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STANDING FIRM: MAINE'S DELEGATION TO CONGRESS DURING THE SECESSION CRISIS OF 1860-1861

BY JERRY R. DESMOND

In the years leading up to the Civil War, many Americans in both the North and the South considered it inevitable that a war between the sections would occur. Historians have debated this idea ever since. Could the war have been avoided? Was a compromise between the sections of the country possible? In this article, the author examines the role played by Maine's congressional delegation in resisting compromise during the Great Secession Winter of 1860-1861. The author is a graduate of the University of Maine, with master's degrees in education (1979) and Arts (History-1991). He served as the lead consulting curator during the planning and development of the National Civil War Museum in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. He is the author of several books and articles about the Civil War, including the forthcoming Mantled in Smoke and Fire: Maine Regiments at Gettysburg (Spring 2014). He is currently the executive director of the Birmingham History Center in Birmingham, Alabama.

A GREAT DEAL has been written in the past century and a half about the “inevitability” of the Civil War. The blame for the conflict has been placed on the “Black Republicans,” the slavocracy, the Congress, James Buchanan, the fire-eaters, Abraham Lincoln, and any other number or combination of promulgators. According to historian Allen Nevins, “For Americans in 1861, as for many other people throughout history, war was easier than wisdom and courage.”¹ Civil War historian Dwight Dumond has argued that we should not consider the war to have been inevitable. “It has been my constant concern,” Dumond noted, “to detach myself from the tradition that the Civil War was irrepressible. That idea implies that the American people were incapable of solving a difficult problem except by bloodletting, and confuses the

designs of party politicians with the arts of statesmanship.”² It is an interesting exercise to determine what role the citizens and representatives of the state of Maine played in the months between the presidential election in November 1860 and the firing on Fort Sumter in April 1861. As a state with considerable political clout in the mid-nineteenth century, were there any Maine men of wisdom and courage, any statesmen to repress the march towards civil war?

“The people are all right everywhere, even in the cities, and our friends have only to stand firm, as I tell all, they will be sure to do,” wrote Vice-President-elect Hannibal Hamlin to Senator Lyman Trumbell (R-Ill) in December 1860.³ Earlier in the month, Trumbell had received a letter from President-elect Abraham Lincoln stating, “Let there be no compromise on the question of extending slavery. If there be, all our labor is lost, and ere long, must be done again The tug has to come and better now, than any time hereafter.”⁴ This, then, was to be the policy of the Republican Party in the interim between the election of 1860 and the inauguration of Lincoln in March 1861, to “stand firm” and offer “no compromise.”

This firm stance was evident in Maine, where attempts to repeal the state’s personal liberty laws (which counteracted the federal fugitive slave laws) ended in failure.⁵ But what of the Republicans at the national level, and their efforts to hold off attempts at compromise until, at least, Lincoln could take hold of the reins of government? What part did the Maine congressional delegation play in this attempt? Maine had eight members in its delegation to the “lame duck” second session of the Thirty-sixth Congress, which met from December 1860 to March 1861. Its six members in the House of Representatives were also “lame ducks” in the true sense of the phrase, as all of them were serving the end of their two-year terms and had not been re-elected. This was not due to any unpopularity with the voters of the state. In the nineteenth century, it was common for members of the same party to follow a practice of “rotation in office” in safe districts, allowing other leading members of the party to go to Washington for a term. As “good Republicans,” they could expect some other political plum as a reward for their magnanimity, especially as a Republican would soon take the highest office in the land and begin dispensing political patronage.⁶

In the winter of 1860-61, the six members of Maine’s delegation to the House of Representatives were Daniel Sommes of Biddeford, John J. Perry of Oxford, Ezra French of Damariscotta, Freeman Morse of Bath, Stephen Coburn of Skowhegan, and Stephen C. Foster of Pembroke. All



Stephen Coburn of Skowhegan, pictured here with his daughter Louise in 1865, served in the House of Representatives during the winter of 1860-1861. Out of Maine's six representatives in the House, Coburn had the least political experience at the national level. Courtesy of the Skowhegan History Museum & Research Center.

of these men were Republicans and all had extensive political experience. John J. Perry, for example, was a second-term member and editor of the *Oxford Democrat* (he continued to write the editorial page from Washington). Freeman Morse had the most experience, as he first served in the House as a Whig in 1843. Stephen Coburn had the least experience at the national level, as he was appointed to serve the remainder of Israel Washburn's term as soon as Washburn was inaugurated as governor of Maine. Coburn, however, did have a great deal of political experience at the state level.

