

## Lincoln's American Empire

American attempts to expand its territory and population ramped up in early 1865.<sup>1</sup> On January 7, 1865, Waldemar Raaslöff attended a dinner hosted by the French chargé d'affaires, L. De Geoffroy, with several Washington dignitaries present including US Secretary of State William Seward. The presence of both Seward and Raaslöff was no coincidence. Authorized by President Lincoln, who had shown Raaslöff an “exceptional” amount of attention at the White House New Year’s reception five days earlier, Seward suggested that he and Raaslöff sit down before dinner in a room adjacent to the dining room to discuss a proposition that Raaslöff almost immediately thereafter relayed to the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a dispatch labeled “Confidential.”<sup>2</sup>

Seward wanted to bring it to “the Danish government’s attention” that the United States “desired through purchase to attain possession of our West Indian Islands.”<sup>3</sup> The American proposition was motivated by the perceived need for a naval and coaling station in the Caribbean, and St. Thomas was at the top of empire-building Americans’ wish list.

<sup>1</sup> For stories of American interest stretching back to 1864, see “Dansk-Vestindien,” *Fædrelandet*, November 17, 1864; Halvdan Koht, “The Origin of Seward’s Plan to Purchase the Danish West Indies,” *American Historical Review* 50, no. 4 (1945): 764–766. See also Charles Callan Tansill, *The Purchase of the Danish West Indies*, reprint ed. (New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1968), 7. Writing from Copenhagen in the summer of 1864, the American minister to Denmark, Bradford Wood, considered the partial territorial dismemberment of Denmark an accomplished fact and wondered what nations would get a share in “the plunder.”

<sup>2</sup> Waldemar Raaslöff, “Kongelig Dansk Gesandtskab. Washington D. 9de Januar 1865,” in *Udenrigsministeriet. 1856–1909 Samlede sager. Vestindien 1865–1909. Box number 771* (Copenhagen: Rigsarkivet, 1865).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

In Raaslöff's account, Seward had wanted to "put forward this Overture" for "quite some time" but had until now not been able to find "a suitable moment."<sup>4</sup> The reason was an Old World conflict, now known as the Second Schleswig War, that turned out to be an important first step in Otto von Bismarck's *Grossstaatenbildung* – the unification of the German states – the consequences of which had only recently become clear.<sup>5</sup>

For Danish politicians, military personnel, and civilians alike, the conflict was devastating.<sup>6</sup> The war reduced Denmark's territorial size by one-third and its population by 40 percent and thrust the country further into international *Kleinstaat* status – so much so that people wondered if Denmark could even survive as a nation and whether it offered economic prospects worthy of future generations' pursuit.<sup>7</sup>

At the peace conference in London, Danish delegates had, "in confidence" and ultimately unsuccessfully, suggested ceding the islands of St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John to Prussia and Austria in exchange for a redrawn border, but there were still raw emotions – and potential real political ramifications – associated with a sale.<sup>8</sup> The Civil War, however, had shown the need for the United States, as part of its own *Grossstaatenbildung*, to become a "naval power," and, now that the peace agreement between "Denmark and the German great powers had taken effect," Seward trusted that negotiations could be conducted with "the greatest possible delicacy and discretion."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Rasmus Glenthøj and Morten Nordhagen Ottosen, *Union Eller Undergang: Kampen for Et Forenet Skandinavien* [Union or Ruin: The Struggle for a United Scandinavia] (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 2021). See also Tom Buk-Swienty, 1864: The Forgotten War That Shaped Modern Europe (London: Profile Books LTD, 2015), xviii.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Rasmus Glenthøj, 1864: *Sønner Af De Slagne* [1864: Descendants of the Defeated] (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 2014). Also Lucie Koch, "Riserup Ds: 2de Juli 1865," in *Christian D. Koch and Family Papers, Mss. 202, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections. Box 2* (LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1865).

<sup>7</sup> Rasmus Glenthøj, "Skandinavismen Som En Politisk Nødvendighed [Scandinavism as a Political Necessity]," in *Skandinavismen: Vision Og Virkning* [Scandinavism: Vision and Effect], ed. Ruth Hemstad, Jes Fabricius Møller, and Dag Thorkildsen (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2018), 246–248; Buk-Swienty, 1864: *The Forgotten War That Shaped Modern Europe* (London: Profile Books, 2015), xviii; Koch, "Riserup Ds: 2de Juli 1865."

