

HURRY ALL TO SEA:  
UNION NAVAL STRATEGY TO COUNTER CONFEDERATE COMMERCE RAIDING

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by

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## Introduction

Much has been written about the depredations of C.S.S. *Alabama* and her sister commerce raiders during the American Civil War. The Confederacy dramatically tried to challenge the effectiveness of the North's blockade through the use of a small number of these specialized vessels. Confederate leaders hoped that the Southern cruisers would divert large numbers of federal ships from blockade duty and thus weaken the economic impact of the central element of Northern naval strategy. In retrospect, this was clearly not an effective strategy. The raiders did succeed in capturing or destroying hundreds of Union merchant vessels, but this had no appreciable impact on the North's ability to wage war.<sup>1</sup>

In 1940, the historian George Dalzell presented the thesis that this handful of Confederate cruisers killed the American carrying trade by harassing Union merchant shipping to the extent that world commerce took flight from ships flying the U.S. flag. In light of this, Dalzell concluded that Confederate commerce raiding was, therefore, the catalyst for extensive damage to the United States Merchant Marine.<sup>2</sup> While this paper challenges the merits of

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<sup>1</sup> William M. Fowler, Jr., *Under Two Flags: The American Navy in the Civil War*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990, p. 308.

<sup>2</sup> See George W. Dalzell, *The Flight from the Flag*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1940, for a thorough discussion of this position. Dalzell also concludes "that the eight [Confederate] commerce destroyers, with their few captures, did

this position, the main point of the study is to explore the Union Navy's reaction to the South's use of commerce raiders.

Missing from the naval literature of the American Civil War is a comprehensive account and analysis of Union strategy designed to deal with the Confederate commerce menace. This is significant since it was the most important international challenge faced by the Navy at that time. Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy under Abraham Lincoln, reflected that there were few practical options to counter this Southern strategy. Welles wrote in his diary on December 26, 1863:

There is no little censure because fast vessels are not sent off after the *Alabama*, and yet it would be an act of folly to detach vessels from the blockade and send them off scouring the ocean for this roving wolf, which has no country, no home, no resting-place. When I sometimes ask the fault-finders to tell me where the *Alabama* is or can be found, assuring them I will send a force of several vessels at once to take her on being satisfactorily informed, they are silenced. Whilst these men blame me for not sending a fleet after the marauders, they and others would blame me more were I to weaken the blockade in an uncertain pursuit. Unreasonable and captious men will blame me take what course I may. I must, therefore, follow my own convictions.<sup>3</sup>

Despite his words, Welles was clearly not immune to the demands of the influential Northern merchant lobby. The Secretary of the Navy actually did everything within the resource constraints of the Union Navy to neutralize Southern commerce raiding. Restricted by a naval force that had rapidly expanded during the

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greater and more permanent damage to the entire nation than the blockaders inflicted on the South" (p. 238).

<sup>3</sup> Howard K. Beale, ed., *Diary of Gideon Welles*, 3 vols, New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1960, I:497.

war to accommodate coastal blockading operations and river warfare, he had few ships capable of sustained high speed, long distance operations. Nevertheless, he made the best possible use of the small number of properly engineered steam powered screw sloops in the Union fleet to pursue and destroy the raiders. Welles was also hindered by a primitive C<sup>3</sup>I (Command, Control, Communication and Intelligence) system for directing fleet operations. He reacted as best he could to State Department Consular information, that was often late or inaccurate, regarding the location of the raiders. However, the lack of a fully developed telegraphic communications network in many parts of the world, and the inability of ships to contact each other at sea, precluded the Union's ability to expeditiously process such intelligence and then rapidly disseminate it to appropriate commanding officers.

This study is organized into five topics. The first three chapters provide the broad context of the situation. First, a review of the status of Southern and Northern navies gives the reader an appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of each side in the war. Next, there is a discussion of the range of foreign and domestic factors that influenced the development of a Union strategy, and thirdly, the importance of C<sup>3</sup>I in the modern Navy is described as a model to contrast and better understand the limitations of the nineteenth century on the Union hunt for the commerce raiders. Having established the context of the story, we turn to describe the action the Union Navy took to counter this

aspect of Confederate naval operations. The final chapter then analyzes these actions to evaluate Secretary Welles' system to deal with the Confederacy's raiders. Together, these chapters show that the popular literature about the exploits of the Confederate commerce raiders has overshadowed an analysis of the strategy which Gideon Welles pursued.

## CHAPTER I

### NAVIES & STRATEGIES, NORTH AND SOUTH

Lincoln's Union entered the war in a decidedly superior position. The North was the industrialized center of the nation and possessed the factories and railroads needed to support a conflict that used a vast new array of warfare technologies. The South, on the other hand, was agriculturally oriented and depended on revenues obtained from the export of cotton to purchase materials with which she could wage war. For instance, the Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond was the only foundry in the South capable of manufacturing heavy ordnance. In addition, the du Pont gunpowder plants in Delaware provided most of the North's supply of this important commodity while the South produced virtually none.<sup>4</sup> The North had developed a shipbuilding industry and was in possession of a small peacetime navy. Since the South could boast of neither, she had to look elsewhere. Southern naval strengths lay in an overabundance of naval officers as more than 200 defected to the Confederate cause at the commencement of hostilities.

#### **The Union Navy and Strategy**

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<sup>4</sup> James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, p.319.

As the Union Navy entered the American Civil War most of its fleet was on station in foreign waters. The home squadron consisted of 12 ships that carried 187 guns and approximately 2,000 men.<sup>5</sup> All of the existing navy-yards were in terrible condition since no appropriations for their improvement had been made in the years preceding the war. The national treasury was depleted and the Navy budget was inadequate due to a long policy of budgetary compromise pursued during the peacetime Buchanan administration.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the confusion and shortages associated with preparing for war created uncertain priorities as the Navy had to compete with other government agencies for money and manpower.

Despite these initial problems, the Union Navy expanded dramatically during the American Civil War as it grew from a contingent of 42 ships at the beginning of hostilities to a force of 670 vessels by war's end.<sup>7</sup> President Lincoln's Blockade Proclamation of 1861 changed the complexion of the war and made the blockade the central focus of the Union Navy throughout the remainder of the war. Despite the lack of preparation for coastal operations at the commencement of hostilities, the thrust of this

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Congress, *Report of the Secretary of the Navy*, Senate Ex. Doc. No. 1, 37th Congress, 2d session, December 2, 1861, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Naval History Division. *Civil War Naval Chronology, 1861-1865*, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1971, p. VI-38.

<sup>7</sup> Details of the Union Navy's shipbuilding program are described at length in the annual Presidential Reports to Congress. See U.S. Congress, *Report of the Secretary of the Navy*, Exec. Doc. No. 1, 37th Congress, 2d Session, December 2, 1861; and *Report of the Secretary of the Navy*, Exec. Doc. No. 1, 38th Congress, 2d Session, December 5, 1864.

strategy was to disrupt Confederate ability to import raw materials and thereby prevent the South's potential to wage an effective campaign on land. Since the Confederate coastline from Texas to Virginia covered more than 3,000 miles, the Union could not effectively blockade it.<sup>8</sup>



Secretary of the Navy  
Gideon Welles  
National Archives Photograph

Gideon Welles, Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy, was responsible for expanding the fleet to meet wartime requirements. Welles was a curious looking individual who sported a full brown wig to complement his flowing white beard. He had served as the Navy's Chief of Provisions and Clothing during the Polk administration and had been influential in organizing the Republican Party in Connecticut. Selected primarily for political reasons - to give New England representation in his cabinet,

Welles knew little of ships or naval strategy. Nevertheless, he became one of the ablest administrators of the war. He had the final decision regarding all shipbuilding efforts, naval

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<sup>8</sup> Kenneth J. Hagan, *This People's Navy: The Making of American Sea Power*, New York: The Free Press, 1991, p. 163.

operations, and general naval policy.<sup>9</sup> Charles Dana, a contemporary who served in Stanton's War Department, characterized Welles as:

a wise and strong man. There was nothing decorative about him; there was no noise in the streets when he went along; but he understood his duty and did it efficiently, continuously, and unvaryingly. There was a good deal of opposition to him, for we had no navy when the war began, and he had to create one without much deliberation, but he was patient, laborious and intelligent at his task.<sup>10</sup>

Welles began his stewardship of the Navy amidst the confusion of a Civil War compounded by the meddlesome intrusions of Lincoln's Secretary of State, William Seward. Welles and Seward were instinctively opposed to each other and typically took contrary positions on any questions that came before the cabinet. In addition, Seward repeatedly attempted to direct affairs of the Navy. Once, he tried to change the structure of the Navy Department by replacing Welles with military leadership. On another occasion, Seward even planned a major naval expedition for the relief of Fort Pickens, Florida without informing Welles.<sup>11</sup>

A former professional naval officer, Gustavus V. Fox, served in the newly created position of Assistant Secretary of the Navy. Together, Welles and Fox were a remarkably strong team for

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Oscar Paullin, *Paullin's History of Naval Administration 1775-1911*, Annapolis, Maryland: U.S. Naval Institute, 1968, p.250.

<sup>10</sup> Charles A. Dana, *Recollections of the Civil War*, New York, 1902, p. 170.

<sup>11</sup> Paullin, *Paullin's History of Naval Administration 1775-1911*, pp. 269-271.

conducting the war. They overcame the political obstacles and developed a Navy capable of waging war during a period of technological revolution. Initially, the Navy leased or purchased an assortment of ships. Coal barges, ferry boats, and tugboats were refitted, armed, and then stationed along the coast. Eventually, Navy-yards and commercial shipyards constructed approximately two hundred ships designed specifically for Navy use. By 1865, the Navy's annual expenditures had increased tenfold from \$12 million in 1861 to \$123 million at war's end. Navy manpower also expanded dramatically. The officer corps grew from 1,300 to 6,700 while enlisted ranks rose from 7,500 to 51,500.<sup>12</sup>

It was an enormous task to enlarge the fleet. While initial enlistments were adequate to support operations, the Navy eventually offered enlistment incentive bonuses to stimulate



Assistant Secretary of the Navy  
Gustavus Fox

U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph

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<sup>12</sup> U.S. Congress, *Report of the Secretary of the Navy, 1865*, pp. xii-xiii.

volunteers. In order to fill officer vacancies, Welles sent the upper three classes at the Naval Academy to sea immediately. In the next step, the Navy offered volunteer commissions to promising individuals. Abbreviated training was conducted in the Navy-yards and then these officers were assigned to their ships. At the end of the war volunteer officers outnumbered regulars by a ratio of four to one.

Debate concerning the economic effectiveness of the blockade has gone on since the war ended. However, the blockade did manage to isolate the South diplomatically and politically. None of the European nations that the South had originally hoped would openly support their cause came forward to officially and formally recognize the independence of the Confederacy.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Southern Naval Strategy**

The Confederacy developed a two phased response to the Union blockade. One aspect of this was coastal defense using a small number of foreign acquired or domestically built ironclads. The South hoped that these technologically advanced vessels would be able to break the hold of the blockade by keeping Southern rivers and coastal cities open to commercial export and import. Another facet of Confederate naval strategy took place on the open ocean.

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<sup>13</sup> Fowler, *Under Two Flags: The American Navy in the Civil War*, pp. 304-05.

Southern commerce raiders attacked the North's merchant shipping in an attempt to weaken the power of the Union blockade and thereby disrupt the North's economy. Prior to the Civil War, the traditional role of the American Navy had been to attack enemy merchant shipping and small warships. This strategy of "guerre de course" had been used effectively in two wars with Great Britain and, in retrospect, was the predominate strategy employed by the nineteenth century American Navy.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, this was precisely the role adopted by the Confederacy's much smaller and less powerful naval force.

The Confederate States officially launched privateering in April of 1861 when President Jefferson Davis issued a proclamation inviting applications for letters of marque and reprisal. The early Southern privateering efforts showed almost immediate signs of success. During the summer of 1861 privateers operated off the coast of Boston and New York. Intense political pressure in New England forced Welles to divert ships from blockade duty to eradicate the problem. But the Secretary concluded that the best way of accomplishing this was to further tighten the blockade. To this end, he established a joint Army-Navy Blockade Strategy Board to investigate ways of improving the blockade. This group identified resupply points along the Confederate coast and targeted them for assault and capture. These bases allowed federal vessels to remain longer on station because they had considerably less

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<sup>14</sup> Hagan, *This People's Navy: The Making of American Sea Power*, p. xi, 20.

distance to travel to re-fuel, re-arm, and re-provision.