During the secession crisis, these men did little or nothing to bring about a compromise between the North and the South. Freeman Morse was the most loquacious of Maine's representatives, yet he only delivered ten speeches in the House during the winter of secession. Likewise, Foster spoke nine times, French eight, and Perry seven. Sommes and Coburn each spoke only once on the floor of the House during the entire lame duck session.⁷ In most cases, their speeches were not related to the secession crisis, but only to conduct the daily business of the Congress. They offered no compromise resolutions, gave no speeches of reconciliation or offerings of hope. Only John J. Perry gave anything like a major speech on the issue of secession. On January 17, 1861, Perry delivered a speech that could only be considered an attack on the South. By that time four southern states had seceded from the Union – and more would soon follow. Perry and other Republicans saw this as treason. "Can the violators of the law – the men who are making war upon the Government – when called to answer for their offenses, hide themselves



Hannibal Hamlin served alongside William Pitt Fessenden as one of Maine's two senators during the secession crisis. In January 1861, Hamlin resigned his seat in the Senate when he became vice-president-elect. Maine Historical Society Collections.

behind the specious plea of State sovereignty?" he asked. He concluded with a stern warning:

To our brethren in the slave States who are sincerely laboring to save the Union, I would extend the olive branch of peace. To them I would make any reasonable concessions that would not involve a sacrifice of principle, or be construed into an abandonment of the doctrines of the Chicago platform [of the Republican Party]. To the Rebels in the cotton states, who are preaching and practicing treason, who are trampling the national flag in the dust, who are seizing our forts and stealing our arms, I have no compromises to offer. They ask for none and I would offer none. So long as they stand with arms in their hands; so long as they stand pointing their weapons of death at American citizens; so long as they forcibly resist the laws of our common country, my voice is for war.⁸

The members of Maine's delegation to the House of Representatives knew where their allegiances lay. Committed to the anti-expansion of slavery plank of their party's Chicago platform, as good Republicans they must wait, stand firm, and not give in to the demands of secessionists or the pleas of compromisers.

Although Maine's representatives in the House contributed little to the national debate on disunion, the state was well represented in the other chamber. Maine's two senators, Hannibal Hamlin of Bangor and William Pitt Fessenden of Portland, both Republicans, were prominent



William Pitt Fessenden was one of Maine's two U.S. senators at the time of the secession crisis. Fessenden was considered one of the leaders of the Maine congressional delegation. During the secession crisis, he spoke eighty-eight times on the floor of the Senate. Maine Historical Society Collections.

figures in Washington. When Hamlin became the vice-president-elect, he resigned his Senate seat in January 1861. Governor Washburn then appointed former governor Lot M. Morrill of Augusta to fill the remainder of Hamlin's term, due to expire in 1863. Since Morrill was completely new to national politics, Fessenden inherited the role as pro forma leader of the Maine delegation. Uniquely suited to the role, his entire life up to 1860 had been one of hardship and upward struggle.

Born out of wedlock in 1806, Fessenden was forced to spend the early years of his life with his paternal grandparents. Precocious as a child, he entered Bowdoin College at an early age, graduating at the age of seventeen in 1823 (although his diploma was held up for a year due to incidents of repeated profane swearing). After graduation, he studied law and soon won election to the Maine House of Representatives in 1831. That same year, his fiancée, Ellen Longfellow, sister of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, died. He was heartbroken. However, he married Ellen Deering, daughter of a Portland businessman, the following year. In 1841, he was elected as a Whig to the U.S. House of Representatives where he served for one term; the Democrats regained control of his district the following election. He stayed out of politics for twelve years, until 1854, when he was elected to the U.S. Senate. In his first speech on the floor of the Senate he rose in opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, a speech that gained him national recognition.

