



Politics & Ideas

The War Came, and So Did the British

***A World on Fire:
Britain's Crucial Role
in the American Civil War***

BY AMANDA FOREMAN
Random House, 1,008 pages

Reviewed by FREDERIC RAPHAEL

AMANDA Foreman has found a lively, bifocal way of revisiting the Civil War in her new history, *A World on Fire*. With remarkable freshness, the bestselling biographer of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, has taken on a topic that Bruce Catton and the marvelously readable Shelby Foote seemed to have made their own and has made it her own as well. She has done so by examining the

FREDERIC RAPHAEL, *the novelist and screenwriter, reviewed A Most Dangerous Book in the September issue.*

struggle through the eyes of British observers, sideways participants in the defining event of American history. Never losing command of events on the battlefields, from Bull Run to Appomattox, she takes illuminating and often entertaining tours through the corridors of power in London and Washington.

The Anglo-American relationship was, through much of the 19th century, an understandably difficult one. The Declaration of Independence was worse than a revolution; it was an impertinence. In 1812, the new nation had declared war on the British Empire and then fought it to a draw over two years. By 1860, the United States threatened to dispute mastery of the Atlantic and of world markets. England's governing duo of Lord John Russell and Lord Palmerston declared their "neutrality" when the Civil War broke out.

Lincoln and his secretary of state, the ambitious, irascible (and also-

holic) William Henry Seward, developed a great distaste for the British because of the clear contradiction between England's principles and her commercial practices. Great Britain had been the first great power to declare slavery illegal. Morality sailed under the British flag. England's command of the seas enabled her to interdict a practice she had fostered in colonial America as early as 1619. By 1787, five of the original breakaway states had already abolished slavery. It was agreed that the others should do the same within 21 years. The importation of slaves was supposed to cease in 1808, but technology trumped good intentions: Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin made cotton the hugely profitable, labor-intensive staple crop of much of the South. Abolition could wait.

Palmerston once observed that countries did not have "friends," only interests—and Britain's commercial interests overrode its ideological friendship with the

anti-slavery states. The main British interest in America was cotton, the Southern crop for which the mills of Lancashire had an insatiable need, but Britain sold her manufactures mainly to the North.

On arriving in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1861, two days after the Federal garrison of Fort Sumter surrendered and the war came, the English journalist William Howard Russell expressed surprise: "If slavery were abolished tomorrow, fewer than three hundred thousand whites would be affected out of a population of 5.5 million. Yet all are in favour of it." Russell, a journalist honest enough to be persona non grata on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line at one time or another, saw the South as a "new Sparta" with a ruling class that resembled the British aristocracy—although resident in places, such as Montgomery, Alabama, that reminded him, in their grimness, of "small Russian towns."

The least likely member of Jefferson Davis's cabinet was the then attorney general, Judah P. Benjamin, whom Russell found to be "the most open, frank, and cordial of the Confederates," even though the journalist "disliked Jews in general." Benjamin was technically a British subject, born in the then British Virgin Islands. His family had moved to Charleston when Judah was 11 years old. By the time he was 14, he was studying at the Yale Law School, from which, for a reason Foreman has not discovered, he was later expelled. It may have been his uncertain sexuality: "women enjoyed his company (although not his wife Natalie, who had moved to Paris with their daughter); he could banter with them for an entire evening in English or French.... But," says Foreman, "behind his perpetual smile there was a mysterious veil which none could penetrate."

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Benjamin, a "stout, dapper little man," is among the liveliest and most enigmatic of the background characters whom Foreman brings to life. In a short time, he became Jefferson Davis's "grand vizier." More intelligent than anyone else in the Confederate government, he appears to have remained undisturbed by the prejudices of the generals to whom he came to allocate the South's meager supply of munitions. When asked what would happen if England refused to "recognize your flags" when Confederate ships were running the Federal blockade, he replied, with a smile, "it would be... a declaration of war against us," but thanks to Britain's need for Louisiana's cotton, "all this coyness about acknowledging a slave power will come right at last."

It very nearly did, and part of the fascination of Foreman's account is the way in which the British sought to accommodate themselves to the Confederacy. In 1863, the so-called liberal William Ewart Gladstone, an

inexhaustible source of moralistic humbug who was then Chancellor of the Exchequer, spoke in favor of recognizing the Confederacy. Slavery was not a good thing, but "they have made a nation." The great soldier Viscount Wolesley, on a visit to the South, could not imagine its armies would ever be defeated by Lincoln's "mercenaries" (even though it was always obvious that the South could never compete with the North's economic clout).