By early 1862 the Confederate privateers had all but disappeared. Privateers with deep draft prizes could not penetrate the blockade to bring their prizes into port. Similarly, privateers were also denied entry to foreign ports as nations declared their neutrality in the conflict.<sup>15</sup>

The short-lived career of the Southern privateers was not a major blow to the Confederacy. They served well as a stopgap measure until the Southern commerce raiders (i.e., vessels owned and operated by the Confederacy) began operations in the latter months of 1861. The transition from privateering to commerce raiding started in June 1861, when C.S.S. *Sumter* escaped through the blockade and destroyed 18 Union merchant vessels during a six month career in the Atlantic.<sup>16</sup>

Southern commerce raiding reached its zenith after vessels such as the relatively fast and maneuverable C.S.S. *Alabama*, C.S.S. *Shenandoah* and C.S.S. *Florida* were acquired in England by Confederate Captain James Bulloch. Bulloch was the principal Southern naval agent in Europe and he did a masterful job in purchasing English ships which were carefully built or adapted for their commerce raiding mission. Because steamships of the 1860s

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<sup>15</sup> For a detailed discussion of Southern privateering see William Morrison Robinson, Jr., *The Confederate Privateers*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1928.

<sup>16</sup> McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, p. 316.





Captain James Bulloch, CSN  
Confederate States Navy Agent in England  
U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph

were severely limited in range by their fuel capacity, these vessels carried a full set of sails to operate at sea for extended periods. In addition, most of the vessels carried heavy guns that ensured their success against modestly armed or unarmed merchantmen. Finally, the best of the commerce raiders were large enough to accommodate confiscated Union cargoes. Space was also important because captured northern crews had to remain onboard until they could be transported to the nearest neutral port for

debarkation.

All told, eight "blue water" Confederate cruisers operated at sea during the war. Collectively, these ships captured 216 northern vessels valued at millions of dollars.<sup>17</sup> In addition to the destruction of these vessels, the presence of the commerce raiders forced many owners to reflag their hulls under foreign registry. Because of this, the decline of the American merchant marine was dramatically accelerated during the war years. Feeling that they lacked adequate Union naval protection, U.S. ship owners sold abroad more than 800,000 tons of their best shipping, valued in excess of forty million dollars. This, in conjunction with the captures made by the Confederate cruisers, represented forty percent of the tonnage engaged in foreign trade before the war started.<sup>18</sup>

The "flight from the flag" for protection under British registry was a result not only of fear, but more importantly of sky rocketing insurance rates for wartime cargoes threatened by Confederate raiders. In 1861 the additional premiums for war risk

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<sup>17</sup> Chester G. Hearn, *Gray Raiders of the Sea*, Camden, Maine: International Marine Publishing, 1992, pp. 302-17. Estimates of the value of shipping captured by the Confederate commerce raiders vary. Officers of C.S.S. *Alabama* indicated the value of vessels burned by their crew at more than \$4.6 million. Officers of *Shenandoah* estimated that they destroyed over \$1 million in vessels and cargo. After the war, an International Tribunal of Arbitration awarded the United States \$15.5 million for the damages done to American merchant vessels by English built Confederate raiders.

<sup>18</sup> William W. Bates, *American Marine*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1897, p. 150.

on American ships rose from one to three percent of the insured value. By 1862 it had risen to four percent, and by 1863 there were rates as high as nine percent. Such rates were paid in addition to the regular marine insurance rates. On June 24, 1863, the New York Chamber of Commerce advised the Secretary of the Navy that: "the war premium alone on American vessels carrying neutral cargoes exceeds the whole freight in neutral ships".<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, the number of neutral ships gained greater and greater shares of overseas U.S. shipping, while American flagged ships were relegated to coastal trade. In November 1863 the New York Shipping and Commercial List noted that of the 150 vessels being loaded for foreign ports only 20 flew the American flag.<sup>20</sup>

#### **Confederate Commerce Raiders**

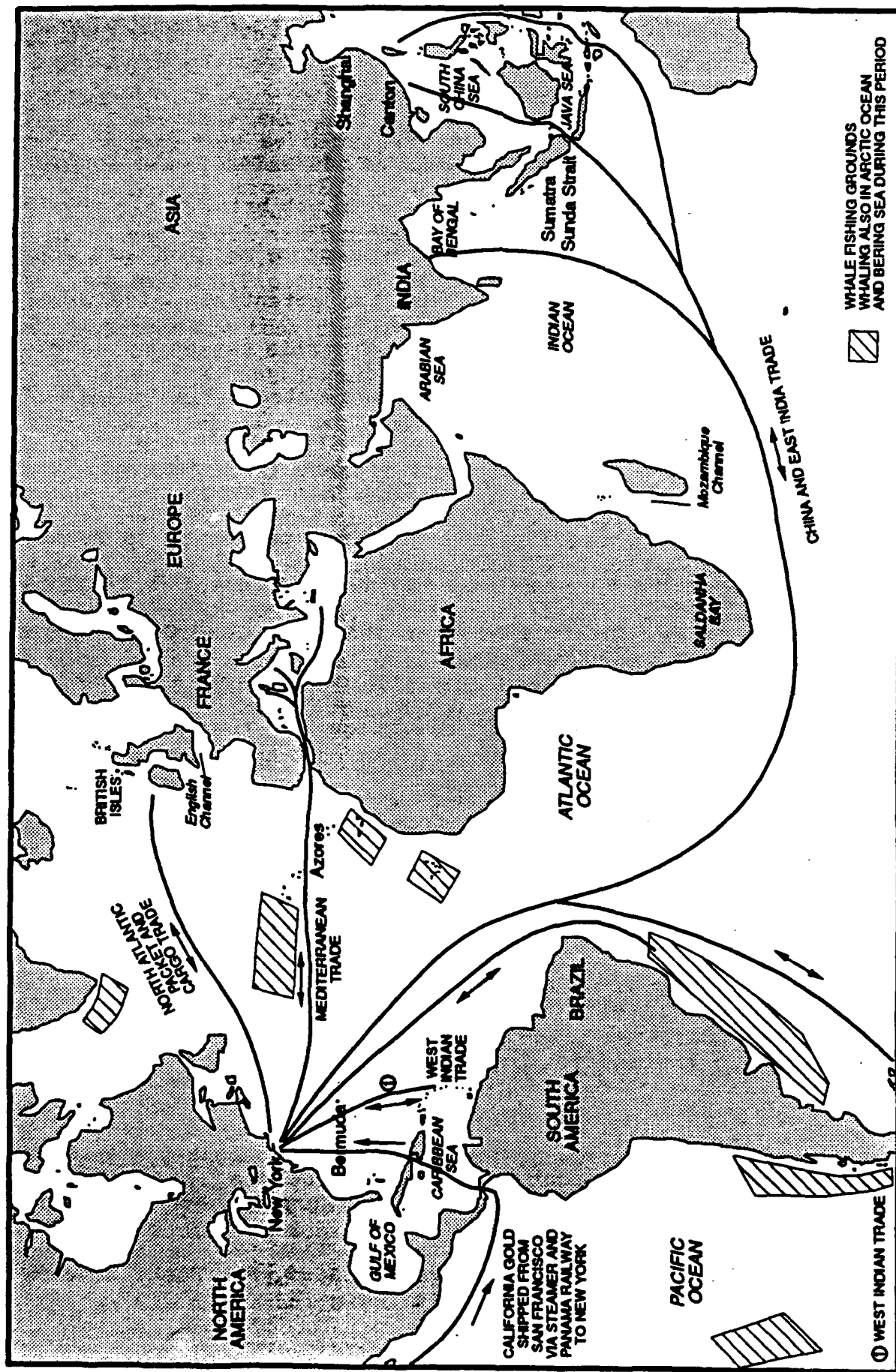
Clearly, the Confederate commerce raiders had an impact on the North. American shipping was present in every sea. Figure 1 depicts the routes and commercial interests targeted by the raiders. Northern whalers were in the Atlantic, the South Pacific and the Bering Sea. Trade with the East Indies came around the Cape of Good Hope and then northward along the Brazilian coast. The West Indian trade routes also offered plentiful opportunities for the Confederate cruisers as there was a robust commerce between Caribbean ports and the North.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Dalzell, *The Flight From the Flag*, p. 239.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.241.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-5.



NORTHERN COMMERCE AND WHALING GROUNDS IN THE 1860'S

FIGURE 1

The commerce raiders had one of the same major limitations that the privateers experienced - they could not bring their prizes into neutral or southern ports. Forced to destroy much of what they seized, they never accumulated any of the potential prize money that a captured merchantman would bring. For this reason one of the most desirable trade routes was the "treasure steamer" shipments of California gold. During the war approximately \$41 million of gold was shipped on average each year from San Francisco.<sup>22</sup> These exports departed by steamship several times per month to Panama where they were carried by rail to Aspinwall (present day Colon) and then north to New York via another steamship. The Confederate Navy was well aware of this route and capture of a "treasure steamer" would have been a major advantage for the Southern war effort.

To fully appreciate the task faced by the Union Navy it is necessary to understand the characteristics of the commerce raiders, how they were acquired, where they operated, and their degree of success.

**C.S.S. Sumter.** Confederate Secretary of the Navy had dispatched James Bulloch to England in May of 1861 to purchase vessels that would:

offer the greatest chance of success against the enemy's commerce...ships [that could] keep the sea ...[and] make extended cruises. Large ships are unnecessary for this

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<sup>22</sup> J.H. Kemble, *The Panama Route: 1848-1869*, New York: Library Editions Ltd., 1970, p 255.

service; our policy demands that they shall be no larger than may be necessary to combine the requisite speed and power, a battery of one or two heavy pivot guns and two or more broadside guns, being sufficient against commerce...Speed in a propeller and the protection of her machinery can not be obtained upon a very light draft, but they should draw as little water as may be compatible with their efficiency otherwise.<sup>23</sup>

However, it took time to effectively implement this program and therefore the Confederacy looked for assets that might be suitable for their purposes at home. The first of the south's regularly commissioned naval vessels was the *Sumter*. Built in 1857, she was operating as the bark rigged, screw steamer *Habana* which regularly sailed between New Orleans and Cuba. The Confederacy purchased her in the spring of 1861, strengthened her frame, and then added magazines and additional coal bunkers. She was armed with an 8 inch pivot gun and four 24 pound howitzers.<sup>24</sup>

The *Sumter* put to sea in June 1861 under the command of the South's most famous captain, Raphael Semmes. Semmes initially took his ship to the West Indies and then operated off the coast of South America. During a highly successful six month period the *Sumter* captured eighteen merchant ships before seeking necessary repair services in Europe. She arrived in Gibraltar in January 1862.<sup>25</sup> Close inspections conducted there revealed serious problems

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<sup>23</sup> *Civil War Naval Chronology: 1861-1865*, 1971, p. I-13.

<sup>24</sup> James Russel Soley, *The Blockade and the Cruisers*, New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1890, p. 171.

<sup>25</sup> Paul H. Silverstone, *Warships of the Civil War Navies*, Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1990, p. 214.

with her boilers. In addition, the ship was in poor condition to put to sea and this was compounded by the fact that Semmes had been unable to purchase coal from either foreign government or private dealers.<sup>26</sup> Realizing that Union warships were cruising in the waters off of Gibraltar, Semmes discharged his men, left *Sumter* in the care of a small maintenance crew, and proceeded to Liverpool where he awaited further instructions. *Sumter* remained at Gibraltar until December 1862 when she was sold for \$19,500.

**C.S.S. Nashville.** The second Confederate commerce raider to be acquired domestically was the *Nashville*. Built in 1853 as a passenger steamer, she was brig rigged and had a side wheel steam propulsion system. The Confederate government seized her at Charleston in 1861 and outfitted her as a cruiser. She was lightly armed having only two 12 pound guns and her career was extremely short.<sup>27</sup>

*Nashville* slipped through the Union blockade in October 1861 and sailed to England. Enroute, she captured a merchant clipper and entered Southampton two days later. The local English authorities received her well. Upon her departure, *Nashville* enjoyed the protection of HMS *Shannon*, who sheltered her from the U.S.S. *Tuscarora*, a Union screw sloop, that had anchored near *Nashville* in the neutral English port in February 1862. Neutrality laws required that a hostile vessel had to wait at least twenty-four hours before

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<sup>26</sup> Soley, *The Blockade and the Cruisers*, p. 176.

