

SECRETARY OF STATE WILLIAM H. SEWARD'S
POLICY TOWARD GREAT BRITAIN, 1861-1865

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I. INTRODUCTION

This report is a review of Secretary of State William H. Seward's realistic and firm foreign policy toward Great Britain during the American Civil War. The word realistic, as used in this paper, is defined as the disposition to face facts and deal with these same facts in a practical manner. Firm is used to describe Seward's adherence to the basic policy he established early in the war and his refusal to deviate from it to any great degree during the war. To say Seward's policy was always consistent and firm is incorrect. There is, however, a strand of realism and firmness to his policy which can be identified early in the war and traced throughout British-American diplomacy until the danger of foreign interference was past.

A key element in Seward's conduct of foreign policy was his maturation and growth as a statesman as the war progressed. This will be evident throughout this paper. Although, some of his initial actions were not realistic when all factors are considered, the realism of his policy grew as his own diplomatic expertise and skills developed.

In order to understand properly relations between Great Britain and the United States during the Civil War some back-

ground is necessary. Prior to commencement of hostilities between the North and South in 1861, relations between the two powers possibly had never been better in United States Diplomatic history. There were no major points of disagreement; intercourse was incessant, and the greater portion of American foreign trade was with England. Approximately four-fifths of American imports came from England or her colonies. Great Britain drew the raw materials for her most important manufacture from the American Southern States. The most crucial commodity exported to England was Southern cotton; a fact which was to cause diplomats of several nations much grief in years ahead.¹

II. FORMING THE TEAM

The Lincoln administration entered office on March 4, 1861. William H. Seward was appointed Secretary of State. It was widely assumed, Seward included, that the Secretary would be the dominant figure in the Administration. Seward was a political figure of great stature, whereas Lincoln was an unknown quantity. This notion was rather quickly dispelled in Seward's mind and he was to work in close harmony with Lincoln until the latter's death in 1865.²

The new Secretary of State had a brilliant career in

¹Mountague, Bernard, A. Historical Account of the Neutrality of Great Britain During the American Civil War, (Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1870), p. 122.

²Henry W. Temple, "William H. Seward," in Vol 7 of The American Secretaries of State and Their Diplomacy, ed. Samuel Flagg Bemis (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), p. 22.

public life behind him. His public service had extended over thirty years and included two terms in the upper chamber of the New York legislature, two terms as Governor of New York, and almost two full terms in the United States Senate. Seward's long career had involved him in many of the momentous questions of the day. His years in the Senate spanned the period when the problems leading to the Civil War were hotly debated. Seward's position against the extension of slavery brought much abuse from Southerners but gained corresponding approval from Northerners. His leadership had, by 1860, made him the leading candidate for the Republican Presidential nomination of that year.³ That he did not receive the nomination over the less well known Lincoln can be attributed to the powerful enemies Seward had made during his political life and his liberal views on most issues.⁴

In addition to the domestic political credentials Seward possessed, he had considerable knowledge and experience in foreign affairs. The new Secretary had traveled in Europe and met some of the leading statesmen. He had served on the Senate committee on foreign affairs and was familiar with the diplomatic relations between the United States and the principal European powers. Seward's long interest in the development of closer commercial relations between his native New York and England and France made him very familiar with how close the

³Alonzo Rothschild, Lincoln, Master of Men (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1906), p. 121.

⁴Thornton Kirkland Lothrop, William Henry Seward (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1899), p. 217.

ties really were.⁵ All things considered, Seward was well qualified to be Secretary of State. Lincoln recognized this and had decided to appoint him to the position very soon after he received the Republican nomination.⁶

Some comments on the Lincoln-Seward relationship are in order before going into the details of Seward's diplomacy with Great Britain. Lincoln did rely on Seward to conduct the nation's foreign affairs. At the same time, the President kept a watchful eye on his Secretary and did not abdicate his overall responsibilities in the field of diplomacy. Lincoln was not hesitant about going against Seward's advice as he did in the question of reinforcing Fort Sumter.⁷ The President exerted his authority in editing many of the messages sent by Seward to American envoys abroad. Although primarily concerned with domestic affairs, Lincoln with Seward's advice made the final decisions on major questions of foreign policy. The Secretary was well aware of his subordinate position within the administration and there is no evidence of his ever attempting to circumvent the President.

