

# The Peril of Intervention: Anglo-American Relations during the American Civil War

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THE PERIL OF INTERVENTION: ANGLO - AMERICAN RELATIONS DURING  
THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

A THESIS BY  
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## INTRODUCTION

The most decisive campaign of the American Civil War was waged in neither Virginia, nor Pennsylvania, nor along the Mississippi River, but rather in Great Britain. Northern military advantages in the prosecution of the war effort could have been completely negated by a serious diplomatic setback in Great Britain. In order to win the Civil War, the North had to prevent Great Britain from entering the conflict. British intervention (which would have also included France), whether in the form of actually entering the war on the side of the South, official recognition of the Confederacy, foreign mediation, or a call for an armistice followed by peace negotiations, would have been a diplomatic disaster for the North and a fatal blow to its attempt to re-unify the nation. Military setbacks on the battlefield were not nearly as threatening as diplomatic setbacks abroad. The North had greater manpower, a stronger and more balanced economy, an industrial infrastructure, and a better equipped army; yet, in order for these advantages to translate into military victory at home, the North first needed to ensure that the domestic conflict did not spread to an international war.

The fact of British non-intervention in the American Civil War gives rise to two questions of interest for scholars: First, how close did they come to actual intervention? And second, why did they choose not to intervene? The first question is far less contentious than the second. Most historians point to two periods of time where the prospects for foreign intervention were highest. The first is in the immediate aftermath of the Trent Affair, in which British national honor and Northern desire to avoid the

appearance of capitulation in the face of British pressure combined to threaten a trans-Atlantic war over maritime rights. Year-long tension and mistrust transformed a relatively minor dispute into an international incident which threatened to plunge the North into another war. These conditions during the late summer and early fall of 1862, a period that witnessed significant Confederate victories at the Battle of the Seven Days and Second Manassas. It was during this time that negotiations between the British and the French to develop a plan for intervention were at their most advanced stage. The leading figures in the British government seemed prepared to intervene in the war. At no other time during the war was Britain closer to getting involved.

Why the British never intervened is the most compelling question of Civil War diplomacy. It was not a timidity to become involved in other nations' affairs that prevented British action. Prime Minister Lord Palmerston, the most powerful figure in Britain's foreign policy, had a history of intervening in the affairs of foreign nations. He would not be dissuaded from intervening in a conflict where British national interests were clearly at stake. By the late summer of 1862, the prime minister, and leading figures in the government, believed that the chance to end the war had come. The North had suffered major defeats in Virginia, and gave no indication that it could subdue the South. Britain's commercial and humanitarian interests dictated that the war needed to be stopped.

British non-intervention should not be attributed to a reluctance to ally Britain with a slaveholding power. At the outbreak of the war, both the North and the South denied that the war was about slavery. The Emancipation Proclamation was not the tremendous diplomatic success that some historians have claimed. Many in Britain

viewed it as a desperate measure of a government in serious danger of losing the war, and not as a declaration of an noble crusade against the hated institution of slavery. Moreover, instead of being interpreted as a humanitarian act, it was largely viewed as a vicious, unconscionable attempt to encourage a bloody servile insurrection.

Non-interventions should likewise not be attributed to a reluctance to see the United States divided. There were many individuals in Britain who believed that a divided United States would benefit Great Britain. Until at least the summer of 1863 and perhaps well beyond that, the opinion of many British policymakers was that dissolution was inevitable. Few believed that the North could successfully subdue the armed resistance of such a committed people. This does not suggest, however, that British non-intervention was due to a belief that because Southern independence was inevitable, they did not need British support. Even if the war produced such a result, Great Britain had little desire to see the conflict played out over a protracted period of time.

Nor could British public opinion be deemed responsible for pressuring the government to stay out of the conflict. Though the British public was engrossed by events across the ocean, neither side was able to generate a significant enough advantage in the realm of public opinion to influence the government's foreign policy. During the course of the war, numerous pro-Northern and pro-Southern societies were formed, hundreds of public meetings were held, and thousands of pamphlets were printed, but their effect proved to be inconclusive.

Finally, the notion that skillful Northern diplomacy was primarily responsible for British non-intervention is erroneous. The Northern diplomats were highly skilled and demonstrated the resistance with which any attempt at foreign intervention would be

met, yet they were not influential enough to prevent British intervention, or to keep European nations from violating the Monroe Doctrine. Secretary of State William H. Seward's threats of war against European interlopers might have forestalled any half-hearted attempts at intervention, but they could not have stopped a committed Anglo-French alliance.

Though numerous secondary factors influenced British foreign policy during this period, only one factor can best account for British non-intervention: concerns about the balance of power in Europe. It was this concern, dramatically influenced by the geopolitics of North America, which determined British inaction. In contemplating intervention, Great Britain had to consider the security of Canada. Canadian defenses were extremely weak, and the nation was vulnerable to any attack by the North. Were Britain to intervene, it would have to consider the possibility of an invasion of Canada by Union troops. The European consequences of a war with the Northern government were even more alarming. A major conflict with the United States could leave Britain unable to influence events in Europe which threatened to break up the fifty-year-old balance of power. Napoleon III, emperor of France and reluctant ally of Britain, was deeply involved in the complicated issue of Italian unification. The prospects of a war involving all the major powers of Europe were significant. Neither Great Britain nor France trusted each other. The Anglo-French alliance could not come to an agreement on any form of intervention.

Furthermore, Great Britain had to consider its maritime interests, most importantly its global naval superiority. For commercial reasons, British officials wanted to break the blockade of the Southern ports; but for their global naval strategy, they had

to accept the blockade. The greatest naval power in the world benefited from lax international maritime regulations. Concern over the balance of power in Europe and North America overcame the strong inclination to intervene in the Civil War and end the conflict. Because intervention carried with it such significant international consequences, it became far easier for the British government to maintain a course of strict neutrality and wait for a more decided turn of events in the American Civil War.



## Chapter 1

### The Diplomatic Crises of 1861

The American Civil War caused a great strain in Anglo-American relations, which had improved dramatically since the War of 1812. In the immediate aftermath of the War of 1812, the United States and Great Britain reached some important diplomatic accords. The Rush-Bagot Agreement of 1817 limited the naval forces on the Great Lakes. A year later, the forty-ninth parallel was agreed upon as the border between British Canada and the United States from the Great Lakes to the Rocky Mountains. In general, England avoided hemispheric conflicts with the United States, and the United States stayed out of European affairs. Though the British were disappointed that they were shut out of the Monroe Doctrine, they grudgingly accepted the unilateral declaration. The only serious Anglo-American conflicts of the period involved the disputed Oregon territory, the border between Maine and Canada, and control over a possible canal in Central America that would connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. These disagreements were solved diplomatically. The Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842 settled the border dispute between Maine and Canada. An Anglo-American agreement in 1846 established the forty-ninth parallel as the Northern boundary of the United States all the way to the Pacific Ocean. The Clayton-Bulwer Treaty of 1850 provided for a joint ownership of an Atlantic-Pacific Canal. Friendlier relations between the two nations were linked to economics. During the first half of the nineteenth century,

the economic ties between the two countries dramatically increased. The administration of Andrew Jackson made decisive steps in liberalizing trade between the two nations; and the economic relationship between them grew throughout the following decades.<sup>1</sup> By the eve of the Civil War, Anglo-American relations appeared to be positive.

The outbreak of Civil War in the United States threatened the Northern government abroad as well as at home. The European powers could not remain aloof, treating the conflict as if it were only a minor temporary disturbance. First Great Britain, then France and the rest of Europe, declared neutrality in an effort to protect their legal and commercial interests. Britain and France considered the declaration of neutrality, which conferred belligerent rights upon the Confederacy, an absolute necessity; but the North considered it an unnecessary and hostile action. Both Washington and London adopted a firm stance in diplomatic negotiations over the course of 1861, in an effort to convince the other side that they might be willing to resort to arms to resolve diplomatic disagreements. Diplomatic relations worsened as the year progressed. The two sides clashed over the legality of the proposed Northern blockade. Only British naval interests prevented the issue from boiling over into a major crisis. The failure to come to an agreement on the rights of neutrals as spelled out in the Declaration of Paris, furthered the mistrust which both nations had toward each other. British relations with representatives of the Confederacy caused the Northern government to believe that Britain had no intention of maintaining strict neutrality, and might be prepared to recognize the Confederacy. None of these conflicts became serious enough to suggest that war would break out between the United States and Great Britain, but they all served

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<sup>1</sup>H.C. Allen, *Conflict and Cord: The Anglo-American Relationship Since 1783* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1959), 216-218.

to heighten the tension and mistrust between the two governments. Each side thought the other was trying to start a conflict. This mistrust was largely due to the contentious relationship between U.S. Secretary of State William Seward and Lord Richard Lyons, the British ambassador in Washington.

#### THE DECLARATION OF NEUTRALITY

The Union government viewed the British declaration of neutrality, which granted belligerent rights to the Confederacy, as a diplomatic disaster. Still clinging to hope that all-out war with the South could be avoided, Seward was adamant about avoiding foreign involvement in what he saw as a purely domestic insurrection. Lincoln and his government insisted that Southern secession was illegal, and that it constituted an internal rebellion, not a conflict between two distinct autonomous parties. Foreign interference of any kind could only serve to aid the rebellion. British policymakers thought that an uprising of several million people constituted more than a mere rebellion, and officially proclaimed Britain's neutrality on May 14. Belligerent status conferred a number of rights to the South.<sup>2</sup> The South could solicit loans, contract for arms, send commissioned cruisers to sea, search and seize vessels, bring captured contraband to prize courts, and have Southern banners and its commissioners recognized as representing a quasi-political community.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The very declaration of neutrality automatically grants the status of belligerency.

<sup>3</sup>Stuart L. Bernath, *Squall Across the Atlantic* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1970), 19-20.

The British declared neutrality as a means of protection, not as a means of aiding the South.<sup>4</sup> In British eyes, the United States was in a state of war. The South had formed its own government, and was creating its own army. This was certainly no minor rebellion. As British foreign minister Lord John Russell, told Charles Francis Adams: “In many preceding cases, much less formidable demonstrations had been recognized.”<sup>5</sup> War in America could have serious consequences for both British citizens living in the United States and British commerce. By April, Lincoln had begun planning a massive blockade of the South. Something had to be done to prevent assault on British commerce. By declaring neutrality, thus bringing the conflict under the rules of international law, the British government was protecting both itself and its citizens. British ships could not carry contraband to the warring factions, nor could its citizens aid either side in an non-neutral manner. By clearly defining the limit of intercourse with the two sides, the British government hoped that conflicts between Great Britain and both the North and South could be prevented. The declaration of neutrality did not explicitly benefit the South, as most Northerners claimed. British subjects could not join either army. The South could not purchase or equip its vessels in British ports. With the North already possessing superior manpower, industrial capability, resources, and naval vessels, any restriction on special advantages that might be available to the South abroad was a benefit for the North.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, by setting Great Britain on a path of neutrality

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<sup>4</sup>I have yet to encounter a single historian who has criticized the British for declaring neutrality. The only consistent criticism that historians have made in this matter is that Great Britain failed to understand the American position at all. The British did not realize why this declaration could be viewed so objectionably by the North.

<sup>5</sup>Cited in D.P. Crook, *The North, the South, and the Powers* (Sydney, Australia: John Wiley & Sons, 1974), 80.

<sup>6</sup>Howard Jones, *Union in Peril* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 28.

from the very outset, the British government would have a more difficult legal argument for any future intervention it might contemplate, which would naturally tend to favor one side over the other.

Notwithstanding all this, the Northern government believed that the declaration of neutrality benefited the rebels, and was suspicious of British motives. When news arrived of the British declaration, Washington was stunned. The declaration appeared to be extremely premature and wholly unfriendly to the United States. Adams, arriving in London on the day of the proclamation, was taken aback. "This intelligence startled me not a little," he noted. "Previously to this I had been counting upon the favorable disposition of this government... to the new administration."<sup>7</sup> Adams, like the top officials in Washington, believed that the declaration had only served to encourage the rebellion by giving the rebel the hope that Europe might be willing to intervene on their behalf. Furthermore, many Northern officials believed that the declaration was just the first step toward eventual recognition. They were suspicious of British motives, and worried that Britain had decided that a fractured United States was in its best interest. That the British had not waited for the arrival of Adams before declaring neutrality furthered suspicions at home.<sup>8</sup> News also arrived that Russell had met unofficially with

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<sup>7</sup>Adams Papers, *Charles Francis Adams: Miscellaneous Reminiscences of His Mission to Great Britain, 1861 - 1862*

<sup>8</sup>The Americans believed that Russell had promised outgoing American ambassador George Dallas, that the government would wait before making any major decisions until Adams had arrived. Russell told Adams that he had made no such binding promise. Adams to Seward, Despatch No. 1. State Department of the United States, *Message and Documents part 1 1861 - 1862* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1861), 86. Hereafter, documents from this collection will be designated SDD.

three agents of the Confederacy, something that the North found intolerable.<sup>9</sup> During Adams' first meeting with Russell, the foreign minister promised to consult the Americans in the event that recognition became a possibility. Adams was pleased by this meeting, but felt some trepidation about how the declaration of neutrality would be received in Washington. Here recorded in his diary, "my conclusion... is that the permanency of my stay is by no means certain... should the government take offense, my recall will follow in about three weeks."<sup>10</sup> Adams' mission was off to a rocky start.

## THE BLOCKADE

The implementation of a massive blockade of Southern ports was one of the North's greatest weapons in the Civil War, and potentially one of its greatest diplomatic minefields as far as Europe was concerned. From the onset of the secession crisis in the United States, the British feared that if a civil war were to take place, the North might attempt to interfere with Southern commerce by means of a blockade. Beginning in March, London instructed Lyons to be firm in challenging any measure that might interfere with British commerce in North America. Lyons repeatedly threatened Seward that any interference with Britain's trade in Southern ports would be vehemently protested. On March 20, Lyons told Seward that he "could not answer for what might happen" if the United States attempted to stop British trade with the cotton-growing states. A week later he warned Seward that a blockade "placed Foreign Powers in the

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<sup>9</sup>It was quite common for the foreign minister to meet unofficially with individuals from as yet unrecognized groups. The British could not imagine why this would cause any consternation. Washington was furious, and believed it another piece of evidence that England was preparing to recognize the Confederacy. Crook, 76.

<sup>10</sup>Adams Papers, *The Diary of Charles Francis Adams*. May 18, 1861.

dilemma of recognizing the Southern Confederation, or of submitting to the interruption of their commerce.”<sup>11</sup> Lyonshoped these threats would prevent any implementation of a blockade.

Despite British pressure, the blockade was too important to the Northern cause to be shelved by foreign protest. Following the attack on Fort Sumter, Lincoln issued a proclamation that announced the North’s intent to blockade the entire coastline. Great Britain expressed its willingness to abide by the blockade so long as it was demonstrably operational. Recent international maritime law had established the legality of a blockade as a part of wars so long as it was proven to be effective. The definition of “effective” was somewhat ambiguous, but there had to be a reasonable chance that a vessel running the blockade could be captured. The North had serious problems in this regard. It would take a much larger amount of ships to cut off three thousand miles of coastline than the government in Washington had available. Seward answered British protests that the American force could not carry out an effective blockade by stating that no formal implementation of the blockade had yet been carried out. Lincoln had merely acknowledged his intent to carry out a blockade, but had not yet actually put one in place. Because of the cost of implementing such a blockade, some of the members of Lincoln’s cabinet, including Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, favored summarily closing Southern ports to foreign trade.<sup>12</sup> The ports bill passed Congress and the President approved it. Great Britain vehemently protested what it considered a “paper blockade.”

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<sup>11</sup>Cited in Norman Ferris, *Desperate Diplomacy* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 9.

<sup>12</sup>This maneuver had no real constitutional foundation. The Constitution bans favoring one American port over another. If, as the government insisted, the conflict was a mere internal rebellion, and not a war between two autonomous groups, then closing the ports would be in violation of existing laws. Jones, 49.

Russell instructed Lyon that “any attempt to enforce it by the seizure & confiscation of a neutral ship may be justly regarded as an act of hostility.”<sup>13</sup> Seward, who favored a traditional blockade, avoided an international crisis by convincing Lincoln to avoid closing any ports. Seward reassured Lyon that the bill had only granted the president the right to close any ports if it were absolutely necessary.<sup>14</sup>

The British respected the blockade of the Southern ports because of their own maritime interests. They were reluctant to challenge the legality of the blockade, because they had used it in the past and wanted to maintain a liberal interpretation of the blockade for future naval campaigns. Even if they thought the blockade ineffective, it benefited them to avoid confrontation. Lord Malmesbury, a member of the House of Lords, remarked that “we find that it is wise policy not to enforce that part of the Declaration.”<sup>15</sup> Palmerston wrote to the Queen that “to force them would be an act of war, and would be a departure from principles, which if Great Britain was a belligerent she would be obliged stoutly to maintain and act upon.”<sup>16</sup> In 1861, Britain was not desperate for Southern cotton, and therefore, economically, it had no great motivation to challenge the blockade. So long as British manufacturing could survive without Southern cotton, Britain was prepared to reluctantly observe the Northern blockade. The North was able to put into effect its most important piece of naval strategy, because it was in Great Britain’s naval interests to refrain from challenging it. Had these interests not been so strong, then the

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<sup>13</sup>Ferris, 87.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 89.

<sup>15</sup>Cited in David F. Krein, *The Last Palmerston Government* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1978), 63.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 63.



implementation of the blockade could have sparked a serious crisis between the two countries. The British government was a strong supporter of free trade, and did not take kindly to serious interruptions of its commerce. With neither side likely to back off of this crucial issue, the ingredients for a major conflict were present.

## THE DECLARATION OF PARIS NEGOTIATIONS

Contentious negotiations between Great Britain and the United States over American acceptance of the Declaration of Paris furthered the diplomatic tension between the two nations during the summer of 1861. Signed by Europe's most important naval powers in 1856, the Declaration of Paris sought to resolve some of the most long-standing international maritime disputes. The signing nations agreed to four points. First, privateering was abolished. Second, with the exception of contraband of war, the neutral flag protected enemy goods. Third, with the exception of contraband of war, neutral goods were not liable to capture on enemy vessels. Fourth, in order for blockades to be legally binding, they had to be effective. <sup>17</sup>The United States was not a signatory, having refused to renounce privateering unless all noncontraband private property was protected. The outbreak of the Civil War prompted a shift in American policy. Wartime necessities forced the North to abandon its long-time support for the rights of neutrals at sea. On April 17, Jefferson Davis announced that the Confederacy would be granting letters of marque and reprisal to privateers. Lacking any real navy, the Confederacy hoped that privateers could disrupt Union commerce while they constructed an actual

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<sup>17</sup>The original signatories were: Great Britain, Austria, France, Prussia, Russia, Sardinia, and Turkey. Jones, 39.

navy. Hoping to take away the South's lone naval threat, Seward instructed his ambassador to negotiate for the United States' acceptance of the Declaration of Paris.

Despite Seward's opportunism, and Britain's apparent receptiveness, this stratagem failed. Disagreements over the enforcement of the first provision of the Declaration of Paris were largely responsible for the eventual failure of the negotiations. Both Great Britain and the United States wanted to reach an agreement, but breakdowns in communication and British unease at American motives hampered the talks. While Seward had instructed that negotiations were to take place in the various European capitals, Russell had instructed Lyon to facilitate negotiations in Washington. Definitive negotiations were unable to take place as neither side was absolutely certain who was conducting the official negotiations and what kinds of authority they had.

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Adams was very upset with Russell, whom he thought was responsible for hindering the negotiations, and believed that Great Britain was demonstrating its duplicity: "This indicates either gross inattention or a little double dealing. In either case, it must hereafter be equally guarded against."<sup>19</sup> Though formal negotiations began in July, the two sides failed to reach an accord regarding enforcement of the provision against privateering. The United States was willing to drop its long-standing opposition to the

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<sup>18</sup>The situation was muddled to say the least. Adams proposed negotiations of a formal treaty to Russell. Russell informed him that Lyon was instructed to reach an agreement with Seward, and therefore, negotiations should take place in Washington. Adams decided not to proceed any further unless he received specific instruction to do so from Washington. Upon a subsequent interview, however, Russell told him that Lyon had been authorized only to accept American adherence to the final three provisions of the Declaration of Paris (avoiding any discussion of privateering). Furthermore, Russell failed to inform Adams that Lyon had no authority to enter into a formal treaty. Russell thought that only an exchange of papers was necessary; but the Americans wanted a formal treaty, which could be ratified by the Senate. Adams, therefore, did not press formal negotiations of a treaty in London, and assumed such matters were being taken care of in Washington. This breakdown in communication delayed formal negotiations and greatly frustrated the American government. It was one more reason to distrust British intentions. Ferris, 78.

<sup>19</sup>*The Diary of Charles Francis Adams*, July 10, 1861.

first provision and accept the entirety of the declaration. The British, however, were only interested in gaining American acceptance of the final three provisions. Russell was concerned that the United States would use the treaty to pressure the European powers to combat Confederate privateering. He wrote to Lyon that “her Majesty’s government cannot accept the renunciation of privateering on the part of the government of the United States if coupled with the condition that they should enforce its renunciation on the Confederate States.”<sup>20</sup> The British feared being trapped into openly aiding the United States against the Confederacy at sea. This would compromise their neutrality. Lincoln had vowed to treat the Confederate privateers as pirates; something the British government believed was outrageous. Seward outlined this policy in a dispatch to Adams: “We treat them as pirates. They are our own citizens, or persons employed by our citizens, preying on the commerce of our country.”<sup>21</sup> The government in Washington could not understand the reluctance on the part of the British to enforce the provision of the treaty and thought it further demonstrated that British intentions toward the United States were not of a friendly nature.

British negotiations with the Confederacy for acceptance of neutral rights were far more awkward and threatened to cause major problems with Washington. Seward had frequently stated that any formal contact with the Confederacy was tantamount to recognition and promised that the government would disavow it as a hostile act. The British, anxious to preserve the safety of neutral shipping, desperately wanted the South

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<sup>20</sup>Cited in Ferris, 74–75.

