

The Hampton Roads Peace Conference During the War Between the States

by [John V. Denson](#)

Most establishment historians today might as well be the Orwellian historians writing for the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell's novel *1984*, especially in relation to the War Between the States. They rarely, if ever, mention the Hampton Roads Peace Conference which occurred in February of 1865, because it brings into question most of the mythology promoted today which states that Lincoln and the North fought the war for the purpose of abolishing slavery and the South fought for the purpose of protecting it, and therefore, it was a great and noble war.

The story of the peace conference is related by a participant who was vice-president of the Confederacy, Alexander H. Stephens, in volume two of his work entitled *A Constitutional View of the War Between the States: Its Causes, Character, Conduct and Results*, at pages 589 through 625.

The story begins in early January of 1865 which was before Sherman left Savannah on his march through the Carolinas. Mr. Francis P. Blair, Sr., instigated the conference by obtaining President Lincoln's permission to contact Confederate President, Jefferson Davis, concerning a possible temporary halt in the war. Mr. Blair was closely connected to the Lincoln administration and he was concerned about the efforts on the part of the French to establish a military presence in Mexico in order to help them reconquer the territory that had been lost in the war with America. Mr. Blair made his proposal to President Jefferson Davis that a secret military conference take place and that all hostility cease between the North and South for the purpose of letting the American army enforce the Monroe Doctrine by directing all of its efforts to evicting the French from Mexico, thereby stopping any assault by the Mexicans on the southwest corner of America. President Lincoln gave his permission to Mr. Blair to talk with Jefferson Davis but indicated to him that he did not endorse Mr. Blair's ideas; however, he would not stand in the way of some military conference to discuss peace terms and to stop hostilities while the conference was in session. Jefferson Davis listened to Mr. Blair's proposal, met with his cabinet and it was decided that three delegates were to be appointed to meet with President Lincoln and his Secretary of State, William Seward. The three Confederate delegates were Mr. Stephens, John Campbell, a former U.S. Supreme Court Justice from Alabama, and a Mr. R. M. T. Hunter, a member of the Confederate Senate. The Confederate delegates were given safe passage through Northern lines and met directly with General Grant, who put them on a boat to go to Fortress Monroe. When they reached Fortress Monroe near Hampton Roads, Virginia, they were then escorted to another steamer where President Lincoln and Mr. Seward were to meet with them. The actual meeting occurred on February 3, 1865.

Mr. Seward indicated that this was to be an informal conference with no writing or record to be made, all was to be verbal, and the Confederates agreed. President Lincoln announced in the beginning that the trip of Mr. Blair was approved by him but that he did not endorse the idea to halt the hostilities for the purpose of the American army going to Mexico to enforce the Monroe Doctrine; however, he had no objection to discussing a peace offer at this time. President Lincoln stated that he had always been willing to discuss a peace offer as long as the first condition was met and that would be for the Confederacy to pledge to rejoin the Union. If that condition was agreed upon then they could discuss any other details that were necessary. Mr. Stephens responded by suggesting that if they could come up with some proposal to stop the hostilities, which might lead to the restoration of the Union without further bloodshed, would it not be advisable to act on that proposal, even without an absolute pledge of ultimate restoration being required at the beginning? President Lincoln replied firmly that there would be no stopping of the military operations unless there was a pledge first by the Confederacy to rejoin the Union immediately.

Judge Campbell then asked what would be the terms offered to the South if they were to pledge to rejoin the Union and how would they be taken back into the Union. Since there was no immediate response by either President Lincoln or Mr. Seward, Vice-President Stephens stated that it would be worthwhile to pursue stopping the hostilities to have a cooling off period so that the peace terms might be investigated without the passions of the war. Mr. Stephens indicated that should the hostilities stop for some extended period of time, he felt that there would be a good chance that many of the states would rejoin the Union on the same terms as they had when they joined in the beginning, but that the sovereignty of the states would have to be recognized upon rejoining the Union. Mr. Seward objected that a system of government founded upon the right of secession would not last and that self-preservation of the Union was a first law of nature which applies to nations as well as to individuals. He brought up the point that if all the states were free to secede, they might make a treaty with some foreign nation and thus expose the Union to foreign aggression. Mr. Stephens responded that the principle of self-preservation also applied to every state by itself and it would never be in the interest of any single state or several states to join with some foreign power against those states which remained in the Union.

