



LINCOLN'S UNPOPULAR WAR—PART 2

April 12, 2011, marks the 150th anniversary of the start of the War Between the States. Prior to the fall of Fort Sumter, few Americans North or South wanted war. On February 18, 1861, Confederate President Jefferson Davis called for peace: “There can be but little rivalry between ours and any manufacturing or navigating community, such as the Northeastern States of the American Union. It must follow, therefore, that a mutual interest would invite good will and kind offices.” On March 4, 1861, Lincoln responded with threats: “The power confided to me will be used to hold, occupy, and possess the property and places belonging to the Government and to collect the duties and imposts (emphasis added); but beyond what may be necessary for these objects, there will be no invasion, no using of force against or among the people anywhere.” In other words, “Surrender and submit to my taxes and no one gets hurt.”

Though Northern support for Lincoln’s war ebbed and flowed with the fortunes of battle, “copperhead” opposition in the North remained strong throughout the conflict. Lincoln had to resort to increasingly harsh and unconstitutional repression to prevent resistance from spreading. Anti-draft riots broke out in New York City and violent resistance to the draft spread throughout the Midwest. So strong was hatred of Lincoln’s War that there was even talk of secession in the Midwestern states of Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa. With the fall of Atlanta and Sherman’s brutal march to Savannah, however, it became increasingly obvious that the Confederacy and the hope for successful secession were finished. The opposition lost heart and faded.

More than a war was lost. In a letter written after the war to Robert E. Lee, the great British statesman Lord Acton wrote:

I saw in State Rights the only availing check upon the absolutism of the sovereign will, and secession filled me with hope, not as the destruction but as the redemption of Democracy. The institutions of your Republic have not exercised on the old world the salutary and liberating influence which ought to have belonged to them, by reason of those defects and abuses of principle which the Confederate Constitution was expressly and wisely calculated to remedy. I believed that the example of that great Reform would have blessed all the races of mankind by establishing true freedom purged of the native dangers and disorders of Republics. Therefore I deemed that you were fighting the battles of our liberty, our progress, and our civilization; and I mourn for the stake which was lost at Richmond more deeply than I rejoice over that which was saved at Waterloo.

For eighty years prior to 1860, the threat of secession was a check on the growth of the federal monster. Given the dire consequences of union victory, one has to wonder if it was not in reality a defeat for all of us.