

Justin Swanson  
Johnson Creek Middle School  
First Place Middle School

## **How Was the Strategy of Blockades Influenced by Britain?**

Imagine you're in Britain, year of 1862. Your cotton clothing factory has shut down because of the lack of cotton being imported. People around you are frantically looking for jobs to provide for their families. During the Civil War, Britain's economy was down and Britain was nearly starved of cotton. The British Government is deciding whether they should side with the industrialized northern part of America, or the rural, cotton producing southern part of America. What would you want your government to choose?

The northern, or Union, plan was to immediately shut down all docks surrounding the United States of America. President Lincoln ordered 75,000 troops to help blockade all the northern and southern docks in hopes of starving Britain of cotton, therefore forcing Britain to side with the Union so they would release all of the blockaded areas. However, Lincoln initially misinterpreted the situation, sending too few troops. But Lincoln quickly realized his error and sent more troops. His plan ultimately succeeded (Frederick Douglass). The way a blockade works is the party who is attempting to enforce the blockade sends troops on naval ships, and they go to all the exporting and importing harbors and make sure that nothing comes in or goes out (The Fighting Man). Abraham Lincoln said in his terms of proclamation to the blockades, "If, therefore, with a view to violate such blockade, a vessel shall approach or shall attempt to leave any of the said ports, she will be duly warned by the commander of one of the blockading vessels, who will endorse on her register the fact and date of such warning, and if the same vessel shall again attempt to enter or leave the blockaded port, she will be captured, and sent to the nearest convenient port for such proceedings against her, and her cargo as prize, as may be deemed advisable."(Civil War Navy-History) Although effective, the Union found this strategy was not foolproof.

One example of the Union botching a blockade was the story of Mason and Slidell, also known as the Trent Affair. Two British men named James Mason and John Slidell were on American ground when they were captured aboard their ship named "The Trent". They were captured by Union troops and taken into captivity while their ship sailed back to Britain. The British Government did not agree with what the Union did so they sent troops to the North's neighboring country, Canada. But the truth was, the Union wasn't in any position to wage war against Britain. They were obviously in war with the Confederacy, and they didn't have nearly enough troops fight against Britain. So, in the end, the conflict was solved in a peaceful manner. The Union ended up sending Mason and Slidell back to Britain. This impacted the north by teaching them to leave Britain alone and try even harder to get them on their side(The Trent Affair).

The southern, or Confederacy, plan was actually based off of the Union's plan. They planned to shut down all of their cotton mills and starve Britain of southern cotton. This plan would have worked, but Britain had enough cotton stored up to last them until 1862 (Seven Day Scholar). They also had other sources of cotton to supply them, one of which was Egypt. Despite Britain now receiving cotton from Egypt and having enough cotton to last them until 1862, they still had high unemployment rates (College Board). In fact, during the Civil War, only 58,638 citizens of Britain were employed throughout the country. The weekly loss in wages there was 136,094 pounds which, in one year, would be a grand total of 7,000,000 pounds. That is equal to \$10,613,750. This is about 210 times the amount an average US citizen made in a year (The War). Despite the high unemployment rates, Britain still stood for what they believed in and stayed neutral. This really backfired on the Confederacy because their whole battle strategy was based on

Britain joining them in the war (Gilder Lehrman). This is a key reason for the Confederate loss to the Union.

Britain had a tough choice to make. They could either stay neutral and have their economy suffer, or they could join either the Union or the Confederacy. The final decision for Britain was to stay neutral (College Board). Once the Civil War was officially belligerent (Miller Center), both sides rushed to win over the British Government. The only minor help received by the Confederates was from some British repair companies. They would help repair naval ships and guns for the Confederacy (Gilder Lehrman). But unfortunately, British mills were still forced to shut down their mills because of the lack of cotton coming in. This led to a huge unemployment rate, previously discussed, which left only 58,638 employed. The consequences of this high unemployment was loss in clothing for British men, women, and children. In addition, there was loss in job growth, the economy dropped, and many people were left with very little money. In fact, during this time period, business in Manchester was at a standstill (The War). Although both sides were seeking British assistance, it was ultimately to the Union benefit that the British stayed neutral.

The British Government was in a tough situation as it was when the Civil War came upon the United States of America because they were being starved of cotton. But the truth is, no matter what choice they made, they wouldn't have gotten cotton either way from the US. If they chose the Union, the Confederacy would have withheld their cotton exports to try and have Britain choose their side rather than sticking with the Union. But, if they chose the Confederacy, the Union would have had the blockades continue to withhold exports. So, no matter what the British Government would have chosen, they

would not have received cotton. History has shown that Britain made the correct choice not to intervene in the American Civil War.

# Bibliography

American Civil War: Letters and Diaries. (n.d.). Retrieved November 28, 2014, from <http://www.library.ucsf.edu/db/american-civil-war-letters-and-diaries>

*Battlefields of the Civil War*. (1979). New York: Arno Press.

<http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/navy-hub/navy-history/blockade.html>

College Board. (n.d.). Retrieved November 28, 2014, from <http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/members>

Davis, K. (1996). *Don't know much about the Civil War: Everything you need to know about America's greatest conflict but never learned*. New York: William Morrow.

Frederick Douglass: Fighting Against a "White Man's War"/Part 2. (2011, February 16). Retrieved January 3, 2015, from <http://jubiloe emancipationcentury.wordpress.com/2011/02/16/frederick-douglass-fighting-against-a-white-mans-war-part-2/>

Gaffney, D. (2011). *Seven-Day Scholar: The Civil War Exploring History One Week at a Time*. Hyperion.

(n.d.). Retrieved November 28, 2014, from

<http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/primarysources/harpers-weekly-the-trent.html>

(n.d.). Retrieved November 28, 2014, from <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/MollyYost.pdf>

Letters, Telegrams, and Photographs Illustrating Factors that Affected the Civil War. (n.d.). Retrieved November 28, 2014, from <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/civil-war-docs>

Miller Center. (n.d.). Retrieved November 28, 2014, from <http://millercenter.org/president/lincoln/essays/biography>

Seymour, G. (1993). *The fighting man*. New York: HarperCollins.

The Blockade of Confederate Ports, 1861-1865- 1861-1865- Milestones-Office of the Historian. (n.d.). Retrieved November 28, 2014, from <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1861-1865/blockade>

The War Between the States is Creating Great Distress in Europe. (2012, December 9). Retrieved January 2, 2015, from <http://www.accessible-archives.com/2012/12/great-distress-in-europe-1862/#more-6340>