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*The Decisive Role of Federal Sea Power in the Civil War*

The Federal navy had three broad objectives during the Civil War: to establish an effective blockade of the Confederacy’s cotton ports in order to limit cash flow into the South, to assault Confederate positions along the coast and open the Mississippi to Union shipping, and to protect Union merchant shipping from Confederate commerce raiding. Despite setbacks, the Union navy managed to carry out these objectives over the course of the war with a relatively high degree of success. The three points of the Union naval strategy as executed often left a good deal to be desired, but taken as a whole it becomes clear that without the help of the Federal navy, Union forces would have had a much harder time winning the war than was actually the case.

In April 1861, when Lincoln proclaimed the blockade of the Confederacy, the Union navy was wholly inadequate for the task. For instance, the Coast Blockading Squadron consisted of seven ships and was tasked with blockading the entirety of the Virginia and North Carolina coastline as well as all of the Chesapeake Bay (Roberts 32). Other locations, such as Savannah, Georgia and Charleston, South Carolina had to deal with even fewer ships enforcing the blockade. In fact, the blockade was so sparse that it ran the risk of being declared ineffective by neutral powers, chief among them Britain. This would have been a crucial blow to the Union strategy had it occurred. Thankfully for the Union, in part due to their expanding force and scope of operations, the British determined the blockade was effective in November 1861.  
 As the ability of the Union to mount the blockade grew, it became clear that it was of paramount importance for the Union to begin taking Southern ports on the Mississippi in order to open the river to Union shipping, close it to Southern commerce, and relieve some of the pressure on the blockading squadrons. To this end, David Glasgow Farragut was dispatched to take command of the Western Gulf Blockading squadron and use whatever force he thought reasonable to go up the Mississippi with the object of taking New Orleans. In April 1862, Farragut ran his ships past forts Jackson and Phillip, obliterated the Confederate River Defense Fleet, and held New Orleans under his guns until the city surrendered. With the capture of New Orleans, the Union effectively silenced the second most valuable port (in terms of exports) in all of North America (Roberts 33-34) and made it possible for the Union to send ships further up the river, taking Baton Rouge and Natchez in the process.  
 Early in 1863, the Confederacy mounted concerted attacks upon Federal blockaders in an attempt to break the blockades at Galveston, Sabine Pass, and Charleston. Even though the attacks were costly to the Union in terms of ships lost, the Union was able to maintain the blockade. Blockade running experienced a sharp upswing in the period leading up to mid-1864, however, due to a combination of factors including the Southern cotton embargo and the limited capability of the runners to ship out the massive cargoes of cotton that the South desperately needed to sell, it became clear that unless the blockade was broken, the South would be in dire straits indeed. With the closing of Mobile Bay by the Farragut in August 1864, blockade running became limited almost exclusively to Texan ports, which were not able to move the required amounts of cargo to keep the Confederacy afloat. As 1864 drew to a close, so too did the noose of the Union blockade draw tight around the South (Roberts 119). The Union had at this point only one true obstacle remaining between it and total encirclement of the South, the port of Wilmington. Wilmington was the only port of any significance left in Confederate control, and it was the key port of intake for supplies necessary to the Confederate army’s continued presence in Virginia. Wilmington’s chief defense lay in Battery Buchanan, which was eventually taken by a joint Union force after a brief engagement on January 15th, 1865. This “meant the end of large-scale blockade-running east of the Mississippi,” (Roberts 156).

With respect to coastal assault and the opening of the Mississippi to Union shipping, it was apparent almost from the outset that it was necessary for the Union navy to extend operations beyond maintaining the blockade in order to further the broader strategic aims of the Union command. In the early days of the war, naval involvement over and above that required by blockade duty was limited almost exclusively to the shelling of Confederate forts, a tactic which directly led to the capture of Port Royal in 1861. However, it became obvious that more direct involvement by the Union naval forces was needed in order to open the Mississippi to Federal trade and lessen the burden that the downriver blockade at the Head of the Passes was having on the blockading force.