Mr. Hunter then brought up the question of whether President Lincoln would require the Confederate army to join with the Union army to go to war in Mexico and stated before Lincoln answered that it was the view of all three commissioners that the Confederates would never agree to join with the Union army in an invasion of Mexico. Both President Lincoln and Mr. Seward responded that the feeling was so strong in the North to enforce the Monroe Doctrine, that they felt that the South would not be needed in the invasion.

The subject of slavery then came up and Mr. Stephens asked President Lincoln what would be the status of the slave population in the Confederate states, and especially what effect the Emancipation Proclamation would have if the Confederates rejoined the Union. President Lincoln responded that the Proclamation was only a war measure and as soon as the war ceased, it would have no operation for the future. It was his opinion that the Courts would decide that the slaves who were emancipated under the Proclamation would remain free but those who were not emancipated during the war would remain in slavery. Mr. Seward pointed out that only about two hundred thousand (200,000) slaves had come under the operation of the Proclamation and this would be a small number out of the total. Mr. Seward then brought up the point that several days before the meeting, there had been a proposed 13th constitutional amendment to cause the immediate abolition of slavery throughout the United States, but if the war were to cease and the Confederates rejoined the Union, they would have enough votes to kill the amendment. He stated that there would be thirty-six (36) states and ten (10) could defeat the amendment. The reader should be reminded at this point that President Lincoln, in his Inaugural Address before the war, gave his support to the first 13th amendment pending at that time which would have explicitly protected slavery where it already existed.

Mr. Stephens then inquired as to what would be status of the states in regard to their representation in Congress and President Lincoln replied that they would have their full rights restored under the Constitution. This would mean that there would be no punishment or reconstruction imposed. President Lincoln then returned to the slavery question and stated that it was never his intention to interfere with slavery in the states where it already existed and he would not have done so during the war, except that it became a military necessity. He had always been in favor of prohibiting the extension of slavery into the territories but never thought immediate emancipation in the states where it already existed was practical. He thought there would be "many evils attending" the immediate ending of slavery in those states. Judge Campbell then asked Mr. Seward if he thought there would be good race relations in the South upon immediate emancipation and inquired about what would happen to the freed slaves. President Lincoln responded by telling an anecdote about an Illinois farmer and how he avoided any effort in finding food for his hogs, and his method would apply to the freed slaves, in other words "let'em root!" The Confederate delegation showed no interest in protecting slavery in the Confederacy with their only interest being independence from the Union and the protection of the right to secede, which raised the subject of West Virginia. Mr. Hunter asked President Lincoln whether West Virginia, which had seceded from the State of Virginia, would be allowed to remain a separate state and President Lincoln stated

that it would. Lincoln had once been a strong proponent of secession, and as a first-term congressman from Illinois, he spoke in a session of the House of Representatives in 1848 and argued that:

"Any people anywhere, being inclined and having the power, have the right to rise up and shake off the existing government and form a new one that suits them better. *This is a most valuable and most sacred right, a right which we hope and believe is to liberate the world.*" (emphasis supplied).

Lincoln recognized the right of West Virginia to secede but refused to recognize the right of the South to secede. Mr. Hunter indicated that President Lincoln's proposal amounted to an unconditional surrender but Mr. Seward responded that the North would not be conquerors but rather the states would merely have to recognize national authority and the execution of the national laws. The South would regain full protection of the Constitution like the rest of the states.

President Lincoln returned to the question of slavery stating that he thought the North would be willing to be taxed to compensate the Southern people for the loss of their slaves. He said that he had many conversations to the effect that if there was a voluntary abolition of slavery the American government would pay a fair indemnity and specified that four hundred million dollars (\$400,000,000) would probably be appropriated for this purpose. Mr. Seward said that the Northern people were weary of the war and they would be willing to pay this amount of indemnity rather than continuing to pay for the war.

Mr. Stephens wrote that the entire conversation took about four hours and the last subject was the possible exchange of prisoners. President Lincoln stated he would put that question in the hands of General Grant and they could discuss it with Grant as they left. Finally, Mr. Stephens asked President Lincoln to reconsider stopping the hostilities for a period of time so that the respective sides could "cool off," and while cooling off, investigate further possibilities for ending the war other than by simply having the South pledge to rejoin the Union. President Lincoln stated he would reconsider it but he did not think his mind would change on that point. Thus, ended the Peace Conference and the Confederates returned to meet with General Grant and were escorted back to the Confederate lines.

