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Research Methods in History

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Three's Company, Too

Although most people only remember two, there were three main players in the American Civil War: the North, the South, and the specter of Great Britain. For the duration of the war, Great Britain, the world's strongest naval power, was officially neutral, but everyone at that time knew that, had she chosen to enter the fray, she (and the intimidating European alliance that would have followed in her wake) would have held keys to victory.¹

As a result, both the Union's and the Confederacy's war strategies pivoted around obtaining Britain's diplomatic favor. Although many factors affected Britain's willingness to intervene and the Northern ability to win, this paper will focus on the effects of the Northern blockade. The Union had constructed a rickety blockade that she hoped to keep intact. Ineffective though it was, the Confederacy longed for its demise. As a result, both powers petitioned the British. The South pled for two tightly interwoven demands: diplomatic recognition and a blockade broken by British forces. The Union had a simpler but more rigorous request: that the British keep out of the conflict altogether. After all, the Union leaders clearly understood that any outside intervention could signal their doom.²

Great Britain understood that as well. They realized that lending the Confederacy even limited aid could tip the balance in Southern favor, splitting the Union in two. Many

¹ Norman A. Graebner, "Northern Diplomacy and European Neutrality," *Why the North Won the Civil War*, edited by David Donald (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 49.

² Brian Jenkins, *Britain and the War for the Union* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1974), 1:39.

Britons longed to watch the great democratic experiment bite the dust.³ In addition to demonstrating the supremacy of the system of constitutional monarchy and vindicating the British defeat in the Revolutionary War, such a collapse would free up the remainder of the North American continent to be claimed by European (preferably British) powers.

At the same time, however, the British realized that remaining unentangled in the conflict could also bear fruit. Having just extracted themselves from the Crimean War, they were not eager to squander their thriving economy and vast resources on another conflict, however small it might be. They realized that there were plenty of economic advantages available to them as neutrals.⁴ Besides, although the British needed Southern cotton to meet their manufacturing needs, they realized that the North could offer them something that would be equally valuable in the long run: a new naval precedent.⁵

When the Crimean War of the 1850s had concluded, the British had lost more than their will to fight; they had also lost their naval edge. The Declaration of Paris, which had officially closed the conflict, had also pick-pocketed Great Britain's greatest naval asset: the blockade. Although the Declaration didn't outlaw blockading altogether, it made the requirements for a legal blockade so rigorous that it might as well have.⁶ This rancid memory made the British think twice before unraveling the frayed Northern

³ Graebner, 50.

⁴ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 383.

⁵ Baxter, James P., III, "The British Government and Neutral Rights, 1861-1865," *The American Historical Review* 34.1 (Oct 1928): 13, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=00028762%28192810%2934%3A1%3C9%3ATBGANR%3E2.0.CO%3B2-F> (accessed Nov 22, 2006).

⁶ Ephraim Douglass Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1958), 1:140.

blockade. After all, if the inadequate Northern blockade was honored, subsequent British blockades could escape the Declaration's exacting standards as well.⁷

As a result, the British decision of whether or not to intervene during the Civil War's first two years hinged not on the battlefield but on the seas. The South spent those years trying to convince Britain that the Northern blockade was illegal. The North spent them trying to make her blockade legal by shoring it up. In the meantime, the North made plain her opinion that the acts of breaking the blockade and recognizing the Confederacy were inextricably intertwined and that either one would be interpreted as a tacit declaration of war.⁸

Most countries that gain advantages in wars achieve them through military and naval prowess; the Union, by contrast, gained hers through her shortcomings. Although elementary school textbooks might paint the Union victorious after the surrender at Appotomax, the North scored an ironic and equally important victory when her good-for-nothing 1861 to 1862 blockade played a large part in convincing the British to do what Northerners wanted them to do the most: to keep out.

How Others Have Seen This Same Blockade

I am not the first author to chronicle the impact of the North's blockade during the Civil War. In reading the short historiographical section of the multi-authored work, *Why the South Lost the War*, one is almost overawed by the abundance of historians who have

⁷ Raimondo Luraghi, *A History of the Confederate Navy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 70-71. McPherson, 385.

Peter J. Parish, *The American Civil War*, (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1975), 407-408.

Frank J. Merli, *Great Britain and the Confederate Navy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), 22-23.

⁸ "Mr. Seward to Mr. Adams," *Correspondence Relative to the Case of Messrs. Mason and Slidell*, 30 Nov 1861, Washington, I. Adams, 1: 270-271.

focused on the blockade.⁹ That book's authors depict blockade historiography as having come in three phases.

The first wave of blockade historians, which included Merton Coulter, Bern Anderson, Charles P. Roland, and James R. Soley, traced the blockade's evolution from inadequate to airtight, arguing that the blockade's efficacy was a major factor in the South's defeat. The second wave of historians, which included Frank L. Owsley, Marcus W. Price, and Richard E. Wood, balked at their predecessors' interpretations, insisting that the blockade was never effective and was ultimately a failure. After them, a third wave followed with a different focus: the Confederacy's response to the blockade. These historians, which included Richard Lester and Richard Goff, claimed that the Confederacy did not make responding to the blockade a top priority and implied that, if she had, she could have won the war.

For my studies, I decided to zero in on a cross-section of these three approaches, focusing on the notably inefficient first two years of the blockade. In addition, I decided to investigate how the blockade's incompetence shaped Northern and Southern interactions with Great Britain. I found many helpful interpretations of this situation tucked away in chapters devoted to the blockade in comprehensive Civil War histories. Especially helpful were James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom*, editor David McDonald's *Why the North Won the War*, Peter J. Parish's *The American Civil War*, and the multi-authored work, *Why the South Lost the War*. Volumes of this sort interpreted the blockade (once it became effective) as one of many factors contributing to the Northern victory.

⁹ Richard E. Beringer, Herman Hattaway, Archer Jones, and William N. Still, Jr, *Why the South Lost the Civil War*, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1986).

When I needed more detail on interactions with the British, I turned to classics such as Brian Jenkins's *Britain and the War for the Union*, Ephraim Adams's *Great Britain and the American Civil War*, Howard Jones's *The Union, the Confederacy, and the Atlantic Rim*, James Callahan's *Diplomatic History of the Southern Confederacy*, and D.P. Crook's *The North, the South, and the Powers*. These histories provided blow-by-blow accounts of international diplomacy from which I was able to glean a more complete understanding of gradual trends.

In the end, I stirred together conclusions from all of these sources to enhance my understanding of a topic of which I had seen nothing in print: how the sheer inefficacy of the Northern blockade from 1861 to 1862 played a large role in keeping the British from intervening on the Confederacy's behalf. This happenstance was incredibly ironic because, had the early Northern efforts created a blockade effective enough to meet the standards of the Declaration of Paris, the blockade probably couldn't have achieved the comparable diplomatic results.

Blockade My Foot

One would expect that a blockade worthy of receiving so much diplomatic attention must have been absolutely crippling to the British economy; ironically, its real state couldn't have been farther from the truth. On average during the war, five out of six vessels that attempted to run the blockade made it through (in 1861, nine out of ten made it out with no problem). These blockade runners made sure that Southern ports stayed busy, hauling out half a million bales of cotton in exchange for two million shoes, half a

million rifles, a thousand tons of gunpowder, and a mind-boggling amount of other war supplies.¹⁰

Although some enthusiasts like Commander S.F. Dupont thrilled at the thought of the blockade's establishment, hoping it would "squeeze the South more than anything," few were surprised by the blockade's inefficacy.¹¹ From the moment Lincoln announced the blockade, the British raised their eyebrows, doubtful that blockading such an enormous area was truly practical for the Union navy.¹² Since the British had blockaded the Eastern coast during the American Revolution, they knew exactly how challenging such a chore could be. The area to be enclosed was enormous: 35,549 miles of coastline laced with numerous tiny inlets and parallel streams. The British had been unable to effectively accomplish the feat with their 800 vessels; it was no wonder they laughed when the North approached the chore with only forty.¹³ Jefferson Davis heckled the scanty Union effort, remarking that the Union's navy was "insufficient to blockade effectively the coast of a single State," much less the entire southern shore.¹⁴

Launching a weak blockade that then was gradually fortified was not unheard of; in fact, that was the strategy employed traditionally by the British, one that had brought them great success and created great resentment in those whom it victimized. After the British blockade of the Crimean War, Britain's enemies agitated strongly for a treaty that would prohibit such "paper blockades." They defined a paper blockade as an instance in

¹⁰ McPherson, 388.

