

Dethroning King Cotton: The Failed Diplomacy of the Confederacy

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In response to President Lincoln's *Proclamation of Blockade Against Southern Ports* in 1861, the Confederacy influenced its people to withhold their cotton from the rest of the world in an attempt to coerce European powers England and France into breaking the Union's blockade and taking up arms in support of the Confederacy. Considering only the success of the cotton industry in previous years, the South failed to see the cracks in King Cotton's armor.

Warehouses were filled to the rafters with cotton all over England and France due to overproduction in years preceding the war, endeavors beginning in 1862 in India and Egypt yielded steady cotton harvests, and England would not raise its arms in support of a belligerent whose primary goal was the continuation of slavery. Crippled from the start with little means to furnish supplies for a war against the industrious North, breaking the blockade was crucial in defeating the Union and achieving Confederate independence. Significantly lacking in population, natural resources, and industrial capacity compared to that of the North's, it was crucial for the Confederacy to compensate with outside help, but blinded by irrational pride, the South implemented cotton diplomacy, a strategy that gained them no allies, wreaked havoc on their own economy for years to come, and greatly diminished their ability to prevail in their fight against the Union.

The growth and success of the cotton industry during the Antebellum period can largely be attributed to two factors: slavery and the cotton gin. Created by Eli Whitney in 1793, the cotton gin made mass production of cotton possible and reinvigorated the slave trade, as large-scale labor was needed to work the plantations. Marking a significant change in the Southern

economy, cotton became the staple crop of the South, dethroning tobacco. Southern industry flourished with the invention of the cotton gin, allowing the South to export enough cotton to account for three-fourths of Britain's cotton imports¹. The South exported over 1.2 billion pounds of cotton in 1859 alone, and used only two percent of its cotton for home consumption, most of which occurred in the North's textile factories². Cotton became the heart of the Southern economy and provided little incentive to increase the South's manufacturing abilities. Lacking the industry to manufacture its own raw materials, the Southern economy relied heavily on foreign trade. Although England and France gained the ability to efficiently grow large amounts of cotton in India, Egypt, the West Indies, and parts of Northern Africa after Whitney brought his cotton gin to Europe in 1794³, the South maintained the belief that their industry was irreplaceable.

British consumption of Southern cotton fueled the King Cotton mentality, a pride so deeply rooted in the minds of Southerners that they saw only the dependence of foreign powers on trade, rather than their own. In Jefferson Davis' Inaugural Address, he stated that "there can be but little rivalry between ours and any manufacturing community"⁴, but failed to account for the fragility of the exclusively agrarian economy. In plantation owner and South Carolina Senator James Hammond's "King Cotton" speech, he exemplified great hubris for the cotton industry but employed little logic in his predictions:

"What would happen if no cotton was furnished for three years? I will not stop to depict what every one can imagine, but this is certain: England would topple headlong and carry the whole civilized world with her, save the South. No, you

¹ McPherson, James. *Battle Cry of Freedom*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988. 438-442

² Christy, David. *Cotton Is King: Slavery in the Light of Political Economy*. 1860.

³ "Eli Whitney, Jr. To His Father." 1793. Teaching US History.

⁴ "Jefferson Davis' Inaugural Address." 1861. Civil War Trust.

dare not make war on cotton. No power on earth dares to make war upon it. Cotton is king.”⁵

Hammond’s ideology of a world without Southern cotton ignores the need for manufacturing facilities, as cotton grew in popularity during the Antebellum period concurrently with the newfound means to refine it into cloth. Southerners considered cotton to be the South’s most useful asset, but without the means to refine the cotton and when trade with countries capable of refining the raw material halted, cotton was useless in the hands of the Confederacy. With their judgment crippled by pride, the South would later withhold their cotton, devastating their own economy instead of Europe’s.

The Mexican-American War, fought from 1846 to 1848, drove a significant wedge between the North and the South. Fought primarily to acquire Texas, a region heavily involved in the practice of slavery, the South believed that after the war was won, Texas would become part of their cotton growing machine⁶. Many Northerners wanted to halt the expansion of slavery into newly acquired territories, opposing the Southern agenda. David Wilmot, a Republican Congressman from Pennsylvania, advocated for the Wilmot Proviso, which mandated that no new territories acquired would permit slavery. Although it was never adopted into law, the South was enraged. The Senate in 1848 was dominated by the pro-slavery Southern based Democratic Party, and the Wilmot Proviso did not pass into law⁷. This political victory, coupled with the Dred Scott verdict, inspired Southerners to advocate for their own interests, deepening the sectional divide between the North and the South. The defeat of the Wilmot Proviso inflated the Southern ego and fueled a feeling of righteousness among Southerners.