In the early months of 1861 Seward had hopes of avoiding armed conflict between North and South through conciliation of the northern tier of slave states. By doing this Seward hoped to divide the South until the tide of reaction had settled and

⁵Ibid., p. 297.

⁶Rothschild, Master of Men, p. 127.

⁷John T. Morse Jr., Abraham Lincoln 2 Vols. in American Statesmen series, ed., J. T. Morse Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1900), p. 246.

everyone came to his senses. This plan was doomed to failure because of Seward's misapprehension of the facts, i.e., the determination of the South to form a separate nation.⁸

Once war began, Secretary Seward and President Lincoln realized foreign intervention on behalf of the Confederacy must be avoided at all costs. They also recognized Great Britain as the key nation in preventing foreign recognition and assistance.⁹ This was unfortunate as Seward was not trusted by British leaders. Their distrust of Seward was based on remarks he had made to the Duke of Newcastle during the latter's visit to the United States in 1860 and Seward's lack of diplomatic experience.¹⁰ British distrust of the Secretary was to be reinforced during the first two years of the war.

Realizing that Great Britain was the most important nation as far as preventing foreign recognition and assistance to the South, Seward obtained the appointment of Charles Francis Adams as American envoy to England. Adams and Seward were close personal, as well as political, friends. Seward thought Adams the best qualified man to represent the United States in Great Britain. The Adams family, by tradition, contained the best diplomats in America. The cultured and aristocratic Adams, it was

⁸Charles Francis Adams, An Autobiography, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1916), p. 73.

⁹Frederic Bancroft, The Life of William H. Seward, 2 Vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1900), pp. 204-205.

¹⁰Thomas A. Bailey, A Diplomatic History of the American People, 8th ed. (New York: Meredith Corp., 1940), p. 318.

hoped, would do much to counter the wide-spread belief among the British nobility that the South could win independence.¹¹

The American minister to Great Britain was not a policy maker and did not attempt to become one. Seward and Lincoln developed the policy and Adams carried it out. His adroit presentation of some of the more belligerent instructions his immediate superior sent him possibly avoided an open break between the United States and Great Britain. The rapport Adams established with British leaders enable him to perform his duties most effectively.¹² He did in fact do much toward easing of tensions between England and the North. Adams role in the war has been evaluated by some historians as no less important than that of many of the leading Northern generals.¹³

III. EARLY DIPLOMACY

One of Secretary Seward's first significant acts after assuming his new office was neither realistic nor consistent with his overall policy he was to follow later in the war. On April 1, 1861, Seward composed and forwarded to President Lincoln a paper entitled "Some Thoughts for the President's Consideration." The part of most diplomatic interest is the section in which he

¹¹Jay Monaghan, Diplomat in Carpet Slippers, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1945), p. 41.

¹²H.C. Allen, Great Britain and the United States: (New York St. Martin's Press Inc., 1955), pp. 454-5.

¹³Thomas A. Bailey, The Art of Diplomacy (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968), p. 250.

advocated United States' involvement in a foreign war as a means to reunite the country.¹⁴ Historians have never fully explained how such a "dangerous scheme found lodgment even in a mind as imaginative and bold as Seward's."¹⁵ The desire for a foreign war expressed in this message directly contradicts Seward's future policy when he did everything possible, without impairing the honor of the nation, to avoid involvement in foreign war.

The first major issue between Great Britain and the United States arose over the blockade of southern ports. President Lincoln declared a blockade of all southern ports from Virginia to Texas on April 19, 1861. The blockade caused much concern to foreign nations, particularly Britain and France, as the cotton supply for their textile industries came from the seceding states. The provisions of the blockade meant that any ship, foreign or American, would be prevented from entering or leaving the blockaded ports.¹⁶ There had been some discussion in Lincoln's cabinet regarding the merits of closing the ports by proclamation, a paper blockade, or a physical blockade by the Federal navy. Seward advocated the latter course as being less likely to bring complications with foreign nations because the right of blockade

¹⁴Bancroft, Life of Seward, p. 133.

¹⁵William Appleman Williams, ed., The Shaping of American Diplomacy, 2nd ed., 2 Vols., "Rand McNally Series in American History" (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1970), p. 260.

