James E. Harvey and the Secession Crisis

A most astounding disclosure appeared in the morning papers: Harvey, the former editor of the Independent & just appointed minister to Portugal, is a traitor: at the very time when he had just received his mission & was preparing for departure he telegraphed the Southerners of the sailing of the fleet to relieve Ft. Sumter. This has transpired in the seizure of the last twelve month’s dispatches at the Telegraphic offices, by the government. Unluckily he has already sailed for Lisbon.”

Sarah Butler Wister’s startled diary entry of June 8, 1861, printed in the July 1978 issue of The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, may well have stirred the curiosity of careful readers. What lay behind the sensational accusations against James E. Harvey, the long-time Philadelphia newspaperman who had been designated the chief American diplomat in Portugal just as the Civil War began? Was Harvey a traitor? To answer such questions, we must look at the man himself and at the extraordinary circumstances of the secession winter, which followed Abraham Lincoln’s election as President in November 1860. The process of historical investigation is facilitated by the preservation of substantial numbers of pertinent Harvey letters, notably in the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln in the Library of Congress, and in the Henry C. Carey Papers in the Edward Carey Gardiner Collection in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The resulting biographical vignette will focus on the conflicted response of a significant but long-forgotten individual at the moment when the American political system encountered its sternest challenge.

The secession crisis weighed heavily on Americans who had ties

both North and South. Horrified by the prospect of disunion and civil war, they deprecated sectional chauvinism and instinctively favored peaceful restoration of the Union. Harvey was a prominent example of the type. Although best known as a Pennsylvania reporter who specialized in coverage of national politics, Harvey had been born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina, where sisters of his still lived. His perceptions of the secession crisis and his abortive effort to preserve the peace will provide the focus for this essay.

Harvey's career began with a rush. By the age of twenty-four, the young Carolinian had established himself in the competitive world of Washington journalism. Capable of sustaining an endless flow of political commentary and gossip, Harvey quickly developed a reputation as one who could penetrate official secrets and find the important stories. His daily column, signed merely "Independent," became a regular feature on the editorial page of the Philadelphia North American and United States Gazette from the mid-1840s until 1861. Harvey also telegraphed a daily summary of events in Washington to Horace Greeley's widely read New York Tribune for several years before the war.²

Like most other political reporters of his era, Harvey was no "independent" but rather an active partisan. In politics, as in journalism, he rose quickly. Deeply involved in the successful Whig presidential campaign of 1848, he won recognition as a skilled political strategist. The collapse of the old Whig Party during the 1850s drove Harvey and most other northern Whigs toward the new Republican Party. But Harvey thought Republican success depended upon tempering the Party's initially radical image, and making a clearer effort to identify itself as the trustworthy heir to the Whig tradition. Harvey believed Republicans should learn a lesson from their failure to carry Pennsylvania and three other states of the "lower North"—Illinois, Indiana, and New Jersey—in the 1856 presidential election. The Keystone State, in particular,

had responded poorly to the antislavery emphasis of the 1856 Republican campaign. Instead, it decisively supported the Democratic presidential candidate, native son James Buchanan of Lancaster. Large numbers of Pennsylvania Whigs voted either for Buchanan or for the American Party presidential candidate, Millard Fillmore. For Republicans such as Harvey, the lesson of 1856 was to say less about the “single idea” of antislavery, and rather to attract industrial Pennsylvania with support for a protective tariff.\(^3\)

By 1860 Harvey was at the height of his influence. Immediately after the Republican national convention in May 1860, he contacted presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln to offer political advice. Lincoln, who also regarded Pennsylvania and the “lower North” as the key to the election, reported himself glad to hear from Harvey “as often as you can conveniently write.” The latter responded with frequent reports on the Republican campaign in Pennsylvania. He persistently urged Lincoln to make a more unequivocal endorsement of the tariff than the ambiguous pledge in the Republican platform “to encourage the development of the industrial interests of the whole country.” Lincoln demurred, but Harvey and other Pennsylvanians put the best face possible on the platform, promoting the tariff issue to the virtual exclusion of all others. The strategy worked perfectly. Republicans scored massive gains in Pennsylvania and Lincoln carried the state. Victorious elsewhere in the “lower North,” Lincoln won the presidency.\(^4\)

