

“IT IS YET TO BE HOPED”: NORTH CAROLINA UNIONISTS, LINCOLN’S PROCLAMATION AND HOPE’S

LAST STAND

There is a story that is often told about North Carolina’s Civil War governor, Zebulon Baird Vance. Though he would serve in both the Confederate army and as governor, Vance was a staunch unionist before the war. According to legend, his conversion from unionist to Confederate occurred dramatically in the middle of a pro-union speech. He was speaking to a large and excitable crowd in April 1861, “pleading for peace and the Union of our fathers,” when a messenger burst suddenly into the hall. The intruder announced that fighting had broken out between Confederate and American forces at Fort Sumter in South Carolina and that, in response to the commencement of hostilities, President Abraham Lincoln had issued a proclamation calling out 75,000 troops to suppress the rebellion in the South. Vance’s arm was frozen dramatically in the air as the herald spoke—his hand still extended toward the heavens in supplication for union. “When my hand came down from that impassioned gesticulation,” Vance later recalled, “it fell slowly and sadly by the side of a Secessionist.” With no hesitation—his transformation thus instantaneous and complete—Vance immediately “called upon the assembled multitude to volunteer, not to fight against but for” the Confederacy.¹

As recollections often do, Vance’s muddle the chronology of the unfolding secession crisis a bit. The crisis began with the secession of South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas and the organization of the Confederate States of America between December 1860 and February 1861. North Carolina, as Vance’s story indicates, remained faithful to the union during the ensuing months of uncertainty. On April 12,

¹ Zebulon Vance, “The Political and Social South During the War,” December 8, 1886, *Life of Zebulon B. Vance*, Clement Dowd, ed. (Charlotte: Observer Printing and Publishing House, 1897), 441.

however, South Carolina troops fired on the federal garrison at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, inaugurating—it would soon become clear—the Civil War. Telegraphic reports of the battle began to arrive in North Carolina that same day. Three days later, on April 15, Lincoln issued his proclamation calling for 75,000 troops, though copies did not begin circulating in state newspapers until days afterward. Even in the most remote parts of North Carolina, therefore, reports of these two events would likely not have arrived at the same time. Still, Vance’s account of his ‘conversion’ following Lincoln’s call for troops nicely illustrates the change that the proclamation—if not the firing on Fort Sumter—wrought on the Upper South’s conditional unionists. Historians generally agree that Lincoln’s April 15 proclamation transformed unionist majorities in states like North Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee into minorities, catapulting those states toward secession. Daniel Crofts explains that the “Unionist advantage [in North Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee] collapsed as soon as the proclamation became known.” Nelson D. Lankford similarly concludes: “News of the proclamation scythed through unionist feeling in the upper South and cut it off at the ground. Overnight, public opinion shifted radically. When it came down to it, having to choose between fellow white Southerners and the North was no choice at all.”²

By late April, North Carolina’s choice was certainly clear. Governor John Ellis (who, incidentally, was a long-time secessionist) had swiftly replied to Lincoln: “You can get no troops from North Carolina.” The governor instead immediately wired Jefferson Davis and promised North Carolina’s fighting men to the Confederacy. Ellis also called a special session of the legislature and ordered North Carolina militiamen to seize all federal property in the state. All of

² Daniel W. Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 323; Nelson D. Lankford, *Cry Havoc!: The Crooked Road to the Civil War, 1861* (New York: Viking Publishing, 2007), 107. See also William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists Triumphant* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 527.

North Carolina's unionist newspapers, meanwhile, had joined their secessionist counterparts in calling for immediate separation by the end of the month. With one voice they proclaimed that the "proclamation of Mr. Lincoln has left to the people of the border states no alternative but resistance or unconditional submission." It was a "rank usurpation" tantamount to a "proclamation of war." Like Zebulon Vance would later recall of his conversion, newspapers reported in late April that "since the receipt of President Lincoln's proclamation...[we] have been in a perfect ferment.—Resistance to the last man is the universal sentiment."³

In unionist newspapers' earliest reports of Lincoln's proclamation, however, a deep ambivalence and uncertainty persisted. Though these newspapers would shortly declare that Lincoln had "'crossed the Rubicon' when he called for troops to subdue the Confederate States," unionist editors' initial reactions to the proclamation were more subdued. Some expressed uncertainty about its meaning. Others reiterated their commitment to the union and voiced tentative hopes that peace could be maintained. Still others explicitly warned their readers that the proclamation did not mean war. But unlike their secessionist counterparts—who unequivocally claimed their own relentless indictments of the Lincoln administration vindicated—and despite their subsequent assertions to the contrary, unionist editors did not immediately know how to interpret Lincoln's proclamation.⁴

Though this uncertainty and optimism would be erased within days, these early reports and editorials offer a glimpse into the process by which many conditional unionists became secessionists. They suggest that the meaning these unionist editors—and perhaps unionists more

³ John Willis Ellis, "Telegram: Raleigh NC Apr. 1861," in John Willis Ellis, *The Papers of John Willis Ellis*, Noble J. Tolbert, ed., (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1964), II: 612; William S. Powell, *North Carolina through Four Centuries*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 347-8; Milton Ready, *The Tar Heel State: A History of North Carolina*, (Columbus: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 214; *North Carolina Standard* (Raleigh), April 25, 1861; *The People's Press* (Winston Salem), April 25, 1861; *Carolina Watchman* (Sailsbury), April 23, 1861.

⁴ *North Carolina Standard*, April 25, 1861.

broadly—later ascribed to the proclamation was not derived from its text alone. A careful examination of these newspapers in the crucial days following Lincoln’s call for 75,000 troops suggests that unionists’ understanding of the proclamation was very much colored by the North’s response to it. Their early hopefulness was eclipsed as reports of the overwhelming and enthusiastic Northern response to Lincoln’s call for troops rolled in. These unionist editors came to understand the April 15 decree as a ‘proclamation of war’ at least in part because of the mobilization that it inspired. Any hopes that moderate Northerners would check the power of the president or that the president did not mean to prosecute a war against the seceded states were quickly dashed, and views of Lincoln and his proclamation were subsequently refracted through this Northern response.

Newspaper coverage in the days immediately following Lincoln’s proclamation thus offers insight into the intricacies of the unfolding secession crisis in the Upper South. Unionist editors’ early responses reinforce the contingencies that complicated each step toward secession in states like North Carolina. They also illustrate the centrality of attempts to assess Northern public opinion in each of those steps. For these union men, hopes for the viability of the union lay in both Lincoln and the Northern public. Perhaps Lincoln was not the radical that secessionists claimed he was. Perhaps his overtures of non-interference were genuine. Or, if he was a radical, perhaps his views did not reflect those of the North more broadly, and the bonds of mutual respect and affection remained strong. Perhaps moderate Northerners would block any attempts by the president to carry out extremist measures. The profound sense of betrayal that unionists would feel by late April—“to the Union party, in particular,” one newspaper reported

on April 23, “it is *treachery* and *fraud*”—reflected the depth of unionists’ commitment and hope, even after the firing on Fort Sumter.⁵

