

Historical Moments

Changing Interpretations of America's Past



Volume II

The Civil War Through the 20th Century

Jim R. McClellan

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Jim R. McClellan
Northern Virginia Community College



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About the Author

A native of Texas, Jim McClellan has served since 1975 on the faculty of Northern Virginia Community College, one of the nation's two largest community colleges. A professor of history, he teaches a wide variety of courses, most frequently American History and American Indian History. He has also joined with colleagues to lead a number of seminars, including field expeditions to Mayan sites in Mexico.

Professor McClellan's previous publications and writing activities include articles on politics, book reviews, and a variety of scholarly pieces. *Historical Moments* was developed in his classroom in a continuing effort to challenge his students to think critically about historical events.

Professor McClellan's many outside interests include the outdoors, travel, and community service. He is currently chairman of the City of Alexandria Human Rights Commission and has been a director of a local school for retarded adults and a child care center. He enjoys playing football and basketball, and fondly remembers dunking a basketball before 15,000 spectators at a professional basketball game—from an unusually tall unicycle.

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of America's Past**

Volume II

Preface

There are moments in history, often seemingly insignificant at the time, which cause an entire nation to change the course of its development. Sometimes these moments produce mere course alterations. Sometimes they cause a society to move off in a whole new direction. This volume, *Historical Moments: Changing Interpretations of America's Past*, Volume II, is an attempt to examine some of the moments in American history that have produced a change of course. It is an attempt to look at these moments through the eyes of those who lived them and through the thoughts of those who lived after them.

Understanding the past is almost as difficult as predicting the future. History is not a mere listing of all that has happened; it is an attempt to understand what has happened in the past in order to better understand the present. A compilation on paper of all that happens to the American people on even a single day would overfill most of the nation's warehouses. But while such a compilation might record all that has happened, it would not explain why. History is an interpretative process. It is an attempt to cull from all that has happened those things that explain the development of the nation.

Each generation rewrites history. It has no choice but to do so. It finds itself at a place along the continuum of time different from that of its predecessors and must understand how it got there. It searches the records of the past to explain its present. Consequently, though what has passed cannot be changed, interpretations of what has passed are forever changing.

With each turning point in history comes a search for its meaning. Not only does the generation that lives through the incident seek to record and assess the meaning of the event, but so do succeeding generations.

The chapters that follow examine the attempt to find the meaning of significant moments in America's past. Each approaches its examination of a moment in history in a similar manner. Following an introduction to the event is a section entitled *First Impressions*. Here the event is described in the words of those who participated in it or through the commentary of contemporary observers. From the writings and speeches of participants, journalists, political leaders, scholars, and others, as well as from an examination of primary documents, a firsthand view of the event may be secured—and secured within the context of its times.

The next section is called *Second Impressions*. With every step forward through time, a glance back through history reveals the past from a new vantage point. This section presents the ongoing effort to make sense of the past. Some of the scholars whose views are presented in this section look at the past with the biases of their time; others seek to challenge the biases of their time by drawing on the lessons of the past. All seek to make sense in their own time of the events that have led to their present.

The third section of each chapter of this volume is entitled *Questioning the Past*. A chapter might be conceived of as a seminar. Around the conference

table sit scholars of the past and students of the present. After the topic is introduced with the words of those who lived it, scholars of succeeding generations present their interpretations of the historical moment under review. Students of the present then continue the search for the meaning of the moment.

The moments chosen for inclusion in this book were selected because they in some way affected a large segment of the American people. Their impact may have been political, social, cultural, economic, diplomatic, psychological, or even a combination of these. No claim is made that the events studied in the chapters that follow constitute a complete listing of all the moments that have shaped the direction of American history. Indeed, every single moment finds the American people acting and reacting in ways that shape their course through history.

At an early stage in the development of the two volumes that make up *Historical Moments*, I received valuable advice on concept and content from several historians: Arthur H. Auten, University of Hartford; John C. Kendall, California State University, Fresno; Robert James Maddox, Pennsylvania State University; and Sylvia W. McGrath, Steven F. Austin State University. Their suggestions led to an important alteration in this work.

