This Mighty Scourge

Perspectives on the Civil War

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The Saratoga That Wasn't: The Impact of Antietam Abroad

THE CAMPAIGN AND BATTLE OF ANTIETAM had consequences that reached far beyond the mountains and valleys and fields of western Maryland where the fighting took place. Indeed, the battle's reverberations were heard across the Atlantic in London and Paris. Like the secessionists of 1776 who founded the United States, the secessionists of 1861 who founded the Confederate States counted on foreign aid to help them win their independence. In the Revolution they got what they hoped for after the battle of Saratoga. French recognition of the fledgling United States and subsequent financial and military support were crucial to American success. In the Civil War the Confederates failed to achieve foreign recognition, which might have been crucial to Confederate success if it had happened. The outcome of the fighting near Sharpsburg was the main reason it did not happen; in that respect Antietam could be described as a failed Saratoga.

The principal goal of Confederate foreign policy in 1862 was to win diplomatic recognition of the new Southern nation by foreign powers. Both North and South—one in fear and the other in hope—understood the importance of this matter. As early as May 21, 1861, Union secretary of state William H. Seward had instructed the American minister to Britain, Charles Francis Adams, that if the British government extended diplomatic recognition to the Confederacy, "we from that hour, shall cease to be friends and become once more, as we have twice before been forced to be, enemies of Great Britain."[1]

Even if diplomatic recognition did not provoke a third Anglo-American war, Southerners expected it to be decisive in their favor. "Foreign recognition of our independence will go very far towards hastening its recognition by the government of the United States," declared the *Richmond Enquirer* in June 1862. "Our independence once acknowledged, our adversaries must for very shame disgust themselves with the nonsense about 'Rebels,' 'Traitors,' &c" and "look upon our Independence . . . as *un fait accompli.*" Confederate secretary of state Judah

P. Benjamin believed that "our recognition would be the signal for the immediate organization of a large and influential party in the Northern States favorable to putting an end to the war." Moreover, "in our finances at home its effects would be magical, and its collateral advantages would be immeasurable."[2]

Benjamin was not just whistling "Dixie." Judging from the strenuous efforts by Union diplomats to prevent recognition and from the huge volume of news and editorial coverage of the issue in Northern newspapers, foreign recognition of the Confederacy would have been perceived in the North as a grievous and perhaps fatal blow. It would have conferred international legitimacy on the Confederacy and produced great pressure on the United States to do the same. It would have boosted Southern morale and encouraged foreign investment in Confederate bonds. Recognition would also have enabled the Confederacy to negotiate military and commercial treaties with foreign powers.

This question, however, presented the South with something of a catch-22. Although Napoleon III of France wanted to recognize the Confederacy from almost the beginning, he was unwilling to take that step except in tandem with Britain. (All other European powers except perhaps Russia would have followed a British and French lead.) British policy on recognition of a revolutionary or insurrectionary government was coldly pragmatic. Not until it had proved its capacity to sustain its independence, almost beyond a peradventure of a doubt, would Britain risk recognition. The Confederate hope, of course, was for help in *gaining* that independence.

Most European observers and statesmen believed in 1861 that the Union cause was hopeless. In their view, the Lincoln administration could never reestablish control over 750,000 square miles of territory defended by a determined and courageous people. And there was plenty of sentimental sympathy for the Confederacy in Britain, for which the powerful *Times* of London was the foremost advocate. Many Englishmen professed to disdain the braggadocio and vulgar materialism of money-grubbing Yankees. They projected a congenial image of the Southern gentry that conveniently ignored slavery. Nevertheless, the government of Prime Minister Viscount Palmerston was anything but sentimental. It required hard evidence of the Confederacy's ability to survive, in the form of military success, before offering diplomatic recognition. But it would also require Union military success to forestall that possibility. As Lord Robert Cecil told a Northern acquaintance in 1861: "Well, there is one way to convert us all—Win the battles, and we shall come round at once."[3]

