

# The Siege of Washington: The Untold Story of the Twelve Days That Shook the Union

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## Review

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**Lockwood, John and Charles Lcokwood** *The Siege of Washington: The Untold Story of the Twelve Days That Shook the Union*. Oxford University Press, \$27.95  
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Fresh Introspective into the First Days of the War

John and Charles Lockwood present a meticulous treatment of the precarious fate of the nation's capital during the critical twelve days in April of 1861 following the firing at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor and the arrival of Northern reinforcements to defend Washington. They offer a picture of the turbulent time of insecurity as Washingtonians anxiously hoped for protection and the nation was lurching toward the devastating fratricidal conflict. In the "Preface" they make clear their primary objective - to tell the story of the often-neglected isolation of Washington and threats to the capital.

To accomplish this, the authors employ a tightly organized chronological strategy. The work consists of twelve chapters treating each day of the siege and bearing titles such as "Fight, Sir, Fight", or "Between Many Fires" which are quotes from primary material which they will cleverly incorporate in the text of the respective chapters. The reader is soon engrossed in hunting to see how the quotes will be utilized. Beyond the chronological chapters, the book provides some interpretive guidelines in the "Preface" and "Epilogue". The siege, the authors suggest, is frequently over-looked, because it would soon be eclipsed by the "fiery trial". The episode, they contend, is significant because it forced Lincoln to recognize the vulnerability of the capital and take measures to transform Washington into the active Union military command post at the nation's capital.

The book is exciting, captivating, informative, and engages the reader with a marvelous sense of immediacy, presence, and human sensitivity. Based on exhaustive primary research, the authors chronicle the developments that

produced the isolation of the city through cutting of rail links, mail service, and telegraph lines to the menace from the surrounding slave states with armed secessionists blocking northern reinforcements to the capital. The Lockwood brothers – one active in National Park Service historic site work and dedicated to public history, the other an authority on architectural history, and both native sons of Washington - approach the events of the siege, as Lincoln termed the experience, from the perspective of participants. Because historical actors could not know the fate of the city in advance, the authors maintain a sense of suspense for the reader. We watch as the residents experience food shortages, critical loss of personal security, and suffer an emotional roller coaster ride of fearing that the secessionist invasion would occur before relief reached them. When 7th New York and 8th Massachusetts Regiments arrived with the promise of additional volunteers, the city erupts in joyful celebration.

The numerous biographical sketches interwoven with the chronological narrative are generally effective. The biographical treatment of Southern leaders, however, is sometimes less than fulsome - Jefferson Davis, for example, is all too frequently treated as a mysterious figure. The scarcity of insight into the southern leadership weakens the Lockwood explanation of their failure to seize Washington.

The portrait of General Winfield Scott is especially noteworthy. Scott, the seventy-five year old general whose service dated to the War of 1812, assumed the daunting task of defending the capital. On April 18, Scott commanded a maximum force of 3,200. The general is portrayed in a refreshingly favorable light as a patriotic man, dedicated to duty, and creatively making the best of a bad military situation. He is applauded for his decision to reject the offer from Virginia to lead the troops of his native state and his spirited attempt to persuade Colonel Robert E. Lee to do the same. Scott prudently ordered the successful destruction of the 15,000 stands of arms at the arsenal in the secessionist captured Harper's Ferry and authorized the burning of ships at the Navy Yard at Norfolk to deprive the enemy of war material. He is complemented for his decision to issue General Order Number Three extending the Washington Military District to include Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania. Perhaps, Scott's most significant contribution was his firm dedication to the supremacy of civilian control of the military and authority of the Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief. There would be no military coup on Scott's watch.

The Lockwoods' picture of Lincoln offers a close look into his daily life, role in cabinet meetings, his office routine as well as his family life and depicts the early development of traits that foreshadow his enduring greatness. We see a thoughtful and sensitive person attempting to preserve the Union, and further American nationalism with the liberal and reforming components cherished by Northerners. The pursuit of these objectives, he fearfully senses, would move the nation closer to tragic horror. Beginning with his decision to formulate a coalition cabinet, we see his political acumen. Wanting more than just a "team of rivals", this arrangement was designed to achieve a unity government embracing Northern Democrats, and Republicans to bring together the disparate northern political forces and bolster national solidarity. At the first cabinet meeting after the fall of Sumter, Lincoln demonstrates his penetrating analytical ability and commitment to executive leadership as he advocates a Presidential Proclamation calling for 75,000 volunteer troops. Cognizant of the immediate danger, wishing to harness northern anger against the first secessionist move, and not wanting to wait for Congress to come back in session, Lincoln selected this vehicle and the precise number of volunteers as sufficient to meet immediate needs without being too large to risk failing to achieve the goal. The Cabinet unanimously followed Lincoln and the Proclamation was issued by virtue of his power as Commander-in-Chief.

Demonstrating his prudence and far-sightedness, he developed contingency plans in event the secessionists invaded the capital. Acting through intermediaries including Seward, the Union Defense League was given emergency powers to purchase steamboats, send volunteer regiments and supplies to Washington, and spend two million dollars from the U.S. Treasury. At the same meeting, Lincoln declared that they should look to the "spirit of the Constitution" and take any available measures to oppose the rebellion and protect the nation. On April 22, Lincoln met with Baltimore officials and the Maryland governor concerning their resistance to troops moving to reinforce Washington. After his conciliatory willingness to meet, listen, and show concern - in part to keep the state from joining the Confederacy - he concluded the interview by threatening he would "lay Baltimore in ashes" if the violence against federal troops did not cease. Here was a 19th-century version of "the Lion and the Fox".

The authors address numerous questions concerning the Civil War experience and develop subtle and generally satisfying explanations. In the tradition of the finest narrative historian, the answers are understated and

suggestive rather than being loud and dogmatic. Explaining the failure of southern forces to launch a lightning frontal attack on Washington, the Lockwoods emphasize the hesitant, fragmented and improvised character of the Secessionist movement. As made clear in the Epilogue, the northern fear of imminent attack was groundless because the Confederate leadership had already decided against it. Strongly influenced by Robert E. Lee, the South focused on creating a defensive position, very limited by states' rights sensitivities, and too wary to stake its uncertain future on such a bold but risky maneuver.

The causal role of slavery is succinctly and effectively treated in the Epilogue by presenting the views of Frederick Douglass. In placing the siege and the coming of the Civil War in its larger historical context, Douglass observed, "We all know what the rebels and traitors mean...they mean the perpetuity, and supremacy of slavery" (243-44).

Although there is much of value in the book, there are areas of weakness. While the tight chronological chapter organization has advantages, the reader must make adjustments for the diversity of topics with something of a disjointed effect. The details of parades, receptions, and travel arrangements of the first two regiments wending their way toward Washington are sometimes redundant. The brevity of treatment for some southern leaders weakens the explanation for the failure to assault Washington. Except for the sensationalist tones of the title, the authors keep reins on their penchant for the melodramatic. In general their footnoting and grounding in source material are effective; but the typographical errors are disconcerting. In treating the Secretary of State, they neglect the rich Seward Papers at the University of Rochester. Despite these limitations, the book is eminently readable and makes valuable contributions through the richness of its detail. John and Charles Lockwood make valuable contributions to our understanding of the Civil War and admirably remind Americans that there are no simple explanations in our history and it is more than a matter for sixty-second sound bites or the twenty-four hour news cycle.

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