

## How brave Britons united the States

**A WORLD ON FIRE BY AMANDA FOREMAN (Allen Lane £30)**

By [Christopher Hudson](#)

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**Battlefield: A scene from the 1989 film Glory**

You might think that after they gave Britain a bloody nose in the War of Independence and the War of 1812, we would have given those pesky Americans a wide berth. Not a bit of it.

Seventy-five years on, during the American Civil War, we were right in there again, counselling, fighting, taking sides and generally arbitrating in what was one of the bloodiest conflicts of the 19th-century.

If Amanda Foreman, author of the best-selling biography Georgiana, Duchess Of Devonshire, set out to enhance her academic reputation, she has succeeded.

This truly magnificent book, ten years in the making, will dispel any lingering doubts that a historian who can be photographed naked behind a pile of her books need be any less a historian.

Reams of books have been written about the American Civil War, but little is popularly known about the crucial British involvement with it - possibly because Americans have always preferred to see it as a straight fight between the Confederates in the slave-holding South and President Lincoln's Unionists (or Federals as they called themselves) in the North. Foreman's magisterial achievement is to put the Brits back into the picture.

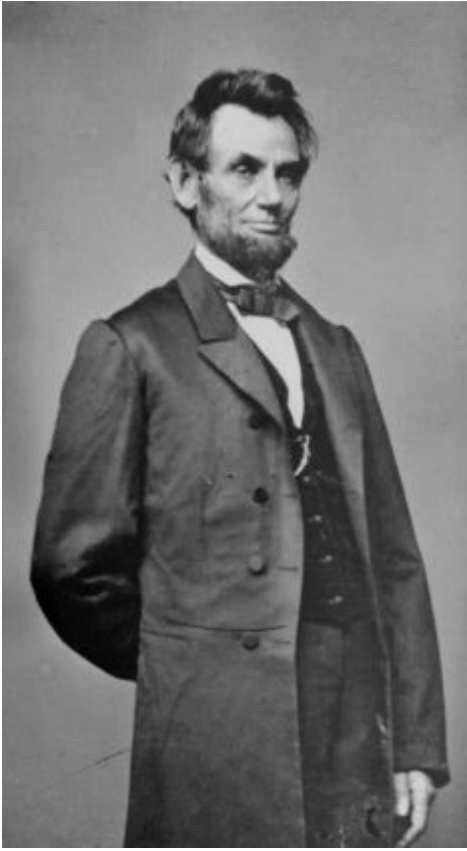
The War itself lasted from 1861 to 1865, and the scars can still be found today, as anybody who has spent time in Charleston, South Carolina, would testify.

Watching, aghast, from the sidelines in London were men such Gladstone, Palmerston, Earl Russell and the Duke of Argyll: powerful men in what was, in the 1860's, the richest and most powerful country in the world.

They could see the divide widening: the North building cities, factories and banks and the South, less than half of it literate, wedded to an economy based on the buying and selling of slaves and cotton.

When the two sides, evenly matched, warred among themselves, Britain found herself bound to be dragged in, because of her naval commitments and her need to protect her Canadian frontier.

The one word which could not be spoken, out of mutual embarrassment, was slavery.



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**Abraham Lincoln: As late as two years into the war he was not committed to the total abolition of slavery**

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Despite the popularity of Uncle Tom's Cabin, few politicians in the North were prepared to pledge to abolish it. Even Lincoln, two years into the War, wrote publicly: 'If I could save the Union without freeing every slave I would do it'.

A couple of years, and an election later, he was strong enough to promise them full emancipation in his immortal Gettysburg Address. Foreman marshals a huge cast - spies, adventurers, journalists and guerillas as well as the generals and politicians - and deploys them masterfully, which is no mean task in a book of 800 pages.

Twice in four years the two countries nearly went to war, which would have been enough to set 'the world on fire' according to William Seward, the excitable, anglophobe U.S. Secretary of State.

He was to be calmed down, however, by two of the British heroes of Foreman's story: Earl Russell, the tough but wise Foreign Secretary, and the harried, courteous, infinitely painstaking Lord Lyons who served as Minister at the British Legation in Washington.

It was these British diplomats and politicians who acted as impartial mediators when it looked as if all the Americas, from Canada to the Caribbean, could be engulfed in war.

This book belongs not only to them, but to the millions of people in Britain who took sides in the war, torn between despising the South for its dependence on slavery and admiring it for its plucky bid for independence.

Washington was appalled that the British government should remain strictly neutral; but the British public still remembered that the North had sacked the city of Toronto during the Napoleonic Wars.

When one of the best Southern generals, Stonewall Jackson, was killed, flags in Britain flew at half-mast in a spontaneous outpouring of public grief.

Some British students, artists and writers signed up to fight on both sides - as they were to do in the Spanish Civil War - although there is little evidence that these individuals had any effect on the fighting.

Foreman draws deeply on a wide-range of contemporary letters, memoirs and sketches to produce graphic and haunting descriptions of the carnage of battle.

The names still resonate down the ages - Bull Run, Shiloh, Gettysburg, Appomatox - but the reality was different.

After Shiloh, many of the 10,000 wounded were left on the battlefield all night to be chewed by wild pigs. At Antietam, where 25,000 men were killed, wounded or missing, bodies were piled in heaps; the fields were backened with blood.

Antibiotics did not exist; Chloroform was in its infancy. In a Washington hospital surgeons cut and sawed merrily (often drunkenly), surrounded by legs and arms in various stages of decomposition.

In 1863, General Lee's Confederates were within 25 miles of Washington before Union generals Grant and Sherman began pushing the Confederate forces back south.

Foreman supplies good maps of the battle, in a book which cannot be faulted for its painstaking notes and references.

Lincoln was assassinated in April 1865, just as the Civil War ended with the surrender of the South.

Enslavement was not banished overnight. A delegation of black New Yorkers was denied the right to walk behind Lincoln's funeral cortege and had to be protected from the violence of the mob.

The next President, Andrew Johnson, vetoed a new Civil Rights Bill, although Congress overturned the veto.

Relations with the Old Country, soured by a general conviction that Britain had supported the South, were patched up with a truce and a realisation that no European bank would renegotiate lower interest rates on the U.S.'s foreign debts until its relations with Britain had been resolved.

The world, after all, was not set alight.

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