

The Lion and the Eagle: Great Britain and the American Civil War

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“If England’s ruling Ministers shall cower before the bravado of the United States, their places will soon be replaced by other,” declared the *Charleston Mercury* in December, 1861.¹¹⁴ So began the Confederate State’s efforts to appeal to Great Britain. The war, which began earlier that year, threatened to disrupt both the long-treasured peace and unity of the United States as well as the economic prosperity of overseas investors. Lincoln’s blockade of southern ports threatened Great Britain’s dependency on southern cotton. Great Britain stood to lose more by intervening in the conflict on the side of the Confederacy than remaining neutral.

When Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the United States in 1860, the country was at a crossroad. Decades of bitter dispute between pro and anti-slavery factions left many Americans politically, culturally, and even spiritually divided. Significant events such as the publishing of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and John Brown’s praised and often denied martyrdom after the Raid on Harper’s Ferry turned the attention of the international community towards the slavery issue in the American South. Lincoln’s election to the presidency pushed the plantation states to the brink, and in December 1860, South Carolina became the first state to secede from the Union. Once South Carolina had left the Union, other states followed suit. The Confederacy had been declared by its government to be separate from the remaining United States and the task of gaining international recognition now lay before Confederate President Jefferson Davis.

An article published in *The Christian Recorder* stated that Lancashire alone contained one third of Great Britain’s textile factories.¹¹⁵ As the war continued, Great Britain faced an economic crisis as a cotton shortage soon set in. *The Charleston Mercury* reported in October, 1861, that the people of South Carolina as well as a majority of the Southern population anguished at the sluggish reaction of Great Britain towards the Union blockade which threatened to disrupt Great Britain’s economic investments.¹¹⁶ Confederate victories early in the war boosted Southern morale as the possibility of foreign intervention on behalf of the Confederacy moved closer to reality. It did not come as quickly as Southerners had hoped for, however.

Up until the outbreak of the Civil War, relations between the United States and Great Britain had steadily been improving. A tour made by the Prince of Wales in the summer of 1860 to the eastern United States ended with a formal ball held in his honor at the White House. Both British and American citizens glowed in the face of the others cordiality, and even His Royal Highness expressed satisfaction with the reception he received. With the sudden outbreak of secession and the coming conflict between North and South it was uncertain whether or not this friendship would survive. With the victory at Bull Run still fresh in the minds of many Southern troops, the Confederate congress in Richmond now turned to England and France for support and recognition of their sovereignty.

As 1861 drew to a close and another bloody year loomed, more Confederate victories against Lincoln’s armies had been achieved in the east. After turning back General McClellan’s advance on the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia, in 1862, the Peninsula Campaign, as it

¹¹⁴ “Great Britain and the Civil War,” *The Charleston Mercury*, December 21, 1861.

¹¹⁵ “The Factory Statistics of Great Britain,” *The Christian Recorder*, May 10, 1862.

¹¹⁶ “Great Britain and the Confederate States,” *The Charleston Mercury*, October, 1861.

would come to be known, turned into a disastrous defeat for the Union. Victories against the Confederacy in the West, though joyfully celebrated back home, had lost significance as a result of such a devastating defeat for McClellan's army in Virginia. Parliament declared the current status of the conflict a stalemate, though Confederate President Jefferson Davis felt it was only a matter of time before Great Britain would intercede on his behalf.

Lincoln's blockade of southern ports hindered the South's ability to maintain a system of trade with Great Britain, as "King Cotton" brought both parties economic prosperity. In the years prior to South Carolina seceding from the Union, American political writers stressed the importance of the cotton production in the South. In his book, *Great Britain and the American Civil War: Volume II*, Ephraim Douglas Adams states, "cotton was one of the great wealth-producing industries of America and as the one product which would compel European intervention in American policies."¹¹⁷ The question was asked passively at the time, what would happen if cotton were not manufactured for three years? The answer was that Great Britain would literally destroy itself and the rest of the civilized world in order to save the South. There was not a doubt in either British or Americans minds that cotton was king.

