

# William Henry Seward: "Tending to Soothe the Public Mind"

Michael Kelly  
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## An introduction to William Henry Seward's letter to Abraham Lincoln on February 24th, 1861 regarding changes to Lincoln's first inaugural speech.

William Henry Seward (1801-1872) lived in central New York for the greater part of his life, and served as senator and governor of that state during the early part of his political career. Through his close friendship with Whig Party boss Thurlow Weed, Seward became one of the most influential members of this party in New York. Although his two terms as governor were not without controversy, as he proposed costly internal improvement projects, advocated support for parochial schools and strongly endorsed anti-slavery programs, he was generally well liked even by his political opponents.<sup>1</sup> His strong optimism and moral conviction, along with his relationship with Thurlow Weed served to boost his political standing until the time of the depression of the 1840's when he was defeated in the 1842 election over the issue of his large state expenditures.<sup>2</sup> For a time, Seward resigned himself back to his home in Auburn, New York where he worked at his private law practice.

In 1848, the anti-slavery sentiment was strong enough in the North to call Seward back into the political realm and he was elected to the United States Senate in 1849 and again in 1855.<sup>3</sup> During his term, he showed great conviction in anti-slavery issues, the rights of immigrants, and further internal improvements. Seward continued to possess the same natural optimism along with humanitarian ideals, but he sometimes displayed them with impulsiveness and impatience. As the slave question became more acute he declared that the slave issue would be removed by "gradual voluntary effort, and with compensation within framework of Union or Union would be dissolved and civil wars to follow."<sup>4</sup>

In 1855, as the Whig Party was incorporated into the rising Republican Party, Seward enthusiastically became an advocate of Republican Party principles and made great gains

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<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary of American Biography*, "Seward, William Henry" p 615.

<sup>2</sup> *Dictionary of American Biography*, "Seward, William Henry" p 616.

<sup>3</sup> *Dictionary of American Biography*, "Seward, William Henry" p 616.

<sup>4</sup> *Seward at Washington 1846-1861*, "March 11, 1850" p 127.

within the party over the next five years and became one of its most prominent political leaders.<sup>5</sup> During that time period he represented the ever increasing anti-slavery sentiment in the North more than any other individual. He possessed strong moral conviction and sometimes it expanded to a type of reckless passion in his actions and words. During his well-known speech in the Senate on March 11, 1850, while voicing his opposition to Henry Clay's Compromise of 1850, he said that "there is a higher law than the Constitution which regulates our authority over the domain"<sup>6</sup> In this speech, Seward represents a new group of politicians from the North; a group of men committed to standing up to the moral compromises over slavery that had helped establish the Union in the original writing of the Constitution. Seward took the large political step and posed slavery in moral terms rather than in the legal terminology common to compromising statesmen. On October 25, 1858, during his famous Rochester, New York speech he said that there would be "an irrepressible conflict" until the United States became either all slave or all free.<sup>7</sup>

In June 1860, as a man of well-respected character and moral conviction, and as someone who represented much for what the Republican Party stood for, Seward appeared to be the leading candidate for President of the United States. However, in the midst of the Republican convention he was passed over because of his strong anti-slavery reputation and his close association with the controversial Thurlow Weed, who was suspected of corruption.<sup>8</sup> He had also taken a strong stance against nativism in his reforms to help Irish-immigrants, which somewhat alienated the Know-Nothing faction within his Republican party. However, despite being passed over in the presidential election, he offered full campaign support in the North for the chosen Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln.<sup>9</sup> Seward attempted to minimize fear of the secession of the South over the period of campaigning and toned down his moral fervor in order to make the Republican platform have a more wide appeal. Although he had called the conflict "irrepressible" in 1859, he now fought hard with Lincoln to avoid it. As the real threat of secession and conflict came to impress itself upon the new Republican Administration, he became much more conciliatory in his tone and did much to advise Lincoln to follow suit.

In recognition of Seward's political ability and moral sense, Lincoln named him his new Secretary of State. Seward saw himself as the real leader in the administration, and in several instances actually seemed to overstep the bounds of his position. In early April of 1861, Seward went so far as to suggest a full list of things that must be and said that if Lincoln did not feel that he could act upon this list that he, Lincoln, should abdicate his

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<sup>5</sup> *Dictionary of American Biography*, "Seward," p. 617.

<sup>6</sup> *Seward at Washington 1846-1861*, "March 11, 1850," p. 124.

<sup>7</sup> *Seward at Washington 1846-1861*, "October 25, 1858," p. 352.

<sup>8</sup> *Dictionary of American Biography*, "Seward, William Henry" p. 618.

<sup>9</sup> *Dictionary of American Biography*, "Seward, William Henry," p. 618.

power.<sup>10</sup> Although he made a few errors in judgment such as this one, Lincoln seemed to like him as a friend and trusted his advice and his work as Secretary of the State.

Little more than a month before the fateful shot was fired at Fort Sumter, Lincoln made his inaugural speech to a nation coiled with tension over the issue of slavery. In the closing paragraph of his address, Lincoln makes what would turn out to be one of his final pleas for unity: "I am loth to close. We are not enemies but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."<sup>11</sup> This beautiful and almost poetic closing of Lincoln's first inaugural speech, although of little avail in stopping the Civil War, illuminates much of the moral and political ideals that characterized this Republican Administration. However, the tone of these closing lines by Lincoln could have just as easily been aggressive and uncompromising, as in the first draft, if it had not been for the suggestions made by Seward in his February 24, 1861 letter to Lincoln.