<sup>21</sup>SDD, Seward to Adams, *Dispatch No. 10*, May 21, 1861. His further instructions read: “As to the treatment of privateers in the insurgent service, you will say that this is a question exclusively your own. . . if Great Britain shall choose to recognize them as lawful belligerents and give them shelter from our pursuit and punishment, the laws of nations afford an adequate and proper remedy.”

to accept at least part of the Declaration of Paris. Seward seemed to hint that if talks were done discreetly, he might be inclined to turn a blind eye, but he would not accept such negotiations if forced to formally acknowledge them.<sup>22</sup> Lyons and the French ambassador to Washington, Henri Mercier attempted to conduct surreptitious negotiations by using Robert Bunch, a British consul in Charleston, as the liaison to the Confederate government. Negotiations proved successful as the Confederacy approved Articles Two and Four of the Declaration of Paris.

The plan quickly went awry, however, and a diplomatic crisis ensued. Instead of sending the details of negotiations to Lord Lyons, Bunch entrusted them to a civilian friend, to carry along with private correspondence to Great Britain. The Americans arrested the man, Robert Mure, in New York. Washington was furious. Bunch, a consul, whose responsibilities dealt strictly with commerce, had conducted secret negotiations with the Confederate government, and had given them along with private correspondence to a private citizen. Seward instructed Adam to demand the removal of Bunch, and the return of any treasonous documents. Russell refused to recall Bunch, claiming that the British government had no plans of recognizing the Confederacy as an independent state. Seward protested, and revoked Bunch's *sexequatur*.<sup>23</sup> The acrimony was such that Russell advised Lyons that he should consider retiring to Canada for a while, if Seward chose to use this incident as an excuse to break off relations.<sup>24</sup> Apparently, Seward did not believe the situation warranted further confrontation and gradually toned down his protestations.

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<sup>22</sup>Crook, 88.

<sup>23</sup>An *sexequatur* is a written recognition of authority as a consul given by the government of the United States.

<sup>24</sup>Crook, 89.

The Bunch Affair never seriously threatened to cause a major conflict between Britain and the United States, but it was the latest in a series of diplomatic disputes that increased the tension between the two.

## SEWARD AND LYONS

Much of the friction between Great Britain and the United States during the first months of the Civil War may be attributed to the sometimes hostile relationship between Lord Lyons and Seward. For many years, the leading figure in British foreign policy held contempt for the often bellicose nature of American diplomacy. Lord Palmerston had spent almost half a century dealing with international disputes with the United States. During the 1840's he had written that "with such cunning fellows as these Yankees, it never answers to give way, because they always keep pushing their encroachments as far as they are permitted to do so; and what we dignify by the names of moderation and conciliation, they naturally enough call fear."<sup>25</sup> The best way to deal with the Americans, Palmerston believed, was with the threat of force. Seward was one of the few individuals in Lincoln's government with whom the British were familiar. Many thought him to be the most powerful figure in the government, and feared that he might be inclined to cause a quarrel with Britain.<sup>26</sup> Lyons's dispatches to England during the first months of the Civil War reaffirmed this image of the American secretary of state. Lyons thought

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<sup>25</sup>Cited in Ferris, 15.

<sup>26</sup>Britons were not alone in thinking Seward the most powerful man in the government. The American author of a pamphlet that criticized Seward's "restless ambition" claimed that Seward was trying to dominate the government. "Mr. Seward evidently thinks that a Secretary of State is, the paragon of other countries, a 'Prime Minister,' a 'Premier,' a 'First Lord of the Treasury,' and that a Prime Minister is something in foreign affairs which absorbs or controls all government functions. This un-American, unconstitutional theory crops out very often in the volume of his pet dispatches." William B. Reed, *Review of Mr. Seward's Diplomacy. By a Northern Man* (Philadelphia, PA: 1862), 6-7.

Seward was “a vapouring blustering ignorant man,” and thought it was “not at all unlikely that either from foolish and uncalculating arrogance and self-sufficiency or from political calculation Mr. Seward may bring on a quarrel with us.”<sup>27</sup> While Russell doubted that Seward would be foolish enough to deliberately provoke a major conflict, he was still dismayed that the secretary of state had turned out to be “so reckless and ruthless.”<sup>28</sup>

Lyons portrayed himself as doing everything in his power to soften the attitude of the war-mongering Seward, while still exerting the necessary amount of pressure to ensure that the United States knew that Great Britain would strongly react to any American threat to its commercial interests. The British government took Lyons' words as an accurate portrayal of Seward. Evidence of this is clear in Adams' account of a conversation he had with Palmerston. “He intimated that [Seward's] way of doing things towards Lord Lyons had been ungracious and unpleasant,” Adams recorded. “I said in reply that I wondered at this, for that I believed Mr. Seward was not disposed to be offensive, and his temper was mild and conciliatory.”<sup>29</sup> Subsequently, Adams wrote a letter to Seward in which he expressed concern about the negative effect his dealings with Lyons were having.<sup>30</sup>

It was not only Lord Lyons who was increasing Britain's distrust for Seward, but political opponents of Seward at home, most notably Charles Sumner. Sumner, a Massachusetts senator and political enemy of Seward, was perhaps the most widely

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<sup>27</sup>Cited in Ferris, 17.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 16.

<sup>29</sup>*The Diary of Charles Francis Adams*, June 1, 1861.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., June 21, 1861.

respected American politician in Great Britain. He had many British contacts, and they took seriously his alarmist portrayal of Seward. Adams wrote the secretary of state in early June, warning him of the impact Sumner's private correspondence was likely to have in Great Britain. <sup>31</sup> Sumner reinforced the popular idea that Seward was a war mongerer. Lyon saw Sumner as a potential ally against Seward's overtly aggressive diplomacy. He wrote to Russell that "no greater service could be rendered to the cause of peace" than to make Sumner aware of the danger Seward's combative attitude was having to Anglo-American relations. <sup>32</sup> Some of Seward's diplomats were not helping to soften his image. Several of the newly appointed American ambassadors to the European capitals, arrived with patriotic vigor, and made some less than diplomatic statements. Cassius Clay, the new ambassador to St. Petersburg wrote a letter to the *Times of London* in which he threatened that Great Britain could not afford to turn its back on the Union cause. He warned about antagonizing Britain's best trading partner, and a nation which in half a century would have 100 million people. Surely England was not so confident in its security so "as to venture, now in our need, to plant the seeds of revenge ... if she is just, she ought not," Clay pontificated. "If she is honorable and magnanimous, she cannot. If she is wise she will not." <sup>33</sup> To many Europeans, this was just another example of American arrogance.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., June 1, 1861.

<sup>32</sup> Ferris, 57.

<sup>33</sup> Cited in Ferris, 60. In Paris, he claimed that should England side with the South, France would join the North in striking down the power which had destroyed both the empires of Napoleon and Louis XIV. In an ultimate statement of frighteous indignation towards individuals who claimed he had threatened Great Britain he said, "I am not in the habit of casting about me to see how I may make truth most palatable. Let those who stand in the way of truth look out." p. 61

The conflict between Seward and Lyons escalated the tension that was already inherent in early Civil War diplomacy. The United States was determined to prevent foreign intervention, even if it meant threatening war. The British government believed that the surest way to protect British interests was through a hard-line policy toward interference with their commerce. In and of itself, this would be enough to create a tense diplomatic environment. The portrayal of Seward as an anti-British war-monger by Lyons and Sumner had a further negative impact on Anglo-American diplomacy. Undoubtedly, Seward was not the most conciliatory statesman, and he did display an undiplomatic manner at times, but he was certainly not the hostile individual he was made out to be in Great Britain. Ultimately, Seward's goal was to prevent a foreign war at all costs. He confided to Adams:

However otherwise I may at any time have been understood, it has been an earnest and profound solicitude to avoid foreign war; that alone has prompted the emphatic and sometimes, perhaps, impassioned remonstrances I have hitherto made against any former measure of recognition against the insurgents by the government of Great Britain.<sup>34</sup>

A fundamental misunderstanding governed the diplomacy of the first months of the American Civil War. Great Britain could not understand the impassioned insistence of the United States government that the situation be treated as if it were a domestic conflict, rather than a war between two autonomous groups. By restricting it to a domestic affair, the United States would cut off any hope that the South had for foreign interference. The North viewed the British declaration of neutrality as a crippling blow for its foreign policy, and the first step toward eventual recognition of the Confederacy. When combined with reports that the British were in contact with Confederate envoys, it

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<sup>34</sup>SDD, Seward to Adams, *Dispatch No. 42*, July 21, 1861.



appeared to some Northern policymakers that the British were prepared to use the split in the American Union to its own advantage. The United States, therefore, could not understand that for the British, the declaration of neutrality was simply a legal matter, designed to guarantee the safety of British commerce and citizens from getting involved in a major international conflict. This was not the first step in a plan for ultimate recognition of the Confederacy; rather, it was an acknowledgment of what seemed obvious to the British: That the conflict in the United States was not a mere domestic disturbance, but a full-scale war. Because of these fundamental misunderstandings, and the contentious relationship between Seward and Lyons, the distrust between the two sides steadily grew during the first few months of the Civil War. Each side firmly believed the other had hostile intentions. No one particular incident during this period was significant enough to seriously threaten the outbreak of war between Great Britain and the United States, but they served to dramatically heighten the tension between the two countries. It is this very tension and mutual distrust that explain how a relatively minor incident such as the Trent Affair became such a serious crisis.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE TRENT AFFAIR

Of the many significant wartime disputes between the United States and Britain, none came closer to bringing the two nations to war than the Trent Affair. During the tense month of December 1861, Britain hastily prepared for a possible war in North America as the Union government debated releasing the Confederate diplomats it had imprisoned. The crisis had as much to do with national honor as it did with international maritime law. The incident which spawned the international crisis was relatively minor; but tension between the two nations that had been increasing during the first months of the war, and a rush to defend national honor, caused the incident to reach crisis-level proportions. Fortunately, the capitulation of Lincoln's government prevented a war that would have been disastrous for the Union. The North could not wage a war with both Great Britain and the Confederacy at the same time. Despite its diplomatic settlement, the Trent Affair had been a serious threat to Anglo-American relations.

THE MISSION

On the evening of October 11, 1861, two Confederate emissaries, James Mason and John Slidell, as well as their two aides, James Macfarland, and George Eustis, slipped out of Charleston harbor, past Union blockading vessels and headed towards Nassau.<sup>35</sup> From Nassau, the emissaries sailed to Havana, Cuba where they awaited a British mail steamer which would take them to St. Thomas. From St. Thomas, they would travel on to Southampton, England. Mason and Slidell were to be the South's two most important diplomats in Europe, charged with the task of convincing the European governments to officially recognize the Confederacy and end the Union blockade. Mason was to be the Confederate representative in England, Slidell the representative in France.

The Northern government was anxious to prevent the emissaries and their dispatches from ever reaching Europe. The government erroneously believed that Britain and France, having formerly acknowledged the belligerent status of the South, were considering formal recognition. News of Mason and Slidell's departure reached Washington on October 15. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles issued orders to send out a vessel and intercept the Confederate steamer *Nashville* before it reached Great Britain. Unknown to Welles, the Confederate emissaries were not on a Southern ship,

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<sup>35</sup>Norman B. Ferris, *The Trent Affair: A Diplomatic Crisis* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 7-8. Mason had been a U.S. senator from Virginia for fourteen years. Slidell, a native of Louisiana, had also been a senator. He had far more diplomatic experience than Mason, having been sent by Polk in 1845 to try to resolve disputes with the Mexican government. William H. Russell, special correspondent of *The Times of London* to Washington called Slidell "one of the most determined disunionists...subtle, full of device, and of a fond of intrigue", and predicted that while in prison at Fort Warren he "would conspire with the mice against the cats sooner than not conspire at all." Cited in Jones, 83.

but a British vessel. U.S. Naval Commander John B. Marchant sets sail with his ship the *James Adger* on a futile mission. <sup>36</sup>

## THE CAPTURE

Captain Charles D. Wilkes, the man at the center of the controversy surrounding the Trent Affair, was sent in early 1861 to the coast of Africa to take the command of the U.S.S. *San Jacinto*. Though ordered to return her to the Philadelphia Naval Yard for repairs and refitting, Wilkes, anxious for combat, sailed her along the coast of Africa for almost a month, in the hope that he would encounter a Confederate privateer. <sup>37</sup> Wilkes then headed toward the West Indies where he hoped to sink the Confederate commerce raider *Sumter*. After touching down at Cienfuegos on the southern coast of Cuba, he learned that Mason and Slidell had arrived in Havana and would soon be en route to Europe. Wilkes arrived in Havana on October 30, and learned of the envoy's planned voyage on the British mail -steamer *Trent*. He decided on a daring plan to intercept the *Trent* and seize the diplomats and their dispatches. After a brief study of several books available to him on international maritime law, Wilkes convinced himself that he had the

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<sup>36</sup>Ferris, 9. Mason and Slidell had initially planned to sail on the *Nashville*, but this plan was abandoned in favor of a vessel with shallower depth which could sail close to shore, and more easily evade the Northern blockade. Confused reports of their escape had come out in Northern newspapers.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 18 -19. Wilkes, sixty -two, had won fame early in his career as a scientist and Antarctic explorer. He was not given important commands and denied promotion in the years leading up to the Civil War because of his reputation for insubordination and his ill -temper. Historian Gordon H. Warren calls him: "cocky, headstrong, aware of his abilities, and blind to his imperfections," and notes that he "demanded slavish obedience, and overreacted when he felt his position challenged." Gordon H. Warren, *Fountain of Dis content* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1981), 11.

right not only to capture the dispatches but the ambassadors as well, whom he deemed “the embodiment of despatches.”<sup>38</sup>

The *San Jacinto* encountered the *Trent* in the Bahama Channel, 300 miles east of Havana, on November 8. Wilkes’ executive officer D.M. Fairfax boarded the vessel and demanded the surrender of the envoys, their baggage, and their dispatches. After arresting the envoys, he requested permission to search the vessel, but was denied. Fairfax could have taken command of her as a prize, but feared doing so would prompt far greater British indignation. He and the boarding party returned to the *San Jacinto* with the four prisoners, but without the valuable dispatches.<sup>39</sup> Fairfax convinced Wilkes that placing a large prize crew on the *Trent* would render him unable to take part in an imminent Union naval attack on Port Royal, South Carolina. Furthermore, it would inconvenience many “innocent persons” on board the vessel to take it back to Key West as a prize of war.<sup>40</sup> Wilkes agreed, and allowed the *Trent* to continue its voyage. Ironically, it was this peaceful gesture that became the death knell of all American legal claims in the ensuing furor over the Trent Affair. Wilkes sailed north, stopping to refuel in Hampton Roads, Virginia, and arrived at Fort Warren, located eight miles from Boston, on the morning of November 24.<sup>41</sup> By then, Washington had received his

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<sup>38</sup>Crook, 104. His first officer, D. MacNiell Fairfax objected and urged him to consult Judge Marvin, a maritime law authority who resided in Key West. Wilkes, having made up his mind, refused.

<sup>39</sup>Mason had ordered his secretary to give his dispatch bag to the mail agent on board the steamer, to tell him the nature of the contents, and to ask him to lock it up, so as to prevent it from being seized. Ferris, 22. The agent’s deliberate harboring of the dispatches of a belligerent power may have been a violation of British neutrality. This fact was lost in the ensuing furor over the seizure of the envoys.

<sup>40</sup>Ferris, 26.

<sup>41</sup>While on board the *San Jacinto* and held in Fort Warren, the captured Confederate envoys were treated like distinguished guests, as opposed to prisoners of war.

official report of the incident, and the public was celebrating his military “triumph.” The reaction in Great Britain would not be so joyous.

## THEREACTION

The immediate Northern reaction to the capture of Mason and Slidell was jubilant. The North had been humiliated at the Battle of Bull Run and Confederate commerce raiders and privateers were inflicting considerable losses at sea. Northerners were desperate for a victory of any kind, and they instantly seized upon Wilkes’ bold move.<sup>42</sup> A writer from the *Boston Transcript* claimed that the capture of the envoys “was one of those bold strokes by which the destinies of nations are determined.” Wilkes had “dealt a heavy blow—at the very vital of the conspiracy threatening our national existence.”<sup>43</sup> Writing almost fifty years after the incident, Charles Francis Adams Jr. concluded:

Speaking generally, I think I do not remember in the whole course of the half-century’s Retrospect—equal to the period which elapsed between the surrender at Yorktown and the presidency of Andrew Jackson—any occurrence in which the American people were so completely swept off their feet, for the moment losing possession of their senses, as during the weeks which immediately followed the seizure of Mason and Slidell.<sup>44</sup>

Boston greeted Wilkes with loud congratulations upon his arrival. Over two thousand people attended a reception for him at Faneuil Hall. Mayor Joseph Wightman praised

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<sup>42</sup> Charles Francis Adams Jr. wrote that “the community, in a state of the highest possible tension, was constantly hoping for a successful coup somewhere and by someone executed in its behalf.” Charles Francis Adams Jr., *The Trent Affair: An Historical Retrospect* (Boston, 1912), 5.

<sup>43</sup> Ferris, 32. Northern papers called Mason “a knave,” a “coward,” a “bull,” a “snob,” a “pompous, conceited, shallow traitor.” Slidell was labeled as “cold, cruel, selfish,” and “the most accomplished soundrel, and ablest engineer of conspiracy in all the South.”<sup>32</sup> -33.

<sup>44</sup> Adams Jr., 5.

Wilkes' "sagacity, judgment, decision, and firmness." <sup>45</sup>For a moment, even leading Bostonians familiar with maritime law, got swept up in the fervor, and insisted that Wilkes' act had legal sanction. Edward Everett, a veteran of local, national, and international politics was convinced of the legality of Wilkes' actions. The United States District Attorney for Massachusetts, Richard Henry Dana Jr., declared that the *Trent* was a "lawful prize." <sup>46</sup>For a brief period, many Northerners became "experts" on international maritime law. They debated and discussed legal precedents, and many were convinced that the British could not challenge an action which "clearly" had legal standing. The British consul in Boston reported that the average citizen was "walking around with a Law Book under his arm and proving the right of the *Ss. Jacinto* [sic] to stop *H.M.'s* mailboat." <sup>47</sup>

As quickly as public fervor had been aroused, it began to wane. Newspapers reported that many of the precedents which had been proclaimed in public were erroneous or inapplicable. Many individuals were concerned as to how the British would react to such a bold maritime maneuver. The indignant reactions of British Canada, British subjects in Central America and the West Indies, and Englishmen residing in the United States indicated that Great Britain might respond with violent outrage. <sup>48</sup>The *New York Herald*, a traditionally Anti-British newspaper predicted that "it is more than

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<sup>45</sup>Warren, 27. The following day, Wilkes attended a banquet where numerous influential Bostonians spoke for five hours discussing the seizure and praising Wilkes.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>47</sup>Ferris, 33. A visiting Englishman noted that within twenty-four hours of learning of the capture of the envoys, lawyers rushed to provide justification, with the populace following suit until "every man and every woman in Boston were armed with precedents."

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 35.

probable that the government will do as I vow the proceedings, apologise for it, promising never to do it again, and perhaps reprimand the naval officer for permitting his zeal to outstrip his discretion.”<sup>49</sup> Horace Greeley, influential editor of the *Daily Tribune*, suggested that the Washington government could release the prisoners, while at the same time, reaffirming age-old American maritime policy that championed neutral maritime rights against search and seizure.<sup>50</sup> American public opinion was by no means unanimous on the subject, and a strong British reaction could temper the initial jubilation.<sup>51</sup> Just what the Washington government would do if challenged by Great Britain remained unknown.

The British Foreign Office had been well aware of the possibility that a Northern captain might attempt to seize the Confederate envoy off of a neutral vessel. Early in November, 1861, the Northern warship *James Adger* arrived in Southampton, England. The presence of the vessel alarmed British intelligence, which believed it was waiting to intercept the West Indian mail packet on which the Confederate ambassadors were rumored to be arriving. Lord Palmerston requested that the Foreign Office consult crown legal officials to determine the legality of a seizure of ambassadors and their dispatches on board a neutral vessel in international waters. On November 12, Palmerston requested

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<sup>49</sup>Crook, 112.

<sup>50</sup>Ferris, 34.

<sup>51</sup>Historians differ as to the duration or unanimity of public support for Wilkes. All agree that there was a dramatic outburst within the first few days, but some like Norman Ferris and D.P. Crook have argued that there was concern of the legality from the very beginning, which quickly grew over the following weeks. Ferris 33-36 and Crook, 111-112. Gordon Warren argues that this period of jubilant support lasted somewhat longer, until the British reaction was known. Warren, 45-46. It tends to agree with Ferris and Crook, but concedes Warren's point that this initial reaction may have influenced Lincoln in his desire to hold onto the envoys despite British protests.



a surprise meeting with Adams to discuss the situation. <sup>52</sup>In his notes on the meeting Adams indicated that Palmerston was uncertain of the legality of such a seizure; yet even if it were proved to be legal, the prime minister did not believe it would be worth the trouble. Palmerston implied that “it was surely of no consequence whether one or two more men were added to the two or three who had already been on long here. They would scarcely make a difference in the action of the government after once having made up its mind.” <sup>53</sup>Palmerston was presenting a point of great importance. The seizure of envoys off of a British vessel, whether it were legal or not, would cause a major stir in England, and the enforcement of a maritime right was not worth the trouble it would cause in the relations between the two countries. <sup>54</sup>Mason and Slidell would not be received officially, and their presence in Europe would do nothing to change British policy. Adams put Palmerston’s concern to rest, stating that the instructions for the *James Adger* were to pursue an enemy vessel and did not allow for an action against a neutral one. After the meeting concluded, the prime minister quickly wrote a letter to the editor of the *Times of London* that said Adams had given him a “very satisfactory explanation.” <sup>55</sup>

The subsequent British reaction to these seizures showed that it had indeed caused more trouble than it needed to. When news of Wilkes’s arrest arrived on September 27,

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<sup>52</sup>In his six months in London, Adams had dealt exclusively with Foreign Minister Russell; consequently, the request for a meeting from Palmerston came as a complete surprise to Adams.