This examination of the secession crisis in North Carolina will proceed in four parts. The first section will examine the role of North Carolina newspapers on the eve of the Civil War. By early 1861, newspapers were operating as part of the larger unionist and secessionist political machines at work in the state. Given their regular publication, their constant interaction with one another and the dearth of traditional political contests from late February to mid-May, North Carolina newspapers offer a unique glimpse into the changes in public opinion in the days surrounding Lincoln’s proclamation. The second section tracks unionist and secessionist newspapers as word of the attack on Fort Sumter reached the state. A close examination shows that while secessionists celebrated the attack as a vindication of their position, unionists received news of the attack with decided ambivalence. Unionist editors remained wary of both Northern and Southern extremism and encouraged their readers to exercise caution and forbearance. The third section, at the heart of the paper, continues chronologically to examine early reactions to Lincoln’s April 15 call for troops. For secessionists, the proclamation merely reiterated lessons from Sumter. For unionists, however, the meaning of the proclamation was less clear. For a brief moment, not lasting more than a single issue in most newspapers, unionists remained hopeful that sectional differences could be resolved—even after news of the proclamation and attack on Fort Sumter reached them. This hope was grounded in an expectation that Northern and Southern moderates could, as they had so many times before, reach a settlement that would bring the nation back from the brink of war. The fourth section details how Northern mobilization dispelled unionists of this notion and shattered their hopes for the union. This

⁵ *Carolina Watchman*, April 23, 1861.

perceived betrayal by Northerners transformed the way that unionists understood Lincoln's proclamation, and the proclamation was retroactively identified as the moment when the terms of their commitment to the union had been violated.

DISUNIONISTS AND SUMBISSIONISTS: NORTH CAROLINA NEWSPAPERS ON THE EVE OF WAR

Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860 signaled the beginning of a tumultuous political realignment in the state of North Carolina. Ominous rumblings from Democratic leaders and editors before the election became open calls for secession by mid-November. Democratic governor John Ellis announced to the North Carolina General assembly on November 20 that "there exists but little ground upon which to rest a hope that our rights will be secured to us by the general government" and called for a state convention to consider secession. Democratic vehicles like the *Winston Sentinel*, *Warrenton News* and *Raleigh Register* who dragged their feet after the election jumped aboard the secessionist bandwagon following the secession of the Deep South. By early 1861, most Democratic leaders were agitating for immediate separation.⁶

Unlike in the Deep South where Democrats constituted the only substantial political power, the vestiges of the Whig party—operating under the banner of the Opposition Party—remained strong in North Carolina. These former Whigs quickly arrayed themselves against secessionist Democrats, kicking their own party and media machines into high gear for the union. As the question of union moved to the forefront of North Carolina politics, however, it began to transcend the boundaries of political party. In late 1860 and early 1861, North Carolina

⁶ Here and elsewhere, I use the term 'secessionist' as a synonym for 'separationist.' Though not all separationists believed in the legal right of secession—some believed separation could only be justified as revolution—the legal question of secession was, at best, tangential to antebellum discussions that focused on the *prudence* of staying in or withdrawing from the union. The legal question of secession will therefore not be my focus here, and I do not draw distinctions between those unionists and separationists who believed in a legal right of secession and those who did not. I have foregone the more accurate term 'separationist' in favor of the more familiar 'secessionist' because it was the most common contemporary label for those who advocated separation.

John Willis Ellis Papers, 513; Thomas E. Jeffrey, *State Parties and National Politics: North Carolina, 1815-1861*, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press: 1989), 302-305.

politics were reorganized along unionist and secessionist lines. “We know no party...[in] this great struggle for the Union,” one editor concluded in February; another echoed: “old party lines are forgotten, as if they never existed.” Ruptures appeared in the Democratic ranks, and the slight majority that Democrats had commanded in the state the previous fall disappeared. A number of prominent Democrats like *North Carolina Standard* editor William Woods Holden jumped ship and joined the union cause.⁷

Even as unionists and secessionists faced off against one another, however, they shared many of the same goals and assumptions. Both sides professed a strong commitment to slavery, and their dispute centered on how best, and not whether, to protect it. Secessionists claimed that slavery was no longer safe in the union. The election of Abraham Lincoln—a “Northern Sectional abolition President”—without the support of a single Southern state signaled that South no longer possessed the political power to protect itself or its institutions. This vulnerability was only exacerbated with the secession of the Deep South. To late converts, the secession of the Deep South had settled the question of union or disunion; the union had been compromised, and North Carolina’s choice was now between the North or the South. The *State Journal* explained: “while we clung with tenacity to [the union] and desired its perpetuation, *in its original pristine purity, seven* sovereign and independent States have withdrawn from it and have now a well-organized and distinct Government.” To these men, there was no question which section the state should ally itself with.⁸

Unionists, meanwhile, contended that slavery was safer in the union than without it. “The disunionists,” one North Carolina unionist thundered, “instead of standing upon the Constitution, and demanding our rights and such guarantees as will insure their full recognition,

⁷ *North Carolina Standard*, February 13 1861; *Fayetteville Observer*, February 25, 1861; Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, 260-7; Jeffrey, *State Parties and National Politics*, 310-11.

⁸ *Wilmington Journal*, November 13, 1860; *Weekly State Journal*, April 3, 1861.

propose that because our rights have hitherto been imperfectly observed, we shall surrender to our enemies the very charter by which they are secured, as well as the army, the navy, and all the physical and moral power by which they are enforced.” Unionists thus maintained a determined faith that republican government and the constitution remained the most powerful tools with which to protect slavery, and they sustained a qualified optimism that these safeguards would continue to do so. Still, for a majority of unionists, devotion to the union was conditional. Most made clear that any attempts to interfere with slavery—or, after the secession of the Lower South, to coerce the seceded states to return to the union—would be met with resistance. Until and unless that happened, however, unionists were determined to “exhaust every honorable effort” to save the union.⁹

Implicit in these views about the viability of slavery in the union were divergent assumptions about the nature of public opinion in the North. For many secessionists, the election of Lincoln represented the ascent of a radical abolitionist majority in the North. “This decision is

⁹ A minority of North Carolina unionists were what historians have often called “unconditional unionists.” I have not made the distinction here between conditional and unconditional unionists because, at least in antebellum discourse, it is very difficult to tell the difference between the two. Almost all unionists qualified their attachment to the union during antebellum debate, and the conditional/unconditional distinction is one that is often applied retroactively to distinguish those who advocated secession following the battle at Fort Sumter and Lincoln’s proclamation from those who did not. Some who professed an attachment to the union at all costs determined that there was no more union to be attached to by the end of April 1861, and others who had qualified their attachment to the union as conditional remained loyal after the start of the war and Lincoln’s proclamation. Even as a distinction after Lincoln’s proclamation, therefore, the term “unconditional” unionist is somewhat problematic because those who continued to oppose separation often did so because they continued to believe that North Carolina’s interests were better served in the union than outside of it. This is an important distinction because this brand of unionism—which persisted beyond Lincoln’s proclamation—was often a continuation of antebellum unionism rather than a different version of it. North Carolina unionists made different value judgments about the utility of remaining faithful to the union following Lincoln’s proclamation, but that did not necessarily represent a fundamental—or, more relevant for my purposes, discernable—difference in their philosophies *before* the proclamation. This distinction is even less useful in an examination of public opinion through North Carolina newspapers because *all* of the state’s unionist newspapers—despite their many differences and various reasons for remaining faithful—advocated separation following Lincoln’s proclamation. I have not, therefore, tried to distinguish between the groups that historians have traditionally dubbed “conditional” or “unconditional” unionists. For discussions of conditional and unconditional unionism, see Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, 104-5; Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*, 501-2; James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 235-7.