⁵ Hammond, James. *Cotton Is King*. 1858.

⁶ “Mexican-American War.” History Channel.

⁷ “Wilmot Proviso.” History Channel.

The Panic of 1857, caused by the crash of a major insurance company operating on Wall Street, further inflated the Southern ego. Southern cotton growers were immune to the crash, taking no considerable blow to profit or yield. The North, facing stock plummets of forty-five percent, took until 1859 to recover fully from the panic while the South thrived under the reign of King Cotton, keeping the Union's economy afloat with their agricultural, rather than business-based, economy. Cotton, still being exported in record volume, appeased the British when their stakes in Northern railroad stocks and bonds failed them. As the world's first global crash, many countries felt the sting in their own economies, fueling a feeling of superiority in many Southerners. James Hammond argued that because the South had saved the American economy, the North should be quick to bend to the wills of the South in the future, incubating a popular belief of a power shift between the North and the South⁸. The Panic of 1857 expedited the growth of the Southern ego by creating a sense that the rest of the world, unable to control their economies while the South's flourished, was dependent on the South and its cotton.

Union President Abraham Lincoln, knowing that the South lacked the means to produce their own arms, and to hinder cotton exports, issued the *Proclamation of Blockade Against Southern Ports* in 1861 with the intent to restore peace as quickly as possible⁹. The North need not have issued the proclamation; at this time, the Confederacy unofficially enacted a self-embargo of cotton against European powers England and France. Diplomacy in the early years of the war for the Confederacy consisted of reckless neglect of reason and logic by negating their most useful asset. Enforced only by the pride of the public and not by a decree of law, cotton planters withheld their yields from England and France to create a shortage. Aware that eighty-

⁸ Foreman, Amanda. *A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War*. New York: Random House, 2010.

⁹ "Proclamation of Blockade against Southern Ports." 1861. The History Place.

percent of cotton imports in England came from the Southern states, and ninety-percent in France, the South reasoned that out of economic necessity, England and France would take up arms in support of the Confederacy¹⁰. Due to cotton farmers willingly stockpiling their yields with the encouragement of the Confederate government, and with some farmers going as far as to burn over 2.5 million bales of cotton at the start of the war¹¹, only three percent of the amount of cotton exported to England in 1860 was exported in 1862¹². The people of the Confederacy believed with great confidence that England and France would succumb to crippling cotton famines and intervene to save their own skins¹³. Because of the surplus of cotton in Europe, and the unattractiveness of war, the self-embargo alone was not enough to drive England and France to intervene on behalf of the Confederacy.

In 1861, England declared its neutrality in the War Between the States, but this did not hinder the Confederacy. In an attempt at diplomacy between the Confederacy and England in 1861, Confederate delegates, Mason and Slidell, boarded a ship on course to England. Union ships on blockade duty intercepted the Confederate vessel and captured the two delegates, enraging the South and becoming what is known as the Trent Affair. Confederates believed that if the incident went unavenged by England, it would be in violation of England's neutrality¹⁴. Already in violation of that neutrality, England acted in favor of the Confederates by providing shelter for the ships running the blockade, accepting goods smuggled from Southern ports, and lending aid and selling arms, including the future ironclad *Alabama*, to the Confederate States

¹⁰ Herring, George C. *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008, 226.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 226.

¹² McPherson, James. *Battle Cry of Freedom*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988. 383

¹³ Risley, Ford. "The Queen's Proclamation and the Blockade." In *The Civil War: Primary Documents on Events from 1860 to 1865*, 163-64, 2004.

¹⁴ Risley, Ford. "The Capture of Our Ministers." In *The Civil War: Primary Documents on Events from 1860 to 1865*, 101, 2004.

Army¹⁵. England demanded the release of the Confederate delegates captured in the Trent Affair, intended as a display of power over the North, but interpreted by the South as a move in favor of the Confederate cause¹⁶. Excited by the prospects of a humiliated Union, and of an aroused England, the South was quick to ignore the reality of the extent of the success of their diplomacy: England had yet to break the blockade, send the South significant amounts of military aid, or even acknowledge the legitimacy of the infantile Confederacy.

