

Lincoln's Gamble: How the Southern Secession Crisis Became the American Civil War

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Abstract

What prompted US President Abraham Lincoln to respond to Southern secession with military force? Existing explanations are largely information-oriented: if the Northern states had simply possessed better information regarding the capabilities and resolve of the Southern states and the likely consequences of attacking the South, a war would not have taken place. However, the evidence suggest otherwise: Lincoln, his cabinet, and his most senior generals knew that Southern forces were experienced and that attacking could ignite a large and costly war. Instead, the onset of the American Civil War must be understood through the logic of preventive war: the North attacked to prevent British recognition of the South as an independent nation. Well into June 1861, Lincoln hoped a blockade would compel the Southern states to rejoin the Union without bloodshed. However, as the prospect of British recognition of the South became more acute, Lincoln, believing a demonstration of force could prevent such recognition, chose to strike Southern forces at Manassas Junction, Virginia. An inability to prevent Confederate troops from sending reinforcements caused the attack to fail. This emboldened Southern forces and compromised Lincoln's credibility, thus igniting a long and bloody conflagration.

1 Introduction

Conflict scholars have largely ignored the American Civil War.¹ This is surprising for three reasons. First, the American Civil War killed more people than any European major power war between 1815 and 1914.² Second, by foreshadowing the technological advances that created the First World War's battlefield carnage, military historians identify the American Civil War as the first modern war.³ Third, the American Civil War illuminates how crises escalate to wars (which did occur) and how wars expand beyond the original belligerents (which did *not* occur).⁴

Conflict scholars' inattention to the American Civil War may explain why a fundamental question

¹Dan Reiter attributes this to students of interstate war viewing the American Civil War as (no surprise) a civil war and students of civil war focusing on conflicts after 1945 (Dan Reiter. *How Wars End*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2009). This is not to say that the American Civil War has been completely ignored by conflict scholars. Some scholars have used the American Civil War to understand how information revealed during a war does (or does not) influence the terms of peace offered by the opposing sides (Scott Wolford, Dan Reiter, and Clifford Carrubba, "Information, Commitment, and War." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (forthcoming); Reiter, *How Wars End*, 2009). Others have discussed the American Civil War in the context of the democratic peace. Waltz highlights the American Civil War as a possible disconfirming case of the democratic peace. Waltz states quite bluntly that, "in the 1860s, the northern American democracy fought the southern one" (Kenneth Waltz. "The Emerging Structure of International Politics." *International Security*. Autumn 1993. p. 78). However, Ray argues that this could not be the case since the Confederacy never had time to establish the democratic precedent that one party would step down if it lost (James Lee Ray. "Wars Between Democracies: Rare, or Nonexistent?" *International Interactions* 18/3 (1993), pp. 251- 276). Therefore, it was not a true democracy. Spiro counters Ray by pointing out how many countries (such as Japan until the early 1990s) did not set a similar precedent and, yet, were still considered democratic (David Spiro. "The Insignificance of the Liberal Peace." *International Security*. Autumn 1994. pp. 50-86). Moreover, Spiro points out that both the Confederacy and the Union had similar constitutional practices (e.g. neither allowed for women or slaves to vote). In short, as Spiro remarks, "what prevents the South from now being considered a democracy is that it did not win the war." (Ibid., p. 60).

²Common estimates place US deaths during the Civil War at approximately 620,000. The most devastating war of 19th century Europe was the Crimean War of 1853 - 1856. Deaths during the Crimean War range from 217,000 (Jack Levy. *War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495 - 1975*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press. 1983), to 264,200 (J. David Singer and Melvin Small. *The Wages of War 1816-1965: A Statistical Handbook* John Wiley and Sons Inc. 1972. p. 30), to 507,600 (Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy. *The Harper Encyclopedia of Military History: From 3500 BC to the Present* 4th Edition. New York: Harper Resource. 1993), to 615,000 (Michael Coldfefer. *Warfare and Armed Conflicts: A Statistical Reference to Casualty and Other Figures, 1618 - 1991* Second Edition. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company. 1992).

³Quincy Wright. *A Study of War*. University of Chicago Press. 1964. Other scholars contend that the Crimean War of 1853-1856 was the first modern war (see Orlando Figes, *The Crimean War: A History* Metropolitan Books. 2011).

⁴For reading on crisis escalation, see James Morrow, "Signaling Difficulties with Linkage in Crisis Bargaining," *International Studies Quarterly*, June 1992, pp. 153-172. On war expansion, see, among many others, Michael F. Altfeld and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, "Choosing Sides in Wars," *International Studies Quarterly* 23. 1979. pp. 87-112; Chae-Han Kim, "Third-party Participation in Wars," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35(4). 1991. pp. 659-677; Alastair Smith, "To Intervene or Not to Intervene: A Biased Decision," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*. 40(1). 1996. pp.16-40. For a work covering both topics, see John A. Vasquez. *The War Puzzle Revisited*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. 2009.

regarding the war has not been answered: how did the American Civil War become a war? Stated differently, why did US President Abraham Lincoln respond to Southern secession with military force? Existing explanations are largely information-oriented: if the North had simply possessed better information regarding Southern capabilities, Southern resolve, and the likely consequences of attacking the South, war could have been avoided. At best, such information-oriented explanations for the American Civil War's onset are misleading. At worst, they are wrong. As will be shown, Lincoln, his cabinet, and his most senior generals possessed fairly accurate information regarding Southern capabilities and feared that an attack might ignite a large and costly war.

I argue that the onset of the American Civil War must be understood through the logic of preventive war: the North attacked the South to prevent British recognition of the Southern states as an independent nation. Well into June 1861, Lincoln hoped a blockade would compel the Southern states to rejoin the Union without bloodshed. In contrast, members of his war council advocated an offensive strike against Southern forces at Manassas Junction, Virginia. The plan's supporters argued that attacking could quickly end the crisis, but only if Southern reinforcements did not arrive. Lincoln, fearing eventual British recognition of the South, took a calculated risk by choosing to strike. As feared, Northern forces could not prevent Southern reinforcements. The South's victory emboldened Southern military planners and compromised Lincoln's credibility. This ignited a long and bloody conflagration.

Exploring the onset of the American Civil War holds policy implications and deepens our understanding of several key theoretical concepts. First, foreign policy makers should note Lincoln's caution regarding the use of force and his recognition that things could go wrong when force is applied. In particular, from the perspective of civilian-military relations, the events leading to the attack on Manassas contrast sharply with the recent Iraq War.⁵ Planning during the Iraq War was marked by fractious civilian-military relations as civilian leaders virtually ignored advice from

⁵For more on civilian-military relations, particular the tendency of leaders to heed (or not) the advice of their military commanders, see also Samuel P. Huntington. *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1957. For more on the failure of civilian leaders to listen to military personnel during the Iraq War, see Dale R. Herspring *Rumsfeld's Wars: The Arrogance of Power*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas. 2008.

military advisors.⁶ In contrast, generals exercised a great deal of influence on Lincoln's decision. In many ways, Lincoln's decision to use force captures the best features of civil-military relations: the generals spoke candidly to Lincoln, disagreed with one another, made Lincoln aware of the risks associated with the various options, and then allowed him to decide.

Second, the American Civil War compels a rethinking of how scholars explain war onset. In particular, bargaining theories of war identify two main causes of war: private information (ignorance regarding an opponent's capabilities or resolve) and commitment problems (an inability to trust an opponent's promises).⁷ But that level of abstraction leaves no operational linkage between concepts and actual state policy or behavior. As Powell states, "These mechanisms are too general and too sparse to explain particular outcomes in any degree of specificity."⁸ For instance, David Lake finds that bargaining theory cannot explain the onset of the Iraq War primarily because "the key information failures were rooted in cognitive biases in decision making...both the United States and Iraq engaged in self-delusions, biased decision making, and failures to update prior beliefs that are inconsistent with the assumption that actors will seek out and use all available information"⁹ This is why Dan Reiter calls for additional qualitative analysis as a way of testing bargaining theory: "case studies of individual wars will be necessary to test the central ideas of the bargaining model...Theoretically informed studies need to be conducted of other major conflicts, including the Napoleonic War, the American Civil War, the Second World War, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War."¹⁰ This paper continues that challenge.

⁶Peter Feaver. "The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Iraq Surge Decision." *International Security*. Spring 2011. pp. 87-125.

