

British Neutrality during the American Civil War

Written by

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One of the most curious aspects of the American Civil War is why Great Britain remained neutral throughout the duration of the war and did not support the Confederacy, or at least recognize it as a fully-fledged nation. When the Civil War broke out, only fifty years had elapsed since Britain and the United States had fought each other in the War of 1812. As children of the eighteenth century, the two most important British Statesmen of the Civil War period, the British Prime Minister, Henry John Temple Palmerston, and the British Foreign Secretary, John Russell, were both young men in 1812 and were certainly both exposed to the Revolutionary War era sentiments of their forefathers.¹ Characterized by his contemporary, Richard Cobden, as a man who “likes to drive the wheel close to the edge and show how dexterously he can avoid falling over the precipice,” Palmerston was, however, hesitant to bring Britain into the war.² I argue that this hesitance stemmed from three main facts: first, that British public opinion was against slavery; second, that British involvement did not appear advantageous enough; and third, the ineptitude of the Confederacy in their diplomatic efforts.

By 1860 it could be discerned that the Industrial Revolution was fast making the institution of slavery an obsolete relic of a bygone era. New sources of power, such as steam and coal, were making slave labor unnecessary, while new industries, driven by new technologies, were superseding the old agrarian model. And people were flocking to the cities, where these new industries were centered. In England, “such cities accounted for 17 percent of the total

¹ Stern, *When the Guns Roared: World Aspects of the American Civil War*, Page 21

² Stern, *When the Guns Roared: World Aspects of the American Civil War*, Page 22

English population in 1801, 35 percent as early as 1851, and fully 54 percent in 1891.”³ These changes sapped the life from slavery in England. As slaves decreased in economic importance, the humanitarian aspects of slavery loomed proportionally larger in the public mind and, as a result, the abolition movement gained worldwide traction. The nation that industrialized first, Great Britain, was in 1833 the first major European power to abolish slavery throughout her dominion.⁴ The nations of Sweden, Denmark, and France followed in the 1840s and Russia was preparing to free her serfs in 1861 when the Civil War broke out.⁵

In the United States, changes ushered in by the Industrial Revolution came first and most appreciably to the Northern states, whose dynamic economies were based on industry and commerce.⁶ The Southern states, on the other hand, were still agrarian and mostly unindustrialized in 1860 and white Southerners still clung to their traditional way of life, which included slavery.⁷ However, the pace of the world was quickening and it was rapidly becoming hostile to the institution of slavery. Even if Southerners refused to acknowledge this, it seems as though they knew it on a subconscious level, and felt, rightly, that their way of life was threatened.

The British were, for the vast majority, staunch advocates for the abolition of slavery. Most of the famous British writers of the day were pro-North, including John Stuart Mill, Anthony Trollope, and Charles Darwin, among many others.⁸ However, for many of these individuals and institutions, “their hatred of slavery, rather than any love for the Union, was what united them in their efforts.”⁹ Indeed, Charles Dickens, perhaps the most famous English writer

³ McKay, *A History of Western Society*, Page 719

⁴ Stern, *When the Guns Roared: World Aspects of the American Civil War*, Page 19

⁵ Stern, *When the Guns Roared: World Aspects of the American Civil War*, Page 19

⁶ <http://www.historycentral.com/CivilWar/AMERICA/Economics.html>

⁷ <http://www.historycentral.com/CivilWar/AMERICA/Economics.html>

⁸ Stern, *When the Guns Roared: World Aspects of the American Civil War*, Page 20

⁹ Campbell, *English Public Opinion and the American Civil War*, Page 18

of his century “damned the South for its slavery and the North for its bombast and swagger.”¹⁰

The Union was nowhere near universally loved, but slavery was so loathsome that many people found the idea of supporting the South unpalatable. However, the anti-slavery view was more widespread among the middle and working classes, who could perhaps better empathize with the downtrodden slaves, than among the richer Brits who were “more or less willing to tolerate [slavery] in America” because they had a vested economic interest in its continuation.¹¹

The chief agricultural product and backbone of the Southern economy was cotton. Abraham Lincoln was acutely aware of this when he declared a blockade of all Southern ports on April 19, 1860.¹² An embargo of this sort was exactly what Southern politicians thought would bring Europe into the war. They believed that Southern cotton was so essential to European industry that any attempt to curtail shipments of it to Europe would foment bellicose outrage. Senator Louis Wigfall of Texas espoused this viewpoint:

“I say that cotton is king, and that he waves his scepter not only over these thirty-three states, but over the island of Great Britain and continental Europe, and that there is no crowned head upon that island, or upon the continent that does bend to the knee in fealty and acknowledge allegiance to that monarch.”¹³

The Southerners were correct that their cotton was ubiquitous in the European textile industry; about eighty percent of the total raw cotton used in Britain and France was imported from the Southern states.¹⁴ And in the English city of Lancashire, then the world’s largest manufacturer of cotton textiles, the percentage of Southern cotton used was fully 85 percent.¹⁵ However,

¹⁰ Stern, *When the Guns Roared: World Aspects of the American Civil War*, Page 21

¹¹ Stern, *When the Guns Roared: World Aspects of the American Civil War*, Page 20

¹² Jones, *Union in Peril: The Crisis over British Intervention in the Civil War*, Page 22

¹³ Jenkins, *Britain and the War for the Union*, Page 2

¹⁴ Barnes, *The American Civil War through British Eyes*, Page iv

¹⁵ Campbell, *English Public Opinion and the American Civil War*, Page 50

Confederates failed to anticipate the situation correctly when they formulated their “King Cotton” policy. The cotton crop of the year prior to the outbreak of the Civil War had been so plentiful that there was an estimated two and a half years worth of cotton stockpiled in the warehouses of Europe.¹⁶ This eliminated all of the leverage that the Confederates were expecting to have over Europe and made the forcible removal of the blockade not worthwhile to the European powers. As Richard Bickerton Pemell Lyons, the British Ambassador to Washington, remarked, “Great as is the real importance of their staple, their own notions of the influence it will secure to them have become so much exaggerated as to become preposterous.”¹⁷ Naturally, the law of supply and demand dictated that by the time the cotton surplus in Europe was depleted large quantities of cotton were being cultivated in India and Egypt and shipped to Europe with ease.¹⁸ In the end, the Southerners’ arrogance over the importance of their cotton would undermine support for them overseas.

The slavery issue rankled British sentiments, but if the Confederacy had made a strong argument for their right to secede, they may have convinced Britain to support their cause. However, diplomatic efforts made by the Confederate leadership throughout the war were, for the most part, inept and bungled. For one thing, the “Southern sons” they sent abroad on diplomatic missions were horrible choices. Perhaps the worst was William L. Yancey, the man whom the Confederate President Jefferson Davis chose to head a three-member commission to Europe. Yancey had a violent history that “included killing his wife’s uncle over a point of honor” and Yancey was emphatically dismissed by the British consul in Charleston as “impulsive, erratic and hot-headed; a rabid secessionist, a favorer of a revival of the Slave-Trade,

¹⁶ Barnes, *The American Civil War through British Eyes*, Page v

¹⁷ Barnes, *The American Civil War through British Eyes*, Page 11

¹⁸ Barnes, *The American Civil War through British Eyes*, Page v

and a ‘filibuster’ of the extremist type of ‘manifest destiny.’”¹⁹ Such a man was unlikely to encourage European support and sending a man to Britain whom the British had already dismissed was ill considered. Some speculated that Davis sent Yancey to Europe so as to get rid of him, but in any case this decision reveals how poorly Davis understood European diplomacy, or, at least, how little importance he placed on it.²⁰ In light of this, it is unsurprising that the Confederacy was doomed to failure in its attempts to garner European support and recognition.

However, the British refusal to support the Confederacy was more deep-seated than this. The Confederate attitude towards Europe was tinged with condescension and many people in Britain believed that the Confederacy was attempting, or at least wanted, to blackmail them into joining the war by withholding cotton.²¹ This caused British resentment towards the Confederacy and contributed to a national feeling of duty to stay out of the war. In the words of one English newspaper, “it will be national suicide if we do not strain every nerve to emancipate ourselves from moral servitude to a community of slaveholders.”²² Even though the British had introduced slavery to the Southern states when they were colonies, and were therefore at least partially responsible for it, the British considered themselves more civilized than the Confederates because they no longer participated in that vile institution. In this manner the British reciprocated the condescension shown by the Confederacy and an atmosphere of mutual aversion was generated.

