

Howard Jones, Union in Peril(1992)

Introduction: HJ makes case that for the first 18 months of the war there was a danger that Britain (and France) were considering intervention into the CW. Lincoln was rightly alarmed about this possibility.

If the British had announced recognition of the Confederacy the American ambassador to Court of St. James was leave his post thereby setting in motion the drift toward war.

1. Problems of Recognition: Seward's hysteria right before the shelling of Ft. Sumter when he recommended that Lincoln should call France and Spain about their recent interventionist activities in Mexico and if their response was not satisfactory, go to Congress and ask for a declaration of war. Seward hoped this kind of foreign policy diversion would unify the nation in the face of their political crisis of secession. The president ignored Seward's recommendation and let it known that he would decide national policy.

England never understood what was at stake in the CW. But Lincoln contributed to this dimness early on when the Union announced its war aims and excluded slavery from the Cause. By bowing to domestic pressures and steering around the slavery issue L relieved the British from having to make a decision between their moral commitment to antislavery and their economic interests in Southern cotton. W moral questions cast aside, economic considerations became paramount w/ the Palmerston govt. Even while L placed the highest priority on preserving the Union he realized that slavery was the cause of the war. L was determined to preserve the Union that the FF had created. But he and his party were tied to the containment doctrine as the way to end chattel slavery. He hoped White Hall would understand this. It was not by coincidence that the most explosive confrontations bbtw No and So throughout the antebellum period were related to slavery.

L's aggressive foreign policy was pointed to make it clear that any kind of intervention would not be welcomed by the Union. Mediation no matter how high minded in stated purpose would only raise Southern hopes and make the Union cause that much more difficult.

England choose to view the struggle as the efforts of the So. to enjoy her independence against the oppressive No that wanted empire in the Americas.

2. British Neutrality and the Rules of Modern Civilized Warfare: British initial position was strict neutrality toward the struggle. In London's eyes both sides were involved in a struggle in which the So. was in rebellion against the Union and had the right to have its belligerency recognized and Britain expected to be able to trade with both sides.

So's King Cotton tactics. Over 80% of Southern cotton went to England. The South sought to exercise leverage on England and achieve recognition by withholding her cotton once the war broke out. The advantage sought was nullified for a time since the bumper cotton crops and exports in 1858 and 1859 provided England's textile owners with a surplus of cotton. But a protracted war could change all this. Some time in the middle of 1862 England would begin to feel the pinch.

### 3. Bull Run and Threat of Foreign Intervention

This first battle and the No's humiliation strengthen convictions in England (govt., Parliament members who were pro-South, and press like the London Times) that the No. was incapable of suppressing the South's determined drive for independence. BR battle intensified France's interests in intervention. Louis Napoleon had nefarious plans for reestablishing French power in the W. Hemisphere (following the example of his uncle Napoleon I) by playing in the Mexican embroglio and to assure a steady flow of Southern cotton.

### 4. The Trent affair and Recognition

Interventionist impulses quickened by BR were further accelerated by the Trent affair. When England learned of the capricious actions of Capt. Wilkes of the San Jacinto the war fever climbed perilously. British honor had been violated by this action. James Mason was the principle author of the infamous Fugitive Slave Act and a "co-conspirator" in the K/N matter. Slidell had earned the reputation as one of the most dedicated secessionists in Congress.

The No. saw the affair as a great Union success in capturing these "rabble-rousers." US Ambassador Charles Francis Adams told his legation personnel that they would be home in a month. Adams was certain that war was in the near offing. Sir John Russell (minister of foreign affairs) insisted on an apology and compensation. The NY stock market plunged w/ the news from England while the British cut off shipments of saltpeter to the Union. England demanded the return of Mason and Slidell. It was a scorching matter of honor. Seward expostulated at an affair at the Portuguese embassy that if England wanted war she shall have it. "We will wrap the whole world in flames!"

Richmond was certain that the Trent affair would play to her advantage. The word was that London would demand not only the return of the two Confederate diplomats but insist that the North lift the blockade.

Lincoln delayed in responding but ultimately he knew he would have to comply w/ England's demands. After all England had international

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law on her side. As soon as the diplomats were released the enflamed issue subsided. Settlement of the Trent affair did not mean that intervention was dead in England. In an ironic, backhanded way, the British Govt. had its hand strengthe\ned in holding back on any decision on intervention by standing tall with the Yanks in this matter. It was gained particvular political favor at home.