But the thrill of victory was short lived. Within weeks after the


\(^4\) Harvey to Lincoln, May 21, 27, June 5, 13, 25, 28, July 4, 27, Sept. 22, 25, Oct. 6, 9, and Nov. 6, 1860, microfilmed copy of the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln, Library of Congress; Morton McMichael to Harvey, June 10, 1860, Lincoln Papers; Lincoln to Harvey, June 9, Aug. 14, Sept. 27, and Oct. 2, 1860, in Roy P. Basler (ed.), \textit{The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln} (New Brunswick, 1953), IV, 73, 94–95, 122, 125 (hereinafter cited as \textit{Collected Works}). It is apparent that there were more 1860 letters between Lincoln and Harvey than have survived. \textit{Ibid.}, 73, 95.
election it became apparent that many southerners would risk secession rather than "submit" to a Republican president. Southern intransigence caught most Republicans by surprise. Indignation and disbelief coupled to produce paralysis in party counsels. By late November Harvey was convinced that his party and the country faced an extraordinary emergency. His initial hopes that the secession "fever" would dissipate gave way to a realization that the "epidemic" of revolution was sweeping the cotton states. "Unless some mode of extrication be found, and that speedily," he warned, "the secession of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida may be considered nearly certain. How far the infection of that example may extend afterwards, cannot now be foreseen; but the prospect is saddening to contemplate. . . ."

Republican moderates such as Harvey believed the difficulty resulted from deliberate distortion. The South was infested, in his view, with "lying demagogues." They had "grossly misled" many people in their region by creating a false alarm about Republican intentions to hurt the South. Privately, Harvey also blamed the "Yankees," his code word for the vociferously antislavery wing of the Republican Party. He thought strident Yankee antisouthernism had made the propaganda of southern agitators superficially plausible. "There is danger at our doors, and the Yankees are mainly responsible," Harvey complained to a friend; "They have negrofied our whole politics." To counteract the mischief created by extremists North and South Harvey prescribed reassurances about Lincoln's "conservatism." He believed that non-Yankee Pennsylvania could become a sectional mediator: "It is eminently fitting that Pennsylvania should take the lead and set an example of conciliation. She stands between the two extremes of opinion—a model breakwater against ultraism of either. She neither sympathizes with abolition nor secession. . . ."

Harvey was more ready than most Republicans to conclude that

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6 North American, Nov. 13, 29, Dec. 4, 6, 1860; Harvey to Carey, "Thursday" (early December 1860), and Dec. 14, 1860, Carey Papers.
his party had primary responsibility to alleviate the crisis. Even if Republicans were the victims of misrepresentation, he reasoned, they alone could set the record straight. He was especially concerned to support "the brave and patriotic Union men of the South," who were "loyally and gallantly" trying to resist secessionism: "They are bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, our friends and brothers, and courageous defenders of the Constitution and the Union." Together with other conciliatory Republicans such as Thurlow Weed, Harvey struggled to make his party aware of the need to help southern Unionists "arrest the secession stampede." 7

Harvey thought Republicans should endorse a "seeming concession" such as the re-establishment of the Missouri line, 36 degrees and 30 minutes, so as to allow southerners the theoretical right to hold slaves in federal territory south of that line. The concession would be symbolic, designed simply to give southern Unionists "enough to stand upon to show their people that the charge[s] made against the Republicans by demagogues who desire disunion are unfounded, and that the rights of the South are not to be violated." Harvey felt that such a concession would not sacrifice "any real principle," since slaveowners did not actually desire to settle in the western territories anyway. "I am as much and more truly opposed to the extension of slavery," he explained to a friend, "than these infernal philanthropists, who are constantly shouting their faith at the corners." 8

During December 1860 and January 1861 a coalition of northern and southern moderates in Congress tried to frame a satisfactory plan of adjustment based on extension of the Missouri line. Harvey gave full coverage in his newspaper column to the emerging "Border State Plan" sponsored by Republican Congressman James T. Hale

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of Pennsylvania. The Border State Plan called for the prohibition of slavery in federal territory north of 36 degrees and 30 minutes, while south of the line neither Congress nor a territorial legislature should "pass any law for or against slavery." This seemed to Harvey a more reasonable basis for settlement than the famous Crittenden Compromise, which reflected the same basic approach but was weighted down with features sure to be opposed by Republicans—federal protection for slavery in all territories south of the Missouri line then owned or "hereafter acquired."