¹⁶John G. Nicolay and John Hays, ed., Abraham Lincoln, Vol 2, (New York: Century, 1894), p. 35.

was well established and recognized by all nations.¹⁷ In this instance we see an example of Seward being realistic in advocating a formal blockade but somewhat unrealistic in another sense. By proclaiming a blockade the United States had publicly declared a belligerent status and under the commonly accepted laws of the day this meant relations between the United States and foreign powers would be governed by the laws of neutrality, not the laws of peace. As we shall see, Seward was later to protest vigorously when Great Britain, in accordance with commonly accepted practice, issued a declaration of neutrality.¹⁸

Seward's basic guidelines for American relations with Great Britain had already been established in a lengthy dispatch to Adams dated April 10, 1861. This dispatch establishes the general tone for the firm policy Seward was to maintain toward Great Britain throughout the war. The message is also one of the three or four most important notes Seward was to formulate concerning Anglo-United States relations. Briefly stated, Seward instructed Adams that "Your task. . . . involved the responsibility of preventing the commission of an act by the government of that country which would be fraught with disaster, perhaps ruin, to our own."

After this broad but succinct statement of Adams' purpose as American envoy, Seward presented the general instructions the

¹⁷Lothrop, William Henry Seward, pp. 288-290.

¹⁸Henry W. Temple, American Secretaries of State, pp. 48-49.

minister was to follow in the conduct of his duties. Adams could acknowledge British official sympathy for the problems confronting the United States government but he was not to admit to any weaknesses in the Constitution or "apprehensions on the part of the government." The United States representative was, in no case, to entertain suggestions by Britain regarding compromise between the United States and the Confederacy. Adams was to consider himself the sole representative of the United States in England and that he represented all the nation, "When you are to divide that duty with others (Confederate Envoys), diplomatic relations between the government of Great Britain and this government will be suspended, and will remain so until it shall be seen which of the two is most strongly entrenched in the confidence of their respective nations and mankind."

Adams was to leave no doubt in the minds of the English leadership that recognition of the Confederacy would be interpreted as a hostile act toward the United States. Any objections Adams might make to such recognition were not to be based on any favors from the United States government or the Republican party. In Seward's mind the United States continued to exist as one nation and he hoped to persuade the European powers to accept this theory of undiminished sovereignty. Finally, Adams was to remember the seceding states "are now, as they always heretofore have been and, notwithstanding their temporary self-delusion, they must always continue to be, equal and honored members of this

Federal Union.¹⁹

Thus Seward identified several points of policy which he would follow throughout the war:

First, he was never to acknowledge the Confederacy as a nation. Secondly, British official association with Confederate envoys would be grounds for breaking off diplomatic relations. Thirdly, any attempts at mediation between the North and South by Britain or any other nation were to be summarily dismissed. Fourth, British recognition of the Confederacy would be interpreted as a hostile act against the United States. Finally, the struggle in America was a domestic affair of a temporary nature, and as such, foreign interference would be rejected by the United States.

Seward was somewhat unrealistic in the above message when he alluded to the war being of a temporary nature. The slight unreality in this message, however, is more than offset by the firmness with which Seward adhered to these points throughout the course of Anglo-American relations. That the Secretary believed the war would be of short duration is implicit in many of his writings at this time. This again proves that his early assessment of the dedication and intent of the Confederate leadership was incorrect.

Secretary Seward's first outright effort to gain European

¹⁹George E. Baker, ed., The Diplomatic History of the War for the Union, Vol. 5 of The Works of William H. Seward (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1890), pp. 199-213.

support for the Northern cause was his attempt to negotiate United States participation in the Declaration of Paris.²⁰ Almost one month before Great Britain accorded belligerent status to the Confederacy, Secretary Seward had formulated a plan by which he hoped to avoid just such action. The Declaration of Paris, drawn up in 1856 by the maritime powers of Europe, outlined the status of neutrals in relation to warring powers. Briefly stated, the provisions of the declaration were:

1. Privateering is and remains abolished.
2. The neutral flag covers enemy goods, with the exception of contraband of war.
3. Neutral goods, with the exception of contraband of war are not liable to capture under enemy's flag.
4. Blockades, in order to be binding, must be effective; that is to say, maintained by forces sufficient really to prevent access to the coast of the enemy.²¹

The United States had not signed this agreement at the time Lincoln assumed office. The issue of privateers arose again in 1861 when Confederate President Jefferson Davis decided to use Southern privateers against Northern commerce. To counter Confederate action, Seward attempted to have America entered as a party to the declaration. The British would not agree to the United States becoming a signatory unless a provision was added that it would not affect the seceding states. Seward would not agree to this provision and American efforts

²⁰ Ehphraim Douglas Adams, Great Britain and the American Civil War., Vol 2, (New York: Dongmans, Green and Co., 1925), p. 137.