In summary, the South wanted independence, not the protection of slavery, and the North wanted reunion rather than abolition of slavery. This is what President Lincoln had stated in the very beginning before the war and again what he had stated near the end of the war.

It was generally recognized in both the North and the South by 1865 that slavery was a dying institution, not just in America, but throughout Western Civilization. It was also obvious to both the North and the South that slavery would be hard to maintain in a separate Confederate South without the constitutional and statutory fugitive slave provisions which had required free states to return escaped slaves. In fact, many abolitionists had advocated Northern secession before the war as a means to end slavery by depriving the Southern states of the benefits of the fugitive slave clause in the Constitution and the laws relating thereto. The offer of the North to pay for the freed slaves was merely an added inducement to rejoin the Union but Lincoln had always been willing to accept slavery where it already existed if the South would remain in, or later, rejoin the Union. The right of a state to secede clearly had been accepted in the North and the South at the time of the formation of the Union and up until the time of the War Between the States. For example, the New England states frequently asserted the right of secession and threatened to use it on five occasions: in 1803 because of President Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase; in 1807 over the Embargo Act; in 1812 over the admission of Louisiana as a state; in 1814 at the Hartford Convention because of the War of 1812; and finally, in 1845 over the annexation of Texas.

If the agricultural South rejoined the industrial North, they would again be subject to economic exploitation of the protective tariff, which was paid primarily by the South and was by far the main tax to operate the central government in Washington, D.C. The North, due to their increased representation in Congress, was able to

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control where the money was spent, which was primarily for internal improvements in the North, a practice the South considered unconstitutional. The protective tariff and internal improvements had been two of the key problems between the two sections since 1828, along with the general disagreement about the size and power of the central government in Washington.

Finally, in order to bring into clear focus the significance of the Hampton Roads Conference, it should be recalled that on April 4, 1861, before the start of the war on April 12, the Secession Convention in Virginia, which had convened in February of 1861, sent a delegate to visit President Lincoln in the White House to discuss the results of the action recently taken in Virginia. When the State of Virginia originally voted on its ratification ordinance approving the U.S. Constitution, it contained a specific clause protecting their right to secede in the future. The delegate was Colonel John B. Baldwin, who was a strong opponent of secession by Virginia, although he recognized the right. His message communicated privately to the president on April 4, was that the convention had voted not to secede if President Lincoln would issue a written pledge to refrain from the use of force in order to get the seceded states back into the Union. President Lincoln told Colonel Baldwin that it was four days too late now to take that action. Unknown to all except a few insiders of the administration, meaning that members of the Congress did not know, the president had already issued secret orders on April 1, to send a fleet of ships to Fort Sumter in order to provoke the South into firing the first shot in order to start the war. (For more details see my chapter "Lincoln and the First Shot: A Study of Deceit and Deception" in the book *Reassessing the Presidency*.) Lincoln stated that he could not wait until the seceded states decided what to do and added:

"But what am I to do in the meantime with those men at Montgomery? Am I to let them go on?"

Baldwin replied:

"Yes sir, until they can be peaceably brought back."

Lincoln then replied:

"And open Charleston, etc., as ports of entry, with their ten percent tariff . . ." (as opposed to the much higher forty percent Federal tariff). "What then would become of my tariff?" (For more details on this meeting and a subsequent meeting with President Lincoln by other delegates of the Virginia Secession Convention, again see my chapter "Lincoln and the First Shot")

The original Constitution, still in effect before the war, prohibited all "direct" taxes on the people, i.e. income, estate, gift, etc., so almost all the revenue to operate the Federal government in Washington was derived from an "indirect" tax on imports. The South, being agricultural, had to import almost all manufactured goods from Europe (primarily England) or buy the products from the North. The higher the tax on imports, the more protection the North got to raise its prices for its manufactured goods and for this reason a high import tax was called a "protective tariff." As long as, the import tax was ten percent or less it was classified as a "revenue tax" to which the South did not object. In fact, the new Confederate Constitution adopted in March of 1861, placed a maximum tax on imports of ten percent. However, when an import tax or tariff exceeded ten percent, it became known as a "protective tariff" for the protection of domestic (Northern) industry. Shortly before the war, the *Chicago Daily Times* was only one of many newspapers predicting a calamity for federal revenue and business in the North if the South was allowed to secede with its ten percent limit on import taxes which would attract trade, especially from abroad, to the South rather than the North. In an editorial it stated:

"In one single blow our [Northern] foreign commerce must be reduced to less than one-half what it now is. Our coastwise trade will pass into other hands . . . We should lose our trade with the South, with all of its immense profits. Our manufactories will be in utter ruins. Let the South adopt the free-trade system, or that of a tariff for revenue (ten percent or less), and these results would likely follow."

