

Hot Oxygen

On April 15, President Lincoln issued a proclamation urging the states of the Union to muster militias and supply 75,000 troops to suppress the secessionist activities in the southern states. This call aimed to reaffirm U.S. law and restore the Union's honor and integrity, emphasizing a commitment to protect existing slavery in hopes of retaining the border states. In anticipation of this new army's mission, Lincoln aimed to repossess seized federal properties while ensuring no disturbance to citizens or destruction of property.

The proclamation had an immediate, explosive impact. Northern states responded with widespread jubilation, while southern leaders reacted with anger. Governors like John Ellis of North Carolina condemned Lincoln's call for troops as a violation of peace and liberty, while Tennessee's governor pledged troops for defense against coercion. Virginia's decision to secede came just days later, after a fervent debate, symbolized by even unionist William Rives shifting his support towards secession.

Celebrations erupted in Charleston, with local leaders exulting over Virginia's decision. The scene intensified with Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee voted for secession, contrasting with the ambivalence of border states that refused to provide troops against their Southern counterparts. The landscape was divided, demanding loyalty declarations as the nation teetered on the brink of civil war.

A pivotal figure in this turmoil was Robert E. Lee, a respected U.S. Army colonel. While considering an offer from Lincoln to command Union forces, he grappled with Virginia's secession, ultimately resigning due to his allegiance to his state despite his views on slavery and secession. His resignation marked a painful personal and professional turning point.

Simultaneously, as conflict brewed across the nation, British journalist William Russell observed the South's fervor and jubilation during his travels. Arriving in Charleston following the proclamation, he witnessed celebrations filled with armed crowds and a palpable spirit of victory. Russell's observations hinted at the depth of Southern convictions, believing that the Union could never regain its former strength and unity.

Overall, this chapter paints a vivid picture of a nation in crisis, the fierce emotional divides between North and South, and the initial responses to the escalating conflict leading up to the Civil War.