²¹ Bancroft, Life of Seward, p. 187.

at becoming a party to the declaration were dropped.

The actions of the Secretary of State in regard to the Declaration of Paris are understandable. Had the European powers allowed the United States to become a party to the declaration in its original form, all Confederate privateering would have been unlawful.²² Another important point was that American and European agreement on the declaration would have made recognition of Confederate belligerency more difficult as the treaty would have acknowledged the United States as one nation. A major consideration in evaluating Seward's action is that his original proposal for adherence to the declaration was made before the British declaration of neutrality was issued. Once Britain had recognized Southern belligerency Seward lost interest in the entire matter.²³ Seward's refusal to agree to the British stipulation that the treaty would not apply to the Confederacy was in line with his firm policy of refusing to acknowledge the right of foreign nations to recognize the Confederacy as a government.

During the months of April and May 1861, momentous events took place which severely strained Anglo-United States relations. Foremost among these was establishment of the Union blockade, arrival of Confederate envoys in England, and issuance of the

²²Charles Francis Adams, Charles Francis Adams, Vol. 24 of American Statesmen, ed. John T. Morse, Jr., 32 Vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1900), p. 39.

²³Adams, American Civil War, p. 169.

13 May British declaration of neutrality in recognition of Lincoln's blockade proclamation. This declaration announced Britain's determination "to maintain a strict and impartial neutrality"²⁴ in the contest between North and South. How effectively this was carried out will be seen when the trouble over British construction, manning, and arming of Confederate warships is discussed. This British declaration, whose timing was taken as an affront by Seward, caused much friction between the United States and England because it gave the Confederacy belligerent status. The proclamation was issued on the same day Charles Francis Adams arrived in England to assume his duties as United States envoy. Seward interpreted this as a desire on the part of the British Government to avoid listening to arguments against it and to make clear British sympathy for the South.²⁵

Confederate envoys arrived in England during April and were seen unofficially by the British Secretary of Foreign Affairs.²⁶ Seward's reaction to these events was contained in a dispatch to Adams dated May 21, which was not to be shown to the British leaders, but the essence of it transmitted by Adams.²⁷ This document very emphatically illustrates Seward's strong stand on each of these major events. Should the British offi-

²⁴Bernard, Neutrality of Great Britain, p. 132.

²⁵William A. Dunning, The British Empire and the United States (New York: Charles Scribner, 1914), p. 208.

²⁶James Morton Callahan, The Diplomatic History of the Southern Confederacy, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1901), p. 144.

²⁷Lothrop, William Henry Seward, p. 301.

cially recognize the Confederate envoys, Adams was instructed to "... desist from all intercourse whatever, unofficial as well as official, with the British government, as long as it shall continue intercourse of either kind with the domestic enemies of this country."

The position of the United States concerning British recognition of Confederate belligerency was made very clear. Seward told Adams that recognition of the Confederacy was "not to be made a subject of technical definition". He stated, that as far as he was concerned, it was direct recognition for Britain to acknowledge a belligerent status as they had just done. The Secretary considered it direct recognition to receive Confederate Ambassadors or any other representatives from the Southern government. He further stated that "no one of these proceedings will pass unquestioned by the United States . . . British recognition would be British intervention, to create within our territory a hostile state by overthrowing the Republic itself".

Seward's instructions regarding British anxiety over the blockade were equally firm and direct. Adams was told that by U.S. law, the laws of nature, and the laws of nations, the United States had the right to suppress insurrection. The blockade was a proper measure to take in doing this. Seward further directed Adams to tell the British that if the blockade was not maintained by sufficient force Great Britain did not have to respect it. The Secretary went on to say, however, that the blockade was being maintained by force and the United States expected Britain to

honor it.²⁸ This dispatch had actually been toned down by President Lincoln before Seward sent it.²⁹ The threat of war implied within this message was so strong that Adams assumed it had been forced on Seward by other members of the cabinet.³⁰

The firmness of the policy stated within this communication is readily apparent. How realistic it was in view of the situation in the United States at this time is open to some debate. The Army and Navy of the United States were in no position to engage in war with a foreign nation in addition to the Confederacy. The Union Army was being soundly defeated by the Confederates in almost every engagement, and full scale construction of the navy was only in its early stages. The majority of the ships in existence were primarily involved in the blockade. In Seward's view, however, such a strong and firm policy was realistic. Although not actually possessing the military force to back up his threats, he believed the nation must put up a front indicating it did have sufficient military strength.³¹

The succession of Union defeats between April and November 1861 did nothing to ease Seward's task of preventing foreign recognition of the Confederacy. His dismay over the course of

²⁸Baker, Seward's Works, pp. 241-245.