T. N. Crumpler, “Speech of T.N. Crumpler, of Ashe, on Federal Relations, Delivered in the House of Commons, Jan. 10, 1861,” (Raleigh: *Raleigh Register*, 1861), 7.

not a mere party triumph—not a mere transient victory—not a mere casualty,” one secessionist newspaper reported of Lincoln’s election, “It is the culmination of a movement which has been gaining strength for years. It is the expression of the settled purpose of the vast majority of Northern people, as shown by the immense and almost fabulous majorities, given to Lincoln in nearly every Northern State.” It was this radical majority, therefore, and not just Lincoln’s election that sounded the death knell of slavery in the union.¹⁰

Unionists, by contrast, tended to be more optimistic that moderation would prevail in the North. They believed that most Northerners, like them, were not radicals who wanted to tear the country apart but conservative, reasonable men who championed compromise. Unionists thus maintained a persistent hope that the sensible men of both sections could reach a settlement—just as they had in decades before—which would reunite the North and South. A guarded version of this optimism extended to the new president, as well. Unionists hoped that, whatever antagonism he had toward slavery and the South, he would not commit the folly of trying to coerce the seceded states. “The tone of the Northern press...is now undergoing a marked change for the better,” a unionist newspaper reported following the election, “[and] we have the strongest reasons for believing Lincoln’s administration will not be aggressive upon the South.” Unionists therefore sustained a cautious sanguinity that neither Lincoln nor the Northern public were as radical as secessionists believed.¹¹

This union coalition managed to successfully challenge the convention campaign launched by Governor Ellis in the fall of 1860, forcing a number of crucial concessions from secessionist Democrats in the General Assembly. Unionists effectively delayed the passage of a convention bill until the end of January 1861. They also forced the secessionists to include a

¹⁰ *Wilmington Journal*, November 20, 1860

¹¹ *Fayetteville Observer*, November 19, 1860.

referendum in that bill, so that when North Carolinians went to the polls on February 28, they would vote on whether or not to hold a convention in addition to selecting delegates. By then—just as the unionists had hoped—passions from November’s election and the secession of the Deep South had subsided, and new hopes of reconciliation were emerging. The result was an overwhelming union victory at the polls. The convention was narrowly defeated, but more than two thirds of the delegates that would have attended were union men. Better than sixty percent of North Carolinians had voted for union delegates. “The returns received warrant us in asserting that North Carolina has gone for the Union by an overwhelming majority,” the secessionist *Raleigh Register* conceded in early March.¹²

Throughout March and early April public opinion continued to wax and wane, but the unionist and secessionist party organs remained relatively stable. Secessionists tried to rally following their defeat in February while unionists attempted to maintain control of the state, but both leaned heavily on their party’s newspapers in their attempts to do so. As was typical during the period, newspapers and editors explicitly associated themselves with particular parties; during late 1860 and early 1861 this translated to identifying as either unionist or secessionist. Thus on the eve of the firing on Fort Sumter and the beginning of the Civil War, newspaper allegiances—whether unionist or secessionist—were solidly (if temporarily) established and reasonably easy to identify. These newspapers also operated in very self-conscious unionist and secessionist networks. Unionist newspapers frequently republished articles from fellow unionist newspapers and critiqued and dissected commentary from “disunionist” ones. Secessionist newspapers similarly supported one another and sought to tear down their “submissionist” rivals.

¹² Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, 140-9; Jeffrey, *State Parties and National Politics*, 305-8; Marc W. Kruman, *Parties and Politics in North Carolina: 1836-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 204-10; *North Carolina Standard*, April 3, 1861; *Wilmington Journal*, April 4, 1861; *Raleigh Register*, March 6, 1861.

In the absence of more traditional political engagements in North Carolina from late February to mid-May 1861 (when the North Carolina secession convention convened), therefore, unionist and secessionist newspaper networks offer one of the clearest glimpses into the changes that rocked public opinion and sent the state careening toward secession following Lincoln's proclamation.¹³

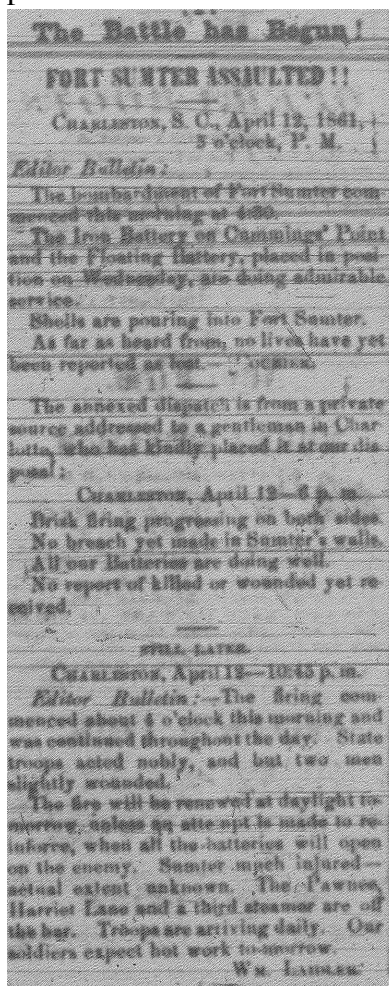
Secessionist newspapers, unsurprisingly, predominated in Democratic strongholds near the coast and along the border with South Carolina. The secessionist *New Bern Weekly Progress* and *Wilmington Journal*, two of the largest newspapers in the state, dominated the eastern tidewater where slaveholding and plantation agriculture were more common than in the rest of North Carolina. Other important secessionist newspapers operated out of the state capital in Raleigh, including the *Weekly State Journal* and *Raleigh Register*. The third nexus of secessionist power lay in the western city of Charlotte—whose close proximity and kinship ties to South Carolina encouraged radicalism there. Important secessionist newspapers in the Charlotte area included the *Daily Bulletin*, the *North Carolina Whig* and the *Western Democrat*.

Unionist newspapers, meanwhile, predominated in the western mountains and central piedmont where former Whigs were more powerful and slaveholding was less common. William Woods Holden's *North Carolina Standard* was the largest and most influential unionist newspaper in the state. Because Holden had so publicly abandoned his Democratic colleagues to support the union, he was simultaneously the favorite foil of secessionists and the celebrated bipartisan mascot of his fellow unionists. Editorials from the *Standard* were reprinted and commented on more often than those of any other newspaper, and its influence thus arguably extended further than that of any other publication. Still, the unionist newspaper network was

¹³ Coopersmith, Andrew S. *Fighting Words: An Illustrated History of Newspaper Accounts of the Civil War* (New York: The New Press, 2004), xiv-xvi; Jeffrey, *State Parties and National Politics*, 309-11; Kruman, *Parties and Politics in North Carolina*, 207-220.

powerful in its own right and included periodicals from across the piedmont and the mountains. The Raleigh *Ad Valorem Banner*, *Fayetteville Observer*, Salisbury *Carolina Watchman*, Greensboro *Patriot*, Hillsborough *Recorder* and Winston Salem *People's Press* all boasted substantial readerships and played a crucial role in the long-dominant unionist machine.

