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## **Last Chance Peace Mission of the Civil War: The Hampton Roads Conference**

The subject of this article is the only unofficial meeting of the representatives of the Union and the Confederacy, held aboard a steamship in Hampton Roads, Virginia on February 3, 1865. The article will also discuss previous communication efforts, preparations for the conference, and the probable course and outcome of the negotiations. It will also place under scrutiny its possibilities for concluding a peace treaty between both parties and the meaning of the resolve for further warfare.

Apart from the official documents published by the authorities of the North and the South<sup>1</sup>, only representatives of the defeated Confederacy have left more extensive reminiscences of the conference<sup>2</sup>. Until now the issue has not aroused much interest among American historians. Only dozen-odd-page-long papers and a few articles have been published<sup>3</sup>. Although many

- <sup>1</sup> *Peace. Message transmitting, in compliance with the resolution of February 8th, 1865, information relative to a conference held at Hampton Roads with Messrs. A. H. Stephens, R. M. T. Hunter, and J. A. Campbell* (Washington 1865), 10; *President Abraham Lincoln to Major Thomas T. Eckert: facsimiles of two letters relating to the abortive Hampton Roads Peace Conference of January 30-February 3, 1865* (Los Angeles 1957), 8; *Journal of the Congress of the Confederate States of America, 1861-1865*, v. VII (Washington D.C. 1905), 545.
- <sup>2</sup> Alexander H. Stephens, *Recollections of Alexander H. Stephens; his Diary Kept when a Prisoner at Fort Warren* (Boston Harbour 1865); *Giving Incidents and Reflections of his Prison Life and some Letters and Reminiscences* (New York 1910), 113, 137, 141, 145, 183, 241, 264, 271, 275, 280-281, 371-375, 423; Idem, *A Constitutional View of the late War Between the States; Its Causes, Character, Conduct and Results*, v. II (Philadelphia 1870), 594-619; John A. Campbell, *Reminiscences and Documents Relating to the Civil War During the Year 1865* (Baltimore 1887), 11-17; Robert M.T. Hunter, "The Peace Commission of 1865", *Southern Historical Society Papers*, 1877, v. III, 168-176.
- <sup>3</sup> Julian S. Carr, *The Hampton Roads conference: a refutation of the statement that Mr. Lincoln said if union was written at the top the southern commissioners might fill in the balance* (Durham 1917); Josef W. Rich, *The Hampton Roads Conference* (Iowa City 1903); William C. Harris, "The Hampton

American historians have noted this event in their research work, they have typically devoted only a few pages at most to the conference in question<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, in Polish historiography, the conference was merely acknowledged by Krzysztof Michałek, among others<sup>5</sup>.

It is my contention that this conference remains largely unappreciated, and due to this fact it is worth taking a closer look at the circumstances under which the meeting of February 3, 1865 took place, as it might have altered the course of the Civil War – though in the end it never did.

After the secession and formation of the Confederate States of America, their official recognition (by both the United States and the international community) as either an independent country or as *belligerent* was at stake<sup>6</sup>. Granting such status could happen either in an explicit declaration by the government of the United States or as the effect of actions taken by that government aimed at putting an end to the uprising. Such actions included: declaration of a sea blockade, exercising the right of visit and search in relation to country-of-origin third countries, applying the right to spoils, and exchange of prisoners of war. During the conflict, all of these conditions were fulfilled, although until the end of the war the authorities of the Union made efforts to conceal that fact from the public and consistently refused to officially recognize the Confederacy<sup>7</sup>. The government of the North presented the same standpoint toward its opponent. Despite these difficulties, toward the end of the war, representatives of both conflicting parties met at a peace conference in Hampton Roads.

Before the conference was held, the authorities of the Confederate States of America led by President Jefferson Davis had tried on numerous occasions

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Roads Peace Conference: A Final Test of Lincoln's Presidential Leadership", *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 2000 (January), v. 21, issue 1, 30–61; Charles W. Sanders Jr., "Jefferson Davis and the Hampton Roads Peace Conference: To secure Peace to the two countries", *Journal of Southern History*, 1997 (November), v. 63, 803–826.