<sup>27</sup> Silverstone, *Warships of the Civil War Navies*, p. 213.

leaving a neutral port to give chase to another ship. The presence of HMS *Shannon* ensured that *Tuscarora* observed this aspect of international law.<sup>28</sup>

During her return voyage *Nashville* captured another merchant in late February before passing through the blockade at Beaufort, North Carolina. She was never again able to pursue commerce raiding on the open ocean. Union forces captured her on the Ogeechee River in February 1863.<sup>29</sup>

*C.S.S. Florida*. The *Florida* was the first of the English commerce raiders. Contracted for by the Confederate agent, James Bulloch, she was built in Liverpool, deceptively disguised as an Italian merchant vessel. However, the Italian Consul disclaimed all knowledge of her and despite protests by Mr. Charles Adams, U.S. Minister to England, she departed for Jamaica under the name of the *Oreto* in March 1862. At the same time, guns and ammunition were cleverly shipped from Hartlepool, England, to a rendezvous in Nassau.<sup>30</sup>

After receiving her six 6 inch muzzle-loading rifles, two 7 inch muzzle loading rifles and a 12 pound howitzer, *Oreto* was commissioned as *C.S.S. Florida* in Nassau. She was sloop rigged and equipped with dual engines that made her capable of speeds of

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<sup>28</sup> Fowler, *Under Two Flags: The American Navy in the Civil War*, pp. 281-82.

<sup>29</sup> Silverstone, *Warships of the Civil War Navies*, p. 213.

<sup>30</sup> Soley, *The Blockade and the Cruisers*, p. 183.

approximately 12 knots. She displaced 700 tons and drew thirteen feet.<sup>31</sup>

During a two year cruising career, *Florida* captured 33 Union merchant vessels. Among them was the *Jacob Bell*, the richest prize taken by any Confederate commerce raider with a cargo of tea and Chinese silks valued at \$1,500,000.<sup>32</sup>

On October 7, 1864 while at anchor in the neutral Brazilian port of Bahia, U.S.S. *Wachusett* rammed *Florida* in a flagrant violation of international law. Capturing her, *Wachusett* towed *Florida* to Hampton Roads, Virginia, where she sank after a collision with a federal army transport steamer.

**C.S.S. *Alabama*.** Raphael Semmes commanded *Alabama*, the most successful of all the Confederate commerce raiders. After leaving the *Sumter* at Gibraltar, he had remained in England until his next, and most famous command, was ready. Known as *Hull 290* during her secret construction at Laird Brothers Shipyard in Birkenhead, England, she was launched as a merchant ship in May 1862 to evade neutrality laws. The *Alabama* was bark rigged, single screwed and with her dual engines was capable of producing speeds of up to 12 knots. She was 210 feet in length, 32 feet at the beam and had a draft of 15 feet. Displacement was 1,023 tons and the normal ship's

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<sup>31</sup> Silverstone, *Warships of the Civil War Navies*, p. 211.

<sup>32</sup> Maffit to Mallory, February 26, 1863, *Official Records of the Navy*, ser. I, vol. 2, p. 667. Hereafter cited as ORN.

complement was approximately 150 men.<sup>33</sup> The Confederate Navy commissioned her at sea off of the Azores in August 1862. At that time, she was armed with six 32-pound smooth bore guns, one 110 pound muzzle loading rifle, and one 68-pound smooth bore gun.<sup>34</sup>

Alabama began her nearly two year cruise in the whaling grounds off the Azores. Within two weeks of her commissioning, Semmes had made his first capture, the whaler *Ocmulgee*. After heavily damaging the Union whaling fleet in the Azores, Alabama headed for the waters off Newfoundland where she captured several Union merchant vessels carrying grain. She then moved south and attacked vessels operating along the Caribbean trade routes in the West Indies and then sailed into the Gulf of Mexico. Here Alabama earned the distinction of sinking the only Federal warship that was sunk on the open ocean during the war, the iron hulled, three masted schooner, U.S.S. *Hatteras*. After this engagement, Semmes headed south for Brazil where he found and captured merchants heading home from the Far East. Semmes cruised the waters off of South America for three months and then sailed for Cape Town at the southern tip of Africa.

Finding the area devoid of significant targets, the Alabama then sailed into the Indian Ocean where she remained for the next six months, destroying Northern commerce wherever she could find

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<sup>33</sup> Charles Grayson Summersell, *C.S.S. Alabama: Builder, Captain and Plans*, University of Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1985, pp. 108-114.

<sup>34</sup> Silverstone, *Warships of the Civil War Navies*, p. 209.

it. After twenty months at sea, the *Alabama* was in great need of overhaul and Semmes decided to sail his ship back to either England or France where he hoped to obtain the required repairs. Off Cherbourg, France, U.S.S. *Kearsage* intercepted and sank the *Alabama* on June 19, 1864.

*C.S.S. Georgia*. Another of agent Bulloch's English acquisitions, the *Georgia* was launched as the merchant ship *Virginia* in March 1863. An iron framed, steam brig capable of 13 knots, she acquired five small guns and provisions off Ushant and was commissioned as a Confederate vessel at sea in April. Although she claimed nine prizes during six months at sea, she was never a very capable or effective commerce destroyer. She decommissioned in Cherbourg in October 1863 and was sold in Liverpool the following summer.<sup>35</sup>

*C.S.S. Chickamauga*. The Confederate government purchased the blockade-runner *Edith* in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1864. She was armed with a light battery of three guns and commissioned as the cruiser *Chickamauga*. Never well suited for service as a raider, she was relatively light (585 tons) and had a shallow draft of 7 feet, 9 inches. Her twin screws allowed her to attain speeds in excess of 13 knots. From October through November 1864, she cruised the North Atlantic and took seven prizes. In order to prevent her capture in February 1865, Confederate forces burned her at Fayetteville, North Carolina.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 211-12.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

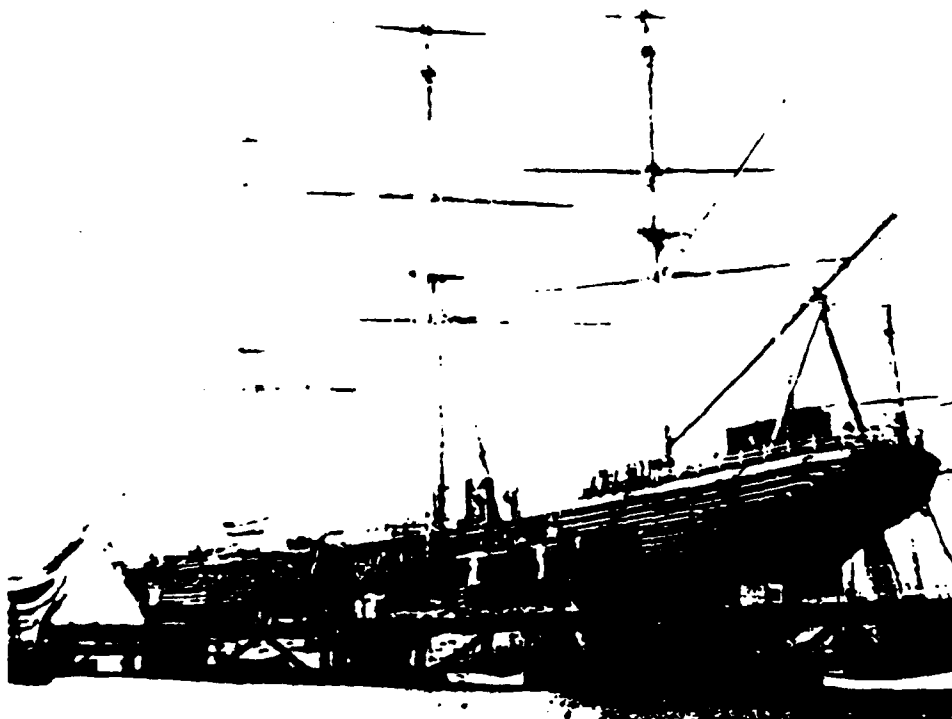
*C.S.S. Tallahassee*. The merchant *Atlanta* was built at Millwall on Thames ostensibly for use in the Chinese opium trade. The Confederacy originally obtained her in 1864 and planned to use her as a blockade runner between Bermuda and Wilmington, N.C. Convinced of her potential capabilities as a commerce raider, she was commissioned as the cruiser *Tallahassee* in July. She cruised the North Atlantic the following month and captured 32 merchant vessels. Unable to return to a Confederate port, she sailed to Liverpool and was sold in April, 1865.<sup>37</sup>

*C.S.S. Shenandoah*. The last of the Confederate commerce raiders, *Shenandoah* was launched as the merchant ship *Sea King* in Glasgow, Scotland. Commissioned at sea in October 1864, after receiving her armament of eight guns, she prowled the Northern Pacific in search of Union whaling vessels. During a cruise of thirteen months, *Shenandoah* covered more than 58,000 miles, took thirty-eight prizes and entered port only twice. Most of her captures were made after Lee's surrender at Appomattox on April 9, 1865. In fact, on June 28th *Shenandoah* enjoyed her most successful single day as a commerce raider by capturing eleven American whalers near the Bering Strait. She learned of the war's end in August 1865 and returned to London, where she lowered her colors on November 6.<sup>38</sup>

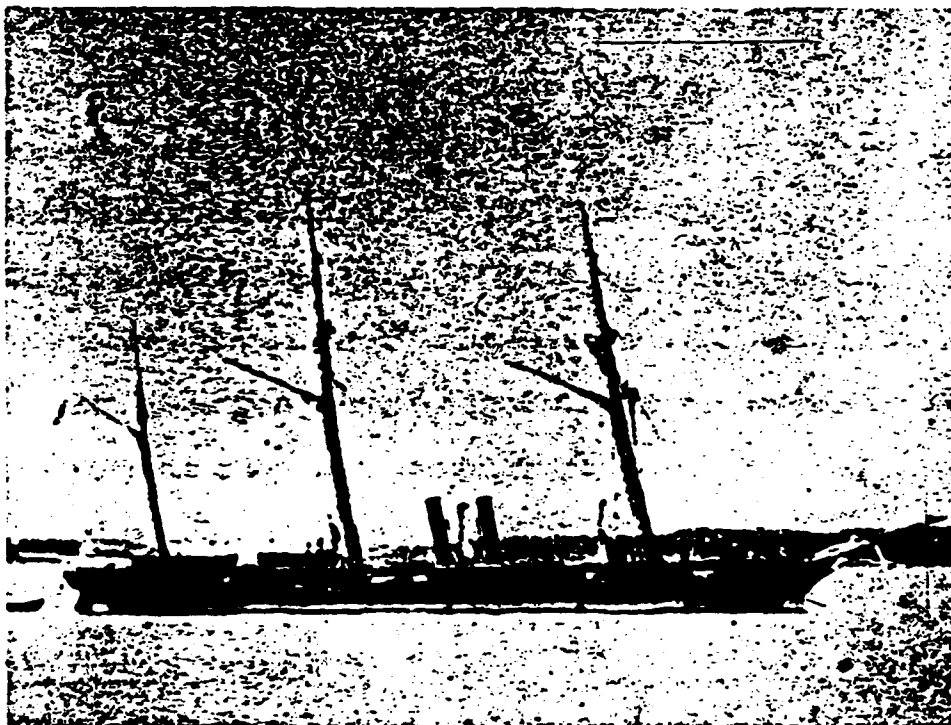
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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.214.



**CSS Shenandoah hauled out at  
Melbourne, Australia, February, 1865  
U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph**



**CSS Florida  
U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph**

## Conclusions

The Union Navy had 42 ships in commission at the time Fort Sumter was attacked. Rapid and massive expansion followed as President Lincoln proclaimed a blockade of the Southern states. This focus, together with Northern commercial interests represented in every sea of the world, precluded the Union Navy's ability to immediately react to the commerce raiding problem. The Confederacy, lacking the resources to build a large fleet, developed a dual Naval strategy which was intended to keep Southern ports open while undermining the Union's blockade through attacks on Northern commerce. The South acquired a handful of fast, ocean-going, commerce raiders to accomplish this. These Confederate cruisers quickly aroused public opinion and Secretary Welles was pressured to respond.

## CHAPTER II.

### DOMESTIC & FOREIGN FACTORS

Secretary Welles developed his Naval strategy amidst a highly complex domestic and international environment. He faced mounting criticism from commercial interest groups and other members of the Lincoln cabinet to do something about the commerce raiders, but his major obligation was support of the President's blockade proclamation. In addition, Welles found it difficult to pursue the commerce raiders because major foreign powers were neutral.