⁷There is a third explanation, indivisibilities, but many theorists dismiss this explanation as empirically trivial because states can make side payments or take other actions that resolve the problem and allow ex ante bargains. See, in particular, James Fearon. "Rationalist Explanations for War." *International Organization*. Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer, 1995), pp. 379-414; James Fearon. "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes." *The American Political Science Review*. Vol. 88, No. 3 (Sep., 1994), pp. 577-592; Robert Powell. "War as a Commitment Problem" *International Organization*. 60: 2006. pp. 169-203; Robert Powell. *In The Shadow of Power*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1999; and R. Harrison Wagner, *The Theory of International Politics: War and the State*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. 2007.

⁸Powell *Shadow of Power*, p. 6.

⁹David Lake, "Two Cheers for Bargaining Theory: Assessing Rationalists Explanations for the Iraq War." *International Security*. Vol. 35, No. 3 (Winter 2010/11), pp. 7-52.

¹⁰Dan Reiter, "Exploring the Bargaining Model of War." *Perspectives on Politics* 1 March 2003. p. 32.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 summarizes the current explanations for the American Civil War's onset, which emphasize the role of information. Section 3 presents the argument that the onset of the American Civil War can best be understood through the logic of preventive war. Section 4 provides evidence that Lincoln initiated an offensive strike against Southern forces hoping a victory would end the secession crisis before the South gained foreign recognition. It also explains how the subsequent Southern victory contributed to the escalation of the crisis into a full fledged war. Section 5 concludes.

2 Explaining the American Civil War

This section establishes three points regarding the American Civil War's onset: (1) one must separate Southern secession from the Northern response to secession; (2) one must look chronologically past the April 12, 1861 attack on Fort Sumter; and (3) that the current narrative regarding how the 1861 secession crisis escalated to a war can be labeled an information-oriented explanation.

2.1 Focusing on the Northern Response to Secession

To understand how the secession crisis of 1861 became a four year cataclysmic event that killed over 600,000 American soldiers, one must separate the decision of the Southern states to leave the Union from the Northerner response to that secession. According to historian Phillip Paludan, delving into the issues of dispute between the Northern and Southern states will not explain why war came: "a description of the decision for secession is not...a description of why the war came...To understand why the war came we must look not at secession but at the Northern response to it."¹¹

¹¹Phillip S. Paludan, "The American Civil War Considered as a Crisis in Law and Order." *American Historical Review*. Oct. 1972, p. 1013. For work exploring how these issues led to the secession of the Southern states, see, among many others, David M. Potter. *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861*. Harper Collins. 1976; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese. *Slavery in White and Black: Class and Race in the Southern Slaveholders New World Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2008; Barry Weingast. "Political Stability and Civil War: Institutions, Commitment, and American Democracy." in *Analytic Narratives*. Robert Bates, Avner Greif, Margaret

Similarly, the political scientist Richard Benseal argues how the events of 1860 and 1861 must be considered as two separate decisions: the decision of the Southern states to secede from the Union and the Union's decision to use military force to restore the Union; "Between the secession of South Carolina and the inauguration of Lincoln, Congress considered many responses to the withdrawal of southern states from the union."¹² This is also why the military historian Brian Holden Reid writes, "close attention must be accorded to the immediate origins of the conflict because it is only these that actually produce war at a given date in a specific form...and military considerations come to the fore."¹³

If we must give particular attention to military considerations, then when did the North decide to use military force against the South? Many narratives on the North's decision to use force end with the April 12, 1861 bombing of Fort Sumter by Southern troops.¹⁴ However, as will now be explained, this is problematic.

2.2 Looking Beyond Fort Sumter

To review, on April 10, 1861 Lincoln dispatched a supply expedition to Fort Sumter, South Carolina and notified the Governor of South Carolina of the expedition's departure and mission. Lincoln did this knowing that the likelihood of attack was high: "They knew—they were expressly notified—that the giving of bread to the few brave and hungry men of the garrison, was all which would on that occasion be attempted, unless themselves, by resisting so much, should provoke

Levi, Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, and Barry R. Weingast (eds.). Princeton University Press. 1998; Mark Thornton and Robert B. Ekelund Jr., *Tariffs, Blockades, and Inflation: The Economics of the Civil War*. Scholarly Resource. 2004; and Herschel Grossman, "Choosing Between Peace and War." *NBER Working Paper* No. 10180. December 2003.

¹²Benseal 1990 p. 78.

¹³Reid, Holden. *The Origins of the American Civil War*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman. 1996.

¹⁴See, among others, Eric FONER. *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* Norton. 2010, p. 161; Russell McClintock, *Lincoln and the Decision for War*. University of North Carolina Press. 2008; the collected essays in *Why the Civil War Came* Gabor Boritt (ed.) Oxford University Press. 1996; Richard Current, *Lincoln and the First Shot*, Addison-Wesley. 1964; Kenneth Stamp. "Comment on 'Why the Republicans Rejected Both Compromise and Secession'" in *The Crisis of the Union, 1860 - 1861*. George H. Knoles (ed). Louisiana State University Press. 1965; Kenneth Stamp *And the War Came: the North and the secession crisis, 1860-1861*, Louisiana State University Press. 1950; J.G. Randall and David Donald. *The Civil War and Reconstruction*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company. 1969.

more.”¹⁵ As expected, South Carolinian forces attacked Fort Sumter on April 12, prompting the Union troops inside to surrender (there were no casualties). On April 15, Lincoln issued a proclamation declaring that he “thought fit to call forth, and hereby do call forth, the militia of the several States of the Union, to the aggregate number of seventy-five thousand, in order to suppress said combinations, and to cause the laws to be duly executed.”

But focusing on the attack of Sumter is problematic. As the historian David Potter states, “focus upon Fort Sumter can perhaps be intensified too much.”¹⁶ It will be shown below that despite calling up militias, Lincoln’s initial policy response to Sumter was to impose a blockade with the hope of reuniting the country without violence. Had this strategy worked, Sumter may have gone down in history as an event of no more consequence than the 1835 ‘Toledo War’ between the territory of Michigan and the state of Ohio.¹⁷ This is why the historian Emory Thomas refers to the three months following Sumter as a ‘phony war’.¹⁸

Unfortunately, as will now be discussed, scholars who do look beyond Sumter largely attribute the war to one factor: stupidity.

2.3 The Current Narrative: Information-Oriented Explanations

For one scholar, the war occurred because “nearly no one had a clue about what they were doing. Public and private discourse was loud and long and wrong about what might happen if war broke out...[many felt] one battle or campaign would ensure victory for ‘our’ side.”¹⁹ Another historian claims the war resulted from the participants being “foolish,”²⁰ while another argues that when the

¹⁵Lincoln Address to Congress, July 4, 1861. Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln. p. 425.

¹⁶David M. Potter, “Why the Republicans Rejected Both Compromise and Secession.” in *The Crisis of the Union, 1860 - 1861*. George H. Knoles (ed). Louisiana State University Press. 1965, p. 105.

¹⁷ The ‘Toledo War’ was not not inconsequential, since its resolution gave Michigan the upper peninsula and Ohio the Toledo strip. See Don Faber. *The Toledo War: The First Michigan-Ohio Rivalry* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 2009.

¹⁸Emory M. Thomas. *The Dogs of War: 1861* Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2011, p. 69.

¹⁹Thomas *Dogs of War*, p.ix

²⁰Reid. *The Origins of the American Civil War*

Republicans (with Lincoln) rejected compromise “they did not know that it would end by leaving them with a war on their hands.”²¹ Still others claim the participants simply misjudged the eventual cost of the war: “Some writers have specifically remarked that perhaps the largest surprise of the war was how large it became.”²² In short, these explanations maintain that a major war would not have ensued if the sides simply possessed better information regarding the other side’s capabilities and/or resolve.