¹¹ S.F. Dupont, *Civil War Letters: Volume 1: The Mission*, edited by John Hayes (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 67, 76. Although there is some dispute about a blockade of the entire coastline or only several ports of entry was essential to obtain the blockaders' objectives, there is little disagreement over the fact that the Northern blockade was very weak during the war's first two years.

¹² Adams, 246.

¹³ "The Departments: The Report of the Secretary of the Navy," *The New York Times* 8 Dec 1864, Proquest, via McKee Library, <http://library.southern.edu> (accessed September 28, 2006).

¹⁴ Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (New York: Sagamore Press, 1958), 2:373.

which a country claimed that its ships formed an impermeable barrier that halted all international commerce but in actuality accomplished little, allowing foreign ships to slip through freely and continue trade. In 1856, the British had reluctantly accepted the new stipulations for an effective blockade when they signed the Declaration of Paris along with every other “civilized nation” except for the United States.¹⁵ In the Declaration, the British agreed that from there on out, “blockades, in order to be binding, must be effective . . . maintained by a force sufficient really to prevent access to the coast of the enemy.”¹⁶

Some sections of the Declaration were feared by Southerners who worried that they might damage Confederate commerce.¹⁷ The portion about paper blockades, however, they embraced entirely, making it the fulcrum of their foreign policy. They were thrilled because that proclamation, originally intended by the European nations to be wielded against Britain, could now be used against the North. Although Lincoln had vowed that a “competent force [would] be posted so as to prevent entrance and exit of

¹⁵ The United States was engaged in the Declaration’s negotiations and in fact proposed her own amendment, but when it took too long for her amendment to be tacked on, she lost interest in the document.

¹⁶ Adams, 1: 140.

¹⁷ Jenkins, 41-42. Adams, 150, 201. One of the reasons that the United States had refused to sign the Declaration of Paris was because they clung to their right as a neutral to engage in privateering, i.e. armed robbery of belligerent ships. In prior conflicts, this privilege had been invaluable since the United States had been the weaker naval power. Privateering was one of the only ways that underdogs could gain an advantage.

When the Civil War began, however, the tables turned. Suddenly the South was the weaker power and the one using privateering as a form of exploitation. As a result, the Union was filled with remorse for not having signed the Declaration of Paris. They hoped that if they signed the document to abolish privateering, it would cause the other European powers to look down on the Confederacy as more primitive because she still privateered. The Union hoped that the European powers would not bestow recognition on a primitive country.

More than that, the North hoped that, after the Union signed the Declaration, the European nations would intervene with their navies to *prevent* the South from privateering and defying the Declaration. This Union wish, however, never came true. The foreign powers saw through her scheme, and she was never permitted to sign the Declaration.

vessels from the ports,” it was common knowledge during the first two years of the war that the rickety blockade was not in full working order.¹⁸

In fact, according to Jefferson Davis (and numerous other irate Southerners), the Union’s “announcement of a mere paper blockade” suspiciously resembled the inadequate British blockades of old.¹⁹ The Confederate states were certain that they were not the only ones who saw the parallel, and they very verbally cherished the hope that Britain, dead-set on enforcing the Declaration, would declare the Northern blockade illegal, puncture it with their ships, and send it to the bottom of the sea.²⁰

Plus, the South found another source of hope in the doubletalk used by the North. The North claimed that it could declare the Confederacy a rebellion while blockading her coast at the same time. This assertion, however, was a diplomatic paradox.²¹ After all, international law declared that nations never blockaded *their own* territory, only that of an independent foe. Claiming to blockade the Confederacy was as good as declaring her independent. If the Confederacy was only rebelling, then the North should have instead declared Southern ports *closed*.

William Seward, Lincoln’s Secretary of War, was painfully aware of this contradiction, but he was even more aware that Great Britain would disregard a simple declaration that the Southern ports were closed, especially if the Southern states were

¹⁸ Abraham Lincoln, “Proclamation Declaring a Blockade of the South’s Ports,” *Essential Documents in American History: 1492-present*, Academic Search Premier, via McKee Library <http://library.southern.edu> (accessed August 31, 2006).

¹⁹ Davis, Jefferson, “War Message,” *The Annals of America: 1858-1865, The Crisis of the Union* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc, 1968), 9: 268.

²⁰ _____, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, 2: 373-374.
²⁰ Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary From Dixie*, edited by Ben Ames Williams, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 92. McPherson, 383. Ironically, both the North and the South cherished hopes of foreign intervention on behalf of preserving the honor of different aspects of the Declaration. No such interference, however, ever came through.

²¹ *Ibid*, 388.

able to keep on trading as if nothing was wrong. In Seward's eyes, using inconsistent terminology that was controversial was a wiser move than being technically correct and completely ignored.²² Seward's verbal paradox irked the Confederate leaders, but there wasn't much they could do about it beyond crossing their fingers that such diplomatic impertinence would trigger European intervention. All of this drama snowballed around an obsession with the fact that the Union blockade was fundamentally ineffective.

Belliger-whats?

The British leaders were not pleased with the situation into which they had been thrust. From the beginning, a blockade had been their worst nightmare. "Above all things, endeavor to prevent a blockade of the Southern coast," Lord John Russell, the British Foreign Secretary, had implored the prime minister in February of 1861. "It would produce misery, discord and enmity incalculable."²³ Beyond that, the issue was a hassle because it forced Great Britain to take sides. If she declared that the South was in rebellion, then she was giving her blessing to the Northern effort. If she declared the Northern blockade illegitimate, then she was bestowing her favor upon the South. Great Britain understood that, if she explicitly endorsed any aspect of either side's agenda, neutrality would become nearly impossible.²⁴ Although at other points in history she might have welcomed such an opportunity, at this moment that prospect was particularly displeasing. Because Great Britain had just wrapped up one nasty conflict, the Crimean War, she was not chomping at the bit to entering another.

²² Parish, 407. Merli, 40. Later Seward discovered that his instinctual belief that the British would refuse to honor such a declaration had been on target. When Seward mentioned in passing to Lord Lyons, the British Ambassador to Washington, that the North was pondering declaring Southern ports closed, Lyons responded immediately that England would consider such a declaration "null and void."

²³ *Europe Looks at the Civil War*, edited by Belle Becker Sideman and Lillian Friedman (New York: The Orion Press, 1960), 19.

²⁴ "Mr. Seward to Mr. Adams," 1.

Even so, Great Britain had to come to terms with the Northern blockade somehow. For the British, common sense insisted that the Confederate upheaval, with its population approaching nine million, its 750,000 miles of terrain, its well-orchestrated army, and its coherent constitution was far too advanced to be considered a rebellion.²⁵ As Lord Russell pointed out, one doesn't recruit 400,000 soldiers and cough up \$400,000,000 to extinguish a riot.²⁶

A desire to safeguard Great Britain's honor also played a part. As the war rolled on, numerous Confederate complaints regarding Northern conduct on the seas insisted that through innumerable violations of the Declaration of Paris, the Union was "claim[ing] a general jurisdiction over the high seas" that truly belonged to England.²⁷ Whether or not the North was really making this claim, such Southern accusations ruffled many a British feather. More importantly, the British understood that eventually they would have to obtain more Southern cotton for their manufacturing sector, and they knew that cotton could only be obtained by going through the blockade.²⁸

To deal with these issues, Southern diplomat William Yancey set sail for England. Although his pro-slavery and slave trade tendencies handicapped his diplomatic influence in anti-slavery Britain, he had one strong advantage over the Union representative: Yancey arrived first. And he took advantage of his early arrival to press for diplomatic recognition and to protest fervently the blockade's illegitimacy. Whether it was because of Yancey's eloquence, because of deep-seated British convictions, or because of a non-

²⁵ McPherson, 388.

²⁶ John Evans, *Atlantic Impact* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1952), 138.

²⁷ "The Civil War in America," *Illustrated London News* 39, no 1121 (14 Dec. 1861): 593, <http://beck.library.emory.edu> (accessed October 27, 2006).

Frank Lawrence Owsley, *King Cotton Diplomacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 221-2.

²⁸ "Mr. Seward to Mr. Adams," 1.

confrontational desire to come to some conclusion without having to engage in Northern negotiations, the British hastily announced their position on the day before the Northern diplomat arrived.²⁹ Their two-step verdict of neutrality partially pleased and partially peeved both sides.

