



LINCOLN'S UNPOPULAR WAR—PART 1

April 12, 2011, marks the 150th anniversary of the start of the War Between the States. It was a war Abraham Lincoln pursued not to free slaves but to enslave free men. Lincoln's overriding concern was to keep the Southern states as taxpaying provinces of the federal government.

Until the War Between the States, the independent states had the right to leave the union if they wanted to -- they were sovereign entities within a federal structure. The states were declared to be "free and independent states" by the 1776 Declaration of Independence and recognized as such by Great Britain in the 1783 Treaty of Paris. Neither the 1777 Articles of Confederation that formed the original union nor the 1789 U.S. Constitution prohibited secession, and the Tenth Amendment to the Constitution made the right of secession all but explicit. The tenth amendment states: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people." Further, several states (New York, Rhode Island, and Virginia) explicitly reserved the right of secession as a condition of their ratification of the Constitution. The right of secession was also asserted at the 1814-15 Hartford Convention where the states of New England considered and ultimately decided against secession and asserted again in 1828 when South Carolina threatened to secede over the "Tariff of Abominations" (a protective tariff designed to protect politically connected Northern manufacturers).

But as far as most Northern newspapers were concerned, if the Southern states wanted to leave the union, they should be allowed to do so. The Albany Atlas and Argus stated, "We sympathize with and justify the South because their rights have been invaded to the extreme. If they wish to secede, we wish them God-Speed." (Nov. 1, 1860) The Detroit Free Press said that "An attempt to subjugate the seceded States, even if successful, could produce nothing but evil -- evil unmitigated in character and appalling in extent." (Feb. 19, 1861) The Chicago Daily Times declared, "Like it or not, the cotton states will secede, and Southerners will regain their sense of independence and honor." (Nov. 21, 1860) The Concord Democratic Standard appealed for "concession of the just rights of our Southern brethren." (Nov. 24, 1860) and the New York Times put it bluntly: "There is growing sentiment throughout the North in favor of letting the Gulf States go." (Mar. 21, 1861)

There were those in the North who disagreed, but it is doubtful Lincoln had the votes in Congress for a declaration of war against the Confederacy. Perhaps this is why he never sought one. Instead, he acted unilaterally first by provoking the Confederacy into firing on federal tax collectors at Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, and then using the incident (in which no one was killed or even injured) as an excuse to launch a full scale invasion.