4 For ex. Bruce Catton, *The Civil War* (Boston 2005), 248-253; Shelby Foote, *The Civil War. A Narrative. Red River to Appomattox*, v. III (New York 1974), 773-784; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom. The Civil War Era* (New York 1988), 822-824; Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederate Nation: 1861-1865* (New York 1965), 294-295; James G. Randall, Richard N. Current, *Lincoln the President: Last Full Measure* (New York 1955), 326-40.

5 Kszysztof Michałek, *Dyplomaci i okręty. Z dziejów polityki zagranicznej Skonfederowanych Stanów Ameryki 1861-1865* (Warszawa 1987), 234-235; Idem, *Historia Stanów Zjednoczonych Ameryki 1861-1945. Na drodze ku potędze* (Warszawa 1992), 53-54.

6 Belligerents (from French) – any entity acting in a hostile manner whose soldiers have all the rights in international armed conflicts (for example a prisoners of war exchange) – Marian Flemming, *Jęńcy wojenni. Studium Prawno-historyczne* (Warszawa 2000), 257.

7 More in: Łukasz Niewiński, *Obozy jenieckie w wojnie secesyjnej 1861-1865* (Warszawa-Białystok 2012), 128-130.

to establish official and unofficial contact with their counterparts from the North<sup>8</sup>. The conference in Hampton Roads was not the first attempt at peace negotiations between the two parties of the conflict. Such efforts had been made on numerous occasions by the Southern side, which wanted to attain peaceful co-existence far more than the North, due to its smaller population and limited industrial potential.

Shortly after the outbreak of the war, which officially began on April 12, 1861, the President of the Confederacy submitted an official letter to his counterpart from the North which concerned mainly the issue of the exchange of prisoners of war, including the crew of the southern privateer *Savannah*<sup>9</sup>. Davis's letter remained without reply from Abraham Lincoln, who avoided any direct recognition of the Confederacy at all costs<sup>10</sup>.

The next attempt at establishing mutual relations – this time round, however, made by the North – also concerned prisoners of war. Acting upon a U.S. congressional resolution of December 11, 1861 regarding the opening of an agreement on POW exchange with the Confederacy, the Union's Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton appointed two commissioners whose task was to visit rebel prisoner-of-war camps and provide the POWs with financial aid<sup>11</sup>. On January 25, bishop Edwards R. Ames of the Methodist Church and Hamilton Fish from New York became commissioners. Having crossed the front lines, they would visit the camps for federal prisoners of war, make a list of all their needs, and assure them of the U.S. Government's endeavors

8 Jefferson Davis (1807-1889), born on June 3 in Kentucky. In about 1811 the Davis family settled near Woodville, Mississippi. Educated at Jefferson College, at Transylvania University and at West Point Military Academy. Twice married (1. Sarah Knox Taylor, 2. Varina Howell). In 1845 elected to U.S. Congress. Colonel during the Mexican War (1846-1847). Wounded at the Battle of Buena Vista. U.S. secretary of war during President Pierce's administration (1853-1857). President of the Confederate States of America (1861-1865). After the war imprisoned at Fortress Monroe (1865-1867). Four of his sons died before him, one of them during his presidency (like Lincoln's son) - *Encyclopedia of the Confederacy*, v. II, ed. by Richard N. Current (New York 1993), 448-453.

9 *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Later: O.R.), ser. II, v. III (Washington D.C. 1898), 5.

10 Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), born in Kentucky, 16th U.S. President, after 1828 settled in Illinois, lawyer from 1836, member of Congress (1847-1849), in 1856 joined the Republican party, elected for president on 6th November 1860, determined to save the Union at all costs, in 1862 he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, in 1864 re-elected for second term, assassinated by John Wilkes Booth on 14<sup>th</sup> April 1865, died the next morning – Mark M. Boatner, *The Civil War Dictionary* (New York 1959), 483-484.