First of all, although the British did not fully recognize the Confederacy or offer her aid, England did award the South makeshift belligerent status, which everyone assumed was an indisputable segway to formal diplomatic recognition.³⁰ After all, “intercourse of any kind with the so-called Commissioners [would be] liable to be construed as a recognition of the authority which appointed them.”³¹ Although the Union found this belligerent recognition annoying, it did not come as a huge surprise because British and Confederate cotton interests were so closely intertwined.³²

Instead, it was the second part of the British declaration that astonished both the North and the South, when in spite of Yancey’s insistence that the blockade was practically invisible, the British declared it fully legal instead.³³ The North hailed the news with exultation, the South with outrage and alarm.³⁴ From that moment on, protestations of the blockade’s obvious illegality would become the number one complaint that tattletaling Southern diplomats carried to Great Britain, a matter which was to the Confederacy comparable in importance only to securing diplomatic recognition. As a result, Confederate-British relations from 1861 to 1862 pivoted thereafter around a watery hinge: the absurdity of the Northern blockade.

²⁹ McPherson, 387-388.

³⁰ Graebner, 55. Parish, 497.

³¹ Abraham Lincoln, “21 May 1861,” University of Michigan Digital Library Texts, *Collected Texts of Abraham Lincoln* (accessed November 3, 2006).

³² Merli, 43.

³³ Adams, 1: 245-246.

³⁴ Parish, 407.

The Forcotton Confederacy Snaps to Inaction

From the first cannon's firing, the Confederacy had built its response to the Northern blockade around an unspoken assumption that it would receive British recognition and aid.³⁵ One word convinced the South that Southern and British interests were incalculably intertwined: cotton. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, cotton had been Britain's most important import and the South's most important export. The Southern States had provided on average 77.5% of Britain's cotton needs; and in 1860, the last year before the war began, the South had stocked over 80% of Britain's fluffy arsenal.³⁶

Wide-spread awareness of these statistics inflated Southern confidence in their ability to win the war. As a result, Confederate Vice-President Alexander Stephens could not imagine that the blockade would stay around for long. "Our cotton is . . . the tremendous lever by which we can work our destiny," he explained. "In some way or other [the blockade will] be raised or there will be revolution in Europe." But Stephens, along with most Southerners, did not plan on being actively engaged in breaking the blockade; instead, Southerners hoped that English dependence on Southern cotton would force the British to shatter the blockade while the Confederacy looked on.³⁷ One Charleston merchant's comment to the *London Times* shortly after the war broke out succinctly summed up Southern expectations. "If those miserable Yankees try to

³⁵ Chesnut, 73, 92, 247, 347, 445.

³⁶ Pelzer, John D. "Liverpool and the American Civil War." *History Today* 40, no. 3 (Mar90): 46-52. Academic Search Premier, via McKee Library <http://library.southern.edu> (accessed August 30, 2006).

³⁷ "Lyons to Russell, Dispatch 719," Nov. 29, 1861, *British Eyes*, 1: 234.

blockade us, and keep you from our cotton, you'll just send them to the bottom and acknowledge us," he said. "That will be before autumn, I think."³⁸

One result of this overconfident assumption was a scandalous neglect of the Southern naval program. Because the South expected to elicit British support by impressing them with Confederate military prowess, the Southern Cabinet funneled most of its resources into terrestrial army operations instead of funding naval interests.³⁹ For most Confederates (at least within the first two years of the war), the blockade was inefficient, irrelevant, and easy to ignore.⁴⁰ Stephen Mallory, the Confederate Secretary of the Navy, was one of the few who saw it as a latent threat, a cobra slowly but surely encircling the Confederate regime. Although everyone in the Southern Cabinet believed that the blockade must be broken in order to win the war, Mallory was the only one who believed that the South must play an active role in destroying it; the rest longed to leave the matter in able British hands.⁴¹

Although Mallory did his best to persuade his colleagues to respond to the blockade by constructing a Confederate navy, the plan seemed too daunting and was not given top priority. After all, the Confederates had begun the war with no ships, no seamen, and no suitable naval yards. Although the Confederates had a brief love affair with British-produced ironclads, this fling was too short-lived to produce long-term results.⁴² As a result, two years into the war, well-known Southern oceanographer

³⁸ William Howard Russell, *My Diary, North and South* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1954), 69.

³⁹ Joseph P. Durkin, *Confederate Navy Chief: Stephen P. Mallory* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1954), 364.

⁴⁰ Owsley, 253-262.

⁴¹ Durkin, 364.

⁴² Burton J. Hendrick, *Statesmen of a Lost Cause: Jefferson Davis and His Cabinet* (New York: The Literary Guild of America, Inc., 1939), 374. Owsley, 394-426.

Matthew Maury could still observe that it was “evidently no part of the plan of the [Southern] Administration to have a navy at present or to even encourage one.”⁴³

Rather than formulating a labor-intensive naval response, the South opted for a more practical and less taxing option: an embargo. The Confederates believed that the British suffering that would be inflicted by a cotton embargo would be enough to rouse the British from their neutral stupor and actuate them to break the blockade. Hoping to secure both revenge and acknowledgement with one stealthy blow, the South decided to hold back their cotton and let the British enjoy what they insisted existed: an effective blockade.⁴⁴

In order to accomplish this feat, an incredibly well-unified, grassroots Southern embargo was launched. Many Congressional endorsements of the embargo were proposed, but none of them ever passed, leaving the orchestration of the movement largely in its citizens’ capable hands. Local newspapers encouraged their people to “keep every bale of cotton on the plantation . . . [not] send[ing] a thread to New Orleans or Memphis til England and France have recognized the Confederacy—not one thread.”⁴⁵ Patriotic farmers obeyed, taking a financial hit in the name of succession.⁴⁶

The numbers resulting from the embargo were impressive; during its first (and only) year, the amount of Southern cotton exported to Europe was 1% of what it had been before.⁴⁷ Unfortunately for its Southern adherents, the embargo’s effects on the British were nowhere near what the South had hoped for. The Confederacy had assumed that the

⁴³ Ibid, 364.

⁴⁴ McPherson, 384-385.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 383.

⁴⁶ Graebner, 59. Those who did not share the enthusiasm were also forced to partake in the embargo by self-appointed “Committees of Public Safety” who worked to impose a level of vigilante unity.

⁴⁷ Parish, 398. In late 1862, the embargo gradually lost steam as that strategy was abandoned and a new one of using cotton to buy war materials was adopted in its stead. Unfortunately, by this time, the blockade was tightening, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to ship cotton overseas.

British manufacturing industry was one-pronged like the South's own one-crop economy, which revolved almost entirely around cotton exports. This assumption, however, was untrue; although cotton manufactures had commandeered the British economy in the past, for some time now its importance had been receding.⁴⁸

The Confederate states' calculations had pictured their embargo's causing "England [to] topple headlong and carry the whole civilized world with her, save the South."⁴⁹ Instead, the British continued to thrive, and it was the Southern cotton farmers who found themselves financially floundering.⁵⁰ Other unforeseen and unsavory Confederate quandaries also resulted from the embargo. For example, since the Southern farmers were riddled with debt, many were not able to supply themselves with war arms. Worst of all, the Confederacy was robbed of her cotton market as British leaders began to brainstorm other destinations from which cotton could be imported.

Ironically, what led to the embargo's defeat was what had from the start most infused Southerners with confidence: their faith in Britain's reliance on Confederate cotton supplies. Strangely enough, the Southern mistake was not that they had overestimated their importance to the British manufacturing industry from 1857 to 1860.

⁴⁸ McPherson, 386. In addition to their belief that the conflict would end soon, the British understood that the Civil War was continuing to rework the composition of their economy, decreasing cotton's overall importance and increasing the significance of other industries such as ship-building and munitions exports. In that way, the cheers in Liverpool, Britain's most prominent ship-building district, drowned out the moans of Lancashire, a manufacturing district that relied heavily on cotton.

⁴⁹ McPherson, 383.

⁵⁰ "France and the American Blockade: Attempts to Procure Recognition of the Rebel Government." *The New York Times* 26 Oct 1861. Proquest, via McKee Library <http://library.southern.edu> (accessed September 28, 2006). Parish, 408. *Europe Looks*, 211. "Lyons to Russell, Dispatch 585," Oct. 21, 1861, *British Eyes*, 1:186. Had the British economy been less stable, the Southern embargo might have succeeded. In France, which was also under the embargo's decree, vast suffering was experienced when its manufacturing districts were "prostrated by the civil war" as a result of the airtight Southern embargo. The districts in question "[urged] for an immediate recognition of the Confederate States and the raising of the blockade," and for a time many people "expressed a confident belief that the Emperor of the French [contemplated] recognizing the Confederate States of the South." Unfortunately, for the Confederacy, the French were unwilling to intervene alone. Ironically, historians believe that the Confederacy stopped conducting its embargo right around the time it would have become effective in England.

