

LINCOLN LORE

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RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE CIVIL WAR

Extensive publicity has been accorded remarks derogatory to Abraham Lincoln recently made in the Capitol's Statuary Hall at Washington by the Professor of American History at Georgetown University, Dr. Charles C. Tansill. The pronouncements which have received most attention follow:

"The dubious intrigue that preceded the firing upon Fort Sumter does not have to be rehearsed here today. To many minds it is clear that Lincoln deliberately played fast and loose with representatives of the South in order to trick them into a bombardment of that famous fort. If it could be accomplished, war would then be inevitable and the South could be made to appear as the aggressor. The responsibility for the Civil War rests securely upon only one pair of shoulders and those shoulders belonged to Abraham Lincoln."

Tansill further remarked that Lincoln's election in 1860 killed the Federal Union, which Washington, Jefferson and Jackson worked for, and exclaimed that the newly elected President "did not have the decency to give it a polite burial." Tansill alleged that Lincoln did nothing following his election "to quiet the growing friction that pointed to war" and complained that the "Sphinx of Springfield remained eloquently silent."

The occasion for these remarks and others of the same tenor, was a memorial program arranged for June 2, 1947, in honor of Jefferson Davis, under the auspices of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. However it must be said in justice to the sponsors that they immediately disavowed Dr. Tansill and Mrs. John W. Wilcox, president general of the U. D. C. commented, "His allusions to Mr. Lincoln do not reflect our views." Fred P. Meyers, commander of the Sons of Confederate Veterans said, "I think he went too far."

The following day the Professor of American History at Georgetown University was interviewed by the press and it is claimed he was still "standing by his guns." He had no word of retraction but amplified his viewpoint by this statement, "My idea is that its a good idea to tell the truth in history. What's the idea of perpetuating the Lincoln legend? It's a good Republican legend, but why do we have to pussyfoot?" *Who's Who in America* gives Mr. Tansill's political preference as "Democratic."

Dr. Tansill, born in Fredricksburg, Texas, in 1890, is the grandson of two forebears who fought in the Confederate Army. He graduated from Catholic University of America in 1912 and received a Ph. D. from the same institution in 1915 and a Ph. D. from Johns Hopkins University in 1918. Before coming to Georgetown he was Professor of History at Fordham University.

It is a strange coincidence that last week's issue of Lincoln Lore entitled "Lincoln Attracts the Professors of History" seems to anticipate this Lincoln comment by Dr. Tansill and really serves as an appropriate introduction to at least one professor's interpretation of Lincoln. A paragraph which is given special emphasis in Professor Beale's discussion on "Causes of the Civil War" is entitled *Predisposition* which should be reread in the light of the present controversy about Professor Tansill's remarks.

The conclusions of Dr. Tansill will have a tendency to focus attention on just what is being taught in our colleges with respect to the origin of the Civil War. Certainly it is no new theory that Dr. Tansill has set forth about the importance of the preliminaries to Fort Sumter which caused its bombardment, but he must think that Lincoln had very broad shoulders indeed if all the scheming and intrigue for the previous 30 years could be shifted off onto the president-elect during the few weeks he stood in a position of authority.

Some of the historical authorities mentioned by Pro-

fessor Beale; Professors Greg, Ramsdell, Craven, and Randall who have suggested some part Lincoln may have had in the causes that brought on the War are here introduced and their testimonies submitted. One of the earliest critics to charge Lincoln with deliberately forcing the war was Percy Greg who in his "History of the United States" (Book IV p. 169) states:

"Mr. Lincoln, Mr. Seward and their colleagues intentionally and deliberately forced on the collision, determined to leave the South no choice . . . they had baffled the earnest efforts of the Confederates to keep the peace, and hidden those efforts from the great majority of the northern people. The South had been forced, the North tricked into war."

The modern school of historians look to Prof. Charles W. Ramsdell as the sponsor of the theory just recently amplified by Tansill: He proposes that the notice to Governor Pickens "carried a threat that force would be used if the provisions were not allowed to be brought in. It was a direct challenge." (Journal of Southern History Vol. III p. 280).

Avery Craven, Professor of American History at the University of Chicago in his book on *The Coming of the Civil War* (p. 437) states: "The unofficial assurances given to Southern agents by Seward were repudiated and a set of conditions created which made the actual firing on Fort Sumter by alarmed and enraged Southerners almost a foregone conclusion."

"Whether these acts were part of a well-worked-out policy of accepting what seemed to be an irrepressible conflict, and cleverly throwing the responsibility for beginning the war onto the South for the psychological advantage, or whether they were the result of blundering along with the sweep of events, we cannot say with complete assurance."

When Paul M. Angle was gathering outstanding chapters for his recent book *The Lincoln Reader* he chose an article on the beginnings of the Civil War by James G. Randall, Professor of History at the University of Illinois. The concluding sentence of Prof. Randall's discussion follows:

"Lincoln's refusal to relax the tension on the forts at a time when such an easing of tension would have been understandable and even pleasing to many of his followers was like a veritable declaration of war to the South." (Angle, *The Lincoln Reader* p. 347.)

While many noted historians have felt that somehow the preliminaries to the firing on Fort Sumter were important no public utterance in recent years has been quite so abusive of Lincoln as Professor Tansill's harangue. Apparently he placed little dependence on these two statements of Lincoln, one in the first and the other in the second inaugural, which deal directly with the responsibility for bringing on the war.

In his First Inaugural Address delivered thirty-eight days before the firing on Fort Sumter by Confederate forces Lincoln said, "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. . . . In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The Government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors."

The Second Inaugural contains these words:

"Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish. And the war came."