

# The Major Gets an Idea

The Major Gets an Idea centers on Capt. John G. Foster, a seasoned veteran of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, tasked with strengthening the defenses of Charleston Harbor during the tense period following South Carolina's secession in December 1860. At thirty-seven years old, Foster was already known for his experience and distinctive limp, a remnant of past combat. He had taken the initiative to reinforce Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie by employing civilian workers to dig a wet ditch around Fort Moultrie and construct additional defenses to guard against potential infantry attacks. Additionally, Foster initiated plans to give Major Anderson the ability to destroy the fort if secessionist forces attempted to seize it. His proactive approach reflected the urgency of the situation, understanding that Charleston's strategic location made it a critical target for both Union and Confederate forces.

Recognizing the importance of arming his workforce, Foster requested forty muskets from the federal arsenal, a decision that, although reasonable in his eyes, risked escalating tensions with the South. Col. Benjamin Huger, the arsenal's commander, had already promised the South Carolina governor that no arms would be supplied to the Union forces, making Foster's request controversial. The tension heightened when War Secretary Floyd sent a telegram instructing Foster to return any arms taken from the arsenal, reinforcing the precariousness of the situation. Foster complied, fully aware of the political consequences that could follow if he defied the order. The act of requesting weapons had already put him at odds with the Confederate-aligned officials, showcasing the challenges faced by Union commanders in the South, where each decision had the potential to tip the scale toward further conflict.

Meanwhile, a letter from Secretary of War Floyd to Major Anderson cast further doubt on the federal government's commitment to defending the forts. Floyd, who had already been accused of corruption and betrayal, altered his earlier orders, now

suggesting that defending the forts might be a “useless sacrifice.” This drastic shift in policy only deepened Anderson’s suspicions, as it contradicted earlier instructions to hold the forts at all costs. Floyd’s words reflected a broader sense of indecision within the federal government, hinting at the growing divide between Union loyalty and Southern secessionist sentiment. Anderson, deeply troubled by the apparent lack of commitment from Washington, began to feel isolated and increasingly doubtful of the government’s resolve to maintain its hold over the forts in Charleston.

Amid these shifting tides, Anderson recognized that Fort Sumter was the only defensible position left in Charleston. The deteriorating situation at Fort Moultrie and the growing threat of secessionist forces led Anderson to consider relocating his troops to Sumter. However, he was mindful of the potential political and military fallout from such a move, as it would surely provoke South Carolina officials. Anderson’s decision, though necessary for the defense of his men, had to be kept private, particularly from his officers, to avoid raising tensions or triggering premature conflict. The realization that the government’s commitment to defending Charleston was faltering made the decision all the more urgent. As Anderson prepared for these significant changes, he remained deeply aware of the political landscape, knowing that his actions would play a pivotal role in the unfolding crisis.

The complexities of Anderson’s situation reflect the broader uncertainty of the time, where military strategy and political maneuvering were inextricably linked. Foster’s initial steps to reinforce Fort Moultrie and prepare Fort Sumter illustrated the Union’s efforts to maintain control over key strategic locations, but his actions were continually undermined by the political environment. The tension between military necessity and political realities grew sharper as the federal government struggled to maintain a unified stance while Southern states rapidly moved toward secession. The decisions made by Anderson, Foster, and others would ultimately contribute to the escalation of hostilities, setting the stage for the events that would soon lead to the Civil War.