Despite British disgust with Southern slavery, it is naïve to assume that the British would have remained neutral in all circumstances, for they “saw clearly that the former American colony which had seceded from England might become a rival world power if it succeeded in

¹⁹ Jones, *Blue and Gray Diplomacy*, Page 16

²⁰ Stern, *When the Guns Roared: World Aspects of the American Civil War*, Page 15

²¹ Campbell, *English Public Opinion and the American Civil War*, Page 52

²² Campbell, *English Public Opinion and the American Civil War*, Page 50

settling its internal disputes.”²³ This prognosis was completely correct, but circumstances never led Britain to believe that her intervention was worth the high cost of military involvement, the almost certain outcome of any interference. However, British intervention seemed imminent on several occasions.

Perhaps the most serious such instance was the Trent Affair, a diplomatic crisis that occurred when a Northern ship requisitioned several confederate agents onboard a British vessel.²⁴ On November 8, 1861 the Union warship, the *San Jacinto*, sighted the *Trent*, a British packet that was bound for Europe, off the coast of Havana.²⁵ Aware that Confederate agents who had eluded capture were stowed away onboard this ship, the rash captain of the *San Jacinto* fired two shots across the *Trent*'s bow and then proceeded to forcibly remove four Confederate agents.²⁶ This was a grievous affront to British honor because it violated the safety of people under British protection. However, the British leadership still did not want a war, so they offered the Union the opportunity to release the prisoners. This was a move that put William Henry Seward, the Union Secretary of State, in the “‘very painful dilemma’ of either bearing ‘the humiliation of yielding to England’ or becoming ‘the author of a disastrous Foreign War.’”²⁷ Of course Seward yielded and the crisis was averted. But this incident was the closest that the British ever came to declaring war on the Union and it is important to note that it came about not by an outbreak of sympathy for the Confederates, but rather, because the British were badly insulted. Remarking on this incident, the British *Times* wrote, “‘We should have done just as much to rescue two of their own Negroes.’”²⁸

²³ Stern, *When the Guns Roared: World Aspects of the American Civil War*, Page 21

²⁴ Barnes, *The American Civil War through British Eyes*, Page vii

²⁵ Jones, *Blue and Gray Diplomacy*, Page 88

²⁶ Jones, *Blue and Gray Diplomacy*, Pages 88-89

²⁷ Jones, *Blue and Gray Diplomacy*, Page 105

²⁸ Jones, *Blue and Gray Diplomacy*, Page 110

The British could have heavily influenced the American Civil War, but they did not. It is interesting to speculate on how history would be different if Britain had sided with the Confederacy. During this time, Britain's "power was then so great that even the ambitious French Emperor, Napoleon III, had to be content to follow her lead."²⁹ So had Britain supported the Confederacy, it is likely that other European powers would have followed suit. It is true that the British had not been very successful in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, the last two wars that they had fought on American soil, but the Civil War was different in at least two respects. First, despite their differences, the beleaguered Confederates would probably have welcomed British forces, giving them a sympathetic populace that the British had lacked in those previous wars. Second, new technology, such as the steamship's ability to hasten force projection, would have made the British military much more effective. Therefore, it is very likely that the Confederacy would have secured its independence with British help. And since the United States was the dominant country throughout the 20th century, this outcome would have altered global history on a fundamental level.

The 1860s were a time when "no European nation stood waiting in the wings to redress the balance of power, as France had done in the aftermath of the great eighteenth-century wars for empire that had led to her expulsion from North America."³⁰ Because of the absence of an aggrieved European power, Britain, the "mistress of the seas," was the logical ally for the Confederacy to obtain. However, the Confederacy did not make their war for secession look attractive to British eyes and therefore failed to obtain the support of the powerful British navy, a force that could have tipped the scales in her favor. While there were undoubtedly many fine people in the South, the general British consensus was that "the temper of the South is essentially

²⁹ Stern, *When the Guns Roared: World Aspects of the American Civil War*, Page xix

³⁰ Merli, *The Alabama, British Neutrality, and the American Civil War*, page 13

barbarous,” and the British were worried that the “Confederacy would become a despotic, not democratic power.”³¹ A few short words uttered by John Russell in May of 1861 on the floor of the House of Commons succinctly capture the British attitude and response to the American Civil War: “for God’s sake, let us if possible keep out of it.”³²

³¹ Campbell, *English Public Opinion and the American Civil War*, Page 48

³² Jones, *Union in Peril: The Crisis over British Intervention in the Civil War*, Page 26

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