The way in which these newspapers were printed—both unionist and secessionist—lends itself to close reading of the crucial days surrounding the firing on Fort Sumter and Lincoln's proclamation. Rather than being assembled and printed all at once immediately before



newspapers were issued, editors assembled and printed stories as they arrived. This meant that whole pages of the paper were often printed days before their publication date, and the news page, in particular, tended to be ordered chronologically. Frequently news items were reported and dated as a series of telegraphic dispatches. The first reports on the unfolding battle at Fort Sumter, for instance, were printed this way in both newspapers like the *Greensboro Patriot*, which released an extra edition on April 13, and the *Carolina Watchman*, which published the same set of dispatches (in addition to more current ones) in its normal weekly edition on April 16 (left). News items and other articles were also often accompanied by commentary, and even editorials sometimes contained post-scripts added just

before they went to press. Though news of Fort Sumter and Lincoln's proclamation were received in close succession, therefore—and, in the case of weekly newspapers, were sometimes

first reported on in the same issue—the way that antebellum newspapers were printed allows one to track how newspaper editors interpreted information as they received it.

“THERE IS NO SUFFICIENT CAUSE”: NEWSPAPERS AND THE FIRING ON FORT SUMTER

In the days immediately preceding the firing on Fort Sumter, rumors abounded about a fleet of ships that had recently departed from New York City. Some reports suggested that the fleet was destined for Fort Sumter, while others claimed that it was headed for another federally occupied fort near Pensacola, Florida called Fort Pickens. Still others speculated that the ships would soon blockade Southern ports in order to collect revenues. Some contended that the armada was headed to Texas to help governor Sam Houston contend with “the Indians and the Mexicans.” Additional reports suggested that they might be headed for Santo Domingo to forestall a Spanish invasion. Most newspapers published an array of these reports, but how each newspaper interpreted the various rumors correlated strongly with its position on secession.

Secessionist newspapers were more inclined to see the departed ships as harbingers of belligerent government action. Secessionist reports of the fleet leaving New York repeatedly branded them “warlike movements.” The *Weekly State Journal*, *Wilmington Journal* and *Raleigh Register*, for instance, published accounts from New York bearing the headline “Highly Exciting News: Preparations for Coercion Completed—Troops Moving South.” Though most newspapers were unsure where exactly those “warlike movements” were directed, they expressed confidence that some sort of clash was imminent. “There is that peculiar feel in the atmosphere that precedes, and, we might say, indicates a storm,” the *Wilmington Journal* declared on April 11. The *Weekly State Journal* similarly noted: “At all events great uncertainty exists as to the policy of Lincoln, and it will in all human probability be seen in the course of a

few days whether he means to fight or be friendly. Our opinion is he means *fight*, and will if he can.” Some secessionist newspapers even expressed impatience for the coming conflict. War, they felt sure, would finally drive the state out of the union. The *Raleigh Register* thus concluded: “if the administration attempts a reinforcement, war will begin, and every Border Slave State will be forthwith on the side of the South...If the administration designs to coerce the South, let the issue be fought out and settled at once.”¹⁴

Unionist newspapers, by contrast, treated all rumors with the utmost skepticism. Most union newspapers referred to the various reports as “sensation dispatches,” refusing to give them much credence and denying secessionist rumors that conflict was imminent. “The newspapers before us are filled with ‘war, and rumors of wars,’” the *North Carolina Standard* commented on April 10. “We attach but little importance to these rumors....We will keep our readers posted as to events of importance which really take place, but we have no taste for these sensation rumors.” Unionist newspapers, instead, identified such speculations as products of secessionist fearmongering—noting the impatience with which secessionist newspapers anticipated a conflict. The *Fayetteville Observer* commented on April 11: “it appears that these blood and thunder dispatches answer the ends of their getters-up.” The *People’s Press* similarly implored: “We ask the People of North Carolina to note this fact, admitted by the writer of a Secession paper, that *peace* is the destruction of the hopes of the Secessionists, and *WAR* their only hope of success.” With this in mind, unionist editors advised caution and patience above all else. Fear and uncertainty, they warned, were enemies of the union.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Weekly State Journal* (Raleigh), April 10, 1861; *Wilmington Journal*, April 11, 1861; *Raleigh Register*, April 10, 1861. See also *Daily Bulletin* (Charlotte), April 9, 1861; *New Bern Weekly Progress*, April 9, 1861; *Western Democrat* (Charlotte), April 9, 1861.

¹⁵ *North Carolina Standard*, April 10, 1861; *Fayetteville Observer*, April 11, 1861; *People’s Press* (Winston Salem), April 12, 1861 (reports of the firing on Fort Sumter had not yet reached the editors when the paper went to press).

Unionist optimism was reinforced by a series of unofficial reports from Washington that the president's intentions were peaceful and that he did not intend to reinforce Forts Sumter or Pickens. Rumors had circulated during March that Fort Sumter was soon to be evacuated. A number of North Carolina newspapers reprinted intelligence from the *National Republican* in mid-March, for example, that: "Last evening we learned that in a Cabinet meeting on Saturday it was determined to evacuate Fort Sumter." These reports were buttressed by the diplomacy efforts of Secretary of State William Seward, who sent reassurances of the administration's peaceful intentions through a number of unofficial channels. Many of these efforts were directed toward unionists in Virginia, where a state convention was in session, but rumors of the Administration's intentions spread to North Carolina, as well. The Fayetteville Observer thus reassured its readers on April 11 that "The secretary [of State] indicates a peaceful policy on the part of the government." Weeks of reassurance seemed to reinforce unionist optimism that Lincoln would not risk confrontation with the seceded states.¹⁶

It was in these frameworks, therefore, that secessionist and unionist newspapers situated the first dispatches about the firing on Fort Sumter. Secessionist reactions were swift and predictable. Many of them had anticipated conflict days or even weeks before, and they were swift to point out that they had been right. The *Wilmington Journal* reported: "Sundry papers in North Carolina, and elsewhere, are trying to make a little capital by talking about 'sensation' dispatches and false prophets. And all that sort of thing. Now it is evident that...in the main all our dispatches were strictly correct....War is upon us." More importantly, however, secessionist editors believed that the commencement of hostilities vindicated arguments that they had long made about the inimical, abolitionist intentions of Lincoln and the Northern public. Though

See also *Carolina Watchman*, April 9, 1861; *Hillsborough Recorder*, April 9, 1861; *Greensborough Patriot*, April 11, 1861.

¹⁶ *Fayetteville Observer*, March 18, 1861 and April 11, 1861.

Confederate forces had fired on Fort Sumter, therefore, secessionist newspapers concluded Lincoln had been the aggressor and precipitated conflict. The *Raleigh Register* explained:

We have heard it stated that Lincoln was not responsible for the battle at Fort Sumter, as the attack was made by Confederate troops. The facts of the case do not sustain this assertion...the Federal Administration [informed]...the Confederate authorities that it was its purpose to supply Fort Sumter with provisions, ‘*peaceably if it could, forcibly if it must.*’ With these facts before them, and with the knowledge that a large fleet of armed vessels was on its way to Charleston to co-operate in the work of provisioning and reinforcing Fort Sumter, were the Confederate authorities to await the arrival of that fleet at its destination? By no means.—Such conduct would have been the height of infatuation and folly.