11 O.R., ser. II, v. III, 157, 183; Charles W. Sanders Jr., *While in the Hands of the Enemy: Military Prisons of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge 2005), 80-82.

aimed at exchanging them<sup>12</sup>. The mission brought no result because the rebels refused to grant them the right to enter Richmond.

In the middle of 1863 the Confederates made a test attempt at peace negotiations combined with an exchange of POWs. Confederate Vice President Alexander H. Stephens in his letter to Davis of June 12, 1863<sup>13</sup>, offered to travel to Washington in order to negotiate a new POW exchange agreement and, at the same time, initiate peace negotiations with the U.S. Government<sup>14</sup>. Davis accepted his patriotic offer on July 2, 1863, stipulating, however, that his mission should only be of a humanitarian character. Davis stressed that the meeting would serve its purpose on condition that it would lead to recognizing him as President of the Confederacy and that the talks would take place on equal terms. He also consented to initiating negotiations with regard to developing a new POW exchange agreement. In addition, he attached a letter to Lincoln in which he confirmed Stephens's authority to conduct negotiations<sup>15</sup>.

Happening concurrently with the mission was General R.E. Lee's Confederate army offensive against the northern states. Davis hoped that a possible victory would help start peace negotiations from a position of power. Unfortunately for the Confederate States, this military action failed completely. Stephens, who arrived in Hampton Roads on July 4, 1863 and waited for the start of negotiations, was disappointed. No one from the authorities of the North had the slightest intention of conducting talks with him; moreover, it was indicated to him indirectly that he was *persona non grata* in Union ter-

12 O.R., ser. II, v. III, 213, 222-223.

13 Alexander H. Stephens (1812-1883), born in Georgia, lawyer, member of the U.S. Congress. Firstly he opposed secession, later elected vice president of the Confederacy (1861-1865). Ignored by Davis, he staying at home for long periods of the Civil War. Commissioner to the Hampton Roads peace conference. After the war imprisoned at Fort Warren in Boston Harbor by Union authorities. Postwar Georgia congressman and governor – *Encyclopedia*, v. IV, 1538-1542.

14 *Messages and Papers of Jefferson Davis and the Confederacy*, v. I, ed. James D. Richardson (New York 1966), 339-341.

15 In a letter to Lincoln, Davis wrote: "Numerous difficulties and disputes have arisen in relation to the execution of the cartel of exchange heretofore agreed on by belligerents, and the commissioners of the exchange of prisoners have been unable to adjust their differences and I do hereby authorize the said Alexander H. Stephens to arrange and settle all differences and disputes which may have arisen or may arise in the execution of the cartel for exchange of prisoners of war heretofore agreed on between our respective land and naval forces; also to prevent further misunderstandings as to the terms of said cartel, and finally to enter into such arrangement or understanding about the mode of carrying on hostilities between the belligerents as shall confine the severities of the war within such limits as are rightfully imposed, not only by modern civilization, but by our common Christianity" – O.R., ser. II, v. VI, 74-76; *Messages and Papers*, 341-343.

ritory<sup>16</sup>. The then current military situation had a decisive influence on this state of affairs. On the western front, the two biggest strongholds of the South on the Mississippi River – Vicksburg and Port Hudson – had capitulated on July 4 and July 9 respectively. Furthermore, Lee's eastern offensive had been stopped by Union divisions in the Battle of Gettysburg (July 1-3). The Confederates did try to enter into talks with the Unionists a few more times – however, each time round, to no avail<sup>17</sup>.

