

Hampton Roads Peace Conference
February 1865

Francis P. Blair, one of Lincoln's advisors, helped to arrange a peace conference in early 1865. Representing the Confederacy were Robert M.T. Hunter, John A. Campbell and Vice President Alexander H. Stephens. President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of State William H. Seward represented the United States. The meeting was held aboard the River Queen, a Union transport ship anchored off Hampton Roads, Virginia.

Lincoln's position was clear from the beginning. He required the following:

An immediate end to the fighting and the disbandment of Confederate forces

Southern recognition of the emancipation of the slaves

Dissolution of the Confederacy and return to the Union by all seceded states.

The President was prepared to consider some form of compensation for slaveowners and generous treatment of Confederate officials, despite the disapproval of his advisors.

The Southern delegates were prepared to discuss only the recognition of an independent Confederate States of America by the United States. They felt that Lincoln's proposals were humiliating and the conference broke up after four hours.

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The Hampton Roads Peace Conference:
A Final Test of Lincoln's Presidential Leadership

WILLIAM C. HARRIS

Civil War historians have dismissed the Hampton Roads Peace Conference of February 3, 1865, in which President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of State William H. Seward met with Southern representatives or "commissioners," as a fruitless and relatively unimportant episode occurring two months prior to the surrender of the Confederate armies.¹ One prominent scholar in his history of the Lincoln presidency has completely ignored the meeting.² Other historians cite the results of the conference as additional proof of Lincoln's "strategy of unconditional surrender" in the war.³ David Donald in his magisterial biography of Lincoln asserts that the

president did not expect to achieve any real results at Hampton Roads. According to Donald, Lincoln's purpose in meeting with the rebel commissioners was not peacemaking; it was "to undermine the Jefferson Davis administration" by appealing to the discontented Southern masses' longing for peace. "He wanted to raise their hopes, if necessary through a campaign of misinformation," including the prospect "that at least the remnants of their 'peculiar institution' could still be saved."⁴ 1

Historians are probably correct in concluding that an end of the conflict based on Abraham Lincoln's terms—the restoration of the Union and the destruction of slavery—was not possible until the surrender of Confederate armies in April. At Hampton Roads, Southern representatives, on instructions from Jefferson Davis, rejected out of hand any peace that failed to recognize Confederate independence or provide for a cease-fire. Though the Hampton Roads Conference did not produce peace, it was more important than historians have judged, particularly in regard to Lincoln's purposes and concerns during the last few months of the war and the Northern reaction to his peace effort. Furthermore, a history of the conference can provide insights into Lincoln's late-war leadership, his emancipation and reconstruction policies, and his standing among contemporaries before his apotheosis as an American icon. 2

The presidential election of 1864, occurring after the spectacular Union military successes at Mobile Bay and in Georgia and the Shenandoah Valley, reaffirmed the Northern majority's commitment to the suppression of the rebellion in the South and the restoration of the Union without slavery. Arguably, Abraham Lincoln's victory owed more to the Northern rejection of the Democratic party's war-failure platform and its call for an armistice preparatory to a national peace convention than to the voters' confidence in the president's leadership.⁵ Ironically, though the peace party had been defeated in the election, the Republican success inspired renewed demands in the North for negotiations to end the war. Many Northerners, including prominent Republicans like Horace Greeley of the New York Tribune, believed that Southerners, demoralized by serious military setbacks, the defeat of the "Copperhead" party in the North, and prolonged suffering at home, now realized the hopelessness of their cause and would be receptive to peace overtures based upon reunion and emancipation.⁶ 3

Lincoln, who fervently wanted to end the bloodshed, gave a great deal of thought to peace after his reelection. He realized, however, that serious obstacles stood in the way of any negotiations

that would restore the Union and acknowledge black freedom. The main obstacle, he concluded, was Jefferson Davis. "No attempt at negotiation with the insurgent leader could result in any good," Lincoln declared in his annual message to Congress on December 6. Davis "would accept nothing short of severance of the Union—precisely what we will not and cannot give. His declarations to this effect are explicit and oft-repeated. He cannot voluntarily reaccept the Union; we cannot voluntarily yield it." The issue "between him and us ... can only be tried by war, and decided by victory," the president told Congress.^{7 4}

Lincoln also knew that any effort by his government to treat with Davis might suggest a recognition of the Confederacy and its state governments, a position that he had carefully avoided throughout the war. In a cabinet meeting on November 25, 1864, both Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton and Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles had reminded Lincoln of his nonrecognition policy and strongly advised him to continue the practice, as outlined in his 1863 Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction, of working through state "entities" and individuals who wanted "to return to their duty" in the Union.^{8 5}

Prompted by Stanton and Welles, Lincoln announced in his annual message to Congress that, though he could not deal with Davis, he could do so with his followers. "They can, at any moment, have peace simply by laying down their arms and submitting to the national authority under the Constitution. After so much, the government could not, if it would, maintain war against them." Lincoln promised that "if questions should remain, we would adjust them by the peaceful means of legislation, conference, courts, and votes, operating only in constitutional and lawful channels." Though "the abandonment of armed resistance to the national authority [was] the only indispensable condition to ending the war," the president made it clear that he would not "retract or modify the emancipation proclamation, nor ... return to slavery any person who is free by the terms of that proclamation, or by any of the Acts of Congress." The war, he assured Northerners and Southerners alike, "will cease on the part of the government, whenever it shall have ceased on the part of those who began it."^{9 6}

Lincoln soon found that no rebel state government, or any large body of insurgents, offered to cease their hostilities against the Union. Confederate armies, despite their losses and heavy desertions, continued to fight and on occasion administer embarrassing setbacks to federal forces. Though criticism of the Richmond administration

was widespread, Southern political and military leaders still recognized the authority of Davis to negotiate with the enemy. And the Confederate president expected to use that authority to secure Southern independence. 7

Several "amateur peace negotiators," as the New York Herald referred to them, during the winter of 1864-1865 offered their services to bring the two sides together. In the beginning, Lincoln kept a discreet distance from these movements.¹⁰ By far the most important of the peacemaking efforts was that of seventy-three-year-old Francis Preston Blair, Sr., a prominent political editor of the Jacksonian era. On December 28, Blair, a resident of Silver Spring, Maryland, met with the president to secure a pass through Union lines to visit Richmond. Ostensibly, the trip would be made to retrieve personal papers seized by General Jubal Early's forces in their July raid on Washington. Lincoln granted the pass but in their meeting abruptly stopped Blair when he attempted to describe his reasons for going to Richmond. The president understood that if the mission failed he did not want to find himself in the position, as had occurred after the fiasco of the Niagara conference, during the summer of 1864, of having sanctioned a fruitless and embarrassing peace attempt.¹¹ 8

On December 30, Blair addressed two letters to "President Davis." The first, for public consumption, indicated that he wanted to visit Richmond in order to reclaim his papers; the second, for Davis only, explained his real reason for the trip. "The main purpose I have in seeing you," Blair informed Davis, was "to submit to your consideration ideas which in my opinion you may turn to good and possibly bring to practical results, [repairing] all the ruin the war has brought upon the nation." He wrote the Confederate president that he came "wholly unaccredited except in so far as I may be by having permission to pass our lines and to offer to you my own suggestions—suggestions which I have suggested to none in authority on this side [of] the lines."¹² 9

Though Blair made it clear that he had no official credentials, Davis, upon receipt of the letters, probably thought—and understandably so—that Lincoln was aware of the peace scheme and perhaps had endorsed it. If indeed Blair came as an unofficial envoy of the Union president, Davis concluded that he might be able to turn the meeting to his own advantage, and also to that of the Confederacy. At any rate, Davis thought, talks with Blair would reduce the growing charges of intransigence against him regarding peace negotiations, charges that threatened his ability to prosecute

the war. Then, if the Lincoln government failed to recognize Confederate independence, which he expected would be the case, and continued to insist on the "subjugation" of the South, Davis could rally the people to a greater support for the war. 10

On January 3, Blair received Davis's message inviting him to Richmond. Secretary of Navy Gideon Welles, who probably was aware of Blair's peace purpose, provided the flagship of the Potomac flotilla for the trip to Aiken's Landing on the James River, where a flag-of-truce steamer took Blair to Richmond. This assistance by the federal navy added to the belief that the mission had Lincoln's sanction. On January 12, Blair arrived at his destination and arranged for a meeting that night with the Confederate president.¹³ 11

After a friendly greeting by Davis and his wife, Varina, who had frequently visited in his Maryland home, Blair laid out his peace proposal. The plan, which he read from a prepared paper, called for the cessation of hostilities between the North and the South and the uniting of forces to oppose French expansion in North America.¹⁴ Blair declared that slavery, the cause of the sectional conflict, "no longer remains an insurmountable obstruction to [national] pacification," nor would it cause future sectional divisions because all sides now agreed that the institution was doomed. He indicated to Davis that Lincoln in his liberal Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction and in his recent annual message to Congress had opened the door for reconciliation and a permanent peace. Blair suggested that perhaps an armistice could be immediately arranged, preparatory to a united effort to expel the French from Mexico. The military alliance, he suggested, could be followed soon by the restoration of the Union. 12

