

Lincoln's Gamble: Bargaining Failure, British Recognition, and the Start of the American Civil War

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Abstract

Why do leaders respond to bargaining failures with violence? Bargaining theory, while useful for understanding why states fail to reach agreement in the face of a costly lottery, is too abstract to link bargaining failures directly to any specific policy. The American Civil War is an excellent case for beginning to bridge this gap. There was an obvious bargaining failure and US President Abraham Lincoln had several options for responding to that failure. Well into June 1861, Lincoln hoped a blockade would compel the Southern states to rejoin the Union without bloodshed. Drawing from a variety of primary source documents and using preventive war logic, I argue that as the prospect of British recognition became more acute, Lincoln, believing a demonstration of force could prevent such recognition, chose to strike Southern forces at Manassas Junction, Virginia. The subsequent Northern defeat emboldened Southern military planners and ignited a long and bloody conflagration.

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1 Introduction

Bargaining theory is the ‘work horse’ model of war.¹ Viewing war as a costly lottery chosen when states fail to agree over the division of some pie, the model identifies two main causes of war: (1) private information (ignorance regarding an opponent’s capabilities or resolve) driving disagreement about the nature of the war, and (2) commitment problems (an inability to trust an opponent’s promises).² While useful for understanding why states fail to reach agreement in the face of a costly exit option, the model’s abstractions leave no operational linkage between concepts and actual state policy or behavior. As Powell writes, “these mechanisms are too general and too spare to explain particular outcomes in any degree of specificity” (Powell 1999: 6).³ Put differently, it is unclear why a particular leader responds to a specific bargaining failure by authorizing the firing of guns against the opponent. That violence is not a necessary outcome of bargaining failure is evident by labor economics using bargaining theory to understand the onset of work stoppages (which, with a few notable exceptions, do not regularly entail actual violence). Tilly’s explanation that “coercion works” (Tilly 1992: 70), while perhaps true, fails to account for leaders seeking alternative costly responses, such as economic sanctions, before exercising militarized violence.⁴ Since coercion and costly lotteries need not entail military force, why do leaders eventually abandon alternative options in favor of war?⁵

¹Works directly using the bargaining model are too numerous to fully list here. However, prominent examples include Schelling 1966; Morrow 1989; Kim and Morrow 1992; Fearon 1994, 1995; Powell 1999, 2006, 2012; Goemans 2000; Slantchev 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2011; Schultz 2001; Smith and Stam 2004; Leventoglu and Tarar 2005; Wagner 2007; Wolford, Reiter, and Carruba 2012.

²A third explanation, indivisibilities, many theorists dismiss as empirically trivial because states can make side payments or take other actions that resolve the problem and allow ex ante bargains. Hence, as Powell (2006) points out, indivisibilities are just a variant on the commitment problem – bargaining breaks down because the two sides can not commit to the ex ante bargains.

³This is not dissimilar from Gartzke (1999)’s complaint that bargaining models are unable to predict why war occurs in some crisis situations marked by uncertainty, but not others. Also, Slantchev (2011: 79) notes that the bargaining model “is a reflection of the trade-off between realistic approximation of the empirical and a tractable stylization that we can use for transparent analysis.”

⁴Gartzke and Li (2003: 7) point out that since many issues simply lack the salience to merit consideration of military force, economic integration provides, via the ability to impose trade or financial restrictions, an alternative and less costly means of engaging in political competition. Trager (2010) expands the menu of options available to leaders during the crisis bargaining phase, but not after the collapse of bargaining.

⁵Attributing war onset to random chance (Shelling 1960) or to unobservables (Gartzke 1999) is unsatisfying. Moreover, Shultz (2012) says that such claims do not square with the historical record.

To begin clarifying this issue, Reiter calls for detailed qualitative analysis to test bargaining theory: “case studies of individual wars will be necessary to test the central ideas of the bargaining model... Theoretically informed studies need to be conducted of other major conflicts, including the Napoleonic War, the American Civil War, the Second World War, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.” (Reiter 2003: 32).⁶ Heeding Reiter’s challenge, I use the American Civil War’s onset to understand how bargaining failures translate into the decision to use military force.⁷

The American Civil War is an ideal case for three reasons. First, there was an obvious bargaining failure: the Southern States chose to leave the Union and US President Abraham Lincoln refused to make an offer to retain their allegiance. Second, after the breakdown of bargaining, Lincoln considered several options for responding to Southern secession. Hoping to reunite the country without bloodshed, Lincoln initially responded to secession (and the casualty-free bombardment of Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861) by imposing a blockade and reaffirming a policy of non-invasion (Potter 1965: 105; Potter 1976; Thomas 2011: 69). As William Davis writes, “The Confederacy had assailed the Federal Government...the battle lines were drawn, but no blood had been shed. There was still hope for peace, though whether it would come by reconciliation or separation no one could say” (Davis 1977: 4). Third, Lincoln eventually shifted course. On June 25 and 29, Lincoln summoned two war council meetings to authorize an offensive strike against Southern forces at Manassas Junction, Virginia. The subsequent Union defeat at the First Battle of Bull Run on July 21 emboldened Southern military planners, sparked full mobilization in the North, and ignited a long and bloody conflagration.

What prompted Lincoln to change his mind and respond to Southern secession with offensive military force? To evaluate the gap between the bargaining failure and Lincoln’s decision to use offensive force, I rely on a common motive for war – preventive war logic – to offer a novel explanation for the war’s onset: *Lincoln authorized the use of offensive force to prevent British recognition of the Southern states as an independent nation.* In addition to bolstering the Southern

⁶Case studies are also useful because, as Gartzke (1999: 576) states, “what explains international conflict – what leads states to war or to peace – are precisely those factors that cannot be anticipated, that are unique to each event.” Reiter explicitly mentions the following list of wars as good cases to explore: the Napoleonic War, the American Civil War, the Second World War, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.

⁷See also Lake (2010/11) for an application of the bargaining model to explain the decision of the United States to invade Iraq in 2003.

states' resolve, recognition might have opened the door for foreign powers to supply the South with military aid. Attacking confederate forces at Manassa Junction could prevent foreign recognition in two ways. First, and most obviously, defeating the Confederate forces and capturing Richmond would presumably prompt an immediate end to the crisis (and, hence, no Confederacy to recognize). Second, and a reason more explicitly discussed by members of Lincoln's cabinet, was the desire to initiate war so as to signal to the Europeans the North's unwillingness to sit and do nothing. Failure to act might lead the Europeans to perceive *de facto* independence of the South.

Historians have long recognized how British dependence on Southern cotton fed Northern concerns over (and Southern hope for) British recognition, that these concerns persisted throughout the war, and that Lincoln's administration feared possible British recognition in the Spring of 1861 (Adams 1918; Owsley 1959; Donald 1995; McPherson 1982; Jones 1992, 2010; Mahin 1999; Foreman 2011). Despite this, only two historians (by this author's count) have even briefly entertained the possibility that recognition played a role in Lincoln's decision to use offensive force. The first is Fehrenbacher (1987: 15): "[Bull Run] was the first opportunity to [take a bold stroke against the South], and here, as in the case of Fort Sumter, there was probably more to be lost by inaction (a decline of public morale, for instance, and perhaps European recognition of the Confederacy) than by action, whatever its result." The second brief reference, perhaps drawing from Fehrenbacher, is Burlingame (2008: 181): "[Lincoln] may also have believed that to postpone an attack would dispirit the North and perhaps even lead to European recognition of the Confederacy." Unfortunately, after making these brief statements, neither scholar attempts to further explore recognition's role in prompting the attack on Bull Run.