The Union, aware of the “super human difficulty it would take to conquer [England] and the Confederacy together,” was not about to start another war with England. Secretary of State William Seward was quick to “decide the form and conditions of the [Union’s] compliance with the demands of Great Britain.”¹⁷, which led to the release of Mason and Slidell. The South saw it as “so pitiful, contemptible, and ignominious a surrender”¹⁸ while the North celebrated the diplomatic victory; England would not use their extensive naval power to avenge the South in the wake of the Trent Affair, allowing the Union to engage in “one war at a time”¹⁹.

Lincoln and Seward were poised to stop any form of English intervention on the Confederacy’s behalf, beginning with the blockade in 1861 to discourage English trade²⁰. After the Battle of Antietam, Lincoln, finally holding the advantage he so desperately needed, issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, crushing not only the legal institution of slavery in the South but English allegiance to the Confederacy as well. No amount of cotton could persuade

¹⁵ Risley, Ford. "English Treachery- Gross Violation of Neutrality." In *The Civil War: Primary Documents on Events from 1860 to 1865*, 170-71, 2004.

¹⁶ Risley, Ford. "The Yankee Back Down." In *The Civil War: Primary Documents on Events from 1860 to 1865*, 105, 2004.

¹⁷ "The Trent Question." *Harpers Weekly*, 1862. Civil War Trust.

¹⁸ Risley, Ford. "The Yankee Back Down." In *The Civil War: Primary Documents on Events from 1860 to 1865*, 105, 2004.

¹⁹ "The U.S. Civil War 1861-1865." Civil War Trust.

²⁰ "The Surrender of the Traitors." *Harpers Weekly*, 1862. Civil War Trust.

England, a country with a working class deeply against the institution of slavery, to fight for the Confederacy's right to have it. Having abolished the slave trade in 1807 and slavery entirely in 1833, Britain did not look fondly upon the South for their enslaving practices²¹. The release of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852 gave an inside view on the atrocities of slavery in the South, creating villains out of the enslavers in the eyes of the British. The South's cotton, blackened by the horrors of slavery, was trivial to the masses of Britain in comparison to the North's intentions of abolishing the archaic institution. Without the necessary support of the public, the revered Royal Navy would not give the Confederacy what it desperately needed: a broken blockade. The Emancipation Proclamation, issued in September 1861, was the catalyst for the end of English intervention in the war, shattering the fight for Southern independence and creating instead an imperative crusade against slavery.

Cotton in Europe was growing sparse. By the spring of 1862, one third of England's cotton mills were closed and half of England's textile workers were unemployed²². France was in an even worse condition due to the effects of cotton diplomacy, and the French foreign minister, in a panic, proclaimed, "We are nearly out of cotton, and cotton we must have."²³ Europe was in desperate need of a reliable cotton source, and by 1863, it was clear that smuggling Southern cotton through the blockade was a less-than ideal solution to the cotton famine. Due to the risks of capture, imprisonment, and the tensions of an illegal trade, blockade runners rarely broke the blockade twice, even with a forty-three percent return on the cotton they smuggled from Southern ports. This cotton, which could be bought for about ten cents per pound in the South,

²¹ Foreman, Amanda. *A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War*. New York: Random House, 2010.

²² Herring, George C. *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008, 240.

²³ *Ibid*, 240.

sold for fifty-four cents per pound in France, and an even higher amount in England²⁴. This level of compensation was deemed unsuitable when privateers considered the level of risk in running the blockade, as the five hundred Union ships patrolling the blockade seized the cotton, as well as the men, on all ships they could, leaving the privateers with no ship, no goods, and no freedom. Eight thousand trips from Southern ports to England during the four years of war paled in comparison to the twenty thousand trips made in the four years previously, significantly reducing the South's access to global trade²⁵. By 1863, Europe was taking small steps in gaining independence from Southern cotton by establishing a multitude of cotton industries in its territories²⁶, rendering blockade running obsolete as less risky cotton trades became more readily available. European-planted cotton was on the rise, and allegiances based on cotton were crumbling. Without the monopoly on cotton that the South previously enjoyed, and Europe's dependence on the cotton wavering, the once revered King Cotton found itself without a kingdom.

