

THIS WAS THE CIVIL WAR



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE AWAITED—With the nation uncertain and nervous, a lame duck Congress met in December, 1860, awaiting a State of the Union message from President Buchanan. The message was sent Dec. 4 and it served only to alienate everyone. Buchanan's attempt at compromise fell flat. He tried to straddle the issues, secession and slavery, and succeeded only on enraging both sides. This political cartoon drawn by Thomas W. Strong, published in early 1861, reflects the opinions most of the people had for Buchanan after the message. (UPI Telephoto)

Buchanan Angers North, South

By MERTON T. AKERS
UPI Correspondent

A lame duck Congress met in Washington Dec. 3, 1860, uncertain and nervous.

This second session of the 36th Congress, meeting nearly a month after its successor had been elected, but not yet sworn in, accurately reflected the perplexity of the country.

On that winter day in the capital, pigs still wandered in the muddy streets. The unfinished dome of the Capitol bore a construction crane like a waving statute, and this was the State of the Union:

Five Southern states had started the process of secession—South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida and Georgia. Hot heads in Arkansas, Tennessee, North Carolina and Louisiana were on the verge of disunion. Texans were pushing their governor, Sam Houston, staunch unionist and Indian fighter, toward the same decision.

—Abraham Lincoln, president-elect and three months away from power, sat silent in Springfield, Ill., spasmodically working behind the scenes.

James Buchanan, lame duck President torn by indecision and swayed by a Southern-dominated cabinet, prepared his State of the Union message with a two-nibbed pen.

On the rim of the Charleston, S.C., harbor, Maj. Robert Anderson, USA, strove mightily to wall up his ring of forts against the hair-trigger militia.

Public opinion across the Northern states seemed lethargic, even paralyzed.

When the Congress assembled, Southern members all were in their seats except Sens. James Chestnut and James H. Hammond of South Carolina. They had indignantly resigned after the election of Lincoln. But the South Carolina House delegation was on hand in full force, waiting and watching.

Democrats dominated the

Senate. Republicans the House. Southern Democrats guided their party councils and could prevent the Republican Senate minority from forming coalitions. Congressmen from the Lower South, where the machinery of secession was already grinding, had nothing to lose and everything to gain by retaining their seats. They wanted separation, but they wanted it without war and Congress was the arena for maneuver.

Compromise, time-honored method of administering the Republic, seemed only a straw to reach for, but all sides were ready to try, at least for the record.

President Buchanan's message came by messenger at noon on Dec. 4.

Message Straddles Issue

It was a curious one. Buchanan hoped it contained something for everyone. Actually it contained something to alienate everyone.

The President argued in one breath that secession was unconstitutional and in the next that neither Congress nor the President had the power to force a state to remain in the Union. Although the country was great and powerful, Buchanan wrote, it did not have the right to make war on a state. If it did have the right to make war on a state, he held "the resulting loss of blood and treasure would make future reconciliation impossible."

"The fact is that our Union rests on public opinion, and can never be cemented by the blood of its citizens shed in civil war. If it can not live in the affections of the people, it must one day perish."

Why was the country in this predicament? Buchanan asked. Because of Northern anti-slavery agitation, which had harried the South until:

"Many a matron throughout the South retires at night in dread of what may befall herself and her children before morning."

The spirit of John Brown, hanged this one year and two days, was marching.

It wasn't the election of Lincoln, but Northern state laws recognizing the Negro as a man instead of a chattel, that had endangered the South, Buchanan wrote. Unless these laws were repealed, the South, having used all peaceful means for redress, would be justified in revolution.

Amendment Sought

Buchanan held that federal forts in the South were government property beyond question and cited the fact that the South Carolina forts had been purchased with the consent of the legislature and the authority over them had been granted to Congress.

The President made one recommendation to meet the crisis. He suggested a constitutional amendment to clarify slavery. This amendment would recognize the right of property in slaves in states where slavery existed or where it might exist, guarantee the right of slave owners in territories until they were admitted as states and declare all Northern laws abridging the Fugitive Slave Act unconstitutional.

Reaction was immediate, all against Buchanan. A half dozen Southern senators quickly arose to denounce the message.

Way out west in Springfield, Lincoln made no recorded comment. But his position on the two main points of the message were pretty well known. Where Buchanan was ready to meet the demands of the South for extension of slavery, Lincoln was pledged against it, personally and by the Republican platform. Where Buchanan contended that the President must execute the laws but that he was unable to do so constitutionally, Lincoln held that it was the President's duty to do so.

Compromise Tried

The first of several attempts to find a compromise out of the crisis came the same day Buchanan sent his message.

On motion of Alexander R. Boteler, Virginia aristocrat elected in opposition to the regular Democratic slate, the House voted, 145 to 38, to set up a committee of one member from each state to consider the perils of the moment. All the opposition votes came from the Republicans. Some of the Southerners abstained.

On Dec. 6, Speaker William Pennington made his appointments to the House committee which would be known as the Committee of 33. Pennington's choices were unfortunate. While balanced with 16 Republicans, 14 Democrats and three Independents, Pennington ignored Douglas Democrats and his Southern choices were denounced as unrepresentative.

His choice for chairman, Tom Corwin of Ohio, was a strong one. Corwin had considerable stature. He had been governor of Ohio, a U.S. senator and secretary of the treasury in the early '50's.

There would be much talk about compromise before this lame duck session of Congress was ended but . . . Deserions from Buchanan begin!



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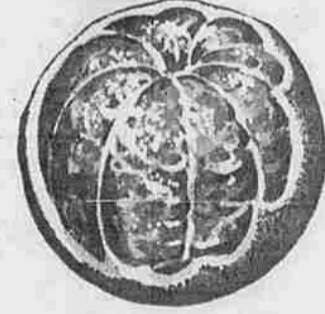
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