Economically, the North was an industrialized center that enjoyed the benefits of a thriving mercantile trade. As the commerce raiders increased their activities, Welles faced mounting pressure to take aggressive action against them in all corners of the world. Critics continually requested the Secretary to provide increased vigilance and protection for Union commerce. The American commercial sector had vast interests which business leaders explained to the Secretary of the Navy during the war. Typical of these interests, merchants and shipowners in Boston, Massachusetts wanted increased security in the Mediterranean:

We, the undersigned, merchants and shipowners of Boston, engaged in trade with the Mediterranean, respectfully represent that our interests are materially jeopardized from the fact that no U.S. man-of-war is at present in that sea, and urgently request that at least one Government vessel be stationed there for the protection of our commerce, especially

against the danger incurred from privateers [commerce raiders] of the Confederate States, which have now every opportunity of cruising in the Mediterranean unmolested.<sup>39</sup>

Likewise, insurance companies felt the pressure of escalating rates and wanted increased naval attention in the important North Atlantic shipping lanes:

We earnestly request that vessels may be sent in search of the rebel steamer *Alabama* forthwith. Her depredations upon American commerce are very heavy. She is in the track of European bound vessels. We send a communication by mail today giving her description and whereabouts.<sup>40</sup>

The powerful and influential New York Chamber of Commerce had still other requirements:

Sir: I have the honor to transmit to you a copy of a resolution passed at a meeting of the Chamber of Commerce on the 4th instant, in relation to dispatching a naval force to the coast of South America to protect American commerce from depredations of rebel privateers.<sup>41</sup>

Other merchants had interests in the Pacific and wanted an already fully committed Navy to provide assistance on the other side of the continent:

The undersigned, merchants of this city, largely interested in whaling vessels pursuing their voyages in the Pacific Ocean, respectfully represent that they have reason

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<sup>39</sup> Lasigi, Goddard & Co., William Perkins, Francis Bacon (President China Mutual Insurance Company) to Gideon Welles, November 14, 1861, ORN, 31 vols. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894, ser. I, vol. 1, pp. 240-41.

<sup>40</sup> J.D. Jones (President Atlantic Mutual Insurance Company) to Welles, October 16, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, p. 508.

<sup>41</sup> A.C. Richards (Secretary, Chamber of Commerce of the State of New York) to Welles, December 6, 1862, ORN, ser I, vol 1, pp. 576-77.

to believe that the Confederate cruiser Shenandoah will attempt the destruction of some of the American whaling vessels which frequent the Arctic Ocean near Bering Strait, Okhotsk Sea, coast of California, coast of Chile, and near the equator in the Pacific Ocean. These vessels, with their cargoes, in which the officers and crews are largely interested, are of great value and are totally unprotected.

We therefore pray that you will...order...vessels...to afford due and adequate protection to all whaling vessels that may be exposed to the depredations of any Confederate cruiser.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the civility of these requests, concern soon reached a fevered pitch. When C.S.S. *Nashville* evaded the Union blockade and escaped from Beaufort, N.C. on 17 March 1862, businessmen reacted spontaneously and pessimistically throughout the country. The U.S. Consul at Gibraltar wrote to the Commanding Officer of U.S.S. *Tuscarora*: "...Federal steamers reached that quarter soon after she [*Nashville*] had escaped. Petitions were being signed all over the country for the removal of the Secretary of the Navy."<sup>43</sup>

The Northern newspapers helped to fuel the fires of discontent and were usually critical of the Navy Department's management of efforts to control the raiders. Two different reports appearing in *The New York Times* on January 1, 1863 are characteristic of the negative scrutiny under which Welles managed the Navy during the war. In one story, the *Times* characterized the exploits of the Southern raiders as a "...disgraceful example of our folly...I see

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<sup>42</sup> Williams & Haven, William & Barns, C.A. Williams, Frink & Prentis, Richard H. Chapell to Welles, May 13, 1865, ORN, ser. I, vol. 3, pp. 516-17.

<sup>43</sup> H.J. Sprague to Commander T.A. Craven, April 28, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, pp. 382-83.



The Approach of CSS *Alabama* to a U.S. Merchant Vessel  
(From Harper's Weekly, Volume 7, January 1863)

U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph

no hope for our navy in the future - nothing but miserable inefficiency and constant national disgrace".<sup>44</sup> Another, more detailed entry described the situation in the following manner:

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<sup>44</sup> *The New York Times*, January 1, 1863, p. 8.

Fifteen months ago we entreated the government to build a few very fast war vessels, for the distinctly specified purpose of catching pirates [i.e., commerce raiders]...since that time the rebels have not only procured the 290, but have inflicted with their one ship, in the short period of a few weeks, more damage upon our commerce and disgrace upon our Government, than the whole navy has done to them since the capture of New Orleans.<sup>45</sup>

Inside the Lincoln administration there was little sanctuary from the criticism and ridicule that Welles experienced from those outside government. There was often little cooperation in the Cabinet. Welles wrote: "I have administered the Navy Department almost entirely independent of Cabinet consultation...This has not been my wish...Cabinet meetings... [are] infrequent, irregular, and without system."<sup>46</sup> In particular, Welles had trouble dealing with the Secretary of State, William Seward. Welles wrote in his diary, "[Seward wants]...to have a controlling voice in naval matters with which he has no business, which he really does not understand, and he sometimes improperly interferes..."<sup>47</sup>

Cabinet members found that concerns which might have been discussed at cooperative Cabinet meetings were frequently dealt with only in formal correspondence. Seward believed the Navy Department was inefficient in its use of resources and criticized Welles' attempts at controlling the commerce raiding problem. Writing to Welles in February 1863, Seward indicated his

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, January 1, 1863, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> Beale, *Diary of Gideon Welles*, September 16, 1862, I:130-136.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, September 16, 1862, I:133.

displeasure at the Navy's inability to better patrol the Azores and Cape Verde Islands - areas which he felt were being frequented by Southern cruisers. He wrote: "...I beg leave, therefore, to suggest that when the public interests will permit, one of our steamships now in the Mediterranean or on the coast of Africa, or from the blockading fleet [should cruise] around these islands and the Cape Verdes until...[relief is attained]".<sup>48</sup> In June, 1864 Seward suggested to Welles that he send vessels to France where they might quickly "appear in the different ports and disappear frequently", thus giving the impression of a larger and more robust fleet. Seward believed that these tactics would: "spread the idea that we are alive and are a naval power".<sup>49</sup>

There was a more fundamental difference of opinion between Welles and Seward. Seward was not only the architect of the administration's foreign affairs but was also Lincoln's mentor in running the protocol of the White House. He typically put himself in a place of importance next to the Chief Executive and Welles felt that he unwisely influenced the President. The son of Gideon Welles wrote that his father regarded Seward as "...a man of political expediency, instead of a man of fixed principals and convictions."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Seward to Welles, February 11, 1863, ORN, ser. I, vol. 2, p. 82.

<sup>49</sup> Seward to Welles, June 27, 1864, ORN, ser. I, vol. 3, pp. 87-88.

<sup>50</sup> As quoted in Clarence E. Macartney, *Lincoln and His Cabinet*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931, p. 172.

The myriad economic and domestic political problems which the Navy faced during the war were minor in comparison to the constraints imposed by military and international diplomatic conditions. Welles had to develop a strategy to deal with the commerce raiders within the framework shaped by this environment. When the President ordered the blockade of the southern coast, Welles embarked on one of the largest naval build-ups in U.S. history. But the blockade also became one of the most complex and contentious events in nineteenth century American foreign affairs.<sup>51</sup>

In proclaiming the blockade, Lincoln gave *de facto* recognition to the Confederacy's independent status as a "belligerent" state. In international law, nations can only blockade the ports of foreign nations. During an internal insurrection, a state would normally close its ports. However, European governments would not have abided by a closing of the ports, since it had no status in international law. Thus Lincoln was forced into taking a wider step.<sup>52</sup>

Only a few years before the war, European and South American nations had agreed to the rules and regulations established by the Declaration of Paris in 1856. Forty-six nations had signed this document which included four major points of maritime law. First:

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<sup>51</sup> Robert Browning, "From Cape Charles to Cape Fear", Ph.D. dissertation, University of Alabama, 1988, p 1.

<sup>52</sup> Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *William Henry Seward*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 300.

privateering was abolished. Second: a neutral flag could protect an enemy's goods, with the exception of wartime contraband. Third: neutral goods were not liable to capture under the enemy's flag. Fourth: for a blockade to be binding, it had to be effective (i.e., maintained by a sufficient force to prevent access to the enemy's coast).<sup>33</sup>

Thus, international law required that a blockade physically prevent communication with the sea. At the start of the war, some believed that twenty five vessels could blockade the entire coast and that only six would be needed to control the coasts of North Carolina and Virginia.<sup>34</sup> But the blockade's effectiveness soon became a critical foreign policy issue. Confederate diplomats insisted that the ease of running the blockade proved its ineffectiveness and therefore foreign nations could ignore it. In 1861, Southern diplomats tried to persuade England to declare the blockade illegal and they hoped that the Royal Navy would eventually intervene to protect British trade with the South.<sup>35</sup>

The North could not ignore the Confederacy's diplomatic offensive. As the pressure grew to establish a comprehensive blockade, Lord Lyons, the British ambassador, informed the Lincoln Administration that England would not recognize any blockade that was not thorough and effectual. The North felt that the British

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<sup>33</sup> Browning, "From Cape Charles to Cape Fear", p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> S.C. Hills to Welles, May 2, 1861, ORN, ser. I, vol. 4, p. 361.

<sup>35</sup> McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, pp. 382-83.

were establishing legal ground for the nullification of any measure that threatened their supply of cotton.<sup>56</sup>

The challenge to Welles' Navy Department was more demanding than ever. Adequate support of the President's proclamation had assumed double importance as now, the Federal Navy had to maintain a blockade that would not only hinder Southern trade, but also keep England out of the conflict. In his report to Congress at the end of 1861, Welles outlined a strategy with three complementary "lines of naval operations":

1. The closing of all the insurgent ports along a coast line of nearly three thousand miles, in the form and under the exacting regulations of an international blockade...
2. The organization of combined naval and military operations against various points of the southern coast... and in operations on the Mississippi and its tributaries.
3. The active pursuit of the piratical cruisers which might escape the vigilance of the blockading force and put to sea from the rebel ports.<sup>57</sup>

Since the government had only 42 vessels in commission a month prior to Fort Sumter, the North could not put this strategy into effect immediately. Even if the Navy had 600 operational ships, continually deployed along a 3,000 mile coast, that would still amount to only one vessel for every five miles. Yet these figures are misleading. A closer look shows that the challenge was even greater. On the Confederacy's Atlantic shore, the outer coastline

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<sup>56</sup> Brian Jenkins, *Britain & the War for the Union*, vol. 1, p. 14.

<sup>57</sup> U.S. Congress, *Report of the Secretary of the Navy*, Senate Ex. Doc. No. 1, 37th Congress, 2d session, December 2, 1861, p. 7.

is really a series of irregular islands stretching along the whole Atlantic. Behind these islands, there are a series of sounds and connecting channels, forming an almost continuous body of navigable water, all the way from Norfolk to Florida. The outer coastline is pierced by hundreds of navigable inlets, each connected to the bays and channels of the inner coast. This meant that the total length of the Confederacy's Atlantic coast alone was 3,550 miles, and this included guarding some 190 harbors. Added to this, the Navy had to patrol 2,000 miles in the sounds, bayous and rivers of the Gulf coast and approximately 3,600 miles along the Mississippi and its tributaries. Therefore, the total length for the Union Navy to patrol and blockade was 9,150 miles.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to the extent of coastline, the Union Navy faced a serious problem with its ships. Of the 90 total ships listed in the *Navy Register* for 1861, 50 were sailing vessels - frigates, sloops and brigs. They were magnificent vessels in their day, but they were obsolete in the developing steam era. In addition, these vessels were not suited for blockade duty. The Navy required specialized classes of vessels for unique missions. The new situation required efficient, stable ships for extended picket duty; heavily armed and well protected vessels to deal with harbor fortifications; and highly maneuverable, shallow draft vessels for work in rivers and sounds.

To accomplish these tasks, the Union Navy expanded to deal

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<sup>58</sup> Clarence E. Macartney, *Lincoln and His Cabinet*, p. 188.

with its three missions. In addition to purchasing and refitting vessels, the Navy built ships specifically for blockade duty. It contracted for 23 armed screw gunboats designed to operate in the shallow waters of the South and developed a "double-ender", with a bow and rudder at each end to operate in narrow channels. In order to deal with coastal bombardment and harbor attack missions, the Crimean War had demonstrated ironclads would be well suited to this task. This was the most revolutionary element of the Navy's construction program .<sup>59</sup>

The Navy needed its overwhelming preponderance to maintain an effective blockade. This was a complicated task to accomplish in the turmoil of a nation at war. Not surprisingly, the Navy was unable to do much about the commerce raiding problem during the early war years. In March 1862, Commander Pickering of U.S.S. *Kearsage* pointed out the principal problem as he anticipated that C.S.S. *Florida* would soon begin operations in the Mediterranean. "Our commercial interest", Pickering wrote to Welles, "induces me to recommend to the Department an augmentation of the present naval force. Steamers are the only vessels that would meet all the demands".<sup>60</sup> With the emphasis on the blockade, Welles had neither the flexibility nor enough fast ocean-going steamers to carry out Pickering's recommendation. The *New York Times* was well aware of the fleet's deficiencies. In a January 1863 editorial it reported:

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<sup>59</sup> Paullin, *History of Naval Administration*, p. 283.

