

# Correspondence between Gen. Braxton Bragg and Col. Henry J. Hunt, 1861

## Introduction

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On April 12, 1861, Confederate officials informed Major Robert Anderson, US commander at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina, that they would allow one hour for him to surrender his forces. When he refused, Confederates unleashed more than forty cannons on the fort, and continued to hold it under fire for a day and a half. The attack on Fort Sumter marked the opening of the Civil War. This terrible conflict would divide families, separate former friends, and open rifts in communities.

The following exchange between two old army friends illustrates the painful choices made by Americans after the surrender of Fort Sumter. At the time, the Confederate General Braxton Bragg was in command in Pensacola, Florida, while Union Colonel Henry Hunt was at Fort Pickens, just across the bay. Each was moved to explain their differences and to anticipate the consequences of the impending conflict. Bragg wrote to Hunt (GLC00925.01), noting the strangeness of their sudden enmity: “A few short months since companions in army, and almost brothers in friendship, it is hard to realize the fact that we are in hostile array against each other.” But as a Louisianan, Bragg wanted his Northern friend to appreciate how the “people, en-mass” of the Confederacy were ready for the fight. Henry Hunt, hailing from Michigan, responded (GLC00925.02) with his own conviction that the “unity of our people will be eventually restored” when “the name of American will supersede that of northerner, and southerner.”

### [Excerpt of Bragg to Hunt, April 21, 1861]

How strange are the mutations of life! That we should be in hostile array against each other. A few short months since companions in army, and almost brothers in friendship, it is hard to realize the fact that we are in hostile array against each other. But so it is, and tho' I would have taken an oath that my old friend Hunt could never be the instrument of oppression in the hands of a Black Repub[lica]n yet we see strange things in this world, and even must be content to put up with it as we find it. Each one of us of course will follow the dictates of his own conscience.

### [Excerpt of Hunt to Bragg, April 23, 1861]

We must each as you say act according to the dictates of our consciences. Although you think my course a wrong one you know that I never have felt and I do not feel now hostile to the South, her institutions or her people nor can I have toward them the feelings of an “alien enemy.” I trust and I believe notwithstanding the dark prospects before us, and although blood may flow like water, that the time will yet come – if neither of us fall in the struggle – when we will meet again not merely as friends, which I am sure we will continue to be, but as fellow citizens of a

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great, prosperous, happy and united country.

### Questions for Discussion

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Read the document introduction, examine the excerpts, and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. Some officers who remained with the Union as well as those who joined the Confederacy had attended West Point together, served in the Mexican-American War together, or simply knew each other from prior military assignments. How does this help us understand why Braxton Bragg and Henry Hunt wrote these letters?
2. What did Bragg mean when he claimed to be surprised that Hunt would become “the instrument of oppression in the hands of a Black Republican”?
3. How accurate were Hunt’s predictions regarding the future?

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## Image

21. Apr 61

Dear Bragg,

Saturday Evening (21. Apr 61 + 314)

My Dear Hunt,

How strange are the mutations of life! That we should be in hostile array against each other. A few short months since companions in arms, and almost brothers in friendship, it is hard to realize the fact that we <sup>are</sup> in hostile array against each other. But so it is, and tho' I would have taken an oath that my old friend Hunt could never be the instrument of oppression in the hands of a Black Republic we see strange things in this world, and even must be content to put up with it as we find it. Each one of us of course will follow the dictates of his own conscience.

But for fear you may act under a misapprehension in regard to this more in the south, I will give you a few facts on which you may rely. This is no movement of politicians. The people, ex-majors are the leaders - and every man is now united in the cause. You may destroy us, but cannot conquer. Every class is represented in the ranks. - Many of my private here

Braxton Bragg to Henry J. Hunt, April 21, 1861 p.1 (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00925.01)

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are men of income, from \$10,000 to \$20,000 a year, and I could in thirty four hours raise \$20,000,000 by subscription, were it necessary to further our cause. I do not say that my dear old friend to influence you, I know too well your elevated character, to allow me to triffl with it - but I merely wish you to have the truth before you - We feel that we cannot live with the North in peace and we desire to be left alone to pursue the career chosen of our way - We submitted until we could submit no longer, and we decide to quit, and now we merely ask to be left alone.