On the contrary, the sad reality was that they had done their job too well. They had overexported, creating a cotton surplus in Britain that would tide the British manufacturers over until Southern zeal for the embargo was largely extinguished. As a result, instead of plunging the British cotton-manufacturing industry into a depression, historians believe that the Southern embargo actually aided the industry, aborting a recession that would have occurred as a result of the overload.⁵¹

Diplomatically, the embargo also ate away at the likelihood of Southern success. Even though the Southern government never claimed responsibility for the embargo, preferring to depict itself to the foreign powers as the hapless victim of a popular movement, the British understood that the government offered the embargo its tacit support. As a result, they were disinclined to ally with the South, annoyed that the Confederacy had tried to coerce them into friendship. "I wonder that the South do not see that our recognition *because* they keep cotton from us would be ignominious beyond measure, & that no English Parlt could do so base a thing," one English leader exclaimed. The sentiments of thousands of irate British citizens echoed that opinion, and their view of the North's paper blockade was enhanced because of British annoyance with the Southern embargo.⁵²

Stacking the Deck:

Why the British Smiled Upon the Northern Blockade

The belief that cotton was king was not confined to the South. William Seward, whose attitude was characteristic of the average Northerner's, also feared that the British

⁵¹ McPherson, 385-6.

⁵² Graebner, 60. McPherson, 384-5.

would try to “save cotton at the cost of the Union.”⁵³ His worries were not unfounded; they were spurred along by many British remarks that seemed to betoken cotton-driven diplomacy. “We do not like slavery,” remarked Prime Minister Henry Palmerston, “but we want cotton, and we dislike very much your Morrill tariff.”⁵⁴

Both the North and the South believed that other factors also presaged British interference in favor of the Confederacy. For example, although the British had long since accepted the fact that the United States was no longer a colony, obvious anti-democratic sentiment lingered on.

It is precisely because we do *not* share the admiration of America for her own institutions and political tendencies that we do not now see in the impending change [that is, the collapse of the Union] an event altogether to be deplored.

wrote Blackwood’s magazine in 1861.⁵⁵ A crumpled Union offered another enticement, a promise that the North American continent would once again be fair game, no longer held captive by the American cult of Manifest Destiny and the Monroe Doctrine.⁵⁶

And then of course there was the motivation of revenge. In both the Napoleonic and the Crimean Wars, the Americans had defied ineffective British blockades, denouncing them as permeable and therefore illegitimate. The opportunity to intervene in the Civil War now appeared to be the picture-perfect occasion for the British to return the

⁵³ Merli, 43.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 22. Such a tariff’s passage had long been agitated for by the North and long spurned by the South. The succession of the Southern states and the subsequent removal of their representatives from Congress made such a passage possible. However, the fact that it was now possible did not necessarily mean that it was now wise. After all, it hurt the British just as the Civil War broke out, the worst possible time to irk such a strong power and potential enemy.

⁵⁵ Graebner, 50.

⁵⁶ The Monroe Doctrine was an American declaration by President James Monroe in 1823 that championed European nonintervention and noncolonization in the Americas. Although it was initially the subject of great derision because the United States was too weak to actually enforce it, European respect (and resentment) for the declaration gradually snowballed. The topic was of especial interest to England’s French allies during the Civil War because they were attempting to annex Mexico and did not desire Northern interference.

favor, using the Declaration of Paris's new definition of what constituted a paper blockade as an excuse to bash the Northern war effort to pieces.⁵⁷

But even though all of these factors caused the British to await the Union's division with "an impatience which it [had] difficulty disguising," two main lines of reasoning led the British to declare themselves neutral. First of all, they were certain that the South would triumph by default since the British did not "see how the United States [could] be cobbled together again by any compromise."⁵⁸ Under the impression that the war would end quickly with the outcome that they desired, the British did not see any motivation to enter into an unnecessary and possibly messy intervention.⁵⁹ If for some reason the South was unable to win the war easily, the British did not want to be stuck with the bloody tab. This aversion forced them to place any thoughts of intervention on hold until the South demonstrated indisputably that it could attain victory on its own.⁶⁰

Secondly, and more importantly, the British thoroughly comprehended the long-term consequences of violating the Northern blockade. Although shutting down Union pretensions using the Declaration of Paris might be exhilarating for a moment, the British knew that such a move would be a Pyrrhic victory. "A blockade is by far the most formidable weapon of offence we possess," noted the *London Times*. "Surely we ought not to be over-ready to blunt its edge or injure its temper?"⁶¹

After all, meeting the requirements for a true blockade according to the Declaration was prohibitively difficult, and the British understood that whatever standard

⁵⁷ McPherson, 382-383.

⁵⁸ Parish, 388. Merli, 21. *Europe Looks*, 19.

⁵⁹ Adams, 1: 246, 266.

⁶⁰ Graebner, 65-6. McPherson, 384.

⁶¹ Baxter, 13.

they applied to other nations could eventually be retorted against herself.”⁶² It seemed absurd that a power that was so self-aware would even consider “tak[ing] a step . . . that may hereafter be quoted against herself, and may make it impossible for her, with honour or consistency, to avail herself of her superiority at sea.”⁶³

As a result of these considerations, when Lord Russell set to drafting a British declaration of which characteristics must be in place in order for Britain to regard the Northern blockade as legitimate, he did so strategically. His definition was nowhere near the rigorous Declaration of Paris’s. Instead, it was lenient, remarking significantly that the fact that “various ships may have successfully escaped through [the blockade] . . . [would] not of itself prevent the blockade from being an effective one by international law.”⁶⁴ All things considered, the indirect approval of Great Britain gave the rickety Union blockade the nod.

Building Blockades, Building Relationships

Great Britain’s acknowledgement of the blockade, however, would by no means remain uncontested. From the beginning, the Confederacy was outraged by what they saw as incomplete neutrality, the policy of a nation that was “clearly [trying] to reopen to the prejudice of the Confederacy one of the very disputed questions on the law of the blockade which the Congress of Paris proposed to settle.”⁶⁵ To combat these injustices on the seas, they decided to send a Southern ambassador to Britain.

The man they selected was William Yancey. Yancey had not sought out his foreign post; in fact, at first he had declined the offer. But Jefferson Davis insisted,

⁶² Luraghi, 70-71. Parish, 407-408. McPherson, 385. Merli, 22-23. Baxter, 13.

⁶³ Baxter, 13.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 13.

⁶⁵ Davis, *The Rise and Fall*, 2: 375.

demanding that Yancey either take a Cabinet position or become head of the commission to Europe. After much deliberation and ignored advice, Yancey chose the latter.⁶⁶

Although the Confederacy knew what she wanted to accomplish diplomatically, at first she had no clear conception of how to achieve it. According to the Confederate constitution, only the president could instruct Yancey on his diplomatic duties.⁶⁷

Although they could not present it themselves, the Committee on Foreign Relations composed a foreign policy directive containing instructions that they hoped Davis would explain to Yancey. Unfortunately, Davis never got around to it, leaving Yancey entirely without direction.⁶⁸

Prior to Yancey's departure, one of his colleagues asked him how he how to planned on negotiating with the British. His reply was fluff, only generalizations about the importance of cotton. "Sir," his colleague exclaimed after hearing his response, "you have no business in Europe. You carry no argument which Europe cares to hear . . . My counsel to you as a friend is, if you value your reputation, to stay at home."⁶⁹

But by this counsel Yancey would not abide. Uninstructed, he sailed for Europe. Once he arrived, since he had no formal authorization for what he could lay out in negotiations, he soon became restless and discontent, feeling like less a diplomat and more like a blockade statistics billboard. Worst of all, because the communications he received from home base were erratic, infrequent, and insufficient, even the statistics he touted were inadequate. "Not a day passes that fails to bring demands upon us . . . [for] information concerning the inefficiency of the blockade," he wrote home irritably.

⁶⁶John Witherspoon Dubose, *The Life and Times of William Lowndes Yancey* (New York: Peter Smith, 1942), 2: 588.

⁶⁷Ibid, 589.

⁶⁸Ibid, 596-9.