Focusing on Lincoln's decision to attack Southern forces (and thereby escalate the war) is not to render irrelevant the war's general causes (North-South disputes over slavery and disagreements about state rights). However, it is well established that Lincoln faced a menu of options for responding to the immediate crisis. Some options (compromising with the Southern states or simply permitting their secession) Lincoln dismissed outright (Stampf 1950; Potter 1965; Bensel 1990: 78; McClintock 2008). One option Lincoln did pursue was imposing a blockade in the hope of reuniting the country without bloodshed. I maintain that, absent the threat of British recognition, Lincoln would have continued to pursue a blockade-only policy. This counter-factual argument is

plausible as it is both *historically consistent* and *theoretically consistent* (Fearon 1991; Chwieroth 2002; Mahoney and Goertz 2004; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). By focusing on a switch between policies that were vigorously debated within Lincoln’s cabinet, I consider only policy options that were available, discussed, and narrowly defeated by the relevant actors (historical consistency).⁸ Because preventive logic provides an explanation for Lincoln’s decision that is consistent with existing theories of war onset, the connecting principle follows from well-established theoretical generalizations (theoretical consistency).⁹

Besides bridging bargaining failure and the actual decision to use military force, this paper makes three further contributions. First, building from Poast (2010), this paper illustrates how an ostensibly dyadic conflict (a war between the North and South) actually follows a *k*-adic process. To understand Lincoln’s decision to use force, one cannot focus solely on the North-South dyad. Instead, one must consider the triad of North-South-Britain.¹⁰ Second, by emphasizing the role of the cotton trade in concerns over recognition, this paper is yet another example of how international political economy informs international security. Third, understanding how the secession crisis of 1861 escalated to war is of general importance to the entire field of political science. For scholars of American politics, the American Civil War altered federal and state relations, expanded Presidential powers, and shaped American political life (Bensel 1990: ix). In comparative politics, the American Civil War exemplifies force as a tool of state modernization – the industrializing North defeated, occupied, and reorganized the less-developed, agrarian South – and federal consolidation (Black 1966; Moore 1967; Taylor 2007). For political theory, Lincoln and the Civil War continue to have influence (Jaffa 2000). For international relations, more combatants died during this intrastate war than any European major power war between 1815 and 1914¹¹ and the

⁸Also called the ‘minimal’ rewrite rule.

⁹ Moreover, just as Morrison recently identified how the Earl of Shelburne – through the influence of Adam Smith – moved England toward open trade, the individual – in this case Lincoln (and, as will be seen, William Seward) – is central to my analysis (Morrison 2012: 423). This is useful because, “in many critical junctures, the specific individuals who were the ‘actors’ clearly mattered” (Ibid).

¹⁰Indeed, the North’s belief that the British would not intervene if the North attacked the South illustrates the claim by Gartner and Siverson (1996) that war initiators consider the possibility of third parties entering the conflict.

¹¹Common estimates place US deaths during the Civil War at approximately 620,000, while recent evidence places the death toll at 750,000 (Hacker 2011). The most devastating war of 19th century Europe was the Crimean War of 1853 - 1856. Deaths during the Crimean War range from 217,000 (Levy 1983), to 264,200 (Singer and Small 1972: 30), to 507,600 (Dupuy and Dupuy 1993), to 615,000 (Coldfelter 1992).

war foreshadowed the technologies that would produce the carnage of World War I.¹²

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents Lincoln's decision to reject compromise and peaceful secession, as well as Lincoln's policy change from imposing a blockade in April 1861 (and denying a desire to invade the South) to authorizing an invasion of the South in late June 1861. Section 3 considers prominent explanations for Lincoln's decision to change from a defensive to an offensive strategy, highlighting these explanations' shortcomings. Section 4 discusses preventive war logic, a prominent explanation for war onset (Axelrod 1979; Betts 1982; Mearsheimer 1983; Van Evra 1999; Renshon 2006; Powell 2006; Levy 2008; Schroder 2011). Section 5 provides primary source evidence that hoping to end the secession crisis before the South gained foreign recognition partially (if not largely) drove Lincoln's decision. Section 6 offers discussion and addresses some possible counter arguments to my explanation.

2 The Bargaining Failure

The American Civil War resulted from bargaining failure. The Southern states, concerned about the sustainability of slavery, declared their right to leave the Union. The leadership of the Northern states, desiring to preserve the Union, needed to formulate a response. As the historian Phillip Paludan states, "to understand why the war came we must look not at secession but at the Northern response to it" (Paludan 1972: 1013. See also Bensel 1991: 78). To understand the Northern response, only US President Abraham Lincoln matters. As McClintock makes clear, with Congress unable to secure a compromise, the final decision to use force or to seek compromise "lay in the hands of one party, and ultimately of just one man, Abraham Lincoln" (McClintock 2008: 164).

Explaining why Lincoln rejected the options of compromise and peaceful secession is a key first step for understanding how the bargaining breakdown led to war. While Weingast (1998: 186) emphasizes that the demise of sectional balance in the Senate (the institution of maintaining an

¹² Some identify the American Civil War as the first modern war (Wright 1964.) Other scholars contend that the Crimean War of 1853-1856 was the first modern war (Figs 2011). Some international relations scholars have used the American Civil War to understand how information revealed during a war does (or does not) influence the terms of peace offered by the opposing sides (Wolford, Reiter, and Carrubba 2012; Reiter 2009). Others have discussed the American Civil War in the context of the democratic peace (Waltz 1993: 78; Ray 1993: 251- 276; Spiro 1994: 50-86; Layne 1994; and Owen 2000).

equal number of slave and non-slave states) raised the stakes and “threatened the South – more so than at any previous time in American history,” he is quick to add that “in principle, the sections could have resolved their differences as they had on previous occasions.” Identifying why this did not occur requires exploring why Lincoln, and the Republican party more generally, refused to compromise. Once we identify why Lincoln chose to “exit” the bargaining game, we can begin to comprehend how this exit converted into the costly lottery of war.

2.1 Choosing the Exit Option

Kenneth Stampp argues that one must see the options facing Lincoln and the Republicans as they perceived them in the early spring of 1861. These options were (1) compromise, (2) acquiescence to secession, (3) wait for the secessionist fervor to die out (or for the Southern Unionists to gain influence) at which point the Southern states would return, and (4) force. As Stampp states, “these were the alternatives as most Republicans understood them then, and they were the real alternatives as we know from our hindsight” (Stampp 1965: 108).

With respect to concessions, these were rejected by Lincoln and the Republican party because, in the vernacular of the bargaining model, they created a commitment problem – an inability to trust that one side will not seek to alter the terms of an agreement. Congress attempted to reach several compromise solutions. These attempts focused on slave-policy, the statehood status of the Western territories, and creating constitutional protection for the southern states. The attempts include: the Committee of Thirteen and the Crittenden proposal, the Douglas proposal, the Hale proposal (i.e. the “border-state plan”) and the Committee of Thirty-Three, the Corwin-Adams plan of New Mexico as a Slave State, and the Washington Peace Conference (McClintock, 2008: 98, 116, 118; Gunderson 1961). However, no piece of compromise legislation was supported by the Republicans.¹³ Take, for example, the Crittenden proposal and the Adams proposal. The Crittenden proposal was defeated in Senate committee by a vote of 7 to 6 (with all five Republicans voting against), while the Adams proposal was defeated in the House by a vote of 115 to 71 (with 76 Republicans against and 26 in favor). The Republicans had largely come to view the threat

¹³McClintock argues that one needs to focus specifically on the views of the Republican party, since most Northern citizens believed diplomacy and compromise could resolve the secession crisis (McClintock 2008: 164).

of secession, which had occurred on a regular basis since at least 1846, as a form of ‘political blackmail,’ not a genuine indication of danger to the Union. As Potter states, “it seemed that danger of disunion could be eliminated only by eliminating the disunionists (in the South), and this could never be accomplished by paying them off at regular intervals” (Potter 1965: 99). As will be discussed below, the existence of commitment problems of this type – between the established actor and the emerging actor – are critical within the bargaining framework for explaining when states might have an incentive to launch a preventive war.