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Ove Hornby, *Kolonierne i Vestindien* [The West Indian Colonies], edited by Svend Ellehøj and Kristoff Glamann (Copenhagen: Politikens Forlag, 1980), 294. See also Raaslöff, "Kongelig Dansk Gesandtskab. Washington D. 9de Januar 1865."

<sup>9</sup> "Kongelig Dansk Gesandtskab. Washington D. 9de Januar 1865."

Still, the Schleswig question complicated American imperial pursuits. As Erik Overgaard Pedersen has shown, Denmark's foreign policy after 1864 was primarily determined by attempts to regain at least part of Schleswig and minimize any further loss of territory or population. To affect such an outcome, support from France and Great Britain – who were wary of the United States extending its strategic and military position into the Caribbean – was crucial. On the other hand, a successful sale of the Danish West Indies would bolster the depleted Danish treasury while also resolving a complicated – and by 1865 no longer economically beneficial – colonial relationship in a far-away region.<sup>10</sup>

These intricate international relationships would, along with the American domestic tension over citizenship questions, determine the negotiations for the next five years. In the end, despite a treaty signed by both American and Danish diplomats, the United States, in Seward's words, chose “dollars” over “dominion” as the Senate never ratified the agreement and thereby revealed the limits of small state diplomacy as Danish politicians had little, if any, leverage.<sup>11</sup>

Initially, however, it was Danish fear related to the threshold principle that hampered the negotiations.<sup>12</sup> Raaslöff, for example, described the thought of losing the West Indian Islands as “too painful for me to entertain” and sensed that a sale “would be contrary” to King Christian IX's “feelings.”<sup>13</sup> The origins of such “painful” thoughts, and Schleswig's future importance, were found in an attempt to consolidate the Danish Kingdom more clearly along ethnic and linguistic lines.<sup>14</sup> On November 13, 1863, the Danish parliament passed the so-called November Constitution aiming to divide Schleswig from the mainly German-speaking Holstein.<sup>15</sup> This move,

<sup>10</sup> Erik Overgaard Pedersen, *The Attempted Sale of the Danish West Indies to the United States of America, 1865–1870* (Frankfurt am Main: Haag + Herchen, 1997), 14–16.

<sup>11</sup> William Seward, quoted in Edward Lillie Pierce, *A Diplomatic Episode: The Rejected Treaty for St. Thomas* (Boston, MA: 1889), 30.

<sup>12</sup> Raaslöff, “Kongelig Dansk Gesandtskab. Washington D. 9de Januar 1865.”

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*; Tansill, *The Purchase of the Danish West Indies*, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Glenthøj, “Skandinavismen Som En Politisk Nødvendighed [Scandinavism as a Political Necessity],” 228, 40–41. Concurrently, with the November Constitution there were important discussions taking place related to increased pan-Scandinavian cultural and political cooperation.

<sup>15</sup> Inge Adriansen and Jens Ole Christensen, *Forste Slesvigske Krig 1848–1851: Forhistorie, Forlob Og Folger [First Schleswig War 1848–1851: Causes, Course, and Consequences]* (Sønderborg: Sønderborg Slot, 2015), 33.

however, was seized upon by leading politicians within the German Federation, the Prussian minister-president Otto von Bismarck among them, as a breach of the London Treaty following the First Schleswig War. Within months, war between Denmark and Prussia – the former aided by a contingent of Swedes, Norwegians, and Finns, the latter allied with Austria – broke out.

These Old World developments were followed closely in America by politicians, diplomats, and Scandinavian immigrants alike.<sup>16</sup> *Emigranten*, *Fædrelandet*, and *Hemlandet* ran weekly updates, and in New York Scandinavian leaders and diplomats, led in part by Waldemar Raaslöf, organized a fundraising drive.<sup>17</sup> The war found its decisive military moments at the battles of Dybbøl and Als. After a two-month-long siege, numerically superior Prussian troops overran the Danish ramparts at Dybbøl on April 18, 1864, and by late June seized all of mainland Jutland. As noted, the war's consequences were deeply felt in Northern Europe.<sup>18</sup> Not only had Denmark lost sizable territory and population to emerging great powers in Europe, the post-war years also saw Denmark, Sweden, and Norway lose population to emigration, in part due to Seward's promotion of the Homestead Act.