Such arguments can be labeled *information-oriented* explanations: the American Civil War would not have occurred if the actors involved, particularly the decision makers in the North, simply possessed better information about the capabilities and resolve of the South and how these translated into prosecuting a quick and successful fight against the South. As the historian Emory Thomas laments, “during the prologue to the Civil War, precious few military ‘authorities’ had the opportunity to offer council. Had political leaders in the United States and Confederate States heeded them, they likely would have heard truth spoken to power...[but] no one asked those who would have to fight this war what might happen once the dogs of war were let slip.”²³

This argument’s logic is supported by the bargaining model of conflict. According to Fearon, if two rational actors receive identical information, they should reason to the same conclusion, meaning they should have the same estimates regarding the likely outcome of conflict.²⁴ Thus, if the two actors have different estimates, this must be due to one of the agents having different (and necessarily private) information. This is why bargaining theories of war view private information as a primary cause of war.²⁵ All states know that each state possesses private information about capabilities (or resolve) and each state can benefit by lying about the true condition of its capabilities. Since all states know that all other states have an incentive to bluff, it becomes incredibly difficult for states

²¹David M. Potter, “Why the Republicans” , p. 105.

²²Gerald Gunderson. “The Origins of the American Civil War.” *The Journal of Economic History*. Vol. 34. No 4 (December 1974). p. 932.

²³Thomas *Dogs of War*, p. 22.

²⁴Fearon “Rationalist Explanations,” p. 393.

²⁵For a critique of the mutual optimism alone as a cause of war, see Mark Fey and Kristopher Ramsay. “Mutual Optimism and War.” *American Journal of Political Science*. October 2007. pp. 738-753.

to convince one another that statements of their true capabilities are, in fact, true. Thus, like poker players, states must force one another to ‘ante up’ through costly conflicts in order to learn the true nature of the other states capabilities.²⁶ Applying this logic to the onset of the American Civil War, the sides failed to realize that force would lead to a protracted war because the actors lacked specific information regarding the capabilities of the other side. In particular, given Paludan’s above comment that “to understand why the war came we must look not at secession but at the Northern response to it”, Northern decision makers must have misperceived their capabilities and resolve relative to the South.²⁷

Consider the explanation for the Civil War’s onset offered by the historian Kenneth Stampp. Stampp argues that Lincoln and the Republicans – who had rejected all proposals for compromise – perceived force as necessary to collect federal revenues and to recover or maintain possession of federal property.²⁸ According to Stampp, Lincoln strongly believed the federal government would have to enforce the law in order to suppress secession. Stampp points to a number of letters written by Lincoln in late December 1860 articulating this view. For instance, in a letter dated December 21 he wrote that General Winfield Scott should be instructed “to be as well prepared as he can to either hold or retake the forts, as the case may require, at, and after the inauguration.”²⁹ Again, on December 29, Lincoln wrote “I think we should hold the forts, or retake them, as the case may be, and collect the revenue.”³⁰ However, Stampp claims that Lincoln and the Republicans “saw

²⁶See Erik Gartzke, “War Is In the Error Term,” *International Organization*, Summer 1999, p. 571. See also Branislav Slantchev “The Principle of Convergence in Wartime Negotiations.” *American Political Science Review*, November 2003, pp. 621-632. Even if states have fully and accurate information regarding capabilities, they may still disagree on how these capabilities will translate to war victory (e.g. although A and B might both agree about the cohesion of A’s army, they might disagree about how important cohesion is in terms of measuring strength). See Alastair Smith and Allan Stam, “Bargaining and the Nature of War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. December 2004. pp. 783-813.

²⁷Paludan, “The American Civil War” , p. 1013.

²⁸Kenneth Stampp. “Comment on ‘Why the Republicans Rejected Both Compromise and Secession’” in *The Crisis of the Union, 1860 - 1861*. George H. Knoles (ed). Louisiana State University Press. 1965.

²⁹quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 111.

³⁰quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 112. Lincoln restates this view in his inaugural address; “ In doing this there needs to be no bloodshed or violence; and there shall be none, unless it be forced upon the national authority. The power confided to me will be used to hold, occupy, and possess the property and places belonging to the government, and to collect the duties and imposts; but beyond what may be necessary for these objects, there will be no invasion – no using of force against or among the people anywhere.” (Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address. March 4, 1861. *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. p. 254).

enforcement of the laws [through force] as an alternative *that would not necessarily lead to war.*³¹

One might charitably label Stamp's argument as ambiguous, at least in comparison to the statements that opened this sub-section. However, other variants of the information explanation are more clear. Consider Dan Reiter's recent account. As evidence of private information biasing Northern assessments of war, Reiter cites Lincoln's Secretary of State William H. Seward. Seward, according to the New York banker George Templeton Strong, told a group of New York financial and cultural elites (such as Columbia University President Charles King) that "there would be no serious fighting after all; the South would collapse and everything be serenely adjusted."³² This leads Reiter to state that "the war began under conditions consistent with an information-oriented view on the causes of the conflict."³³

But using this particular statement by Seward to support an information-oriented explanation for the Civil War's onset is problematic. Specifically, this statement was made by a member of the cabinet to individuals in the general public. As will be shown below, the sentiment *inside* Lincoln's war council (which included Seward) and between US diplomats was not so sanguine.

If the evidence will call into question an information-oriented explanation for the war, then what explains the North's decision to use force? The next section will discuss the logic underpinning an alternative explanation for the onset of the American Civil War: preventive war.

3 The Preventive War Argument

I argue that Lincoln's decision to use force can best be understood through the logic of preventive war: key decision makers in the North decided to launch a strike against Southern forces, not because they misjudged Southern capabilities or Southern war fighting skill, but to prevent British

³¹Stamp "Comment On Republicans", p. 110. Emphasis Added.

³²quoted in Ibid., p. 142. See also, George Templeton Strong. *The Diary of George Templeton Strong*. p. 144.

³³Ibid.

recognition of the South. In this section, I review the definition of preventive war, the motivations that drive leaders to choose preventive war as a strategy, and briefly introduce how the logic of preventive war explains Lincoln's decision to use force against the South.

3.1 Defining Preventive War

Jack Levy defines preventive war as “a strategy designed to forestall an adverse shift in the balance of power and driven by better-now-than-later logic.”³⁴ Specifically, a state decides that it is “better to fight now rather than risk the likely consequences of inaction,” which include a decline in relative power, diminished bargaining leverage, and war under less favorable circumstances later.³⁵ Stated differently, preventive war motivations arise when indefinite stalemate appears impossible and the attacker recognizes this (or assumes it) before the victim.³⁶ In many ways, preventive logic underpins what John Mearsheimer calls ‘Offensive Realism’: “Given the difficulty of determining how much power is enough for today and tomorrow, great powers recognize that the best way to ensure their security is to achieve hegemony now, thus eliminating any possibility of a challenge by another great power.”³⁷

As Stephen Van Evera writes, preventive logic is a “ubiquitous motive for war.”³⁸ For instance,

³⁴Jack S. Levy, “Preventive War and Democratic Politics,” *International Studies Quarterly* 52. 2008. p. 1.

³⁵Ibid. See also Jack Levy, “Preventive War: Concept and Propositions.” *International Interactions*. 37: 1. 2011. pp. 87-96; Ricard K. Betts. *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institute. 1982.; Robert Axelrod, “The Rational Timing of Surprise,” *World Politics*. January 1979. pp. 228-246; and John Mearshiemer, *Conventional Deterrence* Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press. 1983.

³⁶Betts *Surprise Attack*, p. 146. Preventive war is related to, but intellectually distinct from, another concept that follows a ‘better-now-than-later’ logic: preemptive attack. A preemptive attack is a military strategy designed to seize the initiative upon receipt of strategic warning that the enemy is preparing an attack of its own (Betts *Surprise Attack*, p. 145). The classic example of a preemptive attack is the 1967 Six Day War, in which Israel – in response to the deployment of Egyptian troops on the Sinai peninsula and the conclusion of a defense treaty comprising of Israel’s neighbors (not including Lebanon) that gave the impression of an imminent attack by the Arab states – launched an attack against the Arab states (see Betts *Surprise Attack*, p. 66. See also Michael Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2002. For an account critical of the Six Day War as a preemptive war, see Ersun N. Kurtulus, “The Notion of a ‘Pre-emptive War: the Six Day War Revisited,” *The Middle East Journal* Spring 2007. pp.220 - 238.)

³⁷John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W.W Norton. 2001. p. 2.

³⁸Stephen Van Evera. *Causes of War*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1999. p.76.