Given the inability of the Republican party to consider compromise, peaceful secession was even more unpalatable. According to Potter, both Lincoln and his Secretary of State, William Seward, were convinced that secessionism was a superficial phenomenon and that deep Unionist feeling still survived and could be rallied in the South (Potter 1965: 99). Lincoln based this view, in part, on the rejection of secession by conventions in key border-states, including Virginia in February. Lincoln and Seward also believed, as stated by Seward, that “we shall keep the border states, and in three months or thereabouts, if we hold off, the Unionists and the disunionists will have their hands on each others throats in the cotton states” (Ibid: 101).

2.2 The Bombardment of Fort Sumter

Lincoln was concerned with protecting federal property in the Southern states during the secession crisis (Stamp 1965: 111). As Lincoln states in his inaugural address:

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

In line with this policy, Lincoln, on April 10, dispatched a supply expedition to Fort Sumter, South Carolina and notified the Governor of South Carolina of the expedition’s departure and

mission. Lincoln did this knowing that the likelihood of attack was high (since South Carolinian officials had informed Lincoln that they would oppose any attempt to resupply the fort). This is expressed in his comments to Congress on July 4, 1861, “They knew—they were expressly notified—that the giving of bread to the few brave and hungry men of the garrison, was all which would on that occasion be attempted, unless themselves, by resisting so much, should provoke more” (Lincoln Address to Congress, July 4, 1861. *CWL*: 425). As feared, South Carolinian forces attacked Fort Sumter on April 12, prompting the Union forces inside to surrender.

But it is in no way apparent that an event such as Sumter – in which no casualties were incurred and both sides had complete information regarding the sequence of events – could be sufficient to induce a major conflagration between the two sides. As David Potter (1965: 103) states “focus upon Fort Sumter can perhaps be intensified too much.” It is also why historian Emory Thomas (2011: 69) refers to the three months following Sumter as a ‘phony war.’ In fact, as I will now discuss, after Sumter Lincoln initially pursued a policy of economic blockade in the hope of reuniting the country without violence.¹⁴

2.3 Lincoln’s Initial Response to Fort Sumter: Blockade and No Invasion

Following the attack on Fort Sumter, Lincoln held a cabinet meeting to determine the appropriate response. At the meeting, Secretary of State William Seward, Secretary of the Interior Caleb Smith, and Secretary of War Simon Cameron favored imposing a blockade, as did Lincoln’s primary general, Winfield Scott (Goodwin 2005: 351). Scott argued that invading the Southern states would harden the insurgents’ resolve and, as a result, “I will guarantee that at the end of the year you will be further from a settlement than you are now” (quoted in McPherson 2008: 34). Attorney General Edward Bates, Secretary of the Treasury Solman Chase, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, and Postmaster General Montgomery Blair opposed the blockade and favored more aggressive measures (Goodwin 2005: 351). Bates argued against the passive policy by stating “[the Southern states] think and in fact find it perfectly safe to defy the Government, and why? Because

¹⁴Had this strategy worked, Sumter may have gone down in history as an event of no more consequence than the 1835 ‘Toledo War’ between the territory of Michigan and the state of Ohio – an event that was not inconsequential, since its resolution gave Michigan the upper peninsula and Ohio the Toledo strip.

we hurt nobody; we frighten nobody; and do our utmost to offend nobody (Edward Bates diary, entry for April 23, 1861).

Lincoln, according to Goodwin, “concluded that Seward’s position was stronger” and chose the defensive policy of blockade and non-invasion (Goodwin 2005: 351). Lincoln’s private secretary, John Hay, recorded in his diary on April 25, 1861 how Lincoln appeared pleased with the adopted policy:

“Lincoln seemed to be in a pleasant, hopeful mood, and in the course of conversation partially foreshadowed his present plan. He said ‘I intend at present, always leaving an opportunity for change of mind, to fill Fortress Monroe with men and stores, blockade the ports effectually, provide for the entire safety of the Capital...and then go down to Charleston and pay her the little debt we are owing her’ (April 25, 1861 diary entry of John Hay, from Dennett 1939: 11).

Other than suggesting his desire to eventually reclaim Fort Sumter (which did not begin until April of 1863), Lincoln is describing a highly defensive policy. This defensive policy was based on the assumption that Southern pro-Union sentiment would eventually overrun the radical Southern elements (Potter 1965: 105; Thomas 2011: 69). According to McPherson (1997), “[Lincoln’s initial] strategy of limited war – indeed, so limited that it was scarcely seen as a war at all –... was a strategy founded on an assumption of residual loyalty among the silent majority of Southerners” (McPherson 1997: 298-299). Lincoln also adamantly opposed invading the South, stating bluntly in his inaugural address that “there will be no invasion – no using of force against, or among the people anywhere” (Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address. March 4, 1861. *CWL* 4: 266). In late April, in a response to Maryland Representative Reverdy Johnson, Lincoln again made clear how he had no intention of invading: “I *do* say the sole purpose of bringing troops *here* is to defend the capital. I *do* say I have no purpose to *invade* Virginia, with them or any other troops, as I understand the word *invasion*.” (Lincoln to Johnson, April 24, 1861. *CWL*: 343. Emphasis in original).¹⁵

¹⁵Lincoln’s statement might indicate that he did not consider the use of troops within the borders of the United States to constitute an ‘invasion’. However, the letter’s full text makes clear that this is not what he means. Additionally, when the statement is coupled with his decision to impose a blockade in the hope of peacefully reuniting the country, the more likely interpretation is that he did think it would be necessary to use Northern troops to enter and hold Southern territory.

2.4 Lincoln's New Policy: Invasion

In late June of 1861, Lincoln quickly and decisively changed his mind (Detzer 2004: 75; Elliott 1937: 727; Donald 1995: 306). On June 25 and 29, 1861, Lincoln summoned two war council meetings to authorize an invasion of the South. In attendance were General Montgomery Meigs, General Scott, and General Joseph Mansfield, along with Lincoln and his cabinet (Weigley 1959: 169). The meetings began with Scott reporting on the current situation of the Federal forces and their rivals. According to Scott, while the estimated North-to-South troop differential favored the North, the Southern troops “excelled the Federals in experience in the use of arms” (quote in *Ibid.*). This final point is important, as Scott was reluctant to rely on less experienced troops: “They were too much liable to panic. [But] given time the Federal soldiers could be turned into heroes” (quoted in *Ibid.*). General Irwin McDowell then presented his plan (which was devised under orders from Scott) for attacking Confederate forces at the railroad at Manassas Junction, Virginia. Like Scott, the inexperience of Northern soldiers concerned McDowell: “I said that I went over there with everything green. That was admitted; but they said that the other side was equally green. I said that the chances of accident were much more with green troops than with veterans, and I could not undertake to meet all their forces together” (quoted in *Ibid.*).