<sup>60</sup> Pickering to Welles, March 15, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, p. 363.

...it would appear that the *Florida* is quite as fast...as her compeer, the *Alabama*...the *Florida* depended entirely upon her speed for safety from the guns of our vessels that started off Mobile in pursuit...the Navy Department lately informed us it had sent a fleet so numerous and powerful that it seemed impossible a rebel craft should show itself and live...[but] it was well known that not one of these vessels was fast enough to catch either the *Alabama* or the *Florida*...It is hardly worth while to send out any more vessels of the same style as those now jocularly said to be after the privateers. If there were a hundred such, instead of twenty, it would not add a whit to our assurance.<sup>61</sup>

Manpower became another limiting factor in the U.S. Navy's efforts to both maintain the blockade or to pursue commerce raiders. In the first year of the war, sailors readily volunteered and ships were seldom delayed more than a few days for want of a crew. By 1864, the situation was quite different. With the Navy's rapid expansion and the Army's conscription, it was difficult to find seamen. In March 1864, 35 ships were awaiting crews and the Navy was in need of 10,000 seaman.<sup>62</sup> A frustrated Welles wrote the President:

The unfortunate policy pursued of entirely ignoring the naval service in the enrollment act and the omission to remedy these difficulties by authorizing or directing that enlistments in the Naval service should be credited to the seaports or towns, have had the effect of so weakening and crippling the service, that the Department has been unable to carry out the arrangements and despatch vessels for the protection of our commerce.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *The New York Times*, January 30, 1863, p. 4.

<sup>62</sup> Paullin, *History of Naval Administration*, p. 304.

<sup>63</sup> Welles to Lincoln, March 25, 1864, Letters Sent by the Secretary of the Navy to the President and Executive Agencies, 1821-1886. RG 45, M472, National Archives.

In short, Welles was sensitive to the needs of his commanders who were sent off to search for the commerce raiders, but he lacked both the right type of ships and enough men. In response to Rear-Admiral Wilkes's request for additional, faster vessels, Welles replied in late 1862:

The Department would be glad to increase our force at every point had it the men and ships. As it is, we must make the most of the force we have. The efficiency of the blockade must not be impaired, and at this season the squadrons are expected and required to carry on offensive operations. These matters cannot be dispensed with.<sup>64</sup>

Welles found it difficult to maintain an efficient blockade not only because of the physical limitations he faced in ships, geography and manpower, but in the context of changing diplomatic relations. England had declared her neutrality on May 13, 1861 and directed her original proclamation toward British subjects who might violate the blockade. The British government's long term interests lay in expanding and maintaining the blockade, so they did not protest the North's actions. While the Federal blockade annoyed them, the British realized it would establish convenient precedents for them in the future. France also agreed to recognize the legitimacy of the blockade if it were executed in accordance with international law.<sup>65</sup> This satisfied one of the Union's earliest concerns to maintain the major European powers as neutrals. However, another entire different set of problems

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<sup>64</sup> Welles to Wilkes, December 15, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, pp.587-88.

<sup>65</sup> Browning, "From Cape Charles to Cape Fear", pp.4-5.

developed to take the place of this initial concern.

Britain's neutrality proclamation conferred belligerent status on both the Union and the Confederacy. Lord Russell explained that the British wished to "live on amicable terms with both parties".<sup>66</sup> To clarify matters he issued a supplementary directive to the Admiralty on January 31, 1862. This fully explained the British concept of neutrality:

Her Majesty...resolved to prevent, as far as possible, the use of Her Majesty's harbours, ports, and coasts, and the waters within...in aid of the warlike purposes of either belligerent, has commanded me to communicate ...the following rules...if there shall be ships of war or privateers belonging to both the said belligerents within the territorial jurisdiction of Her Majesty...the Lieutenant-Governor shall fix the order of time in which such vessels shall depart. No...vessel of either belligerent shall be permitted to put to sea until after the expiration of at least 24 hours from the time [the previous vessel departed]...all ships of war and privateers of either belligerent are prohibited from making use of any port...in any of Her Majesty's Colonies...as a station or place of resort for any warlike purpose, or for the purpose of obtaining any facilities of warlike equipment...[neither belligerent shall take in supplies or coal] except such coal as may be sufficient to carry such vessel to the nearest port of her own country...and no coal shall be again supplied...to such ship...in any [of Her Majesty's possessions]until after the expiration of 3 months from the time when such coal may have been supplied.<sup>67</sup>

The French adopted many of these same provisions in their

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<sup>66</sup> Robert Huhn Jones, "Anglo-American Relations, 1861-1865, Reconsidered", *Mid-America*, Volume 45, January 1963, p. 38.

<sup>67</sup> *British and Foreign State Papers: 1860-1861*, London: William Ridgway, 1868, pp. 265-68.

position.<sup>68</sup> Such proclamations imposed conditions which became additional constraining influences, restricting the Union Navy's ability to pursue the Confederate raiders. Welles had to continually remind his commanders to be extremely careful of the rights of the major powers of Europe. Characteristic of many dispatches Welles sent to Union vessels chasing the cruisers, Welles cautioned Rear Admiral Wilkes, "The Department relies upon you to adopt every measure in your power to overtake and capture or destroy this piratical steamer without violating neutral territory or international rights."<sup>69</sup>

Britain's proclamation provided an immediate advantage to the Confederacy. In February 1862, U.S.S. *Tuscarora* found C.S.S. *Nashville* at Southampton, but she could do little about it. *Tuscarora*'s frustrated Commander Craven reported his dilemma to Secretary Welles:

I have the honor to inform you that by the late rule of pretended neutrality, issued on the 31st of January by the Government of Great Britain, I am effectually driven from these waters; not only am I not permitted to remain in any port more than twenty-four hours, but am prohibited from taking in coal more than once in three months, being thus deprived of the ability of cruising on this coast...I have been, from day to day, confined within narrower limits, by such stringent rules as gave every advantage to the privateer *Nashville*...this final decree of Earl Russel renders my presence here perfectly idle and useless.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Declaration of the Governor of Martinique, November 19, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, p. 556

<sup>69</sup> Welles to Wilkes, December 12, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, pp. 583-4.

<sup>70</sup> Craven to Welles, February 3, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, p. 299.

Later that year, *Tuscarora* faced a similar situation. Receiving word that the *Alabama* was about to depart from the Laird shipyard at Liverpool, *Tuscarora* steamed to that area and tried to intercept her before she started her commerce raiding career. British neutrality again favored the Confederacy. Commander Craven wrote to Welles: "So long as the 'order in council' prohibits our ships of war lying in British ports...,it will be out of the power of our cruisers to prevent these piratical vessels being fitted out and getting to sea....Not being permitted to coal...,I can not cruise, and feel powerless."<sup>71</sup>

An important aspect of the British neutrality proclamation was the clause concerning coal. Steam driven vessels were the only ships potentially capable of capturing the Southern cruisers. They were typically faster than sailing vessels and could move in all types of weather. However, the Navy had little experience with steamers and did not have adequate logistical facilities to support worldwide operations. Large steam driven vessels such as the *Dacotah* could only stay under full steaming conditions for six days without the need to re-coal.

Since coaling was a slow process and impractical to accomplish while underway, early steam driven fleet operations were dependent on the location of coaling stations. This was a tremendous advantage to nineteenth century England. During that period England

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<sup>71</sup> Craven to Welles, August 4, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, pp. 414-15.

exported more coal than any other country. By virtue of this, Britain developed a near monopoly on the world's coal trade. England established coaling stations around the world.<sup>72</sup> By the coaling clause in his supplementary directive, Lord Russell drastically limited the cruising range of pursuing Federal warships. Welles summarized the Department's problems in a November letter to Secretary of State Seward:

...we cannot keep steamers off the European coasts, as they are allowed but twenty-four hours in port once in three months, & there is no place to coal them. The difficulty in obtaining coal is an unsurmountable obstacle to the pursuit of rebel steamers, which appear to receive facilities not extended to our vessels.<sup>73</sup>

## Conclusions

To support Lincoln's Blockade Proclamation, Welles had to develop a specialized fleet that could maintain an internationally recognized blockade as the essential ingredient to ensure the neutrality of the major European powers. This specialized fleet was engaged in coastal and amphibious operations, and was not suited for blue-water operations. As Welles reflected:

On the department devolved the task of creating within a brief period a navy unequalled in some respects and without a parallel; of enforcing the most extensive blockade which was ever established, of projecting and carrying forward to

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<sup>72</sup> John H. Maurer, "Fuel and the Battle Fleet: Coal, Oil, and American Naval Strategy, 1898-1925", *Naval War College Review*, Volume XXXIV, Number 6, November-December 1981, pp. 60-77.

<sup>73</sup> Welles to Seward, November 2, 1863, Letters Sent by the Secretary of the Navy to the President and Executive Agencies, 1821-1886. RG 45, M472, National Archives.

successful execution immense naval expeditions; [and] of causing our extensive rivers, almost continental in their reach, to be actively patrolled.<sup>74</sup>

Unable to find the resources for a large fleet of steam driven ocean-going vessels of the type needed to pursue the Confederate cruisers, Welles had to use what he had. Today, the modern Navy can use limited resources and rely on high technology and timely intelligence to help counter the type of threat which the Confederate raiders presented. However, the Civil War Navy was operating only at the very beginning of the modern age for navies. At that time, there was only the base outlines of such an information system for command and control.

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<sup>74</sup> Macartney, *Lincoln and His Cabinet*, p. 188.

### CHAPTER III

#### COMMAND, CONTROL, COMMUNICATIONS & INTELLIGENCE (C<sup>3</sup>I) IN THE UNION NAVY

The Union Navy faced more than political obstacles in its attempts to stop the commerce raiders; it faced a technological revolution in naval warfare. The U.S. Navy had used steam driven vessels for the first time in the war with Mexico, but in that conflict the enemy had no navy to speak of and the significant advantages of the new ships were not fully appreciated. During that war, the Navy conducted operations against poorly defended points on the land and had blockaded a country where commerce was insignificant.<sup>75</sup> To curtail commerce raiding during the American Civil War, the Union Navy had to conduct a whole new type of warfare, on a global scale, and without the technical knowledge and logistical resources to effectively implement it.

The Union Navy of the 1860s was a fairly unsophisticated organization. There was no chief of naval operations position nor was there a structured method of addressing strategic problems. Most of the orders directing ship movements came directly from the Secretary's office, but the Navy Department was unable to rapidly

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<sup>75</sup> Soley, *The Blockade and the Cruisers*, p.2.

communicate with ships at sea or in foreign ports. This proved to be the biggest problem in the hunt for the commerce raiders. For example, if a Confederate vessel was located in a European port by a Union agent, that information had to be first transmitted by mail to Washington. The transit time from London to New York alone could take ten to twelve days, assuming optimal conditions.<sup>76</sup> Secretary Welles then had to determine which, if any, of his faster ships were inport and give that ship dispatch instructions which described the raider's position. If he were fortunate enough to have a ship inport and not under repair, he could send it telegraphic instructions in a matter of hours. The Union ship could be underway in a short period, but it would take another ten days to recross the Atlantic. By this time, roughly three weeks after the Union agent made his report, the Southern cruiser would have long since departed for destinations that were speculative at best.