Fredrick the Great, anticipating a coalition between Austria, Russia, and France (directed toward Prussia) initiated in 1756 what the historian M.S. Anderson calls the “the most famous preventive war in history.”³⁹ Fredrick attacked “before his opponents were ready” in order to disrupt an anticipated coalition.⁴⁰ Preventive logic can also explain Japan’s attack on the United States in 1941: “In the end, [Japan] chose war for one simple reason: they believed that without a war Japan would decline so profoundly that it would become vulnerable to future attacks from either the United States or traditional enemies such as Russia.”⁴¹ More recently, the American Administration offered a preventive war rationale for attacking Iraq in 2003:

“We know that Saddam Hussein is determined to keep his weapons of mass destruction; he’s determined to make more. Given Saddam Hussein’s history of aggression... given what we know of his terrorist associations and given his determination to exact revenge on those who oppose him, should we take the risk that he will not someday use these weapons at a time and the place and in the manner of his choosing at a time when the world is in a much weaker position to respond?”⁴²

3.2 The Motivations for Preventive War

As is evident from his definition, Levy maintains that preventive logic is militarily driven – one wishes to prevent a relative decline in military power.⁴³ Indeed, the evidence will show that preventing foreign material assistance and a boost in war fighting resolve factored into the North’s decision to attack the South. But preventive motivations can go beyond military considerations.⁴⁴

³⁹M.S. Anderson, *18th Century Europe, 1713-1789*, New York: Oxford University Press. 1966. p. 34.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Dale C. Copeland, “A Tragic Choice: Japanese Preventive Motivations and the Origins of the Pacific War,” *International Interactions*. 37: 1. 2011. pp. 116-125.

⁴²Colin L. Powell. *Remarks to the United Nations Security Council*. February 5, 2003. Accessed through *The National Security Archive*. George Washington University. (www.gwu.edu/nsarchiv/). May 9, 2011.

⁴³Levy 2011; Levy 2008

⁴⁴Paul Schroeder, “Preventive Wars to Restore and Stabilize the International System.” *International Interactions*. 37: 1. 2011. pp. 96-107.

Paul Schroeder argues that states will launch preventive wars, not solely because they deem a state to be a direct military threat (indeed, sometimes the state is not perceived as a threat at all), but to prevent detrimental changes in the international system:

“some preventive wars have been launched primarily because... a breakdown in international order leading to intolerable uncertainty and lawlessness in the international system, and...not to destroy their opponent’s military power but to restore and stabilize the threatened international order.”⁴⁵

A related argument is offered by Jonathan Renshon.⁴⁶ Renshon argues that preventive war can be undertaken to avoid a loss of international prestige or status: “There can be numerous other motivations at work in a state’s decision to initiate a preventive action...[For example] the perception of Britain’s loss of influence, status, and prestige weighed heavily on [Prime Minister] Eden’s mind [during the Suez Crisis].”⁴⁷

Schroeder uses the example of Austria against Sardinia-Piedmont in 1859 to illustrate a preventive war that was not motivated by shifting military power. Austria launched a preventive war against Sardinia, not because it feared Sardinia-Piedmont’s military might (the Austrian army had twice crushed Sardinia’s army in 1848-1849 and no one at Vienna doubted that it could easily do so again), but because Sardinia-Piedmont was a political, fiscal, and ideological threat:

“In its effort to drive Austria from Italy and to expand Sardinia-Piedmont in its place, the government at Turin exploited and promoted Italian nationalism; supported revolutionary movements against Austrian rule in Lombardy-Venetia and regimes linked with Austria elsewhere in Italy, especially the Papal State; conspired with anti-Austrian revolutionaries abroad, especially Hungarians and Serbs, in an effort to promote nationalist risings within the Monarchy; and had tried in 1855-1856 to lure France and

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 96.

⁴⁶Jonathan B. Renshon. *Why Leaders Choose War: The Psychology of Prevention*. Westport, CT: Praeger. 2006.

⁴⁷Jonathan B. Renshon. *Why Leaders Choose War*, pp. 4 and 145

Britain, then allied against Russia in the Crimean War, into a general European war to destroy Austria.”⁴⁸

Schroeder then writes that none of these acts by Sardinia necessarily posed a serious military threat to Austrian rule in Lombardy-Venetia or Austrian hegemony in much of Italy. Instead, these acts made “Lombardy increasingly ungovernable, forced Austria into costly mobilizations and military measures straining its already shaky state finances, harassed it with propaganda and diplomatic challenges, embarrassed it in European public opinion, and encouraged discontent within the Monarchy, especially in Hungary.”⁴⁹

3.3 Lincoln’s Decision as Preventive War: A Preview

In what way was Lincoln’s decision motivated by the logic of preventive war? Historians commonly recognize the First Battle of Bull Run (a.k.a First Manassas) as the “war’s first significant encounter,”⁵⁰ but they rarely think of it as the actual start of the war. However, it was at Bull Run that Lincoln, as the Union’s primary decision maker, chose to abandon a policy of economic blockade (in the hope that this would compel the South to rejoin the Union) and instead launch an offensive strike on Southern forces at Manassas, Virginia.

The evidence below will show that, in the lead-up to deciding to attack the South, two facts are clear: (1) that Lincoln and his cabinet considered the possibility of British recognition to be *the primary threat* facing the United States with respect to the secession crisis, and (2) that Lincoln and his cabinet received credible information that exercising force against the South could forestall this recognition.

⁴⁸Schroeder “Preventive War”, p. 102.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 102.

⁵⁰Foner *Fiery Trial*, p. 174.

4 The Evidence: Lincoln's Decision to Attack Manassas

Reviewing the evidence will reveal four key points: (1) that Lincoln and his cabinet did not choose to attack Southern forces at Manassas because they lacked information regarding Southern capabilities or resolve; (2) the attack did not fail because Lincoln and his cabinet lacked information on Southern forces; (3) during the lead-up to authorizing the attack on Southern forces, Lincoln and his cabinet considered the possibility of British recognition to be the primary threat facing the United States with respect to the insurrection crisis; and (4) prior to deciding to attack, Lincoln and his cabinet received credible information that exercising force could forestall British recognition.

4.1 Lincoln's Initial Response to Sumter

To argue that Lincoln took a calculated risk in the hope of quickly ending the secession crisis is not to argue that Lincoln thought an eventual war would be low cost or short. According to historian James McPherson, Lincoln was not nearly as optimistic as many in the North regarding the prospects of a short war. In both his April 15 proclamation and first Inaugural speech, Lincoln used the term 'war', which was not simply a loose way of referring to conflict or dispute.⁵¹ As both Stamp and Potter observe, "Lincoln was always precise to a unique degree in his statements."⁵²

Moreover, though Lincoln called up 75,000 militiamen, the Militia Act of 1795 limited this call to just ninety days. Lincoln, recognizing the possible need for longer troop deployments, issued on May 3 executive orders (which may have violated Article I of the Constitution) calling for 43,034 three-year volunteers, increasing the size of the regular army by 22,714 men, and increasing the size of the navy by 18,000 men. In his July 4 address to Congress, Lincoln called for even more resources: "It is now recommended...that you place at the control of the government, for the work, at least four hundred thousand men, and four hundred millions of dollars."⁵³

⁵¹James McPherson, *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief*. New York: Penguin Press. 2008.

⁵²Stamp "Comment On Republicans," p. 112.

⁵³Lincoln's Address to Congress. July 4, 1861. *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. p. 432.

It does not appear, however, that Lincoln initially intended to fight a war. Instead, Lincoln supported the ‘envelope strategy’ of General Winfield Scott, which used the navy to establish a blockade by sea and along the Mississippi River. The goal of the strategy was to seal off the Southern states from the outside world. According to General Scott, the strategy would “bring [the secessionist] to terms with less bloodshed than by any other plan.”⁵⁴

The blockade strategy rested on two beliefs. First, a blockade would buy time for pro-unionists to gain support in the South and assert their demands to remain in the Union. Second, if the North invaded the South, then, fearing the resulting hardening of Southern resolve, Scott proclaimed, “I will guarantee that at the end of the year you will be further from a settlement than you are now”⁵⁵ Thus, on April 27, 1861 Lincoln announced the blockade.⁵⁶

A critical turning point was reached on May 21, 1861, when the Confederate Congress voted to locate the capitol of the Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia – just 100 miles from Washington, D.C.. This created support throughout the North to attack and hold Richmond before the Confederate Congress could meet on July 20. As the historian Russell Weigley states, “The pressure for an advance in strength could not be contained much longer.”⁵⁷

It would be easy to attribute Lincoln’s decision to invade the South as a response to the growing Northern pressure to take Richmond. However, analyzing the meetings between Lincoln and his inner circle of military advisors reveals that public pressure played little role.

