

Lincoln and War Leadership

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"In a great national crisis, like ours, unanimity of action among those seeking a common end is very desirable — almost indispensable. ... We are gaining strength, and may, if need be, maintain the contest indefinitely."

**Lincoln's last message
to Congress, Dec. 6, 1864.**

A decisive, resolute and victorious president and commander-in-chief delivered this message. But on Presidents Day in this time of uncertainty, it's worth noting that this was not always so during the strife-filled time of the Civil War under the administration of President Abraham Lincoln.

Lincoln's first cabinet was impressive; it included four rivals for the Republican nomination in 1860. But militarily, their political credentials were not matched by military expertise or policy agreement.

Within a month of Lincoln's inauguration, the Cabinet was shocked by the proposal of commanding Gen. Winfield Scott to abandon Fort Sumter in South Carolina and Fort Pickens in Florida. Postmaster General Montgomery Blair proved the closest thing to a war hawk in the Cabinet; West Point-educated Blair urged the president and his Cabinet to face the secession crisis directly rather than follow Scott's timid strategy.

Although suspected by Blair of composing Gen. Scott's pacifist message in March 1861, Secretary of State William H. Seward went to work on his own plan to resupply the Union forts. Seward fancied himself the government's "prime minister," suggesting to Lincoln on April 1, 1861, that a war with Europe might be just the thing to reunite the fractured country. Seward also saw himself a director of homeland security, including control of the government's intelligence service and its habeas corpus decisions. Seward's duplicity did not endear him to other Cabinet members nor to his former colleagues in the U.S. Senate.

"General" Simon Cameron was secretary of war. He had wanted to be secretary of the treasury, but Lincoln reluctantly appointed him secretary of war. Cameron was the "Great Winnebago Chief," notorious for cheating the Winnebago Indians in Wisconsin. The high-minded secretary of the treasury, Salmon P. Chase, generally exercised influence through back-door channels. He complained to Ohio journalist Murat Halstead: "I am not responsible for the management of the war and have no voice in it, except that I am not forbidden to make suggestions, and do so now and then, when I cannot help it."

"No such uncongenial or contentious group had ever assembled beneath the White House roof," wrote historian Burton J. Hendrick in "Lincoln's War Cabinet."

This Cabinet struggled through the first year, leaving to President Lincoln most of the responsibility and anguish in the conduct of the Civil War. Its weakness was illustrated one year into Lincoln's first term when the fearsome ironclad Merrimack, rechristened the Virginia by Confederates, attacked Union ships at Hampton Roads on March 8, 1862. When word of the attack reached Washington the next day, consternation and fear were the official reactions. At this point in the Civil War, Cameron had been replaced by the martinet Edwin M. Stanton as secretary of war. Lincoln called Stanton "Mars," and stuffy and grumpy Secretary of the Navy Gideon

Welles "Neptune." By moving the War Department's telegraph office next to his own, Stanton turned that room into the Lincoln administration's situation room. The War Department became in effect the West Wing of the White House. Sometimes telegrams coming in were deemed so secret by Stanton that he declined to show them to the president.

The Merrimack crisis, however, was played out in the president's office in the White House, where Mars, Neptune, Gen. George B. McClellan and other aides had gathered. Neptune disapprovingly recorded in his diary, "For a little while there was a great flutter and excitement — the president being the coolest man of the party. There were all sorts of suggestions — all sorts of expressions of fear." Welles later described the agitation of Lincoln's top advisors: "Mr. Stanton, impulsive, and always a sensationalist, was terribly excited, walked the room in great agitation, and gave brusque utterances, and deprecatory answers to all that was said, and censured everything that had been done or was omitted to be done. Mr. Seward, usually buoyant and self-reliant ... was greatly depressed ..."

Two months later, the president and his Cabinet advisors recovered their nerve and arranged their own maritime assault near the site of the confrontation of the Monitor and Merrimack. Chase, Stanton and Mr. Lincoln demonstrated exactly what hands-on leaders they could be, planning and executing the capture of Norfolk, Va. They personally made a moonlight reconnaissance and planned a successful attack for the next night.

Despite this tactical success, the Lincoln Administration had no well-oiled national security team, plagued as it was by revolving commands and conflicts among civilian and military leaders. Congress exercised oversight through its Committee on the Conduct of the War, composed of several of Lincoln's most implacable critics.

There was no military staff apparatus at the White House. The president had a tendency to call on military officers like Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs at critical points early in the war, to the annoyance of their civilian superiors. When necessary, he worked around key Cabinet members by relying on Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus V. Fox and Assistant Secretary of War Charles Dana. His closest military confidant was Secretary of War Stanton, who alienated almost everyone else in and out of government. For special operations and confidential missions, President Lincoln used a recent college graduate who worked and slept at the White House, "Major" John Hay.

For Lincoln, war planning was a lonely enterprise complicated by a commander who couldn't get on a horse (Winfield Scott), a commander who wouldn't disclose his plans when he finally got off his sick bed (George B. McClellan) and a commander who tried not to give advice (Henry W. Halleck). It was three years into his presidency before Lincoln appointed Ulysses S. Grant, whom Lincoln could trust and with whom he planned and executed victory.

Still, Lincoln's tenacity prevailed. So did the union and emancipation. American security to this day depends on presidential statecraft in the Lincoln tradition.

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