We have asked for peace, but shall not decline war. Your president has decided on war. His order to you are to get you into position and war is inevitable - His policy is at last <sup>"to subjugate us"</sup> declared, and the result is that Virginia has at once seceded by an almost unanimous vote, and taken the Navy Yard & Arsenal at Norfolk, and Dupont says Harper's Ferry. North Carolina Tennessee Kentucky Mississippi & Arkansas have followed, and are passing out troops by the thousands to defend themselves. Maryland has forbidden northern troops to pass her borders, and every avenue to Washington

Braxton Bragg to Henry J. Hunt, April 21, 1861 p.2 (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00925.01)



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is done. Hundreds of officers from these States are resigning daily, and the whole country is on the eve of a long and bloody civil war. Surely this ought not to be, but so it is, and there is no help for it. Now that I can see, but for the people to rise up & decide to separate peacefully.

For Sumpter has succumbed to a "military necessity" - would to God the whole question were he submitted to three plain sensible men to settle justly. There is room enough in this world for us all to live in peace, and why should we not do so?

I enclose you a few slips of news, and only wish I could see you and my other old friends at the social house. For friends I still believe them, tho' I think them mistaken in their course.

Yours most truly,

Braxton Bragg

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### Transcript

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Near Barrancas,  
Saturday Evening (21 Apl 61 H.J.H)

My dear Hunt:

How strange are the mutations of life! That we should be in hostile array against each other. A few short months since companions in army, and almost brothers in friendship, it is hard to realize the fact that we are in hostile array against each other. But so it is, and tho' I would have taken an oath that my old friend Hunt could never be the instrument of oppression in the hands of a Black Repub[lica]n yet we see strange things in this world, and even must be content to put up with it as we find it. Each one of us of course will follow the dictates of his own conscience. But for fear you may rest under a misapprehension in regard to this move in the South, I will give you a few facts on which you may rely. This is no movement of politicians. The people, en-mass, are the leaders – and every man is now united in the cause. You may destroy us, but cannot conquer. Every class is represented in the ranks. Many of my privates here [2] are men of incomes from \$10,000 to \$50,000 a year and I could in twenty four hours raise \$20,000,000 by subscription, were it necessary to further our cause. I do not say this my dear old friend to influence you, I know too well your elevation of character, to allow me to trifle with it – but I merely wish you to have the truth before you. We feel that we cannot live with the North in peace and we desire to be left alone to pursue the even tenor of our way. We submitted until we could submit no longer, and we decided to quit, and now we merely ask to be let alone.

We have asked for peace, but shall not decline War. Your president has decided on War. His orders to you are to get you into position and war is inevitable. His policy is at last declared [*inserted*: “to subjugate us”] and the result is that Virginia has at once seceded by an almost unanimous vote, and taken the Navy Yard & Vessels at Norfolk, and report says Harpers Ferry. North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri, & Arkansas have followed, and are pouring out troops by the thousands to defend themselves. Maryland has forbidden Northern troops to pass her borders, and every avenue to Washington [3] is closed. Hundreds of officers from these States are resigning daily, and the whole country is on the eve of a long and bloody civil war. Surely this ought not to be, but so it is, and there is no help for it now that I can see, but for the people to rise up & decide to separate peacefully.

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Fort Sumpter has surrendered to a “military necessity” – would to God the whole question could be submitted to three plain sensible men to settle justly. There is room enough in this world for us all to live in peace, and why should we not do so?

I enclose a few slips of news, and only wish I could see you and my other old friends at the social board. For friends I still believe them, tho’ I think them mistaken in their course.

Yours most Truly,

Braxton Bragg

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## Image

Fort Pickens, April 23. 1861

My dear Bragg,

I was much gratified by the receipt of your note of Saturday evening. I do not doubt the nature of your feelings for I judge of them by my own.

How strange it is! We have been united in our views of almost all subjects, public and private, we still I have I trust a personal regard for each other, which will continue, whatever course our sense of duty may dictate, yet in one short year after exchanging at your house assurances of friendship, here we are face to face, with arms in our hands, with every prospect of a blood collision. How strange!