In his response, Davis agreed that "no circumstances would have a greater effect" on European monarchists with ambitions in America "than to see the arms of our countrymen from the North and the South united in a war upon a foreign power assailing principles of government common to both sections and threatening their destruction." The Confederate president, however, summarily rejected the scheme for a joint military expedition against the French in Mexico. The Mexicans themselves, he said, would have to drive out the French puppet regime, after which "no one can foresee how things would shape themselves" in Mexico. On the matter of reconciliation between North and South, Davis, without conceding Confederate independence, told Blair that a restoration of friendly relations "depended upon well-founded confidence" on both sides. Davis made it clear that he had no confidence in Secretary of State

William H. Seward, whom he thought would be the central figure in any formal peace talks. Blair agreed that Seward could not be trusted, but he allayed the Confederate president's concern by indicating that "this matter, if entered upon at all, must be with Mr. Lincoln himself," whose word, Blair assured Davis, was his bond. "The transaction," Blair said, "is a military transaction, and depends entirely upon the Commander-in-Chief of our armies." 13

Davis then expressed his willingness to appoint a delegation to meet with President Lincoln or his representatives for the purpose of ending the war. He gave Blair a note indicating "the substance of remarks made by me, to be repeated by you to President Lincoln." Davis wrote: "I have no disposition to find obstacles in forms, and am willing now, as heretofore, to enter into negotiations for the restoration of peace; and am ready to send a commission whenever I have reason to suppose it will be received, or to receive a commission, if the United States government shall choose to send one, ... with a view to secure peace to the two countries."15 14

Elated with Davis's agreement to pursue peace talks, despite the "two-countries" condition, and confidentially informed by old Southern friends in Richmond that they believed their cause was hopeless, Blair returned to Washington on January 16. When Blair met with Lincoln on January 18, he showed him Davis's letter indicating a willingness to initiate talks "with a view to secure peace to the two countries." Blair suggested to the president that a golden opportunity for peace existed. Lincoln, ignoring Blair's fanciful Mexican scheme for ending the war, expressed his satisfaction with the "Sage of Silver Spring's" report, particularly the description of the despondency existing in the Confederate capital and Davis's apparent willingness to negotiate.¹⁶ The president, however, could not accept the "two-countries" condition for negotiations because, of course, he did not recognize the Confederacy as a nation. Nevertheless, Lincoln, based on Blair's optimistic report and Davis's comment that he had "no disposition to find obstacles in forms," believed that Southern pressure for ending the war, which was certain to increase since the fall of Fort Fisher on January 15, might force the "insurgent leader" to ignore the "two-countries" stipulation for peace talks. Such talks could conceivably lead to reunion. With that in mind the president asked Blair to return to Richmond, this time carrying a carefully crafted letter for Davis. The letter was addressed to Blair, not "the insurgent leader," whom Lincoln could not recognize directly. "You may say to him," Lincoln wrote Blair, "that I have constantly been, am now, and shall continue, ready to receive any agent whom he, or any other influential person

now resisting the national authority, may informally send to me with a view to securing peace to the people of our one common country."17 With this statement, Lincoln wanted to make clear from the beginning that he would not agree to any negotiations based on Davis's "two-countries" condition. 15

Meanwhile, Blair's activities had spawned wild speculation—and controversy—regarding peace. The Washington National Intelligencer observed that "the Blair Mission has become the national excitement is evident enough from [reading] the leading press of the country."18 Nowhere was the rumor mill more active than in the national capital. The Washington correspondent of the New York Herald reported on January 21 that the city "has been under an intense excitement during the last few days over the question of peace. All manner of probable and improbable, possible and impossible stories have been in circulation. We have had the rebellion closed up, Jeff. Davis flying towards Mexico, and the bulk of the rebel Congress marching for Washington to apply for admittance here." Other reports circulated that Secretary of State William H. Seward "had decided to make peace on the best terms possible."19 Lincoln, while reportedly maintaining "a reticence of the strictest kind" regarding negotiations, left the impression with visitors to the White House that Blair's first trip to Richmond "was far more successful than he anticipated ... and that peace is much nearer at hand than the most confident have at any time hoped for."20 16

Lincoln, however, faced important opposition within his own party to Blair's diplomatic initiative. Radical Republicans like Charles Sumner, Benjamin F. Wade, and Thaddeus Stevens, who already were at odds with the president over reconstruction, did not trust Blair, an erstwhile Democrat, the father of the conservative Montgomery Blair, and an old friend of Jefferson Davis. Moreover, they assumed that Lincoln, in sending Blair to Richmond, planned to negotiate a compromise peace with the rebels. The fall of Fort Fisher, Radicals believed, meant that the unconditional surrender of the Confederate armies would soon occur, obviating any reason to negotiate peace terms with the rebels. Radicals feared that the president, in order to stop the fighting at this time, would grant universal amnesty to the rebels, return confiscated property, and abandon emancipation, at least in those areas where slaves had not been freed. Stevens exclaimed on the floor of the House of Representatives that if the country could vote again for president, Benjamin F. Butler, not Lincoln, would be the nation's choice. Senator Zachariah Chandler expressed the Radical view when he wrote: "Blair is an old fool for going to Richmond upon a peace

mission & the Administration is little better for permitting him to go.... Nothing but evil can come of this nonsense." Joseph Medill, editor of the Chicago Tribune, told Lincoln that the only way to end the war was to pound the rebels to submission.²¹ 17

Moderate (or conservative) Republicans, who reportedly constituted a minority on the issue, generally stood by the president. They questioned, however, whether the time was ripe for peace negotiations, particularly talks entrusted to an unofficial representative of the government such as Blair. The New York Times warned: "None but national authorities can wage war or make for peace; and the moment we enter into negotiations with the rebel Government for terms of peace, that moment we have actually and legally conceded everything for which they have been making war." Federal officials, the Times advised, should continue to deal "solely and exclusively with the rebels as individuals," not their pretended government in Richmond. A moderate Republican, while expressing "unbounded confidence in the President," wrote in the Boston Advertiser that "the loyal masses [would] revolt at the idea of treating with Jeff. Davis and his confederates in despotic government." Richmond authorities "are usurpers in their present position, having no right whatever to stand between our government and the people of the insurgent States." Furthermore, according to that writer, "negotiation will mar the close of the war, and damage the future welfare of both sections of the country.... Let our conquering generals be the only negotiators of peace."²² 18

Even within Lincoln's administration, powerful officials like Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton questioned the wisdom of the Blair mission or the policy of holding peace talks with rebels before their armies had surrendered. The Union, they reasoned, held all of the cards now, and it would be foolish to sit down at the table with the rebels and deal them a hand in the settlement. Furthermore, high-level officials believed that peace talks would hamper the recruitment of troops and weaken the fighting spirit of the forces in the field, thereby unnecessarily extending the life of the rebellion. Some cabinet members feared that peace talks could divide or "Tylerize" the Republican party and throw the president into the arms of the Democrats.²³ Much to the dismay of Stanton, Lincoln, in approving Blair's second trip to Richmond, did not consult with his cabinet. Secretary of Navy Welles, whose respect for Lincoln had grown during the war, commented in his diary regarding the peace effort: "The President, with much shrewdness and much good sense, has often strange and incomprehensible whims; takes sometimes singular and unaccountable freaks. It would hardly surprise me were he to

undertake to arrange terms of peace without consulting anyone."²⁴ 19

Blair, armed with Lincoln's message to Davis indicating his willingness to receive Confederate representatives for the purpose "of securing peace to the people of our one common country," returned to Richmond on January 20. The next day he met with the Confederate president and gave him Lincoln's message. Later, Blair dictated and Lincoln wrote the following regarding Davis's reaction to the message: "Mr. Davis read it over twice in Mr. Blair's presence, at the close of which he, Mr. B remarked that the part about 'our one common country' related to the part of Mr. D's letter about 'the two countries' to which Mr. D replied that he so understood it."²⁵ Blair told Davis that Lincoln could not compromise on the one-country principle as a condition for peace talks or "enter into any arrangement" with the Confederacy "by use of political agencies." Peace might be achieved, Blair told Davis, through a military convention between Generals Lee and Grant. A suspension of hostilities could be arranged, followed by the restoration of the Union. Disregarding Blair's reunion remark, Davis, who had long hoped for an armistice that would end the federal coercion of the South, quickly responded that he would willingly entrust cease-fire negotiations to General Lee.²⁶ 20