On December 6, 1864, in his annual message to Congress, Abraham Lincoln stated explicitly that the main goal of the Federal Government should be the restoration of the Union. Concluding a peace agreement on terms of unconditional surrender by the South would be impossible if the opposing party should be represented by Jefferson Davis. Lincoln did not, however, rule out the possibility of holding negotiations with other representatives of the South. In his speech he said:

The public purpose to re-establish and maintain the national authority is unchanged, and, as we believe, unchangeable... No attempt at negotiation with the insurgent leader could result in any good... What is true, however, of him who heads the insurgent cause, is not necessarily true of those who follow. Although he cannot reaccept the Union, they can. Some of them, we know, already desire peace and reunion<sup>18</sup>.

Francis P. Blair, Sr. decided to choose an open path to negotiations<sup>19</sup>. This aged, nearly 73-year-old citizen of Virginia, a Democrat and supporter of the Union, both trusted by Lincoln and a close friend of Davis, decided to try and achieve what seemed impossible – signing a peace treaty between the North and the South. Blair, in all likelihood persuaded by Mexican representatives and Horace Greeley's suggestions<sup>20</sup>, put forward a plan to put an end to the Civil War<sup>21</sup>.

The plan was based on reaching a ceasefire agreement between the conflicting parties. It did not allow recognition of independence of the South by the North. In return, Blair offered the South restoration to the Union on terms which were supposed to be easy on them. Upon conclusion of a ceasefire agree-

16 O.R., ser. II, v. VI, 79-80, 84, 94-95.

17 For example: Niagara Falls Conference (July 1864) – William C. Harris, *The Hampton Roads*, 34.

18 *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, v. VIII, ed. Ray P. Basler (New Brunswick, N.J. 1955), 151.

19 Francis Preston Blair (1791-1876), born in Virginia, lawyer, newspaperman, editor *Washington Globe*, Democrat, from 1856 Republican, a Lincoln confidante, whose sons gained prominence in Lincoln's cabinet and army, close friend of Jefferson Davis – *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, ed. Lynda L. Crist, v. XI (Baton Rouge 2003), 319.

20 Horace Greeley (1811-1872), born in New Hampshire, editor (*New York Tribune*) and politician, opponent of slavery, nominated for president in 1872 – Mark M. Boatner, *The Civil War*, 354-355.

21 Sanders Jr., *Jefferson Davis*, 809; Harris, *The Hampton Roads*, 34.

ment, the armies of the Union and Confederacy would invade Mexico together, a country that had been subdued by the French and Emperor Maximilian. In this way Blair related to practical implementation of the Monroe Doctrine<sup>22</sup>.

Francis Blair took certain measures in order to realize his plan as early as July 1864; however, an opportune situation occurred as late as December. On December 22, Blair met with Abraham Lincoln and, at least partially informed him of his intentions, asking for a pass to the enemy's capital city. Lincoln granted this permission as late as December 28, after the Federal Army had captured Savannah. The official reason for Blair's mission to Richmond was his wish to recover documents important to him personally, seized by the Confederate Army in July 1864, and only for such a mission did he receive a pass. The authorities of the South consented to his request for permission to visit Richmond. Due to bad weather and other unfavorable circumstances, he arrived there as late as January 11 or 12, 1865. He engaged in at least two conversations with Jefferson Davis and may also have held talks with other politicians from the South. During his conversation with the President of the Confederacy, the issue of Mexico was discussed. Moreover, Davis expressed misgivings about negotiating with Union Secretary of State William H. Seward, but at the time tactically did not insist on Southern independence<sup>23</sup>.

Nevertheless, he changed his tone in a letter handed to Blair in order to sustain peace negotiations with Lincoln:

...am willing now as heretofore to enter into negotiations for the restoration of Peace; am ready to send a commission whenever I have reason to suppose it will be received... appoint one immediately and renew the effort to enter into conference with a view to secure peace to the **two countries**<sup>24</sup>.

Initiating peace talks and recognition of two American countries was Davis's main goal.