Meanwhile, the economy of the South was in chaos. Lightly taxed in the Antebellum period, the people of the South were ill-prepared to finance a war. Without the capacity to furnish the necessities of the people, as well as those of the army, the South floundered under the pressure of the blockade. Keeping their cotton as a hostage, the South cut itself off from significant influxes of money, causing the Confederacy to print paper currency that lacked a backing in gold. Inflation plagued people of all economic stations and prices for goods were at unprecedented highs²⁷. Seward, as a preemptive strike against European intervention, and to

²⁴ Lebergott, Stanley. "Through the Blockade: The Profitability and Extent of Cotton Smuggling, 1861-1865." *The Journal of Economic History* 41, no. 4 (1981): 867-88.

²⁵ McPherson, James. *Battle Cry of Freedom*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988, 378.

²⁶ Pomeroy, Earl S. "French Substitutes for American Cotton, 1861-1865." *The Journal of Southern History* 9, no. 4 (1943): 555-60.

²⁷ McPherson, James. *Battle Cry of Freedom*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988, 438-42.

appease Britain's complaints concerning their cotton famine, opened four Southern ports to trade in 1862, but the South, still holding on to the idea that cotton diplomacy would gain them aid from Britain and France, did not take full advantage of the opportunity, exporting only a fraction of the cotton that they had in previous years²⁸. Having caused internal chaos with the implementation of cotton diplomacy, the Confederacy was faced with a daunting reality: England and France would not save them from the devastating economic situation that the South had intended for the European powers.

It was clear that cotton diplomacy alone was not enough to drag England or France into war against the Union. Confederate delegates Mason and Slidell, having made it to England after the Trent Affair, spewed out exaggerations and confident predictions concerning the war to the English and French diplomats. Their main focus was on breaking the blockade; the South was heading for ruin under the economic stress that it imposed. The delegates insisted that the blockade was made of "paper", and could be easily broken with outside intervention. This claim, when examined in context with cotton diplomacy, weakened their argument that the blockade was feeble, as little Southern cotton was exported at that time, giving the blockade an appearance of effectiveness²⁹. Kept in poor communication with the Confederate government for much of their stay in Europe, Mason and Slidell were uninformed on the progressions of the war, greatly decreasing their ability to persuade England and France to help their cause³⁰. Because cotton diplomacy was extremely passive-aggressive compared to the Union's compliance with Europe during the onset of war, the Confederacy's attempts at direct diplomacy were not well-received. By convoluting the European economy, the South unintentionally broke the bonds between

²⁸ Foreman, Amanda. *A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War*. New York: Random House, 2010.

²⁹ McPherson, James. *Battle Cry of Freedom*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988, 383.

³⁰ Baylen, Joseph O., and William W. White. "A. Dudley Mann's Mission in Europe, 1863-1864: An Unpublished Letter to Jefferson Davis." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 69, no. 3 (1961): 324-28.

Europe and themselves, ruining their chances of receiving European aid and ensuring that alternative attempts at diplomacy would be in vain.

Southerners, consumed by their egos, were unwilling to accept the diplomatic defeat. Exasperated by the lack of support of their best customers, the Confederate public became dissatisfied with the possibility of future associations with Europe. *The Daily Constitutionalist*, a newspaper published in Augusta, Georgia, wrote on the topic:

“It is useless longer to submit to shame, by wearing the appearance of supplicants for foreign recognition. We can manage to get along as well without foreign nations as they can without us. We have cast off swaddling clothes, and proved our ability to stand alone. Let our Commissioners return from Europe.”³¹

Even in the face of defeat, the South still believed that they were above groveling for Europe’s affections. Attempts at diplomatic relations between the Confederacy and Europe virtually ceased after 1863 with the Confederacy calling back most of their delegates to the South at that time³². Varina Davis, first lady of the Confederacy, in the onset of the war boasted “that foreign recognition was looked forward to as an assumed fact”, but Davis, like so many other confident Southerners, found that the unraveling of the war had proved her wrong³³. With the hopes for foreign intervention dashed, the South was forced to continue on without an industrial capacity, an influx of money, and the necessities of war and the common lifestyle.

By 1863, virtually every Confederate citizen had felt the sting of the blockade. Plagued by shortages of food, clothing, medicine, paper, and hundreds of other household items, citizens of every economic standing were affected by the blockade. Lacking in self-sufficiency, the South

³¹ Risley, Ford. "Our Foreign Relations." In *The Civil War: Primary Documents on Events from 1860 to 1865*, 168-70, 2004.