The Civil War was the last in which men, especially from England, hurried to involve themselves, as if it were an adventure like the Trojan War. A good many Brits, lured by bounties, joined the Union Army; not a few deserted as soon as they received the money. Almost as many others rallied to the colors of the charismatic Robert E. Lee. Their choice of side was often a toss-up. Lieutenant Colonel James Fremantle opposed slavery, but the "gallantry and determination" of the South won him over. Hardly any of the British grandees, common soldiers, fugitive husbands, and wayward sons who went South are said by Foreman to have had an ideological urge to defend slavery.

The most charismatic warrior was Sir Percy Wyndham, a Byronic figure with "mustache and beard extending from his lips like bushy Christmas trees" who was gazetted colonel of the First New Jersey Cavalry. His courage inspired them as much as his George Patton-style discipline: he was thrown out for thumping a reluctant trooper but was later reinstated. The only Medal of Honor awarded to a British subject during the war was won by Private Philip Baybutt, for seizing the regimental flag of the Sixth Virginia Cavalry, but British officers and men on both sides were often outstandingly bold.

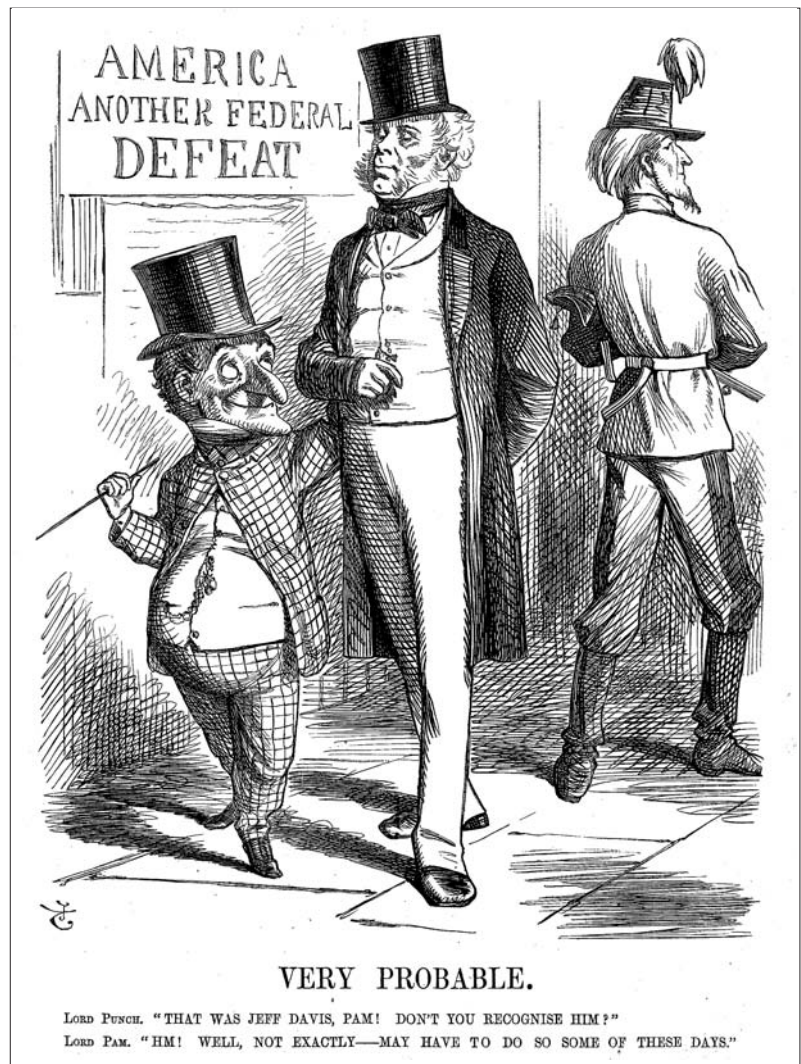
The keenest recruits to the Union Army were Irish Fenians. Their

desire for an independent Ireland led them to fill the ranks of three New York regiments. The quarrel with the British was much more important to them than Lincoln's with the South. When things were going badly for the Federal cause in 1862, the Catholic archbishop of New York, John Hughes, dared to say that "we Catholics...have not the smallest idea of carrying on a war that costs so much blood and treasure just to gratify a clique of abolitionists." In response Lincoln said famously, "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it."

By 1863, the war was going so badly for the North that, after the introduction of the draft law, there were widespread race riots in New York City. "Kill all niggers!" was the war cry of the 50,000-strong "mostly Irish working class" mob that attacked a Colored Orphan Asylum and beat one of the little girls to death. British ships with black crew members (or refugees) on board were also popular targets.

On both sides of the wide Atlantic, diplomats, statesmen, and secret agents maintained a war of words and double-dealing. Not the least of Foreman's skills lies in sustaining our interest in, and sympathy with, the two ambassadors—Lord Lyons in Washington, Charles Francis Adams in London—on whom fell the heavy, dull, and lonely duty of explaining their two governments' often menacing words to suspicious ears. Neither Lyons nor Adams could rely on his own charm. Lyons was a shy bachelor (only in his last year in the United States did he discover romance, on a trip to Niagara Falls) who combined a strong sense of duty to the Crown with a keen sense of the personalities he had to deal with.