In 1857, his second wife died and his own health was seriously affected by a strange ailment, a nineteenth century version of Legionnaire's

disease, which seemed to originate from his stay at the National Hotel in Washington. His health was never the same after these setbacks, making him irritable and unsociable. It did not seem to affect his performance in the Senate, however, as he became one of the most respected debaters in that chamber. His particular talent lay in his ability to defeat Senator Stephen Douglas (D-Ill) in debate.⁹ Fessenden was certainly not shy about speaking on the floor of the Senate. During the “lame duck” session of 1860-61, he gave eighty-eight speeches, four of which were major Republican policy speeches. In the first session of the Thirty-seventh Congress, beginning in March 1861, Fessenden practically dominated debate, in fact once pushing Senator Douglas to the point of challenging Fessenden to a duel. Luckily, cooler heads prevailed.¹⁰

In the month after the election of Abraham Lincoln, the entire country waited to see if the Deep South would follow through with its threats to secede from the Union. Henry Adams, great-grandson and grandson of two U.S. presidents, believed that many Republican congressmen “underrated the danger,” later describing himself as having been “ignorant and helpless.”¹¹ Fessenden seemed to be among those who underestimated the will of secessionists in the South. In a letter to a relative he argued that “much of the noise is got up for effect in the hope that the North will be frightened and the Republicans induced to falter and thus lose the confidence of the people in their firmness and capacity.”¹²

Prior to South Carolina’s secession in late December 1860, few of the Republican newspapers in Maine seriously considered that the South would secede from the Union. The editor of the *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* expected that “the sane men of the South will soon take care of the thing, and prevent the Hotspurs from absolutely ruining that section . . . meanwhile the North has only to keep quiet.”¹³ The *Portland Advertiser* agreed with this assessment: “The truth is that the disunion movement in South Carolina and Georgia is, and has been very much exaggerated . . . the [Robert Barnwell] Rhett men found themselves in a miserable minority and powerless when brought in opposition to the more general and conservative opinions of the people.”¹⁴ At least one Republican newspaper dared the southerners to secede. On December 11, 1860, the *Bangor Jeffersonian* included this poem in its pages:

To the South Carolina Disunionists
 We ask one favor – only one,
 Just take this brief confession.
 We’re sick and tired to hear you prate,
 So long about secession.

Out get you gone – nor stop to talk,
You blustering hateful varlots.
We feel as virtue feels at threats,
Which come from lips of harlots.

Just as the frightened Tuscan cried,
Unto those stern beholders,
As some pale loathsome corpse was tied,
To rot upon his shoulders.

So cries from Northern lips have rung,
Though few have deigned to heed'em,
While slavery's rotting corpse was hung
Around the neck of freedom.¹⁵

Maine's Democratic newspapers were less sure that the talk of secession was just that. The *Farmington Franklin Patriot* observed, "however dark the signs of the times may be, it is not yet too late to attempt to allay the impending storm, if the friends of the country will but exert themselves as they may."¹⁶ The *Machais Union* echoed those sentiments and warned, "Public opinion must be concentrated against them [abolitionists]. They are the enemies of peace and traitors to their country."¹⁷ The *Eastern Argus* of Portland, in an article full of forebodings, warned that secession "will be a blow, the inevitable effect of which, will be the destruction of the national government."¹⁸

Of all Mainers, Marcellus Emery, editor of the *Bangor Daily Union*, was probably the most outspoken opponent of coercing the South to remain in the Union. In 1860, he supported John J. Breckinridge, the southern Democratic candidate for president. Soon after the election, Emery wrote a lengthy editorial on the right of secession:

The Union of Maine with South Carolina rests and depends for its continuance on the free consent and will of the sovereign people of each. When that consent and will is withdrawn on either part, their Union is gone, and no power exterior to the withdrawing can ever restore it. A sovereign State may be conquered and held as a subject province; but no aggregation of power can ever force or compel it to be a co-sovereign and co-equal member of the American Union. It may yet be in the power of the North, which had most wickedly and unjustifiably provoked this unhappy controversy, to save the Union. Let there be no delay, else our glorious Union is gone, and gone forever.¹⁹

President James Buchanan's State of the Union address in December 1860 was greeted with mixed reviews in the Maine press. Even the Democratic newspapers had trouble finding something positive to say about it. The *Eastern Argus* reported, "he lacks the boldness and decision firmly to propose and execute a policy designed to relieve the country from its distress."²⁰ Republican newspapers attacked the president for his weakness, but applauded his statement that no state had a constitutional right to secede. Following Buchanan's address, Congress set up committees in both chambers to consider possible compromises. The Senate Committee of Thirteen included important members from both the North and the South, men such as Stephen Douglas (D-Ill), John J. Crittenden (D-Ky), Jefferson Davis (D-Miss), Robert Tombs (D-Ga), William Seward (R-N.Y.), and Benjamin Wade (R-Oh). The House Committee of Thirty-three had one member from each of the states; Freeman Morse represented Maine. These were the most prestigious men in Congress. The hope was that their influence was great enough to avoid catastrophe.

However, by the time the committees were formed and met for the first time, South Carolina had seceded from the Union. Time was running out for Congress to reach a compromise. It was also clear that Abraham Lincoln was opposed to any compromise involving the expansion of slave territory. This type of compromise had been introduced by Senator John J. Crittenden. The so-called Crittenden Compromise proposed adding several amendments to the Constitution that would reestablish the 36° 30' line (from the Missouri Compromise) as the boundary between free and slave states, protect slavery where it already existed, protect slavery in Washington, D.C., and protect the interstate transportation of slaves. Crittenden also urged Congress to reaffirm the Fugitive Slave Act and recommended the repeal of the personal liberty laws in the North.

Senator Fessenden's mail ran very much opposed to compromise. His uncle, Joseph P. Fessenden of Bridgton, wrote early in January 1861, "The very existence of the Republican Party and the safety of the country depend on a determined adherence to the platform which they put forth to the people and by which they triumphed in the late elections."²¹ Likewise, Woodbury Davis, justice of the Maine Supreme Court, wrote on January 14, 1861:

I am opposed to all temporizing schemes and tricks, designed mainly to put off the decisive hours. Slavery will not consent to give up the control without a struggle. The sooner it comes the better. Internal quarrels and starvation will soon bring the South to terms, without

our yielding one iota. Pardon me, as one of your constituents, for praying you resist all propositions for concession, from whatever quarters they come.²²

Finally, Hannibal Hamlin wrote to his former Senate colleague in January complaining about the Crittenden proposals:

What of the movements in Washington? Is there to be a miserable and humiliating compromise by which we as Republicans are to be disgraced? I trust not, and yet I have my fears as I look at things from my standpoint. It seems to me that Crittenden is doing more mischief than all the fire-eaters in the land. Has he an idea that his scheme can be carried out by guaranteeing slavery in all the continent south of 36° 30' for it amounts to that? When it comes to that, it will be time for us to try secession.²³

Maine Republicans were clearly in no mood for compromise, and many were willing to consider extreme measures to end the dispute over slavery.

On January 12, 1861, Senator William Seward gave his much-anticipated speech on the Senate floor. Many believed that, as a leader of the Republican Party and probable secretary of state in Lincoln's cabinet, Seward would submit Lincoln's plan to ease the crisis or in some way try to placate the southern states. Many were disappointed with his speech in that regard, although the *Bangor Whig and Courier* called it "a great and patriotic effort for the preservation of the Union."²⁴ Southerners saw nothing new in the speech; within a week Georgia joined South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, and Alabama by seceding from the Union. Some northerners believed the speech was too wishy-washy and conciliatory. When Seward followed this speech with another of the same tone on January 31, Senator Fessenden felt compelled to rise and attack. However, Senator Mason of Virginia took the floor before him and attacked Seward's speech so vigorously from the southern viewpoint that Fessenden decided to refrain from speaking.²⁵