Secessionists thus understood the battle at Fort Sumter to be a manifestation of the danger that they had long anticipated. The federal government, as they saw it, had finally shown its true colors.¹⁷

Secessionists’ wrath was not reserved for Lincoln alone, however. In the crucial days before the proclamation was issued, secessionists made clear that Lincoln’s attempts to reinforce Fort Sumter portended more than just an attack Charleston harbor. As they had long maintained, Lincoln’s abolitionist designs were so dangerous because the weight of the radical North was behind him. The *Wilmington Journal* thus predicted:

Congress will probably be called together in a very short time, perhaps in a few days...there will be no difficulty in obtaining the passage of any law or the grant of any powers that this present Black Republican administration may seek for or demand for the purpose of coercing, subjugating, overrunning the South. And the wild hordes of that section will come to his aid, and the John Brownites from Passamaquoddy to Philadelphia, and westward to Kansas and Nebraska will join in the hunt against our brethren of the seceded states.

The attack on Fort Sumter, secessionists therefore believed, represented the ultimate vindication of their position. They had withstood blistering assaults from their unionist rivals for months, but they had never wavered in their warnings about the menace of Lincoln and the North. They

¹⁷ *Wilmington Journal*, April 18, 1861; *Raleigh Register*, April 17, 1861;

alone had foretold the impending doom. “The readers of this paper have been led to expect just what has transpired,” the *Weekly State Journal* thus concluded, “We have seen the purposes and designs of the enemies of the South, and have never failed to warn our readers of them....The result has shown that we were right—that we were one of the faithful sentinels upon the watch tower.” Much maligned and in the minority for so many months, secessionists could not stop themselves from shouting “I told you so.”¹⁸

Unionist reactions to the firing on Fort Sumter were much more reserved. As the earliest reports of the battle rolled in, unionist editors—unlike their secessionist counterparts—espoused caution and forbearance. Echoing the repeated warnings they had issued about speculation and rumor in the preceding days and weeks, unionist editors warned their readers against drawing any conclusions about what the confrontation meant before all of the details had been received and confirmed. “Let us wait for something more definite and reliable than the telegraph furnishes,” the *Fayetteville Observer* entreated as it published reports of the battle, “The stake is too great to rush into disunion and civil war upon the strength of telegraphic dispatches. In the mean time it will do no harm to be cool, calm, and look the crisis in the face.” The *Ad Valorem Banner* similarly echoed: “we say, stand firm and keep cool until the smoke clears away so that we can see where we are...We shall cling to the Union of our fathers as long as we can with honor and safety.” Unionist editors thus expressed a deep sense of uncertainty and anxiety. Their emotional attachment to the union and suspicion of secessionist agitation prevented them from drawing any hasty conclusions. Their hesitation and reluctance, however, also signaled that armed confrontation itself did not necessarily signal the end of their hopes for the union.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Wilmington Journal*, April 18, 1861; *Weekly State Journal*, April 17, 1861.

¹⁹ *Fayetteville Observer*, April 15, 1861; *Ad Valorem Banner*, April 16, 1861.

A number of newspapers thus focused their attention upon who was responsible for precipitating violence in South Carolina. Unlike their secessionist counterparts, unionist editors tended to be just as suspicious of South Carolinians as they were of Lincoln. They had speculated for weeks that secessionists, in North Carolina or elsewhere, would attempt to start some sort of conflict to drive the state out of the union. News of the battle in South Carolina—the cradle of secession—was thus met with deep suspicion that this is precisely what had happened. Some newspapers paid special attention to coverage in secessionist newspapers. The *Carolina Watchman*, for instance, republished an article from the *Charlotte Bulletin* referring to news of the battle as “gratifying intelligence.” “‘Gratifying Intelligence!’” the *Watchman* stormed, “It is then, ‘gratifying intelligence’ to the secessionists to see civil war on our country!” Others made their indictments of secessionists more overt—and their determination to thwart secessionist schemes equally clear. “We can but regard the late conflict at Charleston, as brought about by designing men, to precipitate the Border States into revolution,” the *Greensboro Patriot* concluded, “The conflict at Charleston, we say, has resulted from the fact, that the leaders of the disunionists found it necessary to do something to prevent a re-action among their own people, and to involve the Border States.” The *North Carolina Standard* echoed: “The object [of the attack on Fort Sumter] was to ‘precipitate’ Virginia and the border States, through blood, into the ‘Confederate States.’ But the border States have interests and a will of their own. They will do what they believe to be right, without regard to the black Republicans of the North or the disunionists of the South.”²⁰

Early unionist ambivalence about the battle at Fort Sumter thus reflected the dual nature of unionists’ fears. They were wary of Northern and federal threats to the union, but they were

²⁰ *Carolina Watchman*, April 16, 1861; *Greensboro Patriot*, April 18, 1861; *North Carolina Standard*, April 17, 1861.

also guarded against Southern menaces. While unionists had long touted their willingness to resist federal coercion of the seceded states, they seemed equally determined to challenge secessionist machinations. With conflict before them, therefore, unionist editors demonstrated a resolve to resist extremism from all sides and eschew the impulsiveness it fed on. “There is no sufficient cause for so extreme a measure [secession]; nor relief in it, for the evils complained of,” the *Carolina Watchman* thus concluded after the battle at Fort Sumter, “But there is in it an excess of passion, and consequent lawlessness, of which people will become ashamed, and will ere long turn from it with repentance and abhorrence.” A tentative commitment to the union thus endured the onslaught at Fort Sumter. Though the prospect of civil war was upon them, unionists rejected secessionist overtures of vindication and triumph and maintained hope that cooler heads might weather the storm and ultimately prevail.²¹

In the days immediately before or immediately after the firing on Fort Sumter, most unionist newspapers republished a speech by John J. Crittenden that outlined the terms on which compromise might be reached. In the speech before the Kentucky Legislature on March 26th, Crittenden reaffirmed his commitment to the compromise he proposed in Congress the previous winter. He maintained that the 36’ 30” should be extended across the western territories, above which slavery would be prohibited and below which slavery would be permitted. He also reiterated his support for an amendment to the Constitution that would prevent the federal government from interfering with slavery where it already existed. Crittenden maintained—and unionist editors agreed—that Congress’s failure to pass the compromise did not reflect the will of the American people. “I believe in my heart,” Crittenden explained, “that there is at this moment a majority of Northern men that would cheerfully vote for any of the resolutions of

²¹ *Carolina Watchman*, April 16, 1861.

compromise that were proposed by men of the South in the last Congress.” He thus proposed that a convention of all the states be assembled, expressed confidence that his compromise would be adopted and voiced hopes that, upon these terms, the seceded states might rejoin the union. It was with these expectations that secession could be reversed and the country reunited that North Carolina unionists continued to call for compromise, even as crisis broke out around them.²²

“IT IS YET TO BE HOPED”: EARLY REACTIONS TO LINCOLN’S PROCLAMATION

Two days after the surrender of Fort Sumter, President Lincoln issued his famous April 15 proclamation. It called for a special session of Congress to convene on July 4 and summoned 75,000 troops to “suppress” the rebellion in the South and “cause the laws to be duly executed.” Lincoln further specified in the proclamation that “the first service assigned to the forces hereby called forth will probably be to re-possess the forts, places, and property which have been seized from the Union.” Such steps were necessary, he concluded, “to maintain the honor, the integrity, and the existence of our National Union, and the perpetuity of popular government; and to redress wrongs already long endured.”²³

Reports of the proclamation began trickling into North Carolina over the next few days through telegraph dispatches and out-of-state newspapers. These first reports were received by secessionist editors whose early sense of triumph following the battle at Fort Sumter was quickly being tempered by frustration. Amidst their celebrations they had received copies of the unionist newspapers, which, to the secessionists’ great fury, were continuing to condemn them and espouse caution. “Even in the number of the *Observer* before us,” the *New Bern Weekly*

²² *Greensboro Patriot*, April 13, 1861.