This, of course, is a description of optimal conditions under which ships could be dispatched for such duty. More often than not, suitable vessels would not be inport. In this case, Welles had to try and locate a vessel on blockade duty. Since there were no radio communications, the Secretary would have to correspond with the various squadron commanders by mail in the hopes of finding a ship that could be spared. In the end, she might be a sailing vessel or a steamer so lightly armed that even if she did eventually find a Confederate cruiser the results would most likely have been

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<sup>76</sup> Wayne E. Fuller, *The American Mail: Enlarger of the Common Life*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972, p. 204.

questionable. A *New York Times* correspondent, embarked in the 32 year old sailing sloop, U.S.S. *St. Louis*, reported on such a situation in December 1862:

The depredations committed by the rebel steamer *Alabama* in the neighborhood of the Azores caused quite a sensation when the intelligence reached us, and we immediately made preparations for sea, and sailed in search of the pirate...At 10 P.M. of Tuesday, the 7th [December 1862], being becalmed under the Island of Terceira, a steamer's lights were discovered on our port quarter, apparently bearing down upon us. We immediately beat to quarters, cleared ship for action, and made all necessary preparations to receive the stranger, should he prove to be the one which we, above all others, desired to meet.. Had we possessed that all essential auxiliary to modern navigation - steam - escape, if our acquaintance had deemed to be the *Alabama*, would have been impossible under the circumstances under which we met and only proved the more conclusively how little this ship is adapted to subserve the interest of our commercial marine in these waters. Our awkward and useless position in this instance will afford a striking illustration to the Navy Department of the value of vessels such as ours in such uses.<sup>77</sup>

The Navy of the 1860s did not have a large inventory of fast vessels that were armed sufficiently to overpower Confederate raiders. Nor did it possess today's modern technology to detect an enemy and to control efficiently scarce fleet assets. In a military environment the commander must be able to command and to control effectively his resources, optimizing the use of his fighting forces. Today's Navy obtains intelligence from a large number of individuals and from a range of sophisticated sensors. This information is rapidly communicated to the naval commander and his staff. The information coming into a headquarters is first filtered, processed and then passed to those who need it. Much of

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<sup>77</sup> *The New York Times*, January 4, 1863, p. 2.

this is accomplished by means of automated data processing (ADP) systems which expedite the entire operation . After analyzing the data, the commander decides on a course of action which is quickly communicated back to operational units. This is the end product and purpose of the surveillance, ADP and the communications processes. Collectively this is referred to as a Command, Control, Communications, and Intelligence (C<sup>3</sup>I) network.<sup>78</sup>

The official Department of Defense definition of C<sup>3</sup>I is:

Command and control systems are made up of people, equipment, and information systems designed to assist in planning, directing and controlling military forces. Command, control, communications and intelligence systems must enhance the inherent deterrent capabilities of both offensive and defensive forces. They must provide our commanders at all echelons with accurate, timely and credible information, provide a means to process, display and evaluate data and also provide the commander with the capabilities to transmit orders and decisions to our forces and weapons systems.<sup>79</sup>

Today's C<sup>3</sup>I ocean surveillance systems (see Figure 2) obtain information from a myriad of sources which allows the commander to quickly ascertain where the enemy target is located and how he should best intercept it. Ocean surveillance is capable of detecting, tracking and identifying all targets in an area well beyond the horizon. This includes surface as well as airborne and subsurface targets located hundreds of miles from friendly forces.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> A.M. Willcox, M.G. Slade, and P.A. Ramsdale, *Command Control and Communications (C<sup>3</sup>I)*, Washington: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1983, pp. 1-2.

<sup>79</sup> Defense Electronics, ed., *C<sup>3</sup>I Handbook*, Palo Alto, California: EW Communications, 1986, p. 21.

<sup>80</sup> *C<sup>3</sup>I Handbook*, pp. 218-19.

## MODERN DAY OCEAN SURVEILLANCE

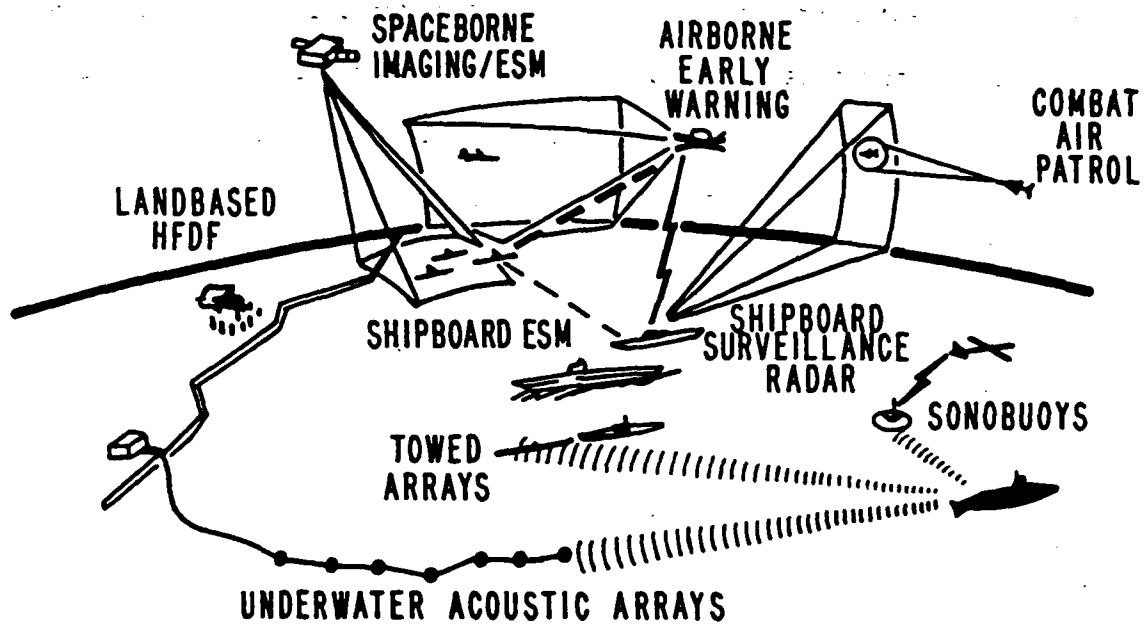


FIGURE 2

In contrast, the Navy of the 1860s had a primitive and frustrating target location system. For example, during November 1863, U.S.S. *Wyoming* learned that Confederate agents were sending coal to Christmas Island to supply the rebel cruisers. The *Wyoming* left her berth at Anjer on November 10 to make a "critical examination" of the island. On the same day, *Alabama* destroyed the merchant *Winged Racer* near the Strait of Sunda. Commander McDougal sent the following report to the Navy Department: "At noon of that day [November 10] we were within 25 miles of her. Since

then I have visited every place in the neighborhood where she would likely lay in case she intended remaining in this region, but nothing has been heard of her since the 11th."<sup>1</sup>

Information on the whereabouts of Confederate cruisers came to the Department from two basic sources. One was from reports filed by individuals who had spent some time onboard one of the raiders. These were either disgruntled crewman who had abandoned their ship when the opportunity arose or crewman of merchant vessels who had been captured by a commerce raider. These individuals could sometimes report on conversations they had overheard between the ship's officers, indicating future intentions. Unfortunately, this intelligence was often misleading.

The information which Clarence Yonge reported provides an illustrative example. Paymaster Yonge deserted from *Alabama* during the ship's visit to Jamaica in late January 1863.<sup>2</sup> He reported to Union authorities a conversation he had overheard between Semmes and C.S.S. *Alabama's* First Lieutenant, John McIntosh Kell, indicating that *Alabama* would travel north as soon as winter was over and "attend to the Europe trade as there were no ships elsewhere". He further reported that the *Alabama* would "go up towards the Banks and cruise between them and the Azores, and not

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<sup>1</sup> McDougal to Welles, November 22, 1863, ORN, ser. I, vol. 2, pp. 502-3.

<sup>2</sup> Vice Consul, Kingston, Jamaica to Secretary of State, February 4, 1863, Despatches From U.S. Consuls in Kingston, Jamaica, British West Indies, 1796-1906, T 31, National Archives.

go on any distant voyage."<sup>13</sup> The track of the Alabama (Figure 3) reveals how inaccurate this first hand account turned out to be. By the middle of March 1863, Alabama was actually off the coast of Brazil heading for an extended cruise into the Indian Ocean which would occupy the better part of the next year.

Secretary Welles received most of his information about the commerce raiders from the vast array of State Department consular offices located around the world. Agents working in these offices represented the nation's commercial interests abroad. The network of consular posts expanded dramatically prior to the Civil War. In 1830 there were 178 offices and this grew to almost 300 by 1856.<sup>14</sup> The North quickly realized the intelligence capability of this organization as Confederate naval activity increased overseas. The State Department charged consular agents with collecting naval, economic and political intelligence about Southern operations in foreign countries. By 1862, it had begun to create new consulates primarily for obtaining naval intelligence. New consular offices opened at Algiers, Barcelona, Malta, Valencia and Lisbon to report on the security of Northern commerce in the Mediterranean. In addition, others opened in Bristol and Cardiff in the United Kingdom; St. Johns, Newfoundland; and Prince Edward Island, Nova

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<sup>13</sup> Dispatch of U.S. Consul at Liverpool, April 3, 1863, Samuel P. Lee Papers, Container No.60, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>14</sup> Frank T. Edwards, "The United States Consular Service in the Bahamas during the American Civil War: A Study of its Function within a Naval and Diplomatic Context", Ph.D. dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 1968, p. 5.