After hearing these and counter arguments by General Montgomery Meigs, Lincoln accepted McDowell's plan and authorized a strike on Manassas Junction, Virginia. Lincoln addressed the concern over troop inexperience by admitting “You are green, it is true. But they are green, also; you are all green alike” (quoted in McPherson 2008: 39). Lincoln's acknowledgment of both sides being ‘green’ does not suggest a flippancy about attacking Southern forces. It only indicates that Lincoln viewed Union inexperience as insufficient for postponing attack. With that, Lincoln authorized an offensive against Southern troops at Manassas Junction rail station as soon as the army could be put in readiness and the necessary transportation assembled (Weigley 1959: 172).

The battle at Manassas (or Bull Run) took place on July 21, 1861, resulting in a Northern defeat. The next day, Lincoln signed a bill for the enlistment of five hundred thousand three-year volunteers and on July 25 Lincoln signed a second bill authorizing another five hundred thousand soldiers. In the South, the victory produced exultation and overconfidence (McPherson 2008: 40).

Confederate President Jefferson Davis responded by calling up 400,000 men and, after consulting with his generals, adopted a defensive strategy (Harsh 1998: 12 and 30; Detzer 2004: 408-427; Escott 2006: 42). Put simply, both sides were now prepared for a long war.

3 Explanations for Choosing Force

In April of 1861, Lincoln decided to pursue a defensive policy of blockade and non-invasion. By late June of 1861, Lincoln changed course by authorizing an invasion into Virginia to attack Manassas Junction. Why did Lincoln change his mind? This question is difficult to answer since Lincoln offered no candid statements providing a ‘smoking gun’ rationale. Historians instead turn to circumstantial evidence, positing a variety of explanations for Lincoln’s policy decision. Each of these arguments possess some truth. Additionally, while none of these may have been decisive, their cumulative effect may have impacted Lincoln’s thinking (Fehrenbacher 1987: 14-15). This section focuses on two of the more prominent explanations – public pressure and information-oriented explanations – to illustrate the extent to which the alternative explanations fail to adequately explain Lincoln’s change in policy.

3.1 Public Pressure Explanations

Perhaps the most widely held explanation for Lincoln’s decision was the presence of relentless public pressure for invasion (Stampp 1950: 286; Fehrenbacher 1987; McClintock 2008; Goodwin 2005: 370; McPherson 2008: 38 and 1982: 207). As articulated by historian James McPherson:

“General Scott did not want public opinion to dictate military strategy. But Lincoln could not afford to ignore such pressure in a democratic polity whose zeal was vital for the mass mobilization that had already exceeded the president’s calls for troops. Lincoln’s concern for a national strategy of maximizing public support for the war trumped the narrower concern for a cautious military strategy” (McPherson 2008: 38).

Similarly, the historian Russell Weigley states how after the Confederate Congress chose to locate the capitol in Richmond, Virginia – just 100 miles from Washington, D.C. – the Northern

public urged attacking Richmond before the Confederate Congress met on July 20: “The pressure for an advance in strength could not be contained much longer” (Weigley 1959: 169). The historian Doris Goodwin holds that “by mid-July, the outcry in the North for some form of significant action against the rebels reached fever pitch” (Goodwin 2005: 370).

That public pressure played a role, even a significant role, cannot be argued.¹⁶ Lincoln was an elected politician and the public was clamoring for action against the South. For instance, public support was high after the attack on Fort Sumter, as expressed in a May 6 letter from Wisconsin governor Alexander Randall to Lincoln: “There is no occasion for the Government to delay, because the States themselves are willing to act vigorously...There is a spirit evoked by the liberty-loving people of this country that is driving them to action, and if the government will not permit them to act for it, they will act for themselves. It is better for the Government to direct this current than let it run wild.” (quoted in McPherson 2008: 38). Later, on June 26, the *New York Tribune* ran the headline “Forward to Richmond!”, while on July 11 Senator Lyman Trumbull introduced a resolution calling for “the immediate movement of the troops, and the occupation of Richmond before the 20th of July” (Ibid).

Such public support indelibly eased Lincoln’s decision to use force. However, there are theoretical reasons to question public pressure as playing a decisive role. Fearon (1994) argues that the political costs of not following through with a public threat – audience costs – will result in a leader’s ouster from office. But Lincoln never publicly issued a threat to invade. Instead, Lincoln did the opposite, declaring in his inaugural address that “there will be no invasion – no using of force against, or among the people anywhere” (Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address. March 4, 1861. *CWL*: 266).

That being said, Snyder and Borghard (2011) find that leaders will face immense pressure in situations where “public opinion is already inclined to favor a hard-line diplomatic stance, and where the public has pressed the leader to make the threat in the first place” (Snyder and Borghard 2011: 437). Given the public fervor after Fort Sumter, a hawkish public might have ‘locked’ Lincoln into using force. However, the historical record suggests otherwise. Hawkish public

¹⁶See also, Stampp 1950: 286 and McClintock 2008.

sentiment was constant throughout the Spring of 1861 and, yet, Lincoln deliberately chose less belligerent policies. First, Lincoln ruled out invasion immediately following the attack on Fort Sumter even though public support for war enabled many states to overfill their militia quota. Second, Lincoln chose to impose a blockade despite the public's hawkish views. Third, boisterous public clamoring to attack Richmond did not immediately change Lincoln's mind. Indeed, it was not until late June – over two months after the attack on Fort Sumter and over one month after the announcement of Richmond as the Confederate capital – that Lincoln finally called a war council to devise and draft plans to attack Confederate forces. In short, public calls for war might have been necessary for attacking the South, but it is difficult – given his ability to apparently ignore (or at least set aside) such sentiment – to accept that such support was sufficient to induce Lincoln to authorize an attack.

3.2 Information-Oriented Explanations

Another set of explanations maintain that the American Civil War would not have occurred if Northern decision makers simply possessed better information about the capabilities and resolve of the South and how these translated into prosecuting a quick and successful fight against the South. As the historian Emory Thomas laments, “during the prologue to the Civil War, precious few military ‘authorities’ had the opportunity to offer council. Had political leaders in the United States and Confederate States heeded them, they likely would have heard truth spoken to power...[but] no one asked those who would have to fight this war what might happen once the dogs of war were let slip” (Thomas 2011: 22). For instance, Detzler argues that Lincoln authorized the offensive strike because he began to rely more on the advice of cabinet members who advocated an aggressive policy, particularly Chase, rather than his generals (Detzler 2004: 69).

