

# On the Scent

On the scent of impending conflict, John Delane, the editor of the *Times* in London, grew increasingly concerned about the escalating political tensions in the United States. Following Abraham Lincoln's election, the conflict between the Southern states and the Union intensified, raising the possibility of violence breaking out. Delane recognized that the situation in America could be an engaging topic for his British readers, many of whom might find some measure of satisfaction in witnessing the turmoil that was unfolding across the Atlantic. As the prospect of war seemed more likely, Delane realized the importance of sending someone to cover the situation firsthand, seeking out a reporter who could capture the gravity of the crisis.

To gain a clearer perspective on the brewing conflict, Delane made the decision to send Sir William Howard Russell, a renowned journalist known for his compelling reporting during the Crimean War. Russell, initially reluctant to leave his comfortable life in London, was persuaded by Thackeray, the famous novelist, to accept the assignment. Although Russell had spent years covering global events and was now immersed in the literary circles of London, his curiosity about the unfolding crisis and his reputation for capturing poignant moments led him to agree to travel to America. His departure was aboard the steamship *Arabia* from Queensland, Ireland, joining a group of Southern passengers, including a former U.S. Legation member who had joined the Confederacy and Colonel Robert S. Garnett, a Virginian officer committed to fighting for the Southern cause.

On the journey across the Atlantic, Russell engaged in conversations that provided valuable insights into the Southern viewpoint of the conflict. Among his fellow passengers was Colonel Garnett, who fervently expressed his belief in a hierarchical society where slavery was seen as a divine institution, rejecting the notion of equality and voicing his disdain for the Northern states. Russell, ever the observant reporter,

noted these viewpoints and recorded them in his diary, understanding that such sentiments would play a pivotal role in the growing divide between North and South. Throughout the fourteen-day voyage, Russell gathered further insights into the core issues dividing the nation, including the contested ownership of two key federal properties: Fort Pickens and Fort Sumter, which were central to the developing crisis.

As Russell's journey continued, he learned of the increasing tension surrounding these federal properties and the speculative concerns regarding how the U.S. government would respond. The Southern states, having already threatened to resist any federal attempts to resupply or reinforce garrisons, were bracing for confrontation. The federal government, in contrast, appeared to be in a state of paralysis, lacking a clear response to the escalating situation. This stalemate was particularly evident as the soldiers stationed at Fort Sumter and other strategic locations were left to navigate the uncertainty of their orders and the precariousness of their positions without clear leadership from Washington. This sense of indecision within the federal government stood in stark contrast to the resolute stance of the Southern states, setting the stage for a conflict that seemed inevitable.

Russell's journey to America, his conversations with key figures, and his observations aboard the *Arabia* provided him with a unique vantage point from which he could report on the rapidly deteriorating political climate in the United States. As he prepared to disembark in America, the growing divide between North and South had already captured his attention, and he knew that the stories he would uncover would be critical to understanding the path the nation was about to take. His reports, once shared with Delane and the *Times* readership, would offer an important and informed perspective on the tensions leading up to the Civil War, illuminating the deep-rooted issues and the personalities that were driving the country toward an inevitable conflict.