But Hale's scheme foundered, as had other compromise ideas, on the reef of opposition from President-elect Lincoln, who ruled out any "surrender" to southern blackmail. Harvey thought Lincoln's position indefensible. He believed the Border State Plan offered the best chance of undermining secession momentum. The "obstinate refusal" of inflexible Republicans to assist southern Unionists struck Harvey as "unworthy of any great party." In early December, Harvey had hopefully anticipated seeing "a break of light among the clouds." By mid-January his hopes had dimmed: "The clouds are still heavy above us, and no sun light yet breaks through them, that I am able to discover."

At this dismal impasse, the floundering effort to establish a conciliatory Republican policy began to receive vital assistance from William H. Seward, Lincoln's designated Secretary of State. Seward extended secret reassurances to Unionist leaders in the upper South, promising that the new Administration would act circumspectly to preserve the peace, and hinting also that it would presently be willing to accept a redefinition of the territorial issue satisfactory to the upper South. Harvey had never admired Seward, but circumstances drew them together as the secession crisis deepened. Harvey and Seward both saw the allegiance of the upper South as the paramount factor; both fervently believed that if the upper South

stayed in the Union, the states of the lower South could be peacefully lured back.10

During February Seward accomplished his initial objective. First Virginia, then Tennessee, and by the end of the month all eight states of the upper South had decisively rejected immediate secession. In three states—Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware—secessionists could not even muster enough support to call a convention election. In two others, North Carolina and Tennessee, a convention was voted down by popular referendum. And in the three remaining states—Virginia, Missouri, and Arkansas—conventions met but a majority of delegates in each opposed secession and hoped to see the Union restored. For Harvey as for Seward, the turn of events in the upper South during February was immensely reassuring. But Seward and his allies now faced the troublesome task of persuading other Republicans, notably the President-elect, to reward southern Unionists with "reasonable concessions." That objective remained maddeningly elusive.11

By late February, Harvey was lobbying openly for Seward's time-buying palliative, a national convention, and giving sympathetic coverage to a Seward-inspired plan to appoint non-Republican southern Unionists to Lincoln's Cabinet. Neither scheme materialized. Yet moderates such as Seward and Harvey still had reasons for guarded hope at the time of Lincoln's inauguration on March 4. No fighting had yet taken place, and the upper South remained uneasily within the Union. Seward had persuaded Lincoln to deliver an inaugural address more conciliatory in many particulars than the original draft. And Congress, with substantial Republican support, finally approved two significant Union-saving overtures: the organization of three new western territories without reference to slavery, and the passage of a Constitutional amendment protecting slavery in the states. Southern Unionists had hoped for more

10 Seward's secession crisis role is carefully and often brilliantly analyzed in Potter, *Lincoln and His Party*. The Sowle dissertation offers, however, an important corrective to Potter, based on more thorough manuscript research. For a complaint about Harvey serving as a "mouthpiece" for Seward, see Joseph B. Baker to James Buchanan, Jan. 11, 1861, Buchanan Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. For candidly expressed reservations the "mouthpiece" had about the source, see Harvey to Carey, Jan. 6, 1861, "Sunday" (early February 1861), Carey Papers.

tangible evidence of Republican flexibility but they believed the new Administration was at least headed in the right direction.\textsuperscript{12}

The most immediate problem facing the Administration was the question of what to do about two outposts still under federal control in the seceded states—Fort Pickens in the harbor of Pensacola, Florida, and Fort Sumter in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina. The latter, especially, had become a symbol of northern determination not to tolerate permanent secession. Popular sentiment in the North therefore strongly favored continued federal occupation of Sumter and Pickens. But southern Unionists, supported in this instance by Republican moderates such as Harvey and Seward, saw the matter differently. They wanted the forts abandoned in order to minimize the chances of a violent clash between the federal government and the infant Confederacy. They feared that any bloodshed would unite the still-divided South and make peaceful reunion impossible.\textsuperscript{13}