In 1861, however, the Confederacy had won most of the battles—the highly visible ones, at least, at Manassas, Wilson's Creek, and Ball's Bluff. And by 1862 the cutoff of cotton exports from the South to Britain and France by the Southern embargo and Northern blockade was beginning to hurt the economies of those countries. Henry Adams, private secretary to his father in the American legation at London, wrote in January 1862 that only "one thing would save us and that is a decisive victory. Without that our fate here seems to me a mere matter of time." In February the *New York Tribune* acknowledged the critical foreign-policy stakes of the military campaigns then impending: "If our armies now advancing shall generally be stopped or beaten back, France, England, and Spain will make haste to recognize Jeff's Confederacy as an independent power." Only Union victories—"prompt, signal, decisive—can alone prevent that foreign intervention on which all the hopes of the traitors are staked."[4]

Northern arms did win signal and decisive victories during the next several months that more than fulfilled the *Tribune*'s hopes, starting with Forts Henry and Donelson and Roanoke Island in February, followed by Pea Ridge and New Bern in March. In London the Confederate envoy James Mason conceded that news of the fall of Forts Henry and Donelson "had an unfortunate effect on the minds of our friends here." Charles Francis Adams informed Seward in March that as a consequence of Northern success, "the pressure for interference here has disappeared." At the same time, Henry Adams wrote to his brother in the army back home that "times have so decidedly changed since my last letter to you. . . . The talk of intervention, only two months ago so loud as to take a semi-official tone, is now out of the minds of everyone."[5] The London *Times* ate crow, admitting it had underestimated "the unexpected and astonishing resolution of the North." Even Napoleon's pro-Southern sentiments seemed to have cooled. From Paris the American minister wrote in April that "the change in condition of affairs at home has produced a change, if possible more striking abroad. There is little more said just now as to . . . the propriety of an early recognition of the south."[6]

News from America took almost two weeks to reach Europe. In mid-May Henry Adams returned to the legation from a springtime walk in London to find his father dancing across the floor and shouting, "We've got New Orleans." Indeed, Henry added, "the effect of the news here has been greater than anything yet." It must have been, to prompt such behavior by the grandson of John Adams and son of John Quincy Adams. While Adams was dancing, James Mason was

writing dispiritedly to Jefferson Davis that "the fall of New Orleans will certainly exercise a depressing influence here for intervention."[7]

Mason did not stop trying, however. He urged Lord John Russell, the British foreign secretary, to offer England's good offices to mediate an end to a war "ruinous alike to the parties engaged in it, and to the prosperity and welfare of Europe." Such an offer, of course, would be tantamount to recognizing Confederate independence. In a blunt reply, Russell pointed out that "the capture of New Orleans, the advance of the Federals to Corinth, to Memphis, and the banks of the Mississippi as far as Vicksburg" meant that "Her Majesty's Government are still determined to wait." Nevertheless, Mason worked his contacts with members of Parliament, who planned to introduce a motion in the House of Commons calling for recognition of the Confederacy. But Palmerston wrote in June that "this seems an odd moment to Chuse for acknowledging the Separate Independence of the South when all the Seaboard, and the principal internal Rivers are in the hands of the North. . . . We ought to know that their Separate Independence is a Truth and a Fact before we declare it to be so."[8]

Therefore, as Charles Francis Adams informed Seward, even among skeptics in Britain "the impression is growing stronger that all concerted resistance to us will before long be at an end." The danger of foreign recognition, Adams had earlier noted, "will arise again only in the event of some decided reverse."[9] Indeed it would, and such reverses were soon to occur as the pendulum of battle swung toward the Confederacy in the summer of 1862.

