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Lincoln's First 100 Days

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Lincoln's First 100 Days

Abstract

Imagine trying to avoid a civil war and then having to figure out how to fight one—all in one's first 100 days in office and all without Congress. That was what Abraham Lincoln's first 100 days as president essentially looked like. From his first full day in office on March 5th, 1861 to his 100th day in the middle of June, Lincoln barely had time to handle the things presidents normally did, never mind relax.

Keywords

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Lincoln's First 100 Days

By [Hannah Christensen '17](#)

Imagine trying to avoid a civil war and then having to figure out how to fight one—all in one's first 100 days in office and all without Congress. That was what Abraham Lincoln's first 100 days as president essentially looked like. From his first full day in office on March 5th, 1861 to his 100th day in the middle of June, Lincoln barely had time to handle the things presidents normally did, never mind relax.



Abraham Lincoln's Inauguration on March 4, 1861. Photo courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#).

On March 5th, one of the first items on his desk was a letter from Major Robert Anderson, the commander of Fort Sumter. Fort Sumter had been surrounded by Confederate troops since South Carolina seceded in December of 1860, and now the situation was desperate. According to Anderson, they had about six weeks' worth of

provisions left before they would have to surrender. Otherwise, based on Anderson's estimate, reinforcing the fort was going to take 20,000 men—4,000 more than the entire army—and might trigger fighting. Lincoln's general-in-chief, General Winfield Scott, recommended surrender. On his first full day in office, Lincoln was facing the possibility of having to break both of his electoral promises regarding war: holding onto government property and waiting for the Confederates to move first.

Lincoln only met with his Cabinet to discuss Fort Sumter on March 9th because, while his Cabinet had been confirmed on March 5th, his administration was not up and running until then. In this meeting, he told them about Major Anderson's letter and General Scott's recommendation. Much to Lincoln's frustration, the majority of his Cabinet agreed with General Scott. Finding no support from his Cabinet or General Scott, Lincoln went looking for optimists. He found one in former Navy Lieutenant Gustavus Fox, whose plan Lincoln presented to his Cabinet on March 15th. Lincoln was frustrated again when five of seven Cabinet officials rejected Fox's plan to run resupplying tugboats to the fort under cover of darkness. Two weeks later, they changed their minds. After the initial rejection, Lincoln had asked General Scott for advice. Scott told him to evacuate Fort Pickens in Pensacola, Florida, too. . After Lincoln informed his Cabinet of the suggestion, they all voted to resupply.

General Scott was not the only one of Lincoln's officials who gave him trouble early on. His Secretary of State, William Seward, was not exactly confident in Lincoln's abilities. When Seward accused Lincoln of being so distracted that he had not bothered to develop either a foreign or domestic policy (that Seward liked) in a memorandum on April 1st, Lincoln was not happy. He told Seward that he already had a domestic policy and that he, not Seward, was in charge.

While Lincoln was not exactly distracted by patronage appointments as Seward suggested, he did have around 1,100 positions to fill. The line of people who hoped to fill these appointments ran all the way from Lincoln's office on the second floor of the White House to the front door, and Lincoln insisted on seeing them all. This took up a great deal of Lincoln's time, even as the effort to resupply Fort Sumter unfolded. On April 6th, almost a week after Lincoln decided to attempt to resupply Fort Sumter, he sent an emissary to the governor of South Carolina informing him of the planned course of action. The escorts for the supply vessels would stay outside the harbor, while the unarmed vessels would go in with the supplies. The governor informed the Confederate president, Jefferson Davis, who ordered South Carolina's forces to deliver an ultimatum to the fort: surrender or the fort will be fired on.

The fort surrendered on April 13th after a 34-hour bombardment, and Lincoln suddenly had a Civil War on his hands, barely six weeks into his first 100 days. On April 15th, he issued a proclamation calling for 75,000 troops for 90 days and calling for a special session of Congress to convene on July 4th. Two days later, Virginia voted to secede and the federal armory at Harper's Ferry and the Gosport Naval Yard fell into Confederate hands. The next day, Lincoln offered Robert E. Lee command of all federal forces, which

he declined. The day after that, April 19th, Lincoln issued a proclamation putting a blockade of the entire Confederate coastline into effect. This move created a legal quandary: Lincoln insisted that the seceded states were simply in rebellion, but blockades were generally used against foreign enemies. When confronted by Thaddeus Stevens on the subject, Lincoln pretended ignorance.

Two days later, after violent anti-Union riots took place in Baltimore and the rail bridges to Philadelphia and Harrisburg were burned, Lincoln agreed to a Maryland delegation's request that he stop sending troops through Baltimore. The next day, another delegation arrived and asked him to stop troops from marching through Baltimore altogether. Lincoln rejected their requests. On April 27th, Lincoln—still frustrated by the lack of troops in a mostly isolated Washington, D.C.—suspended the writ of habeas corpus along the makeshift rail line from Philadelphia to D.C. that had been established by General Benjamin Butler. This, along with his May 3rd call for over 40,000 3-year troops and his increases in the size of the army and navy, was denounced as unconstitutional. According to the Constitution, only Congress had the power to do either of these things. However, Lincoln claimed these “war powers” under his role as commander-in-chief, and Congress did retroactively approve them when its special session commenced.

William Seward gave Lincoln further trouble almost three weeks later when his angry letter to the U.S. ambassador to England, Charles Francis Adams, crossed his desk. In response to the British Foreign Secretary's decision to unofficially meet with Confederate emissaries about formal recognition, Seward ordered Adams to break off relations with England if the talks occurred. Lincoln toned down the letter considerably, but left in the threat of war for “fraternization with our domestic enemy.”

Two days later, on May 23rd, Lincoln ordered that Alexandria, Virginia—right across the Potomac from D.C.—be seized in response to Virginia's official secession. Around the same time, Lincoln was facing pressure to actually attack the Confederates. General Scott had presented a plan for defeating the Confederacy consisting of the coastal blockade, the seizure of the Mississippi River, and a military force holding a defensive position somewhere in northern Virginia. At the same time, the United States was seeing military success in western Virginia, where General George McClellan was busy securing Unionist areas. By the end of Lincoln's first 100 days in office in mid-June, he was leaning increasingly toward a move into Virginia, but what would end up being the first major battle of the war would not take place until July 21st. Lincoln had failed to keep war from breaking out in his first 100 days, but when it did happen, he did not hesitate to respond.

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