⁶⁹Ibid, 600.

“Unfortunately we have been compelled to meet all such inquiries with the reply that ‘we hope to be able to answer them by the next advices.’”⁷⁰

Yancey’s floppy blockade diplomacy made little impact overseas. Although he achieved British recognition of Southern belligerency, his accomplishments ended there. The limited scope of his negotiations led England to declare that she “could not acknowledge the Confederate States until the war or further negotiations more clearly determined their position.”⁷¹ The British were so entirely unimpressed by what Yancey had to offer that Charles Francis Adams, the Union minister to Britain, was able to convince the British authorities to no longer receive the Southern “pseudo-commissioners” at all.⁷² Yancey heard of that declaration through a painful route, reading of his diplomatic fate in public documents. He was outraged, determined to file a complaint because the British has declared that they had “no intention of seeing [the Confederate commissioners] again,” but his colleagues held him back, convinced that it would exacerbate rather than remedy the situation.⁷³

Verbally estranged from the officials whom he had crossed the Atlantic to encounter, Yancey and his fellow commissioners were forced to compose a letter to the British outlining what the South had to offer. Unfortunately, the only thing the letter could serve up was the usual: a steamy invitation for the British to break the blockade sautéed in barbed rhetoric about broken Declaration of Paris vows. After all, the Confederates pointed out (as usual), it was the responsibility of “the neutrals, whose

⁷⁰ Ibid, 608.

⁷¹ “From Europe,” *The New York Times* 24 Feb 1862, Proquest, via McKee Library <http://library.southern.edu> (accessed September 28, 2006).

⁷² Graebner, 49.

⁷³ Adams, 1: 264.

commerce is seriously damaged, to determine for how long a blockade, of such a character, [should] be respected.”⁷⁴

Predictably, the letter confined the Confederacy’s role to playing the damsel in distress until she received recognition. She claimed no responsibility for breaking the blockade; her sole duty would be resuming a lucrative cotton trade once the war was concluded. The English needed her, she insisted, and if they wished to survive, they would “consider the necessities of commercial relations with [the South and their importance] to the preservation of certain great interests in England.”⁷⁵

After elegantly inking their allurements, the diplomats tagged onto their document’s end an afterthought that if the British were not entirely persuaded to come to the Confederate Union’s aid after reading this letter, “such an announcement [would] be received with surprise.”⁷⁶ But when the letter was ignored, Yancey was not astonished. Although his rhetoric in the letter had remained lofty, by late 1861 his hopes were not. Shortly after sending the diplomatic letter, he sent off yet another—his resignation.⁷⁷

The dead-end nature of Southern blockade diplomacy had morphed the diplomat’s shining ideals into a tarnished admission of disillusionment. “Had I known the trouble and delay involved in this mission,” he wrote home, “I should never have accepted [the position].”⁷⁸ Although nearly all of Yancey’s diplomatic efforts had aimed to sour the British opinion of the Northern blockade, Great Britain had her sights set on securing a new naval precedent, and as a result she was unmoved by Yancey’s empty bids for her favor. Yancey had unearthed Britain’s attitude the hard way and was sorely disappointed;

⁷⁴ Dubose, 2: 620-1.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 2: 620.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 2: 620-621.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 2: 620-621.

⁷⁸ Jenkins, 1:144.

it was with great difficulty that he was persuaded to stay put until his successors' arrival.⁷⁹

Captive Controversy

Although many Southerners were temporarily discouraged by the failure of Yancey's mission, their hopes were soon revived by a confidence in their new foreign commissioner to England, James Mason. Prior missions had been premature, Southerners reasoned—now the time was truly ripe.⁸⁰ After all, by late 1861, they believed that, not only were a stream of military victories speaking eloquently in their favor, but the economic impact of the embargo must be testifying on their behalf as well. Papers like the *Morning Post* were so optimistic that they proclaimed that Mason and his companion, John Slidell, the Confederate commissioner to France, had “achieved [Southern] independence” by simply setting sail. In reality, however, the two diplomats would probably not have achieved much more than Yancey had the *Trent* affair had not been brought to fruition by the permeability of the Union blockade.⁸¹

Although Mason and Slidell had made careful preparations for running the blockade, the one thing they did not do carefully was keep a secret. In fact, the specifics of their departure had been so trumpeted that the Union was able to increase the number of warships guarding the Charleston harbor from one to five before the Confederates' blockade runner departed.⁸² But in spite of the beef-up barrier, Mason's crew slipped

⁷⁹ James Morton Callahan, *Diplomatic History of the Southern Confederacy* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1964), 127. Ironically enough, when Yancey was finally permitted to take his leave, he had no trouble running the blockade to get back home.

⁸⁰ Jenkins, 1:192.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1:189.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 1:195. Norman B. Ferris, *The Trent Affair: A Diplomatic Crisis* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 22.

“Mr. Seward to Lord Lyons,” *Correspondence Relative to the Case of Messrs. Mason and Slidell*, 26 Dec 1861, 5.

effortlessly through and began their journey towards Nassau, where they planned to board the British steamer that would carry them across the Atlantic.

If the Northern blockade had been unbreakable and had intercepted Mason's Britain-bound crew, England would have been annoyed, but the affair would probably have blown over. The blockade's permeability and the circumstances that this weakness bred, however, ensured that there would be no simple solutions. After running the blockade, Mason and his crew arrived in Nassau and eventually boarded the British mail steamer, the *Trent*. Soon afterwards they were intercepted by Captain John Wilkes, an overzealous naval officer without government authorization who was determined to terminate Mason's "diabolical scheme" and to avenge the blockade, which had been humiliated by the ease with which it had been run.⁸³

Although Wilkes was trying to aid the Union cause, his actions gave the Confederacy their best chances of success yet. There were many routes of justifying what Wilkes had done by international law, but there was no way of justifying away the British wrath that he had incurred.⁸⁴ Jefferson Davis captured the essence of British outrage when he exclaimed:

These gentlemen were as much under the jurisdiction of the British Government upon that ship and beneath that flag as if they had been on its soil, and a claim on the part of the United States to seize them in the streets of London would have been as well founded as that to apprehend them where they were taken.⁸⁵

⁸³ D.P. Crook, *The North, the South, and the Powers: 1861-1865* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974), 43. McPherson, 389-390.

⁸⁴ "Mr. Seward to Mr. Adams, 1-2.

"Earl Russell to Lord Lyons," *Correspondence Relative to the Case of Messrs. Mason and Slidell*, 30 Nov 1861, Foreign Office, 2-3. "Mr. Seward to Lord Lyons," 3-12.

"Lord Lyons to Mr. Seward," *Correspondence Relative to the Case of Messrs. Mason and Slidell*, 27 Dec 1861, Washington, 15.

⁸⁵ "The Civil War in America," *Illustrated London News* 39, no 1121 (14 Dec. 1861): 593. <http://beck.library.emory.edu> (accessed October 27, 2006).

Slidell, Mason's companion, had also realized the magnitude of the opportunity being thrust into their laps. In fact, he was so eager to be seized and to have the British emotionally drawn into the war on the Southern side that when the British captain of the *Trent* refused to reveal to Wilkes whether or not Mason's party was onboard, Slidell stepped forward and voluntarily made known his presence.⁸⁶

Because the Northerners were so busy rejoicing, it took them a while to process the diplomatic implications of Wilkes's rash actions. For the North, Wilkes's news was a life-preserver in a sea of military setbacks. Better yet, it piggybacked another piece of fantastic news that had arrived only three days before the announcement that the North had finally captured their first Southern cotton port. William Seward, the Union Secretary of War, had long hoped for this development, which he was sure "would materially change the views of the European powers."⁸⁷ For good-news starved Northerners, the two tidbits combined to spawn a "storm of exultation."⁸⁸

As a result, Wilkes received a promotion, the "emphatic approval of the [naval] department," congressional congratulations "for his brave, adroit and patriotic conduct in arresting and detaining the Mssrs. Mason and Slidell," and the common man's adulation to boot.⁸⁹ The *New York Times* hailed him as the "hero of the hour," *Harper's Weekly*

⁸⁶ Ferris, 22. "Mr. Seward to Mr. Adams," 2.

⁸⁷ Jenkins, 1:198.

Lincoln, Abraham, "21 May 1861," University of Michigan Digital Library Texts, *Collected Texts of Abraham Lincoln* (accessed November 3, 2006).