On May 30 and June 6, 1862, Union arms climaxed four months of victories with the occupation of Corinth, Mississippi, and the capture of Memphis. General George B. McClellan's Army of the Potomac advanced to within six miles of Richmond. But even as these events took place, the Confederate team of Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee was beginning to strike back. Jackson's famous "foot cavalry" outmarched enemy forces in the Shenandoah Valley and won a series of victories that pumped up sagging Southern morale. Robert E. Lee took over the Army of Northern Virginia on June 1 and began planning a counteroffensive against McClellan, which he launched on June 26. By July 2 the Army of the Potomac had been driven back to Harrison's Landing on the James River in the Seven Days battles, plunging Northern morale to the lowest point in the war thus far. In the Western theaters also, the Union war machine stalled in the summer of 1862 and then went into reverse as Confederate forces raided through Tennessee and prepared to invade Kentucky.

These Confederate successes reopened the question of foreign recognition. They confirmed the widespread belief in Europe that the North could never subdue the South. The cotton "famine" was beginning to hurt workers as hundreds of textile mills in Britain and France shut down or went on short time. Unemployment soared. Seward's earlier assurance that Union capture of New Orleans would lead to a resumption of cotton exports from that port was not fulfilled, as Confederates in the lower Mississippi Valley burned their cotton rather than see it fall into Yankee hands. Only a trickle of cotton made it across the Atlantic in 1862. The conviction grew in Britain and France that the only way to revive cotton imports and reopen the factories was to end the war. Pressure built in the summer for an offer by the British and French governments to mediate peace negotiations on the basis of Confederate independence.

When news of Jackson's exploits in the Shenandoah Valley reached Europe (much magnified as it traveled), the government-controlled press in France and anti-American newspapers in Britain began beating the drums for intervention. The Paris *Constitutionnel* insisted in June that "mediation alone will succeed in putting an end to a war disastrous to the interests of humanity." In similar language the London *Times* declared that it was time to end this war that had become "a scandal to humanity."[10] The "humanity" the *Times* seemed most concerned about was textile manufacturers and their employees. The American minister to France, citing information coming to him from that country as well as from across the Channel, reported "a strenuous effort . . . to induce England and France to intervene. . . . I should not attach much importance to these rumors, however well accredited they seem to be, were it not for the exceeding pressure which exists for want of cotton."[11] In mid-June the *Richmond Dispatch* headlined one story "Famine in England—Intervention Certain." Northern newspapers published many alarmist news stories and editorials about "British Intervention," "Foreign Intervention Again," and "The Intervention Panic"—all before news of the Seven Days battles reached Europe.[12]

Southerners hoped and Northerners feared that the Seven Days would greatly increase the chances of intervention. "We may [now] certainly count upon the recognition of our independence," wrote the Virginia fire-eater Edmund Ruffin. The *Richmond Dispatch* was equally certain that this "series of brilliant victories" would "settle the question" of recognition.[13] Under such headlines as "The Federal Disasters in Virginia—European Intervention the Probable Consequence," Northern newspapers regardless of party affiliation

warned that "we stand at the grave and serious crisis of our history. The recent intimations from Europe look to speedy intervention in our affairs."[14]

Although perhaps not so critical as this rhetoric might suggest, the matter was indeed serious. "Let us hope that the North will listen at last to the voice of reason, and that it will accept mediation before Europe has recognized the Confederacy," declared the Paris *Constitutionnel*. On July 16 Napoleon III granted an interview to Confederate envoy John Slidell. The "accounts of the defeat of the Federal armies before Richmond," said the emperor, confirmed his opinion that the "re-establishment of the Union [was] impossible." Three days later Napoleon sent a telegram to his foreign minister, who was in London: "Ask the English government if it does not believe the time has come to recognize the South."[15]

The English seemed willing—many of them, at least. The *Times* stated that if Britain could not "stop this effusion of blood by mediation, we ought to give our moral weight to our English kith and kin [i.e., Southern whites], who have gallantly striven so long for their liberties against a mongrel race of plunderers and oppressors." The breakup of the United States, said the *Times* in August, would be good "riddance of a nightmare." The London *Morning Post*, semi-official voice of the Palmerston government, proclaimed bluntly in July that the Confederacy had "established its claim to be independent."[16]