On the day after Blair left Richmond (January 27), Davis called erstwhile dissident and Vice President Alexander H. Stephens to his office to discuss "special and important business." After the Confederate president outlined Blair's proposal and showed him the documents, Stephens recommended that Davis agree to a peace conference with Lincoln. Such a meeting between the political leaders—not the military commanders as Blair had suggested—might secure an end to the hostilities without committing the Confederacy to the Mexican scheme or to reunion. Davis agreed, and immediately obtained the endorsement of his cabinet to the decision.²⁷ 21

Davis selected Stephens, Senator Robert M. T. Hunter, and John A. Campbell, a former associate justice of the United States Supreme Court, to meet with Lincoln or his representatives. He then asked Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin to draft instructions for the peace "commissioners." In his draft, Benjamin sought, as he later admitted, to make the instructions "as vague and general as possible, so as to get at the views and sentiments of Mr. Lincoln and test the reality" of Blair's proposals without conceding Davis's purpose in the conference, namely a cease-fire. Davis, however, objected to the ambiguity in the language of Benjamin's draft. In his final instructions to the commissioners, he directed them "to proceed to

Washington City for an informal conference with [Lincoln] upon the issues involved in the existing war, and for the purpose of securing peace to the two countries."²⁸ ²²

On January 29, the Stephens commission set out for Petersburg to seek permission to enter federal lines. In the absence of General Grant from the army, the commissioners had to wait for authorization from Washington to cross the lines. Uninformed of whether Davis had accepted his reunion requirement for negotiations, Lincoln, by telegraph, directed General Edward O. C. Ord, the ranking officer near Petersburg, to deny permission for the commissioners to enter Union lines until further instructions were received.²⁹ The president, probably at the insistence of Secretary of War Stanton, issued orders for Major Thomas T. Eckert, head of the U.S. Telegraph Office in the War Department, to go to the front and ascertain the commissioners' purpose in seeking to enter Union lines. Lincoln carefully framed his instructions to Eckert, directing him to interview the commissioners, show them his letter of January 18 regarding the "one country" condition for peace talks, and "receive their answer in writing, waiting a reasonable time for it." If they agreed to his requirement, Lincoln instructed the major to inform General Ord to permit the commissioners, "without further condition," to pass through federal lines.³⁰ ²³

Before Eckert left the capital, Grant had returned to the army and had received a message from the Confederate commissioners asking for permission to visit Washington. The Confederates stated their intention to "hold a conference with President Lincoln upon the subject of the existing war, [with] a view of ascertaining upon what terms it may be terminated, in pursuance of the course indicated by him in his letter to Mr. Blair of January 18th. 1865." In their request, dated January 30, the commissioners ignored the "two-countries" conundrum contained in their instructions from President Davis. Unaware of Lincoln's decision to send Eckert, Grant immediately permitted the commissioners to enter federal lines and travel to his headquarters at City Point, Virginia; there he would wait for instructions from Washington regarding the delegation's destination.³¹ ²⁴

A remarkable scene occurred when the Confederate commissioners passed through the lines en route to Grant's headquarters. Fighting ceased and troops on both sides came out of their trenches and bomb-proofs, cheering loudly and shouting lustily, "Peace! Peace!"³² When the Stephens delegation arrived at City Point, Grant informed Lincoln of the commissioners' presence and dispatched a copy of their January

30 request to meet with the president. Still cautious because of the controversy in Washington over negotiations, Lincoln decided anyway "to send Major Eckert forward" to make sure of the intentions of the Confederates; he told Grant to assist the major in his mission.³³ 25

At the same time, Lincoln, in anticipation of Eckert's success at City Point, prepared to dispatch Secretary of State William H. Seward to Fort Monroe, Virginia, to meet with the Confederate commissioners. The president, citing his January 18 letter to Blair as a precondition for negotiations, instructed Seward to inform the Confederate delegation that "three things are indispensable" to peace. First, "the restoration of the national authority throughout all the States"; second, "no receding, by the Executive of the United States on the Slavery question" as set forth in his last annual message to Congress "and in preceding documents"; third, "no cessation of hostilities short of an end of the war, and the disbanding of all forces hostile to the government." Lincoln directed his secretary of state to inform the Confederates that "all propositions of theirs not inconsistent with the above, will be considered and passed upon in a spirit of sincere liberality." The president told Seward not "to definitely consummate anything" but to report to him what the commissioners "may choose to say."³⁴ 26

Meanwhile, reports of impending peace talks had seriously complicated congressional consideration of the Thirteenth Amendment, the cornerstone of Lincoln and his party's emancipation policy. Democrats in the House of Representatives, whose votes were crucial for the two-thirds majority necessary to pass a resolution initiating the ratification process, hesitated in supporting it while reports circulated that negotiations with the Confederates were imminent.³⁵ Long opposed to the Republican antislavery policy, Democrats believed that an early peace could not be achieved if the North insisted on emancipation as a condition for negotiations. The vote on the resolution in the House was scheduled for the afternoon of January 31. Earlier in the day Lincoln had made his decision to send Seward to Fort Monroe, believing that enough Democrats had agreed, regardless of the prospects for peace, to vote for the amendment. While writing his instructions to Seward, the president received an urgent note from Republican congressman James M. Ashley, who was in charge of the resolution in the House. The note read: "The report is in circulation in the House that peace Commissioners are on their way or are in the city, and is being used against us. If it is true, I fear we shall lose the bill. Please authorize me to contradict it, if not true." Putting aside his letter to Seward, Lincoln, as he later

told a visitor, "took sheets of paper" and wrote Ashley the message he wanted conveyed to wavering Democrats. "So far as I know," the president disingenuously indicated in his note, "there are no peace commissioners in the city, or likely to be in it."³⁶ 27

The president's reply had the desired effect, according to Ashley, who later wrote that "the proposed amendment would have failed" if not for Lincoln's reassurance. Ashley recalled that "a number [of Democrats] who voted for it could easily have been prevailed upon to vote against it, on the ground that the passage of such a proposition" on the eve of the peace conference, "would have been offensive to the Commissioners," shattering any hope that the delicate negotiations could succeed. Along with other Republicans in Congress, Ashley marveled at Lincoln's artfulness in handling the situation, which, he said, had become "characteristic of Mr. Lincoln." The president, Ashley told William H. Herndon, "knew that the Commissioners were then on their way to Fort Monroe where he expected to meet them and afterwards did meet them. You see how admirably he answered my note for my purposes and yet how truly." Still, as a visitor to the White House reported a few days after the vote, Lincoln was amused by this "little piece of history" in which he declared, "I eased the [resolution] along—and concluded to send Seward down" to Fort Monroe. The president laughed when he recalled Ashley's fears that his Democratic "converts" in the House "would have gone off in a tangent at the last moment had they smelt Peace."³⁷ Actually, Ashley's fears might not have been misplaced. The House vote on passage of the Thirteenth Amendment resolution was 119 to 56. A switch of five amendment supporters to the opposition, presumably from the Democratic side, would have defeated it. However, if this had occurred, the amendment would have been revived and probably passed after the failure of the Hampton Roads Conference a few days later. 28

At City Point, Grant and General George G. Meade, while awaiting the arrival of Lincoln's emissary, Major Eckert, had several conversations with the Confederate commissioners. Stephens, the leader of the rebel delegation, made it clear to Meade—and probably to Grant also—that he sought a cease-fire, which might be followed by talks regarding reunion. Meade bluntly informed the Confederate vice president that "any proposal based on a suspension of hostilities would not be received" in Washington unless it was tied to reconstruction.³⁸ Grant, who had long admired Stephens, preferred to believe that the commissioners would not insist on an armistice as a condition of peace and reunion. Though he later denied in his Personal Memoirs that he discussed peace terms with the Confederates,

by the time of Major Eckert's arrival on February 1, Grant had become convinced that the Stephens delegation had accepted Lincoln's conditions for negotiations. After conversations with Eckert, the commissioners, in a note to Grant on February 1, but not to the major, reaffirmed their desire to go to Washington and confer with Lincoln, indicating that they accepted the conditions outlined in the president's January 18 letter to Blair and "without any personal compromise on any question in the letter." Eckert, however, much to Grant's dismay, concluded from his conversations with them that the Confederates did not meet Lincoln's terms for negotiations because they did not specifically repudiate the two-countries stipulation. He therefore informed the commissioners that they could not proceed further.³⁹ 29

That night Eckert notified Lincoln that his mission had failed. The disappointed president immediately prepared to recall Seward from Fort Monroe.⁴⁰ However, early the next morning (February 2) Lincoln received, through Secretary of War Stanton, an important message from General Grant that quickly changed his mind. Grant confidentially reported: "I am convinced, upon conversation with Messrs. Stevens [sic] & Hunter that their intentions are good and their desire sincere to restore peace and union." "Their letter to me," the commanding general declared, "was all that the President's instructions contemplated" for the beginning of peace talks. The commissioners unfortunately, according to Grant, had not used the same language to Eckert that they had to him; thus the major had summarily rejected their request for a conference with Lincoln. Grant regretted that "Mr Lincoln cannot have an interview" with the commissioners. "I fear now their going back without any expression from any one in authority will have a bad influence."⁴¹ 30