My view on the immediate occasion of our trouble you know. They are yours, they are those too of my family, all of whom have fought in the north, the battle of the north, and now find they are left to bear the imputation there of having taken sides not merely against their section, but against their country. Yet even now I do not despair of the future. I still think, improbable as it seems, that clearer views of our interests and necessities will reunite us. I acknowledge that the people of the cotton states are apparently united but I have watched the movement closely, and have seen some of the machinery employed to bring about this unanimity of opinion expression. I will be frank with you. A democrat of the freedmen school I now believe that the party was broken up simply to bring about secession, and unfortunately the course of events in the north has enabled the leaders to drop the people with them. With all their wrongs I think the south has not been just to them. When our governors to their friends in the north in breaking off from them at the first faintest defeat in the loss of the executive, all the other branches of government being in their hands. It is not a case in which I born under the flag can feel justified in deserting it. However much my sympathies were with my southern friends, in the immediate question at issue, and however much it pains me to be arrayed against them, I regret deeply that the secession leaders should have pursued such a course that, possibly by disavowing their flag and humiliatingly begging the government and humiliating themselves, their friends in the north could not force an amicable separation. I was not much surprised at it however. Many things, indeed, surprise

Henry Jackson Hunt to Braxton Bragg, April 23, 1861 p.1 (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00925.02)



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applicable in the administration of the war. Dept. in the last eight years are more explained, and  
 I fear that war has considered a necessity to a final separation, and the consolidation of  
 the power of the engineer and leaders of the movement. And, in such, determined on long,  
 210. — I have felt positively certain for the last six weeks, that your president would  
 force a collision if possible under circumstances, which would make the government appear  
 to be the aggressor before the election could take place in Virginia, and it has come to pass as I  
 expected. Notwithstanding this, and the results which may immediately follow I firmly be-  
 lieve that the unity of our people will be eventually restored. We may have to suffer much  
 we may separate with a without further conflict, but we will be reunited, if necessary  
 under new institutions, strong enough to secure all our rights. We shall again be one  
 of the great powers of the south, and the name of American will supersede that of  
 Southerner, and Southerner.

Men will doubtless think see this is dreaming. I do not. No one intellect  
 can grasp all the results of this great movement. Revolution becomes her children  
 the plans and expectations of the leaders on both sides, ~~will~~ fail them. Already the original  
 cause of the quarrel is dwarfed, and become secondary, events differ widely from  
 what the projectors expected, and are assuming forms and proportions that will  
 place their result beyond the power to be established by those who expected to direct and  
 profit by them. It is a great mistake to suppose, as most men do, that bloodshed will be  
 an insuperable barrier to Union reunion. History does not teach this lesson  
 and our people to enter calm between life so highly is to make them spectators to  
 the general war. It would be a frightful calamity, therefore, if defeat is  
 but the ill effect will pass away with the immediate actors. Notwithstanding  
 centuries of war, <sup>now</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>and</sup> England constitute one kingdom. Further our nation  
 is now ~~in~~ <sup>now</sup> in strife between the different parties, and provinces of  
 France. The people are now a united people, stronger than they ever were before  
 and the love of the world, formerly provincial, their national  
 is now intense.

Henry Jackson Hunt to Braxton Bragg, April 23, 1861 p.2 (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00925.02)

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You say "You may destroy but Canada conquer. My dear Bragg, I  
 know of no one who possesses the feelings here attributed. I hear much  
 of this desire of your people for "a fight". I have heard but one Southern  
 express such a desire, and it met with rebuke. Yet it would be acceptable  
 as a necessity, if forced upon us. Your expressed wishes and feelings, are those  
 of all of us here. That the troubles may be settled amicably is the earnest  
 desire of all of us.  
 I have written at great length. In our present position it is  
 a relief to me, and I feel it to be due to you. We must each, as you say,  
 act according to the dictates of our conscience. Altho - you think  
 my cause a wrong one you know that I never have felt, and I do  
 not feel now hostile to the South, her institutions, or her people, nor can  
 I have towards them the feeling of an "alien enemy". Trust and I  
 believe without staining the dark prospects before us, and although  
 blood may flow like water, that the time will ~~be~~ come, if neither of  
 us fall in the struggle, when we will meet as in not nearly as friends,  
 which I am sure is a nice conclusion to be. But my fellow citizens of  
 a great, prosperous, happy, and united country.  
 Very thanks for the newspaper clippings.