For moderates North and South, the proper solution to the dilemma of the southern forts was a policy through which the cotton states would be, in Harvey's phrase, "left severely alone" to self-destruct. Harvey argued for such an approach in the most widely reprinted of his secession crisis newspaper columns:

\begin{quote}
The cotton States are determined to try a separate government. Resistance to it here will unite and consolidate the south, and enable it to do what could not be done in a condition of peace—extort money by forced loans to carry on their government. If left severely alone to work out this problem in their own way, no human power can prevent the destruction and disintegration of the cotton confederacy. . . . If the Administration keeps its hands off and ignores the very existence of the cotton States, the people who have been deceived and betrayed will soon rise up in their might to
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{13} On southern Unionists and the forts, see Crofts, "A Reluctant Unionist," 245-249, and "The Union Party of 1861," 352, 364-370.
crush out the treason and seek a return to the Union, in which their prosperity and protection were so well secured.

Harvey’s passive “hands-off” policy was exactly what southern Unionists wanted. One influential Virginia Unionist, Alexander H. H. Stuart, stated that implementation of the policy outlined in Harvey’s article “would put every thing to rest.”

Throughout March and early April, popular attention focused on Fort Sumter, the beleaguered federal outpost in Charleston harbor. The Fort’s commander, Major Robert Anderson, reported in early March that his food supplies would not last longer than six weeks. But the Confederates promised to resist any federal resupply mission, and they presented a formidable military challenge. Winfield Scott, General in Chief of the United States Army, calculated that 25,000 troops and a naval fleet would be needed to defend the Fort against Confederate attack. Scott’s advice pointed inexorably toward abandonment of Sumter. For one thing, the requisite troops and ships could not be gathered and co-ordinated for months, long after Anderson’s food would be gone. So also, Scott’s assessment indicated plainly that a decision to try to retain Sumter was, under the circumstances, a decision for civil war. After hearing from Scott, all but one member of Lincoln’s Cabinet concluded that Sumter could not be held.

At this juncture, Seward undertook a daring bit of secret diplomacy. Both to Unionists in the upper South and to Confederates in the seceded states, the word went out: Sumter would soon be evacuated. Seward knew that the Unionists would react very favorably to such clear evidence that the Administration intended to try to preserve the peace. They shared his hope that the “hands-off” policy would lead eventually to a peaceful restoration of the Union. Seward also calculated that news of the Sumter evacuation would forestall any rash action by the Confederates. They did not

14 North American, Mar. 25, 1861; Stuart to Joseph C. G. Kennedy, Apr. 1, 1861, William Henry Seward Papers, University of Rochester.

16 Most useful on the Sumter dilemma are James G. Randall, Lincoln the President: Spring-field to Gettysburg (New York, 1945), I, 315-350; and Richard N. Current, Lincoln and the First Shot (Philadelphia, 1963). See also, Potter, Lincoln and His Party; Stampp, And the War Came; and Sowle, “Conciliatory Republicans.”
believe that the “hands-off” policy worked to their disadvantage, and were, therefore, happy to accept Sumter as a gift rather than fight for it.\textsuperscript{16}

Harvey, with family and friends in Charleston, became part of the communications network linking Washington and the deep South. Acting initially on his own authority, Harvey telegraphed several prominent Charleston leaders on March 11: “Orders issued for withdrawal of Anderson’s command. Scott declares it military necessity. This is private.”\textsuperscript{17} One of the Charlestownians, former federal judge A. G. Magrath, telegraphed back to ask for verification. Harvey thereupon consulted with Seward and Secretary of War Simon Cameron. Both told him—Cameron flatly, Seward obliquely—that Anderson would indeed soon be withdrawn from Sumter.\textsuperscript{18} Without implicating his sources, Harvey quickly dispatched a series of three telegrams to Magrath. One was sent on March 13: “My information is direct and positive. Nothing but forms delay consummation. Few days will verify this assurance.” A second was almost certainly sent the next day, March 14: “Great efforts making to reconsider withdrawal, but will fail. Final consultation to-morrow.” Two days later, on March 16, Harvey provided Magrath with an update on developments in Washington, and also sought reassurances that Anderson could evacuate Sumter without formally surrendering to Confederate authorities:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Copies of the telegrams Harvey sent to South Carolina were subsequently printed in the \textit{Congressional Globe}, 40 Congress, 2 Session, 1402–1403 (Feb. 25, 1868). The dates designated in the \textit{Globe} for the first two telegrams, Mar. 11 and 13, 1861, would appear accurate, but the third was printed without a date, and the fourth was dated Mar. 7, 1861, a clear error. The sequence may be reconstructed and correctly dated on the basis of Harvey to Simon Cameron, July 4, 1861, in \textit{ibid.}, 37 Congress, 1 Session, 432–433 (Aug. 3, 1861); Harvey to Cameron, Sept. 20, 1861, Simon Cameron Papers, Library of Congress; Harvey to Carey, Aug. 6, 1861, Carey Papers.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Harvey to Cameron, July 4, 1861, \textit{Congressional Globe}, 37 Congress, 1 Session, 432–433 (Aug. 3, 1861).
\end{itemize}
Final order still reserved. No decision reached in Council yesterday, though six for withdrawal and one against. This is private. Is it true your people will oppose voluntary withdrawal and demand formal capitulation? If so friends of peace here are powerless.