While the Second Schleswig War for some months made it more difficult for Scandinavians to emigrate to North America, as passage between Denmark and northern Germany (e.g. Hamburg) for a period was not possible, the end of the war led a number of Scandinavian immigrants

<sup>16</sup> Koht, "The Origin of Seward's Plan to Purchase the Danish West Indies," 764–765.

<sup>17</sup> "The war that is now raging in Denmark has misery and suffering in its wake," read a joint resolution of Scandinavian-born New Yorkers. Scandinavian immigrants in the United States were encouraged to donate 10 cents weekly to help the war's casualties. See H. Dollner, "Bekjendtgørelse [Announcement]," *Fædrelandet*, March 23, 1864. Moreover, on June 5, 1864, Danish immigrants again met in New York and wrote a statement that was later published in *Emigranten*: "With the keenest attention we Danes here in America have followed the events in our dear Fatherland and today, the anniversary of the Danish Kingdom's Constitution, we have gathered to send you our salute and thanks . . . To the Danish warriors from countrymen in America . . . the ca[n] non's thunder from Dybbøl's redoubts reached us and with pride we received the accounts of your heroic defense." See "De Danske i New York [The Danes in New York]," *Emigranten*, August 22, 1864. Also "Sorgliga Underrættelser [Sad News]," *Hemlandet*, May 4, 1864.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Lucie Koch, "Riserup Ds: 2de Juli 1865," in *Christian D. Koch and Family Papers, Mss. 202, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections. Box 2* (LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1865).



FIGURE 10.1 The mill at Dybbøl came to symbolize the military defeat in 1864 for generations of Danes as the battlefield and surrounding territory was annexed by the emerging German *Grossstaat*. Photo by Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis via Getty Images.

west. For Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish citizens returning home with military experience in the summer of 1864, the United States became an increasingly attractive place to resume a military career.

On September 16, 1864, American consul William W. Thomas Jr. wrote from the Kingdom of Sweden and Norway that Swedish volunteers from the war of 1864 were arriving “in squads of five, ten, and twenty” and that all heartily wished to “go to America and join the forces of the Union.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> W. W. Thomas, “United States Consulate. Gothenburg September 16, 1864,” in *RG 59 Records of the Department of State. Despatches from U.S. Consuls in Gothenburg, Sweden 1800–1906*. T 276 (National Archives at College Park, 1864).

Thomas personally arranged for these soldiers' travel by raising money and working out arrangements with captains in Hamburg. While acknowledging that "as consul I can have nothing to do with enlisting soldiers," Thomas nevertheless wrote with pride that he had "forwarded over thirty [Swedish veterans] this week" whose fare had been paid by "good friend[s] in America, including the Consul himself."<sup>20</sup> Thus, Thomas knowingly leveraged Swedish veterans' post-war economic anxiety to add military manpower in opposition to the interest of Swedish authorities but claimed to provide a valuable opportunity that the veterans' themselves sought.<sup>21</sup>

Thomas' example was far from singular. While recruitment in Germany was officially illegal, more than 1,000 men in Hamburg were enlisted through Boston-based agents in the latter years of the war, and British diplomats raised numerous complaints of "fraudulent enlistment" as well.<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, as described in *Emigranten*, the German Press reported that "several" Danish officers, some of whom may have been living south of the recently redrawn Danish-German border, were about to leave for America from Hamburg and Bremen in December 1864. According to an article in *Hamburg Nachrichten* (Hamburg Intelligencer), eleven war veterans had arrived in the port city and "a large number of comrades were expected to follow."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Also Nels Hokanson, *Swedish Immigrants in Lincoln's Time* (New York: Arno Press, 1979), 27, 69. The idea of enlisting Swedes in the Union army had been on Thomas' mind throughout 1864. On February 12, 1864, Thomas specifically advocated transferring as many of "these descendants of the Vikings" as possible to bolster the war effort. W. W. Thomas, "United States Consulate. Gothenburg Feb. 12. 1864," in *RG 59 Records of the Department of State. Despatches from U.S. Consuls in Gothenburg, Sweden 1800-1906. T 276* (National Archives at College Park, 1864).