This argument's logic is supported by the bargaining model of conflict. If two rational actors receive identical information, they should reason to the same conclusion, meaning they should have the same estimates regarding the likely outcome of conflict (Fearon 1995: 393). Thus, if the two actors have different estimates, this must be due to one of the agents having different (and necessarily private) information. This is why bargaining theories of war view private information

as a primary cause of war.¹⁷ All states know that each state possesses private information about capabilities (or resolve) and each state can benefit by lying about the true condition of its capabilities. Since all states know that all other states have an incentive to bluff, it becomes incredibly difficult for states to convince one another that statements of their true capabilities are, in fact, true. Thus, like poker players, states must force one another to ‘ante up’ through costly conflicts in order to learn the true nature of the other state’s capabilities (Gartzke 1999: 571; Slantchev 2003).¹⁸

However, it is apparent from the war council evidence that such an argument is wrong. Lincoln clearly consulted with his generals. Lincoln did not choose to attack Southern forces at Manassas because he or his cabinet lacked information on Southern capabilities or resolve. Instead, the information provided to Lincoln regarding forces and conditions necessary for success were fairly accurate. Lincoln and his generals were well aware that the attack was not guaranteed success: they knew that failure to prevent Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston’s reinforcements would doom the attack (which is exactly what happened). Moreover, while Chase, by his own account, played a key role in preventing the border states of Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee from leaving the union (Goodwin 2003: 365), his influence by the time of the planning of Bull Run was limited. Chase did advocate an aggressive policy and did recommend to Lincoln that Irvin McDowell (who had been devising plans to attack Manassa Junction throughout May and June) be promoted to General, but Chase also admits that his suggestion in early July that John C. Fremont should replace General Patterson prior to the Battle of Bull Run (Chase to William P. Mellen. July 23, 1861. Chase Papers: 79) and that ideas for conducting the campaign were dismissed by the President (Chase to Richard Smith. November 11, 1861. Chase Papers: 108).¹⁹

Some historians actually take the opposing view: Lincoln authorized the attack on Bull Run

¹⁷For a critique of mutual optimism alone as a cause of war, see Fey and Ramsay 2007: 738-753.

¹⁸Even if states have fully and accurate information regarding capabilities, they may still disagree on how these capabilities will translate to war victory (e.g. although A and B might both agree about the cohesion of A’s army, they might disagree about how important cohesion is in terms of measuring strength) (Smith and Stam, 2004).

¹⁹Moreover, even the historian who Detzler draws upon, Beatie (2002), argues that Lincoln and his cabinet were now open to McDowell’s plan because “They were mentally prepared to insist on an offensive” (Beatie 2002: 202). What led to Lincoln’s mental acceptance of an offensive policy? The works upon which Beatie’s claim is based – John Nicolay’s *Outbreak of Rebellion* and *Abraham Lincoln, A History* by John Nicolay and John Hay – attribute Lincoln’s mental acceptance of an offensive to public pressure (See Nicolay 1881: 171-172, Nicolay and Hay 1909: 321, and Fry 1884-1887: 174). As discussed above, it is unlikely that public pressure was decisive for Lincoln.

because, militarily speaking, “it seemed to Lincoln a chance worth taking” (Williams 1967: 20). More precisely, the historian T. Harry Williams states that “Lincoln made the decision to undertake an offensive for reasons he considered militarily sound and not because the politicians, the press, and the public were screaming ‘Onward to Richmond’” (Ibid).²⁰ It is probably correct that Lincoln, after being presented with the plans by his military advisors, authorized the attack based on strategic calculation. However, this argument fails to address Lincoln’s rationale for calling the meeting in the first place. Instead, Williams simply states how “Late in June, [General] Scott, at the insistence of the President, gave [General] McDowell verbal instructions to prepare a plan of operations against the Confederate army at Manassas” (Williams 1967: 20). Thus, this explanation is, at best, incomplete.

4 Alternative Explanation: Preventive War Logic

Given the shortcomings of existing explanations, I turn again to conflict scholars’ theoretical understanding of war onset. Preventive war logic, a prominent explanation for war onset, can prove useful for bridging the gap between bargaining failure and the leader’s decision to respond that failure with militarized force. Though Otto Von Bismark labeled preventive war “committing suicide from fear of death,” preventive war is more precisely defined as a strategy designed to forestall an adverse shift in the balance of power and driven by better-now-than-later logic (Levy, 2008: 1).²¹ A leader deems it better to fight now rather than risk the consequences of inaction – including diminished bargaining leverage and relative power or war under less favorable circumstances – because he recognizes (or assumes) that indefinite stalemate appears impossible (Betts 1982: 146).²² Fisher (1975: 47) writes that “if a state is certain that its peace is imminently threatened

²⁰See also Ballard 1952: 49-50.

²¹Bismark quote from Fisher (1975: 377). Preventive war is related but intellectually distinct from preemptive attack, a military strategy designed to seize the initiative upon receipt of strategic warning that the enemy is preparing an attack of its own (Betts 1982, p. 145). Prevention and preemption are distinct because they are “responses to different threats, involving different time horizons, and calling for different strategic responses” (Levy 2008: 4). Renshon (2006) points that the key feature of preemption is not time, but the receipt of information that the enemy is actively preparing an attack of its own. See Reiter (1995) on the rarity of preemptive strikes.

²²See also Levy 2011; Betts 1982; Axelrod 1979; Mearshiemer 1983; Lemke 2003; Gilpin 1981: 191. In many ways, preventive logic underpins what Mearsheimer calls ‘Offensive Realism’: “Given the difficulty of determining how much power is enough for today and tomorrow, great powers recognize that the best way to ensure their security

and anticipates this by an attack of its own, it can be said to be fighting a preventive war.”

Van Evera writes that preventive logic is a “ubiquitous motive for war” (Van Evera 1999: 76), while the historian AJP Taylor declares (not uncontroversially) how “every war between Great Powers...started as a preventive war” (Taylor 1956: 166). Schroeder (1972: 322) claims that preventive wars “are not extreme anomalies in politics...They are a normal, even common, tool of statecraft” and, according to the historical study by Copeland (2000: 3), “major wars are typically initiated by dominant military powers that fear significant decline.” Powell adds that “one of the functions of fighting in both civil and interstate conflict is to forestall or impede adverse shifts in the distribution of power” (Powell 2012: 620).

Within the bargaining framework, preventive war originates from shifts in power that induce commitment problems (Kim and Morrow 1992; Fearon 1994, Powell 1999: 128-233, Powell 2006: 180). Changes in a state’s military capabilities will create a new distribution of power in the future. Thus, a currently weak state will, in the future, seek to reverse or renegotiate any bargain reached today. Foreseeing this, the currently strong state will use its power to attack the weak state, thereby locking in today’s bargain (Powell 2006: 181). Thus, as Fearon (1994: 406) makes clear, “the declining state attacks not because it fears being attacked in the future but because it fears the peace it will have to accept after the rival has grown stronger.”

In the above discussion, preventive logic is largely militarily driven – one wishes to prevent a relative decline in military power (Levy 2011; Levy 2008). However, preventive motivations can go beyond military considerations. Schroeder (2011: 96) argues that states will launch a preventive war to prevent detrimental changes in the international system: “some preventive wars have been launched primarily...not to destroy their opponent’s military power but to restore and stabilize the threatened international order.” Similarly, Organski (1968: 371) states how strong states can launch a preventive war “to destroy a competitor before it became strong enough to upset the existing international order.” This is why Renshon (2006: 145) views preventive actions as having multiple motivations, including concerns over a loss of prestige: “[For example] the perception of Britain’s loss of influence, status, and prestige weighed heavily on [Prime Minister] Eden’s mind [during

is to achieve hegemony now, thus eliminating any possibility of a challenge by another great power” (Mearsheimer 2001: 2).

the Suez Crisis].” Within the context of the present study, Jervis (1989) acknowledges that states could initiate a war so as to impress third countries, even if the initiating state loses the battle. This is because

“more important than the display of its lack of military capability could be the display of its resolve, if not foolhardiness. Other nations...might infer that it is willing to fight even when its position is weak, and such an inference might strengthen the state’s bargaining position” (Jervis 1989: 104).