<sup>53</sup>Adams Jr., 22.

<sup>54</sup>Ferris points out that this kind of argument, based on “politics” not principle traditionally bothered Americans like Adams who thought that the former was an important factor in such a discussion was the right of principle, not political concerns. Ferris, 15.

<sup>55</sup>Ferris, 16.

there was an immediate uproar in Great Britain. Many British officials concluded that Wilkes had acted under orders from the federal government.<sup>56</sup> There was an almost universal outcry against the act in the British press and in public opinion. One American in London wrote to Seward, "There never was within memory such a burst of feeling... The people are frantic with rage, and were the country polled, I fear 999 men out of a thousand would declare for immediate war."<sup>57</sup> Britons rushed to defend their national honor. The *London Chronicle* wrote that England had been "piratically outraged" and that the attack on the British flag "must not go unavenged." The *Times of London* called the seizure a "wanton folly" by an "imbecile" government in Washington.<sup>58</sup> A member of Parliament declared that if the United States did not atone for this national insult, the British flag should be "torn into shreds and sent to Washington for the use of the Presidential water-closets."<sup>59</sup> John Bright, one of the strongest Union sympathizers in Britain noted that "the ignorant and passionate and 'Rule Britannia' class are angry and insolent as usual."<sup>60</sup> It is important to note that contrary to what some historians have asserted, news of the euphoric reaction to the incident received in the North did not have a dramatic impact on the British reaction to the Trent Affair.<sup>61</sup> The British government and

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<sup>56</sup>Crook, 124. Testimony to the contrary was available to the British. Slidell's wife and daughter told reporters that Lt. Fairfax had insisted that Wilkes was acting on his own initiative. Wilkes' declaration that the act alone did not arrive in England until December 2, after the British government had decided on a course of action.

<sup>57</sup>Cited in Jones, 83-84.

<sup>58</sup>Cited in Ferris, 47.

<sup>59</sup>Cited in Warren, 105.

<sup>60</sup>Cited in Crook, 125.

<sup>61</sup>Ephraim D. Adams, author of perhaps the most recognized survey of Anglo-American relations during the Civil War, claimed that news of the American reaction greatly influenced the British reaction.

the general public were already quite indignant, even before news of the positive Northern reaction arrived.

## THE DIPLOMACY

The British government scrambled to come up with an immediate response to the seizure of the envoys. Palmerston was furious, believing that the American government had intended this “deliberate and premeditated insult” to provoke a quarrel with Great Britain. Russell demanded a strong reply, and warned the prime minister that the Americans were “very dangerous people to run away from.”<sup>62</sup> On November 28, the British crown law officers declared that Wilkes’ action was illegal because he had failed to seize the vessel as a prize of war and bring it to a prize court to adjudicate the matter. The fourteen-member British cabinet met the following day and agreed that the Americans should return the envoys immediately and apologize for insulting the British flag.<sup>63</sup> The cabinet ordered Lord Lyons to withdraw the legation, and return to London, if Washington refused to agree to the British terms. The harsh tone of the dispatch to be prepared for Lyons was softened by Prince Albert, who along with the Queen was most concerned with maintaining friendly relations with the United States.<sup>64</sup> The Prince’s note gave the Washington government the benefit of the doubt, stating that “Her Majesty’s

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Ephraim D. Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War* vol. I (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1957), 218.

<sup>62</sup>Jones, 84.

<sup>63</sup>Crook, 127. Despite Gladstone’s objection that Britain should first hear what the Americans had to say before withdrawing Lyons, the proposal left no room for an American counter-argument.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 132. The Prince consort spent much of the night of the 30<sup>th</sup> working on a revised draft that was less likely to offend the Americans, while at the same time, satisfying British demands. It was to be the sickly prince’s last work, as he collapsed on December 2 and died on December 14 from typhoid.

Government are unwilling to believe that the United States Government intended wantonly to put an insult on this country.”<sup>65</sup> Following Albert’s lead, the cabinet met again on December 1, and approved a revised, less threatening note. The next day, the *Europa* left England, carrying the vital dispatch. Though there was a possibility of peaceful resolution to the crisis, the threat of serious conflict remained acute. Lyons was instructed to give the Americans seven days to respond once the note was formally presented. Russell told Lyons that “what we want, is a plain Yes or a plain No to our very simple demands.”<sup>66</sup> A refusal to comply could sever diplomatic ties with Britain.

While the ultimatum was en route to Washington, the British prepared for a possible war against the United States. The British government sent reinforcements to Canada. Palmerston lobbied the War Office that previously planned reductions in military spending for 1862 had to be reconsidered. Earlier in the year Palmerston and Lyons had lobbied for a greater British military presence in Canada, but these plans had been rejected by Parliament because of a lack of resources and the belief that British interests in Canada would not be threatened. Palmerston wrote that “relations with Seward & Lincoln are so precarious, that it seems to me that it would be inadvisable to make any reduction in the amount of our military force.”<sup>67</sup> The War Office debated the best strategy for conducting a campaign against the North. A number of high-ranking British officials thought the likelihood of war was probable. Among them were Palmerston, Lyons, and War Secretary Corewall Lewis, who wrote that “the present aspect of affairs

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<sup>65</sup>Cited in Crook, 133.

<sup>66</sup>Cited in Jones, 125.

<sup>67</sup>Cited in Ferris, 44.

seem to me to be inevitable war.”<sup>68</sup> The British foreign office was particularly concerned with what it saw as an alarming increase in American purchases of salt peter as well as other materials necessary to wage war. These purchases were coincidental, but the British government had no way of knowing this.<sup>69</sup> On November 29, the Crown prohibited the export of all “gunpowder, salt peter, nitrate of soda, and brimstone.”<sup>70</sup>

If many in the British government were concerned that war would break out, Charles Francis Adams and his son Henry were certain of it. When first notified of Wilkes’ action, the elder Adams remarked that this affair “would do more for the Southerner than ten victories, for it touches John Bull’s honor, and the honor of his flag.”<sup>71</sup> Upset that he could do nothing to ease the crisis and believing that Seward would not back down, Adams wrote Edward Everett that “I fully expect now that my recall or my passports will be in my hands by the middle of January.”<sup>72</sup> Henry Adams wrote his

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<sup>68</sup>Cited in Ferris, 45. When told of potential American complacency, Lewis remarked that “we shall soon iron the smile out of their face.” Cited in Crook, 135.

<sup>69</sup>Warren, 112. At the outbreak of the Civil War, the American War Department had less than 2,000 tons of salt peter, the primary ingredient in gunpowder. This supply could last for only about six months. Most gunpowder manufacturers had to buy salt peter from India. By the fall of 1861, supplies were dwindling, and the Northern government feared that British sympathy for the Confederacy might lead them to abandon its cash-and-carry policy. With this in mind, Lamont DuPont was immediately dispatched to Europe to acquire all the salt peter that was available for sale in Great Britain. The Trent Affair threatened war, and the British government, already believing that Seward might be trying to start a war, was determined to prevent further sales of these war materials to the United States. Palmerston thought that it would be “a most unfortunate and a most foolish policy to let those whom we may soon be our enemies... go on extracting from our warehouses and workshops the means to make war, against us.” Warren, 114.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 114. This ban also affected pending shipments to Russia, Italy, and the Confederacy. The embargo did not stop the American minister to Belgium, Henry S. Sanford from obtaining large amounts of guns and salt peter. He simply transferred his government funds from London to Paris banks; and bought them much needed supplies in Antwerp and Hamburg. He also planned to smuggle more guns out of England by paying “a good fee” to the customs officer.

<sup>71</sup>Cited in Jones, 85.

<sup>72</sup>Cited in Ferris, 48–49. Due to poor communication, Adams did not hear anything about the incident from Washington until December 11.

brother that “our position is hopeless.”<sup>73</sup> He could not believe that Americans didn’t realize that this action would have serious consequences, complaining: “What a bloody set of fools they are! How in the name of all that’s conceivable could you suppose that England would sit quiet under such an insult. We should have jumped out of our boots at such a one.”<sup>74</sup>

While the diplomats in London anxiously waited, Washington debated the proper course of action. Lincoln seemed initially to favor some form of arbitration, a proposal that was suggested by several prominent Northern sympathizers in Britain as well as by Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner. Sumner recommended Prussia, or “three learned publicists of the Continent” to arbitrate the dispute.<sup>75</sup> Lincoln desperately wanted to preserve national honor, and thought that to give up the prisoners solely because the British threatened retribution would provoke public outrage. Seward, realizing that the British were in no mood for arbitration, thought it better to simply give in to their demands. He lobbied the cabinet for days to release the prisoners and apologize. On December 26, the cabinet recommended that Lincoln free the men. The President decided to heed the advice of his cabinet and told Seward that “I found I could not make an argument that would satisfy my own mind, and that proved to me your ground was the right one.”<sup>76</sup>

Seward now had the onerous task of crafting a reply to the British that would preserve national honor while complying with their demands. His reply was well

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<sup>73</sup>Cited in Warren, 118.

<sup>74</sup>Cited in Jones, 89.

<sup>75</sup>Crook, 156.

<sup>76</sup>Jones, 93.

received by the American public but has been frequently criticized by historians. Seward denied that the United States had done anything wrong, and stated that the release of the prisoners was part of the nation's lengthy history of defending the rights of neutrals. Wilkes' act was wrong, not because he seized the ambassadors from a neutral vessel, but because he had failed to bring the *Trent* to a prize court to adjudicate the matter. Seward acknowledged with satisfaction that the British had finally come around to the American position of respecting neutral rights during wartime. To emphasize that he was not capitulating to British pressure, he stated that the "waning proportions" of the insurrection allowed for the prisoners to be safely released, but that "if the safety of the Union required the detention of the captured persons, it would be the right and duty of this government to detain them."<sup>77</sup> Most historians agree that Seward's argument did not rest on solid legal ground, and have criticized several aspects of the declaration. Gordon Warren criticizes Seward's failure to prove that non-military personnel could be taken off of a neutral vessel heading for a neutral port. Howard Jones notes that by using the terms *neutrality* and *contraband*, Seward was forced to concede the belligerency of the Confederates, something that had caused great enmity between Britain and the United States for much of 1861. Charles Francis Adams Jr. lamented what he perceived to be an abandonment of true American maritime principles in favor of the British "high-handed" and "arrogant" policies.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Cited in Crook, 161.

<sup>78</sup> Warren criticizes Seward for linking Mason and Slide to the hated practice of impressments. He also recalls Seward's reply as "monumental to illogic." Warren, 184. Charles Francis Adams Jr. thought that "the Seward letter was inadequate to the occasion. A possible move of unsurpassed brilliancy on the international chessboard had, almost unseen, been permitted to escape us." Adams Jr., 44. These criticisms, are in many respects, quite valid. Seward's reply was not legally viable nor brilliantly argued. I tend to agree with Ferris, however, when he writes that the importance of Seward's reply was not in its legalistic function, it "lacked the essential elements of a good legal brief — logic, consistency, and the force

On January 8, 1862, the Foreign Office received word of the surrender of the diplomats, and both nations breathed a sigh of relief, although narrowly averting a far more serious crisis. Mason and Slidell arrived in Southampton on January 29, where they would begin the onerous task of trying to persuade the nations of Europe to extend recognition to the Confederate States of America.

### WHY THE OUTRAGE?

In 1862, Count Agénor de Gasparin, a prominent Swiss liberal and supporter of the Union, published a book describing European attitudes toward the United States. At the end of the work, he took up the recently resolved *Trent* Affair. While acknowledging that Wilkes' action was illegal, he launched a major attack against the British government for taking a relatively minor incident, and blowing it so far out of proportion that war was only narrowly averted. Gasparin emphasized that the British were guilty of far greater violations of neutral rights than this incident, which had caused such mass consternation. Gasparin noted that "she has seized sailors when in suite of her on board American ships, hesitating neither to arrest individuals nor to render her naval officers supreme judges in the matter... Let us cease to pretend that the act of Captain Wilkes is an enormity without equal."<sup>79</sup> He further criticized England for displaying a lack of sensible diplomacy by condemning the American government before it had even heard their version of the

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of authority", but as a political and diplomatic document. Ferris, *Desperate Diplomacy*, 183. He argues that its intention was to convince the president, cabinet, and the American public that yielding to the British was the proper course of action. As a diplomatic document, it was designed to avoid an Anglo-American War.

<sup>79</sup>Count Agénor de Gasparin, *America Before Europe: Principles and Interests* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1862), 134-135.



events. Gasparin's work poses an important question: Why did Great Britain react so strongly to a violation of neutral rights at sea?

The *Trent* Affair was largely the culmination of a growing mistrust between London and Washington that had developed over the course of 1861. Failing to understand the motivations behind the declaration of neutrality, Washington was furious at the British for what it perceived as an action that served to keep the rebellion alive. The activities of the European powers in San Domingo and Mexico suggested to many Americans that the European powers might exploit American weakness by reestablishing a foothold in North America. Conversely, the British were very concerned by Seward's often brash rhetoric, and believed that the American Secretary of State would be more than willing to provoke a conflict with the British government. Seward had indeed considered whether a war with Europe might serve to reunite the North and South in the early months of 1861.

The individual most responsible for creating the image of Seward as a war monger and something of a loose cannon was Lord Lyons. In numerous dispatches to England, he complained of Seward's brashness and recommended Britain be prepared for a possible serious conflict with the United States. During May and June of 1861, Lyons had recommended an increased military presence in North America to discourage Seward from pursuing a threatening course of action. Lyons reminded Palmerston that he had long "been in constant apprehension of some violent proceeding on the part of this government towards Great Britain, which would render the maintenance of friendly relations between the two countries no longer possible."<sup>80</sup> The ambassador, not unlike

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<sup>80</sup>Ferris, 54.

many Europeans, had long shown disdain for the American government and thought it largely ruled by the “mob.” As he told Palmerston in October of 1861, “Here the government was in the hands of what are recalled in America ‘politicians.’ men in general of second rate station and ability, who aim at little more than at divining and pandering to the feeling of the mob of voters.”<sup>81</sup>

The Trent Affair demonstrated this criticism to be unfounded. As Gasparin remarked, “A government has been found at Washington, little resembling the picture that had been drawn for us, and a people, for the whole must be confessed, much more sensible and more fully master of itself than has been pretended.”<sup>82</sup> Seward’s political enemies at home and his diplomatic counterparts abroad helped create a vision of the secretary of state as a rash, dangerous figure, who had little regard for polite diplomacy.<sup>83</sup> It is in this light that one can understand the belief of many in Britain that Wilkes had acted under orders from the Washington government to deliberately seize the envoys, and provoke a conflict with Great Britain.

It is difficult to ascertain just how serious the threat of a war breaking out between Great Britain and the United States over the Trent Affair was. On one level, the

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<sup>81</sup> Norman B. Ferris, *Desperate Diplomacy* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 199.

<sup>82</sup> Gasparin, 150.

<sup>83</sup> This is the basic contention of Norman Ferris, who I believe best portrays Seward’s diplomacy. Seward’s detractors point to his bellicose rhetoric and veiled threat to start a war with Europe during the first months of the year, as evidence that Britain had good reason to be wary of the American Secretary of State. Indeed, Seward did not appear to be the ideal choice for the position. As a Congressman, he was noted for his impassioned rhetoric and confrontational style. In regard to America’s possible territorial expansion into Canada and Mexico, however, he did not differ dramatically from many individuals of the period who thought that such expansion was an inevitability. Contrary to what was believed in Britain at the time, he did not promote forceful annexation of any new territory, (something his political enemies at home had insisted). For me, Seward’s record of pragmatic compromise in international disputes during the Civil War is clear evidence that his knack for peaceful diplomacy far outweighs his questionable reputation.

likelihood of the North having gone to war with Britain seems remote. Unlike Britain, which sent troops to Canada and naval vessels to the Caribbean, the North never made any preparations for a war with Britain. Washington quickly capitulated in the face of a British ultimatum. How could the Union, already at war with the Confederacy, be dragged into a war with the world's greatest naval power, over an inconsequential maritime incident?

The answer lies in the diplomacy of 1861. Both American and British foreign policy during the first year of the war emphasized the threat of force. Northern policymakers believed that the best way to keep Europe from intervening in the Civil War was by threatening to go to war with any nation whose much-shined hat the conflict resembled something more than a minor internal rebellion. In order to defeat the secessionists, they believed, one had to convince the "traitors" that no European assistance would be forthcoming. The threat of force was the North's greatest deterrent against intervention. The British, likewise, believed that the only way to prevent American aggression was with the threat of force. British officials thought veiled threats of being willing to do whatever it took to keep regular commercial relations with the South open, might force the North to keep the Southern coast open to British commerce. The aggressive tone that characterized the diplomacy of 1861 was largely responsible for increasing the possibility of conflict. Great Britain and the United States, which were actually reluctant to go to war, were very nearly dragged into one, because of the rhetoric of their diplomacy.

The fundamental diplomatic misunderstandings of the period increased the likelihood of war as a result of the Trent Affair. Over the course of the year, both nations

became convinced that the other nation would welcome a conflict. British officials believed Seward was eager to take on Great Britain; and the North believed that Britain wished to see their nation permanently divided. Each thought the worst of the other and saw hidden motivations behind every incident. The North's belief that Britain had definite plans to recognize the South had a dramatic impact on the events of late 1861. Union officials considered the presence of Confederate diplomats in Europe a serious threat to the security of the nation. Therefore, they aggressively pursued Mason and Slidell. In reality, the Confederate envoys would have made little difference in altering European foreign policy during the Civil War. Palmerston acknowledged as much in his meeting with Adams, in which he suggested that their capture would not be worth the effort. Similarly, British indignation at Wilkes' brash action had much to do with this perception of American motives. Firmly convinced that the Union government was anti-British, and might consider a war with Britain to arouse public support for the government, British officials were quick to assume that Wilkes had acted under strict orders from Washington. In this context, the Trent Affair was not the result of the independent actions of an adventurous Union naval officer, but a deliberate insult upon the British Empire.

The final element that made war a possibility was national honor. The defense of national honor was one of the few reasons why a nation might have ignored all of its political, economic, and military interests. Whenever national honor was perceived to be at stake, the likelihood of war increased dramatically. It was not in Britain's interest to go to war with the North over the Trent Affair, yet numerous intelligent individuals inside and outside of British government clamored for war against America if the North

refused to release the prisoners and apologize for having committed so criminal an offense. Similarly, national honor was the only reason Lincoln could possibly have had for refusing to release the prisoners. The capture of the Confederate envoys came at a time when the North was clamoring for any form of good news. The whirlwind of support for Wilke that followed news of his actions was so strong because it came at a time when many Northerners were struggling to feel good about the war effort. Only a reluctance to appear to be backing down from Great Britain could have prevented the return of the Confederate envoys. The threat of war during the Trent Affair was not a result of either nation's desire to go to war, but rather, the special nature of diplomatic relations between the two nations during the first year of the American Civil War. The threat of European intervention in the American Civil War did not die with the resolution of the *Trent Affair*, however. An even greater crisis faced the North in the late summer and fall of 1862, as Britain and France debated recognition, armistice, and arbitration.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE INTERVENTION CRISIS OF 1862

The success of Northern diplomacy during the first year of the Civil War was mixed. On the negative side, the North had failed to limit the conflict to a purely domestic one. Great Britain had declared its neutrality. European foreign policy leaders had met with Southern commissioners. France, Spain, and Great Britain had challenged the Monroe Doctrine and sent armed forces to Mexico. The North had been forced to give into British pressure during the Trent Affair. On the positive side, Great Britain had accepted, albeit grudgingly, the blockade of the Southern coast, which was the North's most powerful weapon against the South. The British, despite the fears of many in Washington, appeared disinclined to grant official recognition to the South, but rather to maintain the present course of neutrality. Europe was not desperate for Southern cotton

as of yet. The resolution of the Trent Affair, which had threatened the peaceful relations of the two nations, seemed to have produced a great level of diplomatic understanding between Washington and London. In April of 1862 the two nations signed a mutual search treaty that was designed to combat the oceanic slave trade. The British had been seeking such an agreement with the United States for decades.<sup>84</sup> Despite these positive developments, there was no use in predicting that the next year would witness far more cordial relations between the two nations. The best that Palmerston could say was that American hatred for Great Britain was not likely to be much greater than it long had been.<sup>85</sup>

Indeed, it was the late summer and fall of 1862 that was the direst period for American diplomacy. It was during this time that Europe came closest to intervening in the American Civil War. A mixture of economic and humanitarian concerns led first Gladstone, then Palmerston and Russell, to contemplate some form of intervention, be it armistice, arbitration, or recognition. Even the ardent supporters of the North in the British government thought the reunification of America only a remote possibility. Northern diplomats could not forestall the interventionist debates; they could only continue to warn the European powers that any attempt at intervention would be flatly refused. The decision was ultimately up to the British. It took an internal struggle within the French government and an impassioned defense for continued neutrality by dissenting cabinet members to prevent European intervention in the Civil War. This was the North's most perilous hour in Europe.

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<sup>84</sup>Crook, 183.

<sup>85</sup>H.C.F. Bell, *Lord Palmerston* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1966), 315.

## INITIAL INQUIRIES

The initial attempts made by a few individuals within the British government to reach an agreement with France to intervene in the war were rejected by Palmerston and Russell. They failed not because the leading figures in British foreign policy wanted the war to continue, but because the timing was inopportune. The prime proponent of intervention in Parliament was William Lindsay.<sup>86</sup> On his own initiative he held a series of meetings with Napoleon III in April of 1862. Napoleon III communicated to him that he would have tried to force the North to lift the blockade, if only England had agreed. Furthermore, he asked Lindsay to relay his feelings to leading British officials. He was willing to send a fleet to the Mississippi River if England would do the same.<sup>87</sup> These meetings did little to help either individual. Edouard Thouvenel, French foreign secretary, was dismayed at Napoleon's acting without the support of his advisors and Palmerston and Russell were furious with Lindsay for going outside of official diplomatic channels. Sir Austen Henry Layard, British undersecretary of state for foreign affairs, wrote from Paris that "Lindsay seem to have made a completed donkey of himself."<sup>88</sup> Lindsay, who had earlier threatened to introduce a motion in Parliament on recognizing the South if the government did not address Napoleon's offer, put off introducing his motion until mid-July. Palmerston was not intimidated by this threat and argued against any talk of recognition at a time when "all these aboard almost, and the principal internal

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<sup>86</sup>Lindsay was an independent Liberal who represented Sunderland. He was also a powerful British ship-owner.