Magrath telegraphed back that Anderson could evacuate without conditions. Harvey personally told Cameron about Magrath’s reply, and Cameron instructed Harvey to see Lincoln directly. According to Harvey’s subsequent recollection: “I informed the President hastily of all the antecedent circumstances which culminated in that dispatch, and he proposed to retain it, as the subject was still undetermined in his mind, in order to have the information before him with the other papers.”

There the matter stood for the last two weeks of March. Despite the general expectation that Sumter would be abandoned, Lincoln made no decision and kept his own counsel. But events began to work against advocates of a “hands-off” policy. Since Fort Sumter symbolized the federal government’s determination not to acquiesce in secession, the news of its prospective abandonment stirred a sour response in the North, especially among hard-core Republicans. Lincoln obviously writhed under the dilemma of having to take action that might well rupture his party. Deferring the decision, he sent agents south to gather more information and see if any alternative was possible.

While Lincoln waited, new complexities began to develop. Higher federal tariff rates were due to go into effect on April 1, because the departure of low-tariff congressmen from the deep South had made it possible for Republicans to fulfill their campaign pledge to pass a protective tariff. Supporters of the bill had successfully depicted it as a revenue measure. Federal revenues, raised mostly by tariffs on imports, had dropped rapidly during the secession crisis because of commercial uncertainty and reduced international commerce. Treasury officials had desperately arranged loans as a stopgap measure. An increase in tariff rates could thus be justified as a means of raising more money. Passage of tariff legislation capped an effort that had engaged Harvey and other Pennsylvanians for

19 Ibid.; Harvey to Carey, Aug. 6, 1861, Carey Papers.
20 Stampp, And the War Came, 205–208, 265–268; Current, Lincoln and the First Shot, 71–75; Potter, Lincoln and His Party, 336–342; Randall, Lincoln the President, I, 328–331.
almost two decades. It gave them additional incentive for wanting to see the secession crisis peacefully resolved and Lincoln enabled to preside over a united country.21

But fresh doubts about the applicability and wisdom of the new tariff soon arose. It was painfully apparent that the federal government had not been collecting tariffs in the ports of the seceded states. Moderates who still hoped for peaceful reunion feared a violent clash between federal and Confederate authorities, should any attempt be made to enforce the new tariff in the deep South. Consistent with the let-alone policy, they hoped that a passive approach would allow secession to die a natural death. In the long run, Harvey still thought, the new tariff would strengthen domestic prosperity and protect American workers from the competition of "foreign pauper labor."22

But in the short run the new tariff seemed likely to produce only controversy, recrimination, and an exhibition of federal helplessness in the face of secession. The government was running out of money. American trade remained depressed by political uncertainties, and revenue collections therefore lagged. In late March as in January, the Treasury was obliged to float large loans. Its principal creditors, the powerful and influential large merchants of New York City, had strenuously opposed passage of the new tariff, and now urged its repeal. Although initially hopeful that political turmoil in the deep South would bring more interior commerce and hence international trade to New York, they concluded during March that considerable New York trade would be siphoned off to secession ports, where the old lower tariff rates would remain in effect. They were not reassured by Pennsylvania supporters of the new tariff, who insisted that overseas imports would not be diverted South in any substantial quantity because southern ports had inadequate facilities and poorer access to interior customers. The Confederate Congress added to the gloom of the New York merchants by indi-


cating that it would soon move to lower the southern tariff, thereby giving importers added incentive to ship South rather than North. 28