Marcellus Emery seemed quite pleased with Seward and the fact that divisions in the Republican ranks were evident. He wrote in the *Bangor Daily Union*, "Republicans may as well understand, that the North is not a unit of coercion."²⁶ By the time he wrote those words, the chance for a peaceful reconciliation was rapidly vanishing. Both the Senate Committee of Thirteen and the House Committee of Thirty-three were unable to reach any sort of compromise. By February 1, Louisiana and Texas had seceded, bringing the total number to seven states that had left the

Union. Delegates from those states met in Montgomery, Alabama, on the fourth of February and within four days a constitution for the new Confederate States of America had been approved. Even the news that Jefferson Davis had been inaugurated as president of the Confederacy did not seem to move Fessenden. "We have become so accustomed to the Secession movement," he wrote home, "that it frightens nobody. Secession is getting a check in various quarters, and our seceding friends are finding it much easier to raise the devil than to lay him."²⁷

Democratic newspapers in Maine attacked Republicans for their tactics. The editors of the *Eastern Argus*, in an article entitled "The Effects of Delay," commented:

The prospect is worse now than ever before. There is indeed, but very little room for hope. A few days will probably decide the momentous question, whether or not this Government is to be forever broken up! Delays have proved disastrous thus far, and they will be still more so. The Republican leaders can put matters in process of amicable adjustment in twenty-four hours, if they but will it. If they fail, let them not expect to be held guiltless.²⁸

There was, however, another attempt to reach a compromise in February 1861. On the same day that the seven seceded states met in Montgomery, delegates from the other states gathered at Willard's Dance Hall in Washington. The Washington Peace Conference would eventually include one hundred and thirty-two delegates from twenty-one states. It was called by Virginia under the provisions of the fifth article of the Constitution. At first, several leaders of the northern states were opposed to the conference. Governor Israel Washburn of Maine took the lead in trying to convince other northern governors to refuse to appoint delegates. In a telegram to Governor William Yates of Illinois, Washburn wrote that the appointment of delegates would "demoralize the Republican Party."²⁹ He was convinced of the undesirability of answering Virginia's "invitation to reverse the verdict of the people."³⁰ However, when Governor Yates and Governor John Andrews of Massachusetts both decided to send delegates in order to insure a Republican majority at the conference, Washburn relented. He picked the Maine congressional delegation in Washington to attend as delegates to the conference but gave them a stern warning: "Artful politicians – rich merchants, and speculators, whose god is money, will counsel peace, regardless of principle, see that you yield not to their solicitations."³¹

Maine's Democratic newspapers were outraged at Washburn's selec-

tion of delegates. The *Rockland Democrat and Free Press* was particularly scathing in its attack:

These men will go into that convention not to aid, but thwart pacification. By prejudices, association, and commitment, they are against peace. The object of the convention is union, theirs is disunion; the object of the convention is peace, theirs is war; the object of the convention is to save the country, theirs is to save the Republican Party. How long shall this insolence, this wickedness, be upheld in our State?³²

The *Democrat and Free Press* also warned of the economic consequences of disunion:

How much will be done upon our whole line of seacoast in the large towns, during the next season, if this quarrel is not ended soon? Will there be ships built, lumber manufactured, lime burnt, and will other branches of industry flourish? No. Everything must partake of the great depression. But the leading Republicans at Augusta, with Washburn at their head, care nothing for the sufferings of their fellow-citizens.³³

The Republican *Kennebec Journal* of Augusta, by contrast, had nothing but praise for Washburn's selections:

Maine should not be speaking one voice in Congress and another voice in the Convention. When they [the people of Maine] want Democrats to represent them at Washington on the momentous issues that now concern, they will so declare at the ballot-boxes in a way not to be misunderstood.³⁴