I also want to acknowledge my indebtedness to my wife, Catherine Lee Burwell McClellan, for her advice, support, and patience. I was fortunate to have the assistance of my daughter, Shannon McClellan, when researching several of the chapters for Volumes I and II; the reference librarians of the Alexandria Campus of Northern Virginia Community College—Sylvia Rortvedt, Mimi Gronlund, Leslie Humble, and Jean Hogan—were always able and willing to help me track down even the most obscure of sources. I am very appreciative of the support and professionalism of the people I have worked with at The Dushkin Publishing Group. In particular, I want to thank Irving Rockwood, publisher, for his help in the development of these volumes, Marion F. Gouge and Elizabeth L. Hansen for their perseverance in the massive undertaking of securing the permissions, and Catherine Leonard for her work as my editor.

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Chapter 1

Civil War

Fort Sumter Is Fired Upon *April 12, 1861*

Never before had the White House been captured by a candidate whose electoral majority had been won without the vote of even a single Southern elector. The significance of Abraham Lincoln's victory was clear to Southerners: The days when they could direct the course of the country were now a part of the past. South Carolina seceded from the United States on December 20, 1860. Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Louisiana declared in January of 1861 that they, too, were no longer members of the American Union. Texas joined the new confederation created by these seceding states in February.

Following their secession from the Union, the states of the South assumed control of all federal property within their borders. This assumption was accomplished without resistance in most instances. Two federal outposts, however, refused to submit to the imposition of Confederate control: Fort Pickens in Pensacola, Florida, and Fort Sumter, a military installation situated on an island in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. The continuing federal control of these outposts was an irritant to the South and a potentially volatile burden for the North.

- ***First Impressions: The Move toward Confrontation***

As Lincoln formed his new Republican administration, there were important questions awaiting answer. Should his government abandon Forts Pickens and Sumter, or reinforce and attempt to hold them? This question was inseparable from a far more fundamental policy issue. Would the dissolution of the United States occur peaceably? Would it be allowed to occur at all? The answers to these questions did not come until the morning of April 12, 1861.

Source 1: Diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy

On the 6th of March, 1861, two days after the inauguration of President Lincoln, Secretary Holt, who continued to discharge the duties of Secretary of War, . . . called at the Navy Department with the compliments of General Scott and requested my attendance at the War Department on matters of special importance. I went immediately with him to the office of the Secretary of War, where were Generals Scott and Totten, and I think Secretary Cameron, and perhaps one or two others.

General Scott commenced with a statement of the perilous condition of the country and of the difficulties and embarrassments he had experienced for months past; related the measures and precautions he had taken for the public safety, the advice and admonitions he had given President Buchanan, which, however, had been disregarded, and, finally, his apprehensions, perhaps convictions, that hostilities were imminent and, he feared, inevitable. He had . . . taken the responsibility of ordering a small military force to Washington for the protection of the government and the public property and archives. . . . His statement was full, clear in its details, and of absorbing interest. . . . Among other matters, and that for which he had especially requested our attendance that morning, was certain intelligence of a distressing character from Major Anderson at Fort Sumter, stating that his supplies were almost exhausted, that he could get no provisions in Charleston, and that he with his small command would be totally destitute in about six weeks. Under these circumstances it became a question what action should be taken, and for that purpose, as well as to advise us of the condition of affairs, he had convened the gentlemen present.

The information was to most of us unexpected and astounding, and there was, on the part of such of us as had no previous intimation of the condition of things at Sumter, an earnest determination to take immediate and efficient measures to relieve and reinforce the garrison. But General Scott, without opposing this spontaneous resolution, related the difficulties which had already taken place, and stated the formidable obstacles which were to be encountered from the numerous and well-manned batteries that were erected in Charleston Harbor. Any successful attempt to reinforce or relieve the garrison by sea he supposed impracticable. An attempt had already been made and failed. The question was, however, one for naval authorities to decide, for the army could do nothing.