Lincoln's draft, which was sent to Seward for review, and the final version of his inaugural address, which was read on March 4, 1861 at the capitol are vastly different in tone. Seward's suggested, in his letter to Lincoln, generally to make changes "to soothe the public mind" of those members of the "Disunionists" in the Southern slave-holding states. Seward advocates the importance of making the speech more conciliatory out of the fear that Lincoln's original draft might have pushed the southern states into Civil War immediately. For these measures, he specifically advises Lincoln to delete the second and third paragraphs, which Lincoln does completely. The original second and third paragraphs of Lincoln's speech tied his policy to the Republican platform on which he was elected. Although Lincoln had not directly named those issues, he had made quite clear his view of presidential duty to act upon his party's platform. More importantly, Seward's letter seems to have had a large effect on Lincoln's replacement of the closing of the speech. The revised speech appears to have been in response to the part of Seward's letter that likened Lincoln's situation to the one that Jefferson had been in when he was elected to office. In the letter, Seward urges Lincoln to "sink the partisan in the patriot in his inaugural address." Utilizing the advice of Secretary of State William Henry Seward, in speeches such as this, Lincoln was able to strike an honorable position between Republican Party principles and the humanitarian ideals they both advocated while at the same time he offered conciliatory gestures to the slave-holders in the South. Unfortunately, even the concessions made were of little avail in delaying the start of the Civil War less than two months later.

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<sup>10</sup> *Seward at Washington 1846-1861*, "April 1, 1861," p. 535.

<sup>11</sup> *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln 1860-1861*, "First Inaugural Address--Final Text," p. 271.

Seward's work as Secretary of State was notable in many ways, although he was often shadowed by the more mythical figure of Abraham Lincoln. He saw the possible danger of foreign influence on domestic issues, and particularly during the Civil War, kept Britain and France out of the conflict.<sup>12</sup> After the end of the Civil War and throughout his term as Secretary of State under Andrew Johnson, he continued his foreign diplomacy, pushing for expansion of United States territory, as well reinitiating his support for national internal improvements.<sup>13</sup> Seward honestly believed that improvements and expansion of the nation would help to unify the nation and help remedy other domestic problems.

Seward was one of the most important statesmen of his time. Although he was sometimes erratic, his political position stemmed from a strong moral conviction. He had adopted a strong anti-slavery position much earlier than most people and he showed courage in his belief in humanitarian principles. Seward foresaw early on the "irrepressible conflict" that threatened unity in the United States, and although later he tried to minimize the danger of secession by making his tone more conciliatory, Seward's career showed that he viewed slavery as a great moral wrong within the nation. As an advisor to Lincoln, Seward pushed for concessions in slavery over Civil War. Unfortunately, it seems that no amount of "soothing words" could delay the rising tension between the North and South that on April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1861 broke into a war that defined a critical period in American history.

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<sup>12</sup> *Dictionary of American Biography*, "Seward, William Henry," p. 619.

<sup>13</sup> *Dictionary of American Biography*, "Seward, William Henry," p. 620.

# Transcription of a letter from William Henry Seward to Abraham Lincoln

*[The original letter is held in the Manuscript Collection of the University of Rochester Rare Books and Special Collections Department.]*

*Letter dated:* (Sunday evening Feb 24, 1861)

*Letter addressed to:* The Honorable - Abraham Lincoln

My dear Sir,

I have suggested many changes, of little importance, [severally?], but in their general effect, tending to soothe the public mind.

Of course the [concession?] are, as they ought to be, if they are to be of avail, at the cost of the winning, the triumphant party. I do not fear their displeasure, They will be loyal whatever is said. Not so the defeated, irritated, angered, frenzied party.

I, my dear Sir, have devoted myself singly to the study of the case - here, with advantages of [access?] and free communication with all parties of all sections. I have a common [responsibility?] and interest with you - and I shall adhere to you faithfully in every case. You must, therefore, allow me to speak frankly and candidly. In this spirit I declare to you my convictions that the second and third paragraphs, even if modified as I propose in my amendments, will give such advantages to the [Disunionists?], that [Virginia?] and Mearyland will secede, and we shall within ninety perhaps within sixty days be obliged to fight the South for this capitol, with a divided North for [our?] reliance - and we shall not have one loyal magistrate or wartime officer South of the Potomac.

In that case the dismemberment of the Republic would date from the inauguration of a Republican Administration. I, therefore, must respectfully [counsel?] the [omission?] of those paragraphs.

I know the tenacity of party friends, and I honor and respect it. But I know also that they know nothing of the real peril of this crisis -- It has not been their duty to study it as it has been mine. Only the soothing words which I have spoken here saved us and carried us along thus far -- Every loyal man -- and indeed I think every disloyal man in the South will tell you this.

Your case is quite like to that of Jefferson. He brought the first Republican party into power

against and over a party ready to resist and dismember the government. Partisan as he was, he sank the partisan in the patriot in his inaugural address, and propitiated his adversaries by declaring, "We are all Federalists, all Republican." I could wish that you would think it wise to follow this example, in this crisis. Be sure that when all your administrative conduct will be in harmony with Republican principles and policy, you lose the Republican party by practicing, in your advent to office, the magnanimity of a victor.

Very faithfully your friend, William H. Seward