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How to Lose Allies and Alienate People

By *AMANDA FOREMAN*

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One of the more common misconceptions about the Civil War is that the world (meaning Europe and, in particular, Britain) favored a Southern victory because of its dependence on cotton. The economic data appears to provide incontrovertible evidence: the livelihood of one in five Britons was connected in some way to the textile trade.

But, while admittedly a powerful motivator in foreign reactions to the war, cotton was not king. In fact, during the first four months of the conflict, when Britain's response to secession was still maturing, the South's threat to withhold cotton until its independence was recognized caused far less anxiety than the bellicose threats emanating from the Union's secretary of state, William Henry Seward. One of the great tragedies of the Civil War is that Secretary Seward's crass resort to "spread eagle nationalism" at the beginning of the conflict turned Britain from being potentially decisive ally into a hostile neutral.

In April 1861 it was well known among the expatriate circles in Washington that the British minister, Lord Lyons, was "strong for the Union." But at that moment, Seward could not or would not see the signals. Tormented by his declining political influence over President Lincoln, Seward became obsessed with reasserting his once legendary authority in Washington. One byproduct of the Secretary's inner turmoil was a [bizarre memorandum](#) delivered to Lincoln's office on April 1, which argued that a foreign war was the only salvation for the Union. Seward proposed to reunite the country by creating an external threat – in his words, to "change the question before the Public from one upon Slavery ... to one of Patriotism or Union."

Lincoln dismissed the proposal, but somehow its broad contents became known to the diplomatic community.

Library of Congress Lord Lyons

Worse was to follow. The Republican-dominated Congress had just passed a series of highly punitive import taxes on European goods, known as the Morrill Act, with no thought about how such economic warfare would be regarded abroad. Soon after came

the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, and Lincoln's declaration that all Southern ports were under a federal blockade.

Both these developments required careful handling by the State Department. But instead of reassuring the diplomatic community, Seward was aggressively dismissive about the Morrill Act, and careless to the point of fatally negligent with regard to the legalities of the blockade. Neither the American legations abroad, for example, nor the diplomatic community in Washington was given advance warning of its implementation. Ministers who called at the State Department to discuss the situation met with threats and insults from Seward. Lord Lyons was told that if he wished to maintain peace with America he must refrain from describing Southern secession as a civil war. Diplomats were left wondering who was the real target of Washington's aggression.

The French minister, Henri Mercier, urged his colleagues to ignore the blockade, but Lyons vigorously lobbied against the idea, pointing out that such a blatant act would "entail utter ruin upon the [Northern] Administration and their supporters." Lyons wished he could have gone further; however, after another blistering confrontation with Seward, he wrote on May 6: "I confess I can see no better policy for us than a strict impartiality for the present ... The sympathies of an Englishman are naturally inclined towards the North – but I am afraid we should find that anything like a quasi-alliance with the men in office here, would place us in a position which would soon become untenable ... my feeling against Slavery might lead me to desire to co-operate with them. But I conceive all chance of this to be gone for ever."

If Seward does not "pick a quarrel with us," wrote Lyons on another occasion, it would not be because "of the insanity which doing so at this crisis ... would seem to indicate." He thought Seward had no intention of "conciliating the European Powers or at all events of not forcing them into hostility." British newspapers reached the same conclusion after Seward allowed William Howard Russell, a correspondent for the London Times, to see his latest message to the British foreign secretary: "The tone of the paper was hostile," reported Russell, "there was an undercurrent of menace through it, and it contained insinuations that Great Britain would interfere to split up the Republic, if she could, and was pleased at the prospect of the dangers which threatened it."

When these developments became known in England, even pro-Northern journals like the Spectator magazine complained, "The Americans are, for the moment, transported beyond the influence of common sense. With all of England sympathising, more or less heartily, with the North, they persist in regarding her as an enemy, and seem positively anxious to change an ally ... into an open and dangerous foe." The pro-Northern journalist and social reformer Harriet Martineau blamed Seward for having allowed the passage of the Morrill tariff, since the bill was practically "inviting the world to support the Confederate cause." The New York banker August Belmont heard the complaints

first-hand; during an unsuccessful visit to England to drum up interest in Union bonds, he was repeatedly asked to justify Congress's attack on British trade. Premier Minister Lord Palmerston told him at a private meeting: "We do not like slavery, but we want cotton, and we dislike very much your Morrill tariff."

Seward's discovery that his actions had led to British reluctance to do business with the North, let alone provide military or moral support, came as a rude shock to him. Two days before the Battle of Bull Run, on July 19, the secretary paid a private visit to the British legation. He "proceeded, with some hesitation," reported Lord Lyons, "and with an injunction to me to be secret," to explain "that he had used strong language in his earlier communications to Foreign Powers ... from the necessity of making them clearly understand the state of Public Feeling here." Seward added that his only motive had been to prevent disunion, not begin a foreign war. "I was not altogether unprepared for the change in Mr Seward's tone," Lyons admitted, having heard from the French legation that Seward had made a similar speech to Mercier a few hours earlier.

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The change in Seward's approach did not long survive the Confederate victory at Bull Run. In September, Lyon informed London that Seward was once again whipping up a public storm against Britain. "If he is in his present mood, he will be glad to find a pretext for performing other half-violent acts." But, Lyons added despondently, "this cannot go on forever." Some incident, he predicted, would push the war of words into a war of arms. Two months later Capt. Charles Wilkes instigated such an incident when he dragged two Confederate envoys off the Trent, a British mail boat bound for England, and took them back to Boston. London issued an ultimatum: the Confederates' release, or war.

[Library of Congress](#)In 1963, Secretary of State William Seward, far right, met with Lord Lyons, sitting third from right, and other diplomats at Trenton Falls, New York, to gain support for the north's efforts to end the war.

[Library of Congress](#)Delegates in attendance at Trenton Falls, New York.

It is important to stress that as the Civil War progressed, myriad factors affected the North's relationship with Britain. Moreover, Seward transformed over the four years to become the single most important instrument for peace between the two countries. But his early mistakes cost the Union dear. The trajectory of the war would have been quite different if, from the outset, Washington and London had been allied and agreed on a joint policy to prevent the South from using British ports, credit and war materiel. In the early months, as Charles Francis Adams Jr., the son of the American minister to London, later wrote, Seward had "found himself fairly beyond his depth; and he plunged! The foreign-war panacea took possession of him; and he yielded to it."

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