

The Commissioners

The Commissioners, representing the Confederate states, found themselves at a critical juncture between March 9 and March 13, 1861, as they attempted to navigate the complex political climate in Washington. They had learned of rumors suggesting the imminent evacuation of Fort Sumter, which would mark a significant shift in the Union's stance. The news of this potential action was met with fierce criticism from Northern factions who viewed such a move as a betrayal of Lincoln's promise to preserve federal properties across the nation. However, the Confederate commissioners remained optimistic, seeing this as an opportunity to leverage the situation to their advantage. They communicated their belief to Robert Toombs, the Confederacy's Secretary of State, that the Union was likely preparing to evacuate the fort. This belief in an impending evacuation fostered a sense of hope among the commissioners, who saw it as an opening to push for formal recognition of the Confederacy by the federal government.

The commissioners, understanding the intricacies of political maneuvering, believed that William Seward, Lincoln's Secretary of State, held the key to shaping the administration's decisions regarding the fate of Fort Sumter. Seward's inclination toward a peaceful resolution, they believed, was the driving force behind his support for the evacuation of the fort. Attempting to move things forward, the commissioners discreetly sought a meeting with Seward through Senator R.M.T. Hunter, hoping to establish a direct line of communication. Unfortunately for them, Seward declined their request, stating that any meeting would require prior consultation with President Lincoln, which the commissioners perceived as a personal slight. Rather than yielding to Seward's terms, they took a more formal approach by sending a letter to the State Department, asserting their mission's importance and demanding an official meeting to discuss the situation. This formal gesture demonstrated their commitment to the

cause, as well as their frustration with the slow pace of negotiations and the Union's reluctance to engage.

Days passed without a response, and the commissioners' patience began to wear thin. Toombs, ever the staunch supporter of the Confederate cause, praised their dignified refusal to be diminished, reinforcing the idea that they represented a strong and independent nation. On March 13, the commissioners sent an official request for a meeting, hoping that this more formal approach would yield a response. However, as time dragged on without any feedback from the Lincoln administration, the commissioners found themselves increasingly frustrated by the lack of progress. Although they understood the strategic value of waiting for the right moment to press their demands, the uncertainty about their next steps left them in a precarious position. The delay, while potentially advantageous in the long run, created a sense of impatience and doubt within the commissioners as they pondered the next phase of their mission.

In the midst of these political and diplomatic challenges, John Forsyth, one of the commissioners, outlined a more cautious and long-term strategy in a letter to Confederate Secretary of War Walker. Forsyth believed that the North's growing sentiment for peace could play in the Confederacy's favor, and he hoped that by biding their time, they could shift the balance of power in their direction. However, he also cautioned against rushing into any hasty actions that could inadvertently lead to war. Forsyth acknowledged that miscalculations on either side could escalate tensions, ultimately leading to unforeseen conflict. As a result, he advocated for a more measured approach, one that capitalized on the rising peace sentiments in the North while avoiding unnecessary provocation. At the same time, Seward remained firm in his stance, aware that any formal recognition of the Confederate commissioners would deeply undermine the Union's position. He knew that such an acknowledgment could incite war, a scenario he desperately sought to avoid.

The complexity of this political dance, with both sides maneuvering carefully, reveals the precariousness of the situation in early 1861. While the Confederate

commissioners sought to exploit the potential for an evacuation at Fort Sumter as a means of gaining recognition, they also understood the risks of pushing too hard. Seward, on the other hand, was caught in a delicate balancing act, trying to maintain the Union's integrity while simultaneously avoiding war. The lack of clear communication and the absence of decisive action only fueled the mounting tensions. This chapter highlights the intricate nature of diplomacy during the lead-up to the Civil War, where every word, every gesture, and every delay could significantly alter the course of history. The commissioners' struggle to secure recognition for the Confederacy, coupled with Seward's careful handling of the situation, set the stage for the deeper political and military conflicts that would soon engulf the nation.