

The Old Gentlemen Pay a Call

The Old Gentlemen Pay a Call begins with an important and symbolic moment on February 23, when President-elect Abraham Lincoln, newly arrived in Washington, hosted a reception at the Willard Hotel for delegates of the Washington Peace Convention. Among the distinguished guests was William Cabell Rives, a former congressman and senator from Virginia, known for his unionist beliefs despite being a slave owner with nearly a hundred slaves. Rives had long supported the preservation of the Union and believed that secession would lead to national catastrophe. The Peace Convention was meant to offer solutions to the nation's divisive political landscape, but it was becoming increasingly apparent that both sides were entrenched in their positions, leaving the meeting with little hope for compromise. Driven by frustration, Rives delivered a passionate speech that lasted over ninety minutes, urging for reconciliation and pleading for the Union to remain intact. He warned that forcing seceded states back into the Union would be impossible without significant concessions, and the consequences of failing to act would lead Virginia and other border states to follow the South's path toward secession.

During this tense gathering, Lincoln's towering presence at the reception impressed many of the delegates. His demeanor, both gracious and unexpectedly calm, contrasted with the preconceived notions that many had about him. When Rives met Lincoln, he was struck by the President's stature, but Lincoln quickly eased the tension by acknowledging Rives's intellect and distinguished career. Despite the initial cordiality, Rives's conversation with Lincoln revealed a growing sense of unease regarding the future of the Union. Rives, deeply concerned about the country's direction, emphasized the weight of responsibility resting on Lincoln's shoulders, believing that the President's decisions would either preserve or destroy the nation. Lincoln, on the other hand, responded confidently, stating that his path was clear,

focusing on his duty to uphold the Constitution and maintain the Union. Even though Lincoln's words were reassuring, Rives felt a growing sense of doubt and anxiety, believing that the gravity of the situation might not have been fully realized by the President.

As Rives continued his journey back to Virginia, Lincoln, aware of the escalating political tensions, requested another meeting with Rives and other Southern delegates. The conversation grew more tense as Lincoln reiterated his commitment to honoring the Fugitive Slave Act, but Rives and his colleagues made it clear that they would not tolerate coercion. The threat of Virginia and other Southern states seceding was too great, and they warned that any military actions would only escalate the situation. Lincoln, ever the strategist, agreed to withdraw Union troops from Fort Sumter, but he offered no definitive promises about other measures. The conversation ended with Lincoln contemplating whether the delegation would have spoken as freely to any other president, highlighting the complex nature of his relationship with the Southern states. In the following days, a proposal to amend the Constitution was introduced. This amendment, which aimed to protect slavery in places where it already existed, passed through both the House and Senate, although it was ultimately not ratified by the states. This proposal, known as the Shadow or Ghost Amendment, would remain an important yet unrealized part of the ongoing national debate. Its failure to pass solidified the growing divide between the North and South and further entrenched the divisions that would ultimately lead to the Civil War.

The interactions between Lincoln, Rives, and the Southern delegates showcase the precarious political situation in which the nation found itself in early 1861. Despite Lincoln's commitment to preserving the Union and his attempts to appease Southern concerns, the rising tensions and divisions were undeniable. The proposals discussed and the promises made during these meetings revealed the deep divide over the issue of slavery and the future of the Union. The failure to pass the proposed amendment highlighted the impossibility of finding a middle ground between the North and South. With both sides resolute in their beliefs, the stage was set for the outbreak of war, and the delicate balance that had been maintained for decades began to unravel. The

chapter underscores the complexity of the political landscape and the challenges Lincoln faced in navigating the nation through one of its most turbulent times.