"The cards are in our hands," reported the *Charleston Mercury* on June 4, 1861, "and we intend to play them out to the bankruptcy of every cotton factory in Great Britain and France, or the acknowledgement of our independence."¹¹⁸ Great Britain's cotton industry had no rivals up to 1861. Liverpool and Lancashire were the top manifesting locations for textiles. The previous year America enjoyed a bountiful cotton harvest—the largest recorded yet at nearly 4 million bales. Some 3.5 million bales of cotton had been exported abroad and Liverpool received a large portion of it.¹¹⁹ When the war came there was no shortage of cotton in the American South. A collection of what was left was even shipped to the North. So much cotton had been produced and exported abroad that in the following two years there was a lull in the demand for cotton by manufacturers in Great Britain because cotton mills had managed to catch up following earlier depressions in the late 1850s.

The cotton trade was in jeopardy due the mass import of cotton from the American South and not enough exports from Great Britain. There were some mills that had to cut their labor almost in half. The effects of the beginning months of the war were felt in Great Britain's cotton districts, as prices rose to over a shilling per pound of cotton in October, 1861.¹²⁰ Widespread rumors swirled of certain British intervention in the conflict in order to save the cotton trade. The opinion that the war in America would be short collapsed after the Battle of Bull Run in Virginia proved the South's resolve to defend their rights. In the beginning of December, 1861, there was nearly a complete cessation of cotton transports to Great Britain. Up until the end of May, 1862, only 11,500 bales of cotton had been received in Great Britain. This was less than one percent of shipments made in the same period.¹²¹ Even more distressing for British manufacturers was southern planters in the coastal regions of the Confederacy who were moving their slaves further inland and away from Union blockade vessels. At first, the opinion of intervention in the American conflict was seldom given. Even businessmen from the Lancashire cotton district hesitated to insist upon entering into a war with the United States in order to save their industry. Officials in

¹¹⁷ Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War: Vol. II*, 2.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7. In 1850, cotton cost \$4.35 a pound.

¹²⁰ Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War*, 8.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

Parliament began questioning whether or not it would be of any use to attack the Union blockade of southern ports.

South Carolina was one of the largest cotton-producing states in the Union prior to the outbreak of the Civil War. South Carolina had a complicated history with Great Britain during the American Revolution. When Charleston surrendered to British commander Sir Henry Clinton in May 1780, the people of the city were content to recognize the sovereignty of Great Britain. The state's agricultural wealth did not go unnoticed during the time of the British occupation. After South Carolina seceded from the Union, Great Britain feared for the loss of one of its chief suppliers of raw cotton. This was made even more difficult as a result of the blockade for which many southerners resented Britain. The Confederacy believed both Great Britain, as well as France, would do well to recognize its independence.

The next step would then be to break the blockade. Again, the idea of a war with the United States had put Great Britain in a desperate situation. *The Charleston Mercury* printed an article detailing the response of the Queen of England's proclamation concerning the conflict in America and the blockade of southern ports. In her proclamation, Queen Victoria urged the people to avoid coming between certain policies being implemented by the Union against the Confederacy.¹²² This included action against the blockade. In response, the Confederacy declared that cotton and tobacco from the South would not be exported any other way out of the Confederacy but through their ports and that Great Britain was now faced with the decision of whether or not to support the Confederacy. If Great Britain decided to remain neutral in the conflict, the Confederacy believed it—who is “it” would only hurt them—who is them? severely for the South “was a power to be recognized.”¹²³ The Confederate congress in Richmond had even gone so far as to ensure the protection of British citizens who would take up arms in support of the Confederacy. They would be considered belligerents in the service of the Confederate Army and if captured they were to be treated as prisoners of war. If the Union failed to recognize them as such then the repercussions would be severe.¹²⁴