By late March, the New York Times, earlier a bastion of support for the let-alone policy, was editorializing belligerently about the Confederate threat to New York trade. It urged the federal government “at once to shut up every Southern port, destroy its commerce, and bring utter ruin on the Confederate states.” The New York commercial community was so exasperated by depressed foreign trade and anxiety for the future that the Times could remark: “A state of war would almost be preferable.” 24

Northern pressures for drastic action were clearly building. The spectacle of apparent disintegration of the Union fueled demands that the federal government take some decisive step to thwart secession. The revenue collection issue illustrated the difficulty of maintaining a hands-off policy; the issue of southern forts developed similarly. As pressures to “do something” intensified, it became ever harder for the Administration to defend what looked like a “do nothing” policy of abandoning forts. Lincoln also had growing doubts about the military advice he had received from General Scott. Finally, Lincoln decided tentatively in late March to try to resupply and hold Fort Sumter. In so doing, he risked igniting the spark that advocates of a hands-off policy dreaded. But he apparently concluded that his political position would fast become untenable if he did not at least make an effort to retain Sumter. And he may well have concluded the attempt would rally northern patriotic sentiment even if Confederates did capture the fort. 25

As news of Lincoln’s decision reached the Washington grapevine, advocates of the hands-off policy, led by Seward, made a desperate effort to change the President’s mind. For approximately a week,


25 Current, Lincoln and the First Shot, 75–81; Stampp, And the War Came, 276–278; Potter, Lincoln and His Party, 358–363.
controversy raged behind the scenes. Harvey, by his own account, worked "up to the last hour" to sidetrack the Sumter resupply mission. Finally, having failed, he telegraphed Magrath in Charleston on the morning of April 6: "Positively determined not to withdraw Anderson. Supplies go immediately, supported by a naval force under Stringham, if their landing be resisted."

Just as Lincoln was making his fateful decision about Fort Sumter, Harvey received his handsome political appointment as American minister to Portugal. The newspaperman-lobbyist had long felt that he deserved some reward from the "iron gentlemen" for his "thankless service" in behalf of a high tariff. With victory at hand and a Republican administration coming to power, Harvey decided to call in his IOUs. He frankly admitted to his friend Henry C. Carey, the economist, that he wanted a "paying appointment," but insisted that he would not make any efforts in his own behalf. So Carey and other Pennsylvania heavyweights pressed

26 Current, *Lincoln and the First Shot*, 82-107, is a convenient guide to the complex events of late March and early April 1861, though the treatment of Harvey on p. 107 is confused.
28 The timing of Harvey's telegram raises doubts about Lincoln's official explanation, in his message to Congress of July 4, 1861, that the decision to try to resupply Sumter was not finally made until word was received—on Saturday afternoon, April 6—that orders to reinforce Fort Pickens had miscarried. Harvey subsequently complained privately that Lincoln had concealed information from Congress: "the policy of withdrawing Anderson was changed, and . . . the Message does not disclose the whole facts." Harvey to Carey, Aug. 6, 1861, Carey Papers. See *Collected Works*, IV, 424-425; Current, *Lincoln and the First Shot*, 109-110.
20 *Congressional Globe*, 40 Congress, 2 Session, 1402 (Feb. 25, 1868); another copy is in the Lincoln Papers, Item #13653. Harvey subsequently believed that the government did not permit the telegram to go out. Harvey to Carey, Sept. 21, 1861, Carey Papers; Harvey to James W. Grimes, Feb. 25, 1868, *Congressional Globe*, 40 Congress, 2 Session, 1403 (Feb. 25, 1868). But there is reason to believe that it was indeed sent, and that the Confederate authorities checked about the identity of the sender, who had signed himself only as "A Friend." *Ibid.*, 1402; Samuel W. Crawford, *The Genesis of the Civil War, The Story of Sumter* (New York, 1887), 393.
Harvey’s claims. They apparently met with a favorable response from Seward, who had his own reasons for thinking well of the journalist. As a consequence, Harvey left the United States soon after the Fort Sumter crisis. He was spared having to witness directly the war he had tried so hard to prevent.30

But Harvey was not spared an embarrassing controversy about his secession crisis activities. The sectional polarization generated by the Fort Sumter incident and Lincoln’s call for 75,000 troops made proponents of a hands-off policy appear in retrospect to have exercised bad judgment or worse. Would-be peacemakers of the pre-Sumter period looked as if they had been too gentle toward secessionists and overly optimistic about the strength of southern Unionists. Harvey’s final telegram of April 6 was susceptible to an even more ominous interpretation: was this not the work of a Confederate agent who had revealed secret government plans?