Spurred to action by Grant's dispatch, Lincoln, immediately and without consulting any member of his cabinet, authorized the passage of the Confederate commissioners to Fort Monroe. Further-more, he decided to join Seward for the talks. Two hours after approving the meeting, the president, along with one attendant, departed Washington on a special train for Annapolis, where he walked a half-mile to the landing and boarded the steamer Thomas Colyer for passage to Fort Monroe. (Ice on the Potomac made that river hazardous for travel.)⁴² Upon leaving, Lincoln expressed confidence that peace soon could be achieved.⁴³ Based on the rebel commissioners' February 1 note to Grant and the general's assurances, the president had some reason to believe that the Confederates would agree to his terms to end the war. 31

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News of Lincoln's departure to meet the Confederates startled Republicans in Washington, who virtually unanimously, though privately in most cases, criticized the president for undertaking the trip. "Without exception," according to Secretary of Navy Welles, "it struck [cabinet members] unfavorably that the Chief Magistrate should have gone on such a mission."⁴⁴ Many Republicans fretted that the mere meeting of the president with rebel leaders would be construed as recognition of the Confederacy. Radical Republicans especially condemned the peace effort, fearing that Lincoln, now that the antislavery amendment had passed Congress, would make major concessions, perhaps even agreeing to an armistice, in an effort to end the war immediately. Many Radicals, as well as other Republicans, believed that the wily Stephens would get the best of Lincoln and Seward in the negotiations. The New York Tribune reported that "radical War men made no concealment of their anger and their apprehensions" as Lincoln prepared to meet the rebel delegation. In both houses of Congress, Radicals threatened "hostile investigation and hostile resistances" to the president's peace effort. Even whispers of impeachment could be heard in the chambers. Adding to Radical fears was a series of editorials in the Washington Chronicle, generally believed to express Lincoln's views, advocating concessions in order to achieve peace. An attempt in the Senate, however, to launch an investigation of the peace initiative, beginning with Blair's mission, failed.⁴⁵ 32

Outside of Washington—and particularly in New England—Lincoln's decision to open peace talks with the Confederate commissioners reportedly met with almost "universal condemnation." At least one member of a prominent New England family, however, could not agree with the criticism. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., wrote his father that the president's peace initiative was "a step forward, an indispensable first step" that had to be taken, though he did not explain why. "As for dignity, I do not look to President Lincoln for that," Adams condescendingly remarked. However, "I do look to him for honesty and shrewdness and I see no evidence that in this matter he has been wanting in these respects."⁴⁶ 33

Leaving Annapolis on the Thomas Colyer during the afternoon of February 2 and avoiding patches of ice in the Chesapeake, Lincoln arrived late that night at Hampton Roads, with the boat anchoring near Fort Monroe. The Confederate commissioners had arrived earlier in the evening and had dined with Seward on board the River Queen.⁴⁷ The next morning, Lincoln and the commissioners joined Seward on the River Queen, where a room had been prepared for the conference.⁴⁸ Their greetings were friendly, which set the tone for the meeting.

Lincoln during his term in Congress had known Stephens, and, for a few minutes at the beginning of the conference, the two former Whigs reminisced about their old acquaintances.⁴⁹ 34

When the negotiators turned to the business at hand, they agreed that no written notes should be taken and that no one should enter the room except a steward, who would serve refreshments. After the conference, the participants made brief reports, the Confederates to President Davis and Lincoln to Congress. All three Confederates later wrote more extended accounts of the session, including a "Memorandum of the Conversation at the Conference in Hampton Roads" written by John A. Campbell soon after the meeting. Historians generally are not aware of this document. In 1877 Robert M. T. Hunter consulted Campbell's "Memorandum" when he wrote an article on the conference. The main source of information on the Hampton Roads Peace Conference, however, has been Stephens's lengthy account written during the late 1860s and published in his book, *A Constitutional View of the Late War between the States*. In addition, a few days after the meeting, Secretary of State Seward provided Charles Francis Adams, Sr., the American minister in London, with a brief report of the proceedings. The following account has been pieced together from these sources.⁵⁰ 35

Stephens began the discussion by asking Lincoln, "Is there no way of putting an end to the present trouble?" The president bluntly replied that it could be done only if those resisting the Union ceased their resistance. The Confederate vice president then suggested that an international diversion might be found that would calm the war passions of the participants and permit "an amicable and proper adjustment of those points of differences out of which the present lamentable collision of arms has arisen." Lincoln quickly sensed that Stephens had Blair's Mexican proposal in mind. "I suppose you refer to something that Mr. Blair has said," the president retorted. "Now it is proper to state at the beginning, that whatever [Blair] said was of his own accord, ... and he had no authority to speak for me. When he returned and brought me Mr. Davis's letter, I gave him" my January 18 message indicating that "the restoration of the Union [was] a sine qua non with me" for peace talks, "and hence my instructions that no conference was to be held except upon that basis." Lincoln declared that he "was always willing to hear propositions for peace on the conditions of this letter and on no other." He suggested that the Confederate commissioners had accepted these terms in their "application for leave to cross the lines" and meet Union authorities.⁵¹ 36

A short silence ensued, broken by Campbell, who, having already concluded that reunion was the South's only option, wanted to know how reconstruction would take place, provided, he said, that the Southern states agreed. Remarkably in view of the president's emphatic rejection of the Mexican scheme, Seward requested that the answer to Campbell's question be deferred until Stephens had an opportunity to develop fully his views, because, as he indicated, they had "a philosophical basis." All agreed to permit Stephens to elaborate on his proposal, though Lincoln must have been sorely irritated at his secretary of state for seeking to continue the fruitless discussion. Stephens launched into a discourse over the French threat to the Monroe Doctrine and to the principle of self-government on the continent and how an armistice could lead to a joint Confederate-Union effort to free Mexico. Seward prolonged the discussion by asking how, during this period of cooperation and transition, the laws and public affairs could be conducted in states where both the Union and the Confederacy claimed authority? Stephens answered that, after they had agreed upon an armistice, all difficulties could be resolved by a secret military convention between the two sides.⁵² 37

Stephens, as Radicals in Washington suspected would be the case, had cleverly maneuvered the discussion to what the Confederate delegation (except Campbell) sought at Hampton Roads—a cease-fire agreement that could lead to Southern independence. But Lincoln would have no part of it. Though admitting that he could enter into a military convention, Lincoln repeated his position that the federal government would not suspend military operations until the national authority was reestablished throughout the South.⁵³ 38

The discussion then returned to the issue of reconstruction that Campbell had earlier raised. Lincoln again tersely informed the commissioners that reunion could be achieved simply by the Southern states disbanding their armies and permitting federal authorities to resume their functions. Seward interjected that "Mr. Lincoln could not express himself more clearly or forcibly" on the issue than he had done in his annual message to Congress in December. The secretary of state related what Lincoln had said in that message, giving particular attention to his emancipation policy. Campbell, who had a probing legal mind, declared that secession and war had given rise to a number of issues that Lincoln's general policy had not addressed, matters that "required stipulation or agreement of some sort" before a harmonious Union could be restored. He specifically mentioned the disbandment of the Confederate army and its war material, which, he said, "was a delicate and difficult operation" and would take time.