At the Washington Peace Conference, the Maine delegates rejected every compromise resolution and did little else. Six of the eight members simply stayed away, except for the final vote. Fessenden, for one, did not believe the convention could make much of a difference. Fessenden and the other members of Maine's delegation not attending decided to spend their time in Congress. Only Lot Morrill and Daniel Sommes participated much in the proceedings of the conference. Acting as contrarian, Sommes, when he was in attendance, proposed several unnecessary amendments to resolutions. For example, he introduced an amendment guaranteeing free speech in the territories. Morrill was appointed to a committee of twenty-one to which was delegated the responsibility of drawing up resolutions. During one debate on resolutions, James A. Seddon, the obstreperous delegate from Virginia announced, "Virginia will



Lot M. Morrill served as governor of Maine from 1848 to 1851. In 1861, Morrill was appointed to fill Hannibal Hamlin's seat in the Senate when Hamlin was elected vice president. Morrill was one of the few Maine delegates to the Washington Peace Conference who spent significant time at the meeting. At the conference, Morrill was appointed to the committee that was in charge of drafting the resolutions. Maine Historical Society Collections.

not permit coercion." Maine's Lot Morrill rose to reply that such an attitude was one of menace, "It gives aid and comfort to those who trample upon the laws and defy the authority of the Government." At this point, Robert Stockton, a Democrat from New Jersey, shouted "Silence, Sir!" and rushed towards Morrill with violent and angry gestures. Twenty or thirty Republicans formed a wall around Morrill, while a like number of southerners rallied around Stockton. Only the intervention of former President John Tyler, who was acting as chairman, stopped the convention from erupting into a brawl.³⁵

The Washington Peace Conference submitted seven resolutions to Congress for consideration, summarized as follows:

- 1) Reintroduction of the 36° 30' (Missouri Compromise) line dividing free and slave territories in the West.
- 2) Two-thirds vote in Congress to acquire new territories.
- 3) Protection of slavery where it exists.
- 4) Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law.
- 5) Prohibition of the foreign slave trade.
- 6) All of the states would have to agree to a repeal of sections one, three and five.
- 7) Slave owners to be compensated for runaway slaves they were unable to recover because of actions taken by mobs or riotous assemblages. Citizens of the states would be protected.

The only two state delegations to vote against all seven resolutions were those from Iowa and Maine. These resolutions were then rejected by the United States Senate, thus ending the last major attempt to reach a compromise during the secession crisis.³⁶ The Washington Peace Conference of February 1861 ended in failure.

Yet, there was still hope that war could be avoided. When Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office on March, 4, 1861, seven slave states had seceded from the Union, but eight slave states had not. Many in the Republican Party thought that if those numbers could be maintained for a while, perhaps the seceded states might be convinced, one by one, to re-join the Union. Henry Adams wrote, "We shall keep the border states, and in three months or thereabouts, if we hold off, the Unionists and Disunionists will have their hands on each other's throats in the cotton states." Lincoln himself said in his inauguration speech that the issue of civil war was in the hands of the South, as he firmly believed that Unionists in the South were still in the majority and would eventually reverse the course of secession.³⁷

When the Thirty-seventh Congress met in special session in March 1861, not much had changed. Maine's new delegation included Samuel Fessenden of Rockland, John N. Goodwin of South Berwick, Anson P. Morrill of Readfield, Frederick Pike of Calais, John Rice of Foxcroft, and Charles Wilson of Auburn. It was a group even more "ultra" Republican than those of the Thirty-sixth Congress. William Pitt Fessenden and Lot Morrill remained as Maine's senators. These men were not interested in compromise and no new compromise proposals were introduced in this session. In fact, by March, most of the Republican newspapers in Maine were writing about treason and the punishment of traitors. The *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* even asked U.S. District Court Judge Peleg Sprague to write an article defining treason for its readers (which he did two years later in March 1863).³⁸ On April 12, 1861, the problem of simply defining treason became moot, as the first shots of the Civil War were fired at Fort Sumter, off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina. The country was at war with itself.