Unfortunately for Harvey copies of his telegrams had been preserved by the War Department, which had been tapping the telegraph lines south in March and April. Here was potent ammunition for anyone who wanted to cause trouble—and someone did. Starting on June 7, the *New York Herald* ran a series of lurid articles, based on the intercepted telegrams, purporting to show that the minister to Portugal had betrayed secrets to the Confederacy during the secession crisis. Circumstances suggested that Secretary of War Simon Cameron had leaked the damaging information to the *Herald*. Cameron’s motives are hard to reconstruct, especially since he himself advocated a hands-off policy in March. But he may have been seeking revenge after belatedly discovering that his fellow Pennsylvanian, Harvey, had covertly opposed Cameron’s Cabinet appointment. So too, Cameron could cover his earlier tracks and create a more bellicose image by exposing an apparent subversive who held an important government appointment.31


31 *Congressional Globe*, 40 Congress, 2 Session, 1402 (Feb. 25, 1868); Harvey to Carey, Aug. 6, Sept. 21, 1861, Carey Papers; Harvey to Cameron, Sept. 20, 1861, Cameron Papers; *New York Herald*, June 7, 8, 10, 1861; *New York Tribune*, June 8, 1861; *North American*, June 8, 1861. Coverage of the story in Philadelphia newspapers on June 8, 1861, prompted Sarah Butler Wister’s diary entry.
Harvey found himself in the awkward position of defending his job and reputation through the slow traveling mail. From Lisbon, he wrote a fierce public letter, complaining that he had been "shamefully slandered" and broadly accusing Cameron of "distorting facts, perverting the record, and indulging in the worst misrepresentation." Here and subsequently, Harvey stoutly insisted that his efforts to prevent war and hold the border states in the Union were the most patriotic and honorable acts of his life; his only regret was that he had failed to stop the dread collision of arms. When pressed by his friend Carey to explain the controversial intercepted telegram of April 6, Harvey contended that it was consistent with his earlier actions. His warning that the federal government had decided to try to reprovision Fort Sumter, and had contingent plans to use force if challenged, was, by his own account, designed to deter the Confederates from firing the fatal first shot that would lead to war. He was obviously grasping at straws, hoping for "some providential interposition, by which this calamity might be avoided. . . ."

The newspaper stories about Harvey's dispatches opened the issue to congressional scrutiny. It was not a propitious time for him to secure vindication: the disaster at Bull Run had stunned the North and spawned a search for scapegoats. Indeed, an informal committee of three Senators, led by Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, was appointed to ask Lincoln to remove Harvey from his diplomatic post. Only indirect evidence survives to illuminate the confrontation between Lincoln and the Senators. But it is apparent that Lincoln and Seward protected Harvey. The latter remained as minister to Portugal throughout the war and beyond.

What overall assessment might be made of Harvey's role in the secession crisis? Were his actions honorable, or tainted? The historian, even if doubtful about the merits of the hands-off policy, must still conclude that his accusers had no case. What Harvey tried to do during the crisis was fundamentally consistent with the

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32 Harvey to Cameron, July 4, 1861, Congressional Globe, 37 Congress, 1 Session, 432–433 (Aug. 3, 1861); Harvey to "The Public," July 7, 1861, North American, July 27, 1861; Harvey to James W. Grimes, Feb. 20, 1868, Congressional Globe, 40 Congress, 2 Session, 1308–1309 (Feb. 21, 1868); Harvey to Carey, Sept. 21, 1861, Carey Papers.
33 New York Times, Aug. 5, 6, 1861; John Covode to Harvey, Feb. 20, 1868, Congressional Globe, 40 Congress, 2 Session, 1309 (Feb. 21, 1868); ibid., 1403 (Feb. 25, 1868).
beliefs and attitudes to which he adhered throughout his public career.