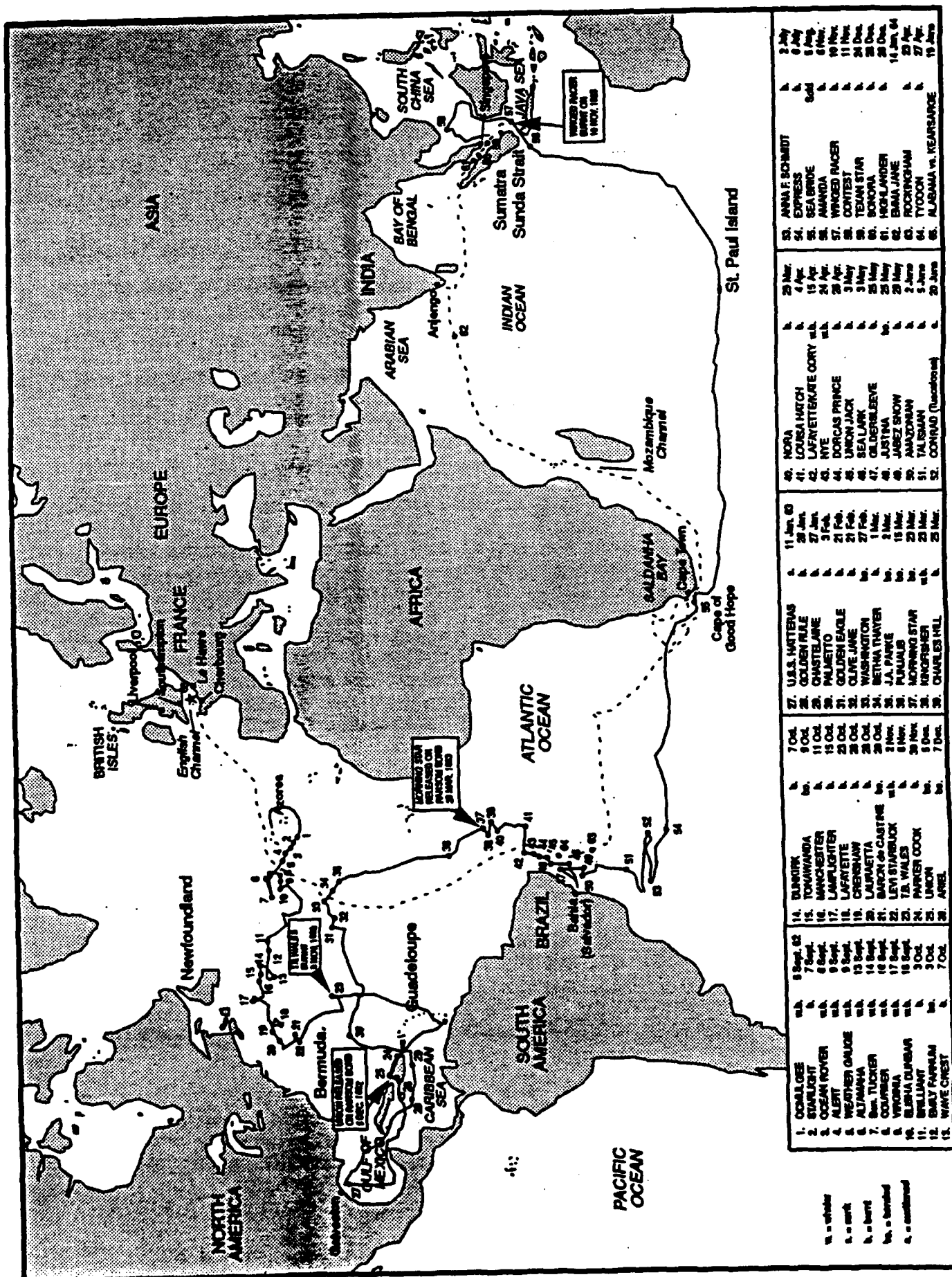


FIGURE 3. CRUISE OF C.S.S. ALABAMA

|                  |            |                      |         |                     |            |                          |         |                           |            |
|------------------|------------|----------------------|---------|---------------------|------------|--------------------------|---------|---------------------------|------------|
| 1. COAL LOADER   | 8 Sept. 62 | 14. DUNKIRK          | 7 Oct.  | 27. U.S.S. MATTHEWS | 11 Jan. 63 | 40. NORA                 | 28 Mar. | 53. ANNA F. SCHMIDT       | 2 July     |
| 2. STARLIGHT     | 7 Sept.    | 15. TONAWANDA        | 9 Oct.  | 28. GOLDEN RULE     | 28 Jan.    | 41. LOUISA WITCH         | 4 Apr.  | 54. EXPRESS               | 6 July     |
| 3. OCEAN ROYER   | 8 Sept.    | 16. MANCHESTER       | 11 Oct. | 29. CHATELAIN       | 27 Jan.    | 42. LAFAYETTE            | 15 Apr. | 55. SEA BRIDE             | 8 Aug.     |
| 4. ALERT         | 9 Sept.    | 17. LAMPETER         | 15 Oct. | 30. PALMETTO        | 3 Feb.     | 43. RYE                  | 24 Apr. | 56. AMANDA                | 10 Nov.    |
| 5. WEATHER GAUGE | 9 Sept.    | 18. LAFAYETTE        | 23 Oct. | 31. GOLDEN EAGLE    | 21 Feb.    | 44. DORCAS PRINCE        | 28 Apr. | 57. WINGED PACER          | 19 Nov.    |
| 6. ALTIMETER     | 13 Sept.   | 19. CRENSHAW         | 28 Oct. | 32. OLIVE JANE      | 27 Feb.    | 45. UNION JACK           | 3 May   | 58. CONTEST               | 24 Dec.    |
| 7. BAROMETER     | 14 Sept.   | 20. LAURETTA         | 28 Oct. | 33. WASHINGTON      | 1 Mar.     | 46. SEA LARK             | 3 May   | 59. TEAN STAR             | 28 Dec.    |
| 8. TICKER        | 16 Sept.   | 21. BARON DE CASTINE | 28 Oct. | 34. BETHA THAYER    | 3 Mar.     | 47. GILDERLEEVE          | 25 May  | 60. BONORA                | 28 Dec.    |
| 9. VIBRATION     | 17 Sept.   | 22. LEVI STARBUCK    | 28 Oct. | 35. J.A. PARKIE     | 15 Mar.    | 48. JAGREZ SNOW          | 25 May  | 61. HIGHLANDER            | 14 Jan. 64 |
| 10. BLOWING      | 18 Sept.   | 23. T.B. WALES       | 28 Oct. | 36. FALGALS         | 15 Mar.    | 49. AMAZONIAN            | 29 May  | 62. EMMAL JANE            | 29 Apr.    |
| 11. BLOWING      | 3 Oct.     | 24. PARKER COOK      | 5 Dec.  | 37. MORNING STAR    | 23 Mar.    | 50. TALISMAN             | 29 May  | 63. ROCKINGHAM            | 27 Apr.    |
| 12. BLOWING      | 3 Oct.     | 25. UNION            | 5 Dec.  | 38. KINGFISHER      | 23 Mar.    | 51. CORRAD (Transferred) | 5 June  | 64. TYCOON                | 19 Apr.    |
| 13. BLOWING      | 7 Oct.     | 26. ANSEL            | 7 Dec.  | 39. CHARLES HILL    | 23 Mar.    | 52. CORRAD (Transferred) | 20 June | 65. ALABAMA vs. KEARSARGE | 19 Apr.    |

Scotia. The Union quickly established a global surveillance network around this consular structure.<sup>15</sup>

The system was most highly developed in England, France, and the West Indies where there was sustained intelligence activity throughout the war. There was a continuous flow of information from these countries. Reports received included data on Confederate ship construction, sailing schedules, industries targeted by the cruisers as well as sketches and descriptions of the commerce raiders. Lincoln's minister to Great Britain, Charles Francis Adams, kept agents everywhere looking for Southern cruisers before they put to sea. He even arranged for photographs to be taken so that the cruisers might later be more easily identified.<sup>16</sup>

A modern C<sup>3</sup>I information loop is dependent on quick, efficient and secure communications. A headquarters staff can communicate today via satellite to fleet units thousands of miles away. Using space technology, communications can be relayed around the globe instantly, surveillance satellites can locate a target in the middle of the ocean, and intelligence photographs can be taken and processed. The weakest link in the Union Navy's primitive C<sup>3</sup>I system was the inability to communicate quickly.

The role of the telegraph in providing Union forces with an effective communications system became increasingly important as

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> William C. Davis, ed., *Fighting for Time: The Image of War 1861-1865*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1983, vol. 4, "Raiders of the Seas," by Norman C. Delaney, p. 135.

the war progressed. By 1863, approximately 1,200,000 telegrams each year were being sent over the Military Telegraph network.<sup>57</sup> Most of these were sent and received by the Federal Army. A telegraphic link between the cities of the Atlantic and Pacific coast was completed in October, 1861. This provided a useful link to Secretary Welles through which he could more easily communicate with ships of the Pacific Squadron, operating out of San Francisco. The Navy Department could also make effective use of the telegraphic services connecting Washington with the Navy yards at New York, Boston, and Portsmouth, N.H. But, official telegraph service between Europe and the United States was not opened until August 26, 1866.<sup>58</sup>

Throughout the war, trans-oceanic contact with the European continent was accomplished exclusively by steamship. Telegraphic connections linked England with the rest of Europe, where there was also a well established water and rail transportation system. For this reason, the vast majority of all official U.S. mail going to or from Europe and the Mid-East was routed through the U.S. Legation in London. This was a slow process and Washington officials had substantial concerns about the security of correspondence travelling on this route. Commander Craven raised this issue in a letter to Secretary Welles in the summer of 1862:

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<sup>57</sup> Robert L. Thompson, *Wiring A Continent: The History of The Telegraph Industry in the United States 1832 - 1866*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1947, p. 393.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p. 434.

I have the honor to suggest that any important communications from the Navy Department to me be folded as private letters, and without the official frank, as nearly all of the letters from the Department which came to me at Gibraltar came with seals broken and mutilated envelopes. I of course do not know if I have received all you have sent me, but it is evident that letters are opened in England.<sup>89</sup>

Since the Federal government did not have a mail steamship connection with the Caribbean, it had to send mail for Central and South America via Havana. Upon arrival in Cuba, the American Consul transmitted it to the British Consul for delivery to areas throughout the Caribbean. A third mail channel connected the Northern states with the South Pacific and the west coast of South America via the Vanderbilt steamships which sailed between New York and Aspinwall, Panama.

Despatch agents who operated throughout the major Northern ports during the war processed and delivered official mail to the State Department within 24 hours after it was received. The State Department reviewed all incoming correspondence and immediately forwarded urgent inter-departmental correspondence to the appropriate bureau. The greatest percentage of mail received at the State Department were consular reports applicable to the Navy Department.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Craven to Welles, June 25, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, p. 395.

<sup>90</sup> Frank T. Edwards, "The United States Consular Service in the Bahamas during the American Civil war: A Study of its Function within a Naval and Diplomatic Context", pp. 10-11.



Rear Admiral S.P. Lee, USN  
U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph

Upon receipt of these reports the Navy copied the most important letters and then forwarded them to the squadron commanders for dissemination to ships under their control. One of the commanders, Rear Admiral Samuel P. Lee, of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, had the information reprinted as intelligence summaries which he then distributed to the ships in his squadron. These documents, known as "Extracts", were selections of paragraphs from different letters containing information recently received by Secretary Welles. Seward and Welles cooperated in this important effort to distribute naval intelligence, despite their personal

differences. In a July letter to Admiral Lee, Secretary Welles stated: "Mr. Seward says he would be glad to receive, from time to time, a few copies of each of them [Extracts], with a view to send them to the Consuls to encourage them and to increase their vigilance."<sup>91</sup>

The data contained in the Extracts varied in completeness and reliability, but frequently contained intelligence about the commerce raiders. For example, it included reports on the configuration and armament of the *Florida* and *Alabama*, as well as suspected coal and supply rendezvous points in various locations throughout the world. In addition, there were position reports for the latest Confederate captures, along with a possible hypothesis as to where the cruiser might strike next.

A common quality in the information which the Navy Department received is the lack of timely transmission associated with it. A review of the published Extracts reflects the *ex post facto* nature of the data that Welles and his Department had to react to. For instance, the Extracts published on January 4, 1864 contains information written by Consuls in November 1863. An earlier issue published on October 15, 1862, is comprised of data from the middle of the previous month. The November 6, 1862 Extracts reported on information obtained from the Liverpool Consul in early October. The intelligence summary in this edition stated that the "*Agrippina* [a vessel which frequently supplied *Alabama* with coal

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<sup>91</sup> Welles to Lee, July 21, 1863, Samuel P. Lee Papers, Container No. 60, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

during the war]...was to meet the *Alabama* at one of the Western Islands".<sup>92</sup> However, a review of Figure 3 indicates that by the time of publication, the *Alabama* was in reality approximately 1,000 miles to the southwest, off the coast of Bermuda.

The absence of telegraphic communications with foreign countries, together with the inability to communicate directly with ships once they were deployed, shaped the way Welles controlled his fleet. He could dispatch ships to a particular area of the world in response to intelligence information, but he had no means of expeditiously re-routing them once they deployed. For this reason, Welles instructed many ships to be somewhat autonomous once they detached from the blockading squadrons. For example, Welles wrote to the Commanding Officer of U.S.S. *Tuscarora* in December 1862:

Until further orders you will remain on the European coast for the protection of our commerce, communicating with our representatives abroad, and keeping near such points as will enable you to obtain the earliest information in relation to rebel vessels, when you will use the utmost exertions to overtake and destroy them.<sup>93</sup>

In this way, Welles improved potential response times, but Union ships still groped their way along the ocean tracks of the world. Captains of these independent vessels used scraps of information they obtained from the local newspapers, U.S. Consuls or passing ships - information that was more timely but still full

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<sup>92</sup> Extracts, dated November 6, 1862, Samuel P. Lee Papers, Container No. 60, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>93</sup> Welles to Craven, December 1, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, p. 566.

of conjecture and often erroneous. U.S.S. *San Jacinto* reported from the Island of Guadeloupe:

Our consul at this place tells me he has information from a reliable source that the *Alabama* chased an American schooner on the 25th of November on the western side of the island of Dominique and she escaped her by putting into Charlotte Town for protection. The consul also informs me of the *Alabama's* having taken in coal...at the Island De Aves, longitude 63°37', latitude 15°41'. Since the 25th of November she has not been heard from...I shall continue to cruise, etc., as stated in my letter of the 26th November...[rumors abound and]I have to make great allowance for the exaggerated reports which reach me.<sup>94</sup>

On the day that Commander Ronckendorff wrote this letter, Semmes' journal shows that the *Alabama* was approximately 1,000 miles northwest of the *San Jacinto*. She had been cruising off Cabo Maisi, Cuba, for several days in search of a Vanderbilt steamer loaded with a cargo of California gold. She had in fact recently coaled, but that was on November 22, at the island of Blanquilla - about 250 miles south of the location described in the consular report.<sup>95</sup>

### Conclusions

The Union Navy had undeniably strong motives to rigorously pursue the Confederate commerce raiders. However, intercepting these elusive vessels proved to be an extraordinary challenge for

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<sup>94</sup> Ronckendorff to Welles, December 6, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, p. 574.

<sup>95</sup> The Journal of Commander Raphael Semmes, November 22, 1862 - December 6, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, pp. 806-10.

the Navy of the 1860s. The lack of effective communications, the essential cornerstone of modern C<sup>3</sup>I systems, made the pursuit of the raiders an expensive game of blindman's bluff. The North's ability to pursue the raiders was typically less than adequate. Hindered by frequently inaccurate, and always late, intelligence information, the Navy Department's command and control of Union vessels pursuing raiders on the open ocean was crippled. The handful of raiders continually shifted the Navy's focus from one end of the globe to the other. Welles had concrete evidence of the presence of a Southern cruiser usually only after a merchant had been sunk. By the time the Federal Navy could respond, the commerce raider would be long gone - waiting to sink another victim.

The tremendous scope of the *Alabama's* cruise reflects the difficulty the North had in accurately predicting where a raider might strike next. A savvy captain could hit his target, disappear and be quickly lost in the endless reaches of the oceans. On December 3, 1862, the *Alabama* was cruising in the heavily travelled passage between Santo Domingo and Cuba. Tongue in cheek, Raphael Semmes summed up the North's frustration in his journal entry for that day: "Where can all the enemy's cruisers be, that the important passages we have lately passed through are all left unguarded? They are off, I suppose, in chase of the *Alabama*."<sup>8</sup>

Without modern day systems to locate isolated commerce raiders operating on the open ocean, Secretary Welles developed a C<sup>3</sup>I system

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 809.

that was rudimentary and inadequate due to the limited communication capabilities of the day. Nevertheless, Mr. Welles pursued a compendium of actions in an environment of multiple domestic and foreign constraints where military initiatives were oftentimes negated by late and inaccurate intelligence.