<sup>87</sup>Jones, 120.

<sup>88</sup>Cited in Krein, 65.



rivers are in the hands of the North.”<sup>89</sup> Parliament finally debated Lindsay’s motion on July 18. A heated debate followed, with Lindsay eventually deciding to withdraw the motion because of the clear opposition of the government.<sup>90</sup> Palmerston was at the height of his power, and Parliament was not likely to be able to force him into action. Despite the withdrawal of the motion, the prime minister noted that “the feeling of the majority of the House is decidedly in favor of the South.”<sup>91</sup>

Neither Russell nor Palmerston thought a move towards intervention by the powers of Europe a wise idea at this time. That did not mean that the prime minister did not desire an early end to the conflict. As early as the previous May, Palmerston had written Edward Ellice, a member of Parliament, that “the day on which we could succeed in putting an end to this unnatural war between the two sections of four North American cousins would be one of the happiest of our lives, but he saw no sense in acting to do so until “this craving appetite for conflict in arms” had settled down, allowing a possible settlement to take place.<sup>92</sup> In October of 1861, he wrote Russell that unless the conflict threatened the economic stability or the security of the Powers of Europe, “our best and true policy seem to be to go on as we have begun, and to keep quite clear of the conflict

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<sup>89</sup>Cited in *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>90</sup>During debate, Lindsay clearly demonstrated his motivations for supporting Southern independence. He claimed that he “desired the disruption of the American Union, as every honest Englishman did, because it was too great a Power and England should not let such a power exist on the American continent.” Cited in Jones, 134.

<sup>91</sup>Cited in: Brian Connell, *Reginavs. Palmerston* (Garden City, NY :Doubleday & Company Inc., 1961), 366.

<sup>92</sup>Cited in: Evelyn Ashley, *Life of Viscount Palmerston 1846 -1865* vol. II (London: Richard Bentley & Sons, 1876), 208 -209.

between North and South.”<sup>93</sup> This course of maintaining neutrality marked British foreign policy for the first half of 1862.

#### GLADSTONE, PALMERSTON, AND RUSSELL

The potential for British intervention reached its wartime high in the fall of 1862 because the three most powerful figures in the British cabinet decided that Europe should do something to end the war. The first to favor intervention was William Gladstone, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Gladstone seemed an unlikely figure to support intervention. Unlike other leading British officials, he admired America's experiment in democracy. He lashed out again at those who sought the dissolution of the United States for Britain's benefit. He feared that a separated America would pose a greater threat to Canada, and the rest of the hemisphere.<sup>94</sup> Despite these feelings, Gladstone pushed for a negotiated peace based on Southern independence as early as the summer of 1862. His liberal belief in the right of local self-determination as well as a growing dismay at what he perceived to be a breakdown of democratic principles in the North, led him to advocate separation. Gladstone believed that the war was destroying the founding ideals of the Republic and was threatening individual liberties. The South could not be forced back into a peaceful association with the North, reasoned Gladstone. “If (and what a if!) they could conquer the South they would only find themselves confronted by political and civil problems which are... wholly insoluble.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 218.

<sup>94</sup>Crook, 228. During the Trent crisis Gladstone wrote: “I am deeply convinced it was for our interest that the old Union should continue.”

<sup>95</sup>Cited in Crook, 229. The parenthetical comment is Gladstone's.

Gladstone had three principal reasons for favoring immediate action. The first was that if Great Britain waited too long until the outcome of the war was certain, then both North and South would have suffered serious damage, and Europe would bear some of the responsibility for not stopping the carnage. Europe could not wait until both antagonists were willing to accept intervention. The second was the fear that as the South's victories continued to mount during the summer and fall of 1862, it would be far more difficult to resolve territorial disputes. Border states previously aligned with the North might decide to side with the Confederacy, further complicating any post-war settlement. The third was that if the economic hardship suffered by the workers in the textile industry (particularly in Lancashire) worsened, and the workers began to stage massive protests against the government, British intervention would be perceived in America as a result of self-interest, not humanitarian concern.<sup>96</sup>

If any plan for British intervention in the Civil War was to be carried out, it would need to have the support of Palmerston. He was at the height of his power in 1862. Neither Parliament nor the cabinet would likely be able to force him into a major policy change if he were not so inclined. Unlike Gladstone, the prime minister believed that a separated, weakened, United States might favor British interests. A weakened power on the American continent could only serve to strengthen Britain's global power. He favored an end to the Civil War for economic reasons as well. An ardent supporter of free trade, he desired the end of the blockade as well as the Morrill Tariff, which threatened British commerce. The Morrill Tariff was passed during the final days of the Buchanan

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<sup>96</sup>Krein, 69. Gladstone wrote Palmerston that "we might then seem to be interfering, with a loss of dignity on the grounds of four immediate interests, and rather in the attitude of parties than as representing the general interest of humanity and peace." Thirty years later he remained adamant that his support for intervention was "an act of friendliness to all America." Jones, 149.

administration in March of 1861. It doubled the general level of duties on imports from Great Britain, and marked the establishment of a policy of protectionism rather than free trade.<sup>97</sup> Palmerston was never averse to intervention on ideological grounds, but was determined to wait until the timing was right. For as much as Palmerston favored a break-up of the United States, he was profoundly against going to war with the North to achieve such an end. Therefore, he would not favor intervention until conditions were such that the North might be either inclined or forced to accept European interference. He did not consider the timing proper when Lindsay proposed his bill in Parliament, but by late July he appeared to have changed his mind. The cause of this shift was most likely the news that Union General George McClellan had abandoned his attempt to capture Richmond, the capital city of the Confederacy, following the Battles of the Seven Days. McClellan had begun his campaign to capture Richmond in April with high hopes, but it now appeared that the North was utterly unable to conquer the South. To Palmerston's thinking, the time might be approaching in which European intervention could be successful. Gladstone wrote his wife that Palmerston had "come exactly to my mind about some early representation of a friendly kind to America, if we can get France and Russia to join."<sup>98</sup>

Of the three most powerful cabinet members, Russell was the most reluctant to support intervention. Like many Englishmen, he believed that a peaceful separation of the United States would have been the best solution for both sections of the country.

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<sup>97</sup>Ferris, 4. Historian D. P. Crook notes that Southerners often claimed that the passage of the Morrill Tariff was a cause of secession. The tariff only passed, however, because the representatives of the cotton interests had already left Congress. The Morrill Tariff was a result, rather than a cause of secession. Crook, 21 -22.

<sup>98</sup>Krein, 65 -66.

Once the war began, he strived to maintain absolute neutrality in the American conflict. By the summer of 1862, even as Gladstone and Palmerston had come to consider some form of intervention, he remained unconvinced that the course of events abroad dictated any need to alter the current government policy. In August, he resisted Palmerston's suggestion that the time might be fast approaching when the cabinet should discuss the possibility of intervention. Citing Lincoln's recently announced request for more troops he said, "I think we must allow the President to spend his second batch of 600,000 men before we can hope he and his Democracy will listen to reason."<sup>99</sup> By mid-September, the foreign secretary had changed his mind. News of another major Union defeat at Bull Run was probably the deciding factor. Another military disaster had befallen the North, and many in Britain speculated that Washington and even Baltimore might be vulnerable to attack. Russell was now convinced that Union victory was impossible. Russell sent a portrait of Stonewall Jackson, the great Confederate general, to Palmerston, and said, "It really looks as if he might end the war. In October the pear will be ripe for the cabinet."<sup>100</sup> He privately asked the British minister in Paris, Henry Cowley, to inquire as to what the French thought of making a joint proposal of armistice. Both Russell and Palmerston thought that if Europe could not get the North to agree to a settlement of the conflict based on separation, it might be appropriate to officially recognize the Confederacy as an independent nation. By the fall of 1862, the three most powerful cabinet members, Palmerston, Russell, and Gladstone were in agreement that the time had arrived to discuss European intervention in the war. The North appeared on the brink of a diplomatic disaster.

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<sup>99</sup>Cited in Krein, 66.

<sup>100</sup>Cited in Krein, 67.

The foreign secretary's shift toward support of European intervention provides an important insight into the motivations of many in Britain and France. The majority of Europeans believed that the North could not possibly conquer a resistant South. Many were convinced of this before the war began; others came to this opinion as a result of the Southern victories in Virginia in 1861 and 1862. Even those who thought the North might be able to destroy the Southern army were uncertain that it could ever suppress such a vast territory determined to fight reunification. As the war became bloodier during the summer and fall of 1862, more individuals who had little or no sympathy for the South advocated an end to the war on humanitarian grounds. In September, the *London Morning Herald* implored the nation to act: "Let us do something, as we are Christian men." The form the action took mattered little: "arbitration, intervention, diplomatic action, recognition of the South, remonstrance with the North, friendly interference or forcible pressure of some sort...., let us do something to stop this carnage."<sup>101</sup> There was a direct link between a belief in the inevitability of Southern victory and a desire to end the war. Historian Sheldon Vanauken argues that Great Britain did not intervene in the war because they were convinced that the South was going to win. Britain did not need to risk becoming embroiled in a conflict with the North, because the separation of the two sections, which they strongly favored, appeared to be certain. Vanauken's argument is entirely wrong. It was for the very reason that the South could not be conquered that many Britons decided that they should intervene to end the war. The prolongation of the war merely served to do significant damage to both sections of the country, and continued hostilities would further threaten the British economy. It was hoped that events at home or European pressure, if needed, would

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<sup>101</sup> Cited in Jones, 162.

convince the North that a continuance of the war was simply suicidal. The desire for British intervention was often motivated by humanitarian concerns as much as it was by economics and geopolitics.

## FRANCE AND RUSSIA

One of the primary reasons why the plans for European intervention failed in 1862 was the inability of Great Britain and France to agree to a joint plan for action and the inability of either power to convince Russia to take part in a joint venture. France and Great Britain were committed to reaching a joint agreement on intervention. Napoleon III of France, who did not hide his sympathies for the South, was prepared to intervene in April of 1862. That month, Edouard Thouvenel explained to the American minister in Brussels, Henry Sanford, that “we are nearly out of cotton, and cotton we must have,” and that France “was going to have cotton even if we are compelled to do something ourselves to obtain it.”<sup>102</sup> At that time, however, there was little clamor for such a move within the British government. Again in early September, Napoleon told a guest from Great Britain that “he was quite ready to recognize the South,” but he could not do so “unless Palmerston did.”<sup>103</sup> Unbeknownst to the French emperor, Palmerston was now in favor of some sort of joint action, but he would not do so unless Russell agreed. Russell was off with the Queen in Europe at the time, and had yet to make up his mind. By mid-September, however, Russell and Palmerston were in agreement on a general plan for

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<sup>102</sup>Cited in Jones, 156.

<sup>103</sup>Cited in Krein, 66.

mediation. A cabinet meeting was tentatively scheduled for late October. All that seemed necessary was French approval.

Amazingly, the French now expressed reluctance. Thouvenel was inclined to wait for the results of the November elections in the North. If the peace Democrats were to win a large number of votes, then they might force the government in Washington to consider ending the war. This sudden French reluctance was due to a crisis within the cabinet. Thouvenel was increasingly at odds with Napoleon and his wife Eugenia over the emperor's Italian and American policies. Believing himself to be on the way out, Thouvenel preferred to stick by what he thought was the best course: a reluctant rush into complicated foreign affairs. For almost a month, until the foreign minister was replaced by Drouyn de Lhuys, a favorite of the emperor's wife, France was generally unresponsive to British appeals for joint intervention.<sup>104</sup> At the height of British support for intervention, the French had changed course due to an internal crisis. The most opportune time for an agreement between the two nations was wasted. By the time the French were ready to propose their own plan of intervention, the British government had become seriously divided over American policy.

Because of its closer relationship with the United States, Russia played a crucial role in the interventionist negotiations of late 1862. Palmerston and Russell were keenly aware that the United States would not be receptive to an offer of mediation by Britain alone. Russian cooperation in any course of action was important for two reasons. First, some British and French officials believed that if several other European powers were included in such an agreement, the pressure upon the United States to accept mediation or an armistice would be greater. The United States would be unlikely to risk war with the

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<sup>104</sup>Crook, 233, and Krein, 67.



great powers of Europe, as opposed to simply Great Britain. British officials discussed the possibility of including Russia, Austria, and Prussia in a European alliance to end the war. Second, Russia's greatest asset for an alliance was its known positive relations with the United States. It was no secret that Russia was sympathetic with the North during the Civil War. If Russia were part of the intervening group, the North might be more inclined to accept mediation than if Britain and France were the only nations offering their assistance. Russian support could mean the difference between a peaceful resolution of the conflict, or continued warfare. The problem for the British was that Russia had no intentions of taking part in any venture against the North. For no matter what the European interventionists might claim, mediation was, in point of fact, a break with strict neutrality; it favored the South. Russell might be able to see intervention and recognition as two different issues, but Seward and the Northern government certainly did not. Russia was to remain on the sidelines during the war.

#### THE CABINET DEBATE

The debate over intervention within the British cabinet weakened the agreement between Gladstone, Palmerston, and Russell, and slowed the push for a change in British policy toward the war. The first member of the cabinet to come out in opposition to Russell's proposal for mediation was George Gower, the Earl of Granville. Granville, the Lord President, was a senior Whig-Liberal Statesman and an experienced foreign minister. Though he believed intervention was certain, he cautioned Russell against what he considered a "decidedly premature" move. Granville questioned whether European governments, who knew little about American politics, could truly serve as mediators.

Furthermore, the North would be unwilling to accept such a measure and might go to war with Britain. Were this to happen, he warned, Napoleon would have a free hand in Europe. He thought it more sensible to stick to the course of neutrality which despite “the strong sympathy with the South, and the passionate wish to have cotton, has met with such general approval from Parliament, the press, and public.”<sup>105</sup> Secretary of War, Cornwall Lewis, and Henry Clinton, the Duke of Newcastle<sup>106</sup>, soon joined Granville in objecting to the proposed intervention. This opposition and the failure of the South to win decisively at the Battle of Antietam sent Palmerston retreating from his plan for mediation, to a more lukewarm consideration of an armistice proposal. At Antietam, Confederate general Robert E. Lee was forced to retreat from his first advance into Northern territory. Washington was safe for now, and the course of the war became more uncertain. It had been the bloodiest single day of the war. More of a pragmatist than Russell, Palmerston was willing to wait for a more decided turn in the military situation in America.

Gladstone dealt the interventionist cause a significant blow through an ill-timed public address. Unaware of the growing division within the cabinet, he made a famous declaration at Newcastle which seemed to indicate that recognition of the South was imminent. “Jefferson Davis and other leaders of the South have made an army,” Gladstone pronounced. “They are making, it appears, an army; and they have made what is more than either, they have made a nation.”<sup>107</sup> The speech created a backlash. Those who favored intervention thought it premature and inconvenient, and those who opposed

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<sup>105</sup>Cited in Crook, 225.

<sup>106</sup>Newcastle was a cabinet member from the colonial office.

<sup>107</sup>Cited in Krein, 70.

intervention rushed to counter Gladstone's declaration. On October 13, Russell circulated a memorandum advocating an armistice and negotiations by Britain, France, and Russia. Lewis countered Russell's memorandum and argued that the government should maintain its current policy of strict neutrality. He warned that it was "better to endure the ills we have, than to fly to others which we know not of."<sup>108</sup> The recent announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation indicated to Lewis that the North was "determined to resort to every means in its power for reducing the Southern rebellion."<sup>109</sup> Palmerston agreed with Lewis, and Russell decided to put off the scheduled cabinet meeting. Unlike Lewis and Palmerston, Russell thought the announcement of the emancipation proclamation was further reason to take action. Though not an advocate of slavery, he believed that the proclamation was a desperate move by Lincoln to resort to servile war in an effort to subdue the South. Russell's humanitarian concerns were piqued by the prospect of brutal conflict, in which slaves tried to kill their masters. This provided all the more reason to put an end to the horrible carnage of the war. Over the following weeks, Russell and Lewis produced a series of papers arguing the merits of various forms of intervention.

Though Russell adamantly held to his position that Britain needed to take action, he was unable to effectively counter Lewis's chief criticisms: the likelihood of the North refusing any form of intervention, and the near impossibility of coming to an agreement which both Southerners and Northerners could approve. Nor could he effectively counter the secretary of war's concern that no coalition of European powers could last for long before it collapsed because of varying self-interests. Furthermore, were the intervening

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<sup>108</sup> Cited in Krein, 71.

<sup>109</sup> Cited in Krein, 72.

nations to come into conflict with each other, the security of Europe might be seriously endangered.<sup>110</sup> The cabinet met on November 11 and 12 to debate a French proposal for a joint call for a period of armistice in America, to be followed by some form of negotiation. The majority of the cabinet members were now against intervention. Few thought that British interests warranted the risk of war. The North was unlikely to accept any European proposal, which would force Britain and France to take the more dramatic step of recognition, or feebly back down under Northern pressure. Though the economic conditions were worsening within the British textile industry, and the blockade was hindering British trade, the conditions were not bad enough to warrant a change in British policy. Only Richard Bethell<sup>111</sup>, the Lord Chancellor, was in favor of Russell and Gladstone's proposal to join the French. Overall, the British cabinet was inclined to wait for a more decided turn of events in America before considering intervention. The greatest chance for joint Anglo-French intervention in the war had passed.

The debate over European intervention during the late summer and autumn of 1862 was the most serious threat to Northern diplomacy during the Civil War for a number of reasons. First, it marked the only time where Palmerston, Russell, and Gladstone, the three most powerful figures within the British cabinet, were in favor of intervention. Though that period of agreement was relatively short, it was nevertheless significant. It demonstrated the firm desire of many in Britain to end the Civil War. The motives varied from economics, to security, to humanitarian concerns, but the belief that it was in Britain's best interest to resolve the American conflict was sincere. The central problem was getting both the North and South to accept an end to the hostilities. Second,

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<sup>110</sup>Crook, 252.

<sup>111</sup>More commonly referred to as Lord Westbury.

Britain and France were never close to a mutual agreement to end the war. Were it not for a crisis within the French cabinet at the very moment when the British government seemed most willing to intervene, a joint agreement might well have been reached. 1862 was a year in which both Britain and France at times favored recognition. The problem was one of timing. Neither government could agree to a single policy at the same moment. Third, unlike the Trent Affair, American diplomacy was relatively helpless. Seward and Adams could threaten that serious consequences could result if Europe intervened; but ultimately, it was up to the European power to decide if the time was right for intervention. During the Trent Affair it was possible for the American government to put an end to the crisis by apologizing and releasing the envoys. During the interventionist crisis, they could only hope that their threats of reprisals would be strong enough deterrent. The North never quite understood how close Europe had come to intervening. They were unaware of the negotiations between France, Britain, and Russia during October and November. More telling, Adams, an extremely skilled diplomat, never realized that it was Russell, not Palmerston, who had most strongly advocated intervention. Several years later, he still believed it was Russell who was most responsible for defeating the French proposal in November.<sup>112</sup> Nevertheless, the threat of European intervention had reached its apex. The North's greatest diplomatic challenge of the war was over.

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<sup>112</sup>Jones, 222.

## CHAPTER 4

### CANADA

From the outset of the American Civil War, the defense of Canada was of particular concern for the British.<sup>113</sup> Separated from Great Britain by the Atlantic Ocean and situated to the north of an increasingly expansionist United States, Canada had been one of the weaker links of the British Empire for decades. Any British consideration of

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<sup>113</sup>American-Canadian relations were uneasy for much of the first half of the nineteenth century. Boundary disputes were the most frequent source of tension. Disagreements over the boundary line of Maine and New Brunswick led to the "Aristocrat War" between American and Canadian settlers in the disputed territory. The Canadian rebellion, which began in 1837, threatened to compromise American neutrality. British troops crossed into American territory, burned the vessel *Caroline*, which had been aiding the Canadians, and killed one American. The government in Washington did not react to this provocation and continued to observe strict neutrality until the rebellion ended. During the 1840's, the major border disputes between Canada and the United States were resolved. The Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842 fixed the boundary between Maine and New Brunswick. In 1846, Britain and the United States came to an agreement on the entire American-Canadian border from the Great Lakes to the Pacific Ocean. Allen, 216-217. The only remaining border dispute between the two nations at the outbreak of the Civil War was San Juan Island, the terminus to the northwest boundary with Canada. Crook, 35.

entering the American Civil War in one manner or another (calling for an armistice, mediation, recognition of the South, armed intervention, etc.) had to include a discussion of the ramifications such a action would have on Britain's lone North American stronghold. Canada would inevitably be the site on which a war between the United States and Great Britain was fought. The difficulty of defending Canada served as a deterrent against possible British intervention. It was far easier for the British Government to develop a "wait and see" attitude towards active involvement when the prospect of a costly naval or land war with the United States over Canada loomed.

#### IMMEDIATE CONCERNS

Before any fighting had begun, the American Civil War presented serious concerns for the British in North America. Canada had very poor defenses. Most of its fortifications were antiquated and deteriorating, and it had only a few thousand British regulars to defend a massive land area. Furthermore, the Canadian Government was reluctant to share the expense of providing for its defense. Canada spent only 1% of its entire 1860 budget on defense.<sup>114</sup> Three outcomes of a shift in the power structure in North America as a result of the Civil War seemed possible. First, Canada might be made more secure by the division of the United States into two separate countries. Second, a Southern victory might make Canada an inviting target for angry Northerners desperate to make up for lost territory. Third, a Northern victory might further already existing annexationist designs and lead to an attack on Canada as a means of bringing

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<sup>114</sup>Warren, 126.

together a divided country.<sup>115</sup> While each scenario seemed plausible, there was no consensus within the British government as to whether any of these was more likely to occur. Ultimately, remaining neutral and avoiding hostilities with the North might be the best way of avoiding a conflict over Canada. A prolonged civil war, however, which would create massive armies in the United States, was dangerous to minimally defended Canada.