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In a debate in England, two notable British citizens, Charles Dickens and John Stuart Mill, took opposing views on the cause of the American War Between the States with Mill stating that the purpose of the war was the abolition of slavery and Dickens maintained that "The Northern onslaught upon slavery was no more than a piece of specious humbug designed to conceal its desire for economic control of the Southern states."

The meeting at Hampton Roads in 1865 and the meeting with Colonel Baldwin in 1861 both showed that President Lincoln's concern was preventing the secession of the South in order to protect Northern manufacturers and to retain the tax source for the Federal government. The abolition of slavery was not the purpose of the war. In his Inaugural Address he promised he would invade the South for the purpose of collecting taxes and recovering the forts but he would support the first 13th amendment which protected slavery in the states where it already existed.

The War Between the States was not a noble war to abolish slavery, but instead was a war of conquest to require the Southern states to continue paying the taxes which paid for the federal government and to change the system of government given to us by our Founders and instead replace it with a strong national government thereby removing most of the political power from the states and the people. When the famous British historian, Lord Acton, wrote to Robert E. Lee after the war, in a letter dated November 4, 1866, he inquired about Lee's assessment of the meaning of the war and the result that would follow. Lord Acton's letter stated, in part, that:

"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 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."

Lee replied in a letter dated December 15, 1866, and stated, in part, what the result would be:

". . . [T]he consolidation of the states into one vast republic, sure to be *aggressive abroad* and *despotic at home*, will be the certain precursor of the ruin which has overwhelmed all those that have preceded it." (emphasis supplied).

Never have truer words ever been written or spoken.

Rarely do any governments, or the politicians, intellectuals and news media who support their wars, tell the truth about the real motives for the wars. After all, the citizens must be convinced either that their safety is being protected from an aggressor or that the war serves some noble purpose, because it's the citizens who fight, die and pay the taxes. The Orwellian historians have falsified the true purposes or motives behind most of America's wars, and have instead given us glorified accounts designed to mislead the public in order to justify the sacrifices the people have made. All wars, whether won or lost, tend to centralize and increase the power into the national government, increase the debts and taxes and diminish the civil liberties of the citizens. It is time we begin to see through the myths and false propaganda about American wars so that we can prevent future wars. Americans have a strong tendency to accept as true the false wartime propaganda which now appears in the history books and which is repeated by politicians and intellectuals to the effect that all of America's wars have been just, necessary and noble. This tendency of the Americans to accept this false propaganda tends to prevent them from questioning the alleged reasons for current wars. There is also a strong tendency by Americans to measure a person's patriotism by how much that person supports an American war rather than how much the person supports the concept of American freedom and the ideas of our Founders, which includes a noninterventionist foreign policy

It is time that Americans learn the truth about the real reasons behind our wars, and particularly, the War Between the States, because of the price that we have paid in the long-term loss of liberty in that war. The deaths of over 600,000 American young men in that war is not exactly inconsequential. This high death total is <http://www.lewrockwell.com/orig2/denson6.html>

more than the total of all the deaths of American soldiers in all the other wars America has fought. The Hampton Roads Peace Conference is a necessary piece to the puzzle of learning that truth.

The abolition of slavery by the 13th amendment was a great step forward in the struggle for individual freedom and it eliminated a horrible evil in America which had been practiced for centuries throughout the world, but the passage of that amendment was not the purpose of the war and slavery would certainly have died soon without a war as it did elsewhere throughout Western Civilization without wars. It is the War Between the States which was the first great turning point in American history away from the system of government and the individual freedom that our Founders provided for us. We need a new "Reformation and Renaissance," but this time, it needs to be about government, especially the American government. We need a new "turning point" to go in the right direction to recover the original ideas about individual freedom advocated by our Founders before it is too late; or have we already passed the point of no return?



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