²⁹Nicolay and Hay, Abraham Lincoln, pp. 48-49.

³⁰Adams, American Statesmen, p. 179.

³¹Bancroft, Life of Seward, p. 163.

events is illustrated by a letter to his wife in the Autumn of 1861:

I have had two weeks of intense anxiety and severe labor. The pressure, . . . which disunionists have procured to operate on the cabinets of London. . . has made it doubtful whether we can escape the yet deeper and darker abyss of foreign war . . . I have worried through and finished my dispatches. They must go for good or evil, I have done my best.³²

IV. THE TRENT AFFAIR

An event was now to occur which brought the United States and England to the brink of war. On Friday, November 8, 1861, the USS San Jacinto, commanded by Commodore Wilkes, halted the British ship Trent, on the high seas, and removed two Confederate envoys bound for England. The seizure was made by the American captain without any instructions to do so from Washington.³³ This action was hailed in the North as a great victory while in England, as one observer noted, "The whole feeling of the people has undergone a change. Sympathy was but coldly expressed for the South. Now it is warm and universal."³⁴ Removal of the envoys from the Trent was, for a time, believed to be an American attempt to provoke England to war.³⁵ The British Government immediately demanded the release of the envoys and

³²Adams, American Statesmen, pp. 320-321.

³³Evan John Simpson (Evan John), Atlantic Impact (London: William Heinemann, 1952), p. 210.

³⁴Bancroft, Life of Seward, p. 224.

³⁵Temple, American Secretaries of State, p. 61.

if this was not accomplished within seven days the British Ambassador was instructed "to leave Washington with all the members of your legation, bringing with you the archives of the legation, and to repair immediately to London."³⁶ Seward's response to this critical situation reflects a realistic appreciation of the dangers involved. After careful thought, and discussions with Lincoln and the Cabinet, British demands to release the envoys were honored. In Seward's reply to the British he conceded that the American captain had violated international law only to the extent that he did not bring the Trent into port for adjudication by a prize court. In Seward's view there was no question about United States rights to remove "contraband" from a neutral ship under the international law.³⁷

The Secretary of State's firm response to the British and his realistic appraisal of the Trent situation had far reaching effects on English and American relations. The release of the envoys satisfied British demands, thereby averting possible war. The aftermath of the Trent affair brought something like British resentment toward the Southern diplomats. This came about because the entire Trent affair called renewed attention in the minds of Englishmen, to the slavery issue. England had been very close to war with the United States which would have made her an ally of a slave-holding nation. Although Lincoln had denied emancipa-

³⁶Bernard, Neutrality of Great Britain, p. 192.

³⁷Adams, American Statesmen, p. 340-346.

tion as an objective, the British people began to perceive that his policies were, in the end, against slavery. The change in the English attitude damaged Confederate hopes for recognition at a critical time. Finally, Seward's actions in releasing the envoys, did much to calm British suspicions that he wanted a foreign war.³⁸

The reaction of Congress to the Trent affair is interesting as a reflection of public opinion regarding the seizure of the Confederate envoys. The House of Representatives passed a resolution praising Commodore Wilkes for his action by a vote of 109 to 16.³⁹ The Senate passed a similar resolution. The Congressional response to Seward's release of the envoys was somewhat less enthusiastic although the majority approved the action. Readings of Senate and House debates leave the distinct impression that Seward's actions in the foreign policy field were met with general approval in the Congress. Those persons opposing the Trent actions were those who advocated peace at any price or were concerned over the questions of international law involved. Senator Charles Sumner serves to typify Congressional attitudes over the seizure of the Confederates. He warmly applauded the initial seizure, was against the release of the envoys as he felt it was bowing to British pressure, yet agreed to their release because he realized the difficulties

³⁸Adams, American Civil War, pp. 238-9.