(Confidential)

Navy Department, April 5, 1861

Captain Samuel Mercer, commanding U.S. Steamer Powhatan . . .

The United States Steamers Powhatan, Pawnee, Pocahontas, and Harriet Lane will compose a naval force under your command, to be sent to the vicinity of Charleston, S.C., for the purpose of aiding in carrying out the objects of an expedition of which the War Department has charge.

The primary object of the expedition is to provision Fort Sumter. . . . Should the authorities at Charleston permit the fort to be supplied, no further particular service will be required of the force under your command. . . .

Should the authorities at Charleston, however, refuse to permit, or attempt to prevent the vessel or vessels having supplies on board from entering the harbor, or from peaceably proceeding to Fort Sumter, you will protect the transports or boats of the expedition in the object of their mission, disposing your force in

such manner as to open the way for their ingress, and afford as far as practicable security to the men and boats, and repelling by force if necessary all obstructions toward provisioning the fort and reinforcing it; for in case of a resistance to the peaceable primary object of the expedition, a reinforcement of the garrison will also be attempted. . . .

I am, respectfully,
Your Obed't Serv't,
Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy

Source 3: Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser

FROM CHARLESTON

Charleston, April 9.—At last the ball has opened.

The state authorities last night received official notification that supplies would be furnished to Anderson at any hazard—peaceably if possible, by force if necessary.

Immense preparations immediately were commenced suitable to the emergency.

Orders were issued to the entire military force of the city, held in reserve, to proceed to their station without delay.

Four regiments of a thousand men each have been telegraphed for from the country. . . .

The community has been thrown into a fever of excitement by the discharge of seven guns from Citadel square, the signal for the assembling of all the reserves ten minutes afterward.

Hundreds of men left their beds, hurrying to and fro toward their respective destinations. In the absence of sufficient armories, [at] the corners of the streets, public squares, and other convenient points companies were formed, for all night the long roll of the drum, and the steady tramp of the military, and the gallop of the cavalry, resounding through the city, betokened the close proximity of the long anticipated hostilities. . . .

South Carolinians are anxious to meet the enemy at the point of the bayonet rather than . . . an exchange of iron compliments. The latter is a too deliberate style of fighting to suit the impetuous nature of the most desperate set of men ever brought together. . . .

No attempt is likely to be made upon the city. Officers acquainted with the caliber of Major Anderson's guns say the longest shot will fall short three-eighths of a mile.

FROM WASHINGTON

THE GAZETTE'S SPECIAL DISPATCH.

Washington, April 10.—I am authorized to say by a member of the Cabinet that the steamers for Charleston carried no arms and no men, but a supply of provisions for the garrison at Fort Sumter, and also that Gov. Pickens was notified that that was the object of the steamers' visit.

FROM CHARLESTON

Charleston, April 10, 1 P.M.—All is still quiet up to this hour. . . . It is believed that no order for attack on Fort Sumter has as yet been received from Montgomery. Nothing outside the bar.

The floating **battery** having been finished, mounted, and manned, was taken out of the dock last evening and anchored in a cove near Sullivan's Island, ready for service.

Our people are not excited, but there is a fixed determination to meet the issue.

An additional regiment of one thousand men is hourly expected from the interior.

Governor Pickens was in secret session with the State Convention to-day before their final adjournment, which took place at 1 o'clock.

About 1,000 troops were sent to the fortifications to-day, and 1,800 more will go down to-morrow. . . .

Large numbers of the members of the convention, after adjournment, volunteered as privates.

About 7,000 troops are now at the fortifications, the "beginning of the end" is coming to a final closing.

Washington, April 11.—The general excitement occasioned here yesterday by the calling out [of] the volunteer militia of the District to be mustered into the federal service has abated, and to-day four or five more companies marched to the War Department and took the army oath, namely; "to bear true allegiance to the United States and serve them honestly and faithfully against all their enemies and opposers, whomsoever, and observe and obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over them, according to the rules and articles for the government of the United States."