Consider a few prominent examples of preventive logic motivating the decision to use military force. In 1756, Frederick the Great, anticipating a coalition between Austria, Russia, and France (directed toward Prussia), initiated what historian M.S. Anderson calls the “the most famous preventive war in history” (Anderson 1966: 34). Frederick attacked “before his opponents were ready” in order to disrupt an anticipated coalition (Ibid). On May 20, 1914, German Chief of Staff Helmut von Moltke shared his views that since “in two to three years Russia would have finished rearming” there was now “no alternative but to fight a preventive war so as to beat the enemy while we could still emerge fairly well from the struggle” (quoted in Powell 1999: 130). In December 1941, Japan attacked the United States’ Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor because the Japanese “believed that without a war Japan would decline so profoundly that it would become vulnerable to future attacks from either the United States or traditional enemies such as Russia” (Copeland 2011). In each of these examples, a similar logic applies: a strong state attacks the weaker one because it anticipates an adverse shift in military capabilities that will worsen its future bargaining position.

Can preventive war logic explain Lincoln’s decision to authorize the strike at Bull Run? Given our theoretical understanding of preventive war, we must observe one or both of the following concerns on the part of Lincoln and his advisors: (1) delay would lead to an adverse shift in the balance of military capabilities between the North and South and/or (2) delay would irreparably harm the international standing of the United States and alter the international system in a manner unfavorable to US interests. As the next section will show, both consequences were associated with British recognition.

5 Fear and Prevention of British Recognition

This section will show that, in the lead-up to deciding to use offensive force against the South, (1) Lincoln and his cabinet considered the possibility of British recognition to be *the primary threat* facing the United States with respect to the secession crisis, and (2) key members of Lincoln's cabinet believed and/or received credible information that exercising force against the South could forestall such recognition.²³ This evidence should help bridge the gap between the bargaining failure and the decision to use force.

My evidence draws from Volume IV of the *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (CWL), the United State's Department of State's *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS), Part II of the *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War* (JCCW), Series 2, Volume II of the *The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies in the War of the Rebellion* (ORUCA), archival letters, and a number of secondary sources.

5.1 Consequences of Recognition

In April, May and June of 1861, Lincoln and his cabinet feared the response of foreign nations if the crisis were allowed to persist. Fehrenbacher (1987:) states how “still another urgent problem at the beginning of the hundred days was the danger of foreign intervention in a manner favorable to the Confederacy.” The administration associated two consequences with foreign recognition, particularly by the British: direct assistance and loss of prestige.

The first consequence, consistent with Levy's emphasis on preventive war as an instrument to stop an increase in an opponent's military strength, is that Lincoln and his administration feared recognition could lead to direct assistance by either the British or another foreign nation, thereby tipping the balance of power in the South's favor. Indeed, even a bolstering of the South's fighting resolve could complicate the ability of the North to decisively suppress the insurrection. According

²³Though I will address potential counter arguments below, it is important at this point to offer one clarification. Levy emphasizes that preventive war is a *strategy* that might very well ignite the war, but it is not, itself, a war classification. Wars result from a multitude of issues and causes and, thus, “to identify a war as ‘a preventive war’ privileges one cause over others” (Levy 2008: 3). The American Civil War is no exception. There would be no need to prevent British recognition of the Southern states if disputes between the North and South over states rights and slavery had not led to secession in the first place.

to Seward, Lincoln viewed as shortsighted any attempt by the British “to lend its aid to a revolution designed to overthrow the institutions of this country, and involving ultimately the destruction of the liberties of the American people” (Seward to Dallas. April 10, 1861. *FRUS*: 79). This is why Seward implored his diplomats to make clear to the British that “Her Britannic Majesty’s government is at liberty to choose whether it will retain the friendship of this government by refusing all aid and comfort to [the Confederacy]...or whether the government of her Majesty will take the precarious benefits of a different course” (Seward to Adams. April 27, 1861. *FRUS*: 83). Moreover, Lincoln felt that success by Southern representatives to secure British recognition “would probably render their success easy elsewhere,” thereby enabling any number of states to recognize, align with, and offer assistance to the South (Lincoln’s views reported by Seward in Seward to Dallas. April 10, 1861. *FRUS*: 75).

With respect to bolstering Southern resolve, the administration thought Southern disunionists were sustained largely by the hope of foreign recognition. As Seward later told Adams, a belief at the time was “[the] simple fact [that] the life of this insurrection is sustained by its hopes of recognition in Great Britain and in France” and how the insurrection “would perish in ninety days if those hopes should cease” (Seward to Adams, November 30, 1861. *ORUCA*: 1108). This is why Lincoln and his administration believed the secessionists gained resolve when Queen Victoria declared the British to be neutral in the conflict, thereby granting belligerent status to the South (Mahin 1999; Jones 2010; Meyers 2008; Ferris 1976; Case and Spencer 1970). Charles Sumner, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, declared this proclamation to be “the most hateful act of English history since the time of Charles 2nd” (Jones 2010: 27).

The second consequence, consistent with preventive war scholars such as Schroeder and Renshon, is that Lincoln’s administration feared a loss of prestige and international status if other nations viewed the United States, in its present composition, as permanently dissolved. For Lincoln, recognition would convert the insurrectionists into a hostile foreign power: “British recognition would be British intervention to create within our own territory a hostile state by overthrowing this Republic itself.” (Draft dispatch with revisions by Lincoln in Nicolay and Hay 1890: 270-275). Seward states in a dispatch to the U.S. diplomat in London, George M. Dallas, how “it is clear that a recognition of the so-called Confederate nations must be deemed equivalent to a deliberate

resolution by her Majesty's government that this American Union, which has so long constituted a sovereign nation, shall be now permanently dissolved and cease to exist forever" (Seward to Dallas. April 10, 1861. *FRUS*: 77). Indeed, Seward feared that recognition, by converting the Southern confederacy into an independent nation, would provoke a hemisphere-wide war: "The new confederacy, which in that case Great Britain would have aided into existence, must, like any other new state, seek to expand itself northward, westward, and southward. What part of this continent or of the adjacent islands would be expected to remain in peace?" (Seward to Dallas. April 10, 1861. *FRUS*: 79).

5.2 Why Recognition? Cotton

Lincoln's administration thought recognition to be a possibility for one reason: British reliance on Southern cotton. By 1858, seventy-nine percent of British cotton imports came from the Southern United States (Owsley 1959: 3). Though British manufacturers sought alternatives (notably Surat yarn from India), the high quality of Southern cotton made it the economical and preferred choice (Ibid: 5). *The Economist* magazine observed in April of 1861 that, "the working people prefer the American as it spins better, does not break so easily and cause delay in work...In all respects (except color) the Indian cotton is an inferior article" (quoted in Ibid).

Due to such dependence, the British Representative to the United States, Lord Richard Lyons, informed Secretary of State Seward in a March 20 conversation that serious consequences could follow if the United States disrupted the flow of cotton:

"H.M.'s Government [is] most desirous to avoid any step which could prolong the quarrel between North and South...[But] if the U.S. determined to stop by force so important a commerce as that of Great Britain with the cotton-growing States, I could not answer for what might happen...It was a matter of the greatest consequence to England to procure cheap cotton...If H.M.'s Government felt it to be their duty to do so, they would naturally endeavour to effect their object in a manner as consistent as possible, first with their friendly feelings towards *both* Sections of this Country" (Lyons to Russell, March 26, 1861. in Newton 1913: 31. emphasis added).