The appointment of William Seward as Secretary of State concerned Britons and Canadians alike. It was widely held belief in Great Britain that Seward had his eyes on Canada and would need only minimal pretext to attempt an imperialistic seizure. Lord Lyons feared that a weakened Canada would tempt Seward to provoke a quarrel with Britain.<sup>116</sup> Critics of Seward's expansionist bluster, like historian Gordon H. Warren, have labeled him largely responsible for creating significant diplomatic tension between the two nations during the first year of the war. Warren claims that Seward, through two decades of often imperialistic rhetoric had convinced the British that he would go to war over Canada in a heartbeat.<sup>117</sup> This indictment of Seward is unfair. Seward was certainly not alone in claiming that it was only a matter of time before the entire continent of North America was under American control; this was a fundamental tenet of many Americans living in the mid-nineteenth century who believed in Manifest Destiny. As historian Norman Ferris points out, Seward never advocated force or coercion toward Canada, but merely thought annexation was a historical inevitability.<sup>118</sup> Regardless of Seward's

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<sup>115</sup>Crook, 68.

<sup>116</sup>Ferris, *Desperate Diplomacy*, 17.

<sup>117</sup>Warren, p. 52.

<sup>118</sup>Ferris, *The Trent Affair*, 96.



responsibility in alarming the British, there was genuine concern in England that the would go to war with Canada if given the opportunity.

## EARLY TENSION

The war was scarcely begun before tensions rose between Canada and the United States. The North was angered by the refusal of Canadian authorities to sell arms to the states of Ohio, Illinois, New York, and Massachusetts, which all made requests following Lincoln's call to arms.<sup>119</sup> Seward protested to Lord Lyons, the British minister in Washington, but to no avail; Britain, and consequently Canada, would adhere to a strict neutrality. Concerned that Canada might fit out privateers for the Confederacy or serve as a base for rebel raids across the border, Seward got the Cabinet to appoint George Ashmun, a Massachusetts congressman, as a special secret agent to Canada. Ashmun was to report on Canadian public opinion, lobby for popular support of the North, and uncover Confederate agents. Word of his mission was leaked to the press and Seward was forced to rescind the appointment.<sup>120</sup> Lyons protested that all official communications with Canadian authorities should be made through the British ambassador in Washington.<sup>121</sup> Though this was by no means a major incident, it was a political setback and it heightened British suspicions of Seward's motives.

The first serious dispute between Canada and the United States took place in late April and early May of 1861. The Union government had received information that

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<sup>119</sup>Crook, 69.

<sup>120</sup>Warren, 63. Ashmun remained in Canada, serving as a liaison between the Canadian government and the Lincoln administration.

<sup>121</sup>Ferris, *Desperate Diplomacy*, 67.

Confederates had purchased the steamer *Peerless* and planned to convert her into a privateer. The *Peerless* was to sail down the St. Lawrence under British papers and be delivered to a pirate commander on the open seas.<sup>122</sup> Seward issued orders to stop and search the vessel, no matter what flag she was waving or what papers she had, if “you have reliable information that the *Peerless* has been sold or contracted for, and has been delivered, or is to be delivered to the insurgents to be used against the United States.”<sup>123</sup> Lord Lyons vehemently protested what he considered a violation of neutral rights. Seward did not back down and urged the Canadian government to seize the vessel. This precarious diplomatic dispute ended without conflict. The Union Navy did not interfere with the *Peerless* and subsequent intelligence revealed that Northern agents had in fact purchased the vessel. It appears that Southerners probably tried to purchase the vessel, but were unable to come up with the finances.<sup>124</sup> The incident did demonstrate the potential for future conflict over neutral maritime rights. Seward may not have realized how seriously Britain would take a perceived violation of these rights.

## THE TRENT AFFAIR

The Trent Affair provided the greatest tension between the North and British Canada during the Civil War. As neither the Americans nor British were initially willing to make concessions in the maritime dispute, war seemed imminent. Instantly, the British rushed to defend Canada, which would be attacked if hostilities between the two sides

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<sup>122</sup>Crook, 69.

<sup>123</sup>Cited in: Helen G. McDonald, *Canadian Public Opinion on the Civil War* (New York: Octagon Books, 1974), 1–62.

<sup>124</sup>Crook, 70.

broke out. Reinforcing Canada, a difficult task under ideal conditions was made all the more difficult by the fact that this conflict took place at the start of winter. It was far more difficult for the British to prepare and defend during this season. From the very beginning of the Civil War, Lord Palmerston lobbied for 10,000 troops to be sent to Canada for security reasons before the St. Lawrence River froze. This plan was rejected by Parliament.<sup>125</sup> With war against the North looming, the situation became desperate. A year later, *The London Times* ran an article that described the paltry force that existed in Canada: "In simple truth, the garrison before Christmas only amounted to one field battery, two batteries of garrison artillery, six officers of engineers, four regiments of infantry. An army hospital corps of 12 men, a commissariat staff of one rank and file (!) and the Royal Canadian Rifles, 1050 strong."<sup>126</sup> The North had the only modern warship on the Great Lakes, and control of the lakes could not be challenged until the spring. The British War Department decided to send 10,000 troops to Canada immediately. The problem they faced was how to place troops where they could be of use. If the St. Lawrence proved unnavigable, the most practical means of transporting troops from New Brunswick to Quebec was by rail along an unfortified road that for 100 miles ran dangerously close to the United States.<sup>127</sup> Transporting troops along this line might cause great alarm in the North and would be impossible to defend once war broke out. The War Office gambled, and attempted to send all of the soldiers up the St. Lawrence before it froze. The plan failed, and the military leadership and its headquarters did not arrive

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<sup>125</sup>Ibid., 140.

<sup>126</sup>Cited in McDonald, 170. Punctuation is the *Times*'.

<sup>127</sup>Crook, 143.

until January, after the Trent Affair had been settled diplomatically.<sup>128</sup> Had a war broken out in the interim, the results could have been disastrous for the British.

The difficulty of preventing an invasion of Canada by the North led most in the British government to emphasize the navy as the key to winning a potential war. As historian D.P. Crooks suggests, the British may have been ultimately willing to tolerate the loss of Canada, relying upon a massive naval offensive to win the war.<sup>129</sup> Secretary of War Cornwall Lewis and First Lord of the Admiralty Edward Somerset developed plans to blockade the major Eastern sea ports. In December, Somerset strengthened Admiral Alexander Milne's fleet in Bermuda by sending vessels from other stations around the world to his Bermuda fleet.<sup>130</sup> Hostilities ended, but the increased British presence in North America demonstrated to the Northern government that Britain was not inclined to stay out of American affairs if its national interests were at stake.

The British government remembered the difficulty of reinforcing Canada during the Trent Affair. During the latter half of 1862, in which the prospect of some form of British intervention in the Civil War was at its highest, the British had to consider the difficulty in defending Canada, should a war have broken out. No one wanted to repeat the previous year's folly of trying to reinforce Canada during the winter. It would be far less difficult to wage war in the spring of 1863, which would allow for better communication and easier transport.<sup>131</sup> If the British government was uncertain about the

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<sup>128</sup>Ibid., 143.

<sup>129</sup>Ibid., 145.

<sup>130</sup>Warren, 136.

<sup>131</sup>Crook, 226.

merit of intervention, then it became easier to wait for a decisive turn of events in the coming months, than risk having to reinforce Canada during the winter.

## LATE WAR CONFLICTS

Though the time of greatest conflict between Canada and the United States had passed, Anglo-Canadian relations were still tested. Late in the war, bands of Confederates and their sympathizers launched minor raids on U.S. territory from Canada in an attempt to create a war between the North and Great Britain. In December of 1863, a small group of primarily British citizens who sympathized with the South, captured the American-owned coasting steamer *Chesapeake* on the high seas. Running short on coal, the ship was cornered in Sambro harbor, Nova Scotia, by a Union warship. The Union ship seized the *Chesapeake* and captured a Nova Scotian raider, John Wade. The *Chesapeake* and Wade were handed over to colonial authorities, with five Union gunboats poised for action in the harbor.<sup>132</sup> No battle took place, but Northern anger over the failure to prevent the raid, and British anger over the “violation” of Canadian waters made it a delicate diplomatic situation.

By 1864, the Confederacy had only one real hope of British intervention remaining: a serious international incident between Britain and the Union. The possibility existed for such an incident in Canada. If conflicts along the Canadian border could be incited, then the North might be provoked into a major conflict with Canada. The St. Albans raid of October 19, 1864 was the most dramatic of several incursions made into American territory during the last years of the war by Confederate

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<sup>132</sup>Ibid., 346-47.

sympathizers. The raid created a border panic. Twenty Kentuckians, led by a commissioned officer, attempted to seize the town of St. Albans, Vermont, in the name of the Confederacy. The raiders robbed three banks and tried to set fire to the town. A Vermont posse pursued the raiders in to Canadian territory and handed them over to Canadian authority. The North dispatched troops to the border and tensions mounted. Over the next several months of diplomatic negotiations, a series of agreements were reached that helped quell the tense situation and conflict was once again avoided. The St. Albans raid was the kind of incident that Washington had feared would occur from the beginning of the war. Confederate troops or their sympathizers might use neutral British Canada as a staging ground for attacks against American interests along the border. The last thing that Washington wanted was for a major Anglo -American crisis to arise because of incidents along the Canadian border. No such event ever seriously threatened a breach in Anglo -American relations. American -Canadian relations were contentious throughout the war, but were never so poor as to threaten a major conflict between Great Britain and the United States

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Canada was a decisive factor in the British decision not to intervene in the American Civil War. Any direct involvement in the war would have surely led to war between the United States and Great Britain. While this would have been a crippling blow to the Northern war effort, Great Britain stood to lose as well. Canada could not be adequately defended without a significant commitment of British troops and resources to prevent its capture. Even if a naval war promised a high possibility for success, the British government had to consider whether it was worth a costly war which might be extremely unpopular at home. As much as the British government wanted to see an end

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<sup>133</sup>Ibid., 350-51.

to the American Civil War, it was not anxious to fight a war to stop it. The difficulty in reinforcing Canada during the winter months discouraged immediate conflicts between the two nations, and increased the possibility of a diplomatic solution to the Trent Affair and a reluctance to intervene in the Civil War until a decisive shift in the American Civil War had taken place.

## CHAPTER 5

### MEXICO

Relatively minor events that take place during periods of extreme tension are often blown out of proportion, and threaten to shatter diplomatic relationships. The *Trent Affair* threatened to plunge the United States into war with Great Britain over a relatively minor naval dispute regarding definitions of contraband and rights of search and seizure aboard neutral vessels. The popular cry for war was thunderous on both sides of the Atlantic, as national honor was deemed more important than avoiding armed conflict. Remarkably, European involvement in Mexico, which posed a diplomatic threat to the

Unions surpassed only by the possibility of European recognition of the Confederacy and intervention to stop the war, never brought the Federal Government to the brink of war with a European power. The potential for serious conflict was obvious. French activities in Mexico were in clear violation of the Monroe Doctrine, the most fundamental element of the foreign policy of the United States in the Western Hemisphere. At almost any other period in American history, such a blatant violation would have led to war. War was avoided because of the skillful maneuverings of William H. Seward, and the undeniable fact that the United States was in no position to go to war with a European nation while it was still embroiled in a desperate domestic conflict.

Napoleon's Mexican adventure was an attempt to take advantage of the American conflict to regain a French foothold in the New World that could provide a valuable market and plentiful resources as well as a last-gasp attempt of the *ancien regime* in Europe to re-establish a powerful monarchy in the Americas, and strike a blow at republicanism. The Mexican conflict strained the tenuous Anglo-French alliance and was yet another factor that Britain had to consider when contemplating intervention in the Civil War.

## WHY MEXICO?

Though Mexico ultimately proved to be a disastrous setback to the regime of Napoleon III, the possibilities which an empire in Mexico seemed to provide lured the emperor into his fateful overseas adventure. Through Mexico he could re-establish a French foothold in North America that had all but disappeared following the Louisiana Purchase. The continent would once again be opened to the French as a major market



and resource provider that would alter the balance of trade in the Americas. Particularly attractive were the fabled Sonora gold mines in Northern Mexico. Mexico could serve as the center of a Catholic, Latin -cultured empire rivaling its Anglo -Saxon neighbor to the North.<sup>134</sup> France could once again have an empire that was commensurate with its glory. The venture was largely the idea of Napoleon's wife, Eugenie, for whom the idea of the extension of European monarchy to the New World was an obsession. Republicanism, whose liberal ideals sparked the dramatic revolutions of 1848, might be contained by the establishment of a powerful monarchy on the Southern border of the United States. Mexico would provide a means of combating the expansionist tendency of the United States as well as the chance to strike a powerful blow against the Monroe Doctrine.<sup>135</sup> Napoleon III thought that he could get an empire cheaply, and he rushed to take advantage of the Civil War , which required all of the United States' attention. The Northern blockade made the prospect of political control in Mexico more attractive. From its foothold in Mexico, France might be able to gain access to the Southern goods it so badly desired.

Franz Josef I, ruler of the Austrian monarchy, though far more cautious than Napoleon III, had his own reasons for going along with the French emperor's scheme. Though he would not actively contribute to the military venture, he could not pass up the opportunity to have his brother Maximilian crowned as emperor of Mexico. The Hapsburg family had once ruled Mexico when it was under Spanish control, and the

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<sup>134</sup>Crook, p. 90.

<sup>135</sup>Many in Europe feared the potential of a growing American Empire. De Tocqueville had predicted that Russia and the United States would eventually be the world's greatest powers. As Turkey was used as a buffer against Russia, Mexico might be used likewise against the United States. Crook, 91. Napoleon III accused Britain and the United States of trying to monopolize world markets. The French detested the Monroe Doctrine, which limited their influence in the Americas . Crook, 90.

chance to once again rule a major portion of the New World was too good to decline. Franz Josef was a champion of monarchy and violently detested republican forms. The opportunity had now arisen to spread the monarchical system to North America. Almost as importantly, from Franz Josef's perspective, the Mexican venture provided a means of removing Maximilian from Europe, where he was more popular than his older brother because of his more liberal views and dynamic personality. Franz Josef was quite willing to see his brother, a potentially dangerous domestic political force, depart for Mexico. Maximilian himself was only too happy to get away from Franz Josef and the offer of emperorship along with the pledged support of France and several other European powers was too inviting to refuse. He too dreamed of a Hapsburg empire of the Americas. Before he left for Mexico, he got permission from the Austrian government to ask his youngest brother Ludvig Victor to marry the daughter of the King of Brazil, Dom Pedro II.<sup>136</sup> Wisely, Ludvig Victor declined. He enjoyed court life in Europe too much to leave, but Maximilian was extremely upset at this refusal. Maximilian had dreamed of an empire which would stretch from Mexico to Brazil.

## SANDOMINGO

The first challenge to the Monroe Doctrine on the eve of the American Civil War came not from the French, but from the Spanish. For almost a decade, both France and Spain contemplated annexation of the eastern half of the island of Hispaniola as a part of renewed imperial ambitions in the Western Hemisphere. Spain was experiencing a

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<sup>136</sup> A.R. Tyrner -Tyrnauer. *Lincoln and the Emperors* (London, U.K.: Rupert Hart -Davis, 1962), 97-98.

nationalistic revival and was eager to reclaim former territory.<sup>137</sup> The opportunity to do so came as a result of the disunion of the United States. Both France and Spain had for some time considered a possible takeover of San Domingo. The two nations reached an unofficial agreement whereby France would respect Spanish claims in the island nation in return for a free hand in Mexico. The Spanish were anxious to move quickly, wary that the Confederacy might try to obtain territory in the region.<sup>138</sup> On March 18, the president of San Domingo formally announced that his nation once again sought to be ruled from Madrid. The British, having been assured by the Spanish that they would not introduce slavery to the island, decided not to interfere, but warned them of the dangers of angering the United States, even under the present circumstances.<sup>139</sup>

The Federal government faced a serious dilemma: whether to threaten war against the Spanish, or concern themselves with domestic troubles and deal with international ones later. Seward, a passionate Unionist, still held out hope for peacefully uniting the two sides and avoiding war. As one means of doing so, he proposed a war against European power.<sup>140</sup> Secessionists would rally around the flag in defense of national honor and the Monroe Doctrine, he hoped. Historians disagree on the earnestness of

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<sup>137</sup>Crook, 53.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid., 54.

<sup>139</sup>Ibid., 54.

<sup>140</sup>Seward submitted a draft proposal for an aggressive foreign policy to Lincoln on April 1, 1861. In the draft, he suggested demanding explanations from France and Spain, as well as Britain and Russia. He thought it a good idea to send agents into Canada, Mexico, and Central America "to raise vigorous continental *spirit* of independence on this continent against European intervention. If "satisfactory explanations" were not received from France and Spain, Seward advised that "we would convene Congress and declare war against them." Cited in Lynn M. Case and Warren F. Spencer, *The United States and France: Civil War Diplomacy* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), 34.

Seward's proposal as well as its logic.<sup>141</sup> It is not impossible, however, to understand why Seward would explore such an option. His proposal was made before Fort Sumter in an attempt to unify the nation. The United States had a strong reason to go to war, according to one of its most powerful tenets of foreign policy (European non-intervention in the hemisphere) and there was a general increase in the European naval presence near the United States in the months leading up to the Civil War. It appeared that European powers may have been preparing to reclaim influence in the Americas. In the end, Washington protested the annexation of San Domingo, but could do little to stop it.<sup>142</sup> Diplomatic relations with Spain were maintained, as the Union government decided to put off action until after the rebellion had been quelled.

### TRIPARTITE AGREEMENT

Napoleon had his eyes on Mexico, and Mexican émigrés were telling him that the people would embrace the French Army. Mexico had been in political chaos for years, and the latest ruler, Benito Juárez, whose government was republican and anti-clerical as well as anti-foreign, was opposed by the church, conservatives, and independent warlords. Furthermore, some Mexicans believed that only the control of their nation by

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<sup>141</sup>Howard Jones calls the proposal "outlandish" and "ill-advised", but believes that Seward was serious. Jones, 15. Case and Spencer agree with this appraisal. They credit Lincoln for not taking Seward's proposal as "an April Fools Joke." Case and Spencer, 34. D.P. Crook does not think that Seward's proposal was illogical. He points to the growing evidence that Washington was receiving, which suggested that several European nations were considering making land-grabs in the Americas. Crook is not convinced, however, that Seward was strongly considering a war with a European power. He suggests that it might have been more of a political move, intended to "stampede a worried Lincoln." Crook, 58-60. Norman Ferris believes that Seward's proposal was earnest, a response to "what seemed to be a desperate situation." Seward was attempting to force Europe to back off its interventionist plans. Ultimately, the Secretary of State's threats were "pleas for restraint" and a "vision to preserve world peace." Ferris, *Desperate Diplomacy*, 10-15.

<sup>142</sup>Crook, 62.

major European power could save Mexico from American aggression. When Juárez confiscated church lands she alarmed French and British investors who feared that their interests would be seized as well. The Mexican Congress suspended interest payments on the nation's international debt in July. Immediately, the French and British broke off ties with the Mexican government. The French proposed a punitive military occupation of Mexican ports until reparations were paid, and Britain and Spain agreed to join the venture by signing the Tripartite Treaty of London in October of 1861.<sup>143</sup> The agreement stipulated that no country could acquire territorial advantage by forceful intervention in Mexico's internal affairs and prohibited the use of force to prevent Mexicans from freely choosing their own form of government. Napoleon had no plan to faithfully live up to these terms, but signed on nonetheless.

The British, still concerned about American reaction to this European intervention, wanted the United States to be involved in this venture. Lord John Russell, British foreign secretary, explained that despite Britain's opposition to the Monroe Doctrine, it would be wiser to avoid provoking American ill-will "unless some paramount object were in prospect, and tolerably easy of attainment."<sup>144</sup> Seward declined the offer, but essentially accepted the right of the three powers to coerce Mexico into observing its international obligations. At the same time, however, Seward made it clear that Mexico was not to be interfered with politically. In reality, the United States could do little to forestall intervention. The secretary of state had his own plan for getting around European interference. He proposed that the United States assume Mexico's foreign

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<sup>143</sup>Ibid., 92.

<sup>144</sup>Ibid., 93.

debts for five years, with security being pledged by public lands and mineral rights in Northwestern Mexico.<sup>145</sup> The British were particularly concerned about this proposal. Lord Palmerston remarked that “a mortgage of Mexico to the United States . . . would certainly lead to foreclosing.”<sup>146</sup> The proposal died in the Senate, and Seward anxiously watched as the Europeans arrived. Unable to prevent foreign incursion into Mexico by force, Seward had nonetheless pursued pragmatic approaches to resolve the conflict. These approaches were ultimately unsuccessful, but they demonstrated the secretary of state’s skill as a diplomat. He could utilize both bombast and subtlety.

#### FOREIGN INTERVENTION

The Spanish were the first to arrive, landing at Vera Cruz on December 17. The coalition soon broke down as the French marched on the capitol at Mexico City in the spring. Wary of French intent, the Spanish and British reached separate reparation agreements with the Juárez government in April, and prepared to withdraw immediately. The Spanish were probably compelled to abandon Mexico because of French non-interference in San Domingo. The British had more complex motives. They did not desire to anger the United States by going along with Napoleon’s scheme which was in violation of the Tripartite Agreement, and were convinced that the French were getting themselves involved in a situation which they could not control. Though officially Britain wanted to maintain strong ties with France as part of their balance of power strategy, they could not help but be interested at the prospect of their long-term rival

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<sup>145</sup>Ibid., 93.

<sup>146</sup>Jones, p. 76.

becoming hopelessly bogged down in Mexican politics. Napoleon's Mexican incursion might take up much of his available resources, and weaken his ability to act in Europe. In March, Seward had sent a note of warning to the allies, which served notice that while the United States was willing to temporarily put up with the Mexican venture, it would not accept on a long-term basis any foreign political interference in Mexico. Seward wrote that "no monarchical government, which could be founded in Mexico, in the presence of foreign navies and armies in the waters and upon the soil of Mexico, would have any prospect of security or permanence."<sup>147</sup>

For the time being, the United States was willing to accept the fiction that France had no real territorial interests in Mexico and was engaged in merely police actions. Seward was content to allow such blatant European intervention in Mexico because he wanted to avoid pushing France towards an alliance with the Confederacy. He was able to walk a middle line by consistently voicing American general disapproval of European meddling in Mexico, which was "injurious and practically hostile to the most general system of government on the continent of America"<sup>148</sup>, without threatening to take action on it.