Campbell also referred to the problem of private property settlement and the complications created by the passage and implementation of confiscation laws by both sides. A policy regarding titles to confiscated properties, Campbell insisted, had to be developed before the end of the conflict. He continued in this vein for a few more minutes, whereupon Seward informed him that property issues would be settled by the courts after the war.⁵⁴ Furthermore, Seward told the Confederates that Congress would be "liberal in making restitution of confiscated property, or providing indemnity, after the excitement of the times had passed off."⁵⁵ 39

This discussion led into the overarching issue of emancipation and the status of blacks in the South. Lincoln, in response to an inquiry by Stephens, indicated that opinions in Washington differed as to the "operation" of the Emancipation Proclamation, particularly after hostilities had ceased and it could no longer be considered a war measure. Some people, he said, believed that it was not operative at all; others, that it applied only to federal-occupied areas; and still others, that it applied to all of the Southern states listed in the proclamation. Seward pointed out that about two hundred thousand slaves had already been freed under the authority of the proclamation, an estimate with which Lincoln agreed. The issue of the Emancipation Proclamation's legality, Lincoln told the Confederate commissioners, would be decided by the courts after the war. Meanwhile, he reminded them, he would not retract or modify any of the proclamation.⁵⁶ 40

At this point, Seward produced a copy of the proposed Thirteenth Amendment, which had not been seen by the commissioners. He declared that if the South abandoned the struggle, the amendment probably would fail to receive the necessary approval of three-fourths of the states for ratification. Seward inferred, according to Stephens's account of the conference, that if the Southern states quickly rejoined the Union, they could assist in voting down the amendment.⁵⁷ 41

Lincoln did not respond to Seward's misleading statement regarding Northern support for the Thirteenth Amendment and the prospects for its ratification. Later, when the issue of emancipation was again raised, the president gave a lengthy explanation of his own antislavery history, beginning with his opposition to the extension of slavery into the territories and repeating his reasons for acting against the institution during the war. The president concluded his account, as Stephens later wrote, by maintaining that he had always favored emancipation but not immediate emancipation, even by the

states, because of the "many evils attending" it. The Confederate vice president also wrote that Lincoln then declared that if he were Stephens, he would go home to Georgia, "get the Governor of the State to call the Legislature together, and get them to recall all the State troops from the war; elect Senators and Members to Congress, and ratify the Constitutional Amendment prospectively, so as to take effect—say in five years." "Such a ratification," the president allegedly said, "would be valid in my opinion." Lincoln went on to say, again according to Stephens, "that whatever may have been the views of your people before the war, they must be convinced now, that Slavery is doomed. It cannot last long in any event, and the best course, it seems to me, for your public men to pursue, would be to adopt such a policy as will avoid, as far as possible, the evils of immediate emancipation."⁵⁸ 42

Although Lincoln's statement on his earlier antislavery position and his continuing concern regarding the problems of sudden emancipation, as reported by Stephens, is consistent with his actions and sentiments expressed on other occasions, the president could hardly have advised the Confederates to go home and secure prospectively the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. Such a course would have undercut his recent and vigorous efforts to secure congressional action on the antislavery amendment. Three days earlier, when the initiating resolution passed Congress, Lincoln had enthusiastically pronounced the amendment "a King's cure for all the evils" of slavery, and he clearly expected its immediate ratification by the states.⁵⁹ The fact that Campbell's account, written soon after the conference, failed to mention what would have been an important declaration by the president provides further evidence that Lincoln did not make the suggestion on the amendment that Stephens attributed to him.⁶⁰ 43

The president did indicate support for federal compensation for slaveholders, provided the Southern states voluntarily abolished the institution. Declaring that the North bore some responsibility for slavery, Lincoln expressed the belief that the Northern people would be in favor of "paying a fair indemnity for the loss to [slave] owners." He cited a figure of \$400,000,000 as a fair amount that Congress might appropriate for this purpose. Seward, however, quickly expressed his opposition to any compensation scheme. Agitated by Lincoln's pronouncement, the secretary of state left his seat and walked across the room, exclaiming that the nation had already spent enough money and suffered enough losses in order to end slavery and restore the Union. "Ah, Mr. Seward," Lincoln interjected, as Senator Hunter later recalled, "you may talk so about slavery, if you will;

but if was wrong in the South to hold slaves, it was wrong in the North to carry on the slave trade and sell them to the South, ... and to have held on to the money thus procured without compensation, if the slaves were to be taken by them again." Whether Lincoln said these exact words is problematical, but clearly, as he implied in his second inaugural address four weeks later and on other occasions, he felt the whole country's guilt for the development of the evil institution. In his inaugural address, the president declared that God had given to both North and South "this terrible war" in expiation for the sins of slavery, a comment that many fellow antislavery Northerners found deeply offensive but which Lincoln thought was a fair rendition of the institution's history.⁶¹ 44

Though not revealed at the Hampton Roads Conference, Lincoln had another reason—and perhaps a more compelling one—for advocating compensation to Southerners for the loss of their slaves. He believed that money payments for slaves would help reduce Southern hostility to reunion and avert the kind of guerrilla activity that the war had produced in Missouri and Kentucky.⁶² While personally supporting compensation for slaveholders, Lincoln reminded the Confederate commissioners that only Congress could authorize it. However, at Hampton Roads he only implied that he would seek congressional approval for compensation. 45

One of the Confederate commissioners then mentioned "the evils of immediate emancipation," specifically, as Stephens later wrote, the hardships that many blacks "who were unable to support themselves" would face in freedom. The president "fully admitted" that the sudden end of slavery might produce severe dislocations, but, instead of elaborating on the point and describing his expectations for the former slaves, he illustrated his view with a rather crude anecdote. Drawing upon his reservoir of rural Midwestern stories, Lincoln told of an Illinois farmer who informed a neighbor that he had discovered a way to save time and labor in feeding his hogs. "What is it?" asked the neighbor. "Why, it is," said the farmer, "to plant plenty of potatoes, and when they are mature, without either digging or housing them, turn the hogs in the field and let them get their own food as they want it." "But," the neighbor inquired, "how will they do when the winter comes and the ground is hard frozen?" "Well," replied the farmer, "let 'em root."⁶³ 46

This anecdote, which appears in both Stephens and Campbell's accounts and which Lincoln later repeated to his portraitist,⁶⁴ reveals a harsh side to Lincoln, perhaps caused by his desire to reassure the Confederates that he did not seek a social revolution in

the postwar South. The story also belies Lincoln's earlier expressions of sympathy for black refugees from slavery and his approval, one month after the Hampton Roads Conference, of the Freedman's Bureau bill providing temporary aid for the former slaves (and white refugees) in their adjustment to freedom. Still, Lincoln, like most Americans at the time, optimistically expected emancipation itself to be "the king's cure" for blacks in the South. Lincoln believed that a free person, now including blacks, should be able to make his way in America through his own ability and effort without the assistance of the state. Though he had admitted the difficulties of the white and black races living together in freedom (his earlier support for black colonization reflected this concern), the president envisioned a limited role for the federal government in protecting and aiding blacks after the war. Had he lived to witness the postwar threat to black freedom, Lincoln might have changed his mind regarding federal responsibility for black liberty.⁶⁵ 47

After almost four hours of talks on board the *River Queen*, Senator Hunter offered his conclusions regarding the conference. He declared that the talks left nothing for the South but "unconditional submission" to the North. Seward promptly replied that the words unconditional submission had not been used by either Lincoln or him. The secretary of state insisted that the South in returning to the Union and "yielding to the execution of the laws under the constitution of the United States, with all its guarantees and securities for personal and political rights, ... could [not] be properly considered as unconditional submission to conquerors, or as having anything humiliating in it." When Hunter expressed doubt, Lincoln informed him that he had the sole power to pardon and restore property, and he would exercise that power "with the utmost liberality." The president said that he could not determine what Congress would do regarding the readmission of Southern senators and representatives to that body, but "they ought to be [seated]."⁶⁶ It was probably during this exchange that Hunter remarked that even Charles I of England had been willing to compromise with the Parliamentary forces in arms against him, and Lincoln should do likewise with the Confederates. Lincoln laughingly responded: "I do not profess to be posted in history. On all such matters I will turn you over to Seward. All I distinctly recollect about the case of Charles I, is, that he lost his head in the end."⁶⁷ 48

The only agreement in the conference occurred as the participants rose to leave. Stephens declared that they should arrange for an exchange of prisoners of war, then suffering under deplorable conditions in both Northern and Southern camps. Lincoln

agreed, and promised to recommend to General Grant that he establish a prisoner exchange cartel with Confederate military authorities.⁶⁸ Upon Stephens' request and as a token of good will toward the commissioners, the president agreed to obtain the immediate release of the Confederate vice president's nephew from a Northern camp in exchange for a federal prisoner in Richmond.⁶⁹ 49

Lincoln, along with Seward, left immediately for Washington amid intense public speculation as to the results of the secret peace talks. Despite the commissioners' rejection of his terms to end the war, Lincoln still had hopes that the Southern states, if not the Confederate administration, would acknowledge his liberality, recognize the inevitability of defeat, and take action to disband their troops and return to the Union.⁷⁰ With this in mind and to follow up on the Hampton Roads talks, the president on February 6 presented to his cabinet a bold scheme to compensate slaveholders for their losses and, at the same time, end the war and secure Southern ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. The plan, in the form of a joint resolution to be approved by Congress, would authorize him, "in his discretion," to pay \$400,000,000 to the Southern states, including the border slave states. The money, in the form of 6 percent government bonds, would be distributed to the states in proportion to their 1860 slave population. One-half of the bonds would be given if "all resistance to the national authority shall be abandoned and cease" by April 1; the remaining one-half to be paid if the Thirteenth Amendment had become a part of the Constitution by July 1. In the proposed resolution, Lincoln also promised that when the above conditions had been met, he would declare the conflict ended, the "armies ... reduced to a basis of peace," all political offenses pardoned, property, except slaves, restored, and a policy of liberality "recommended to congress upon all points not lying within executive control."⁷¹ 50