How does a civil war erupt in a representative democracy? Perhaps the real problem during the Great Secession Winter of 1860-1861 was a lack of statesmanship. It would be easy to blame the inevitability of the war on the fact that John J. Crittenden was not Henry Clay, or William Seward was not Daniel Webster. In many ways, the crisis of 1860-1861 can be compared to the Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s. After a decade or more of confrontation, the Soviets and Americans reached a point

during the Cuban Missile Crisis when accommodations had to be made or war would result. The difference is that in 1962, the leaders of both countries realized that war would be too terrible. The price to pay for superiority would not be worth the cost.

Hardly anyone in 1860-61 had an idea of the coming sacrifices to be made. Very few, in their wildest nightmare, could know that four years of the deadliest war in American history would result or that 620,000 Americans would have to die because of a failure to reach accommodation. Would William Pitt Fessenden or the other members of the Maine delegation in Congress have done anything different if they had known that over 9,000 Maine men would die as a result of the war?

The paradoxes of this period abound. The election of 1860 was won by a party which could garner only 38.9 percent of the popular vote in the country, with no support at all in nine southern states. Eventually, eleven states seceded from the Union even though large pockets of Union support remained in those states, especially in the hill sections of Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia. States' rights advocates in the South wanted federal assurances to help catch runaway slaves. Northern supporters of a strong federal government nullified federal fugitive slave laws. Republicans expected southern Unionists to wrestle control of their state governments from the radicals, so they did not think they had to resort to compromise. Southern Unionists expected adequate assurances of good will from northern moderates and assumed compromise would follow.³⁹ Thus, the whole question of inevitability may rest on the fact that these groups had simply forgotten to listen to each other.

Regardless, the citizens and leaders of the state of Maine had control over three issues which may or may not have changed the course of American history. They could have demonstrated moderation by voting for Stephen Douglas or John Bell in the presidential election of 1860. They could have repealed their personal liberty laws in order to make a minimal concession to the South. They could have supported the Crittenden Compromise, other compromise efforts in Congress, or the Washington Peace Conference. They did none of these. In fact, they did the opposite. They overwhelmingly voted for Abraham Lincoln and Republican candidates in the election of 1860, even though this may have been against their own economic self-interest (as the war effectively ruined the coastal trade and textile industry in the state). They rejected any attempts to repeal their personal liberty laws, even though the laws were technically unconstitutional and, in fact, acts of nullification. Through



The aftermath of secession in Charleston, South Carolina. Pictured here in 1865 are the ruins of the Cathedral of St. John and Secession Hall, where secession was declared by South Carolina in December 1860. Attributed to George N. Barnard. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

their representatives in Congress, they rejected all compromise attempts, even to the point of sabotaging those attempts.

Perhaps, due to rapid shifts and changes in population, technology, industry, westward expansion, revolutionary ideas from Europe, or other factors, the North could not wait for the South to voluntarily abolish slavery as the Russians would communism in the 1990s. Perhaps, it was time to end almost 250 years of slavery in the land of liberty— to take a stand and reject the path of compromise. Perhaps, amidst all the paradox and confusion, the people of the state of Maine and their representatives in Congress knew, steadfastly in their hearts, that it was time.

Notes

1. Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of Lincoln* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), p. 413.
2. Dwight Lowell Dumond, *The Secession Movement, 1860-1861* (New York: Octagon Books, 1963), p. v.
3. H. Draper Hunt, *Hannibal Hamlin of Maine* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1962), p. 137.
4. David Morris Potter, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 157.
5. For more on the personal liberty law issue see Jerry R. Desmond, "The Attempt to Repeal Maine's Personal Liberty Laws," *Maine History* 37, no. 4 (Spring 1998): 194–209.
6. Representative Ezra French, for example, became second auditor of the Treasury in the Lincoln administration.
7. *Congressional Globe*, 36th Congress, second session.
8. *Congressional Globe*, 36th Congress, second session, p. 550. Emphasis added.
9. All of the information about Fessenden's life prior to 1860 comes from Frances Fessenden, *Life and Public Services of William Pitt Fessenden* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1907), volume I.
10. *Congressional Globe*, 37th Congress, first session, p. 1462. It is true that Douglas may have intimated a challenge to Fessenden. Fessenden's reply was: "I am ready to meet my responsibilities here or anywhere, to the best of my ability physically and otherwise, everywhere, I shall not call upon the Senator, although he used language which upon his code would call for something more. I hold that I will insult no man . . . no man whom I believe to recognize a code different from my own."
11. Potter, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis*, p. 78.
12. Fessenden, *Life and Public Services*, p. 116.
13. *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier*, November 9, 1860, p. 2.

