

The Correspondent

The Correspondent, William Russell of the *London Times*, found himself in the midst of a historic and tense moment on Thursday, April 11, when he dined at the home of General Winfield Scott, who commanded the military forces in Washington. Upon his arrival, Russell was greeted by soldiers on horseback patrolling the streets, setting the tone for what would be an evening of considerable political and military significance. Inside, the dinner was attended by influential figures, including William Seward, the U.S. Secretary of State, and Attorney General Edward Bates, alongside Major George W. Cullum, an Army engineer with a formidable reputation for fortifying key locations, including Fort Sumter itself.

The dinner, though pleasant, became charged with political tension when, as the meal was underway, an orderly delivered an urgent dispatch from President Abraham Lincoln. General Scott read the dispatch, which contained critical instructions regarding Fort Sumter, but quickly handed it over to Seward, who seemed visibly disturbed upon reading its contents. This was no ordinary piece of correspondence, as both Seward and Bates, after reading it, exhibited signs of deep concern. To allow for private discussion of the dispatch's contents, Russell excused himself and stepped outside with Major Cullum into the garden. There, he observed the heightened security surrounding Scott's residence, which suggested the gravity of the situation that was unfolding just beyond the walls.

As the dinner came to a close, Russell rejoined the group inside, learning that the dispatch had contained a dire warning: the South Carolina batteries had been ordered to open fire on Fort Sumter unless Major Robert Anderson, the Union commander, agreed to surrender. The news marked a turning point, foreshadowing the onset of open conflict. The implications were clear—an all-out war seemed increasingly likely, with the South's decision to escalate tensions through military action signaling a

crucial shift in the political landscape. After the dinner, Seward escorted Russell back to the Willard Hotel, where they passed through the eerily quiet streets of Pennsylvania Avenue, a reminder of the looming threat from Virginia and rumors of a possible military plot against Lincoln and his cabinet. Seward, though admitting that Washington was “almost defenseless,” believed both the North and South were, at that point, ill-prepared for military aggression.

The following day, Russell set out for Charleston, intending to reach Baltimore first. Despite the heavy rainstorm, his determination to understand the unfolding events brought him to Eutaw House, his hotel, where he was greeted by rumors claiming that the bombardment of Fort Sumter had already begun. However, Russell remained cautious, knowing how misinformation could spread in such uncertain times, especially after encountering numerous false reports in recent days. At the hotel bar, he found the patrons buzzing with speculation about the situation at Sumter, revealing how little actual information was available. Russell, who was supposed to be a source of reliable information himself, found himself caught in the same uncertainty, with no more clarity than those around him who sought his insight.

This chapter exemplifies the fog of war and the challenge of obtaining reliable information in times of national crisis. Russell’s experience sheds light on the confusion and conflicting reports that surrounded the opening moments of the Civil War. Even though he was an experienced war correspondent, he too was caught off-guard by the rapidly unfolding events. This illustrates the difficulty of reporting on an event as momentous as the Civil War at its inception, where the lines between fact and speculation often blurred. It also underscores the fragility of communication during wartime, as news was often delayed, distorted, or misinterpreted, leaving both leaders and citizens alike scrambling to understand the true nature of the crisis at hand.