Stunned by Lincoln's proposal, cabinet members immediately expressed their opposition to any scheme to compensate slaveholders. Secretary of Navy Welles observed after the meeting that "the earnest desire of the President to conciliate and effect peace was manifest" in the proposal, "but there may be such a thing as so overdoing as to cause a distrust or adverse feeling." Faced with the unanimous opposition of his cabinet and the virtual certainty that Congress would reject it, Lincoln abandoned the scheme and did not again raise the compensation issue.⁷² 51

Meanwhile, Congress sought a report from the president regarding the negotiations with the Confederates. In the House of

Representatives, a resolution seeking official information on the Hampton Roads Conference easily passed after Lincoln indicated that he had no objection to it. When informing the president of the House's action, Republican Speaker Schuyler Colfax reassured Lincoln that his report on the negotiations and their results "cannot fail to increase the confidence of the American people in you." In the Senate, Charles Sumner introduced a motion requesting—not demanding—that Lincoln furnish Congress with "any information in his possession concerning recent conversations or communications with certain rebels."⁷³ Sumner and his Radical colleagues already knew of Lincoln's firm stand on reunion and emancipation at the conference. This knowledge had relieved their fears of a "sell out to the rebels"; however, they wanted a full report, probably to demonstrate to an expectant nation the obduracy of the enemy leaders, and thereby rally greater support for a final, victorious thrust against the Southern armies.⁷⁴ 52

Though Lincoln had informally expressed his willingness to provide a report, debate erupted over an amendment to Sumner's resolution by Democratic Senator Willard Salisbury of Delaware. The Salisbury amendment asked Lincoln specifically what terms were offered to the rebels at Hampton Roads. Old animosities between the president's conservative or moderate supporters and Radical senators quickly flared. Ironically, in view of their earlier opposition to Lincoln's negotiations with the Confederates, Radicals, now on the defensive, denied that they had ever wanted to challenge the president's peacemaking prerogative. Still, long-time friends of Lincoln like James R. Doolittle of Wisconsin charged a Radical-Democratic plot to undermine the authority of the president, whereupon Benjamin F. Wade, an old Lincoln nemesis, leaped to the floor and hurled abuse at Doolittle. In the course of a long and bitter exchange, Wade insisted that he was not hostile to the president, despite Doolittle's accusation. "I have not criticized the president at all," the Ohio Radical announced to what must have been a skeptical Senate audience. Wade admitted, however, that he had opposed Lincoln on certain issues, and would continue to do so. After the Wade-Doolittle exchange, the Senate passed Sumner's resolution, but without the Salisbury amendment.⁷⁵ 53

Two days later, on February 10, the president provided Congress with the requested information on the Hampton Roads Conference. The report consisted mainly of messages and other documents relating to the conference, beginning with Lincoln's December 28 pass for Blair to go south. The documents included the president's January 18 letter to Blair (for Davis's eyes) outlining his peace terms, the

Confederate responses, communications with Major Eckert and General Grant, and Lincoln's January 31 letter of instructions to Seward before he left for Fort Monroe. Interspersed with the documents, Lincoln included brief comments that provided a chronological framework for the information. He concluded his report with a short statement, in a legalistic style, about the conference itself. Lincoln indicated that "the whole substance" of his instructions to Seward "was stated and insisted upon" at Hampton Roads, "and nothing was said inconsistently therewith; while, by the other party it was not said that, in any event, or on any condition, they ever would consent to re-union, and yet they equally omitted to declare that they would so consent. They seemed to desire a postponement of that question, and the adoption of some other course first" (i.e., an armistice), which "might or might not, lead to reunion," but which he could not agree. The conference, Lincoln reported, "ended without result."⁷⁶ 54

Newspaperman Noah Brooks, an eye-witness, described the reaction in the House of Representatives when the president's message was read. The reading by the clerk began in "absolute silence," Brooks observed. This continued until near the end of the message, when "the appearance of grave intentness passed away, and members smilingly exchanged glances as they began to appreciate Lincoln's sagacious plan for unmasking the craftiness ... of the rebel leaders." The president, according to Brooks, gave enough information in the report "to show the subtle wisdom with which his mission had been conducted and concluded." When the reading was completed, "an instant and irrepressible storm of applause" erupted, "begun by the members on the floor, and taken up by the people in the gallery.... The Speaker only perfunctorily attempted to quell it."⁷⁷ 55

Thaddeus Stevens, speaking for the Radicals in the House, admitted that they had been wrong about Lincoln's peace mission to Hampton Roads. "I do not believe there was a man on this side who desired to sue for peace" so close was the Union to victory in the war. "But the President thought it was best to make the effort, and he has done it in such a masterly style, upon such a firm basis and principle, that I believe [all] who thought his mission there was unwise will accord to him sagacity and patriotism, and applaud his action."⁷⁸ 56

At the other end of the political spectrum, congressional Democrats, though grudgingly in some cases, applauded Lincoln's handling of the affair. Samuel S. Cox, a Democratic leader, praised the president's "laudable efforts" at Hampton Roads and predicted

that the talks would be the first step toward peace and reunion. Remarkably, Fernando Wood, New York's most notorious Copperhead, praised Lincoln for his firmness in preserving "the integrity of the American Union"; however, he was silent regarding the president's emancipation requirement for ending the conflict. Only a few diehard peace Democrats, notably Representative James Brooks of New York, who, while commending Lincoln "for entering into a negotiation with the rebel commissioners," criticized him for rejecting the Confederate armistice proposal.⁷⁹ 57

The Republican press also hailed Lincoln's performance in the peace negotiations. The New York Times, which had opposed Blair's "meddlesome" peace mission, declared that "we have escaped" the Marylander's damaging complications "due to the practical good sense of President Lincoln." Though the old Jacksonian's "volunteer diplomacy" had committed the administration to a peace conference, "nothing could be wiser, more patriotic, or more satisfactory, than the course pursued by President Lincoln," the Times asserted. This Republican newspaper informed its readers that Lincoln "gave the strongest possible proof of his desire for peace, by meeting personally the rebel commissioners, and by giving the fullest and most liberal consideration to every proposition and suggestion they had to offer. Yet he did not permit them to believe for a single moment, or even suppose, that peace was possible at [the] cost of separation." The results of the conference, the Times indicated, had "made unmistakably clear the exact position" of the two sides in the conflict and swept away the doubts of many Northerners that the rebels were fighting for independence. The rebel "demonstration" at Hampton Roads should now "unite all men, without distinction of party, in a cordial support of the Government and a vigorous prosecution of the war."⁸⁰ 58

The New York Herald, sometime-critic of the administration, proclaimed Lincoln "one of the shrewdest diplomats of the day. The fact is abundantly established in the results of the late peace conference." At Hampton Roads, "Old Abe ... was a giant among the pigmies." Lincoln knew that "his position was impregnable," and by his actions silenced "all fallacious peace clamors" in the North, presenting "to the loyal States the single, substantial and paramount fact that we can have no peace with the so-called Confederate States short of the expulsion of Jeff. Davis from Richmond and the defeat and dispersion of Lee's army." At the same time, the Herald editor believed that Lincoln's liberality regarding the restoration of constitutional rights in the South, combined with his firm commitment to reunion, "will operate to widen the distractions, dissensions,

demoralizations and confusion existing throughout the rebellious States." The next rebel "military disaster will inevitably precipitate a Southern popular revolution in behalf of peace, on the inevitable basis of submission to the Union."⁸¹ 59

In a similar vein, the New York Tribune announced that Lincoln "has made it plain to the impartial world, as it will be made plain to the Southern masses, that [they] can have peace on the simple condition of fidelity to their country and obedience to her laws." The people of the loyal states will now "rally with enthusiastic energy to the support of their Government," and, the Tribune predicted, "we shall very soon have achieved a substantial, honorable and enduring Peace."⁸² The Washington Chronicle summed up the meaning of the Hampton Roads Conference when it declared: the effect "will be to unite the North and to divide the South."⁸³ 60

These Union newspapers and congressional leaders were correct in their declarations that the Hampton Roads Conference had ended Northern dissension over peace and created a unity behind the Lincoln government perhaps not known since the early days of the war. But the reaction in the Confederate South fell short of their expectations. There, staunch Confederates, including President Davis, angrily denounced Lincoln's rejection of peace terms (they meant an armistice agreement). They ignored Lincoln's liberal reconstruction policy and told Southerners that "the black republican" president "demands an unconditional submission to the laws and authority of the United States—the sort of submission which the slave yields to the master."⁸⁴ 61