³⁹U. S., Congress, House of Representatives, Congressional Globe, 37th Cong., 2d sess., 1862, pt.1, p. 101.

failure to release them might bring.⁴⁰

In the Trent case Seward showed, possibly for the first time, high diplomatic qualities. The restraint reflected in the response to British demands marked a statesmanlike maturity in the Secretary not evident in earlier days. The subduing of the South was not going to be the easy task he originally envisioned. Every situation was fraught with danger and must be handled with extreme care.⁴¹

As indicated by his actions in the Trent affair, Seward had decided by the summer of 1862 that a foreign war was to be avoided at all costs. His sentiments are expressed in a dispatch to Adams dated August 18, 1862:

While the nation is convulsed with a civil strife of unexampled proportions, it would be presumptuous, perilous, and criminal to court or provoke foreign wars. . . It is certainly our especial care, under existing circumstances, to do no injustice, to give no offense, and to offer and receive explanation in a liberal spirit whenever they are possible, and thus to make sure that if, at any time either accidentally or through the intrigues of the insurgents, we shall incur the misfortune of collision with foreign states, our position will be one of pure and reproaches self defense. . . The nation has a right, and it is its duty to live.⁴²

V. THE DANGER PASSES

The continued success of the Confederate Armies in 1862

⁴⁰U. S. Congress, Senate, Congressional Globe, 37th Cong., 2d sess., 1862, pt. 1, pp. 241-45.

⁴¹Temple, American Secretaries of State, p. 70.

⁴²Baker, Seward's Works, pp. 349-350.

made British recognition of the Confederacy a real danger. France was pressing Britain for a joint recognition of the South. The feeling in high government circles in London was that Confederate success in establishing independence was inevitable.⁴³ Although Seward did not perceive the danger as being as great as some members of the Lincoln government did, he thought it wise to provide Adams guidance on the subjects of foreign attempts at mediation and recognition of the Confederacy. He told the American envoy that if he were approached either indirectly or directly by the British on the subject of mediation . . . you will answer that you are forbidden to debate, to hear, or in any way receive, entertain, or transmit any communication of the "kind". Adams was to give this same answer whether the subject of mediation was brought up by British alone or in combination with any other party.

The Secretary instructed his minister that if Britain, either alone or in combination with another power, acknowledged the Confederacy when Adams did not have further instructions from Seward, he was to immediately suspend his activities and so inform the British government. If Britain made "any act or declaration of war against the United States" Adams was to desist from his functions, ask for his passport and immediately return to Washington.⁴⁴

⁴³Adams, American Statesmen, pp. 278-290.

⁴⁴Bancroft, Life of Seward, pp. 294-295.

The above message is of interest for several reasons. Paramount, however, is the similarity in firmness between this one and the dispatch of May 21, 1861 cited earlier in this paper. At the time of the 1861 note Seward believed the Civil War would be of short duration and a foreign war could serve to reunite America. Approximately eighteen months later he realized the Civil War would last for some time and a foreign war was to be avoided if at all possible. In spite of these **changes** in opinion, however, Seward was still willing to go to war with England rather than acknowledge any right to foreign interference in a domestic affair. The policy outlined in these two messages, and the time interval between them, serve to illustrate Seward's adherence to a firm and basically unchanging diplomatic strategy throughout a most difficult period of the war. Shortly after the latter message was dispatched, the Union victory at Antietam caused the British to reconsider intervention. The Confederate failure to launch a successful invasion of the North convinced the British that they would never be able to establish independence. The passing of this crisis marked the last serious danger of British recognition of the South during the Civil War.

A closely related event which affected the British attitude toward intervention in 1862 was the issuance of the "Emancipation Proclamation." Diplomatically, this is of interest only from the standpoint of Seward's attitude toward the slavery question and the effect of this attitude on relations with Britain. In

his "Some Thoughts for the President's Consideration," Seward said the administration must "change the question before the public from one upon slavery, or about slavery, for a question upon union or disunion."⁴⁵ Insofar as foreign affairs were concerned, this early attitude of Seward's on the slavery question was somewhat unrealistic. The British nation, quite probably, would have been more sympathetic toward the North in the early stages of the war if the anti-slavery aspect had been more evident on the part of the North. By the fall of 1862, Seward had changed his views on the slavery question and agreed to Lincoln's issuance of the "Emancipation Proclamation." The Secretary of State advised Lincoln not to issue it until after a Union victory as otherwise, it might appear that the Union was grasping at straws. The Confederate repulse at Antietam provided the occasion.⁴⁶ Initially, the proclamation was received in England with some skepticism, but, shortly the sympathies of the English working class became more friendly toward the North. This manifestation exerted some influence in moderating the attitude of the British government.⁴⁷

VI. THE LAST CONTROVERSY

The last major incident marring British and American rela-

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 132.