One of Lincoln's cabinet members, William H. Seward, was now faced with the daunting task of ensuring peace between Great Britain and the United States. As Lincoln's Secretary of State and a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, Seward traveled frequently throughout the country as well as overseas. He faced the mission of keeping Great Britain from interceding on behalf of the Confederacy and thus destroying the Union all together. Seward believed the president would not be able to afford him much help. Norman B. Ferris's *Desperate Diplomacy* argues that Lincoln, prior to his inauguration, had declared to foreign diplomats: “I do not know anything about diplomacy. I will be very apt to make blunders.”¹²⁵

Seward was well aware that the conflict between the Union and the Confederacy would attract the attention of Great Britain politically as well as economically. He was convinced that Parliament would move to strike a blow at the democratic ideals established by the American and French Revolutions.¹²⁶ In May 1861, Sir John Ramsden announced to the British House of Commons that it was now witnessing the destruction of the great republican system, which the United States had prided itself on and had at one time attempted to convince England to rewrite its

¹²² “The Queen's Proclamation and the Blockade,” *The Charleston Mercury*, June 4, 1861.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Norman B. Ferris, *Desperate Diplomacy: William H. Seward's Foreign Policy, 1861*, 1.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

own constitution.¹²⁷ Great Britain continued to hint at interference with Lincoln's blockade, but Seward was relentless. Diplomats warned of Seward's aggressiveness. Great Britain was faced with the decision of joining together with France in recognizing the Confederacy following the final export of Southern cotton in September, 1861. With their combined forces, Seward would have to stand down for he would not be able "to shout them both down."¹²⁸ Britain's Prime Minister, Lord Lyons, refused to accept this as an ultimatum; he believed that a joining of the two European powers against the United States would lead to a future conflict between themselves. Seward's relentlessness was coupled with Lyons's caution and for a brief period tensions eased.

Yet, tensions remained high between the Lincoln's administration and the factions of Parliament in favor of intervening in the American conflict. Great Britain had yet to step into the ring. It appeared as though Lincoln's administration would be able to hold off further interference with Great Britain until in December, 1861, when a diplomatic crisis tested the political endurance of both Great Britain and the United States--the Trent Affair. The captain of the USS San Jacinto intercepted a British mail ship carrying two passengers from the Confederate government on a diplomatic mission to Great Britain. Both passengers were arrested. The capture of Mason and Slidell, received bitter protest from Parliament, which viewed the actions of the Union Navy as a breach of Great Britain's neutrality.

Captain Wilkes, commander of the USS Jacinto that intercepted Mason and Slidell, became a hero to many Northerners for his actions. The British Parliament raged when news reached London. A message reached Lincoln's cabinet demanding the release of Mason and Slidell as well as an official apology for abusive actions taken on the seas against Great Britain.¹²⁹ This appeared to be the final straw for Great Britain and preparations for war began. Parliament implemented a ban on exports of war materials to the United States and the deployment of troops to Canada. The Union blockade became a possible target for a naval attack by Great Britain as well as a blockade of Northern ports. France had even announced that it would back Great Britain's endeavor. Any hope the Confederacy had at aid was now at a minimum.

The Trent Affair would be resolved after Britain's Prime Minister to the United States, Lord Lyons, met with Seward. Their discussion concerned the welfare of Mason and Slidell and a way to avoid armed confrontation between the two countries. Lyons later wrote to the British Foreign Minister, "I am so concerned that unless we give our friends here a good lesson this time, we shall have the same trouble with them again very soon. Surrender or war will have a very good effect on them."¹³⁰ Lincoln and his administration took into careful consideration the situation they now found themselves in with Great Britain. An agreement was reached that it would be sensible to fight one war at a time. The issue with the Confederate diplomats would be pressed no further and on December 27, 1861, Seward sent a message to British officials denouncing the actions of Captain Wilkes and ensuring them that Mason and Slidell would be released, avoiding an armed confrontation. Following their release from prison, Mason and Slidell attempted again to reach out the Great Britain for support and recognition of the Confederacy. This second and final attempt failed. In January, 1862, *The Christian Recorder*, an African American newspaper out of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, reported on the discussion held between Seward and Lyons regarding *The Trent Affair*. In an article published on January 4, 1862, stated that Seward's intention on