Even pro-Union leaders in Britain sent dire warnings to their friends in the North. "The last news from your side has created regret among your friends and pleasure among your enemies," wrote John Bright to Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts on July 12. "I do not lose faith in your cause, but I wish I had less reason to feel anxious about you." Richard Cobden likewise sounded an alarm with Sumner: "There is an all but unanimous belief that you cannot subject the South to the Union. . . . Even they who are your partisans & advocates *cannot* see their way to any such issue."[17] From France, Count Agenor-Etienne de Gasparin, who despite his title was a friend of the Union, wrote to Lincoln that only a resumption of Northern military victories could stem the tide toward European recognition. Lincoln took this opportunity to reply with a letter expressing his determination to stay the course. Yet, he added in a tone of frustration, "it seems unreasonable that a series of successes, extending through half-a-year, and clearing more than a hundred thousand square miles of country, should help us so little, while a single half-defeat should hurt us so much."[18]

Unreasonable it may have been, but it was a reality. A pro-Confederate member of Parliament introduced a motion calling for the government to cooperate

with France in offering mediation. Scheduled for debate on July 18, this motion seemed certain to pass. The mood at the American legation was one of despairing resignation. The current was "rising every hour and running harder against us than at any time since the *Trent* affair," reported Henry Adams.[19]

But in a dramatic moment, Prime Minister Palmerston temporarily stemmed the current. Seventy-seven years old and a veteran of more than half a century in British politics, Palmerston seemed to doze through parts of the interminable debate on the mediation motion. Sometime after midnight, however, he lumbered to his feet and in a crisp speech of a few minutes put an end to the debate and the motion (the sponsor withdrew it). Parliament should trust the cabinet's judgment to act at the right time, said Palmerston. That time would arrive when the Confederacy's independence was "firmly and permanently established." One or two more Southern victories, he hinted, might do the job, but until then any premature action by Britain might risk rupture with the United States.[20]

This did not end the matter. James Mason wrote the following day that he still looked "speedily for intervention in *some form*." In Paris on July 25 John Slidell declared himself "more hopeful than I have been at any time since my arrival in Europe."[21] The weight of both the British and French press still leaned strongly toward recognition. And just before he left England in August for a tour of the Continent with Queen Victoria, Foreign Secretary Russell arranged with Palmerston for a cabinet meeting when he returned in October to discuss mediation and recognition.

During the next six weeks, prospects for the Confederacy grew ever brighter. Stonewall Jackson won another victory at Cedar Mountain on August 9. Lincoln and his new general in chief Henry W. Halleck decided, over McClellan's protest, to withdraw the Army of the Potomac from the Virginia Peninsula southeast of Richmond to reinforce the newly created Army of Virginia under General John Pope along the Rappahannock River. Lee decided to strike before most of these reinforcements could arrive. In a complicated set of maneuvers he sent Jackson's corps on a long flanking march to get into Pope's rear, then reunited the army near the Manassas battlefield of the previous year. On August 29–30 the Army of Northern Virginia withstood a series of disjointed attacks by Pope and then counterattacked to win one of the most decisive victories of Lee's career. Lee decided to make this triumph a springboard for an invasion of Maryland to win that state for the Confederacy and perhaps to conquer a peace on previously Union soil. At the same time, two Confederate armies were in Kentucky carrying out what appeared to be a successful

invasion of that state as well. On September 4 the Army of Northern Virginia began crossing the Potomac River into Maryland.

