suggested that it was an uncommon thing for the President of the United States to become a soliciter of pensions

and that Col. Hamilton at any time would attend to such details for him.

Mr. Lincoln drew out the papers. He had gone over the claim, he said, and he was sure it was a just one. "How long do you think it would take you, Colonel, to get this case through the Pension Office?" he asked. "Half an hour, Mr. Lincoln", was the reply. And in half an hour, he was back with the proper recognition. All that had been necessary to say to the leisurely staff at the Pension Office was that President Lincoln had been himself trying to get a little attention there that day, but had been unable to interest anybody. The horrified clerks put it through in a flash.

Of course officialdom told this as a joking illustration of the President's ignorance of etiquette. But they were to learn later that these little independent expeditions of the President into the departments - and he kept them up through the war - served him as private investigations, efforts to find out how things were done, by putting himself in somebody else's place. That is, Lincoln knew the value of seeing with his own eyes, and he was never willing, while he was President, to give up that habit. It took a long time for people, who felt that their dignity would suffer if they put themselves in the way of learning by direct contact, to understand - if they ever did - the principle behind Mr. Lincoln's informality.

There was something else about him that wise men saw in those days and reflected upon - something in his face that they called mysterious and strange. Every now and then one of

them went away from an interview or from watching him in a crowd to say that there was some tremendous force not yet understood in this practical, active, unassuming, humorous individual. Even a few of those who were offended by his exterior - the way he wore his clothes, the stories he told - were big enough to acknowledge this mysterious inner thing.

The first weeks of the Civil War in Washington had characteristics of opera bouffe - the confidence that it was an uprising, not a war - which Lincoln himself partly shared - the ignorance of everybody, the disorder, the conflicts of authority, the clamour for office; and yet there was a tremendous determination to see it through; an immense burning patriotism always, which dignified the helter skelter exhibit. There was a great haste to move southward from the start. The troops were restless, the officers were restless - the public was restless - everybody wanted quick action - clean up the trouble and get back to the crops - was a general feeling. Military men - and there were a few who had had experience, left-overs from the Mexican War - who saw how green the troops were, how untrained and how confident - hesitated. But up in New York there had developed a newspaper Commander-in-chief, "Field Marshall Greeley," he was often called; and his order was, "On to Richmond!"

It was perhaps just as well that there be a tryout. At any rate Lincoln, with perhaps an over-strong sense that Greeley and those behind him must be kept satisfied, allowed an advance in

July. It was to be the only battle of the war - this they were now to fight, so Gen. Scott assured him. The late Senator Daves once told me that Gen. Scott urged him personally to follow the troops into Virginia, because he never would have a chance to see another battle in this war.

And so they moved out to Bull Run.

It was a Sunday, and the President followed one by one the telegrams. They were so sure by afternoon, that he and Mrs. Lincoln went for a drive. And then he came back to the dreadful news that the Union army was in retreat - the only battle of the war was a defeat.

And all that evening he lay on his couch and listened to reports of the rout and received one after another of the panting, mud bestained, horrified stragglers of importance that had been swept into Washington by the break.

One of the things which should have been more revealing at that moment to those about him than it was to many, was the unflinching calm with which he took everything that came, and his insistence on hearing the worst. One of the first efforts of men who suffer defeat is usually to save their face by explaining the thing away. They could not explain this thing away to Mr. Lincoln. He cut through their bubble with that sharp rapier of his. "I see," he said one day when he had been listening to such an explanation, "I see. We whipped the enemy and then ran away."

But he was not the man, as he had shown himself in

the case of Seward, to refuse to allow men who had failed him and been defeated in their efforts, to save their face. With a magnanimity and a cunning which takes one's breath, he had outwitted Seward and saved Seward's face. Breaking people's bubbles and at the same time saving their faces was now to become his chief business. The result of the battle of Bull Run and of other things happening in other parts of the extending war fields which our next chapter will take up, furnish conspicuous examples of that kind of thing.