Though desperate Confederates hurled defiance at Lincoln, creating a brief flurry of renewed Southern support for the war, the results of the Hampton Roads Conference soon served to increase the gloom and sense of futility that had settled upon the South. News of Lincoln's conditions for peace, which the diehard Confederate press and Jefferson Davis attempted to suppress or distort, widened Southern divisions over continuing the war.⁸⁵ Lincoln's liberal amnesty and reconstruction terms, which hardly constituted "unconditional surrender," as Davis charged and some historians have concluded, offered hope that, if Southerners ceased fighting, their rights, except as to slaves, would soon be restored. Realistic Southerners knew that they could not expect such mild terms if the war continued. 62

At Hampton Roads, Lincoln clearly spelled out his position on the cessation of hostilities, which the Confederate leadership had

repeatedly failed to grasp. In so doing, the president steered a magnanimous but firm course that satisfied all Northern and border-state factions except for the most extreme elements. After he approved Francis Preston Blair's trip to Richmond, though not his quixotic plan for peace, Lincoln cautiously agreed to negotiations with the Confederates, a decision that most Democrats and some prominent Republicans like Horace Greeley and the editor of the Washington Chronicle had urged, but most Republicans, including Cabinet members, opposed. Despite the Democratic desire for the restoration of "the Union as it was," its leaders acquiesced in emancipation, agreed that no armistice should be arranged until the disbandment of the Confederate armies, and approved Lincoln's mild terms for the restoration of Southern rights under the Constitution. More important, moderate or conservative Republicans, who had been the president's main support during the war, praised his firmness, while remaining conciliatory, on the basic Northern objectives in the war—i.e., Union and emancipation. Radical Republicans, though opposing the president's liberal reconstruction policy that would pardon rebels, leave freed blacks in the hands of southern whites, and return confiscated property, admired Lincoln's masterful management of the peace issue. They were especially pleased that the president had put the odium of continuing the conflict squarely upon the rebels, though this had not been his objective in meeting with the commissioners. Lincoln had sincerely hoped that the Hampton Roads meeting would lead immediately to a cessation of hostilities and reunion under his terms. Still, Lincoln in his peacemaking effort had demonstrated the recalcitrance of the Confederate leadership in accepting minimum Union terms, thereby rallying greater support for the war in the North and ending the debate over abolition. Like other Republicans, Radicals were greatly relieved that the president made no concessions to the rebels at Hampton Roads. Thus, Lincoln's handling of the Hampton Roads Peace Conference, including events leading to it, brought him the kind of broad support and even acclaim in the North that had eluded him for most of the war. 63

An observation by General Ethan Allen Hitchcock, reported by Elizabeth Peabody, a Massachusetts friend, soon after the Hampton Roads Conference, is revealing of the stature that Lincoln had attained among many people as the war entered its final weeks. According to Peabody, General Hitchcock, a senior adviser in the War Department, declared that Lincoln's "abilities are very great—& his integrity & love of country most profound." The general asserted that "we have had no greater President—& depend upon it, he says, bye and bye this will be seen & acknowledged."⁸⁶ No more prescient judgment on Lincoln could have been made by a Civil War contemporary.

Notes

1. Two survey accounts of the conference can be found in James G. Randall and Richard N. Current, *Lincoln the President: Last Full Measure* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1955), 326-40, and Edward Kirkland, *The Peacemakers of 1864* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), chap. 5. Kirkland's study focuses mainly on the Confederate role in the negotiations.
2. Phillip S. Paludan, *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1994).
3. James M. McPherson, "Lincoln and the Strategy of Unconditional Surrender," in Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *Lincoln, the War President: The Gettysburg Lectures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 60-61; John Y. Simon, "Grant, Lincoln, and Unconditional Surrender," in Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *Lincoln's Generals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 191-92.
4. David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 557, 559-60.
5. Even Abraham Lincoln sensed that his victory was due more to the Northern opposition to the defeatist Democratic platform than to his own popularity. As Hugh McCulloch remembered, the president told him that if the Democrats, "instead of resolving that the war was a failure and denounced me for not more vigorously prosecuting it, I should not have been reelected." Hugh McCulloch, *Men and Measures of Half a Century* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888), 162.
6. Greeley to Francis P. Blair, Sr., Dec. 15, 1864, reel 17, Blair Family Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (microfilm); Randall and Current, *Lincoln the President*, 322-23.
7. Annual Message to Congress, Dec. 6, 1864, Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953-1955), 8:151.
8. Entry for Nov. 25, 1864, *Diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of Navy under Lincoln and Johnson*, with an introduction by John T. Morse, Jr., 3 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1911), 2:179.
9. Annual Message to Congress, Dec. 6, 1864, *Collected Works*, 8:151-

52.

10. *New York Herald*, Jan. 5, 1865.

11. Pass for Blair, Dec. 28, 1864, *Collected Works*, 8:188-89n; John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, 10 vols. (New York: Century, 1980), 10:96.

12. Both of Blair's letters have been copied in full in Nicolay and Hay, *Lincoln*, 10:94-95.

13. Entry for Jan. 5, 1865, *Welles Diary*, 2:221; *New York Tribune*, Jan. 17, 1865.

14. Memorandum of interview with Jefferson Davis [Jan. 12, 1865], *Abraham Lincoln Papers*, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (microfilm), (hereafter cited as *Lincoln Papers*).

15. Davis to Blair, Jan. 12, 1865, *Collected Works*, 8:275. The italics are mine.

16. Abraham Lincoln to the House of Representatives, Feb. 10, 1865, *ibid.*, 8:275. Evidence of Lincoln's satisfaction with Blair's report can be found in a Blair letter to Horace Greeley immediately after his interview with the president. William Ernest Smith, *The Francis Preston Blair Family in Politics*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 2:311, and in the *New York Herald*, Jan. 23, 1865.

17. Lincoln to Blair, Jan. 18, 1865, *Collected Works*, 8:220-21. The italics are mine.

18. As quoted in Smith, *The Blair Family in Politics*, 2:309.

19. *New York Herald*, Jan. 23, 1865.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*; Noah Brooks, *Washington in Lincoln's Time* (New York: Rinehart, 1958), 202-3; Chandler to his wife, Jan. 25, 1865, *Zachariah Chandler Papers*, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (microfilm); Medill to Lincoln, Jan. 15, 1865, *Lincoln Papers*.

22. *New York Times*, Jan. 10, 1865; Brooks, *Washington in Lincoln's Times*, 202; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, Jan. 25, 1865.

23. "Tylerize" refers to President John Tyler's conflict with Henry Clay over Whig party policy during the early 1840s, resulting in Tyler dividing the party. Tyler ultimately cast his lot with the Democrats.
24. New York Tribune, Feb. 3, 1865; entries for Jan. 30 (quotation), Feb. 2, 1865, Welles Diary, 2:231-32, 235. Already complaints were heard that the recruitment of troops had been hurt by reports of Blair's peace activities. Chicago Tribune, Feb. 2, 1865.
25. This notation, dated Jan. 28, 1865, is on the back of Lincoln's copy of his Jan. 18 letter. Collected Works, 8:276.
26. Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, 2 vols. (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1958), 2:616-17; Alexander H. Stephens, *A Constitutional View of the Late War between the States*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: National Publishing, 1870), 2:591.
27. Stephens, *Constitutional View of the War*, 592-94.
28. Benjamin to Davis, May 17, 1877, Dunbar Rowland, ed., *Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist: His Letters, Papers and Speeches*, 10 vols. (Jackson: Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1923), 7:540-41; Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, 617.
29. Stephens, *Constitutional View of the War*, 595; General O. B. Wilcox to General John G. Parke, Jan. 28, 1865; Stanton to Ord, Jan. 29, 1865, both in *Collected Works*, 8:276-77. Though Stanton sent the latter message to Ord, it was dictated by Lincoln.
30. Lincoln to Eckert, Jan. 30, 1865, *Collected Works*, 8:277.
31. Alexander H. Stephens, John A. Campbell, and Robert M. T. Hunter to U. S. Grant, Jan. 30, 1865, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 73 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Ser. 1, Vol. 46, Pt. 2, 297.
32. Ord to Stanton, Jan. 31, 1865, *ibid.*, 317; George G. Meade to his wife, Feb. 1, 1865, *George Meade, The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade, Major-General United States Army*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), 2:260; Robert M. T. Hunter, "The Peace Commission of 1865," *Southern Historical Society Papers* 3 (1877): 170-71.