A transplanted southerner who achieved success and prominence in the North, Harvey abhorred sectional conflict. He regarded secession as a misguided tragedy, triggered by an exaggerated estimate of radical strength within the Republican Party. Harvey believed that extremists North and South had created the crisis, that neither section had anything to gain by antagonizing the other, and that sectional disagreements about slavery and the role of blacks in American life were not worth a fight. His efforts to prevent the outbreak of war proceeded, therefore, from the unyielding and sincere conviction that bloodshed would be senseless and futile, and would only make permanent the estrangement between North and South.

Even after the war started, Harvey clung tenaciously to the ideas and perceptions he had long held. He never exhibited unqualified enthusiasm for the northern war effort, and was instead painfully aware that the war would bring misery and suffering to innocent southerners such as his sisters. He expected the superior manpower and resources of the North eventually to decide the contest, but he was not at all surprised to find, as he had predicted during the secession crisis, that southerners would unite to support the Confederacy if war came and would "fight to the end." He could Harvey accept the harsh logic of turning the war into an attack on the basic structure of southern institutions. He was contemptuous of the "crusaders" and "zealous philanthropists" who wanted to free the slaves, and he initially believed that such a step would lose all the border states and cause the Union army to melt away. After the war ended, Harvey deplored the tendency to "put the emancipated negro above his true condition." For him, the purpose of Reconstruction was to revive the plantation system, and to compel the freedmen to resume their accustomed task of laboring to produce southern staples.

Although deeply suspicious of radicals within the party, Harvey

34 Harvey to Carey, Oct. 10, 1861, Jan. 26, 1862, Carey Papers.
35 Harvey to Carey, Oct. 10, 1861, Jan. 6, Apr. 6, May 6, June 26, Oct. 16, 1862, May 25, 1865, Carey Papers; Harvey to William D. Lewis, Sept. 6, 1862, Lewis-Neilson Papers.
accepted the consensus Republican view that the Fourteenth Amendment was a reasonable basis for Reconstruction. He did not approve of Andrew Johnson's lack of "good sense and discretion" in attacking the original congressional plan. But Harvey was appalled when the Republican majority in Congress responded to Johnson's obstruction by reorganizing the state governments of the South and requiring black voting. He predicted that "the party which committed that blunder" would inevitably be swept from power. Quite naturally, he became one of the conservative Republicans who opposed the impeachment of Johnson. 36

Harvey became a pawn in the struggle between Johnson and Congress. In a private letter to Secretary of State Seward, Harvey condemned "the folly and madness of some of our so-called friends" in Congress. Seward showed the letter to Johnson, who instructed Seward to give it to the press. Harvey paid a high price for this abuse of his confidence. Congressional Republicans, led by Thaddeus Stevens, retaliated by cutting off appropriations for the mission to Portugal. 37

Harvey returned to Washington in late 1867, determined to collect back pay. But no apparent friend of Andrew Johnson's could expect sympathetic treatment from the same Congress that was then impeaching the President. Harvey's critics even resurrected the issue of his secession crisis telegrams to justify their refusal to fund the Portuguese mission. An infuriated Harvey could only complain bitterly about the "malignant and unscrupulous" campaign to destroy his reputation. Unable to win vindication and alienated from the Republican Party, Harvey thereafter disappeared from public life. 38

Harvey may best be understood as a conservative gradualist tossed abruptly into an unfamiliar world of total war and revolutionary upheaval. It was a shock from which he never recovered. Harvey had long sought to create national political institutions that

36 Harvey to Carey, Apr. 2, Dec. 12, 1867, Jan. 14, 1868, Carey Papers.
would minimize rather than exacerbate sectional differences. He regarded those who championed radical changes in the social order—especially the slave system of the South—as hopelessly naive. Then suddenly everything changed. National political institutions ceased to exist and radical antislavery became an irresistible concomitant to the northern war effort. Harvey’s political instincts and analytical skills were all rooted in the antebellum order he tried “up to the last hour” to preserve. He became a bewildered spectator in faraway Lisbon as the nation he had known spun violently out of control and moved in unprecedented new directions. It was symbolically fitting that forces unleashed by the “Second American Revolution” finally reached across the Atlantic to snuff out the public career of a man whose loyalties to the old order were always more apparent than his acceptance of the new.