Union victories in the West w/ Fts. Donaldson and Henry and the capture of New Orleans fretted Britain and France. It appeared now that the Union might win the war but only after a long and protractive struggle. The cotton issue was looming. These Union victories did not close the possibility of foreign intervention.

#### 6. Seedtime of British Intervention

The prospects of a prolonged war incited Britain and France to seek ways to bring t\it to an quick end. For B it was to stop the war before it involved foreign powers and to assure the flow of cotton. There was talk now btw Eng. and Fr. about a joint effort at mediation.

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By August 1862 there was interest within the British govt. to initiate a move toward mediation. Gladstone and Rusell were on the same page on this question. News of Lincoln's intentions to move the war to a higher level with the pending announcement of the EP acted to spur on this new European initiative. The talk w/ Rusll was that Lincoln was about to inspire a race war. This threat of foreign intervention confiremd Lincoln in his decision to unleash his thunderbolt.

#### 8. Antietam and Move Toward Mediation

The S's second victory at Bull Run started a moved toward mediation.

JH notes that if Lee had not come No right after 2nd Bull Run the South might have won a mediation followed by recognition (and war). W/ the news of Lee's advance into Maryland the Palmerstron govt. delayed its decision upon news of Lee's success and the stronger possibility of the No's acquiescence.

W/ the news of Lee's retreat from Antietem the Palmerston ministry paused to reevaluate the timing of the intervention.

Despite the long-standing belief that the Union victory at Antietam followed by the provisional EP had halted a move by Britain toward intervention, the truth is that the coming of the battle only put on hold a mediation process that was well matured by then, when the results of the battle were known, encouraged Russell to depart from Palmerston's cautionary strictures to begin the move again.

#### 9 Prelude to Intervention

#### 10 Denouement: The November Decision in London

Xeroxed copy of Conclusion (attached).

Research note: See A. Nevins, War for the Union, Vol. 2: 242 for his thought-provoking prognostications if England had interperened in the CW.

*The war therefore  
must go on.*

—Earl Russell,

January 24, 1863

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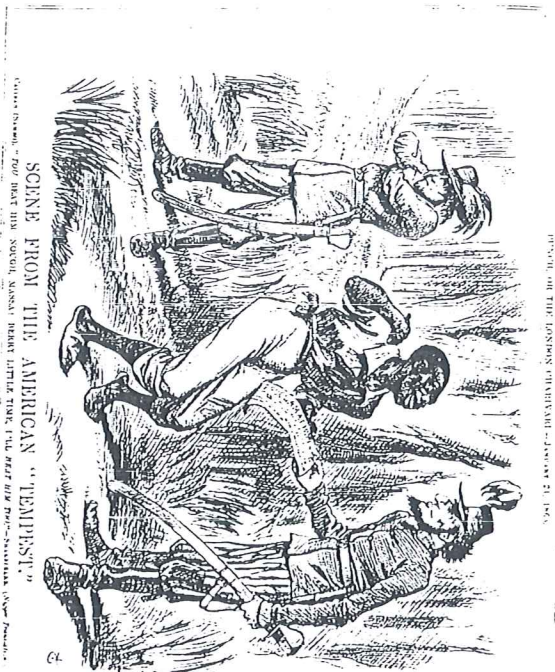
## Conclusion

Lewis's memorandum and Palmerston's reluctance to act provide the final denouement to the question of why the British government refused to intervene in the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> Lewis knew that the key person he had to dissuade from intervention was Russell. He also knew that the foreign secretary relied on history and international law to justify his stand and that the only way to undermine his argument for intervention was to appeal to that same history and international law. This Lewis did with his November 7 memorandum. In arguing against intervention, he included references to history and citations and quotes from Austin, Vattel, and Wheaton, knowing that Russell had relied on these writers in justifying his call for intervention. Lewis lauded the interventionist move as humanitarian in nature—thereby praising Russell—and then, after complimenting the foreign secretary's use of history and international law to promote an intervention, raised the practical and legal obstacles to such a move. Lewis's

tactics made it impossible for Russell to sustain his argument. Russell returned to the camp of the prime minister, who had already confirmed his own hesitation after Antietam.

As time approached for implementing the Emancipation Proclamation, the chances for intervention disappeared as British indignation over Lincoln's move eased with the growing realization that slavery's end was in sight. Argyll, Bright, Cobden, and others had discerned the long-range implications of the document. To the north of London, workers likewise grasped its ramifications. Ignoring the man-made boundaries of the new freedom, they gathered in huge rallies beginning in December, cheering the North and proclaiming the rights of workers everywhere. For weeks Adams was besieged with petitions, resolutions, and letters from working groups (and emancipation societies), all supporting the president's action.<sup>2</sup> The North's heightened morale stemming from Antietam and the imminent Emancipation Proclamation, or so the workers believed, would sweep away the South's resistance and bring a peace that, not coincidentally, would reopen the cotton flow and permit a return to normal work time.