33. Grant to Lincoln, Jan. 31, 1865, *Collected Works*, 8:278. Lest the army believe that peace was imminent and thus no need existed for further fighting, Lincoln sent a telegram to Grant instructing him to "let nothing which is transpiring, change, hinder, or delay your Military movements." Lincoln to Grant, Feb. 1, 1865, *ibid.*, 280.
34. Lincoln to Seward, Jan. 31, 1865, *ibid.*, 250-51.
35. *Congressional Globe*, 38th Cong., 2d Sess. (Jan. 31, 1865), 527-28.
36. Elizabeth Peabody to Horace Mann, Jr., Feb. 1865, in Arlin Turner, ed., "Elizabeth Peabody Visits Lincoln, February 1865," *New England Quarterly* 48 (March 1975): 119-20; Ashley to Abraham Lincoln, Jan. 31, 1865; Lincoln to Ashley, Jan. 31, 1865, both in *Collected Works*, 8:248 and n.
37. Ashley to Herndon, Nov. 23, 1866, group 4, reel 8, Herndon-Weik Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (microfilm); Elizabeth Peabody to Horace Mann, Jr., Feb. 1865, Turner, ed., "Elizabeth Peabody Visits Lincoln," 119-20.
38. George G. Meade to his wife, Feb. 1, 1865, Meade, *The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade*, 2:258-59; Stephens, *Constitutional View of the War*, 595-98.
39. Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, 2 vols. (New York: C. L. Webster, 1885-1886), 2:287-88; Stephens, *Constitutional View of the War*, 597-98; Alexander H. Stephens, Robert M. T. Hunter, and John A. Campbell to Grant, Feb. 1, 1865; Eckert to Lincoln, Feb. 1, 1865, both in *Collected Works*, 8:281.
40. Lincoln to the House of Representatives, Feb. 10, 1865, *Collected Works*, 8:281.
41. Grant to Stanton, Feb. 1, 1865, *ibid.*, 282. This message was sent late on Feb. 1, but it was not received in Washington until 4:35 A.M., on Feb. 2.
42. Lincoln to Grant, Feb. 2, 1865, *ibid.*; *New York Herald*, Feb. 3, 1865; *New York Tribune*, Feb. 3, 1865.
43. Special Washington correspondent of the *New York Herald*, Feb. 4, 1865.

44. Entry for Feb. 2, 1865, Welles Diary, 2:235; New York Tribune, Feb. 3, 1865.
45. New York Herald, Feb. 3, 1865; New York Tribune, Feb. 3, 1865; Brooks, Washington in Lincoln's Time, 202-3.
46. Adams, Jr., to Charles Francis Adams, Sr., Feb. 7, 1865, Worthington C. Ford, ed., A Cycle of Adams Letters, 1861-1865, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1920), 2:253.
47. A correspondent of the New York Herald, reportedly by coincidence, was on board the Thomas Colyer, and he dispatched an account of the trip to and from Hampton Roads. New York Herald, Feb. 5, 1865.
48. New York Tribune, Feb. 6, 1865; New York Herald, Feb. 3-5, 1865.
49. Stephens, Constitutional View of the War, 599.
50. "Memorandum of the Conversation at the Conference in Hampton Roads," in John A. Campbell, Reminiscences and Documents Relating to the Civil War during the Year 1865 (Baltimore: John Murphy, 1877), 11-17; Stephens, Constitutional View of the War, 598-619; Seward to Adams, Feb. 7, 1865, War of the Rebellion, Ser. 1, Vol. 46, Pt. 2, 471-73.
51. Stephens, Constitutional View of the War, 599-601.
52. Ibid., 601-8; Campbell, "Memorandum," 11-12.
53. Campbell, "Memorandum," 13; Seward to Adams, Feb. 7, 1865, War of the Rebellion, Ser. 1, Vol. 46, Pt. 2, 472.
54. Stephens, Constitutional View of the War, 609-10; Campbell, "Memorandum," 15-16.
55. Stephens, Constitutional View of the War, 610.
56. Ibid., 610-11; Campbell, "Memorandum," 14.
57. Campbell, "Memorandum," 14; Stephens, Constitutional View of the War, 611-12.
58. Stephens, Constitutional View of the War, 613-14.

59. Response to Serenade, Feb. 1, 1865, Collected Works, 8:254.
60. At least one historian accepts the veracity of Stephens's account regarding the five-year prospective ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment by the South. Ludwell H. Johnson, "Lincoln's Solution to the Problems of Peace Terms, 1864-1865," *Journal of Southern History* 34 (November 1968): 581-82. David Donald in his biography of Lincoln repeats Stephens's account without critical comment on its accuracy. Donald, *Lincoln*, 558.
61. Hunter, "The Peace Commission of 1865," 174; Campbell, "Memorandum," 17. Stephens reported Lincoln as saying that the people of the North were as responsible for slavery as the people of the South. Stephens, *Constitutional View of the War*, 617. For an earlier remark by Lincoln regarding God's punishment "for complicity in that wrong [slavery]," see Abraham Lincoln to Albert G. Hodges, Apr. 4, 1864, *Collected Works*, 7:282.
62. William C. Harris, *With Charity for All: Lincoln and the Restoration of the Union* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 240.
63. The quotes are from Stephens, *Constitutional View of the War*, 615 and n. See also Campbell, "Memorandum," 14.
64. Francis B. Carpenter, *Six Months in the White House with Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Hurd & Houghton, 1866), 210-11. Lincoln retold the story in reference to the Hampton Roads Conference.
65. As most students of the Civil War know, Lincoln on two occasions indicated his preference for voting rights for "the very intelligent blacks" and for former soldiers of the race. But this was a recommendation only to the Union government of Louisiana, where a relatively large and well-educated African-American community existed. Lincoln showed no disposition to impose black political rights on restored Southern states. Harris, *With Charity for All*, chap. 11.
66. Hunter, "The Peace Conference of 1865," 176; Stephens, *Constitutional View of the War*, 611, 616-17 (quotation).
67. Hunter, "The Peace Conference of 1865," 176; Stephens, *Constitutional View of the War*, 613; Campbell, "Memorandum," 15.
68. Stephens, *Constitutional View of the War*, 618-19. Returning to

City Point, Stephens told Grant what Lincoln had said about a prisoner-of-war exchange, and Grant indicated his intention to set up a cartel with Confederate officials. *Ibid.*, 618.

69. Not only did Lincoln secure the release of Stephens's nephew, the young man visited the White House before going south. Lincoln to Stephens, *Collected Works*, 8:287 and n.

70. Secretary of Navy Welles, based on his conversation with Lincoln and Seward upon their return to Washington, concluded that, though no settlement had been reached at Hampton Roads, "the discussion [there] will be likely to attend to peace." Entry for Feb. 4, 1865, *Welles Diary*, 2:235-36. Intense interest in the results of the conference also gripped the Eastern financial markets. David H. Bates, *Lincoln and the Telegraph Office* (New York: Century, 1907), 339-40.

71. Lincoln to the Senate and House of Representatives [Feb. 5, 1865], *Collected Works*, 8:260-61.

72. Francis Fessenden, *Life of William Pitt Fessenden*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1907), 2:8; entry for Feb. 6, 1865, *Welles Diary*, 2:237; [endorsement], Feb. 5, 1865, *Collected Works*, 8:261.

73. Colfax to Lincoln, Feb. 8, 1865, *Lincoln Papers*; *Congressional Globe*, 38th Cong., 2d Sess. (Feb. 8 [misdated Feb. 10], 1865), 657.

74. *New York Times*, Feb. 7, 1865.

75. *Congressional Globe*, 38th Cong., 2d Sess. (February 8, 1865), 657-60.

76. Lincoln to the House of Representatives, Feb. 10, 1865, *Collected Works*, 8:274-85. The quotation appears on pages 284-85. The *New York Tribune*, Feb. 11, 1865, wished that Lincoln had provided more information on the talks; it would have had a greater political effect, the newspaper said.

77. Brooks, *Washington in Lincoln's Times*, 206-7.

78. *Congressional Globe*, 38th Cong., 2d Sess. (Feb. 10, 1865), 733.

79. *Ibid.*, 730-31, 733. 738 (Cox quotation); Brooks, *Washington in Lincoln's Time*, 204-5.

80. New York Times, Feb. 7, 1865. The Chicago Tribune, Feb. 14, 1865, simply praised the president for his deflection of the rebels's "cunning proposition for a cease-fire."

81. New York Herald, Feb. 8, 1865.

82. New York Tribune, Feb. 7, 1865.

83. As reported in *ibid.*

84. The New York Herald, Feb. 10, 1865, printed defiant commentaries from the Richmond press on the Hampton Roads Conference, including the above quotation from the Richmond Whig.

85. Entries for Feb. 5 and 18, 1865, in Edward Younger, ed., *Inside the Confederate Government: The Diary of Robert Garlick Hill Kean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 198, 201-2; Kemp Battle to Pattie Battle, Feb. 15, 1865, *Battle Family Papers*, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Samuel F. Phillips to R. L. Patterson, Mar. 1, 1865, Rufus L. Patterson Papers, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh. Of course, Southern Unionists, constituting an important minority in some areas of the South, applauded Lincoln's stand at Hampton Roads. See, for example, the Nashville Daily Press, Feb. 7, 1865.

86. Peabody to Mann, Feb. 1865, Turner, ed., "Elizabeth Peabody Visits Lincoln," 124.

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