<sup>21</sup> On December 1864, news of "several former Danish officers" in Hamburg about to embark for New York to "enlist in the Union army" was published in the local newspapers with the expectation that they would be "followed by a larger number of comrades." See "Udvandring Af Danske Officerer Til Amerika [Emigration of Danish Officers to America]," *Emigranten*, January 9, 1865.

<sup>22</sup> Andrea Mehrländer, "'... Ist Daß Nicht Reiner Slavenhandel?' Die Illegale Rekrutierung Deutscher Auswanderer Für Die Unionsarmee Im Amerikanischen Bürgerkrieg [Is That Not Pure Slavetrade? The Illegal Recruitment of German Emigrants for the Union Army During the American Civil War]," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 44, no. 1 (1999). I am grateful to Dr. Michael Douma for unearthing the Mehrländer study. See also Michael J. Douma, Anders Bo Rasmussen, and Robert O. Faith, "The Impressment of Foreign-Born Soldiers in the Union Army," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 38, no. 3 (2019): 76-106.

<sup>23</sup> "Udvandring Af Danske Officerer Til Amerika [Emigration of Danish Officers to America]." Yet, toward the end of the Civil War, life in the United States was not always as promising as immigrants had hoped. Danish Consul Harald Döllner revealed in a letter

These Scandinavian war veterans were, in part, looking for opportunities to use their military experience in the American Civil War, but the Homestead Act, which had taken effect in 1863, also became an increasingly powerful pull factor. After 1864, Scandinavian immigrants, with limited opportunity for upward social mobility in the Old World, thereby played into Seward's Homestead vision of European migration adding to the nation's population, pool of recruits, and territory through the Confederacy's defeat and western expansion when Old World conditions became too desperate.<sup>24</sup>

The Scandinavians who did arrive expressed pride in the nation they had now become part. "At the present time America has a great army and perhaps more than all of Europe's armies," wrote Norwegian-born Ole Jakobsen Berg in January 1865, adding that no country could measure up to the United States. Yet how the newly adopted nation would maintain this appeal and simultaneously reconstruct itself, with the South's added population and territory, after four years of Civil War remained an open question. To Seward, part of the answer was continued expansion.

Despite being a small state diplomat, Raaslöff had cultivated a fruitful relationship with William Seward stretching back to at least 1861, when the two agreed to explore colonization of "now emancipated negroes" in the Caribbean.<sup>25</sup> The mutual trust made Seward confident that he could count on Raaslöff's "discretion" when he opened negotiations for the purchase of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John on January 7, 1865, and

written on January 10, 1865, and published in the Copenhagen newspaper *Fædrelandet* some questionable recruiting techniques in the New World that warranted a warning to people back home. "Many Danes come to New York without means and without understanding English, among them officers of the Danish army, who expect to be placed in the same position as they had at home. As many educated young men have served in the American Army for several years, it presently does not need more foreign officers. For privates there will undoubtedly be adequate opportunity for some time . . . The Danish emigrants must at their arrival here guard themselves against impostors. Usually they [the emigrants] come to the consulate after they have fallen into financial difficulty or have fallen into the hands of impostors who have sold them as soldiers, and at a time when the Consul can't help them." See *Fædrelandet*, "Kgl. Dansk Consulat i New York [Royal Danish Consulate in New York]," *Fædrelandet*, February 1 1865.

<sup>24</sup> Ole Jakobsen Berg, "Clinton Den 8de Janny 1865," in *America Letters and Articles. 1860-1890. P435. Box 2* (Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1865).

<sup>25</sup> Raaslöff, "Kongl. Dansk Gesandtskab. Washington Den 15de December 1861 [Royal Danish Legation. Washington the 15th of December, 1861]."