²³ Abraham Lincoln, “Proclamation Calling 75,000 Militia, and Convening Congress in Extra Session” in *Abraham Lincoln: Complete Works, Comprising his Speeches, Letters, Papers, and Miscellaneous Writings*, John G. Nocolay and John Hay, eds. (New York: The Century Co., 1920), II: 34.

Progress raged, “in which the details of the bombardment at Charleston are given it prates, editorially, about ‘watching and waiting!’” The news of Lincoln’s proclamation was thus welcome; it seemed to reinforce the meaning that secessionist editors had attached to the brouhaha at Fort Sumter and finally—*unequivocally*—prove that they had been right all along. “President Lincoln having made a formal call upon North Carolina for two regiments to assist in coercing the ‘Confederate States,’ the issue is now actually made between North Carolina and the administration at Washington,” the *Wilmington Journal* concluded, “The worst fears of Southern patriots have been realized, and it now behooves us to stand together, and surely *we will...*[and] the insane cry of ‘Union’ will cease.”²⁴

Secessionists also met head-on unionist accusations that they were responsible for precipitating civil war. Going on the offensive, secessionist editors declared that “submissionists” had emboldened Lincoln and Northern abolitionists, and thus unionists—and not secessionists—were responsible for the impending war. If North Carolina and the rest of the Upper South had acted in concert with the states of the Deep South, secessionists maintained, Lincoln would never have risked a collision. The *Wilmington Journal* contended that the Border States “could have crushed this attempted subjugation in its very inception, nay, in its very first thought, if they had taken a firm stand and at once.” The *Weekly State Journal* similarly reflected: “We fear the position of the border States up to this point has emboldened our enemies....A united South would never have witnessed the reckless attempt to reinforce Fort Sumter.” As the nation looked toward the crisis of war, therefore, secessionists sought not only to vindicate themselves but also to define the terms on which that war would begin. If war did come—and it seemed, by then, almost inevitable that it would—they wanted it to be clear that

²⁴ *New Bern Weekly Progress*, April 23, 1861; *Wilmington Journal*, April 18, 1861.

the blood of civil war would not be on their hands. They had done all they could to prevent it, enduring hostility and slander at every turn, and they could thus face the coming fight with their consciences clear and their honor intact.²⁵

But despite these scathing indictments, secessionists directed most of their efforts toward conciliation. They had been right, of course—and secessionists did not want anyone to forget it—but they acknowledged the time had come for unionists and secessionists to forget their differences and unite in defense of the South (almost). “We bury past contests and recollections,” the *Wilmington Journal* proclaimed—even as it faulted unionists for causing the war in the same article. The *Weekly State Journal* similarly entreated: “This is a time when people should forget their past differences and come now to the sacred altar of their country and there *vow to stand together or fall together*”—though they, too, published indictments of unionists. Secessionists were thus not entirely successful in their efforts to put the past behind them, but that was because their understanding of the past was so deeply tied to their understanding of the future. They felt certain that North Carolina would imminently secede, and secessionists believed that—however different things were from the moment when they had first called for secession and however much unionists had qualified their loyalty as conditional—that meant secessionists had won. Their overtures for unity were thus sincere, but the unity they envisioned was a self-serving one. Secessionists believed that unionists would soon join *their* team—and not the other way around. It was with *this* sense of unity, therefore, that secessionists looked to the oncoming civil war.²⁶

Once again, however, secessionists would be disappointed by unionist reactions. Just as they had immediately following the battle at Fort Sumter, unionist newspapers first responded to

²⁵ *Wilmington Journal*, April 18, 1861; *Weekly State Journal*, April 24, 1861.

²⁶ *Wilmington Journal*, April 18, 1861; *Weekly State Journal*, April 17, 1861.

Lincoln's proclamation with decided ambivalence. This ambivalence tended to operate on two levels; unionists, first, remained wary of extremism from both secessionists and Lincoln, and, second, continued to hope that compromise could be reached and war averted. The *Greensboro Patriot*, for instance, contended that Lincoln's threats to send troops to "suppress" the rebellion and "re-possess the forts, places, and property" in the seceded states were not *really* intended to provoke a war. The *Patriot* argued that Lincoln and the seceded states—which had, in turn, promised to send their own troops to march on Washington—were engaged in a mere war of intimidation. "We regard those threats as mere braggadocio," the *Patriot* determined. The editors thus entreated in their commentary directly below the proclamation: "We hope the people will not suffer themselves to become unnecessarily excited on this account, and jump to the conclusion that we are to have war. As no blood has yet been shed, we sincerely hope and trust that none will be....We can't yet believe that Lincoln will be guilty of the folly and madness of invading the Southern States."²⁷

Other newspapers expressed similar hopes that extremism in the North and South could still be checked and conflict avoided. "It is yet to be hoped that the American people will bring about some measures that will be satisfactory to all sections of the country," the *Hillsborough Recorder* maintained in its editorials alongside the proclamation. The *North Carolina Standard* similarly argued: "The mission of the border states now is to command the peace, if possible, and to maintain their rights in the Union. If *they* cannot check and control the two extremes no power can."²⁸ The *Standard* and others thus called—as they had often done in the months

²⁷ *Greensboro Patriot*, April 18, 1861.

²⁸ Here the *Standard* makes explicit reference to the role of the border states. Though unionists had, at various times, flirted with the idea of a Border State Confederacy—some middle way between unionism and secessionism—I do not find any evidence of such a policy in North Carolina newspapers in the days surrounding the firing on Ford Sumter and Lincoln's proclamation. As best I can tell here, the *Standard's* reference to the role of the Border States

preceding—for a national conference to broker peace between the belligerent parties. A “Convention of all the States would be able to command the peace,” the *Standard* felt confident. The *Hillsborough Recorder* republished John Crittenden’s March 26th speech in their April 17th issue, signaling that they had not abandoned hope for reunion on the terms that Crittenden had outlined. Even if Lincoln had taken steps toward war, they maintained hope that his efforts could be circumvented by the states.²⁹

In their calls for a convention and persistent hopes for peace, unionists thus reiterated a confidence that moderate men, and not radicals, dominated the country. They believed that most Americans were, like them, still reasonable and willing to compromise and that the majority of the country did not ascribe to either Northern or Southern extremism. Even if Lincoln was a radical, therefore, unionists remained optimistic that Northern moderates could constrain his radical impulses. The *Greensboro Patriot* articulated this explicitly:

Lincoln is one thing, and the Union another...in a few years Lincoln will be deprived of any ability to do us injury. Lincoln as President is one thing the million and a-half of strong Union men at the North are another...Shall we then cut loose from the strong Union men of the North who love this Union, and who are ready at any time to do us justice? Then we say to the people of North-Carolina, be calm, be still, and suffer not yourselves to be carried by excitement.