Dupont, 255. Eventually the North would try to use this port along with several others to offer cotton-starved Europe some trade relief. British foreknowledge of this premeditated Northern blockade relaxation strategy made the necessity of breaking the blockade to obtain cotton seem less urgent. Unfortunately for the North and for Great Britain, however, Southern insistence on bringing their cotton inland and burning it (rather than having it sold for such abominable profit) would thwart Seward's plan.

⁸⁸ Jenkins, 1:198. Russell, 261.

⁸⁹ "Senate, December 26, 1861-January 20, 1862: The Trent Affair," 2: 379-395. "Lyons to Russell. Dispatch 728," Dec. 3, 1861, *British Eyes*, 1: 237.

rhapsodized about his “triumph[s]” and “glories,” and Northern opinion ran hot in his favor, positive that his actions were justifiable by international law.⁹⁰

“We will wrap the world in flames!” exclaimed William Seward, the Northern Secretary of War, in answer to an inquiry about how the Union would respond to a British declaration of war over the *Trent* affair. “No power so remote that she will not feel the fire of our battle and be burned by our conflagration.”⁹¹ But despite the sweeping implications of Seward’s words, one guest at the party cautioned the correspondent for the *London Times* not to take Seward’s emotions at face value. “That’s all bugaboo talk,” the guest confided. “When Seward talks that way, he means to break down. He is most dangerous and obstinate when he pretends to agree with you.”⁹²

The guest was on target. Seward was posturing for good reason. After all, as the Confederate Secretary of War phrased it, “the press rules America . . . no one can face it and live.”⁹³ Seward did not at first understand the importance of presenting a disapproving Northern reaction to Wilkes’s actions, what he did understand was that he could not swim against the rip tide of public opinion without being washed out to sea. As a result, for a time the Union government obliged the American people their desire by refusing to hand over the captive diplomats. This situation, like so many others, had been spawned by the incompetence of the Northern blockade. And so the North reacted and then sat tight, testing the waters for a British reaction. Very soon a definitive response arrived.

Southern Diplomacy, Take Two

⁹⁰ Ibid. Jenkins, 1:114.

⁹¹ Ibid, 1:224.

⁹² Russell, 262.

⁹³ Ibid, 261.

It took the beating of war drums to convince Union celebrations to subside. And this time the threat did not come from the South; it came from Canada, the route through which the British were planning to invade. The British did not share Northern appreciation for Wilkes's swashbuckling, seeing it not as an act of heroism but instead as "a wanton act of aggression."⁹⁴ "The occurrence cannot but have a baleful effect on our future relations with this government," wrote home Foreign Minister Richard Lyons. After all, the American people were "pleased at having . . . insulted the British flag." Even if Wilkes's action could be justified by international law, Lyons was determined that such impertinence should not be permitted to prevail. Then "they would be confirmed in their idea that England will bear anything from them."⁹⁵

The eruption of such a conflict instigated by the Northern blockade was precisely what the Confederacy had been hoping for, and she took this opportunity to revamp her foreign diplomatic policy accordingly. In the past, she had discovered that arriving promptly for vigilant negotiations had not gotten her very far; after all, Yancey had sped to Britain, arriving only 17 days after Fort Sumter had been fired upon, and his haste had accomplished little. Now, courtesy of the leaky Union blockade, Mason could experiment with a new strategy: arriving late.⁹⁶

While the British were wading through the conflict, Robert Bunch, the Confederate console in Charleston, Virginia, kept a steady stream of statistics disproving the blockade's adequacy flowing across the sea. "The blockade is the laughing stock of the Southern merchant marine," he wrote. "There is in reality no blockade at all of this

⁹⁴ "Commander R. Williams to Lord Lyons, aboard Royal Mail Packet 'Trent' 9 November 1861," letter concealed within "Lyons to Russell, Dispatch 727," Dec. 2, 1861, *British Eyes*, 1: 234.

⁹⁵ "Lyons to Russell, Dispatch 678," Nov. 19, 1861, *British Eyes*, 1: 227-8.

⁹⁶ J. Mills Thornton, "Yancey, William Lowndes," *American National Biography Online*, Feb 2000, <http://www.anb.org/articles/04/04-01080.html> (accessed October 26, 2006).

coast . . . Vessels of various sizes enter and sail almost at pleasure.”⁹⁷ Bunch hoped that in the heat of the *Trent* controversy the frustrated British would finally be more receptive to such information.

For a while, the strategy seemed to be working. The *New York Times* correspondent in London sensed a drastic change in mood. “A Northern man in London is subject to many humiliations. Public opinion is against him,” he lamented. “If there has been a disposition [in England] to overlook small matters connected with the blockade and neutral rights, it exists no longer.”⁹⁸

But although the common Englishman might have been war-dancing in the street, the British leaders were more reticent. They understood, as they had from the start, that entering a foreign war was a major commitment, and as a result felt “distress[ed] and alarm[ed]” by the progression of events.⁹⁹ If they had to, they were more than willing to “inflict a severe blow upon, and . . . read a lesson to the United States which [would] not soon be forgotten.”¹⁰⁰ But it was not their first choice, and they would gladly exchange the prospect of a bloody brawl for the Southern diplomats’ “immediate delivery” and a Northern “apology for the aggression that had been committed.”¹⁰¹

In an effort to extort such results, the British launched a hardcore program of military fortification in Canada, realizing that the more intimidating the preparations for war in Canada were, “the more likelihood [there was] that peace [could] yet be

⁹⁷ Owsley, 253-255. Although Bunch’s reports began to trail off in the spring of 1862, up until that point they were going strong.

⁹⁸ “The American Cause in England.” *The New York Times* 13 Feb 1862. Proquest, via McKee Library <http://library.southern.edu> (accessed September 28, 2006).

⁹⁹ Adams, 1: 265.

¹⁰⁰ Jenkins, 1:216.

¹⁰¹ “Lyons to Russell, Dispatch 777,” Dec. 19, 1861, *British Eyes*, 1: 250.

preserved.”¹⁰² As a result, “both the Imperial authorities [of Canada] and the people [began] preparing for the worst.”¹⁰³ The Confederate leaders licked their lips. Finally, it appeared that rickety blockade itself had forced the British into a situation where they could no longer quietly stand by.

Seward Saves the Day

At first it appeared that the *Trent* affair, which had been spawned by the leaky blockade’s weaknesses, would be the North’s destruction. In the end, however, the affair fostered more communication between the Union and Great Britain than it did dissent, increasing the foreign powers’ trust in one another and lubricating the process of negotiations with goodwill. Because of the relationships that it built, the process required to dissipate the uproar over the *Trent* both righted the situation and—ironically—ensured the blockade’s survival.

Traditionally, British trust in the Northern Cabinet had been less than solid, especially in William Seward, the Northern Secretary of War. Early in 1861, the British minister to the Union had written home that he “[did] not implicitly rely on all Mr. Seward’s assurances.”¹⁰⁴ Such a belief was not confined to his mind alone; the rest of the British Cabinet also regarded Seward with fear mainly because he came off as volatile, unpredictable, and war-mongering, the Kim Il Jong of the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁵

Outward appearances indicated that the British fears were well-founded. Seward frequently derided Britain, whom he saw as the “the greatest, the most grasping, and the most rapacious power in the world.” He longed to kidnap her colonies and was very

¹⁰² Jenkins, 1:216.

¹⁰³ “The Civil War in America,” *Illustrated London News* 39, no 1115 (2 Nov. 1861): 441, <http://beck.library.emory.edu> (accessed October 27, 2006). Chesnut, 174.

¹⁰⁴ “Lyons to Russell, Dispatch 158.” April 22, 1861, *British Eyes*, 1:64.

¹⁰⁵ Jenkins, 1:149. Luraghi, 26.

outspoken in his belief that her removal was essential if the United States were to become a truly dominant power.¹⁰⁶ When the Civil War had first begun, Seward longed to reunite the North and the South in a common cause: a war against Europe.¹⁰⁷ Shortly into the Civil War, he surrendered that hope, but he never seemed to drop his fascination with an impending conflict with Europe over the most minute details.