Seward was publicly belligerent toward the British, and with some



'Punch' predicts in its August 27, 1864, issue that England, pictured here as Lord Pam, will soon have to recognize the Confederacy.

practical motive: he had lost his bid for the White House to Lincoln but still hoped to win the presidency, and he intended his anti-British rhetoric—like threatening the annexation of Canada—to rally voters. Thanks to Lyons's calm magnanimity, Seward's rants were edited so as not to exasperate Palmerston, the prime minister, who also often talked a more aggressive game than he actually played.

After the war, Seward demanded the Bahamas as settlement for the damage caused to U.S. trade by the Confederate privateer C.S.S.

Alabama, which had been commissioned in a British shipyard. The wish to punish London persisted until 1870, when an international convention agreed that the British should pay \$15.5 million, plus interest, for all the damage caused by British-built Confederate cruisers.

Ex-ambassador Adams played a key emollient part in making sure that reason prevailed in the protracted negotiations. Lord Lyons was given the Paris embassy he had always craved. As for Judah P. Benjamin, he escaped from Charleston and wound up in England,

where he resumed his legal career and wrote a standard work on commercial law, *Benjamin on Sales*.

Lincoln's murder did more for Anglo-American relations than anything that happened in his lifetime. Even John Delane, the editor of the *Times* of London, was filled with remorse for his pro-Confederate bias. In 1866, the first transatlantic cable linked Britain and America in what Queen Victoria hoped was a "bond of Union." In his memoirs, Ulysses S. Grant proclaimed the two countries "natural

allies" who should be "the best of friends." Winston Churchill's having an American mother disposed him to sentimentalize the closeness of "the English-speaking peoples," but two nations that had never been on the same side before 1870 did indeed become partners in the "special relationship"—one that with whatever bumps along the way, has kept the world safe. And so, in the end, Foreman's splendid book proves to be an explanation of the unlikely development of the world's most enduring alliance. **S▶**

gressmen going back to the 1970s. They scored the legislators on their votes and then examined the number of times those legislators cited the research of various institutions—ranging from traditional think tanks to advocacy groups—in speeches and committee reports.

It is fair to assume that a liberal congressman will cite information from a liberal source, and that is what Groseclose and Milyo assumed. They then found that reporters for the mainstream media would cite those same liberal sources. The difference was that the media did not acknowledge the ideological nature of those organizations, putting them forward instead as though they were impartial observers and not advocates for a liberal cause.

Groseclose's method is based on two key premises. The first is that media bias primarily manifests itself in selective coverage—what reporters choose to emphasize and the supporting material they use to do so. The second is that one can compare the nature of reporting on political news stories with how politicians speak about political events, because both choose language and sources designed to convince those who are not already locked into their ideological positions or a given voting bloc.

As Groseclose points out, we all think the media should be impartial, and reporters agree, in principle. So what accounts for the distorting selection of sources? Groseclose sees this partially as the consequence of the political homogeneity of the newsroom. A reporter's idea of the importance of a story will be influenced by his environment, and a homogenous crowd provides no countervailing influence. A variety of surveys have shown the breakdown of the voting behavior in these newsrooms to be along the lines of 90 percent in favor of the Democratic Party,

Spin Class

**Left Turn:
How Liberal Media Bias
Distorts the American Mind**

BY TIM GROSECLOSE
St. Martin's Press, 304 pages

Reviewed by JOSH LERNER

THE NOTION that America's mainstream news organizations exhibit a liberal bias has become commonplace on the right and is a source of discomfiture everywhere else—with journalists asserting falsely that they succeed in their efforts at objectivity and many leftists arguing unconvincingly that corporate ownership actually causes the mainstream media to tilt rightward.

The political scientist Tim Groseclose wants to take the controversy in a different direction. His new book, *Left Turn*, attempts to quantify not only the existence of media

bias, but also its effect. The results are stunning: Groseclose claims that persistent bias distorts American politics to such a degree that without it John McCain would have won the presidency. That conclusion is problematic. The rest of his book is remarkable.

Groseclose first began exploring these ideas in a 2005 study he co-authored for the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* entitled "A Measure of Media Bias." The study found that, with only three exceptions, every major national news outlet in the United States—from the *New York Times* to *CBS Evening News* to the *Wall Street Journal*—displayed a perceivable liberal bias. (This refers to the news reporting only, not the editorial boards or opinion pages of those publications.)

Groseclose made it clear he was not offering up a polemic. Rather, he sought to demonstrate his case mathematically, and that case takes up the first two-thirds of *Left Turn*. First, he and his coauthor, Jeffrey Milyo, created a scale that effectively allowed anyone to measure the liberalism of any sitting con-

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