Raaslöff on the other hand reported that Seward was “entirely serious” and acted on behalf of the president.<sup>26</sup> According to Raaslöff’s report of the meeting, Seward stated that “the United States naturally would not want to see” the islands fall into the hands of “another power” and promised the “most loyal and most friendly” negotiating position toward Denmark.<sup>27</sup> If Seward’s proposal did indeed give “occasion for negotiations,” the American secretary of state promised that they would be conducted in the “most ‘generous,’ ‘chivalrous’ and ‘delicate’ manner.”<sup>28</sup>

The meeting sparked high-level negotiations between Seward’s Department of State and the Danish government often represented by Raaslöff. Despite the Danish king’s hesitancy, which initially put negotiations on hold, Raaslöff was notified by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs on February 24, 1865, that the country’s “financial and political position” necessitated a thorough consideration of the American proposal and that “on an occasion such as this, personal feelings should not be the sole factor.”<sup>29</sup>

Yet the negotiations were derailed – as were so many other lives and policy decisions – on April 14, 1865, by John Wilkes Booth’s fateful shot in Ford’s Theater and Lewis Powell’s knife-wielding attack on Seward.<sup>30</sup> The following day, Raaslöff received a melancholic message from Acting Secretary of State William Hunter, who had the “great misfortune” to inform him that:

The President of the United States was shot with a pistol last night while attending a theatre in this City, and expired this morning from the effects of the wound at about the same time an attempt was made to assassinate the Secretary of State [,] which though it fortunately failed, left him severely, but it is hoped not dangerously wounded, with a Knife or Dagger. Mr. F. W. Seward was also struck on the head with a heavy weapon and is in a critical condition from the effect of the blows. Pursuant to the provision of the Constitution of the United States Andrew Johnson, the Vice President, has formally assumed the functions of President.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> “Kongelig Dansk Gesandtskab. Washington D. 9de Januar 1865.” <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Tansill, *The Purchase of the Danish West Indies*, 12.

<sup>30</sup> For the assassination plans, see Martha Hodes, *Mourning Lincoln* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 1–5. Raaslöff’s assessment of the attacks and their consequences for Danish-American diplomacy can be found in Waldemar Raaslöff, “Confidentielt. No. 6. Washington D: 22 April 1865” (Copenhagen: Rigsarkivet, 1865).

<sup>31</sup> William Hunter, “Department of State, Washington 15 April, 1865,” in *Washington D.C., diplomatisk repræsentation. 1854–1909 Korrespondancesager (aflev. 1918). Politisk Korrespondance 1864–1868* (Copenhagen: Rigsarkivet, 1865).



Raaslöff, who responded to Hunter's news with "deep and sincere grief," on April 22, 1865, reported home to the Danish government that a planned meeting with the secretary of state would now be postponed indefinitely.<sup>32</sup>

It was soon clear that the assassination of President Lincoln, who had recently laid out a vision of reconstruction with "malice towards none" and a personal preference for Black men's suffrage, had far-reaching consequences inside and outside American borders.<sup>33</sup> Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, shared the late president's homestead advocacy and vision of expansion into the Caribbean through purchase of "the Virgin Islands," but in his opposition to freedpeople's landownership and equality he helped legitimize ideas of Black inferiority and helped exacerbate splits in the Republican Party.<sup>34</sup> Such nationwide debates over expansion and equality also rippled through Scandinavian-American communities.

<sup>32</sup> Waldemar Raaslöff, "Washington D: 22 April 1865," in *Udenrigsministeriet. 1856–1909 Samlede sager. Vestindien 1865–1909. Box number 771* (Copenhagen: Rigsarkivet, 1865). In the meantime, Raaslöff requested detailed instructions about how to proceed with the negotiations "in the always conceivable event that Mr. Seward dies." See also William Hunter, "Department of State, Washington 15 April, 1865," in *Washington D. C., diplomatisk repræsentation. 1854–1909 Korrespondancesager (aflev. 1918). Politisk Korrespondance 1864–1868* (Copenhagen: Rigsarkivet, 1865).

<sup>33</sup> Hodes, *Mourning Lincoln*, 38.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Johnson, "Third Annual Message" (online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project; [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29508](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29508), 1867); Hodes, *Mourning Lincoln*; Paul Frymer, *Building an American Empire: The Era of Territorial and Political Expansion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 21–22.