Previous to taking the oath, the volunteers were informed that the obligation was for three months, unless they were sooner discharged.

Montgomery, April 11.—The War Department is overwhelmed with applications from Regiments, battalions, and companies to enter the service. Over 7000 men from the Border States offer their services besides two thousand Indian warriors, who have signified a desire to co-operate with the Confederate forces. Numbers of companies are daily arriving at Charleston, Savannah, and Pensacola.

Charleston, April 11, P.M.—A collision is hourly expected.

Northern dispatches state that attempts will be made to-day to reinforce Sumter in small boats protected by schooners lined with sand bags, the war vessels in the meantime to protect the landing party on Morris Island.

It is reported that Gen. Beauregard has demanded the immediate surrender of Fort Sumter.

EDITORIAL

What is Sumter . . . worth, in comparison with the preservation of the public peace, and the avoidance of civil war? Why hinge upon the question of a formal *recognition* of the Confederate States—when the Confederate States have a government, an army, a civil, political, and military organization? Why have the public been left under the impression for weeks past, that Sumter was to be relinquished,

without disturbance? Has not the reported "military necessity" for its evacuation been acquiesced in by reasonable people everywhere, North and South? We believe, not only in the "military necessity," but, under the circumstances, in the propriety of its evacuation. Patriots and statesmen have to look at things as they find them, and to deal with them accordingly. Will holding on to Sumter, or reinforcing the garrison, make *Secession* less a reality than it is—alter the condition of South Carolina—or, in any degree, injure the Confederate States—supposing injury to be intended? Will it strengthen the United States, or any position of the States yet in the Union? Will it strengthen the Union feeling in any of the Southern States which have not yet seceded? Will it not irritate and heighten angry feelings? Will it not, finally, and most of all, . . . tend to, and probably produce, a *civil war*?

Charleston, April 11, 8 o'clock P.M.—It has now been ascertained that a demand for the surrender of the fort was made to-day at 2 o'clock. . . . Thousands of people are assembled on the Battery this evening anticipating the commencement of the fight. . . .

The steamer Harriet Lane is reported off the bar, and signals are being displayed by the guard boats and answered by the batteries, but what is indicated cannot be more than guessed at.

Source 4: Diary of Mary Boykin Chesnut, wife of General Beauregard's aide-de-camp, James Chesnut

April 12— . . . I do not pretend to go to sleep. How can I? If Anderson does not accept terms at 4 o'clock, the orders are he shall be fired upon.

I count four by St. Michael's chimes, and I begin to hope. At half past four, the heavy booming of a cannon! I sprang out of bed and on my knees, prostrate, I prayed as I never prayed before.

There was a sound of stir all over the house, a pattering of feet in the corridor. All seemed hurrying one way. I put on my double-gown and a shawl and went to the house top. The shells were bursting. In the dark I heard a man say: "Waste of ammunition!" I knew my husband was rowing about in a boat somewhere in that dark bay, and that the shells were roofing it over, bursting toward the Fort. If Anderson was obstinate, Mr. Chesnut was to order the Forts on our side to open fire. Certainly fire had begun. The regular roar of the cannon, there it was! And who could tell what each *volley* accomplished in death and destruction.

The women were wild, there on the house top. Prayers from the women and imprecations from the men; and then a shell would light up the scene.

Source 5: *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*

SURRENDER OF FORT SUMTER

Charleston, April 13, 10½ A.M.—At intervals of fifteen minutes the firing was kept up all night on Sumter. Anderson ceased fire at six in the morning. All night he was engaged in repairing damages, and protecting the *barbette* guns on the top of Sumter. He commenced to return the fire this morning at seven o'clock.

An explosion has occurred at Sumter, as a dense volume of smoke was seen suddenly to rise. Anderson has ceased to fire for above an hour. His flag is still up. . . .