⁵⁴quoted in McPherson *Lincoln*, p. 34.

⁵⁵quoted in McPherson, p. 34.

⁵⁶Proclamation of a Blockade. April 19, 1861. Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln. p. 339.

⁵⁷Russell Weigley. *Quartermaster General of the Union Army: A biography of M.C. Meigs* New York: Columbia University Press. 1959. p. 169

4.2 The War Councils

On June 25, 1861, Lincoln summoned a council of war to discuss options for handling the secession crisis. In attendance were General Montgomery Meigs, General Scott, and General Joseph Mansfield, along with Lincoln and his cabinet.⁵⁸ General Scott presented a report on the current situation of the Federal forces and their rivals. According to Scott, the estimated North-to-South troop differential (66,000-to-36,000) favored the North. Moreover, Scott felt Northern troops were “better armed, equipped, and paid” than Southern troops.⁵⁹ The only difference was that Southern troops “excelled the Federals in experience in the use of arms.”⁶⁰ This final point is important, as Scott was reluctant to rely on less experienced troops: “They were too much liable to panic. [But] given time the Federal soldiers could be turned into heroes.”⁶¹ After a brief discussion between the generals over the necessary number of artillery to support the troops if the decision to advance was made, the council adjourned until June 29.

Four days later, the war council reconvened. During those four days, General Scott asked General Irwin McDowell to devise a campaign against Southern forces. Lincoln now wished to see the plan.⁶² McDowell’s plan entailed attacking the railroad at Manassas Junction, Virginia. When devising his plan, General McDowell knew that victory was far from guaranteed. McDowell supposed that Southern forces would know of the attack and, therefore, victory required preventing Southern reinforcements:

“In regard to my plan, I had, in the first place, to assume what the enemy had in front of me. I next assumed that there would be no secret of my preparing to go against

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 169.

⁵⁹Ibid, p. 170.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 170.

⁶¹quoted in Ibid., p 170.

⁶²As McDowell later recalled during testimony before the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War: “Not to be too long, I will say that the general-in-chief, General Scott, called upon me verbally to submit a plan of operations to go against Manassas, and to estimate the force necessary to carry out that plan. I cannot tell the day when this was done... I sent the plan to General Scott, and he read it and approved of it. I was then summoned before the cabinet” (Testimony of General Irwin McDowell to the *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*. Part II - Bull Run - Ball’s Bluff. December 26, 1861. p. 35)

them. They would know it, and as a consequence of that they would bring up whatever disposable force they had. Therefore, it was not so much what they had here, but what they would bring here, that I was to go against.”⁶³

McDowell’s plan required that the forces of Southern General Joseph Johnston be engaged away from Manassas, thereby preventing them from reinforcing the Southern forces at Manassas: “I assumed that if General Butler would keep them engaged below, and General Patterson would keep Johnston engaged above, I would then have so much to go against. To do that I asked for a certain force. They agreed to it, and gave me the force.”⁶⁴

McDowell made clear the necessary conditions for the plan to work; “On several occasions I mentioned to the general that I felt tender on the subject of General Patterson and General Johnston. In reply to some suggestion once made about bringing Patterson over to Leesburg, I said if he went there Johnston might escape and join [Southern General] Beauregard, and I was not in a condition to meet all their forces combined.”⁶⁵ In particular, McDowell, like Scott, was concerned about the inexperience of Northern soldiers: “I said that I went over there with everything green. That was admitted; but they said that the other side was equally green. I said that the chances of accident were much more with green troops than with veterans, and I could not undertake to meet all their forces together.” McDowell said that Scott “gave me this assurance, that there should be no question in regard to keeping Johnston’s troops engaged in the valley of Virginia.”⁶⁶

Nevertheless, Scott’s (and McDowell’s) concerns over the inexperience of Northern troops led him to advocate continuing the envelop strategy. But General Meigs rebutted Scott during the meeting. As Meigs recalled,

“I did not think we would ever win the war without beating the rebels. They have

⁶³Testimony of General Irvin McDowell to the *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*. Part II - Bull Run - Ball’s Bluff. December 26, 1861. p. 36.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid.

come near us. We were, according to Gen. Scott's information given to us at the Council on the 25th, stronger than they, better prepared, our troops better contented, better clothed, better fed, better paid, better armed. That here we had the most violent of the rebels near us; it was better to whip them here than to go far into an unhealthy country to fight them, and to fight them far from our supplies, to spend our money among enemies instead of among friends. To make the fight in Virginia was cheaper and better as the case now stood. Let them come here to be beaten."⁶⁷

After hearing these arguments, Lincoln chose to accept McDowell's plan and launch a strike at Manassas Junction. Lincoln addressed Scott's concern regarding the inexperience of his troops by admitting "You are green, it is true. But they are green, also; you are all green alike."⁶⁸ With that, the war council authorized an offensive against Southern troops at Manassas Junction rail station as soon as the army could be put in readiness and the necessary transportation assembled.⁶⁹

4.3 Why Lincoln Favored Taking the Offensive

It is apparent from the above evidence that Lincoln and his cabinet did not choose to attack Southern forces at Manassas because they lacked information regarding Southern capabilities or resolve. True, the evidence shows Lincoln agreeing with Meigs that both sides are green, and that, as a result, the North can win. However, the information provided to Lincoln regarding forces and the conditions necessary for success were fairly accurate. Moreover, Lincoln and his generals were well aware that the attack was not guaranteed success: they knew that if Patterson could not prevent reinforcements, the attack would fail (which, as will be shown below, is what happened).

So if not for information reasons, why did Lincoln choose to escalate the crisis by authorizing the attack on Southern forces at Manassas? Since we do not possess a comment by Lincoln stating 'I

⁶⁷Meigs Journal, June 29, 1861. Quoted in Weigley *Biography of Meigs*, p. 172.

⁶⁸quoted in McPherson *Lincoln*, p. 39.

⁶⁹Weigley *Biography of Meigs*, p. 172.

authorized the attack at Manassas for X reason,' scholars have offered several possible motivations.

4.3.1 Possible Motivations

First, after the attack on Fort Sumter, there was a high level of public support to attack the South. As expressed in a May 6 letter from Wisconsin governor Alexander Randall to Lincoln, "There is no occasion for the Government to delay, because the States themselves are willing to act vigorously...There is a spirit evoked by the liberty-loving people of this country that is driving them to action, and if the government will not permit them to act for it, they will act for themselves. It is better for the Government to direct this current than let it run wild."⁷⁰ Though such support must have eased Lincoln's decision, the evidence will show that other factors had greater influence on the thinking of Lincoln and his cabinet.⁷¹

Second, by late June, some thirty-five thousand Union soldiers were camped across the Potomac from Washington. Most of these soldiers were ninety-day militiamen whose terms of service would end in the second half of July. According to McPherson, "If [Lincoln] did not do something with them soon, they would disappear and any action would be postponed for months until the three-year men could be equipped and trained."⁷² However, it seems unlikely that this was a decisive factor. Lincoln had already shown a propensity to disregard the restrictions on the power of the Presidency when it served the interest of defending the Constitution (by, for instance, authorizing the 3-year volunteers without congressional approval). Though the counterfactual never played out, one can reasonably suppose that Lincoln would have willingly extended the terms of the militiamens' service in the name of defending Washington.

Third, Lincoln's generals, particularly Scott, were concerned that Southern forces would themselves attempt a preemptive strike. If executed, Scott supposed "success in each of these three

⁷⁰quoted in McPherson *Lincoln*, p. 38.

⁷¹See also, Stamp *And the War Came*, p. 286.

⁷²*Ibid.*, p. 38. Such a concern was explicitly expressed to General Scott by General Patterson in a June 28 letter (Testimony of General Robert Patterson to the *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*. Part II - Bull Run - Ball's Bluff. January 6, 1862. p. 83).

several movements is anticipated, and thereby not only the possession of [Washington D.C.] is thought to be assured, but an advance of the Federal troops upon Richmond prevented.”⁷³ However, if this concern was decisive, then Scott himself would have strongly advocated attacking, rather than rely solely on the embargo strategy. Moreover, as will be shown below, Jefferson Davis had, in actuality, dismissed the plan of an attack by Southern forces on Washington.