14. *Portland Daily Advertiser*, November 14, 1860, p. 2.
15. *Bangor Jeffersonian*, December 11, 1860, p. 1.
16. *Farmington Franklin Patriot*, November 30, 1860, p. 2.
17. *Machais Union*, December 4, 1860, p. 2.
18. *Eastern Argus* (Portland), December 12, 1860, p. 2.
19. *Bangor Daily Union*, November 13, 1860, p. 2.
20. *Eastern Argus* (Portland), December 7, 1860, p. 2.
21. Joseph Fessenden to W. P. Fessenden, January 10, 1861, Letters and Private Papers of William Pitt Fessenden, Library of Congress, Washington.
22. Woodbury Davis to W. P. Fessenden, January 14, 1861, Letters and Private Papers of William Pitt Fessenden, Library of Congress, Washington.
23. Charles Eugene Hamlin, *The Life and Times of Hannibal Hamlin* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1899), p. 383.
24. *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier*, January 16, 1861, p. 2.
25. On the secession of the lower South states see William J. Cooper, Jr., and Thomas E. Terrill, *The American South: A History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991), pp. 339-341; Fessenden, *Life and Public Services*, pp. 121-122.
26. *Bangor Daily Union*, January 22, 1861, p. 2.
27. Cooper and Terrill, *American South*, pp. 341, 344-345; Fessenden, *Life and Public Services*, pp. 124-125.
28. *Eastern Argus* (Portland), February 20, 1861, p. 2.
29. Robert Gray Gunderson, *Old Gentlemen's Convention: The Washington Peace Conference of 1861* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), pp. ix, 33 (quotation).
30. Gunderson, *Old Gentlemen's Convention*, p. 40.
31. Gunderson, *Old Gentlemen's Convention*, p. 40.
32. *Rockland Democrat and Free Press*, February 18, 1861, p. 2.
33. *Rockland Democrat and Free Press*, February 18, 1861, p. 2.
34. *Kennebec Journal* (Augusta), February 15, 1861, p. 2.
35. Gunderson, *Old Gentlemen's Convention*, pp. 55-56, 70.
36. Gunderson, *Old Gentlemen's Convention*, pp. 90, 93-95, 109-110.
37. Nevins, *Emergence of Lincoln*, p. 471; on Lincoln's first inaugural address see Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), pp. 157-161
38. For more see "What is treason?: a charge, addressed by Hon. Peleg Sprague, Judge of the U.S. District Court for the District of Massachusetts, to the Grand Jury, at the March term, A.D., 1863" (Salem, MA: The Salem Union League, printed by C. W. Swasey, 1863). Justice Sprague, after much legalese, reacted to those who favored secession: "They delight to call our political system a compact, and assume that if it be so, they may, of course, destroy it at pleasure: as if

to violate compacts was an inalienable right. They do not rest upon the ultimate right of revolution, to throw off intolerable oppression, but claim a legal right to resist all law, and overthrow the Constitution itself. And the question now is, whether our Government can withstand this last most desperate and atrocious assault, or whether it must fall and bury us and the hopes of mankind in its ruins" (p. 15).

39. On the election of 1860 see Jerry R. Desmond, "Maine and the Elections of 1860," *New England Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (Sept. 1994): 466; on the fugitive slave issue see Desmond, "The Attempt to Repeal Maine's Personal Liberty Laws"; on southern mountain Unionists see, for example, Robert Hodges, "Unionism and Wartime Reconstruction in West Virginia and Tennessee, 1861-1865," *Journal of East Tennessee History* 82 (2010): 53-75.