⁴⁶Bailey, Diplomatic History, p. 339.

⁴⁷Adams, American Statesmen, pp. 291-305.

tions involved British construction of ships for the Confederacy. Throughout the war private companies in England built ships for the Confederacy. These were used as blockade runners and as commerce raiders. The British government's acquiescence in permitting this construction was in violation of the Queen's proclamation of neutrality issued in 1861, which specifically forbade "fitting out, arming or equipping any vessel or ship to be employed as a ship of war" by either of the contending parties.⁴⁸ Seward was not one to permit such a situation to pass unnoticed, although any real danger of war between the two nations had passed.

In a dispatch to Adams on July 11, 1863, Seward stated his feelings regarding American rights to take strong action against such ships in the Confederate service if Britain did not change her policy. This dispatch was written shortly after a British court had ruled, in one case, that the British government could not legally detain a Confederate-bound ship.⁴⁹ Seward told Adams that the United States was "now preparing a naval force with the utmost vigor" and if Britain did not do something about the situation, the United States had no choice but to act against the ships leaving British ports "as against the naval forces of a public enemy". If the English ports were not closed to these "piratical

⁴⁸ Temple, American Secretaries of State, p. 90.

⁴⁹ Bernard, British Neutrality, p. 353.

vessels" the British should not be surprised if the United States Navy received instructions "to pursue these enemies into the ports which thus, in violation of the law of nations and the obligations of neutrality, become harbors for the pirates". Seward ended the message by telling Adams that President Lincoln realized the hazards and risks involved.⁵⁰

Seward left to Adams' discretion how this message was to be transmitted to the British government. Adams chose to do it informally through a third party. In so doing, he was able to make the gravity of the situation known to the British without making official representations from the United States government.⁵¹ This is one of the many instances of the great service Adams rendered to his country. Instructions not to present the text of this message to the British government but to use it as Adams saw fit, reflect Seward's maturity as a diplomat and his realistic appraisal of the difficulties the British were having with legal technicalities. This last crisis was settled when the English did stop construction and support of the Confederate ships. British action in halting support for the Confederate Navy also convinced the Confederate representatives in England of the futility of further attempts at obtaining British recognition. The Southern envoys departed for France and did not return

⁵⁰Baker, Seward's Works, pp. 387-388.

⁵¹Bancroft, Life of Seward, p. 99.

to England.⁵²

In relation to the trouble over ships it should be noted that all differences between the United States and Great Britain had not been resolved at the time the war ended in 1865. The war had brought on new disputes which remained to be settled and had re-opened old issues. Particularly the British attitude toward neutrality during the war had aroused intense anti-British feeling in the North. What was to become known as the "Alabama Claims" was the principal post-war issue.⁵³

The construction of Confederate ships in British ports has already been discussed. After the end of the war the United States continued to press the British government for payment of damages for the destruction of Northern property by several of these ships, principally the Alabama. Seward, until he left office in 1869, continued attempts to reach agreement with Britain. That he was unsuccessful cannot be blamed on the Secretary. The personality of President Johnson and the President's adverse relations with Congress made settlement impossible.⁵⁴

Efforts to resolve the claims dispute continued into the Grant administration. Finally, in September 1872, an international arbitration group awarded the United States damages of \$15,500,000 which was promptly paid by Great Britain. During negotiations of the claims dispute the United States received

⁵³Allen, Great Britain and the United States, p. 501.

⁵⁴Temple, American Secretaries of State, pp. 110-1.

what amounted to a British apology for her unneutral conduct during the war.⁵⁵

VII. CONCLUSION

The firmness of Seward's policies have been substantiated. His message of April 10 and May 21, 1861 established the tone of Anglo-United States relations and this same firm tone is evident in his dispatch regarding the Confederate ships in 1863. At no time during the war did Seward grant any foreign power the right to interfere in a United States domestic problem. Implicit in the principal messages quoted in this paper is the threat that British recognition of the Confederacy would mean war with the United States. His refusal to take any steps which might impugn the nation honor is to his credit. Seward firmly believed the nation had a right to do everything possible to insure its survival. His policy was always to exhibit a show of strength even in the dark days of 1861 and 1862 when war with a foreign power might have been disastrous for the Union cause.

