

Fatal Error

On April 5, Lincoln faced the ramifications of a critical error: assigning the same warship, the Powhatan, to two separate relief expeditions. Late at night, he welcomed Secretary of State Seward and Navy Secretary Gideon Welles, who had hurriedly come after receiving a distressing telegram from New York. Upon reading the telegram, Lincoln expressed disbelief and took full responsibility for what he deemed carelessness and heedlessness on his part. He insisted to Seward that the Powhatan must accompany the Sumter expedition, stressing that the operation's success was vital and could not be jeopardized.

Despite the urgency outlined by Lincoln, Seward maintained that it was crucial to focus on an alternative plan—the Florida expedition—believing he could negotiate a peaceful withdrawal from Fort Sumter. However, Lincoln firmly disagreed, prioritizing the defense of Sumter and demanding immediate action to secure the ship in New York for the Sumter mission.

Seward hesitated again, arguing it was too late to send a telegram, but Lincoln overruled him. Although Seward ultimately relented, he may have delayed the messaging effort, causing the telegram to reach New York only the following afternoon. By that time, the Powhatan had already been assigned to the expedition to Fort Pickens and begun its journey southward. The New York navy yard commander dispatched a fast steamer to recall the ship, but Lieutenant David Dixon Porter, Powhatan's new captain, ignored the order, citing his own direct instructions from Lincoln as superior to a cabinet secretary's command.

Porter proceeded to Fort Pickens without opposition, successfully landing troops and supplies, but lamented never having the opportunity to engage in battle, describing it as "the great disappointment of [his] life." Meanwhile, in New York, Captain Gustavus Fox organized the Fort Sumter expedition, mobilizing a fleet that included three tugs, a large transport, and warships. However, unknowingly, he was oblivious to the fact that the essential Powhatan was already en route to Florida, complicating the mission's logistics and effectiveness.