Blair returned to Washington on January 16 and two days later handed the aforementioned correspondence to President Lincoln, who had his reply to Davis written down straight away, while at the same time taking care not to address the leader of the rebellion directly, as usual. In his letter to Blair, Lincoln wrote:

you may say to him that I have constantly been, am now, and shall continue, ready to receive any agent whom he, or any other influential person now resisting national

22 *The Papers of Jefferson*, v. XI, 321.

23 *Ibid.*, 315-325; Harris, *The Hampton Roads*, 34-35.

24 *The Collected Works*, v. VIII, 275.

authority, may informally send to me with the view of securing peace to the people of **our one common country**<sup>25</sup>.

Blair returned to Richmond and on January 21 met with Jefferson Davis again. During the conversation, he showed the president yet another version of the peace agreement plan, which was to be taken care of by the generals of both armies – Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant. Davis agreed to this proposal. Furthermore, although Blair's visits failed to remain secret (on which Lincoln had insisted), arousing the interest of the Richmond press, Davis did not decide to reveal Lincoln's letter in which he had denied the *raison d'être* of the Confederate States of America. Not only would disclosure of said letter have ended Blair's mission, it would also put an end to the peace-oriented opposition to the authorities in the South. Instead of this, Jefferson Davis decided to continue negotiations, although the standpoints of both presidents on the fundamental issue of the Confederacy's existence were impossible to compromise<sup>26</sup>.

After Blair's departure, Davis was informed of Lincoln's negative reply to the proposal for a military convention. Knowing all the facts, he called his incumbent Vice President Alexander H. Stephens to Richmond. During their conversation it was agreed that Davis would not meet with Lincoln personally – which in any case was unacceptable to the North – so special commissioners responsible for negotiations were appointed. The delegation included the staunchest supporters of a peaceful solution: Alexander H. Stephens, Robert M. T. Hunter<sup>27</sup>, John A. Campbell<sup>28</sup>.

On January 28 Davis gave the three commissioners short and succinct instructions on how to conduct negotiations:

You are requested to proceed to Washington City for an informal conference with him [Lincoln] upon the issues involved in the existing war, and for purpose of securing peace to the **two countries**<sup>29</sup>.

25 Ibid., 275-276.

26 Harris, *The Hampton Roads*, 37, 40; Sanders Jr., *Jefferson Davis*, 814-815.

27 Robert M. T. Hunter (1809-1887), born in Virginia. Educated at Virginia University. Studied law and was admitted to the Virginia bar in 1830. Member of the U.S. Congress in various years. Confederate secretary of state (from July 24, 1861, until February 22, 1862) Member of the Confederate Senate. Commissioner to the Hampton Roads peace conference – *Encyclopedia*, v. II, 801-804.

28 John A. Campbell (1811-1889), born in Georgia. Educated at Franklin College and at West Point. Lawyer and judge. From 1853 to 1861 associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. Resigned in 1861. From fall of 1862 to the end of Civil War Confederate assistant Secretary of War. Commissioner to the Hampton Roads peace conference – *Encyclopedia*, v. I, 255-256.

29 *The Papers of Jefferson*, v. XI, 356.

But the military situation of the Confederacy shortly before the negotiations was hopeless. Most of its territory had been seized by the Union. Southern forces suffered a number of ignominious defeats in Georgia (Atlanta), Tennessee (Franklin, Nashville) and North Carolina (Fort Fisher). The fall of Fort Fisher (January 15), which defended access to Wilmington, the last port controlled by the Confederacy connecting it to supplies from Europe, turned out to be an especially irretrievable loss. It was the last moment for entering peace negotiations.

On January 29 the commissioners of the South set out for the Union Army lines and crossed over the next day. News of their arrival reached both fighting armies quickly and raised hopes for peace. However, their arrival surprised the North. Union authorities did not know what to they were to do with them<sup>30</sup>. Initially, only Secretary of State Seward was to meet with them<sup>31</sup>. He received written instructions from President Lincoln which constituted the basis for commencing negotiations:

You will make known to them that three things are indispensable, to wit: 1. The restoration of the national authority throughout all the States. 2. No receding, by the Executive of the United States, on the Slavery question... 3. No cessation of hostilities short of an end of the war, and the disbanding of all forces hostile to the government<sup>32</sup>.

