Blood and Dishonor

Blood and Dishonor unfolded in Washington on December 27, 1860, as former Assistant Secretary of State William Henry Trescot met with Senators Jefferson Davis of Mississippi and R.M.T. Hunter of Virginia to discuss urgent matters. The three rushed to the White House to brief President Buchanan, who appeared visibly anxious. Trescot observed Buchanan's nervousness during the meeting, especially when Buchanan casually mentioned the consul in Liverpool, prompting Davis to steer the conversation toward more pressing concerns. Davis then asked if Buchanan had received any recent news from Charleston, to which Buchanan replied negatively. It was then that Davis disclosed the alarming news about Major Anderson's relocation from Fort Moultrie to Fort Sumter, a move that Davis claimed had surrounded the presidency with "blood and dishonor." Buchanan, stunned by the revelation, expressed his disbelief and frustration, asserting that Anderson's actions contradicted his orders, leaving him feeling powerless and confused.

In response to the mounting crisis, Secretary of War Floyd was summoned to clarify the situation. Floyd, upon hearing of Anderson's actions, denied having received any confirmation through telegrams, casting doubt on the truth of the reports. He insisted on convening a cabinet meeting to discuss the matter, which stretched on for several days, highlighting the gravity of the situation. During this tense gathering, Floyd presented a statement that placed blame squarely on Major Anderson for violating the government's commitments. He argued that evacuating Fort Sumter was the only way to avoid an escalating civil conflict, framing the move as a necessary step to maintain peace. This position, however, was met with strong opposition, particularly from Secretary of State Jeremiah S. Black, who staunchly defended Anderson's decision as justified. The cabinet found itself deeply divided, with Floyd's suggestion of withdrawal viewed by many as an act of surrender to South Carolina's demands. As the debate raged within the cabinet, Attorney General Stanton criticized Floyd's stance, arguing that it would severely damage public trust in the administration. Stanton pointed out that yielding to South Carolina would not only undermine the government's credibility but also result in the loss of both a significant fort and an immense financial sum. Meanwhile, pressure from other quarters intensified as Senator Robert Toombs visited Buchanan, stressing that the situation at Fort Sumter had serious implications not just for Charleston, but for the entire South. Toombs' visit helped awaken Buchanan to the severity of the crisis, making him realize that the actions of Major Anderson were far from an isolated issue. Anderson's move was hailed as a symbol of bravery in the North, contrasting sharply with the inaction of the administration in Washington. Buchanan recognized that withdrawing Anderson would almost certainly provoke a public outcry, making it clear that the nation was teetering on the brink of a far deeper conflict. The cabinet, the press, and the public all weighed in on the unfolding crisis, each piece of news adding more fuel to the growing fire that would soon lead the country into civil war.

The chapter paints a vivid picture of the growing divide between the federal government and the Southern states, as well as the rising tensions that would ultimately lead to the Civil War. The actions of Major Anderson, initially seen as a simple military maneuver, had far-reaching implications that highlighted the failure of leadership in Washington. President Buchanan, who struggled to balance the political and military realities of the time, found himself increasingly isolated in his indecision. The cabinet, divided over the best course of action, reflected the nation's broader struggle to reconcile the deep divisions over slavery and state sovereignty. This moment in history was a turning point, with Buchanan's inability to act decisively marking a crucial moment in the lead-up to the war. As the pressure mounted, the South's secession and the North's resistance became increasingly inevitable, and Fort Sumter stood as the symbolic flashpoint that would soon ignite the flames of war.