Each of these factors may have played some role in Lincoln’s decision, but, as will now be shown, evaluating the evidence establishes two facts: (1) that Lincoln and his cabinet considered the possibility of British recognition to be the primary threat facing the United States with respect to the insurrection crisis, and (2) that Lincoln and his cabinet received credible information that exercising force against the South could forestall this recognition.

4.3.2 Recognition as A Concern

If the crisis were allowed to persist, Lincoln and his cabinet feared the response of foreign nations. Blockades, such as the one the Union had imposed on the Southern states, are recognized by international law as a legitimate action by a belligerent in a war *between nations*. This led Congressman Thaddeus Stevens to inform Lincoln that, by proclaiming a blockade, he had inadvertently recognized Confederate independence.⁷⁴ Though Lincoln appears to have dismissed this claim, another international factor greatly concerned him and his cabinet: the prospects of recognition, particularly by the British.

Seward, in an exchange with US ambassador to the United Kingdom Charles Adams, claimed that concern over recognition was a constant of the administration: “on our part the possibility of foreign intervention, sooner or later, in this domestic disturbance *is never absent from the thoughts of this government.*”⁷⁵ In fact, acquiring recognition is why General Scott believed Southern forces

⁷³Scott to Patterson, July 7, 1861. The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies in the War of the Rebellion. Series 1, Vol II. p. 164.

⁷⁴Dean B. Mahin, *One War at a Time: The International Dimensions of the American Civil War*. Washington: Brassey’s. 1999. p. 44.

⁷⁵Seward to Adams. July 21, 1861. Foreign Relations of the United States. Department of State. p. 117. Emphasis

had an incentive to launch a pre-emptive strike against the North. Such an attack, if successful, “will give the Confederate cause such prestige and inspire in it such faith as will insure the recognition of its Government abroad.”⁷⁶

Why was recognition always on the mind of Lincoln’s administration? Lincoln’s administration feared three primary consequences associated with British recognition. First, recognition could do irreparable harm to the status and prestige of the United States. Lincoln himself felt the act of recognition would convert the insurrectionists into a hostile foreign power: “British recognition would be British intervention to create within our own territory a hostile state by overthrowing this Republic itself.”⁷⁷ As Seward makes clear in a dispatch to the U.S. diplomat in London, George M. Dallas, “it is clear that a recognition of the so-called Confederate nations must be deemed equivalent to a deliberate resolution by her Majesty’s government that this American Union, which has so long constituted a sovereign nation, shall be now permanently dissolved and cease to exist forever.”⁷⁸

Second, British recognition could lead to foreign aid that would directly enhance the South’s military capacity. According to Seward, Lincoln viewed as shortsighted any attempt by the British “to lend its aid to a revolution designed to overthrow the institutions of this country, and involving ultimately the destruction of the liberties of the American people.”⁷⁹ This is why Seward implored his diplomats to make clear to the British that “Her Britannic Majesty’s government is at liberty to choose whether it will retain the friendship of this government by refusing all aid and comfort to [the Confederacy]...or whether the government of her Majesty will take the precarious benefits of a different course.”⁸⁰ Moreover, Lincoln felt that success by Southern representatives to secure British recognition “would probably render their success easy elsewhere,” thereby enabling any

added.

⁷⁶Scott to Patterson, July 7, 1861. *The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies in the War of the Rebellion*. Series 1, Vol II. p. 164.

⁷⁷Draft dispatch with revisions by Lincoln. Available on pages 270 through 275 of John G. Nicolay and John Hay. *Abraham Lincoln*. New York: The Century Co. 1890.

⁷⁸Seward to Dallas. April 10, 1861. *Foreign Relations of the United States*. Department of State. p. 77.

⁷⁹Seward to Dallas. April 10, 1861. *Foreign Relations of the United States*. Department of State. p. 79.

⁸⁰ Seward to Adams. April 27, 1861. *Foreign Relations of the United States*. Department of State. p. 83.

number of states to recognize, align with, and offer assistance to the South.⁸¹

Third, recognition would bolster the South's resolve. The administration thought disunionists in the Southern states were sustained largely by the hope of recognition by the British and French. As Seward later told Adams, it was believed at the time the "simple fact [that] the life of this insurrection is sustained by its hopes of recognition in Great Britain and in France" and how the insurrection "would perish in ninety days if those hopes should cease."⁸² This is why Lincoln and his administration believed the secessionists gained resolve when the British (and French) declared their neutrality in the conflict. Specifically, on May 13 Queen Victoria issued a proclamation of neutrality that granted belligerent status to the South (France followed suite in June).⁸³ Charles Sumner, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, declared this proclamation to be "the most hateful act of English history since the time of Charles 2nd."⁸⁴

To emphasize (and, perhaps, embellish) the fears of Lincoln's Administration, Seward states how the act of recognition, by converting the Southern confederacy into an independent nation, would inevitably provoke a hemisphere-wide war: "The new confederacy, which in that case Great Britain would have aided into existence, must, like any other new state, seek to expand itself northward, westward, and southward. What part of this continent or of the adjacent islands would be expected to remain in peace?"⁸⁵ Seward later recalled how British recognition would have produced dire consequences for both the United States and the British:

⁸¹Lincoln's views reported by Seward in Seward to Dallas. April 10, 1861. Foreign Relations of the United States. Department of State. p. 75.

⁸²Seward to Adams, November 30, 1861. The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies in the War of the Rebellion. Series 2, Vol II. p. 1108.

⁸³See Mahin *One War*; Howard Jones. *Union in Peril: The Crisis Over British Intervention in the Civil War* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 1992; Howard Jones. *Blue & Gray Diplomacy: A History of Union and Confederate Foreign Relations*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2010; Philip E. Meyers. *Caution & Cooperation: The American Civil War in British-American Relations*. Kent: Kent State University Press. 2008; Norman B. Ferris. *Desperate Diplomacy: William H. Seward's Foreign Policy, 1861*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press; Lynn M. Case and Warren F. Spencer. *The United States and France: Civil War Diplomacy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 1970.

⁸⁴Jones *Union in Peril*, p. 27.

⁸⁵Seward to Dallas. April 10, 1861. Foreign Relations of the United States. Department of State. p. 79.

“I have never for a moment believed that such a recognition could take place without producing immediately a war between the United States and all the recognizing powers. I have not supposed it possible that the British Government could fail to see this; and at the same time I have sincerely believed the British Government must in its inmost heart be as averse to such a war as I know this Government is.”⁸⁶

When viewed through the logic of preventive war, these consequences echo the motivations offered by preventive war scholars. Lincoln and his administration thought recognition could lead to direct assistance by either the British or another foreign nation, thereby tipping the balance of power in the South’s favor. Even a bolstering of the South’s fighting resolve could complicate the ability of the North to decisively suppress the insurrection. Such concerns are consistent with Levy’s emphasis on preventive war as an instrument to stop an increase in an opponent’s military strength. But there is evidence that, consistent with preventive war scholars such as Schroeder, Lincoln’s administration also feared a loss of prestige and international status if other nations viewed the United States, in its present composition, as permanently dissolved.

These dire consequences offer adequate motivation for the North to take any means necessary to prevent British recognition. Moreover, since the possibility of foreign intervention was always on the mind of the administration, it plausibly played *a* role in the decision to attack the South. But was it *the* factor influencing the administration’s decision?

4.3.3 Recognition as *The Concern*

Given the consequences attributed to recognition, it comes as no surprise that Lincoln considered British recognition of the insurrectionist states to be the primary danger facing the country. In a note to Adams dated June 8, 1861, Seward relays Lincoln’s views regarding the importance and danger posed by recognition: “Every instruction you have received from this department is full of

⁸⁶Seward to Adams, November 30, 1861. *The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies in the War of the Rebellion*. Series 2, Vol II. p. 1108.

evidence of the fact that *the principal danger in the present insurrection* which the President has apprehended was that of foreign intervention, aid, or sympathy; and especially of such intervention, aid, or sympathy on the part of the government of Great Britain.”⁸⁷

Seward then states that the “justification of [the President’s] apprehension has been vindicated” by several facts (such as guarded reservation on the part of the British secretary of state when presented with the American protest against recognition and the Queen’s declaration of neutrality).⁸⁸ This is why, in mid May of 1861, Lincoln wanted personally to delineate to the British that overt recognition would not be tolerated. Lincoln had Seward draft a dispatch to share with Adams (who, in turn, would share it with the British Foreign Secretary Lord John Russell). Before the dispatch was sent, Lincoln revised it. These revisions are notable, as they convey the care with which Lincoln wanted to handle the British government. Moreover, given the extensive revisions, we can treat this document as fully representing Lincoln’s view on the possibility of British recognition.