On June 10, 1863, French troops occupied Mexico City and formed a provisional government that would supposedly represent the will of the Mexican people. On July 11, the new regime voted for monarchy and offered the crown to Maximilian. Though it considered this political process bogus, the United States showed marked restraint. Maximilian and his wife Carlota, daughter of Leopold I of Belgium, were crowned on

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<sup>147</sup>Cited in Tyrner -Tyrnauer, 48.

<sup>148</sup>Crook, 262.

June 12, 1864. Seward issued a statement which claimed “that the destinies of the American continent are not to be permanently controlled by political arrangements that can be made in the political capitals of Europe.”<sup>149</sup> The installation of a monarch in Mexico presented the possibility of a Mexican -Confederate alliance that could be a blow to the Union, and would threaten to bring France to the brink of war with the United States.

Though Napoleon III was the leading European supporter for recognition of the Confederacy, and Maximilian had now warm feelings for the North, both rulers chosen not to recognize the Confederacy for several reasons. Napoleon III was unwilling to commit massive amounts of troops to Mexico as it was, and had little desire to have to send still more troops to fight a war with the Union. Also, the French were somewhat concerned about Southern interests in Mexico. The Confederacy was home to many of the most “hawkish” expansionists who had lobbied in the past for a North American empire that would encompass the entire continent. Richmond, likewise, was concerned that the French regime had their eyes set on Texas, and might request it in return for support of the Confederacy.<sup>150</sup> These seemingly natural Mexican -Confederate Alliance never materialized due to mutual distrust and growing Union strength.

By 1864, Europeans were no longer certain that the South would win the war. In helping to change this opinion, the Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg were not only tremendous military successes, but diplomatic victories as well. Seward was able to put greater diplomatic pressure on the French to leave Mexico. He refused to recognize

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<sup>149</sup>Ibid., 354.

<sup>150</sup>Ibid., 345.



the new government, and neither confirmed nor denied that the United States was willing to go to war with France over Mexico. Other factors were influencing Napoleon to abandon his Mexican venture. The war was extremely unpopular in France. In June of 1863, republicans and anti-clerics who opposed monarchy in Mexico were victorious in elections.<sup>151</sup> One of the primary reasons for Napoleon's complete support for Maximilian as emperor of Mexico, the hope of getting Austria to abandon Venetia to the Italians, went up in flames, as Austro-French relations broke down. Napoleon's Mexican venture no longer served a diplomatic purpose in Europe. In February of 1864, the Austrians allied with Prussia and invaded the Danish provinces of Schleswig-Holstein, alarming all of Europe.<sup>152</sup>

Plagued by these concerns and the financial disaster of his Mexican scheme, Napoleon planned his withdrawal. At the convention of Miramar in 1864, which outlined France's support for the Mexican regime, Maximilian was forced to accept French evacuation from Mexico in three years.<sup>153</sup> Late in the war, France and Mexico refused desperate pleas by the Confederate government for assistance in exchange for recognition of the Mexican government. The United States, on the verge of winning its civil war, remained remarkably aloof from affairs in Mexico, despite tremendous Northern anger over French intervention in Mexico. After the war ended, the United States turned its attention to Mexico, finally forcing Napoleon to completely give up his great American project. Having guaranteed perpetual French support for Maximilian's

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<sup>151</sup>Ibid.,338.

<sup>152</sup>Ibid.,339.

<sup>153</sup>Ibid.,339.

regime when the emperor was placed on the throne of Mexico, Napoleon completely abandoned the regime.<sup>154</sup> Convinced he had the love of the Mexican people, Maximilian stayed on, despite international efforts to encourage him to abdicate. The Mexican people loved him so much that they executed him on June 19, 1867. Mexico practically ruined Napoleon III, distracting him from European affairs and severely draining his resources. The greatest beneficiary of this disaster was Prussia, which soundly defeated a weakened France in 1870.

#### ADISASTER AVOIDED

European intervention in San Domingo and Mexico had the potential for utterly destroying the Union. An armed conflict with Europe over the blatant violation of the Monroe Doctrine would have struck a crippling blow to the North's war effort against the South. Seward wisely chose to adopt a basic policy of American non-interference in Mexico until the Civil War was resolved. At the same time, he used language strong enough to caution Europe as to the risks of using this internal conflict to reassert European power in the New World. Northern diplomatic restraint was unaffected by tremendous public outcry against Napoleon's incursion. Though it was virtually impotent to forcefully prevent European intervention in the Americas, the United States had one distinct advantage. Many European powers, particularly the British, were wary of provoking them. A reunited American government might seek reprisal against meddling Europe by either attacking Canada or Mexico. Similarly, if the country were divided, either half might seek to enlarge its power and territory through expansionist conquest. Also of particular importance was the historical disinterest which

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<sup>154</sup>The Austrians never forgave him for this.

the United States showed toward European politics. British officials could expect a free hand in Europe so long as they stayed out of the American sphere of influence. No matter how much the British and other European powers despised the Monroe Doctrine or the “mob democracy” of the United States; they wanted to prevent the growing nation from meddling in the delicate balance of European power and politics. As it turned out, Napoleon’s Mexican incursion never threatened to force Europe to intervene in the American Civil War as much as other conflicts, like the Trent Affair and the Intervention debates of 1862. It certainly could have, however. The incursion was a blatant violation of the strongest doctrine of American foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere. It would have been easy for the North to conclude that France was prepared to ally itself with the South. Seward’s pragmatic foreign policy was largely responsible for preventing a massive Franco-American clash over Mexico. The United States wisely chose to fight one war at a time.

## CHAPTER 6

### BRITAIN REMAINS NEUTRAL

There is no one specific factor that can explain why Great Britain did not intervene in the American Civil War. Just as the motivations of those who favored intervention varied, so did the arguments used in defense of a continued course of strict neutrality. What can be said is that a significant amount of individuals in positions of high authority within the British government favored intervention at some point during the war. Despite this pressure, which was particularly intensified during the Trent Affair and in the late summer and early autumn of 1862, Britain never made a decisive move toward intervention. The best explanation for why the world's greatest power remained neutral

lies in the potential consequences that a protracted, difficult involvement in the war would have with respect to British interests in Europe and the Western Hemisphere. British concerns over the balance of power in Europe and North America severely limited its course of action. Most central to these concerns was maintaining a fragile alliance with France. The alliance was not strong enough to produce a joint agreement on intervention because neither nation trusted the other. Further hindering British action was a reluctance to challenge American naval practices during the war, because of British long-term naval interests. Concerns about the safety of Canada similarly militated against a drastic shift in wartime policy. Of additional importance in this equation was the role played by Northern diplomacy, as well as the complete failure of Southern diplomacy. Above all, however, were British concerns about the balance of power in Europe and North America.

#### THE ANGLO-FRENCH ALLIANCE

During the Civil War, the British and French endeavored to maintain a joint strategy of involvement in the conflict. Most officials agreed that any movement towards intervention was best pursued by both powers acting in concert with each other. The alliance was based on national interests and mutual distrust. Napoleon III needed to maintain good relations with the British government in order that his European intrigues would not threaten a war with Britain. The British hoped to constrain the French emperor's potentially dangerous European interventionism. Both nations were very concerned that if one of them became entangled in the American situation, the other

would be able to operate freely in Europe. Palmerston voiced his concerns about French motives in a letter to Gladstone written on April of 1862.

We have on the other side of the Channel a people who, say what they may, hate us as a nation from the bottom of their hearts, and would make any sacrifice to inflict a deep humiliation upon England. It is natural that this should be. They are eminently vain, and their passion is glory in war. They cannot forgive Aboukir, Trafalgar, the Peninsula, Waterloo, and St. Helena. Increased commercial intercourse may add to the links of mutual interest between us and them; but commercial interest is a link that snaps under the pressure of national passions. 155

This was an alliance of mistrust.

The alliance was the result of a change in the balance of power in Europe that dated back to the beginning of the century. In 1815 at the Congress of Vienna, the four victors of the Napoleonic Wars, Britain, Austria, Russia, and Prussia, agreed to maintain the balance of power in Europe. This four-power alliance barely survived the revolutions of 1848, which rocked much of Europe. The outbreak of the Crimean War in 1853 marked the end of this decades-old alliance as Britain, France, Sardinia, and Turkey went to war with Russia. In the following years, Napoleon III sought to strengthen his ties with Britain. The French government permitted English citizens to enter France without passports.<sup>156</sup> The two nations signed the Cobden-Chevalier Treaty in January, 1860. The treaty imposed reciprocal reductions in the tariff rates and allowed freer trade and freedom of movement between the two nations.

Napoleon's alliance with Britain was nearly destroyed by his involvement in Italian affairs. In 1859, he and Camillo Cavour, the prime minister of Sardinia, declared war on Austria. Before total victory could be won, Napoleon III abandoned his Italian

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<sup>155</sup> Cited in Ashley, 224.

<sup>156</sup> Brian Jenkins, *Britain and the War for Union* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1974), 77.

ally and reached an armistice agreement with Austria. At the peace conference of Villafranca, which ended the war, Napoleon achieved the first step in his attempt to redraw the map of Europe. Sardinia gained the former Austrian controlled territory of Lombardy. For his involvement in the war, Napoleon acquired the provinces of Nice and Savoy.<sup>157</sup> The emperor's Italian exploits concerned British policy-makers who thought that Napoleon was a destabilizing force in Europe. "The Emperor of France appears to be following a system of undermining all governments which are in trouble," Lord Russell told Queen Victoria. "His agents inflame discontent, produce agitation; and this discontent and agitation are afterwards used as pretexts for interference."<sup>158</sup>

The annexation of Nice and Savoy fueled fears in England that the Italian campaign might be a prelude to an eventual attack on Great Britain. The emperor was in the midst of building a large fleet of ironclad ships that were potentially a threat to British naval supremacy. Even if British officials did not think that Napoleon III was a threat to Britain itself, they thought it was evident that the emperor was more than willing to take advantage of every opportunity to redraw the map of Europe. "No man seems to watch more keenly for accidents and trusts more to combinations which may spontaneously arise", wrote the *Times* of London.<sup>159</sup>

The need to keep a careful watch on the emperor's European exploits tended to distract British officials from the growing sectional crisis in the United States. Britons were not unaware of this narrow frame of view. "Movement in Italy, a word spoken in

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<sup>157</sup>Crook, 16.

<sup>158</sup>Cited in Jenkins, 257.

<sup>159</sup>Cited in Jenkins, 77.

Switzerland, as a sign of mutual confidence among the German Powers, or a change in mood of the French newspapers, excites a mind that occupies more attention in England than events of the greatest moment and indications of the deepest significance in the United States," lamented *The Edinburgh Review*.<sup>160</sup> British diplomacy during the Civil War was dependent upon the events which transpired in Europe. The desire to intervene to put an end to the war had to be counterweighed against the feasibility of taking direct action in North America while conflicts arose in Europe that threatened the balance of power.

The alliance of mistrust imposed constraints on France and Britain's American policy. The French declaration of neutrality and acceptance of the blockade was largely due to the need to act in accord with Great Britain. Napoleon III had conflicting motivations with regard to the dissolution of the United States. On one hand, a strong American naval power could serve as a balance against complete British supremacy on the high seas. As long as the young republic had no European ambitions, it was a potential ally against Britain.<sup>161</sup> On the other hand, the French emperor had little sympathy for the Northern government and its radical republicanism, whose every example was a threat to the ruling monarchies of Europe. Once it seemed clear that the United States could not be preserved without a war that would threaten French commercial interests, the emperor adopted a decidedly pro-Southern policy.

Despite his desire to end the war, the emperor had too many European problems that needed to be resolved before he could contemplate intervention in the war. His Italian adventure had been resoundingly decried by the other major European powers and

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<sup>160</sup>Cited in Jenkins, 78.

<sup>161</sup>Crook, 90.



had created some unintended consequences. The unification movement in Italy had gained momentum as a result of the Franco - Austrian War. Napoleon I II, though hoping to end Austrian control over Italy, favored a weak confederation of states, not a unified nation as was developing. As a result, the emperor was busy trying to reestablish the temporal power of the pope over Rome and the Papal States in order to block the unification of Italy. Furthermore, he was negotiating with Austria for the independence of Venice, which the emperor had promised the Italians.<sup>162</sup> The emperor had gotten himself involved in a mess. Napoleon III, unable to risk becoming embroiled in another crisis without British support, followed the lead of his cross -channel neighbor and declared neutrality on June 10, 1861. Subsequently, he accepted the blockade. This was despite the fact that Napoleon III privately protested the legality of the blockade, and was extremely concerned that it would cause an economic disaster in France. France was more dependent on Southern cotton than the British.

The British were quite concerned with the emperor's motivations. Opponents of British war-hawks during the Trent Affair may have worried that France would welcome an Anglo - American war. Rumors floated around Europe that Napoleon III would use such a distraction to make further moves in Europe. John Bigelow, the American consul in Paris, wrote Seward that "the idea is prevalent there that a war between England and America would occupy the British navy to such an extent as to enable France to occupy the Rhine, which is the dream of all imperialists."<sup>163</sup> Since the North eventually backed down during the Trent Affair, there is no way of determining what would have been the British reaction had Washington refused to release the prisoners. It is not unreasonable,

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<sup>162</sup>Jenkins, 175.

<sup>163</sup>Cited in Crook, 160.

however, to question whether concerns in Europe might have prompted the British to further pursue a peaceful resolution to the crisis with America before going to war. During the months following the Trent Affair, the emperor approached the British government about the possibility of intervening in the war, but European concerns, not the least of which was a wariness of the emperor himself, prompted the British government to wait until the warring parties were more receptive to a peace agreement of some sort.

The North survived its most ominous threat of European intervention during the Civil War largely because of European distractions. For a brief period of time in late 1862, Palmerston, Russell, and Gladstone were united in their belief that the time had come for Europe to intervene in the war. Unexpected French reluctance stalled the interventionist momentum long enough for the opponents of intervention within the British cabinet to mount a counter-offensive. France failed to act because it was in the midst of a governmental crisis caused by Napoleon's foreign adventurism. Austria had refused to give up Venetia, despite Napoleon's pledge to break up the newly established Kingdom of Italy, into the Papal States, Sicily, and Piedmont (Sardinia), as well as an offer to place the Hapsburg prince Ferdinand Maximilian on the Mexican throne. <sup>164</sup> Maximilian appeared on the verge of abandoning the entire Mexican project, and Napoleon had alienated his Catholic and conservative supporters within the government who feared that he was about to evacuate French troops from Rome in an attempt to appease the Italians. In August, Napoleon had marched French troops into Rome to prevent the nationalists under Giuseppe Garibaldi from taking control of the city.

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<sup>164</sup>Crook, 245.

Southern Italy was on the verge of civil war. <sup>165</sup>The clerical and pro -Austrian faction within the French court won out, and the pro -Italian Edouard Thouvenel, was replaced as foreign minister by the pro -Austrian Edouard Drouyn de Lhuys. While this crisis was going on, the French were reluctant to consider a British proposal for intervention. Napoleon, who had made known his desire to intervene in the American conflict for many months, lost this best opportunity for British cooperation. The crisis in Italy helped to prevent a European -American crisis.

The Anglo -French alliance, the most serious threat to European neutrality in the Civil War came apart for good in 1863. In February, just as Napoleon was waiting for Washington's response to his offer of unilateral mediation, an insurrection by the Poles against Russia broke out in Warsaw. In the eyes of Europe, the American Civil War became relatively inconsequential. The insurrection threatened to turn into an all-out European war. Napoleon proposed a joint Anglo -French action against Prussia, which had helped to put down the rebellion along the German border. Britain and Austria refused to join any French interventionist scheme. England feared that Napoleon would use the Polish crisis to extend French territory along the Rhine. <sup>166</sup>The Polish crisis split the Anglo -French alliance, something that American diplomats had been trying to do from the start of the Civil War. Charles Francis Adams welcomed the Polish crisis as a "favourable interlude...needed to protect us from the possibility of European intervention."<sup>167</sup> England was resigned to wait until a dramatic turn in the events of the

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<sup>165</sup>Crook, 245 -246.

<sup>166</sup>Ibid., 286 -287.

<sup>167</sup>Cited in Crook, 287.

Civil War before considering any interventionist scheme. Russell wrote Lyon that until the two sides were sick of fighting each other, "I see no use of talking of good offices."<sup>168</sup>

As if there was need of further European distractions, a major crisis broke out a year later as Prussia and Austria invaded the disputed territories of Schleswig-Holstein, claimed by both the Danes and Prussians. Another major European war seemed possible.

Fortunately for the Northern cause, European policies in the Civil War were not formed in a vacuum. Britain and France's American policy was inextricably linked to European affairs.

## RUSSIA

One of the most significant obstacles that prevented Great Britain from intervening in the American Civil War was the unwillingness of Russia to join any European proposal for mediation or an armistice. The leading policymakers in Great Britain were well aware of the staunch resistance that the Northern government would put up against any European interference. The hope was that if Russia was involved in the process, the North might be willing to accept some form of intervention. Russia was the staunchest supporter of the North in Europe. If the tide of the war turned so strongly against the North that it might be receptive to some sort of honorable peace, and Russia was involved in the peace process, perhaps intervention could be successful. This was the hope of the leading British proponents of intervention within the government.

Palmerston was consistent in his belief that Russia had to be involved in any interventionist plan. Russell tended to concur with the prime minister on this, but was willing to move without Russia as a last resort. During the intervention debates of late

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<sup>168</sup>Cited in Crook, 287.

1862, despite mounting evidence that Russia would not join an Anglo-French mediation proposal, the foreign secretary held out hope that Russia would agree to the measure out of humanitarian concern. In late October he wrote Sir George Grey, a cabinet member from the Home Office that despite its pro-Northern sympathies, Russia might join. "What I conjecture," Russell wrote, "is that if England and France went to Russia and proposed to her to join in armistice and treat, the Emperor of Russia would not like to say that he preferred war and desolation."<sup>169</sup> Russell was overly optimistic; Russia declined to join an Anglo-French intervention in late 1862.

Russia's support for the United States was based on its own geopolitical interests. A strong United States was its surest protection against British naval power. Russia viewed England as the sole beneficiary of a weakened United States.<sup>170</sup> Baron Edouard de Stoeckl, the Russian Ambassador in Washington, believed that the Anglo-American rivalry had "been the best guarantee against the ambitious projects and political egotism of the Anglo-Saxon race."<sup>171</sup> If Russia needed another reason to abstain from involvement in the conflict, it could emphasize the right of nations to quell internal rebellions. The Russians were constantly trying to put down internal rebellions by ethnic minorities within their empire. Russia would not support any form of intervention as long as the North was unwilling to accept European involvement. In his reply to the

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<sup>169</sup> Cited in G. P. Gooched., *The Later Correspondence of Lord John Russell 1840-1870* Vol. II (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1925), 332.

<sup>170</sup> In a letter written to Russian Foreign Minister Prince Alexander Gorchakov, the Russian Ambassador in London, Baron Philip Brunow, expressed his opinion that "the English Government, at the bottom of its heart, desires the separation of North America into two republics, which will watch each other jealously and counterbalance one with the other. Then England, on terms of peace and commerce with both, would have nothing to fear from either; for she would dominate them, restraining their rival ambitions." Cited in Belle B. Sideman ed., *Europe Looks at the Civil War, an Anthology* (New York: Orion Press, 1960), 20.

<sup>171</sup> Cited in Sideman, 40. The quote is from a letter Stoeckl wrote to Gorchakov.

French proposal, Russian Prime Minister Gorchakov wrote that “ we believe that a combined measure of the powers, however conciliatory, if presented in an official character, would risk arriving at a result opposed to pacification.”<sup>172</sup> Reluctant to risk war over intervention for financial and geopolitical reasons, the British were wary of attempting interventionist moves that had no chance of Northern acceptance. Without Russian involvement, the majority of the British cabinet did not support intervention. The British and French could not break the alliance between the world’s largest republic and its largest despotism.

## THE BLOCKADE

British naval interests superseded commercial interests in shaping the nation’s policy toward the blockade of the Southern ports. Though British commercial interests pressed the government to protest the illegality of the blockade, the British government was content to merely note the ineffectiveness of the blockading forces. Protests made to Washington were only mild. Before the blockade had been enacted, Lord Lyons threatened that the British would not allow it to stand, but after it was put in place, the British chose to officially accept it. There were several motivating factors behind this decision. First, the British had the largest navy in the world, and in past wars it had used the blockade as one of its most effective weapons. Second, it was in British naval interests to accept a liberal attitude toward the effectiveness of a blockade. In future conflicts, Britain might greatly benefit by not having to implement a large naval force to make a blockade effective. The British could use the American example as a precedent

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<sup>172</sup>State Department of the United States, *Message and Documents 1863-64* part 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1864), 5.

for less than strict enforcement of the blockade part of the Declaration of Paris. In the House of Lords, Lord James Malmesbury, former British foreign secretary, advocated such a position: "I do not believe that a great maritime country should be bound by such a Declaration."<sup>173</sup> The smaller maritime powers had perennially tried to force Britain to recognize neutral rights during wartime; the weakness of the American blockade hurt the cause of these smaller powers, which the United States had historically supported.<sup>174</sup> Third, it stood to reason that an ineffective blockade would allow more ships to get through, thus enabling more goods to be brought back to Britain. Fourth, the North viewed the blockade as its most important weapon against the economic viability of the South, and would more than likely go to the verge of war to protect it.<sup>175</sup> As long as the blockade was not the cause of unbearable economic conditions at home, Great Britain could afford to allow its naval objectives to dominate policy. The blockade remained in place while Europe waited for a dramatic turn of events in the fighting.