¹²⁷ Ferris, *Desperate Diplomacy*, 6.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹²⁹ Ferris, 6.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

releasing Mason and Slidell was for the best interest of the Union.¹³¹ Satisfied by the agreement made between Seward and Lyons, *The Christian Recorder* reported that the question was rightly settled between a peaceful solution and war between Great Britain.¹³²

Another key figure during this period was Lord Palmerston. Palmerston served twice as British Prime Minister in the mid-nineteenth century. In the years before the outbreak of war between the Union and Confederacy, Palmerston was in agreement with Queen Victoria that relations between Great Britain and the United States were improving. In fact, it was Palmerston who decided it would be a great opportunity for improving relations if the Prince of Wales took a diplomatic trip to the United States. He was, however, of the old aristocratic sect and secretly held animosity towards the United States and desired destruction. Palmerston, supported the South during this time, but he was careful not to show as much favor as his colleagues. Members of Parliament agreed that the war in America was being fought over the institution of slavery and that their economic dependence on Southern cotton would be caught in the middle.¹³³

Palmerston actively supported the abolition of the international slave trade. He even met with Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, during her visit to Great Britain. Though he delighted in the news of intercepted and captured slave vessels, Palmerston was not pleased to hear news of the situation of slaves on the cotton plantations of the Confederacy being freed by the armies of the Union. Palmerston was not the least impressed by these men who were under the command of “cigar-smoking Generals in ill-fitting uniforms who came to symbolize radical democracy such as was experienced during the French Revolution.”¹³⁴ For the time being, however, Britain would remain neutral in the conflict. A war with the United States appeared not to be in the best interest of the economy of Great Britain. Palmerston knew of threats made by Seward and other American politicians towards foreign nations who aided and supported the Confederacy. Palmerston went so far as to send additional troops to Canada in the chance that peace between the Union and the Confederacy was made and their attention turned towards invading the British-held territory.¹³⁵

Palmerston had taken advantage of certain events such as *The Trent Affair* to gain more favor for his cause of convincing Parliament to wage war against the United States. He was known for his bitterness towards Irish immigrants going to America. The notion that the Irish controlled many major Northern newspapers was falsely spread. Lincoln's decision to release Mason and Slidell, Palmerston believed, was because of the troops he had sent to Canada.¹³⁶ But following the Confederate defeat at Antietam in September, 1862, and the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation, Palmerston turned away from any notion of war against the United States. All further attempts to intervene in the conflict were rejected because the military situation in America did not appear to require any.

A final obstacle Palmerston faced during his time as Prime Minister during the American Civil War was the issue of the construction of a Confederate raiding vessel in Birkenhead, England. Palmerston ordered the vessel's immediate detainment, as it was a violation of Britain's neutrality. Before the order reached Birkenhead, however, *The Alabama*, as it was named, had captured or destroyed several Union ships as did other raiders that were constructed in Great Britain.

¹³¹ “*The Trent Affair Settled – Mason and Slidell to be Released*,” *The Christian Recorder*, January 4, 1862

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Jasper Ridley, *Lord Palmerston*, 549.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 550.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 553.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 556.

Palmerston was ordered to pay reparations following the end of the war for the damages *The Alabama* had caused. He refused to do so. Following his death, the new British Prime Minister, Lord Gladstone acknowledged the claims made by the United States and agreed to pay. Great Britain was made to pay a total of \$15.5 million in damages.¹³⁷

Great Britain remained divided about events in America. On one hand it stood to lose a fortune economically with the blockade of Southern ports, but on the other hand there remained the long standing peace between two great nations that could have destroyed one another if it came to war. Seward, Palmerston, Lyons and Lincoln each held the cards in their hands at one point during the war and were given the important task of playing them correctly. Several times the Union was faced with the possibility of war with Great Britain. The political cunning of these men prevented this. Great Britain remained neutral during the American Civil War and did not intervene on the side of the Confederacy.

¹³⁷ Ridley, *Lord Palmerston*, 559.