Lincoln regretted the proposal of an unofficial meeting between British diplomats and representatives of the Confederacy and he instructed Adams to “desist all intercourse” with the British government if such a meeting takes place between the British and “the domestic enemies of this country.”⁸⁹ After briefly discussing the blockade, Lincoln jumps directly to the issue of recognition: “As to the recognition of the so-called Southern Confederacy...[it will not] pass unquestioned by the United States in this case.”⁹⁰ It is notable that Lincoln removed the following language by Seward, feeling it too provocative: “When this act of intervention is distinctly performed, we from that hour shall cease to be friends and become once more, as we have twice before been forced, enemies of Great Britain.”⁹¹

⁸⁷Seward to Adams. June 8, 1861. *Foreign Relations of the United States*. Department of State. p. 97. Emphasis added.

⁸⁸Ibid. For more on the early instruction given to the British by the Lincoln administration, see Seward to Dallas. April, 1861. *Foreign Relations of the United States*. Department of State. p. 71 - 80.

⁸⁹Draft dispatch with revisions available on pages 270 through 275 of John G. Nicolay and John Hay. *Abraham Lincoln*. New York: The Century Co. 1890.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Ibid. Such a revision is what led Allan Thorndike Rice, editor of the *North American Review*, to state in 1888 that Lincoln’s revisions of this memo “saved the nation from a war with England” and that “The work shows...an insight into foreign affairs, a skill in the use of language, a delicacy of criticism and a discrimination in methods of

4.3.4 Attacking to Prevent Recognition

The above evidence shows that the possibility of British recognition was not only *a* concern of Lincoln's administration, but *the* concern in May and June of 1861 (when the decision to attack Manassas was made). More precisely, as Seward made clear, Lincoln viewed it as the primary issue surrounding the insurrection. This alone is sufficient to argue that Lincoln chose to strike Southern forces at Manassas in order to end the crisis before the British could offer recognition. However, the evidence also shows that Lincoln and his cabinet had credible information that attacking, in and of itself, might prevent British recognition.

Apprised of the administration's concerns, Adams immediately informed British Foreign Secretary Lord Russell. Adams made clear the American administration's displeasure with the British proclamation of neutrality:

"I must be permitted frankly to remark that the action taken seemed, at least to my mind, a little more rapid than was absolutely called for by the occasion. It might be recollected that the new [American] administration had scarcely had sixty days to develop its policy...it was but just emerging from its difficulties, and beginning to develop the power of the country to cope with this rebellion, when the British government took the initiative, and decided practically that this is a struggle of two sides. And furthermore, it pronounced the insurgents to be a belligerent State before they had ever shown their capacity to maintain any kind of warfare whatever, except within one of their own harbors, and under every possible advantage."⁹²

Adams then bluntly told Russell that the American administration "would inevitably infer the existence [on the part of the British] of an intention more or less marked to extend the struggle [between the North and South]," and if this was indeed the case then Adams would be bound "to

diplomatic dealing" (cited in Mahin *One War*, p. 47).

⁹²Adams to Seward. May 21, 1861. Foreign Relations of the United States. Department of State. pp. 92-93.

acknowledge in all frankness that in that contingency I had nothing further left to do in Great Britain.”⁹³

In response, Russell informed Adams that the Americans had mistakenly attributed hidden meaning to the proclamation – neutrality was necessary to bar the British people from participating in the American conflict and the proclamation was designed “to explain to British subjects their liabilities in case they should engage in war”⁹⁴ Adams rebutted Russell, saying that “the Queen’s proclamation,” irritated the American administration as it appeared “designed to aid the insurgents by raising them to the rank of belligerent State....Our objection to this act was that it was practically not an act of neutrality. It had depressed the spirits of the friends of the [American] government. It has raised the courage of the insurgents.”⁹⁵

After this exchange with Russell, Adams tried to assure Seward that neutrality did not, from the British perspective, equate to recognition. According to Adams, “the idea still remains quite general [in Britain] that there will never be any actual conflict.”⁹⁶ Moreover, the British were particularly concerned that “reunion may be cemented upon the basis of hostile measures against Great Britain.”⁹⁷

Despite these reassurances, Adams then warned Seward that, in the words of the Historian Howard Jones, “the best assurance against intervention was victory in battle.”⁹⁸ Specifically, Adams said that British “positive spirit” towards the United States will “depend far more upon the degree in which the arm of the government enforces obedience than upon any absolute affinity in sentiments.”⁹⁹ To drive home this point, Adams shared how members of the British government “after all, are much disposed to fall in with the opinion of Voltaire, that *‘Dieu est toujours sur le coté des*

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴quoted in Jones *Union in Peril*, p. 44.

⁹⁵Adams to Seward. June 14, 1861. Foreign Relations of the United States. Department of State. pp. 103-105.

⁹⁶Adams to Seward. June 21, 1861. Foreign Relations of the United States. Department of State. p. 109.

⁹⁷Ibid. In fact, Adams pointed out to Seward that “Indeed, such has been the motive hinted at by more than one person of influence as guiding the policy of the President himself.”

⁹⁸Howard *Union in Peril*, p. 55.

⁹⁹Adams to Seward. June 21, 1861. Foreign Relations of the United States. Department of State. p. 110.

gros canons’ (‘God is always on the side of the big guns’)”¹⁰⁰ A few days after receiving this letter, the decision was made at the war councils to launch the offensive strike at Manassas.

4.4 The Result: The First Battle of Manassas and Its Aftermath

4.4.1 Why The Attack Failed

The battle at Manassas (or Bull Run) took place on July 21, 1861, resulting in a Southern defeat of Northern forces. The Southern victory may, in part, be attributed to Southern General G.T. Beauregard, commanding general of Southern forces in July 1861, having foreknowledge of the attack.¹⁰¹ Even with Beauregard’s suspicion of an attack, the outcome of the battle was nearly different. Recall that the author of the Northern attack, General McDowell, was concerned about the Federal soldiers’ inexperience and that Scott gave McDowell assurance “that there should be no question in regard to keeping Johnston’s troops engaged in the valley of Virginia.”¹⁰² However, this did not happen. General Patterson failed to stop Johnston, which allowed Johnston to reinforce General Beauregard.¹⁰³

“But they did not fulfill the condition with me so far as General Johnson was concerned... We got over there and met the enemy; and there I found that, in addition to General Beauregard whose forces were known to be at Manassas, I had General John-

¹⁰⁰Ibid. English translation not in the original

¹⁰¹Report of Gen. G. T. Beauregard, C. S. Army, for the Battle of 1st Bull Run July 16-22, 1861.–The Bull Run, or Manassas, Campaign, Virginia. The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies in the War of the Rebellion. Series 1, Vol II. pp.484-485.