The unannounced arrival of the southern commissioners complicated the situation for Lincoln who was at that time seeing to the adoption by Congress of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution on the abolition of slavery. Adopting the amendment required a 2/3 qualified majority. News of peace negotiations could, however, make Democratic Congressmen reject the bill in order not to irritate the Southerners<sup>33</sup>. Concerned about the fate of the endeavor, James M. Ashley, who was responsible for presenting the said amendment to Congress, on January 31 sent a query to President Lincoln:

30 John B. Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary*, v. II (Philadelphia 1866), 402-403; *The Wartime Papers of Robert E. Lee*, eds. Clifford Dowdey, Louis H. Manarin (Boston 1961), 897.

31 William H. Seward (1801-1872) born in New York, lawyer, Governor of New York (1839-1842), member of U.S. Senate, in 1856 join Republican party, Secretary of State under Lincoln's and Johnson's administration (1861-1869), author of the purchase of Alaska (1867) – Mark M. Boatner, *The Civil War*, 732.

32 *The Collected Works*, v. VIII, 250.

33 Harris, *The Hampton Roads*, 42-43.



The report is in circulation in the House that Peace Commissioners are on their way or are in the city [Washington D.C.], and is being used against us. If it is true, I fear we shall lose the bill. Please authorize me to contradict it, if not true<sup>34</sup>.

In utmost diplomatic manner, Lincoln dispelled Ashley's fears in a reply sent the very same day: "So far as I know, there are no peace commissioners in the city, or likely to be in it"<sup>35</sup>.

The amendment was adopted on January 31 with 119 votes in favor and 59 votes against. The opposition needed only 5 votes more to reject it. Lincoln signed it on February 1. Having dealt with the amendment, Lincoln – after receiving on February 2<sup>nd</sup> a message from General Grant saying that the commissioners from the South wished to restore peace and the Union – joined the group of negotiators. He was not aware of Davis's instructions demanding recognition of the Confederacy (which the commissioners cautiously did not mention). Therefore, desiring a swift ending to the war, on the night of February 2/ February 3, he arrived in the vicinity of Hampton Roads, Virginia, where the remaining participants of the conference – Seward, plus the three representatives of the Confederacy – awaited him<sup>36</sup>.

On the morning of February 3, 1865, the meeting took place aboard the steamship *River Queen* anchored in Hampton Roads. The conference was four hours long and the parties agreed that it would be held behind closed doors and would not be minuted. The only person who could enter the room was a steward serving snacks<sup>37</sup>.

According to later, consistent accounts by the participants, the meeting proceeded peacefully. At the beginning, Lincoln explicitly stated what conditions the Confederates would have to fulfill in order for the talks to be successful (among others, immediate restoration of the Union); he also ruled out the possibility of a ceasefire and the carrying out of Francis Blair's plan. Both parties quickly became aware of the fact that no agreement could be reached, especially on the fundamental matter – the existence of two separate countries or of one unified country. In spite of this, Alexander Stephens tried to channel the discussion into the subject of the South's independence, but the delegation of the North opposed this. The remaining part of the discussion encompassed the following subjects: reconstruction of the southern states, the return of representatives of the rebelling states to the Congress, the issue of the status of West Virginia, the implementation of voluntary emancipation in the South,

34 *The Collected Works*, v. VIII, 248.

35 *Ibid.*

36 *The Hampton Roads*, 45-47.