England's move both toward and away from intervention had little to do with moral sentiments about slavery. Without question, Lincoln's call for emancipation made it difficult for the British to take any action that might place them on the side of the Confederacy. But slavery existed in the South at the beginning of the war, and the Palmerston ministry considered intervention anyway. If one is skeptical about Russell's claims to favor the Union, no doubt can exist that he and his colleagues were neutral and wanted peace as integral to their own nation's best interests. If anything, the attacks by both North and South on the ministry provided evidence of its neutrality. More than a few British spokesmen remained infuriated with what they regarded as the Union's hypocrisy concerning slavery and only reluctantly joined the swelling flood of pro-North support. The Emancipation Proclamation made that task easier. In that sense Lincoln's move against slavery had the impact on England that he mistakenly thought it was having some months earlier. Despite the oft-claimed argument that the Emancipation Proclamation helped to prevent outside interference in the war, the pattern of events in the period before the autumn crisis of 1862 shows that the dec-



"Scene from the American 'Tempest'"  
*(London Punch, Jan. 24, 1863)*

laration actually encouraged talk of intervention because of the widespread fear of slave revolts and ultimate race war.<sup>3</sup>

Other divisive issues irritated Anglo-American relations throughout the remainder of the war and into the postwar period, but none were as explosive as the crisis over intervention. The South continued its efforts to build a navy in England, and more than once the murmurs of war resumed. In early January 1863, after the Southern victory at Fredericksburg of the previous month, Napoleon III made a unilateral and informal offer of mediation, which the Union promptly rejected. Finally, Southern sympathizers John Roebuck and William Lindsay tried one more time in Parliament during the summer of 1863 to arrange an Anglo-French recognition of the Confederacy, but their poorly managed plan collapsed under the weight of its own intrigues, betrayed confidences, and exaggerated claims. British business interests continued to profit from wartime trade with the Union, and the cotton famine in England (and on the Continent) came to an end in 1863 as increased supplies came from blockade runners and from sources other than the American South. And from 1863 on, England became increasingly preoccupied with prob-



"Very Probable" *(London Punch, Aug. 27, 1864)*

lems in Europe. Though the Palmerston ministry had repeatedly threatened to deviate from its course, it remained true to its initial decision not to intervene until the North had learned on the battlefield that subjugation of the South was impossible. In an ironic twist, however, the Union itself sealed the fate of foreign intervention (and that of the Confederacy) with pathbreaking victories at Vicksburg and Gettysburg in July of that same year. A month later, Benjamin directed Mason to leave London.<sup>4</sup>

JAN. 28, 1865.



## THE LAST SUGGESTION FROM RICHMOND.

GHOST OF THE CONFEDERACY—"I propose to throw myself under your protection—either jointly or separately." "I don't see it. If *you* were a free person *you* might—but now you are a mere skeleton—very—no—no."

"The Last Suggestion from Richmond": Napoleon III and John Bull reject the Confederacy (Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, Jan. 28, 1865)

The British had found themselves caught in an unparalleled dilemma. Humanitarian, economic, political, and strategic interests were at stake, and yet the government in London could do nothing to stop the fighting in America. Although the responsibilities of civilization and self-interest rested on the Palmerston ministry, it had no remedy to the American problem and could take no action either with or without allies. The likelihood of conflict with the North outweighed the attraction of intervention. Not only was Canada indefensible, but Palmerston feared an outbreak of war in Europe caused by its own set of problems. French

aggressions had already alienated the Union, and Russia's pro-Union sentiment prevented participation in any policy alien to the Lincoln administration's wishes. Finally, Palmerston and others believed that the Union navy and army had grown to alarming proportions. Lewis's arguments and Palmerston's reluctance led to London's rejection of Napoleon's project, which killed the last major effort at joint intervention. To his consul general in Paris, Seward offered a requiem for the intervention crisis: "We are no longer to be disturbed by Secession intrigues in Europe. They have had their day. We propose to forget them."<sup>5</sup>

The British decision to stay out of the war proved crucial to the collapse of the Confederacy. Before 1863, when talk of intervention was at its highest, the verdict of the war hung in the balance. Had the British chosen to intervene, the South would doubtless have won recognition and dissident groups in the North would have been strengthened in their opposition to the war. The British would then have felt called upon to challenge the blockade, assuring confrontations with Union vessels and a virtual certainty of war. In the meantime, the Confederacy would have secured enough outside military and commercial aid to have prolonged its resistance and perhaps to have won independence. One cannot conclude that recognition would have changed the war's ultimate judgment. And yet, recognition would have provided a morale boost to the South at a pivotal time, heightened its chances for floating loans abroad and raising more money at home, furnished a powerful impetus for war between the Union and England, opened the possibility of the South's signing military alliances, forced the North to dig deeper into its will to maintain the Union, and damaged Anglo-American relations for years to come.

