

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

by

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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.