In mid-May, Lincoln had Seward draft a dispatch to share with US Minister to the United Kingdom Charles Adams (who, in turn, would share it with the British Foreign Secretary Lord John Russell). Lincoln revised the dispatch before it was sent. Lincoln, upset over a proposed unofficial meeting between British diplomats and representatives of the Confederacy, instructed Adams to “desist all intercourse” with the British government if a meeting takes place between the British and “the domestic enemies of this country” (Draft dispatch with revisions. Nicolay and Hay 1890: 270-275). After briefly discussing the blockade, Lincoln jumps directly to the issue of recognition: “As to the recognition of the so-called Southern Confederacy...[it will not] pass unquestioned by the United States in this case” (Ibid). It is notable that Lincoln removed the following language by Seward, feeling it too provocative: “When this act of intervention is distinctly performed, we from that hour shall cease to be friends and become once more, as we have twice before been forced, enemies of Great Britain” (Ibid).²⁴

Despite sending this dispatch, the threat of recognition continued to greatly concern the administration. In an exchange with Adams, Seward claimed that concern over recognition was a constant of the administration: “on our part the possibility of foreign intervention, sooner or later, in this domestic disturbance *is never absent from the thoughts of this government*” (Seward to Adams. July 21, 1861. *FRUS*: 117. Emphasis added). In a note to Adams dated June 8, 1861, Seward relays Lincoln’s views regarding the importance and danger posed by recognition: “Every instruction you have received from this department is full of evidence of the fact that *the principal danger in the present insurrection* which the President has apprehended was that of foreign intervention, aid, or sympathy; and especially of such intervention, aid, or sympathy on the part of the government of Great Britain.” (Seward to Adams. June 8, 1861. *FRUS*: 97. Emphasis added). Since the threat of recognition was the “principal danger” originating from the Southern insurrection, it is highly unlikely that it did not play a prominent role (if not the decisive role) in the decision to authorize the offensive strike against the Southern insurrection.

²⁴Such a revision led Allan Thorndike Rice, editor of the *North American Review*, to state in 1888 that Lincoln’s revisions of this memo “saved the nation from a war with England” and that “The work shows...an insight into foreign affairs, a skill in the use of language, a delicacy of criticism and a discrimination in methods of diplomatic dealing” (cited in Mahin 1999: 47).

5.3 Attacking to Prevent British Recognition

Given the potential consequences and Seward's claim that recognition was the "principal danger" facing the country, it is unsurprising that an idea floating around the administration since the early days of the crisis was that of attacking the South before the European's recognized the Confederacy. Indeed, key members of the administration and advisors to Lincoln either believed or received information suggesting that attacking the South could ensure positive British sentiment towards the North (or, at a minimum, prevent foreign positive sentiment towards the South).

During the April cabinet meetings to decide the administration's initial response to the bombardment of Fort Sumter, Attorney General Bates argued that failing to attack might signal to foreign nations a tacit acceptance of disunion: "[The Southern States] warm up their friends and allies, by bold daring, and by the prestige of continued success – While we freeze the spirits of our friends every where, by our inaction and the gloomy presage of defeat" (Bates, Diary entry for April 23, 1861). After posing the question "what can we do?", Bates then offers a list of "aggressive measures" such as cutting off waterways, obstructing roads, and seizing railway stations "at whatever cost" (Ibid). In other words, Bates feared that, absent a Northern attack, the default outcome would not be the victory of pro-union sentiment in the South, but Southern independence and foreign recognition of that independence.

By authorizing the offensive strike on Manassas, Lincoln appeared to support an aggressive policy along the lines of Bates' initial recommendation. While Lincoln did not state explicitly that he chose to support this policy for the same reasons as Bates, Lincoln was – as will be shown below – cognizant of and concerned about European reaction to the battle. It is clear, however, that Bates fully supported the decision to attack Southern forces and, most importantly, felt this would convince Europeans of the North's superiority to the South. In a July 13 letter – one week before the planned attack on Manassas – Bates states to his friend James Broadhead that "foreigners do not understand why we should allow a hostile army to remain so long almost in sight of the Capitol, if we were able to drive them off." (Bates to Broadhead. July 13, 1861. James Overton Broadhead Papers, Missouri History Museum Library and Research Center). Bates recounts for Broadhead a conversation from that evening with a foreign diplomat. The diplomat informed Bates

how Europeans viewed the presence of the hostile army as pointing to “the power of the insurgents and the comparative weakening of the government.” (Ibid). Bates’ response to the diplomat was brief, but very suggestive: “be patient a little – We’ll disprove that before long” (Ibid).

While Bates’ felt that failure to take military action could increase European support for the South, General Scott – who initially supported a cautious and defensive policy – came to believe that Confederate forces might themselves launch an offensive on Washington. Most importantly, Scott felt the attack’s intent was to impress the Europeans. As Scott states to General Patterson during the planning phase of the Manassas strike,

“The [suspected Southern] plan supposes that this success will give the Confederate cause such prestige and inspire in it such faith as will insure the recognition of its Government abroad, and at the same time so impair confidence in the Federal Government as to render it impossible for it to procure loans abroad, and very difficult for it to raise means at home” (Scott to Patterson, July 11, 1861. *ORUCA* Series 1, Volume 2, 164).

What is particularly notable is Scott’s concern that a Confederate strike could impair the Union’s ability to raise funds abroad. Indeed, Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Chase (who, it should be recalled from above, advocated an aggressive policy against the South) was attempting in late-June to secure a large loan in Europe: “For another Hundred Millions, I propose a Loan in Europe at 6 or 6 1/2 per cent for Twenty or Thirty years...I trust these ideas will meet your approval” (Chase to Stevens. June 26, 1861. *The Salmon P. Chase Papers: Vol. 3, 70*).

While the views of Bates and Scott are insightful, the key decision makers were Lincoln and the man he regularly consulted: Seward. To gain an initial insight into Seward’s views, consider a June 17 letter between British Minister to the United States, Lord Robert Lyons, and British Foreign Minister John Russell. Lyons wrote the letter immediately following a meeting with Seward. Lyons reveals that Seward is aware of and concerned with how the Union’s policies and actions are perceived by European governments: “Mr Seward also no doubt calculates upon the effect which may be produced upon the governments of Europe by the events of the Month” (Lyons to Russell, June 18 1861. Public Record Office (PRO) 30/22/35. *British Archives*). Lyons then states how a military strike by either side could greatly inform British policy: “The perseverance of neither side

has yet been put to the test. No military engagement has taken place and consequently the effect of defeat or victory on the spirit of the two divisions of the Country, can only be conjectured” (Ibid). After Lyons tells Russell that “nothing has yet happened to give any clear notion of the probable extent and duration of the struggle,” Lyons shares how the British should be unimpressed with the military movements taken by the North: “the North has advanced gradually into Virginia without opposition - but if the advance is to go on at the same rate, it will take about half a century to get on to Florida” (Ibid). This statement is notable, as it shows clearly that the British would likely be impressed by the North taking aggressive military action against the South. In fact, Lyons thinks the Confederate troops could be quite successful if they choose to strike first: “no doubt if President Davis could move [his forces] such an attack would have a fair chance of success.” He goes on to state “.. Unless one side makes up their minds to a clash at Richmond or the other at Washington, we may go on in the present state of uncertainty all the summer and even much longer” (Ibid). Again, these comments show that a decision by the North to escalate military operations would shift British policy favorably towards the Union.