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Of course, Patterson later defended himself by arguing that Scott had not given him adequate transportation to move his troops; “There is no doubt that the gallant general believed that what he said was true. But it may be as well to inform the committee that the re-enforcements sent from Washington to me amounted to three regiments, under General Sanford; that they came without wagons, and that General Scott informed me I would have ‘to furnish transportation for them.’” (Testimony of General Robert Patterson to the *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*. Part II - Bull Run - Ball’s Bluff. January 6, 1862. p. 83.) Patterson then went on to claim that he had forwarded a plan, that had it been adopted, “the battle of Bull Run might have been a victory instead of a defeat.” (Testimony of General Robert Patterson to the *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*. Part II - Bull Run - Ball’s Bluff. January 6, 1862. p. 81).

ston - how much of him I did not know. I learned afterwards that some 7,000 or 8,000, the bulk of his force, had arrived. Still, we were successful against both until about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, when the remainder of his force came upon us upon our right when our men were tired and exhausted, and that caused the day to turn against us."¹⁰⁴

4.4.2 The Southern Response and Escalation to War

The resulting Northern defeat is critical for explaining how the Southern insurrection of 1861 became a cataclysmic war. The day after the defeat, Lincoln signed a bill for the enlistment of five hundred thousand three-year volunteers and on July 25 Lincoln signed a second bill authorizing another five hundred thousand soldiers. In the South, the victory produced exultation and overconfidence. A Georgian pronounced Manassas "one of the decisive battles of the world" which "has secured our independence," while a Mobile newspaper predicted that the Union army would "never again advance beyond canon shot of Washington."¹⁰⁵

Confederate President Jefferson Davis responded by calling up 400,00 men and consulting with his generals on the possibility of launching a massive counter-offensive into the North, specifically targeting Washington D.C.¹⁰⁶ During a war council meeting on September 26, Davis' generals expressed concerns that such a major offensive would be not be feasible without additional seasoned troops. As recalled by Confederate General Gustavus Smith, "It seemed to be conceded by all that our force at that time here was not sufficient for assuming the offensive beyond the Potomac."¹⁰⁷ Therefore, it was decided to take on a defensive position and simply engage in smaller attacks

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

¹⁰⁵quoted in McPherson *Lincoln*, p. 40.

¹⁰⁶ Joseph L. Harsh. *Confederate Tide Rising: Robert E. Lee and the Making of Southern Strategy, 1861-1862*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press. 1998. p. 12. For more on the immediate reaction of the Confederate command to the Battle of Bull Run, see David Detzer. *Donnybrook: The Battle of Bull Run, 1861*. New York, NY: Harcourt. 2004. pp. 408-427; Paul D. Escott. *Military Necessity: Civil-Military Relations in the Confederacy*. Praeger Security International. 2006. p. 42.

¹⁰⁷Recollections of conference held on September 26, 1861. Gustavus Woodson Smith. *The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies in the War of the Rebellion*. Series 1, Vol V. pp.885-887.

“against [Union Generals] Sickles or Banks or to break the bulge over the Monocacy [river].”¹⁰⁸ Though Davis wished to launch a major offensive as “time brings many advantages to the enemy,” he recognized how “if not successful, ruin would befall us.”¹⁰⁹

This limited strategy would buy the Confederacy time to amass troops, gather resources for a long war and, according to General Smith, secure some easy victories that would maintain morale: “[Davis] thought, besides injuring the enemy, [these campaigns] would exert a good influence over our troops and encourage the people of the Confederate States generally.”¹¹⁰ Moreover, this strategy allowed Davis to claim during his October address to the Confederate Congress that instead of a “march of unchecked conquest,” the Union forces “have been driven at more than one point to assume the defensive...the Confederate States are relatively much stronger now than when the struggle commenced.”¹¹¹ Put simply, both sides were now prepared for a long war.¹¹²

4.5 Summary of the Evidence

We can draw four conclusions from the above evidence. First, that Lincoln and his cabinet did not choose to attack Southern forces at Manassas because they lacked information regarding Southern capabilities or resolve. The evidence shows that they had fairly accurate assessments of capabilities and that they knew the attack carried risks. Second and related, the attack did not fail because Lincoln and his cabinet lacked information on Southern forces. In fact, the attack failed for the very reason that its planners feared: an inability to prevent Southern reinforcements. In short, it was what Northern troops failed to do, not what they failed to know, that led to the Northern defeat at Manassas.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹quoted in Harsh *Confederate Tide Rising*, p. 30.

¹¹⁰Recollections of conference held on September 26, 1861.

¹¹¹quoted in Harsh *Confederate Tide Rising*, p. 29.

¹¹²For a discussion of whether the American Civil War reached the point of ‘Total War’ see Mark E. Neely Jr. “Was the Civil War a Total War?” *Civil War History* 50(4). 2004. pp. 434-458.

Third, during the lead-up to authorizing the attack on Southern forces, Lincoln and his cabinet considered the possibility of British recognition to be the primary threat facing the United States with respect to the insurrection crisis. This alone strongly suggests that the need to prevent British recognition was the driving motivation for abandoning the blockade policy and attacking the South. Fourth, we know that, prior to deciding to attack, Lincoln and his cabinet received credible information that exercising force could forestall British recognition. This further supports the case that the need to prevent British recognition motivated the decision to attack the South.

5 Conclusion

The logic of preventive war provides a more compelling account for the onset of the Civil War compared to an information-oriented explanation. The Southern insurrection of 1861 became the American Civil War because President Lincoln chose to launch an offensive strike against Southern forces at Manassas, Virginia. Following the attack on Fort Sumter, Lincoln had not dismissed the prospect of peaceful reunion and, consequently, hoped a blockade would induce the Southern states to rejoin the Union. However, members of his war council believed the crisis could be brought to a quick end with a decisive strike against the South's forces. The plan was not guaranteed to work and Lincoln feared the possibility of provoking a long and devastating war. However, Lincoln also wished to prevent British recognition of the Confederacy. Therefore, Lincoln took a calculated risk by initiating an offensive strike on Manassas, Virginia.

One could claim that my preventive war argument is itself an information argument: because Northern decision makers thought the British would intervene, Northern decision makers overestimated the potential future capabilities of the South and, therefore, desired to end the war sooner, rather than later. Similarly, because the Confederates thought the British would eventually intervene, this encouraged their intransigence and eliminated bargaining space. Such a sentiment among Confederate decision makers was evident from the recollections of Confederate cabinet meetings by Confederate Secretary of War Leroy Walker, "At the time [May 1861], I, like every-

body else [in the cabinet] believed there would be no war.”¹¹³ As Confederate Attorney General Judah Benjamin recalled, the sentiment in the cabinet was that “when the Mississippi is floating cotton by the thousands of bales, and all our wharfs are full” the British would seek to end the North’s blockade.¹¹⁴ Given this, my argument is plausibly an information argument – with the caveat that the imperfect information pertained to the actions of the British, not the military capabilities of the two sides. However, simply labeling my argument an information argument fails – as per Powell’s critique from the introduction – to explain how imperfect information translated into a war.¹¹⁵ In contrast, preventive war logic directly explains how the North’s motivations translated into the use of force.

Though the North’s offensive strike failed to defeat Southern forces, it may have succeeded from the standpoint of prevention – the British did not recognize the Southern states. On the one hand, it is difficult to draw a direct causal arrow from the North’s use of force to a subsequent non-decision by the British. In fact, given that the North lost the battle, it could very well be the case that fears of imminent British recognition were exaggerated. On the other hand, once major fighting began, British Prime Minister Palmerston informed British Foreign Minister Russell that British policy would “merely to be lookers-on until the war shall take a more decided turn.”¹¹⁶

I have focused on the proximate causes of the war, but this should not diminish the importance of the deeper causes (i.e. dispute over slavery, disagreements about state rights). Without these deep causes, the proximate cause of preventing British recognition could not have provoked a war. In many ways, this balancing of deep causes versus proximate causes echoes debates over the origins of World War I. In their edited volume on the origins of the First World War, Richard Hamilton and Holger Herwig critique the ‘Big Cause’ explanations for World War I without refuting these causes role in setting the conditions for the conflict Their comments regarding ‘the men of 1914’ could pertain just as well to Lincoln and his cabinet and, therefore, I shall conclude with them:

¹¹³quoted in Amanda Foreman, *A World on Fire: Britain’s Crucial Role in the American Civil War*. New York, NY: Random House. 2011. p. 85.

¹¹⁴Ibid.

¹¹⁵Powell *Shadow of Power*, p. 6.

¹¹⁶quoted in Mahin *One War*, p. 135.

“The ‘big causes’, by themselves, did not cause the war. To be sure, the system of alliances, militarism, nationalism, imperialism, social Darwinism, and the domestic strains, to name but half a dozen of the more often-touted causes, had all contributed toward forming the *mentalité*, the assumptions of the ‘men of 1914’. There is no doubt that most senior policy makers in 1914 gave some consideration to expansion, imperialism, nationalism, armaments, and mass opinion. But we argue that the actual decisions to go to war were a matrix of alliance needs, of power and prestige, of immediate opportunities, and of survival. It does injustice to the ‘men of 1914’ to suggest that they were all merely agents – willing or unwilling – of some grand, impersonal design.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig (eds.). *The Origins of World War I*. Cambridge University Press. 2003, p. 451.