

Fatal Error

Fatal error marked a pivotal moment on April 5, when President Lincoln found himself grappling with the consequences of a critical mistake. He had assigned the same warship, the Powhatan, to two separate relief expeditions. Late that night, after receiving a troubling telegram from New York, Lincoln quickly convened with Secretary of State William Seward and Navy Secretary Gideon Welles. Upon reading the telegram, Lincoln expressed his disbelief and took full responsibility for the mishap, acknowledging his carelessness and oversight. He insisted that the Powhatan be reassigned to accompany the Sumter expedition, stressing that the success of the operation was too vital to be jeopardized by the mistake. Lincoln's sense of urgency was evident, as he fully understood the stakes involved and the potential repercussions of the error.

Despite Lincoln's insistence on prioritizing the Sumter mission, Seward had a different approach. He proposed focusing on an alternative plan, the Florida expedition, and believed he could negotiate a peaceful withdrawal from Fort Sumter without escalating tensions. Seward's strategy suggested that diplomacy could still play a role in resolving the situation, and he felt that the Florida mission was equally important. However, Lincoln vehemently disagreed, viewing the defense of Fort Sumter as paramount. He demanded immediate action to secure the Powhatan in New York for the Sumter mission, further highlighting the growing rift between the two men on how best to handle the crisis. Lincoln's decision to overrule Seward reflected the high stakes and the urgency he felt regarding the Union's position.

The disagreement between Lincoln and Seward continued as they discussed the necessary steps to resolve the issue. Seward, acknowledging the urgency of the situation, hesitated, arguing that it was too late to send a telegram to New York to redirect the ship. However, Lincoln stood firm, overruled Seward, and insisted that the

telegram be sent immediately. Although Seward ultimately relented, the delay in dispatching the message caused further complications, with the telegram reaching New York only the following afternoon. By then, the Powhatan had already been reassigned to the Fort Pickens mission and was en route to Florida, further complicating the logistics of the Sumter relief effort. This series of delays highlighted the fragile coordination between Lincoln's administration and the military, reflecting the challenges they faced as tensions escalated.

Upon receiving the telegram late, the commander of the New York Navy Yard acted quickly, dispatching a fast steamer to recall the Powhatan. However, Lieutenant David Dixon Porter, the new captain of the ship, ignored the order to redirect, citing his direct instructions from Lincoln. Porter considered his orders from the president more authoritative than those of a cabinet secretary. The refusal to comply with the recall order led to the Powhatan's continued journey southward to Fort Pickens, where it successfully delivered troops and supplies without opposition. Despite the success of the mission, Porter expressed his frustration at not being able to engage in battle, calling it "the great disappointment of [his] life." His comments reflected the deeper emotions felt by military leaders caught in the growing tension, eager to contribute to the conflict but frustrated by the lack of direct action.

In the meantime, Captain Gustavus Fox was diligently organizing the Fort Sumter expedition. He mobilized a fleet, which included warships, a large transport, and three tugs, all prepared to support the mission. However, Fox was unaware of the crucial fact that the Powhatan was already en route to Florida, complicating the logistics of the Sumter mission. This oversight added to the growing confusion and inefficiency of the Union's efforts to respond to the crisis. The failure to coordinate the assignment of the Powhatan, a key ship, highlighted the challenges faced by Lincoln's administration in managing multiple missions simultaneously. The situation revealed a critical flaw in the Union's planning, with miscommunications and delays ultimately hindering the effectiveness of their response.

This chapter underscores the critical nature of the early moments of the Civil War, where simple mistakes, like assigning the same ship to two different missions, could have far-reaching consequences. The tension between Lincoln and Seward, combined with the logistical errors surrounding the Powhatan, highlighted the difficulties of managing a nation on the brink of war. The failed coordination of military resources reflected the broader confusion and lack of preparation that marked the initial stages of the conflict. As the Union scrambled to reassert control and respond to the South's secession, such missteps served as a stark reminder of the complexity and uncertainty that would define the early years of the Civil War.