On innumerable occasions, Lincoln had had to tone down Seward's ultimatums to the British by editing his letters to foreign diplomats.¹⁰⁸ Even after Lincoln's tweaking, however, many of Seward's statements remained blatantly offensive. Seward's posturing attitude was one of the primary reasons that the British minister to the Union was frustrated with what he perceived as an overall Northern belief that she could "conquer the South with one hand and chastise Europe with the other."¹⁰⁹ Worst of all, Seward was explosively impulsive and would sometimes fire off flammable rhetoric that he insisted be carbon-copied to the British leaders at the very moment it was mailed to the American ambassador. This made the American ambassador's job of softening Seward's message considerably more difficult and decreased the likelihood that the Union would long remain in a one-enemy war.¹¹⁰

Lucky for the Union, the delays inherent in overseas communication caused the *Trent* affair to take three months to be resolved, a long enough period of time for tempers to cool and judgment to become unclouded.¹¹¹ At first Seward had been one of Wilkes's most solid supporters, but the long lapse in cordial communications, which had been

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 30-31.

¹⁰⁷ Graebner, 53.

¹⁰⁸ Jenkins, 104.

¹⁰⁹ "Lyons to Russell, Dispatch 263," June 8, 1861, *British Eyes*, 1: 111.

¹¹⁰ Jenkins, 42-43.

¹¹¹ Adams, 1: 230.

filled with ostentatious Canadian war preparations, gave Seward a chance to come to his senses and be persuaded that the Union had “no time to be diverted . . . into controversies with other powers, even if just causes for them could be found.”¹¹² The fact that Seward had come around gave the British a rare opportunity to see in him the rational leader they so wanted to do business with.¹¹³

What encouraged the British was the quality of communication between Seward and Richard Lyons, the British minister to the Union. Although Seward refused to completely reveal his hand, the increase in amicable communication was remarkable. Lyons was satisfied by Seward’s attitude of listening to British demands “seriously and with dignity,” “without any manifestations of dissatisfaction.” In an especially uncharacteristic moment, Seward “begged [Lyons] to be assured that [Seward] was very sensible of the friendly and conciliatory manner of British demands.”¹¹⁴

Seward was not a man to beg, and his change in attitude was so groundbreaking that Lyons had no qualms about lending Seward an unofficial copy of the list of British demands so that Seward could work to soften the American response to the letter’s official announcement. Lyons felt so comfortable with Seward’s behavior that, rather than demanding an answer immediately, he gave Seward “until tomorrow” to think the communications over.¹¹⁵ In the end, Lyons’ indulgences paid off, yielding both the surrender of the prisoners and an “[admission] that Reparation is due to Great Britain.”¹¹⁶

¹¹² Jenkins, 1: 224.

¹¹³ Luraghi, 27.

¹¹⁴ “Lyons to Russell, Dispatch 777,” Dec. 19, 1861, *British Eyes*, 1:250.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* Jenkins, 225.

¹¹⁶ “Mr. Seward to Mr. Adams,” 1. “Mr. Seward to Lord Lyons,” 3. “Lord Lyons to Mr. Seward,” 15. “The Trent Affair, Senate, December 26, 1861–January 20, 1862,” 2: 379–395. Jenkins, 1: 178, 239. Dupont, 310. In the end, Seward won over public opinion in three ways. First of all, he had the advantage of time. The necessary delays in overseas communication dragged out the affair and allowed popular opinion to cool. Secondly, the warlike preparations of Great Britain had succeeded in aggravating Union

After the *Trent* affair was resolved, British public opinion was as strongly behind the Union as it had once been opposed to it. The news of the conflict's resolution, announced between acts at the local British theaters, brought standing ovations.¹¹⁷ But beyond winning the goodwill of the common man, the *Trent* affair had won British approval for the Northern Secretary of War as well, laying a foundation of trust for future negotiations.¹¹⁸ "I do not believe that Seward has any animosity to this country," wrote one prominent diplomat confidently. "It is all buncom" (*sic*). "At all events I am heart and soul a neutral . . . What a fuss we have had about these two men."¹¹⁹ And just like that, the blockade-created disaster was averted, contrary to all expectations. Not only did the Union and Great Britain not go to war over the issue, but their relationship was enhanced by it instead.

Foiled Again

After Seward's (temporary) diplomatic makeover, the tides of British favor turned noticeably Northern.¹²⁰ Charles Francis Adams, the Union minister to London, who could feel the wintry British opinion melting to spring, cheerfully branded the affair's outcome "rather opportune than otherwise."¹²¹ "Our victory is won on this side of the water," he

fears and dampening their appetite for war. Third, Seward portrayed the Union's concession as a victory rather than as a defeat, claiming that the Union had only capitulated to the British demands because the British were acting upon "principles confessedly American" in their zeal to protect the rights of neutrals on the seas.

In his addresses, Seward clung to the fact that Wilkes had acted "without any instructions from the government." Although some people were upset by Seward's concession, most were well-satisfied with his response. "[Seward's behavior regarding the incident is] the most able thing he has ever written," said S.F. Dupont, rear admiral of the Northern navy. "If we were going to give in, it was as well done as it could be."

¹¹⁷ Jenkins, 1:239. McPherson, 391.

¹¹⁸ Adams, 1: 236.

¹¹⁹ Graebner, 59. Adams, 1: 243.

¹²⁰ Charles P. Collup, *Confederate Propaganda In Europe: 1861-1865* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1969), 31. Owsley, 253-255. McPherson, 390.

¹²¹ Adams, 1: 265.

declared. "The prospect of [British] interference with us is growing more and more remote."¹²²

Southerners also observed the change and were consumed by a "deep and burning . . . rage" mixed with hapless despair.¹²³ "The *Trent* affair has done us incalculable injury," one Confederate wrote home from London. Jefferson Davis was equally infuriated, exasperated because he correctly observed that the "neutral rights [granted by Britain] were alternately asserted and waived in such manner as to bear with great severity on [the South], while conferring signal advantages on [the North]."¹²⁴

In this midst of this storm of emotions, Mason finally arrived in England in late January on the very vessel he had been expected to cruise up in months before. But in spite of the fact that the British had butted heads with the Union to ensure Mason's safe arrival, Mason observed with alarm that once he set foot on shore the British leaders treated him with a "studied discourtesy."¹²⁵ He felt keenly what he did not yet know, that the British had decided he should "not to be received with honours or treated otherwise than as a distinguished gentlemen."¹²⁶ John Russell, the British foreign secretary, met with him but refused to view his credentials, deeming the gesture "unnecessary [since their] relations were unofficial."¹²⁷ Beyond that, Russell's attitude towards Mason was

¹²² Ibid, 262.

¹²³ Russell, 263.

¹²⁴ Adams, 1: 265. Davis, *The Rise and Fall*, 2, 376.

¹²⁵ "The American Cause in England." *The New York Times* 13 Feb 1862. (from London correspondent) Proquest, via McKee Library <http://library.southern.edu> (accessed September 28, 2006). Clifford Dowdey. *Experiment in Rebellion*. Garden City, NY: Double Day & Company, 1946, 293.

¹²⁶ Adams, 1: 235.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 265.

cold, transparently unsympathetic, and very aloof. "His personal sympathies were not with us," Mason lamented, "his policy inaction."¹²⁸

Unfortunately for Mason, not only did he have to cope with the *Trent* affair's resulting Northern goodwill, but he also had little with which he could entice the British to change their attitude. Although his instructions from home were more sufficient than Yancey's had been, both his tactics for inciting British intervention and the success that they engendered bore a striking resemblance to his predecessor's policies.¹²⁹ Mason had tried to set his strategy apart by carrying across the seas recent and thorough statistics that "would prove completely the utter inefficacy of the blockade;" unfortunately, by the time he actually arrived, the statistics were hopelessly dated.¹³⁰

Although Colonel Bunch did keep a steady trickle of blockade-busting information coming from his Charleston post, British opinion was by this time too strong in Northern favor for Bunch's statistics to make much of an impact. Although Lord Russell, the British foreign secretary, claimed that Bunch's letters would "induce [them] to consider the whole view of this question with a view to deciding what the course of the government should be," the British were inclined towards indifference. Instead of zeroing in on the blockade's flagrant violations, Russell focused on the "great exaggeration[s]"

¹²⁸ Ibid, 266.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 264. "The Obstructing of Southern Harbors." *The New York Times* 12 Feb 1862. Proquest, via McKee Library <http://library.southern.edu> (accessed September 28, 2006).

¹²⁹ "Lyons to Russell, Dispatch 30," Jan. 14, 1862, *British Eyes*, 1: 274-275. Mason's agenda largely resembled Yancey's except that Mason and his colleagues agreed to hold off on agitating for recognition, choosing to instead pound the blockade with ever-greater insistence. One new point that Mason raised was the injustice that the North exhibited in using large stones and sunken ships to increase the efficacy of her blockade. Mason's ploys were unsuccessful, however, and the resolution of the dispute actually increased the amicability of Northern-British relations.

