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## North and South — with Britain watching

June 19, 2011 | By Matthew Price, Globe Correspondent

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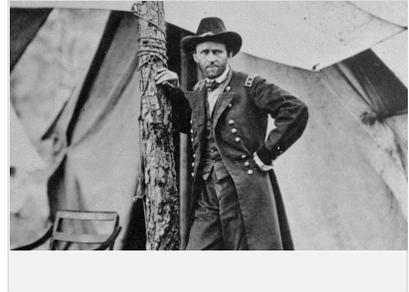
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### **A WORLD ON FIRE: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War**

By Amanda Foreman

Random House, 958 pp., illustrated, \$35

A sprawling, memorable contribution to the teeming ranks of Civil War scholarship, "A World on Fire" joins the river of such books due as the nation marks the conflict's sesquicentennial. Amanda Foreman's ostensible subject is Great Britain's complex role in the war, in itself a fascinating if neglected aspect of the conflict; but the messy vastness of her narrative — the book, studded with a monograph's worth of footnotes, weighs in at more than 950 pages of text — transcends such a narrow categorization.



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Twelve years in the making, and written at an incredible level of detail, "A World on Fire" is history as a Cecil B. DeMille epic. Ranging from the drawing rooms of Washington and London to the battlefields of Gettysburg and Antietam, to the high seas, and to Confederate and Union home fronts, Foreman has written a diplomatic, military, and social kaleidoscope of the Civil War. She superbly conveys the horror, pathos, and chaos of battle, the political and moral ambiguities, and the devotion of those who fought.

She has also restored an international dimension missing from many histories. The fall of Fort Sumter in April 1861 set off a furious diplomatic contest between North and South for the favors of Great Britain, then the world's superpower. Britain had a tangle of economic interests in the United States; it was bound to the South by cotton, which kept the British textile industry spinning, and British investors held millions in stocks and securities.

For the Confederate States of America, wooing Britain was a political necessity. As more than a rebellious province but less than a sovereign state, it needed the endorsement of Britain to make good on its bid to be an independent nation. The British government, led by the doughty and ruthlessly pragmatic Lord Palmerston, declared itself neutral, which did nothing to ease relations with either side.

President Lincoln's combustible secretary of state, William Henry Seward, who loved nothing more than stirring up American Anglophobia, spent much of the war fulminating against perceived British bias toward the South. He liked a good tirade, and was ready to fight, if necessary, a war with both the South and any European ally, making this threat in 1861: "If any

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