The first objective of the Union navy with respect to opening the river was New Orleans, which Farragut took with minimal losses in April 1862. From there, the naval effort became focused on taking first Baton Rouge, then Natchez, and finally Vicksburg. At Vicksburg, the navy ran into a good deal of trouble. Vicksburg was so located as to make it almost impossible to assault from the river. “Assessing the situation at Vicksburg in late May, [Farragut] determined that the force available could not take the city-the ships’ guns could not be elevated far enough to hit the Confederates’ defensive batteries, and the 1500 troops Butler had sent were not sufficient to assault the city by land,” (Roberts 55). Despite this assessment, Farragut was ordered to link up with the Western Flotilla above the city rather than take Mobile, which might have proved more useful in the long run, considering that at this point, Mobile was not heavily fortified and as such was highly vulnerable to Union attack. Various schemes were tried to take the city, including building a canal to bypass the hairpin turn above Vicksburg and sending ships down the Yazoo River to come out above Vicksburg without having to negotiate the turn under fire. Eventually the Union landed troops below Vicksburg who then besieged the city from the east, leading to its unconditional surrender in 1863.

Concurrent to the demise of Vicksburg, a change in strategy on both sides of the war effort was occurring. The South became increasingly reliant on commerce raiding to draw blockading ships off station to protect Union shipping, making it easier for Southern blockade runners to get past the blockade. While this was a good plan in theory, in practice, it left something to be desired. Despite the legendary successes of the CSS Alabama, CSS Sumter, and CSS Shenandoah, the 300 Union vessels destroyed by Confederate commerce raiders had little actual effect on lifting the blockade. While the Union navy was for the most part unable to defend far-flung Union shipping interests directly, their indirect efforts including maintaining the blockade and preventing the Confederacy from increasing the number of at-large commerce-raiders proved successful. The relatively small force of commerce raiders proved ineffective at causing any sort of real damage to Union shipping, instead, it had the effect of prompting Union ships to move to neutral flags and owners to mitigate the risk of loss and rising insurance rates (Roberts 134).

Had the Union diverted vast squadrons of ships in order to convoy merchants against depredations at the hands of Confederate raiders, they would have risked the important tactical advantage that they held through the maintenance of the blockade. At the end of the day, the important fact with respect to the Union’s efforts against commerce raiders is that “while fifty ships were searching for raiders, over six hundred were not,” (Roberts, 137). While commerce-raiding was certainly very annoying, it was not widespread enough to cause sufficient damage to the Union economy to necessitate the lifting of the blockade as was its original goal. In short, the Union navy was more effective at protecting Union merchant interests by keeping the Confederate navy under close blockade (at the same time forcing private Confederate concerns to turn to blockade running rather than commerce raiding for profit) and allowing the State Department to handle the diplomatic implications of Confederate commerce raiding with nations such as England and France than it would have been diverting resources to hunt down the limited number of raiders threatening Union merchants.

The Union strategy succeeded in the long term on all fronts. First and foremost, the blockade worked. It may have been porous, but it limited the flow of necessary goods in and out of the South to a sufficient degree to make it difficult for the South to wage effective war. Second, the Union succeeded in opening the Mississippi to Union ships and closing it to Confederate ships; this further limited the ability of the South to get vital exports out and move troops and supplies around within the states served by the Mississippi. Third, the naval assaults on the coasts proved successful; the Union navy was able to capture vital positions such as Port Royal and New Orleans, leading to a consolidation of Confederate defenses in order to defend critical points against attack. This diverted resources away from where they were most necessary and kept the Confederates under constant fear of attack by sea. Finally, although the South’s commerce raiding efforts were costly and highly visible, they proved to be too little too late. Protection of shipping through the maintenance of the blockade and application of diplomatic pressure to countries where the Confederates might find safe haven and aid made it so that however flashy and damaging the raiders appeared in individual cases, the actual effect they had on the Union war effort and Union shipping was negligible.