It was because of this faith in their Northern brethren that unionists continued to cling to the union. They could thus read Lincoln’s proclamation—including its call for thousands of troops and promises to “subdue” the South—and maintain hope that moderation and peace would prevail.³⁰

Unionist editors’ hopes for peace and resolution would very quickly disappear, but in those first crucial days following the receipt of Lincoln’s proclamation, their faith endured. In

speaks to a hope that, as a geographical boundary between the belligerent sections, they might be able to prevent fighting between the two.

²⁹ *Hillsborough Recorder*, April 17, 1861; *North Carolina Standard*, April 17, 1861.

³⁰ *Greensboro Patriot*, April 18, 1861.

most cases those hopes were obliterated by the time the next issue went to press, but the hopes were there all the same. Even secessionists editors—to their great dismay—took notice of unionists’ persistent optimism. On April 23 the *New Bern Weekly Progress* seethed that “the *Greensboro Patriot* sides with Lincoln and *against* the South in the awful Revolution now raging. It accuses the Confederate States with ‘dishonoring’ the flag of the union and ‘raising the cry of rebellion’ in the same issue in which Lincoln’s [Proclamation] is given.” The *Progress* levied similar charges against the *Fayetteville Observer* in the same issue: “We assert that its entire course since the inauguration of Lincoln has been *against the South and in sympathy with the Lincoln administration.*” For unionist editors, therefore, the future appeared to hang in the balance during the days immediately following Lincoln’s proclamation. The forces that would shortly undermine their faith were already at work in the North, but for unionists those crucial days seemed to be seeded with deep contingency. For that moment, Lincoln’s proclamation did not destroy hopes for the union in the state of North Carolina.³¹

“WE HAVE READ THE LATE NORTHERN PAPERS CAREFULLY AND SADLY”: NORTH CAROLINA

UNIONISTS ABANDON THEIR CAUSE

Soon after news of Lincoln’s proclamation reached North Carolina, reports of Northern reactions to the proclamation began to arrive. Northern governors’ responses to Lincoln’s requests for troops were overwhelmingly positive. “The people of Maine of all parties will rally with alacrity to the maintenance of the Government of the Union,” Maine’s governor confirmed. The governor of Ohio similarly replied: “We will furnish the largest number you will receive. Great rejoicing here over your proclamation.” The governor of Rhode Island wired Washington that his state would furnish 1,000 troops and volunteered to lead them himself. Reports of the

³¹ *New Bern Weekly Progress*, April 23, 1861.

governors' responses, however, were almost instantly dwarfed by accounts of the changes in Northern public opinion. "The startling evidence of the sudden rousing of a sweeping warlike spirit continues to arrive here by mail and telegraph from all parts of the North," one North Carolina correspondent in Washington explained, "Leading men of all parties express their readiness to stand by the federal government in the present trial of its strength, in the most enthusiastic and encouraging terms."³²

Rumors abounded about just how extensive mobilization in the North was. Unionist and secessionist newspapers alike published extravagant estimates of the number of troops being raised in the Northern states. "Every Northern State is responding to Lincoln's call," the unionist *Fayetteville Observer* announced on April 22, "New York is to furnish 30,000, one-third of all demanded. Pennsylvania talks of 100,000. Indiana of 30,000, &c. &c." The next day the unionist *North Carolina Standard* reported that "from New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, New Haven, Worcester, Providence, and from every locality in every free State, the notes of preparation for war—for sustaining Lincoln's proclamation are wafted to us." That same day the secessionist *New Bern Weekly Progress* reported that more than 150,000 troops would be raised in the North, and the secessionist *Western Democrat* conveyed that anti-Southern mobs reigned in New York and Philadelphia. Though they published a wide variety of reports, therefore, both unionist and secessionist newspapers quickly concluded that the Northern response to Lincoln's call for troops was enthusiastic and overwhelming. It was soon clear, as the secessionist *Weekly State Journal* reported on April 24, that the "North to a man is up against us."³³

³² Lankford, *Cry Havoc!*, 107; *North Carolina Standard*, April 24, 1861.

³³ *Fayetteville Observer*, April 22, 1861; *North Carolina Standard*, April 23, 1861; *New Bern Weekly Progress*, April 23, 1861; *Western Democrat*, April 23, 1861. Though these reports of troop mobilization were exaggerated, reports about the state of Northern public opinion were not. The firing on Fort Sumter and Lincoln's proclamation completely (if temporarily) united the North behind war, and the response to both events was overwhelming. See

No doubt secessionist newspapers received these reports with a certain degree of smugness. Just as the *Wilmington Journal* had predicted, the “wild hordes” of the North had rallied behind Lincoln to subdue the South, and thus in one fell swoop secessionists’ claims about the Northern populace seemed to be confirmed. In general, however, secessionist newspapers paid far less attention to Northern reactions than did their unionist counterparts. For unionist editors, the news was apparently earth shattering. By the last week of April, all of the unionist editors in the state would be openly advocating separation. All pleas for peace would stop, and all hopes for compromise would be seemingly extinguished. In their place, the formerly unionist editors would issue calls for their readers to organize into regiments.³⁴

Unionist editors’ preoccupation with Northern responses pointed toward the source of this change. Unionist hopes following (and before) Lincoln’s proclamation had been grounded in a confidence that most people in the North, like them, still wanted compromise and peace. Unionists thought that if *only* the reasonable men of the nation could be assembled, a settlement could be reached just as it had so many times in decades before. They believed that belligerent posturing was the work of minorities in both sections of the country, and they hoped that the moderate majority would yet rise to save the country from civil war. The overwhelming response to Lincoln’s call for troops thus stunned unionists who had, mere days before, expressed unwavering confidence in the “strong Union men of the North who love this Union, and who are ready at any time to do us justice.” Unionists felt deeply deceived and utterly betrayed. They had remained faithful to the union as conflict broke out around them, but in that same moment the union abandoned them.

Russell McClintock, *Lincoln and the Decision for War: The Northern Response to Secession* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 254-74.

³⁴ *Wilmington Journal*, April 18, 1861.

It was with this profound sense of betrayal, therefore, that North Carolina newspapers reflected on the North's response to Lincoln's call for troops. One week after it first reported on the proclamation and declared that the Border States should "command the peace" and "maintain their rights in the Union," the *North Carolina Standard* recounted:

We have read the late Northern papers carefully and sadly. The Northern people appear to be uniting by large majorities against us. The attack on Fort Sumter roused and banded them—the proclamation of the President fired and cemented them in one common purpose, and that purpose is war to the knife...They [sic] people of North-Carolina would not call for this, in any event, towards Massachusetts or Maine; and they will not submit to it when attempted towards the Confederate States.