## CANADA

Just as Britain's American policy during the war was inherently linked to European events, so was it also linked to concern over Canadian security. Canadian defenses were weak and archaic. The British military presence in place could best be described as paltry. For years, the British government had been reluctant to appropriate the large amount of funds needed to provide a more formidable military presence in

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<sup>173</sup>Cited in Krein, 63.

<sup>174</sup>Norman A. Graebner, "Northern Diplomacy and European Neutrality" in *Why the North Won the Civil War*, ed. David H. Donald (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 67.

<sup>175</sup>Krein, 63.

Canada. Furthermore, the Canadian government was reluctant to pay for the troops out of its own pocket. British officials were extremely concerned that the conflict in the United States might seriously threaten the security of its North American colony. From the onset of the war, Lord Lyons pleaded with British officials at home to send thousands of troops to Canada to protect or serve as a deterrent against invasion from the Union army. Palmerston supported sending reinforcements, but Parliament was reluctant to finance it.<sup>176</sup> In any interventionist scheme, the British needed to consider whether Canada would be endangered from a hostile Northern government. Even if some British officials believed that a war with the United States involving Canada could be fought rather easily, through a rapid naval campaign against the Northern seaboard, they had to consider that a war in Canada might leave Britain unable to defend its interests in Europe. Though it seems doubtful that the Union would have been willing to fight two wars at once, Britons who thought Seward crazy enough to attempt it did not discount that possibility.

The crisis of the Trent Affair proved the difficulties of defending Canada. British attempts to reinforce Canada met with disaster. Troop transportation became almost impossible during the winter. It took troops arriving from Britain almost a month to reach locations that could serve a defensive purpose. This near disaster had significant implications nearly a year later, when the British government most strongly considered intervention. If Britain were to intervene in the war, there was the possibility that the North would react violently and attack Canada. If this occurred, further troops would have to be sent to Canada. The difficulty of the previous year concerned some officials

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<sup>176</sup>Crook, 140.



who thought that it would be far safer to wait until the following spring before risking intervention. At that time of year, it would be far easier to send reinforcements to Canada and deploy them properly. In a letter to Russell, Palmerston acknowledged this possibility:

As regards possible resentment on the part of the Northerners following upon our acknowledgement of the independence of the South, it is quite true that we should have less to care about that resentment in the spring when communication with Canada opens, and when our naval force could more easily operate upon the American coast than in winter, when we are cut off from Canada and the American coast is not so safe.<sup>177</sup>

By itself, this concern was not likely to determine the timetable of British intervention, but when taken in conjunction with concerns about British flexibility of action in Europe and North America, it was more than enough to convince some within the British government that the most prudent course to take was to wait until events in America took a more decided turn. Britain had to consider the fate of Canada in any plan of intervention on the American Civil War.

## MEXICO

Napoleon's incursion into Mexico complicated Britain's foreign policy during the Civil War. Though Britain and Spain were part of the tripartite military expedition to Mexico in late 1861, they both pulled out of Mexico after it became clear that Napoleon was committed to remaining in Mexico for an extended period of time. French adventurism threatened to break the Anglo-French alliance, because Britain disapproved of what it considered an attempt at empire-grabbing. France was trying to regain a foothold in North America. A strong French presence in Mexico also threatened to

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<sup>177</sup>Cited in Gooch, 326-327.

severely damage European relations with the United States. Mexico bordered the Confederacy and the potential for a French alliance with the South seemed possible.

Despite these misgivings, the British were not wholly upset by the prospect of a French presence in Mexico. French control of Mexico would put an end to American expansionism in the continent. For years, Southerners had seen Mexico as a likely future site of American expansion. Furthermore, European involvement in North America could be an effective challenge to the Monroe Doctrine, and set the precedent for future action in the Western Hemisphere. Finally, British foreign policy might very well benefit from a distracted Napoleon III in Mexico. Many Europeans (including some within the French government) were convinced that the French emperor had gotten himself into a difficult situation. Napoleon's attempt to grab an American empire on the cheap was a greater risk than the emperor imagined. Palmerston and Russell, despite their support for an Anglo-French alliance, were not averse to seeing the French embroiled in a Mexican conflict which would drain their resources and weaken France's potential for action in Europe. Great Britain distanced itself from the emperor, so as to avoid severe rapprochement from the United States, but quietly watched with approval as the French became involved in a Mexican quagmire. While the incursion was never a major factor in determining whether Britain supported intervention or not, it did increase wariness of acting in joint venture with Napoleon on American affairs, and it served British interests in Europe.

## NORTHERN DIPLOMACY

The role which Northern diplomacy played in preventing European intervention in the Civil War is complex. The very fact that no European power ever attempted a major intervention is evidence that Northern diplomacy was ultimately successful, yet the extent to which it was responsible for European non-intervention is questionable. Ultimately, British concerns over the balance of power in Europe and North America had a greater influence than Northern diplomacy.

In general, the Northern diplomatic corps was comprised of some of the world's finest diplomats. Charles Francis Adams, despite the fact that he often appeared to be miserable in Britain, helped navigate the Union through some of the most contentious diplomatic crises of the war. British officials respected him for his class and professionalism. Adams was skilled at knowing the proper moment to press certain issues, and displayed great reserve in the tensest of situations. He was able to successfully temper some of Seward's fiery indignation towards Britain. Other American ambassadors performed great service to their country during the war. Historians praise Henry Sanford, ambassador to Belgium, William Dayton, ambassador to Paris, and other leading diplomats for their skillful maneuverings around the often unfriendly courts of Europe.<sup>178</sup>

Despite the dire predictions by many in Europe and some at home that he would get the United States involved in a disastrous war with Europe, William H. Seward proved to be a highly successful secretary of state. Though he initially infuriated European policymakers with his brusque style, Seward was able to gradually erase his reputation as a dangerous Anti-British ideologue who thought nothing of getting

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<sup>178</sup>Case and Spencer, 559, 603-604. Crook praises Sanford, Dayton, Carl Schurz (Spain), and Thomas Corwin (Mexico) while criticizing Cassius Clay (Russia), and Joshua Giddings (Canada). Crook, 44. Dayton performed admirably, especially considering he didn't speak French.

embroiled in a conflict with a European power. The secretary of state wisely persuaded Lincoln to acquiesce to British demands during the Trent Affair, and took a pragmatic stance toward the French incursion into Mexico. The North could not afford more than one war at a time, and Seward avoided unnecessary foreign entanglements. Despite his bluster, he made sure that the North defeated the South before challenging the European powers. In retrospect, one might say that he had no choice but to follow this policy, but it is not unreasonable to consider the possibility that another individual, at the head of a nation engaged in a brutal fight for its existence, might have mounted a desperate attack against a foreign power which appeared to be attempting to take advantage of the nation's temporary weakness.

The most effective element of Seward's diplomacy was its repeated insistence that no European intervention would be tolerated. The foundation of Northern diplomacy was the premise that any attempt by a foreign power to intervene in the American Civil War would be met with fiercer resistance. "British recognition would be British intervention, to create within our territory a hostile State by overthrowing this republic itself," Seward told Adams. His goal was to convince other nations that "no European State is as really capable to do us harm as we are capable to defend ourselves."<sup>179</sup>

Though America would not welcome war with Britain, the nation would not be reluctant to defend itself. "War in defence of national life is not immoral, and war in defence of independence is an inevitable part of the discipline of nations," wrote Seward.<sup>180</sup> To some in Europe, these must have seemed to be idle threats, coming from a toothless power, but they were not without great effect. The constant insistence that intervention

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<sup>179</sup>SDD, Seward to Adams, *Dispatch No. 418*, December 8, 1862.

<sup>180</sup>SDD, Seward to Adams, *Dispatch No. 10*, May 21, 1861.

wastantamounttowarforcedBritainandFrancetoconsidertheconsequencesof becomingembroiledinaconflictwiththeUnitedStatesduringthemajordiplomatic crisesofthewar.EvenifvictorymightcomeeasilyinNorthAmerica,theEuropean powershadtoconsidertheglobalconsequencesofbecominginvolvedinaconflict acrosstheAtlanticOcean.AnAmericandistractioncouldleavearivalfreetoactin Europe.Americanrefusaltoacceptanyformofoutsideinterference severely complicatedthesituationforthoseinFranceandBritainwhodesperatelywantedthe CivilWartocometoanend.

Despitethesediplomaticsuccesses,therewerelimitationstoAmerican diplomacy.ItwasunreasonablefortheUnitedStatestoexpectEuropetoremain completelyoutoftheconflict.TheBritishandFrenchdeclarationsofneutralityand grantingofbelligerentstatustotheConfederacywereabsolutenecessitiesforthepowers . ThechallengeofhavingtomaintainthattheAmericanconflictwassimplyadomestic rebellionandnotanall-outwarforcedSewardintosomeembarrassingandcontradictory diplomaticpostures.TheNorthclaimedastateofwar didnotexistbutnonetheless proclaimeditsrighttoblockadetheentireSoutherncoastundertherulesofinternational law.Becauseofwartimenecessity,theUnitedStatesadoptedliberalrightsofmaritime searchandseizure,whichwentagainstthenation'sentirehistoryofpromotingneutral rights.

NortherndiplomacyfailedtobreaktotheAnglo-Frenchalliance.Earlyinthe war,Sewardtriedtodividethealliesbyappealingtotheirdivergentinterests.Sanford toldThouvenelthatEnglandwantedtoweakentheUnitedStatesasarivalpower.He toldtheFrenchforeignministerthatFrenchpolicyshouldbe“toencouragethegrowth

and development of a commercial power, the rival of England.”<sup>181</sup> Britain, on the other hand, received intelligence that France was trying to use its influence in Central America. <sup>182</sup> Despite his best efforts, Seward was unable to divide the powers. France and Britain acted in concert on the issue of neutrality, staged a joint venture into Mexico, and continued to discuss the possibility of intervening in the Civil War. But for a crisis within the French government, the two nations might have reached a common accord on intervention. American diplomats never knew how close to intervention the Allies had come. Adams never realized that Russell had joined Palmerston and Gladstone in favor of intervention. Though Northern diplomacy was skillful, its power was limited. Had the Anglo-French alliance been stronger, the geopolitical situation in Europe more stable, or the economic crises in France and Britain more severe, it is unlikely that the North would have been able to prevent a committed Anglo-French alliance from intervening in the war.

## KINGCOTTON

The failure of Southern diplomacy doomed the Confederacy to rely on the whims of Europe for foreign assistance. Southern diplomacy was based almost entirely on the premise that Britain and France would intervene in the Civil War because their economies were dependent upon Southern cotton. Once the cotton shortage took hold at home, the two European nations would break the Union blockade and recognize the Confederacy. Southerners expressed confidence that it was naturally in Europe's interest to see a divided United States with a South free of protectionist tariffs.

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<sup>181</sup> Cited in Crook, 84.

<sup>182</sup> Crook, 84.

The cotton shortage did not produce any ill effects in Britain during the first year of the war. Palmerston was not particularly concerned about the lack of Southern cotton. He wrote Russell that “the probability is that some cotton will find its way out from America, and that we shall get a greater supply than usual from other quarters.”<sup>183</sup> The previous year had produced a bumper crop of cotton, and there was a sufficient surplus available. Large cotton manufacturers may have actually benefited by the decrease in the availability of cotton. The prime minister told Charles Villiers, a leader of the Poor Law Board, that “the truth of the matter is that if there had been no Civil War in America there would have been much distress in our manufacturing districts owing to the overproduction of the last two years.”<sup>184</sup> The South had not done itself any favors by burning much of its crop of 1861 in an attempt to decrease the cotton that was available to Europe, and put more pressure on foreign nations to break the blockade. Some within the British government saw the lack of cotton from the South as an opportunity to reduce British dependency on American cotton by finding alternative suppliers within the empire, most notably in India. Among those who favored this outlook were Palmerston, Edward Stanley, the Tory opposition leader, and George Campbell, the Privy Seal.<sup>185</sup>

Unfortunately for the Southern cause, distress caused by the cotton shortage never superseded other British interests. By late 1862, a crisis caused by the lack of cotton took its toll on the workers of Lancashire County, the nation’s largest textile center. A few officials believed that the disgruntled workers might pose a serious political problem for

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<sup>183</sup>Cited in Ashley, 218.

<sup>184</sup>Cited in Krein, 63.

<sup>185</sup> Stanley is more commonly referred to as Lord Derby, and Campbell is referred to as the Duke of Argyll. The Privy Seal was in charge of managing the daily and weekly business of the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

the Palmerston government. This concern prompted Gladstone to favor intervention. He wanted to quell a major disturbance within British manufacturing. The crisis may have been overblown a bit. The workers were unhappy, but the major manufacturers were still taking in a profit. To alleviate worker discontent the British government set up a relief program to try to assist the unemployed workers in Lancashire.

The economic concern over the shortage of cotton did not determine British policy. That is not to say that policymakers did not favor raising the blockade in order to resume regular economic relations with the South, but the conflicting economic interests did not take precedence over geopolitical concerns in Europe or North America. Obtaining Southern cotton was not worth risking a major conflict with the North. France, more dependent on Southern cotton than Britain, was in far worse economic condition than its cross-channel neighbor. Napoleon III strongly favored lifting the blockade, but he could not act without British support. The failure of the South's only diplomatic weapon left it with few options. Barring an international incident that threatened to drive Britain and the North towards war (like the Trent Affair), the South's only real hope of European intervention was to achieve enough military successes that Southern independence became a foregone conclusion.

## THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

The issue of slavery and the Emancipation Proclamation did not considerably influence the likelihood of British intervention.<sup>186</sup> Despite the general antipathy against

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<sup>186</sup>The traditional historical view is that the Emancipation Proclamation was a great diplomatic victory for the Union in Europe. The abolition of the slaves gave a higher purpose to the war, and made it more difficult for Europeans to favor Southern independence. Historian Thomas A. Bailey supports this viewpoint, arguing that the proclamation "elevated the conflict into a holy crusade against human



slavery in Britain and the rest of Europe, Lincoln's momentous proclamation did not stir many policymakers to alter their position on the war. While the Emancipation Proclamation made it more difficult for some government officials to support intervention, which in its ultimate form favored the South, the potential ramifications of the abolition of the slaves in the South actually caused a few leading figures like Lord Russell to increase the pressure for intervention. Many government officials viewed the proclamation cynically.

Much of British indifference to the Emancipation Proclamation was related to the events of the war. At the outset of the conflict, both sides claimed that the war was not being fought over slavery. The South argued that it was a matter of states' rights and freedom from Northern economic oppression. A desire not to alienate the "Border States", and a general Northern antipathy against a war for abolition, led Lincoln to maintain that this was a war to preserve the Union, not to abolish slavery. This official government policy made sense at home, but it alienated part of the staunch abolitionist community in Europe. The failure to turn the war into a moral crusade tended to make policymakers more receptive to the dissolution of the United States, since neither the North nor South could claim to hold the moral high ground. Adams did not hide his opinion of what caused the war. "There can be no hope of future peace," he recorded in

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bondage." The revisionist historical perspective challenges this belief, and argues that the proclamation had no impact on British public opinion. Joseph Henson, a member of the revisionist school, claims that "the belief that the Emancipation Proclamation effected a great change in British public opinion appears to be totally fallacious." Crook, 236-237. It tends to lean more toward the revisionist stance. The positive effects which the proclamation produced had a greater impact on the general populace than on policymakers. The one effect it may have had was to demonstrate the willingness of the North to do whatever it took to stay in the war.

his diary, “so long as slavery remains in any part of North America.”<sup>187</sup> He had difficulty convincing the British, however, that the North truly wanted to free the slaves.

The way in which they viewed the course of the war influenced those Europeans who looked unfavorably upon the Emancipation Proclamation. The majority of European policymakers believed that the North could not force the South back into the Union. By the summer of 1862, it appeared that the North had little hope of defeating the Confederate army.<sup>188</sup> Many believed that the North should realize the futility of the conflict and end needless bloodshed by coming to a peaceful settlement of the war based on Southern independence. In this light, the Emancipation Proclamation could be seen as a desperate political and military move rather than a righteous cause. Russell noted that the proclamation freed the slaves only in territory which was not under Lincoln’s authority. “The right of slavery is made the reward of loyalty; the emancipation is not granted to claims of humanity but inflicted as a punishment on their owners,” Russell quipped.<sup>189</sup> The *Liverpool Courier* argued that the North was just as responsible for the institution of slavery as the South. The paper claimed that “it was the North that shielded the domestic institution of slavery from the detestation and hostility of the world. It was the Northern navy which menaced the English cruiser that dared to board an American

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<sup>187</sup>*The Diary of Charles Francis Adams*, August 4, 1861.

<sup>188</sup>Most Europeans were convinced that the South was winning the war decisively because they inevitably focused on the Eastern theatre of the war. To them, the campaigns in Virginia were the American Civil War. It is not surprising, therefore, that they did not pay particular attention to the Union successes in the West. This “one theatre” understanding of the conflict was persistent until the fall of Vicksburg in July of 1863. Until that time, of the major battles fought outside of the Eastern theatre, only the fall of New Orleans generated much discussion in Europe.

<sup>189</sup>Cited in Crook, 238.

slavery at heart, was wary of the imposition of freedom by force. He had, as he put it, “no faith in the propagation of free institutions at the point of the sword.”<sup>190</sup>

One of the major motivations behind the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation was to influence European policy. In Chicago, Lincoln told a gathering of Christians from various denominations that “no other step would be so potent as to prevent foreign intervention.” Emancipating the slaves would be proof that “we are incited by something more than ambition.”<sup>191</sup> Not everyone in Britain agreed with the president. William Stuart, the British chargé in Washington, wrote Russell that the president’s move showed “no pretext of humanity” and was “cold, vindictive, and entirely political.”<sup>192</sup> Fears escalated that a massive servile war was imminent; slaves would seek to murder their masters. The *Times of London* questioned whether Lincoln’s presidency was “to go out amid horrible massacres of white women and children, to be followed by the extermination of the black race in the South?”<sup>193</sup> Even Richard Cobden, one of the strongest supporters of the North in Parliament, was concerned that to attempt to defeat the South with the help of the slave population would lead to “one of the most bloody and horrible episodes in history.”<sup>194</sup> Russell, whose support for intervention was motivated primarily by humanitarian concerns, was horrified by the prospect of a

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<sup>190</sup> Cited in Crook, 239.

<sup>191</sup> Cited in Crook, 239.

<sup>192</sup> Cited in Jones, 172. The speech was given on September 13, 1862.

<sup>193</sup> Cited in Jones, 175.

<sup>194</sup> Cited in Jones, 176.

<sup>195</sup> Cited in Jones, 176.

dramatic escalation in the already ghastly bloodshed. For him, the potential consequences of the Emancipation Proclamation were further reason to press for European intervention to end the war. The proclamation did not stem the overall tide of interventionist support in Britain.

#### THE INTERVENTIONIST IMPULSE

At one point or another during the American Civil War, the many high-ranking government officials in Britain and France favored some form of intervention. Their motivations varied, but their desire to see an end to the war did not. It appeared to be in the interest of Britain and France to end the war. What prevented such intervention were other interests. Neither Britain nor France was anxious to risk a conflict with the United States which might threaten their abilities to act elsewhere. Both members of the Anglo-French alliance believed that their cross-channel neighbor would be happy to see their diplomatically embroiled in an American conflict. Though both governments favored intervention at one time, they were unable to agree on a single course of action before one of them backed off. A crisis in the French government prevented the greatest possibility for European intervention in the Civil War during the fall of 1862. The alliance based on mistrust fell apart over Napoleon's interventionist schemes in Italy. Along with European concerns, the British were responsible for ensuring the security of Canada, and Napoleon was embroiled in an empire-grab gone wrong in Mexico. The refusal of Russia to join an alliance lowered British expectations as to the possibility of a successful intervention. Seward's hard-lined diplomacy forced the allies to consider the global and domestic ramifications of a war with the United States. In the end, it was far

easier for the British government to maintain a course of strict neutrality and await a dramatic change in the course of the war.

## CHAPTER 7

### British Popular Opinion

Great Britain's European interests were against intervening in the American Civil War. These interests outweighed all other British concerns and kept the nation neutral during the war. If there was one factor which could have tipped the scales in favor of intervention it was British popular opinion. Had there been an extreme public outcry in favor of intervention, the British government might have been compelled to stop the war in America. That British popular opinion was so divided, and did not significantly influence government policy, does not take away from the fact that it might have proved decisive. As has been previously demonstrated, there were a number of factors which

favored British intervention; and were public opinion to be added to them, the course of British policy could have been altered. Anevaluation of the public reaction to the war yields several important findings. First, the American Civil war captivated Britons from all parts of society. Britons followed the war, and cared about its outcome. Second, though the wealthier classes in Britain tended to favor the South, and the working classes tended to favor the North, social class was by no means the only factor in shaping British opinion. Third, public opinion was evenly divided during the war. Neither the pro-Northern nor the pro-Southern factions were able to gain a decisive enough edge that they might be able to influence government policy. British popular opinion is a particularly important subject of study because both the North and South considered it a crucial element of their European diplomacy.

## THE HISTORIOGRAPHY

The historiography of British popular opinion during the Civil War years has taken two main forms. The traditional argument claims that sympathies fell almost exclusively along class lines. The British upper classes, the aristocracy and upper middle class that dominated parliament and had control over much of the press, were sympathetic to the Southern cause, because of its aristocratic society and anti-democratic sentiments that shaped their negative view of the North. The professional and working classes are credited with almost unanimously supporting the Northern cause because of their abolitionist history and support for free labor. The revisionist argument attacks a solely class-based analysis of popular support and emphasizes the broader support for the Confederacy through all levels of British society. Those laborers who worked in areas

hardest hit economically during the war, particularly those dependent upon cottons such as Lancashire, are claimed to have generally supported the Southern cause; not because of sympathy for slavery but because they believed that Southern independence would ease their hardships.