³² Herring, George C. *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008, 240.

³³ Jones, Howard. *Abraham Lincoln and a New Birth of Freedom: The Union and Slavery in the Diplomacy of the Civil War*. University of Nebraska Press, 1999.

was unable to compensate for the dire need for food, and a panic spread throughout the Confederacy³⁴. Primarily dependent on blockade runners for food, the Confederacy was ill-prepared to accommodate for the decline in willing smugglers. The small amount of ships that ran the blockade in the later years of the war often brought luxuries, such as wine and silk, which were useless to the starving Confederacy. Confederate leaders largely ignored the shortages, and never fully implemented a system of government-controlled blockade runners³⁵. The South previously thrived through free trade with the North and Europe, allowing the South to base its own economy on cash crops and ignore the production of the necessities. Without the means to produce the commodities Southerners enjoyed prior to the war, and without a buyer for the South's staple crop cotton, the Confederacy began to lose the support of its people.

In the onset of the war, the South was hell-bent on keeping its cotton out of the hands of the North, but the cotton growers of the Confederacy grew tired of the economic struggles imposed upon them and began selling their cotton to the Union. Trading cotton with the Union was strictly prohibited since 1861, but inflation and starvation caused the cotton trade with the Union to resurface. Northern buyers paid premium prices for the cotton, undermining any inhibitions farmers might have had concerning going against the wishes of their government. This practice saved some cotton farmers from financial ruin and starvation³⁶, but food shortages were still plaguing the people of the Confederacy. Cotton farmers, considered to be the heart of the South, greatly put a damper on Confederate patriotism with their betrayal.

³⁴ Massey, Mary Elizabeth. "The Food and Drink Shortage on the Confederate Homefront." *The North Carolina Historical Review* (1949): 306-334.

³⁵ Tans, Jochem H. "The Hapless Anaconda: Union Blockade 1861-1865." *Concord Review* (1994): 13-130. Varsity Academics.

³⁶"Union Cotton Trade: Selling to the Enemy." Home of the American Civil War.

The Confederate Army greatly lacked supplies due to the constraints of the blockade, and the troops were not immune to the starvation that the Southern civilians were facing. Often without shoes and proper attire, Confederate troops trudged along with the orders of their officers, but without full stomachs, their allegiance often wavered. Desertions rose as the food shortage became dire; many soldiers returned home to help provide for their starving families. With Union Armies, particularly Sherman's, ravaging the towns of the South, many soldiers felt that it was their duty to protect their families instead of protecting the Confederacy. The Army of Tennessee reported that "desertions are multiplying so fast in this army that almost one-third of it is gone", with similar amounts occurring in other Confederate Armies³⁷. The bonds between the Confederate cause and its soldiers were broken by extreme economic distress at home and the lack of supplies on the front.

The Confederacy could not pull off a victory with their significantly weakened army. Deficient in numbers, health, and morale, the Confederate Army faced defeat at the Appomattox courthouse on April 9, 1865. General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, in an attempt to obtain a shipment of supplies, found themselves surrounded by General Ulysses S. Grant's Army of the Potomac³⁸. With the war over, the Southern public was relieved; the blockade would be dissolved and the shortages would subside, however, the hardships that the South faced due to the blockade did not end with Lee's surrender, but continued on during the Reconstruction and later.

Through a series of bad judgments guided by hubris, the Confederacy failed miserably at gaining aid and recognition from England and France. Having enjoyed significant economic

³⁷ McPherson, James. *Battle Cry of Freedom*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988, 440.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 650.

success in the years prior to the war, the South became overconfident in their economic capabilities. Cotton diplomacy failed to account for all factors in England's relationship with the South, ignoring the largely held belief that slavery was immoral. The South should not have expected England to wage war on the North, an equally valuable trade partner, in support of the slavery-ridden Confederacy. The South acted in a misguided fashion during the war and rendered their attempts at breaking the blockade through diplomatic relations a failure, causing great internal stress as food shortages spread across the states. The Southern economy was devastated by the effects of the war; having lost their monopoly on cotton, and the slaves they utilized to produce it, King Cotton was no more. Due to catastrophic diplomatic decisions, the Confederacy lost the Civil War not on the battle field, but on their economic home front.

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