That same day, the *Hillsborough Recorder*—which had also first reported on Lincoln's proclamation a week before and contended that it was "yet to be hoped that the American people will bring about some measure that will be satisfactory to all sections of the country"—similarly related: "We had hoped, in a crisis like this, that the conservative spirit at the North would have checked the ambition of the President, but in this we were disappointed. The Northern states, all of them, respond with great alacrity to the call of the President, and troops are assembling in large numbers." Northern mobilization had, for these unionist editors, delivered the coup de grace to the union.³⁵

The Northern reaction to Lincoln's proclamation thus transformed the events of the previous weeks. The meaning of the battle at Fort Sumter and Lincoln's subsequent call for troops were permanently altered in former unionists' minds as they were refracted through the Northern response to them. The attack on Fort Sumter now marked the beginning of the war rather than an isolated eruption of extremist violence. Lincoln's call for troops now signaled the inauguration of coercion rather than mere "braggadocio" toward the South. And suddenly, therefore, Lincoln's proclamation seemed to mark the point of no return for North Carolina

³⁵ *North Carolina Standard*, April 17 and 24, 1861; *Hillsborough Recorder*, April 17 and 24.

unionists. Unionists had always maintained that any attempt to coerce the seceded states to return to the union would not be countenanced, and Lincoln's promise to "re-possess the forts, places, and property which have been seized from the Union"—once empowered by Northern mobilization to carry them out—constituted just such an attempt. The sense of betrayal they felt when the North united against them was consequently reappropriated to Lincoln and his April 15 proclamation. Their tremendous sense of loss—the feeling that they had been abandoned by their own countrymen—was channeled into condemnations of Lincoln and his treachery.

In fact, from late April on, former North Carolina unionists would almost universally point to the proclamation as the moment of their great betrayal by Lincoln and conversion to the Southern cause. Unionists reflected upon the countless unofficial reassurances they had received that Lincoln would not try to retake property seized in the South nor attempt to resupply Fort Sumter and concluded that Lincoln had purposefully misled them. He had made promises of peace, leading unionists to believe he would not interfere with the seceded states, and then he had double-crossed them. After everything North Carolina unionists had done to preserve the union, this seemed to them the basest perfidy imaginable. "The President's Proclamation is 'the last feather that breaks the camel's back,'" the *Fayetteville Observer* concluded on April 22, "It shows that the professions of peace were a delusion and a cheat." The *Carolina Watchman* similarly reported that *Lincoln* "basely falsified these assurances [of peace], and is now proceeding to levy a war of the most gigantic proportion to retake forts and to enforce the laws of the United States in the States that renounced them...Toward the Union men of the border states, this conduct is infamous...[and] to the Union party, in particular, it is *treachery* and *fraud*."³⁶

³⁶ *Fayetteville Observer*, April 22, 1861; *Carolina Watchman*, April 23, 1861.

North Carolina unionists thus concluded that Lincoln's betrayal left them no course but total resistance. "We regard Lincoln's call upon North Carolina for troops to aid in subduing their brethren of the South, as an insult, and intended as such" the *Greensboro Patriot* proclaimed on April 25, "and should arouse such an indignation throughout the State, as should cause her sons to rush to arms to drive back any invasion of her soil, by the tyrant, the oppressor." The *North Carolina Standard* likewise declared that "The proclamation of Lincoln has left the people of the border States no alternative but resistance or unconditional submission...People of North Carolina!...We must fight!" From that moment on, former unionist editors would join with their old secessionist foes to lead North Carolina charging toward civil war. And from that time forward, the moment of hope and contingency that followed Lincoln's proclamation was forgotten. In former unionists' collective memory, Lincoln's proclamation became the moment of their conversion rather than the last stand of hope.³⁷

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Even as secessionists and former unionists united under the Southern banner, however, old differences would not be forgotten. Just as secessionists gloated and pointed to unionist "submissionism" as the cause of the war, former unionists stepped up to defend the stance they had taken in previous months—even as they called for separation. Former unionists contended that they had been right to defend the union as long as they did. They could rest assured that they had done everything in their power to preserve the union and that responsibility for its destruction lay with others. "We glory in our course as a Constitutional Union [men]," the *North Carolina Standard* recounted on April 25, "The Union men are, at least, 'guiltless of their

³⁷ *Greensboro Patriot*, April 23, 1861; *North Carolina Standard*, April 25, 1861.

country's blood.'” Unionists thus contended that their ‘conversion’ was consistent with their former position; they had always made the conditions of their faithfulness clear, and their abandonment of the union signaled not their lack of devotion but the onset of true crisis. The *People’s Press* thus declared: “we have not changed our opinion as to the impolicy of secession as a measure of redress...nor of the value of the Union as a source of the unexampled prosperity of the whole country. But all our fondest hopes for an amicable adjustment of our sectional difficulties have been blasted, and the stern reality of resistance to the arbitrary rule of Abraham Lincoln must be encountered.”³⁸

In absolving themselves of inconsistency and blame, however, former unionists did not reserve their wrath exclusively for Lincoln. Indeed their choicest insults were directed at him, but former unionists did not forget the accusations they had levied against secessionists following the battle at Fort Sumter. Former unionists acknowledged after Lincoln’s proclamation, just as they had before it, that secessionist machinations had been integral to the precipitation of conflict. The *Fayetteville Observer* thus detailed:

In the new aspect of affairs, we see no reason to change any opinion that we have expressed, that the difficulty ought to have been peaceably settled, and would have been if good men had been influential at either extremity of the country. We believe now, as heretofore, that by the exercise of that patience which the immense issues at stake demanded, there would have been a peaceful settlement.

Former unionists still believed that extremists in the North and South were responsible for inaugurating conflict. They thus maintained, even as North Carolina hurtled toward civil war, that things should and could have ended up differently.³⁹

CONCLUSION: A MOMENT LOST

³⁸ *North Carolina Standard*, April 25, 1861; *The People’s Press*, April 25.

³⁹ *Fayetteville Observer*, April 22, 1861.

In North Carolina newspapers from April 1861, the first days after Lincoln's proclamation are enshrined as the last stand of hope for most North Carolina unionists. Though what came in the days after would transform that last glimmer of hope into a moment of betrayal, the documentary record preserves what has been lost in collective memory—then as well as now. The story of unionists' persistent optimism following Lincoln's proclamation does more than just move the timeline of their conversion forward a few days, however. This moment offers deeper insight into *why* unionists abandoned hope. Unionists could remain optimistic even after the battle at Fort Sumter and Lincoln's call for troops because their belief in the viability of the union was tied so deeply to a belief in Northern loyalty and moderation. In their Northern brethren, unionists saw commonalities that could trump their many differences. They thus believed that, like they had so many times before, Northern and Southern voices of restraint and reason would bring the country back from the brink of disaster. And right up until they heard that tens of thousands of Northerners were responding to Lincoln's call for troops to invade the South, many unionists held on to that conviction.

The moment of hope following Lincoln's proclamation thus also offers a glimpse into just how contingent the coming of the civil war seemed to those who lived it, even after armed conflict had erupted and both sides were suiting up for war. Whether North Carolina unionists' expectations of their Northern counterparts were realistic or not, those expectations meaningfully shaped the way that unionists understood the secession crisis unfolding around them. The profound sense of betrayal they felt when Lincoln's call for troops was realized by Northern mobilization reflects just how deep unionists' confidence in their Northern brethren ran and how sincere their hopes for the union were. For North Carolina unionists, the events of April 1861

amounted not to fruits of an irrepressible conflict but a great calamity that could and should have come out differently.

Whatever Governor Zebulon Vance would later misremember of the secession crisis, he did not forget this sense of tragedy. When he reflected on that period 25 years later, he recalled, more than anything else, the depth of North Carolina's commitment to the union and the reluctance with which the state abandoned it. "The people of North Carolina, more, perhaps, than those of any of the eleven seceding States, were devoted to the Union," he maintained, "They had always regarded it with sincerest reverence and affection, and they left it slowly and with sorrow."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Vance, *Life of Zebulon Vance*, 440-441.