The traditional view was principally the work of the early historians of the civil war crisis, writing within the base of abolitionist tradition. Historians like Friedrich A. Sorge and Richard B. Morris, author of *Encyclopedia of American History*, supported an analysis that Karl Marx had made while reporting on the war from London. Marx, as other historians would later claim, credited the British working class for preventing Great Britain from abandoning neutrality. As Marx observed, "It ought not to be forgotten that at least the *working class* of England, from the commencement to the termination of the difficulty, have never forsaken them."<sup>196</sup> In this line of reasoning it was the active and determined efforts of the British laboring classes that pressured the ruling class of Britain not to enter the Civil War, as they undoubtedly would have without those efforts. Southern historians did not greatly challenge this class-based view of British public opinion. They tended simply to devalue the influence of the laboring classes, arguing that they had no real influence either way. Frank L. Owsley, author of *King Cotton Diplomacy*, wrote that "the population of Lancashire and all Industrial England was politically apathetic, sodden, ignorant, and docile, with the exception of a few intelligent and earnest leaders."<sup>197</sup> Even Sheldon Vanauken, who questioned the tendency to

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<sup>196</sup>Cited in Philip S. Foner, *British Labor and the American Civil War* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981), 13.

<sup>197</sup>Owsley Cited in Foner, 14.

discount the tremendous British support for the Confederacy, did not challenge the notion that the vast majority of workers supported the Northern cause.

TherevisionistviewwasledbyRoydenHarrison,professorattheUniversityof Warwick.Heemphasizedelementsofthelaborandworking-classpress that actively supported the Southern cause. Harrison cited the early failure of the North to make emancipation a major issue, the initial military losses suffered by the Union army, and a disdain for industrial capitalists at home and abroad, whose enemy seemed just as much the enemy as slavery.<sup>198</sup> Though Harrison later questioned some of his earlier conclusions regarding the broad pro-Southern (or perhaps more appropriately, Anti-Northern) sympathy, his argument was used by subsequent historians to question the sentiments of the British working class. Mary Ellison's study of Lancashire challenged the traditional "myth" of the cotton workers, suffering through unemployment and the privations that the drop in cotton supply had produced, yet nobly supporting the Union. These sacrifices Lincoln had once called, "an instance of sublime Christian heroism which has not been surpassed in any age or any country."<sup>199</sup> Ellison countered that these workers had generally supported the Confederacy, not because of an indifference towards slavery, but because of disillusionment with Northern interests and their own economic needs.

In recent years, there have been few studies of this subject. Those that have been published, most notably, R.J.M. Blackett's *Divided Hearts*, have taken a more balanced approach. British popular opinion was far more dynamic than it has often been credited

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<sup>198</sup>Foner, 16.

<sup>199</sup>Ibid., 13.



as being.<sup>200</sup> This is the point of emphasis of my argument. A simple class-based analysis fails to explain the wartime activities of numerous influential public officials. Though Southern support was somewhat stronger in the upper classes, and Northern support somewhat stronger in the middle and lower classes, neither side was able to gain a definitive enough advantage to drastically alter government policy. During the Victorian Age, there was an assumption that public opinion could greatly influence government policy if it could be adequately demonstrated. Ultimately, the British public was divided enough to prevent any real alteration of government policy. That it failed to do so does not make it an unimportant topic of discussion, because the battle for the British public was of significant importance to the combatants across the Atlantic Ocean, and the American Civil War excited British popular interest like few contemporary foreign affairs had.

#### WARTIME SENTIMENT

The outbreak of the Civil War left many in Britain confused. The reasons for secession were not as readily apparent to many in Britain as they were to those in the longer-United States. Prior to the commencement of any real combat between the two sides (pre-Bull Run), the general feeling was more favorable to the North. Lincoln's election was not perceived as an inescapable threat to southern institutions. Losing a political election did not seem to be sufficient grounds for secession. A few argued that this was merely the next step in the drive for a slave empire; having faced Northern restraint, the South was now seeking freedom to conquer a greater portion of the

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<sup>200</sup>By *dynamic* I mean: influenced by numerous social and economic factors.

continent.<sup>201</sup> Once the North clearly demonstrated that it would go to war to maintain the Union, and it implemented the blockade, any near unanimity of opinion was impossible.

The Trent Affair of late 1861 created the most vociferous public outcry in Britain of the war. The initial reaction of a large portion of the British public was a cry for war. The United States, long a menace to British maritime interests, had blatantly violated British rights, and more importantly, British honor. Vanauken summarized the emotions of the time:

Englishmen suddenly remembered all their old irritation in connection with the slave trade: it seemed that the United States, after piously denying the right of naval search to the point of blockading the great humanitarian cause of destroying the slave trade were now, when it suited their purpose, proving themselves hypocrites by exercising that right --- and against an English ship!<sup>202</sup>

The Trent Affair threatened to transform the conflict into an international one, but both sides preferred a peaceful solution. The great public outcry to the seizure of Mason and Slidell is not as reflective in ascertaining the overall Northern or Southern sympathy of the public as might be imagined. The indignation is more reflective in regard to the outcry generated by attacks on British maritime rights/honor than on a disdain for the Northern cause itself. Had the South perpetrated a similar action, the reaction probably would not have been dramatically different. This was not a decisive moment of solidarity with the South but rather a protest against what was viewed as an international criminal act. Those who were angered at Northern maritime policies, including the blockade,

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<sup>201</sup>Crook, 37.

<sup>202</sup>Sheldon Vanauken, *The Glittering Illusion* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1989), 39.

were not likely to have been sympathetic with the North to begin with, and the majority of those for whom the issues of the war were more important were probably unlikely to abandon all Northern sympathies long after the Trent Affair was peacefully settled.

As the war dragged on into the bloody years of 1862, 1863, and 1864, the overall public division did not greatly change. Ardent supporters of both sides generally maintained their commitment throughout the war. The early fall of 1862 probably represented the apex of Confederate support. Robert E. Lee's military victories at the Seven Days convinced many that the South would be impossible to effectively conquer. The increasing brutality of the war generated a substantial peace movement in Great Britain. Despite the desire for an end to the hostilities, an agreement as to what should follow a break in fighting was hardly obvious and never concerted enough to generate the kind of pressure needed to force the British government to demand mediation. At the close of the war, many pro-Northern supporters, eager to demonstrate the influence which they had had during the war, claimed that a great majority of the British public supported the North. British public support, however, was far more ambiguous than would later be claimed.

## THE ABOLITIONISTS

Having given a very brief picture of general public sentiment during the war, it is time to examine the various members/groups that made up British public opinion. The abolitionist tradition in Great Britain was a very strong one. Their nation having been among the first to abolish slavery at home as well as abroad, the vast majority of Britons had a strongly negative view toward the Southern institution. If there were a single

factor that most favored the North in the court of British public opinion, it was as the reluctance of most Britons to support the cause of a society, whose foundation rested upon the institution of slavery. Unfortunately for Northern supporters, abolitionist sentiment in Britain during the mid-nineteenth century was not as strong as it had been in years past. The complications of emancipation in the British West Indies had lessened the strength of the British abolitionist movement.<sup>203</sup> The collapse of the West Indian economy was blamed on the freed slaves' abandonment of the plantations. Not everyone was convinced that immediate emancipation was beneficial to the slave. Novelist Anthony Trollope wrote that "the freedman has always thrown away his hoe, has eaten any man's hog but his own, -- has too often sold his daughter for a dollar when any such market has been open to him."<sup>204</sup>

Others still strongly committed to abolitionism, thought that the North should just let go of the South and end its stain of being part of a union with slavery. Because the South was not willing to abolish its slaves, it was simply better to let them go. Such views were often predicated on the belief that, because of the impermanent economic viability of the institution of slavery, the South would eventually have to emancipate its slaves, even if it were a gradual process over a number of years. Finally, some abolitionists were disheartened by the rhetoric coming from Washington. Instead of making the war about slavery, as they had hoped, Lincoln referred only to the restoration of the Union. The combination of the belief that the South would gradually emancipate

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<sup>203</sup>In 1834 an apprenticeship/transitional phase was implemented. Full emancipation came on August 1, 1838.

<sup>204</sup>R.J.M. Blackett, *Divided Hearts* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 38.

the slaves if it gained independence, disillusionment with the North, where freed blacks were subject to intense racism, and the failure of the North to make the war a crusade against slavery, led some abolitionists to abandon Northern sympathy.<sup>205</sup> Liberian diplomat Edward Blyden echoed these sentiments in a letter to Gladstone: “Both sections of the country are Negro-hating and Negro-crushing-intending and doing justice to 5 million of oppressed people among them only as they are driven to it by European sentiment.”<sup>206</sup> This is not to suggest that British abolitionists were defeated. Much of the leadership for the pro-Northern societies and organizations came from the generation of reformers that had committed itself to the abolitionist cause. As Blackett points out, “there existed a residue, a tradition, that could be called upon in times of need. Abolition still had currency.”<sup>207</sup> A weakened, yet resilient abolitionist Britain needed other public sources of support if it were to carry British public opinion.

## THE ARISTOCRATS

The upper classes in Britain, though generally sympathetic to the Southern cause, were less unanimous in their support than is often thought.<sup>208</sup> Aristocratic support can be tied to general suspicion of democracy, with its potential to elect the “most simple/common” individual to important public offices. A certain kinship with Southern gentleman was certainly possible. Merchants, industrialists, and businessmen salivated at the opportunity of potential new markets and trading alliances. Englishmen of all trades

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<sup>205</sup> Vanauken, 88.

<sup>206</sup> Cited in Crook, 196.

<sup>207</sup> Blackett, 88.

<sup>208</sup> By *generally*, I mean a simple majority.

who feared the growing power of the United States could seek solace in the break-up of the nation into two smaller powers. These were merely possibilities, however, and not everyone was convinced that Southern independence would be a sufficient benefit to England to warrant British intervention in the crisis, which could very well lead to a costly war.

Parliamentary support for the South was not as strong as one might have expected. Parliament was comprised of some of the elite members of British society. These were individuals who were supposed to be the Confederacy's strongest advocates, yet Parliament was deeply divided on the subject of what to do regarding the conflict abroad. During the Trent Affair and other contentious times, some Northerners were complaining that the Tories were trying to push the Liberals into a war against the United States. Yet many of these Conservatives did not support the Confederacy but rather tended to go against Palmerston's practice of intervening in other nations' affairs.<sup>209</sup> Vanauken argues that a vast majority of parliamentary members supported the South. To demonstrate this, however, he argues that one should not study what was said on the floor of Parliament, but rather, what was said elsewhere. He uses estimates by those "in the know" that place support for the South at around four-to-one.<sup>210</sup> This is faulty logic. If Southern support in Parliament was only strong in private correspondence or anywhere else outside of the floor, then the actual strength of Southern sympathy was very weak and ineffectual. What was said inside of Parliament was a far greater reflection of the commitment of Parliamentary members to the cause.

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<sup>209</sup>Crook, 131.

<sup>210</sup>Vanauken, 98.

## THE DIVIDED NATION

One of the understudied elements of British public opinion during the Civil War is politics, local and national. This is not to say that sympathies did not cut across party lines, but rather that old alliances and local disputes often influenced the decision to favor one side. Whether one was a liberal or a conservative was a better indicator than one's class in many cases. Such was the case with many members of the business community. Evidence from membership lists of three of the most prominent Civil War societies, the Union and Emancipation Society (UES), Southern Independence Association (SIA), and the London Emancipation Society (LES), indicates a surprising amount of support for the Union from wealthy industrialists and businessmen. Of the 83 Southern supporters who were significant manufacturers and businessmen, 49 were involved in cotton manufacturing. Many silk and cutlery manufacturers, also greatly affected by the war, were supporters of the Confederacy. Despite the South's King Cotton Diplomacy, 27 of the 62 significant manufacturers and businessmen who supported the North were involved in cotton manufacturing. Blackett's study of these lists revealed that a slightly larger number of merchants supported the North than the South; and the North drew from a greater variety of businessmen and manufacturers.<sup>211</sup> His study also suggests that professionals, the "head" of the middle class more actively supported the South.<sup>212</sup> He speculates: "Why they chose to support the Confederacy may have more to do with domestic political considerations than with the contending merits of the warring factions

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<sup>211</sup>Blackett., 102 -103.

<sup>212</sup>Ibid., 103.

in America.”<sup>213</sup> These numbers paint a more diverse picture of public support than much of traditional or revisionist historiography suggests.<sup>214</sup>

Working class support for the South, though not as strong as support for the North, was a very real presence in British public opinion. Confederate associations in Britain were not completely dominated by elites. James Spence, one of the leading pro Confederates in Britain, was thrilled that the Manchester Southern Club was not comprised of “the rich spinners but young men of energy with a taste of agitation but very little money.”<sup>215</sup> D.P. Crook describes the questions about the purpose of the war which laborers were asking: “Was not the war fought to tighten the grip of northern business over the south? Was not the conflict an irrelevancy for international labor?”<sup>216</sup> The North was conscious of the uncertainty of British labor solidarity with its cause. Emblematic of the desire to see British labor supportive, the Northern press turned a relatively unimportant meeting in Staleybridge, a cotton town in hard-hit Lancashire County, into a dramatic victory for the Northern cause. The meeting, organized by southern supporters, was to call for recognition of the Confederacy, but it was taken over by workingmen who overwhelmingly voted that the problems facing the manufacturing districts in Britain was caused by the Southern rebellion against the Constitution. The New York Times wrote that:

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<sup>213</sup>Ibid., 120.

<sup>214</sup>There was almost no division, however, within individual churches. Anglican ministers almost universally supported the South while Dissenters strongly favored the North.

<sup>215</sup>Blackett, 68.

<sup>216</sup>Crook, 197.



The British laboring classes are not blind to the fact that the interest of labor and of democratic institutions is identified with the success of the North, and that the South is a simple embodiment of the veteran domination and tyranny which the capitalist has always struggled to maintain over the workman. No suffering, not even famine itself, will ever alter this conviction or make the English masses unfaithful to it. <sup>217</sup>

Such a statement was new to the countless supporters of the South among the laboring classes of British society.

The battle for British public opinion was fought on several fronts. Newspapers, pamphlets, and meeting houses were the battlefields of this struggle. *The London Times*, the largest newspaper in the country, was staunchly pro-Confederate. There was not a complete imbalance in the press, however, as both sides struggled for editorial control over the nation's print. Pro-Northern and Pro-Southern societies printed thousands of different pamphlets throughout the course of the war. Spence's book *The American Union*, was hugely popular and influenced the ways some viewed the war. It was the Pro-Confederates' best propaganda of the war; but no pro-Confederate speaker could match the success of two of the Northern stalwarts, George Thompson, one of the nation's most respected reformers and a veteran of numerous social movements, and William A. Jackson, the former black coachman of Jefferson Davis, who became a sensation in Great Britain. These were two of the individuals employed by the Union government to promote the North's cause to the British. Both the Northern and Southern governments sent agents abroad and supported those already in Britain in an effort to rally support for their cause. The Northern agency was far more effective.

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<sup>217</sup>New York Times, October 16, 1862. Cited in Crook, 274.

Meetings were the center of community activity. Thousands of major public meetings took place throughout the country during the Civil War. Partisans did their best to disrupt large gatherings sponsored by their opponents in an incessant struggle for the hearts and minds of the British public. Neither side could be said to have gained the upper hand during the early years of the war, but, by the final year of the war, the Northern supporters had the advantage in staging meetings and garnering public support. Pro-Northern organizers were better at mobilizing their supporters and they tended to have greater resources with which to work.

#### THE COLOSSAL NON-FACTOR

The British public was divided during the Civil War. It was not solely divided along strictly class lines as has often been argued, but was pulled apart by conflicting influences. Political, social, economic, religious, and ideological factors influenced the individual's opinion. Neither the pro-Northerners nor the pro-Southerners were able to hold a definitive advantage during the early years of the war, when it mattered most. The onus was on the pro-Confederates, for they needed to convince the British government to change its policy of neutrality while the Pro-Unionists had to maintain the status quo. The best hopes for intervention came in the first two years of the war. The kind of dramatic public support needed to influence the British government during these years was not strong enough to compel a change in policy. British public opinion was not the definitive factor in deciding Anglo-American relations during the Civil War, yet it is an important topic of study, because both sides understood the importance of British public support and made a concerted effort to win it.

There is one important element of British popular opinion during the American Civil War that has been largely neglected by historians, and requires future examination. That is, an estimation of the percentage of the population which supported one side or the other, but were unwilling to go to war to defend the side which they supported. For public opinion to have forced a change in British wartime policy, the pro-Southerners would have had to represent the overwhelming majority of the population. Furthermore a large percentage of those individuals must have been willing to go to war with the North. It was one thing to say that one supported the cause of Southern independence; it was quite another to say that British men should be sent across the ocean to fight the Northern troops in order to end the war. I doubt that the percentage of those who were willing to go to war was particularly high at any time other than during the Trent Affair, when the emotions of the country were running extremely high. In retrospect, the task facing the pro-Southern supporters was nearly impossible. Nevertheless, the battle over British public opinion was one of the most fascinating elements of Anglo-American relations during the Civil War.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION: THE WAR NOT WORTH FIGHTING

The Civil War is part of American culture. More books have been written about that four-year period than about almost any other subject in American history. Despite this fact, the diplomatic history of the war is not very familiar to most Americans. Few students of American history realize that the North's most successful campaign of the Civil War was won in Great Britain. In order to defeat the Confederacy, the North had to make sure that no European power came to the aid of the South. The Union could not

fight more than one war at a time. Though the Civil War lasted longer than almost anyone had expected, there -unification of the United States was completed in 1865.

That unification would have been impossible had Britain intervened in the Civil War.

The North's most successful campaign in the war was by no means its easiest. The diplomatic crises of 1861 severely strained the relations between the two countries. When taken by themselves, the declaration of neutrality, the implementation of the blockade, the Bunch Affair, and the failure of the Declaration of Paris negotiations, were not serious enough conflicts to threaten the cessation of Anglo -American diplomatic relations. These disputes served, however, to convince both nations that they had to be wary of the other's motives. The North thought that the British favored the dissolution of the United States, and would eventually recognize the Confederacy. Great Britain believed that Secretary of State Seward would stop at nothing to provoke a quarrel with England. Both nations adopted a diplomatic strategy that emphasized the threat of force to preserve vital interests. The increasingly worsening relations between the two nations were magnified during the Trent Affair. Great Britain and the North were on the verge of war because of national honor, not the legality of a maritime dispute.

The possibility that the two nations would go to war with each other was *real*. There were well -respected individuals on both sides of the Atlantic who did not anticipate a peaceful resolution to the crisis. The British government had committed itself to stand up to American affronts. Lincoln's decision to release the prisoners was the wise choice, but it was not inevitable. The President and Secretary of State could have chosen to refuse to give into British bullying tactics. That they did so without much of an argument is a reflection of the often pragmatic nature of Northern wartime diplomacy,

not conclusive proof that Anglo-American relations were never in serious danger of collapsing.

The Intervention debates during the late summer and early fall of 1862, marked the most serious threat of European intervention in the war. It was in many ways, more dangerous than the Trent Affair, because there was little that the North could do to prevent it. British motivations to end the war were much greater than they had been the previous year. Economic concerns and the apparent senselessness of the war nearly brought the British government, and its three leading figures; Palmerston, Russell, and Gladstone, in step with France. A committed Anglo-French alliance would have been too much for the North to take on. After the summer of 1863, the only real threats to Northern diplomacy were the French incursion in Mexico and the potential outbreak of another international incident along the lines of the Trent Affair.<sup>218</sup>

Ultimately, European affairs saved the North from intervention. By late 1862, both Napoleon III and the most powerful men in the British government believed the time was approaching for some form of European intervention. The two governments seemed poised to reach a momentous agreement. A crisis within the French government halted the proceedings just long enough for opponents of intervention within the British cabinet

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<sup>218</sup>Most historians would include one other issue as a major threat to Anglo-American relations in the latter years of the war: the disputes over the construction of Confederate commerce raiders in Europe. In this paper, I have avoided discussion of these Euro-American conflicts concerning the outfitting of Confederate naval vessels in the neutral ports Britain and France. Most famous of these vessels were the Laird-Rams and the Confederate commerce raider *Alabama*. I have not omitted discussion of this issue because I doubt its significance in the history of Anglo-American relations. I have done so, because I believe it is a more appropriate topic for the discussion of relations between the two nations in the post-Civil War years. The reparations debates, which it spawned, were *the* most serious threat to Anglo-American relations in the decade following the war. As early as the summer of 1861, Charles Francis Adams protested to Lord Russell that Britain was not adhering to strict neutrality in its contact with Confederate commerce raiders. The issue lasted throughout the war. It is my contention, however, that no matter how indignant the United States was at what it perceived to be serious violations of neutrality, the threat of war between the two nations because of this issue was not serious during the Civil War itself. Furthermore, these disputes did not have any effect on British prospects for intervening in the war.

to mobilize. Palmerston's quick retreat from the brink of intervention demonstrated the uncertainties that faced any interventionist proposal. The inability to get Russia to join any Anglo-French intervention was a major blow to British hopes. Without Russian involvement, the proposal had almost no chance of being accepted by Washington. Since the North was unlikely to accept European intervention, Great Britain had to consider the effects a conflict with the North would have on Britain's global sphere of influence.

Europe was in the middle of a dramatic transformation. Italian and German independence movements threatened to overturn the balance of power in Europe. Napoleon had established a foothold in North America and was recklessly meddling in European affairs. Britain could not afford to be handicapped in Europe by a conflict in North America. Canadian security was a major concern as well. The difficulties in defending Canada forced the British to question whether intervention was worth a possible Northern invasion of Canada. Furthermore, British intervention might negatively affect its naval strategy. Though the blockade hindered free trade, and was a major economic concern, it set a precedent for the liberalizing of international naval law. When the British government considered all of these factors, a conflict with the United States became a war not worth fighting.

The American Civil War was not the first time that the United States had benefited from European distractions. The Louisiana Territory had been available for purchase because Napoleon needed money for a war in Europe. At the treaty of Ghent, which ended the War of 1812, the United States received extremely favorable terms because Britain's finest diplomats were at the Conference of Vienna, trying to resolve the future of Europe in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars. The Civil War was the latest

example of America benefiting from European concerns. Great Britain's global position, with its vast empire, made it the most powerful nation in the world during the middle of the nineteenth century. That global role, however, had drawbacks. Britain had to consider the possible worldwide implications of any major involvement in American affairs. Despite its earnest desire to end the war, Britain was unable to do so because it had too many other concerns in its global balance of power strategy.

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