April 13—Forenoon—Fort Sumter is undoubtedly on fire. Major Anderson has thrown out a raft, and men are passing up buckets of water from it to extinguish the flames. The fort is scarcely discernible in the smoke. The men on the raft are now subjected to the fire from the Cummings Point batteries. With good glasses, balls can be seen skipping along the surface of the water and occasionally striking near the raft, creating great consternation among the men thereon.

The flames can now be seen issuing from all the portholes, and the destruction of all combustible matter in the fort appears to be inevitable. . . .

A reliable source states that up to 10 a.m. no one at Fort Moultrie had been killed. Eleven shots had penetrated the famous floating battery below her water line. The few shots fired by Anderson, early in the morning, knocked the bricks and chimneys of the officers quarters in Moultrie like a whirlwind.

It seems to be Anderson's only hope to hold out for aid from the fleet.

Two ships are making in towards Morris Island, apparently with a view to land troops to silence the destructive battery. . . .

April 13, 1 p.m.—Anderson's flag and mast are down. Supposed to have been shot away.

The federal flag has again been hoisted. Wm. Porcher Miles, under a white flag, has gone to Sumter.

Anderson has hauled down the federal flag, and hoisted a white one.

The batteries have all stopped firing, and two boats with Confederate flags are on their way to the fort.

Fort Sumter has surrendered. The Confederate flag has been hoisted.

Source 6: Jefferson Davis's message to the Confederate Congress

April 29, 1861

The declaration of war made against this Confederacy, by Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, . . . renders it necessary . . . to devise the measures necessary for the defence of the country. . . .

The war of the Revolution was successfully waged, and resulted in the treaty of peace with Great Britain in 1783, by the terms of which the several States were each by name recognized to be independent. . . .

It was by the delegates chosen by the several States . . . that the Constitution of the United States was formed in 1787, and submitted to the several States for ratification.

Strange, indeed, must it appear to the impartial observer, that . . . an organization created by the States, to secure the blessings of liberty and independence against foreign aggression, has been gradually perverted into a machine for their control in their domestic affairs.

The creature has been exalted above its Creator—the principals have been made subordinate to the agent appointed by themselves.

The people of the Southern States, whose almost exclusive occupation was agriculture, early perceived a tendency in the Northern States to render a common

government subservient to their own purposes by imposing burthens on commerce as protection to their manufacturing and shipping interests.

Long and angry controversies grew out of these attempts . . . to benefit one section of the country at the expense of the other. . . .

When the several States delegated certain powers to the United States Congress, a large portion of the laboring population were imported into the colonies by the mother country. In twelve out of the fifteen States, negro slavery existed, and the right of property existing in slaves was protected by law; this property was recognized in the Constitution, and provision was made against its loss by the escape of the slave. . . .

The climate of the Northern States soon proved unpropitious to the continuance of slave labor, while the reverse being the case at the South, made unrestricted free intercourse between the two sections unfriendly.

The Northern States consulted their own interests by selling their slaves to the South and prohibiting slavery between their limits. . . .

As soon, however, as the Northern States, that had prohibited slavery within their limits, had reached a number sufficient to give their representation a controlling vote in Congress, a persistent and organized system of hostile measures against the rights of the owners of slaves in the Southern States was inaugurated and gradually extended. A series of measures was devised and prosecuted for the purpose of rendering insecure the tenure of property in slaves.

Fanatical organizations . . . were assiduously engaged in exciting amongst the slaves a spirit of discontent and revolt. Means were furnished for their escape from their owners, and agents secretly employed to entice them to abscond.

The constitutional provision for their rendition to their owners was first evaded, then openly denounced. . . . Often owners of slaves were mobbed and even murdered in open day solely for applying to a magistrate for the arrest of a fugitive slave. . . .

Finally, a great party was organized for the purpose of obtaining the administration of the Government, with the avowed object of using its power for the total exclusion of the slave States from all participation in the benefits of the public domain. . . . This party, thus organized, succeeded in the month of November last in the election of its candidate for the Presidency of the United States. . . .