H. J. Hunt.

W. H. Bragg.

Henry Jackson Hunt to Braxton Bragg, April 23, 1861 p.3 (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00925.02)

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Transcript

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Fort Pickens April 23, 1861

My Dear Bragg:

I was much gratified by the receipt of your note of Saturday evening. I do not doubt the nature of your feelings for I judge of them by my own.

How strange it is! We have been united in our views of almost all subjects, public and private. We still [*struck*: I] have, I trust a personal regard for each other, which will continue, whatever course our sense of duty may dictate, yet in one short year after exchanging at your house assurances of friendship, here we are face to face, with arms in our hands, with every prospect of a bloody collision. How strange!

My views on the immediate occasion of our troubles you know, they are yours, they are those too of my family, all of whom have fought in the north, the battles of the south, and now find they are left to bear the imputation there of having taken sides not merely against their section, but against their country. Yet even now I do not despair of the future. I still think, improbable as it seems, that clearer view our interests and necessities will reunite us. I acknowledge that the people of the cotton states are apparently united but I have watched the movement closely, and have seen some of the machinery employed to bring about this unanimity of [*struck*: opinion] expression. I will be frank with you. A democrat of the [*illegible*] school I now believe that the party was broken up simply to bring about secession, and unfortunately the course of events in the south has enabled the leaders to drag the people with them. With all their wrongs, I think the south has not been just to themselves nor generous to their friends in the north in breaking off from them at the first partial defeat, in the loss of the executive, all the other branches of government being in their hands. It is not a case in which I born under the flag can feel justified in deserting it, however much my sympathies were with my southern friends, in the immediate question at issue. And however much it pains me to be arrayed against them, I regret deeply that the secession leaders should have pursued such a course that except by dishonoring their flag [*struck*: and humiliating] degrading their government and humiliating themselves, their friends in the north could not foresee an amicable separation. I am not much surprised at it however. Many things hitherto inex[2]plicable in the administration of the War Dept. in the last eight years are now explained. And I fear that war was considered a necessity to



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a final separation, and the consolidation of the power of the engineer and leader of the movement. And, as such, determined on long ago. – I have felt positively certain for the last six weeks that your president would force a collision (if possible under circumstances which would make the government appear to be the aggressor) before the election could take place in Virginia, and it has come to pass as I expected. Notwithstanding this, and the results which may immediately follow, I firmly believe that this unity of our people will be eventually restored. We may have to suffer much, we may separate with or without further conflict, but we will be reunited – if necessary under new institutions, strong enough to secure all our rights. We shall again be one of the great powers of the Earth and the name of American will supersede that of northerner, and southerner.

You will doubtless think all this is dreaming. I do not, no one intellect can grasp all the results of this great movement. Revolution devours her children, the plans and expectations of the leaders on both sides will fail them. Already the original cause of the quarrel is dwarfed, and become secondary. Events differ widely from what the projectors expected and are assuming forms and proportions that will place their results beyond the formulas established by those who expected to direct and profit by them. It is a great mistake to suppose, as most men do, that bloodshed will be an insuperable obstacle to [*struck*: disunion] re-union. History does not teach this lesson, and our people do not value human life so highly as to make them exceptions to the general rule.– It would be a frightful calamity, therefore I de[*illegible*]t it but the ill effects will pass away with the immediate actors. Notwithstanding centuries of war, Scotland and England constitute one kingdom. Within one century oceans of blood [*strikeout*] [*inserted*: has been] shed in strife between the different parties and provinces of France: the french are now a united people, stronger than they ever were before and the terror of the world, formerly preeminently provincial, their nationality is now intense.

[3] You say “you may destroy but cannot conquer.” My dear Bragg, I know of no one who possesses the feelings here attributed. I hear much of the desire of your people for “a fight.” I have heard but one northerner express such a desire, and it met with rebuke. Yet it would be accepted as a necessity if forced upon us. Your expressed wishes and feelings are those of all of us here: That the troubles may be settled amicably is the earnest desire of all of us.

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Many thanks for the newspaper slips.

H J Hunt.

B. Bragg