The Secretary of State was sometimes unrealistic in his evaluation of particular situations and the actions he took in certain circumstances. Certainly his desire for a foreign war in 1861 reflects a serious error in judgment. Seward's failure

⁵⁵Julius W. Pratt, A. History of United States Foreign Policy, (New York: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1955), pp. 315-9.

to realize the determination and dedication of the Confederate leaders in 1861 was certainly unrealistic. On the other hand, his action in the Trent case and correct evaluation of the British government's position concerning Confederate warships show a very realistic appraisal of difficult situations. Seward's ability to recognize changing circumstances and adjust his policy to the new conditions is certainly illustrative of his growth and maturity as Secretary of State.

That Seward did mature as a diplomat and statesman is unquestionable. His shift from advocating a foreign war in 1861 to acknowledging that such a situation must not be allowed to occur in 1862 is an example of this maturity and understanding. The basic policies as outlined in Seward's April 10, 1861 message to Adams were followed throughout the war. Seward's diplomatic maneuvers to implement and maintain these policies did change somewhat. The Secretary's original attitude, as he has been shown, was very doctrinaire and inflexible. As the war developed one can see the growth of restraint, tact, and a willingness to yield on minor points.

Seward's policies toward Great Britain were firm and generally realistic. The main piece of evidence supporting this conclusion is that Great Britain did not formally recognize nor give significant aid to, the Confederacy, thus, Seward accomplished his primary task. The effectiveness of Seward's policy is well

indicated by a compliment paid him by his opposite number on the Southern side. Confederate Secretary of State Benjamin said:

It is impossible not to admire the sagacity with which Mr. Seward penetrated into the secret feelings of the British Cabinet; and the success of his policy of intimidation which the world at large supposed would be met with prompt resentment, but which he with deeper insight into the real policy of that Cabinet foresaw would be followed by submissive acquiescence in his demands.⁵⁶

⁵⁶Julius W. Pratt, A History of United States Foreign Policy, (New York: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1955), pp. 315-9.

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POLICY TOWARD GREAT BRITAIN, 1861-1865

by

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SECRETARY OF STATE WILLIAM H. SEWARD'S
POLICY TOWARD GREAT BRITAIN, 1861-1865

The purpose of this report is to examine Secretary of State Seward's firm and realistic policy toward Great Britain during the Civil War. His policy was firm in that basic guidelines were established early in the war and followed until its end. Seward's policy was, for the most part, realistic in that he chose practical solutions for the particular problems which arose in British-American relations.

Relations between America and Britain at the start of the Civil War were excellent. No major questions troubled the two powers and trade was extensive. Only England's reliance on Southern cotton was to cause the most difficulties in the initial stages of the war.

Seward and President Lincoln realized that foreign intervention on behalf of the Confederacy had to be prevented. Great Britain was the most important foreign power in this respect. Once the Secretary of State perceived the difficulties involved in the subjugation of the South, his primary task was to prevent foreign recognition and interference. Charles Francis Adams, American Minister to Great Britain, contributed significantly to the successful accomplishments of this great task.

Several basic points can be identified in Seward's policy with which he permitted no compromise. First, the Confederacy was not a separate nation but remained an integral part of the United States. As such, no foreign powers had the right to intervene. Secondly, official recognition of the Confederacy or her envoys would be grounds for rupture of relations between the United States and Britain. Thirdly, the problem in the United States was a domestic affair, therefore, no foreign power had the right to mediate the quarrel and any attempts to do so were to be summarily dismissed.

Principal problems arising between the United States and Britain during the war were: the British declaration of neutrality, the Trent Affair, and British construction of ships for the Confederate Navy. In dealing with these events Seward refused to compromise the basic tenets of his policy and was willing to go to war with Britain if this was necessary to uphold them.

Seward was not inflexible in his policies, however, and this is possibly his strongest trait. When tracing the Secretary's actions with regard to Great Britain one can identify the growth of restraint, tact, and a willingness to yield on minor points. In short, Seward matured as a diplomat and statesman as the war progressed.

The Secretary of State's policies toward Great Britain were firm and realistic. His success is evident by the fact that Britain did not formally recognize or give significant aid to the Confederacy.