The news of Second Manassas and of Lee's invasion accelerated the pace of intervention discussions in London and Paris. Benjamin Moran, secretary of the American legation in London, reported that "the rebels here are elated beyond measure" by tidings of Lee's victory at Manassas. Moran was disgusted by the "exultation of the British press. . . . I confess to losing my temper when I see my bleeding country wantonly insulted in her hour of disaster." Further word that Lee had invaded Maryland produced in Moran "a sense of mortification. . . . The effect of this news here, is to make those who were our friends ashamed to own the fact. . . . The Union is regarded as hopelessly gone."[22] The French foreign secretary told the American minister in Paris that these events proved "the undertaking of conquering the South is impossible." The British chancellor of the exchequer, William Gladstone, said that it was "certain in the opinion of the whole world except one of the parties . . . that the South cannot be conquered. . . . It is our absolute duty to recognise . . . that Southern independence is established."[23]

Gladstone was not a new convert to this position. The real danger to Union interests came from the potential conversion of Palmerston. After Second Manassas he seemed ready to intervene in the American war. The Federals "got a very complete smashing," he wrote to Russell (who was still abroad with the queen), "and it seems not altogether unlikely that still greater disasters await them, and that even Washington or Baltimore might fall into the hands of the Confederates." If something like that happened, "would it not be time for us to consider whether . . . England and France might not address the contending parties and recommend an arrangement on the basis of separation?" Russell needed little persuasion. He concurred, and added that if the North refused to accept mediation, "we ought ourselves to recognise the Southern States as an independent State."[24]

On September 24 (before news of Antietam arrived in England), Palmerston informed Gladstone of the plan to hold a cabinet meeting on the subject when Russell returned in October. The proposal would be made to both sides: "an Armistice and Cessation of the Blockades with a View to Negotiation on the Basis of Separation," to be followed by diplomatic recognition of the Confederacy.[25] But Palmerston and Russell agreed to take no action "till we see a little more into the results of the Southern invasion. . . . If the Federals sustain a great defeat . . . [their] Cause will be manifestly hopeless . . . and the iron should be struck while

it is hot. If, on the other hand, they should have the best of it, we may wait a while and see what may follow."[26]

Little more than a week later, the news of Antietam and of Lee's retreat to Virginia arrived in Europe. These reports came as "a bitter draught and a stunning blow" to friends of the Confederacy in Britain, wrote American legation secretary Moran. "They express as much chagrin as if they themselves had been defeated."[27]

The London *Times* certainly was stunned by the "exceedingly remarkable" outcome of Antietam. "An army demoralized by a succession of failures," in the words of a *Times* editorial, "has suddenly proved at least equal, and we may probably say superior, to an army elated with triumph and bent upon a continuation of its conquests." Calling Lee's invasion of Maryland "a failure," the normally pro-Southern *Times* admitted that "the Confederates have suffered their first important check exactly at the period when they might have been thought most assured of victory."[28] Other British newspapers expressed similar sentiments. The Union victories at South Mountain (a preliminary battle three days before Antietam) and Antietam restored "our drooping credit here," reported American minister Charles Francis Adams. Most Englishmen had expected the Confederates to capture Washington, and "the surprise" at their retreat "has been quite in proportion. . . . As a consequence, less and less appears to be thought of mediation and intervention."[29]

Adams's prognosis was correct. Palmerston backed away from the idea of intervention. The only favorable condition for mediation "would be the great success of the South against the North," he pointed out to Foreign Secretary Russell on October 2. "That state of things seemed ten days ago to be approaching," but with Antietam "its advance has been lately checked." Thus "the whole matter is full of difficulty," and nothing could be done until the situation became more clear. By October 22 it *was* clear to Palmerston that Confederate defeats had ended any chance for successful mediation. "I am therefore inclined to change the opinion I wrote you when the Confederates seemed to be carrying all before them, and I am [convinced] . . . that we must continue merely to be lookers-on till the war shall have taken a more decided turn."[30]

Russell and Gladstone, plus Napoleon of France, did not give up easily. The French asked Britain to join in a proposal for a six-month armistice in the American war during which the blockade would be lifted, cotton exports would be renewed, and peace negotiations would begin. France also approached Russia, which refused to take part in such an obviously pro-Confederate scheme.