37 Stephens, *A Constitutional View*, v. II, 599-600.

the status of former slaves, and the possible compensation of \$400m to their owners. Lincoln refused to negotiate in any official fashion with the authorities of the South, or to sign any treaty, agreement or convention with them; and was adamant about the Emancipation Proclamation. William Seward in turn, presented to the surprised Confederates the text of the adopted Thirteenth Amendment and deceitfully proposed that in the case of a speedy reunification of the North and the South, the latter would have influence on the future of the Union. Lincoln did not react to Seward's bluff. He insisted, however, on the disbanding and dissolution of all Confederate military forces and stated that restoration of the Union must be the ultimate result of military action. Otherwise, he threatened to continue the war<sup>38</sup>.

The conference was coming to a close and it did not seem likely that any matter of argument would be solved. It was then that Alexander Stephens mentioned the topic of an exchange of prisoners of war, including his own nephew. He reminisced:

I arose and stated that it seemed our mission would be entirely fruitless, unless we could do something in the matter of the Exchange of Prisoners. This brought up that subject. Mr. Lincoln expressed himself in favor of doing something on it, and concluded by saying that he would put the whole matter in the hands of General Grant, then at City Point, with whom we could interchange views on our return. Some propositions were then made for immediate special exchanges, which were readily agreed to... At City Point we again had an interview with Gen. Grant... The subject of the Exchange of Prisoners was then mentioned to him, and what Mr. Lincoln said about it, when he expressed a like willingness for an immediate and general Exchange. That subject was then left with him and our Commissioner of Exchange, Col. Ould. Thus ended this Mission<sup>39</sup>.

The commissioners from the South had raised this issue during their talks with General Grant held during the period from January 30 to February 2, 1865. Grant implied this indirectly in his letter of February 2, 1865, to Union Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. In his letter he included the main rules according to which a future exchange was supposed to take place. Furthermore, even before negotiations, both parties would perform a gesture of goodwill toward the other, for example replacing the Confederate Secretary of War or dismissing a Union exchange agent<sup>40</sup>.

38 Ibid., 594-617.

39 Ibid., 618-619.

40 Boatner, *The Civil War*, 82-83, 730; Sanders Jr, *While in the Hands*, 274, 281; Dick Nolan, *Benjamin Franklin Butler. The Damnedest Yankee* (Presidio, Ca 1991), 326-327.

After the conference ended, already on February 6 Jefferson Davis was presenting his account of the course of the meeting in his message to the Congress of the Confederate States. He mentioned its informal character and unofficial commissioners. He did not refrain from using (for propaganda purposes) Lincoln's refusal to enter negotiations with the Confederate States or the North's unwillingness to sign a ceasefire agreement or a peace treaty. Moreover, he announced to the assembly the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and unfolded his vision of the emancipation of all slaves by Union authorities<sup>41</sup>.

Later that evening Davis delivered a public speech to the citizens of the Confederacy at the largest building in Richmond – the First African Baptist Church. In his 45-minute speech, he commented on the fiasco of the talks with Lincoln, opposed unconditional surrender, and called the nation to a fight for victory<sup>42</sup>.

The failure of the conference in Hampton Roads also brought changes in the Confederate authorities. The supporters of peaceful return to the Union had to give in; for example, Alexander Stephens went back to his home state of Georgia. Equally significant was the fact that also on February 6, John C. Breckinridge was appointed the new Confederate Secretary of War and Robert E. Lee became general-in-chief of all Confederate forces<sup>43</sup>.

Returned from Hampton Roads, Abraham Lincoln decided to present the documentation concerning the proceedings of negotiations only two days after a query from Congress on February 8<sup>th</sup>. He summarized the course of the conference in a brief speech consisting of merely 8 sentences<sup>44</sup>.

One should ask here what both parties had to offer at the conference and if reaching a peace treaty between them as separate, distinct countries was possible. It needs to be asserted that the Northern side was in possession of all the trump cards: military strength, industrial potential, and – finally! – victories in the battlefield. The only thing the Confederates could hope for before their final defeat was the offer of compensation to slave owners for lost property – a proposition which would not necessarily be accepted by Congress. Another possible concession to be made would be quick political restoration, resulting in the co-opting of the current representatives of the South to the Senate and the House of Representatives, where they might have some influence on the legislative process, among other things.