Early in April the attention of the whole country was attracted to extraordinary preparations for an extensive military and naval expedition in New York and other Northern ports. These preparations commenced in secrecy, for an expedition whose destination was concealed, and only became known when nearly completed, and on the 5th, 6th, and 7th of April, transports and vessels of war with troops, munitions and military supplies, sailed from Northern ports bound southward. . . .

According to the usual course of navigation, the vessels composing the expedition, and designed for the relief of Fort Sumter, might be looked for in Charleston harbor on the 9th of April. . . . [O]ur flag did not wave over the battered walls until after the appearance of the hostile fleet off Charleston. . . .

The people of Charleston for months had been irritated by the spectacle of a fortress held within their principal harbor as a standing menace against their peace and independence—built in part with their own money— . . . intended to be used . . . for their own protection against foreign attack. How it was held out with persistent tenacity as a means of offence against them by the very Government which they had established for their own protection, is well known. . . .

Scarcely had the President of the United States received intelligence of the failure of the scheme which he had devised for the reinforcement of Fort Sumter, when he issued a declaration of war against the Confederacy.

Source 7: President Abraham Lincoln's Special Session message

July 4, 1861

Fellow-Citizens of the Senate and House of Representatives:

Having been convened on an extraordinary occasion, your attention is not called to any ordinary subject of legislation.

At the beginning of the present Presidential term, four months ago, the functions of the Federal Government were found to be generally suspended within the several States of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Florida, excepting those of the Post Office Department.

Within these States all the forts, arsenals, dockyards, custom-houses, and the like . . . had been seized and were held in open hostility to this Government, excepting only Forts Pickens, Taylor, and Jefferson, on or near the Florida coast, and Fort Sumter, in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. . . .

The forts remaining in the possession of the Federal Government in and near these States were either besieged or menaced by warlike preparations, and especially Fort Sumter was nearly surrounded by well-protected hostile batteries. . . .

On the 5th of March, the present incumbent's first full day in office, a letter of Major Anderson, commanding at Fort Sumter, . . . received at the War Department on the 4th of March, was by that Department placed in his hands. This letter expressed the professional opinion of the writer that reinforcements could not be thrown into the fort within the time for his relief rendered necessary by the limited supply of provisions. . . . The whole was immediately laid before Lieutenant-General Scott, who at once concurred with Major Anderson in opinion. . . . In a purely military point of view this reduced the duty of the Administration in the case to the mere matter of getting the garrison safely out of the fort.

It was believed, however, that to so abandon that position under the circumstances would be utterly ruinous; that the *necessity* under which it was done would not be fully understood; that by many it would be construed as a part of a *voluntary* policy; that at home it would discourage the friends of the Union, embolden its adversaries, and go far to insure to the latter a recognition abroad; that, in fact, it would be our national destruction consummated. This could not be allowed. . . . [I]t was resolved . . . to notify the governor of South Carolina that he might expect an attempt would be made to provision the fort, and that if the attempt should not be resisted there would be no effort to throw in men, arms, or ammunition without further notice, or in case of attack upon the fort. This notice was accordingly given, whereupon the fort was attacked and bombarded to its fall, without even awaiting the arrival of the provisioning expedition.

It was thus seen that the assault upon and reduction of Fort Sumter was in no sense a matter of self-defense on the part of the assailants. . . . They knew that this Government desired to keep the garrison in the fort, not to assail them, but merely to maintain visible possession, and thus to preserve the Union from actual and immediate dissolution, trusting, . . . to time, discussion, and the ballot box for final adjustment; and they assailed and reduced the fort for precisely the reverse object. . . .

It might seem at first thought to be of little difference whether the present movement at the South be called "secession" or "rebellion." The movers, however, well understand the difference. At the beginning they knew they could never raise their treason to any respectable magnitude by any name which implies *violation* of the law. . . . They invented an ingenious sophism, which, if conceded,