We do not know the extent to which Lyons informed Seward that Britain would view favorably an escalation of violence against the South. We can suppose that the meeting at least touched on this topic, since Lyons wrote this letter immediately following the meeting with Seward. We also know that the British view was shared with Charles Adams, who in turn shared it with Seward. Specifically, Adams warned Seward that British “positive spirit” towards the United States will “depend far more upon the degree in which the arm of the government enforces obedience than upon any absolute affinity in sentiments” (Adams to Seward. June 21, 1861. *FRUS*: 110).²⁵ To drive home this point, Adams shared how members of the British government “after all, are much disposed to fall in with the opinion of Voltaire, that ‘*Dieu est toujours sur le coté des gros canons*’ (‘God is always on the side of the big guns’)” (Ibid. English translation not in the original). Adams makes this point again to Seward in an August 16 dispatch regarding the European reaction to the Northern defeat at Bull Run: “All nations are more or less impressed by the idea of power and of

²⁵Seward would not have possessed this dispatch prior to the June 25 meetings. According to the historian Ephraim Douglas Adams, the quickest a message could arrive would be by telegraph to Halifax, by Steamer to Liverpool, and then telegraph to London. This would mean the dispatch could arrive in seven days (Adams. *Great Britain and the American Civil War*, 90).

success. They will even make allowances for ill fortune and defeat if the consequence of a sharp struggle” (Adams to Seward No. 29, August 16, 1861. *United States National Archives*).²⁶

Finally, and perhaps most notably, was the reaction of Lincoln himself to the defeat at Bull Run. Immediately following the defeat, Senator Orville H. Browning observed Lincoln as “melancholy” and though Lincoln initially denied knowing the source of his depressed feelings, Lincoln eventually replied that “they [Britain and France] were determined to have the cotton crop as soon as it matured” and “[the British government] was now assuming the ground that a nation had no right, whilst a portion of its citizens were in revolt, to close its ports or any of them against foreign Nations” (July 28, 1861 entry in *Diary of Senator Orville H. Browning*. Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library. Theodore Calvin Pease (ed.). 1925, 489). Indeed, the European reaction to the First Battle of Bull Run bothered Lincoln for at least another year. In August 1862, Lincoln informed the French statesman Agénor-Etienne de Gasparin how “it seems unreasonable that a series of successes, extending through half-a-year, and clearing more than a hundred thousand square miles of country, should help us so little, while a single half-defeat [at Bull Run] should hurt us so much” (Lincoln to Agénor-Etienne de Gasparin. August 4, 1862. in *CWL*, 355-356). Lincoln’s concern suggests that *a* (though not necessarily *the*) primary concern of Lincoln following the failed strike was that the British and French might now become more aggressive in their efforts to recognize the South and impede the Union’s ability to suppress the rebellion.

6 Discussion

The abstractions of the bargaining model leaves no operational linkage between concepts and actual state policy or behavior (Powell 1999: 6). Hence, Reiter calls for additional qualitative analysis to test bargaining theory. Heeding Reiter’s call, I use the onset of the American Civil War to understand how bargaining failures translate into the decision to use military force. I maintain that preventive war logic can explain why Lincoln’s administration eventually responded to the bargaining failures associated with the Southern secession crisis with offensive force. Lincoln,

²⁶This counters Jefferson Davis’ belief that, following the victory at Manassas, foreign recognition “was an assured fact” (in Varina Davis. *Jefferson Davis, Ex-President of the Confederate States of America: A Memoir by His Wife*. 2 Vols. New York: Belford. 1890. Vol 2, p. 165).

fearing the possibility of British recognition, authorized an offensive strike against Southern forces at Manassas Junction, Virginia.

The North's offensive strike failed to defeat Southern forces (and prompted both sides to prepare for a long war), it may have succeeded as a tool of prevention – the British did not recognize the South. On the one hand, it is difficult to draw a direct causal arrow from the North's use of force to a subsequent non-decision by the British. In fact, given that the North lost the battle, it could very well be the case that fears of imminent British recognition were exaggerated. On the other hand, once major fighting began, British Prime Minister Palmerston informed British Foreign Minister Russell that British policy would “merely to be lookers-on until the war shall take a more decided turn” (quoted in Mahin 1999: 135). This is consistent with Jervis (1989)'s claim that states can benefit from launching a preventive war even if it loses the initial battle.

One critique of my argument is that the majority of evidence centers on William Seward. To what extent did Seward's views, and the information received by Seward, influence Lincoln? Seward claims in his correspondences to be sharing the views of the administration and of Lincoln, but to what extent is this true? More importantly, would Adam's statements to Seward have been shared with Lincoln and would Lincoln have deemed this useful and credible information?

It is unlikely that Seward failed to continually inform Lincoln of his concerns. As the historian Norman Ferris points out, “it was Seward's ‘ordinary habit’ to read his most important diplomatic instructions to the president before sending them...Even as Lincoln frequently sought Seward's advice about the wording of such documents as his inaugural addresses and the emancipation proclamation, so Seward welcomed the President's concurrence before issuing important state papers” (Ferris 1991: 35).²⁷ In a June 5, 1861 correspondence to his wife Frances, Seward confided how Lincoln's “executive skill and vigor are rare qualities. The President is the best of us but *he needs constant and assiduous cooperation*” (quoted in Goodwin 2005: 363. emphasis added). Fehrenbacher (1987: 16) mentions how “the two men discussed foreign policy frequently.” It is also unlikely that Lincoln ignored Seward's concerns. The trust between Lincoln and Seward was

²⁷Moreover, Ferris goes on to state that Lincoln himself recognized a need for the New Yorker's advice and placed great value on it was reported repeatedly by such contemporaries as Salmon Chase, Sumner, Welles, and the Blairs, who bitterly resented Seward's special influence with the President” (Ferris 1991: 38).

high in June 1861, the time of Lincoln's decision to invade the South: "June had been a month of consolidation and reconciliation between the president and [Seward]." (Foreman 2011: 122-123). Recall also how Lincoln, when formulating his initial response to the attack on Fort Sumter, supported Seward's view in the face of a split cabinet. Indeed, the perception amongst members of Lincoln and Seward's party was that Seward was highly influential and had the President's ear (Goodwin 2005: 368).²⁸

One may also question preventive war logic as the correct theoretical lens through which to view the evidence. In particular, my explanation, by applying preventive war logic to the possibility of foreign intervention, fails to square with existing research on third party intervention. My argument, in essence, maintains that a quick and aggressive strike can forestall third party intervention. In contrast, Werner (2000) argues that lowering demands, rather than striking quickly, will dissuade third party intervention. However, Werner's theory applies to situations where the third party is explicitly a defender of the threatened state (i.e. has an alliance). This was not the case with the South and Great Britain. Alternatively, one might assert that since fighting – though only to a limited degree – had already begun and preventive war is only an instrument of war initiation, then a more appropriate theoretical frame might be that of a high risk military strategy in the midst of war, such as that described in Goemans (2000).²⁹ However, even if a 'low-level' war had begun prior to Lincoln's decision (setting aside his thoughts that blood had not yet been spilled), the attack on Manassas was a major escalation of the war and this escalation was driven by the same 'better-now-than-later' logic that drives preventive war. Moreover, the disadvantage of using a 'high-risk or calculated-risk strategy' argument is that, unlike preventive logic, it provides no exact reason *why* the leader deems as necessary such a strategy. In contrast, preventive war logic specifies an actual motivation for using force – to prevent a future adverse shift in power.

²⁸Wendell Phillip's, the abolitionist editor, proclaimed to a crowd on July 4, 1861 that "We have an honest President, but, distrusting the strength of the popular feelings behind him, he listens overmuch to Seward" (Ibid). Such a view was shared by Republican Congressman Thaddeus Stevens and Republican Senator Charles Sumner (Ibid).

²⁹Goemans technically refers to this as a 'high variance' strategy (Goemans 2000, chapter 2).

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