On November 12 the British cabinet also rejected it after two days of discussions in which Secretary for War Sir George Cornewall Lewis led the opposition to intervention. In a letter six days later to King Leopold of Belgium, who favored the Confederacy and supported intervention, Palmerston explained the reasons for Britain's refusal to act. "Some months ago," wrote Palmerston, when "the Confederates were gaining ground to the North of Washington, and events seemed to be in their favor," an "opportunity for making some communication" appeared imminent. But "the tide of war changed its course and the opportunity did not arrive."[31]

Most disappointed of all by this outcome was James Mason, who was left cooling his heels by the British refusal to recognize his own diplomatic status as well as that of his government. On the eve of the arrival in London of news about Antietam, Mason had been "much cheered and elated" by initial reports of Lee's invasion. The earl of Shaftesbury, Prime Minister Palmerston's son-in-law, had told Mason that "the event you so strongly desire," an offer of mediation and recognition, "is very close at hand." Antietam dashed these hopes and soured Mason on the "obdurate" British; he felt "that I should terminate the mission here."[32] He decided to stay on, but never again did his mission come so close to success as it had in September 1862.

Another consequence of Antietam with an important impact abroad was Lincoln's issuance of a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. During the war's first year the North had professed to fight only for Union. Even as late as August 1862, in his famous public letter to *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley, Lincoln had said that if he could save the Union without touching slavery he would do it. This position alienated many potential British friends of the Union cause. Since "the North does not proclaim abolition and never pretended to fight for anti-slavery," wrote one of them, "how can we be fairly called upon to sympathize so warmly with the Federal cause? . . . If they would ensure for their struggle the sympathies of Englishmen, they must abolish slavery."[33]

In his letter to Greeley, however, Lincoln had also said that if he could save the Union by freeing some or all of the slaves, he would do that. In fact, he had already decided to take this fateful step and had so informed his cabinet on July 22. Secretary of State Seward persuaded him to withhold the proclamation "until you can give it to the country supported by military success." Otherwise, in this time of Northern despair over the military reverses in the Seven Days battles and elsewhere, the world might view such an edict "as the last measure of an exhausted government, a cry for help . . . our last *shriek*, on the retreat."[34]

The wait for a military victory to give the proclamation legitimacy and impetus proved to be a long and discouraging one. But Antietam brought the waiting to an end. Five days after the battle, Lincoln issued a proclamation warning Confederate states that unless they returned to the Union by January 1, 1863, their slaves "shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free."[35]

Europeans responded to this preliminary proclamation with some skepticism. But when January 1 came and Lincoln fulfilled his promise, a historic shift in European—especially British—opinion took place. "The Emancipation Proclamation has done more for us here than all our former victories and all our diplomacy," wrote Henry Adams from London. "It is creating an almost convulsive reaction in our favor all over this country." Huge mass meetings in every part of Britain—some fifty of them in all—adopted pro-Union resolutions.[36] The largest of these meetings, at Exeter Hall in London, "has had a powerful effect on our newspapers and politicians," wrote Richard Cobden, one of the most pro-Union members of Parliament. "It has closed the mouths of those who have been advocating the side of the South. Recognition of the South, by England, whilst it bases itself on Negro slavery, is an impossibility." Similar reports came from elsewhere in Europe. "The anti-slavery position of the government is at length giving us a substantial foothold in European circles," wrote the American minister to the Netherlands. "Everyone can understand the significance of a war where emancipation is written on one banner and slavery on the other."[37]

Antietam was unquestionably the most important battle of the Civil War in its impact on foreign relations. Never again did Britain and France come so close to intervention; never again did the Confederacy come so close to recognition by foreign governments. In the Revolution, the battle of Saratoga brought French intervention, which was the key to ultimate American victory. In the Civil War, Antietam turned out to be the Saratoga that failed.