"The Civil War in America," *Illustrated London News* 39, no 1121 (14 Dec. 1861): 593, <http://beck.library.emory.edu> (accessed October 27, 2006).

¹³⁰ "Lyons to Russell, Dispatch 705," Nov. 25, 1861, *British Eyes*, 1: 230. Adams, 1: 268. The only available up-to-date evidence was that of Robert Bunch, but this evidence only accounted for Charleston's port, and even it began to dwindle towards the close of 1862 as the Union blockade grew more effective.

that the Southerners had used and accused them of cooking the books just as Britain's enemies done in previous wars.¹³¹

Rather than focusing on Bunch's statistics, Russell urged Parliament to consider the big picture when pondering a change of stance on the blockade:

Has the Southern coast had a free and uninterrupted communication with Europe? Have your lordships heard that cotton has arrived in its usual quantities here, and that the manufacturers of Great Britain and France have arrived freely at the ports of the States which are now in a state of civil war? On the contrary, the intelligence we received shows that there has been no uninterrupted intercourse, but that great inconvenience has been suffered by the inhabitants of these Southern states, owing to the existence of that blockade, which is said to be defective.¹³²

He reminded them that they had "entered into no engagement with that [Confederate] Government" thus far, and it would probably be best if matters stayed that way.¹³³ After all, he explained what the *Trent* affair had made increasingly obvious: that for Britain to take sides in the Civil War would have "been a misfortune and calamity for the world, and for the people of America especially."¹³⁴

As a result, Parliament decided to leave England's official stance on the blockade unaltered; after all, the blockade was by "now universally acknowledged as unobjectionable."¹³⁵ Plus, they claimed, echoing the long-term North attitude, the issues of the Southern recognition and the Northern blockade were so tightly intertwined that

¹³¹ "The Blockade in the House of Lords," *The New York Times*, 25 Mar 1862, Proquest, via McKee Library <http://library.southern.edu> (accessed September 28, 2006). For example, when the Southerners were counting the number of ships that had run the blockade, they also included in their statistics very tiny vessels of little consequence that could dart between ports by navigating creeks, streams, and tiny inlets within the North American continent.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* Owsley, 242. Some historians like Brian Jenkins argue that the British preparations to invade Canada were part of what convinced Great Britain that starting another foreign war was a bad idea. Jenkins argues that, as they hastened to prepare for the conflict, the British were deterred from the prospect of war as they realized just how unprepared they were and what a huge investment of time and money another war would require.

¹³⁵ Adams, 1: 271.

one could not be approached without affecting the other.¹³⁶ After all, the North had as of late been overwhelmingly cooperative; to reward its good behavior with a sudden retraction of approval for its blockade would be the same as starting an “unproclaimed war.”¹³⁷ And the last thing the British wanted was war.

Conclusion

Although the British would continue to consider intervention as the war continued, after the years of 1861 to 1862 a beefed-up blockade would ensure that the British did not use the North’s inadequate blockade to justify British intervention.¹³⁸ Although the Northern blockade would never measure up to the requirements laid down in the Declaration of Paris (and what fantastical blockade ever could?), it would become sufficiently sturdy to please two of the three parties involved.

Although the ramshackle Northern blockade could have become a Southern ticket to success, the delays of 1861 to 1862 caused a vital opportunity to be missed.¹³⁹ Southern miscalculations were largely responsible for this enormous uh-oh. The Confederates were correct in believing that the British were driven by self-interest, but because they underestimated British foresight, the Confederates misdiagnosed the route that this interest would necessitate. The South was sure that the top British priority would be cotton; they had no idea that concerns about blockade precedents were even on the British radar.

Although the North never *wanted* to have an ineffective blockade, the blockade’s inadequacy accomplished more for the North than ten Declaration-of-Paris worthy

¹³⁶ Ibid, 270.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 1: 271. “Mr. Seward to Mr. Adams,” 1.

¹³⁸ Parish, 398.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

blockades could have done because the situation decreased British interest in intervention. This instance provides a valuable lesson for historians. Nations at war are not perfect and cannot always tell what will be in their best interest in the long run, whether they will ride their weaknesses to victory or be thwarted by their strengths.

A study of the development of precedents in this situation is also worthy of our consideration. As our world becomes increasingly global, the foreign relational tact exhibited by the British in the Civil War becomes an increasingly relevant model for all nations. Because Britain thoughtfully navigated (or rather, refused to navigate) dangerous diplomatic waters, they transformed what could have been a quagmire into an opportunity. Swift British thinking made it so that two nations could emerge victorious from the conflict: the North, who fought long and hard, and the British, who never fought at all. Today's diplomatically-savvy nations will do the same.

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Southern Scholars Honors Program
Senior Project Proposal Information Sheet



Name Angela Ford

Date 10/20/06

Major History

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A significant scholarly project, involving research, writing, or special performance, appropriate to the major in question, is ordinarily completed the senior year. The project is expected to be of sufficiently high quality to warrant a grade of "A" and to justify public presentation.

Under the guidance of a faculty advisor, the Senior Project should be an original work, should use primary sources when applicable, should have a table of contents and works cited page, should give convincing evidence to support a strong thesis, and should use the methods and writing style appropriate to the discipline.

The completed project, to be turned in in duplicate, must be approved by the Honors Committee in consultation with the student's supervising professor four weeks prior to the last day of class for the semester the project is turned in. Please include the advisor's name on the title page. The 2-3 hours of credit for this project is usually done as directed study or in a research class.

NOTE-Senior Project Proposal Due Date: The senior project proposal is due in the Honors Program Director's office two weeks after the beginning of the semester the project will be completed. The proposal should be a detailed description of the Honors Project's purpose and proposed methodology.

Keeping in mind the above senior project description, please describe in as much detail as you can the project you will undertake. Attach a separate sheet of paper.

Signature of faculty advisor Kim Miller

Expected date of completion 12/4/06

NOTE: An advisor's final project approval does not guarantee that the Honors Faculty Committee will automatically approve the project. The Honors Faculty Committee has the final vote.

Approval to be signed by faculty advisor when the project is completed:

This project has been completed as planned (date) yes

This is an "A" project yes

This project is worth 2-3 hours of credit yes

Advisor's Final Signature Kim Miller Date: 11/21/06

Chair, Honors Committee _____ Date Approved: _____

Dear Advisor,

(1) Please write your **final** evaluation on the project on the reverse side of this page. Comment on the characteristics that make this "A" quality work.

(2) Please include a paragraph explaining your specific academic credentials for advising this Senior Project.

My senior project is a 20-30 page paper that discusses how the fact that the Union blockade was largely *ineffective* from 1861-1862 helped them win the Civil war. Everyone understood that if England entered on the side of the South, the war's outcome would be settled in Southern favor. In my paper, I will talk about how this awareness resulted in both the North's and the South's building their diplomatic reactions around persuading the British of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the Northern blockade.

Using a plethora of both secondary and primary sources, I will discuss specific statistics about how the blockade was ineffective, how its ineffectiveness was defined by international law, and how it was in Britain's favor to have this definition changed. I will also cover the blockade-enhancing effects of the South's cotton embargo; the one-sided, ultimately insufficient damsel-in-distress Southern stratagem; and the multifaceted, ultimately successful give-and-take strategy of the North in matters such as the stone blockade and the *Trent* affair.

Southern Scholar: Angela Ford
Advisor: Lisa Clark Diller

My credentials for evaluating Angela's work lie primarily in my knowledge of the process of researching and writing. I have experience in finding primary sources and evaluating their usefulness for understanding the subject. While not an expert on the Civil War itself, I have experience in reading the historiography of a subject, finding a question, and then finding relevant evidence. I have done this in my own dissertation and I have supervised dozens of history majors in doing this for their senior thesis.

Angela's "A" is based on her exhaustive reading in her subject (smuggling during the Civil War and the diplomatic history that surrounds that) and then her ability to find a question to which she could contribute through evaluation of primary documents in the context of these secondary sources and questions. Angela has taken an extremely complicated subject and shed new and interesting light on it. What, exactly, was the role of the blockade was in helping the North win the Civil War, considering that everyone knew the blockade was a failure in its stated purpose? She has approached this subject counter-intuitively and pulled from a huge variety of sources to form her answer. Her clear writing, her mastery of the subject, and her ability to integrate primary and secondary sources are why she earned an "A."