Adams was correct in declaring that the Union was passing through the crisis of its fate during the late autumn of 1862. Mediation, however well-intentioned, would undoubtedly have gone beyond a mere push for peace into the next step of recognition and then to an outbreak of hostilities fostered by the North's unwilling opposition to foreign involvement. Even without British intervention, Americans harbored ill feelings toward the Palmerston ministry that were still in evidence years afterward. In 1871 an arbitral commission in Geneva awarded the United States \$15 million in damage claims arising from the blockade-running ac-

tivities of the *Alabama* and other vessels built in England. But running beneath these complaints was the Union's bitter belief that England's refusal to renounce any intention to recognize the South had prolonged the war. To make such an admission, the British claimed, would bolster Seward's unfounded attempt to hold them liable for all losses stemming from the Civil War. A little over a year after the war, Seward had complained to Adams that England's premature recognition of Southern belligerency had approved "British sympathy, aid, and assistance," making them "active allies" of the Confederacy. England's meddling in America's domestic affairs, Seward insisted, had threatened "the life of the nation itself."<sup>6</sup>

Fortunately, in 1862, Lewis emerged as the voice of reason and supported Palmerston's hesitancy to become involved in a war in which the intervening power possessed no remedy other than the use of force. Given the other issues that threatened the midcentury Anglo-American rapprochement both during the Civil War and afterward, British intervention would almost certainly have led to a third war between the Atlantic nations with repercussions reaching well into the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Once the British refused to intervene, the French followed suit, and this most horrible of wars, as the Palmerston ministry regarded the American conflict, would have to grind on to its end at Appomattox Courthouse in April 1865.

## NOTES

### ABBREVIATIONS

- AR: Duke of Argyll  
 BSSP: *British and Foreign State Papers*  
 BPP: *British Parliamentary Papers*  
 Brit. Lib., Add. Mss.: British Library, Additional Manuscripts, London, England  
 CFA: Charles Francis Adams  
 CFA Diary: Letterbook: Adams Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts  
 CFA, Jr.: Charles Francis Adams, Jr.  
 CL: Fourth Earl of Clarendon  
 CWL: Roy P. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*  
 Disp., GB (NA): Department of State, Diplomatic Dispatches, Great Britain (National Archives), Washington, D.C.  
 DS: Department of State, United States  
 FO: Foreign Office, Great Britain  
 FRUS: United States, Department of State, *Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs*  
 GB: Great Britain  
 GC: General Correspondence  
 NA: National Archives, Washington, D.C.  
 NFB (NA): DS, Notes from British Legation in the United States to the Department of State, 1906 (National Archives), Washington, D.C.  
 NITFL, GB (NA): Department of State, Notes to Foreign Legation in the United States, from the Department of State, 1834–Great Britain (National Archives), Washington, D.C.  
 ORN: *Official Records of the Union, Confederate Navies in the War*  
 Rebellion  
 Parl. Debates: Thomas C. Hansard's *Parliamentary Debates*  
 PMJ: Prime Minister's Journals  
 PRO: Public Record Office, Kew, England  
 RU: Lord John Russell

### INTRODUCTION

1. See Blumenthal, "Confederate Diplomacy"; Davis, *Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, 2:368–70. Not until the early twentieth century did nations distinguish between de facto and de jure recognition. Lauterpacht, *Recognition in International Law*, 332. A de facto government in control, regardless of questions of its legality. A de jure government considered lawful even though it may not be in actual control.

2. Russell to Lyons, Mar. 21, 1861, no. 69, Gladstone Papers, Brit. Lib. Add. Mss., 44:593, vol. 508. Palmerston was Henry John Temple, 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount.

3. Lyons to Russell, Feb. 4, 1861, Russell Papers, PRO 30/22/35 April 1861 Stockel tried to arrange negotiations between Seward and Southern representatives, but the secretary of state at the last minute deci-