41 *The Papers of Jefferson*, v. XI, 377-382.

42 *Ibid.*, 382-386.

43 Sanders Jr, *While in the Hands*, 281; *The Papers of Jefferson*, v. XI, 382-383.

44 *The Collected Works*, v. VIII, 284-285.

In my opinion, Lincoln's intention was above all to achieve – as soon as it was possible – the unconditional surrender of the army of the South, dissolution of the Confederate States of America and reunification of the United States. The meeting was supposed to show the leaders of the rebellion their tragic and futile military and political situation.

Did Jefferson Davis, for his part, manage to sort out the opposition problem by sending the three staunchest supporters of a compromise with the Yankees to a meeting that was doomed to be a fiasco? It seems this could have been one of the reasons why Davis became involved in the process of negotiations in the first place. In case of failure, he would have lost nothing personally (as opposed to the directly involved negotiators). Yet he did not expect a positive outcome of the conference. In either case Davis would gain at the level of propaganda, posing as either a conciliatory and sensible politician or the main architect of the success of the peace process.

Resumption of POW exchange was the only positive outcome of the arrangements of the conference in Hampton Roads. On the moral side, the said exchange constituted a solution which was supposed to relieve the suffering of the prisoners of war. What is more, the government of the South planned to use the several dozen thousand exchanged soldiers to put up resistance to the armies of the North longer. Failure to implement the plan was due to the massive disproportion of forces in favor of the North and the fact that most prisoners of war released from federal camps were in such poor physical condition that they were taken to hospitals, not to the front line.

To sum up, concluding a peace treaty could only have taken place on Abraham Lincoln's and not on Jefferson Davis's conditions. Neither of them would make any concessions. Lincoln's main condition was unconditional surrender of the Confederacy and restoration of the Union. The Confederates could have negotiated better conditions of capitulation than those they were forced to accept a few months later. Compensations to slave owners would have probably saved many growers from bankruptcy. The South would have returned to the Union much faster with regard to politics and its reconstruction would not have been so long and painful as it turned out to be. Moreover, the lives of a dozen-odd thousand soldiers on both sides would have been spared. The agreement, however, was not concluded and the only positive result was resumption of the exchange of prisoners of war.

## STRESZCZENIE

**Misja ostatniej szansy w wojnie secesyjnej:  
Konferencja w Hampton Roads**

Tematem niniejszego artykułu jest jedyne nieoficjalne spotkanie przedstawicieli Unii i Konfederacji, do którego doszło 3 lutego 1865 roku na pokładzie parowca w Hampton Roads w Wirginii. W tekście zostały omówione próby wcześniejszej komunikacji i negocjacji między walczącymi stronami, przygotowania do konferencji, prawdopodobny jej przebieg i ustalenia.

Należy podkreślić, że wszystkimi kartami w negocjacjach dysponowała strona północna. Za nią stały siła, potencjał przemysłowy, zwycięstwa na polu walki. Jedyne na co mogli liczyć Konfederaci przed ostateczną porażką to propozycja rekompensat dla właścicieli niewolników za utraconą własność. Zamiarem Abrahama Lincolna, była przede wszystkim chęć jak najszybszego uzyskania bezwarunkowej kapitulacji armii Południa, rozwiązania Skonfederowanych Stanów Ameryki i przywrócenia jedności Unii. Z kolei Jefferson Davis obstawał przy zachowaniu niepodległości Konfederacji, a jednocześnie wykorzystał obrady Konferencji do własnych celów politycznych. Do zawarcia pokoju mogło dojść tylko na warunkach Lincolna, a nie Davisa. Żaden z nich nie chciał ustąpić. Ostatecznie Konferencja w Hampton Roads nie przyniosła rezultatów, a jedynym jej pozytywnym akcentem było wznowienie wymiany jeńców wojennych.