## CHAPTER IV

### STRATEGIC ACTIONS TO COUNTER THE COMMERCE RAIDERS

The Confederate commerce raiders presented the Union Navy with an enormous challenge. Secretary Welles' principal strategy was the blockade which demanded enormous resources and patient, long term vigilance. Commercial interests, demanding immediate protection in every quadrant of the world, coerced the Navy into a series of strategic actions. Limited by logistical, technological, manpower, and diplomatic constraints, there were few initiatives that the Navy Department could pursue with much chance of success. This chapter reviews the steps Gideon Welles took as he tried to counter the threat posed by the commerce raiders.

#### Convoy

Commercial interest groups exerted pressure upon the Secretary of the Navy during the war, but the Navy could not respond to the wide spectrum of requests for protection in virtually every ocean of the world. Welles had built a large Navy, but it was urgently needed to blockade the South. The Secretary seriously considered all the requests placed upon the Navy Department. He clearly reviewed the voluminous demands pouring into the Department, but virtually every response explained his

inability to comply because of the blockade commitment.

Despite this, the Navy did agree to protect mail steamers, travelling from San Francisco to New York and carrying valuable shipments of California gold. Until the transcontinental railroad linked the East coast of the United States with the Pacific in 1869, gold was shipped along this route by way of Panama. From 1849 to 1869 approximately \$710 million in gold specie was sent in this manner. The apex of gold shipments actually occurred during the war: In 1864, \$45.7 million in gold was carried from California to New York via Panama.<sup>97</sup>

The Panama route became particularly important during the war as a potential target for Confederate commerce raiders. Of all the cargoes carried by Northern merchantmen, this was the most desirous. Attacking the Union's commerce may have caused commercial losses in the North, but since the commerce raiders could not take their prizes into port, the South gained little themselves from their captures. Gold was an altogether different commodity. The North needed the gold to finance the war effort, but the South desperately wanted to use it to bolster their deteriorating foreign credit.<sup>98</sup>

At first, the mail steamers carried small calibre guns to defend themselves against attack by the Southern cruisers. This practice was soon abandoned. On December 7, 1862 the *Ariel*, a

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<sup>97</sup> Kemble, *The Panama Route: 1848-1869*, p. 207.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

steamer southbound to Aspinwall to pick up a shipment of gold , was captured by *Alabama*. Semmes released her since she had not yet received her precious cargo and the large number of passengers could not be accommodated onboard *Alabama*. On her return voyage *Ariel* left her designated cargo at Aspinwall because the Captain feared *Alabama* would be awaiting her return trip.<sup>99</sup> Reaction in the North was immediate. On December 29th Cornelius Vanderbilt wrote the following letter to Secretary Welles:

I hope you will not consider it improper for me to make the following suggestion:

It strikes me that the rebel steamer *Alabama* is now looking for a homeward-bound California steamer. If the steamer *Vanderbilt*, or some other of sufficient speed, could be placed in the Caribbean Sea to convoy steamers on leaving Aspinwall...up to the west end of Cuba, then returning to Aspinwall to be ready for the sailing of the next steamer, which is ten days apart, it would give ample security and would give her a better chance to fall in with the 290, as it seem she is determined to be on the track of the California steamers. In this case I would direct the California steamers all to go and come the west side of Cuba, as it appears to me there is little danger between this place and that point, inasmuch as our own coast is so well guarded by our own blockading squadron.<sup>100</sup>

Welles responded immediately. U.S.S. *Connecticut* was dispatched the next day with instructions to comply exactly as Vanderbilt had requested.<sup>101</sup> For the next two and one half years, the Union Navy provided a convoy escort to the California mail steamers. Welles worked closely and cooperated fully with the

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 110-11.

<sup>100</sup> Vanderbilt to Welles, December 29, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, pp. 604-5.

<sup>101</sup> Welles to Cooper, December 30, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, p. 604.

private steamers. When he felt conditions warranted it, he even offered to provide additional Naval protection. His letter to Vanderbilt in late August 1864 is indicative:

You are aware that the California steamers are now convoyed, in accordance with your wishes...As the rebels now have a very swift steamer, the Tallahassee, at sea, and others of a similar description may soon be out, more extended convoy seems to be needed as a matter of precaution, and will be given if you so desire. If you think it important, convoy will be afforded on the entire passage of the treasure ships from Aspinwall to New York, or so much of it as you may suggest.<sup>102</sup>

The convoy operation became more sophisticated over time with additional vessels added to what soon became a small convoy "fleet". Since the convoy ships were away from normal coaling bases on the Atlantic coast, Welles eventually established a coal station at Cape Haitien Harbor to ensure their continued availability.<sup>103</sup> The convoy fleet never encountered any of the Confederate cruisers, but the mail steamers were never attacked once the convoy system began.

#### **Optimal Use of Resources**

During the Civil War steam was still an auxiliary power source. Steam plants were inefficient and vessels on the open ocean

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<sup>102</sup> Welles to Vanderbilt, August 31, 1864, ORN, ser. I, vol. 3, p. 179.

<sup>103</sup> Welles to Ransom, April 25, 1863, ORN, ser. I, vol. 2, pp. 166-67.

depended heavily on sail for propulsion.<sup>104</sup> Coal capacity limited the cruising range of most warships. In many cases, even the newest and largest ships travelled under sail until the enemy was found and then boilers would be hastily fired. However, steam was essential for chasing commerce raiders around the globe. It could mean the difference in a confrontation when the wind was not cooperating or prove a great advantage on a long chase.<sup>105</sup>

The Confederate commerce raiders, operating under sail and steam presented a formidable challenge to the Federal Navy. The *Alabama* and *Florida*, the most successful commerce raiders, were ships that proved the most difficult to capture. Alabama's First Lieutenant, John McIntosh Kell, wrote of her:

The *Alabama* was built for speed rather than battle...In fifteen minutes her propeller could be hoisted, and she could go through every evolution under sail without impediment. In less time her propeller could be lowered; with sails furled, and yards braced within two points of a head-wind, she was a perfect steamer. Her speed, independent, was from ten to twelve knots; combined, and under favorable circumstances, she could make fifteen knots...we lived principally upon provisions taken from our prizes...[and] Our condenser enabled us to keep the sea for long periods, as we had to seek port only to coal.<sup>106</sup>

A shipboard condenser was an innovation at the time and was

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<sup>104</sup> Dean C. Allard, "Naval Technology During the American Civil War", *American Neptune*, Spring 1989, pp. 114-122.

<sup>105</sup> Harrison A. Trexler, "Coaling The Confederate Commerce-Raiders", *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, March 1933, vol. 17, pp. 13-25.

<sup>106</sup> John McIntosh Kell, "Cruise and Combats of the *Alabama*", *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, New York, 1884-1888, vol. IV, p. 600.

not found on many vessels.<sup>107</sup> It is now difficult to envision the constraints placed on a ship roving the ocean, or one pursuing her, that had to frequently renew her supplies of drinking water. Alabama's entire crew not only had a continuous supply of fresh water, but also an iron tank in which to store the priceless commodity.<sup>108</sup>

Semmes reflected on his vessel's qualities after the war. In his memoirs he wrote:

I was much gratified to find that my new ship proved to be a fine sailor, under canvas. This quality was of inestimable advantage to me, as it enabled me to do most of my work under sail. She carried but an eighteen days' supply of fuel, and if I had been obliged, because of her dull sailing qualities, to chase everything under steam, the reader can see how I should have been hampered in my movements. I should have spent half my time running into port for fuel....This [allowed my] keeping of the sea, for three, and four months at a time.<sup>109</sup>

A naval architect recently described Alabama as having "good sailing qualities, given fullest rein by virtue of her lifting screw, [which] spared her precious coal, vastly extended her cruising range, and made a significant contribution to her phenomenal success. She was, in her time, as nearly perfect as a sailing ship and a steamer could be."<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> John M. Taylor, "The Fiery Trail of the Alabama", *Military History Quarterly*, Summer 1991, vol. 3, num. 4, p. 92.

<sup>108</sup> Stephen C. Kinnaman, "Inside the Alabama", *Naval History*, Summer 1990, p. 56.

<sup>109</sup> Raphael Semmes, *Memoirs of Service Afloat*, Secaucus, N.J.: The Blue and Gray Press, 1987, pp. 419-20.

<sup>110</sup> Stephen C. Kinnaman, "Inside the Alabama", p. 57.



Captain Raphael Semmes, CSN  
Standing next to *Alabama's* 110 pound rifled gun  
Capetown, South Africa, August 1863  
U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph

Perhaps *Alabama's* weakest point was her armament. Her weight of broadside was listed as 274 pounds,<sup>111</sup> but two of her guns were rifled Blakelys imported from England. Rifled guns offered advantages of longer range, greater accuracy and better projectile penetration over smoothbore guns.<sup>112</sup> This battery was sufficient to overpower any merchant she might come across and together with her speed and sea keeping ability was more than a match for most vessels in the Union Navy.

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<sup>111</sup> Statistical Data of Confederate Ships, ORN, ser. II, vol. 1, p. 247.

<sup>112</sup> Spencer Tucker, "Confederate Naval Ordnance", *Journal of Confederate History IV*, Brentwood, Tennessee: Southern Heritage Press, 1989, pp. 133-152.

The *Florida* was another imposing vessel when matched against potential Union adversaries. Also configured for long range cruising, she was built at the same Laird Brother's Shipyard that built *Alabama*. She had a heavier broadside than *Alabama* by 90 pounds and all of her guns were rifled. Her biggest advantage, however, was in her superior speed. When U.S.S. *Wachusett*, one of the North's most modern and capable cruisers, located *Florida* in 1864 at Bahia, Brazil, Commander Collins pondered the best method of capturing her. *Florida* had the heavier armament but what concerned Collins more was *Florida*'s ability to escape because he felt she was much faster than the *Wachusett*.<sup>113</sup>

Speed was considered the biggest advantage that the commerce raiders enjoyed over the pursuing Union Navy. The *New York Times* reported on this dilemma in two different articles in the January 1, 1863 edition:

While high officials have denied not only the feasibility of attaining high speed, but the importance of employing it, the "290" has achieved one of the most brilliant success on record, solely and exclusively by reason of her high speed. And of all the immense and costly navy created by our Government, with the full knowledge of modern steamship improvement, not one of the vessels of the Department's own design will exceed ten knots at sea, and, according to present evidence, not more than one of their purchased vessels [i.e., U.S.S. *Vanderbilt* a side-wheel acquired from Cornelius Vanderbilt in March 1862] will catch the "290".<sup>114</sup>

It may seem strange that the energy and resources of the country cannot result in ridding the ocean of a pestering

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<sup>113</sup> Wilson to Webb, October 31, 1864, Despatches from U.S. Consuls in Bahia, Brazil, cited by F.L. Owsley, Jr., "The Capture of CSS *Florida*", *American Neptune*, January 1962, p. 47.

<sup>114</sup> *The New York Times*, January 1, 1863, p.4.

pirate. Officers of the highest standing give the following reasons for this:

First. In the *Alabama* everything is sacrificed for speed. It would not do to build men-of-war on that plan before the pirate's peculiarities were known, and since, the most expeditious constructor could not have completed her equal.

Second. The difficulty of finding one small ship on the wide ocean, especially when she can have as bright a lookout as her competitor, and can get out of the way with great alacrity.

Third. There is not in the United States, to be purchased for love or money, a steamer possessing the speed necessary to catch her, and at the same time the strength to catch her.<sup>115</sup>

Raphael Semmes was aware of *Alabama's* advantages during the war. He reviewed the Union Navy's shipbuilding program by reading newspapers taken from captured merchantmen. In his journal entry of October 12, 1862, Semmes noted:

Memorandum of the enemy's gunboats, extracted from the *New York Herald* of October 5: One gun, 10; two guns, 29; three guns, 32; four guns, 36; five guns, 34; six guns, 28; seven guns, 21; eight guns, 2; nine guns, 13; total 192. Of this whole number there are only 13 superior in force to myself. The first set of propeller gunboats, built after the war, are said to be indifferent [i.e., ninety day gunboats]. The second set, very fine and heavily armed. The side-wheel boats are not very fast and only tolerable.<sup>116</sup>

Semmes saw that the Union Navy had emphasized building ships to support the Blockade Proclamation. The ninety day gunboats which Semmes referred to were clearly vessels suited for this work. It didn't matter that they were more heavily armed than *Alabama* -there was no way that one of these could have caught a commerce raider on the open ocean. Such ships, designed for the blockade, were to be

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<sup>115</sup> *The New York Times*, January 1, 1863, p.8.

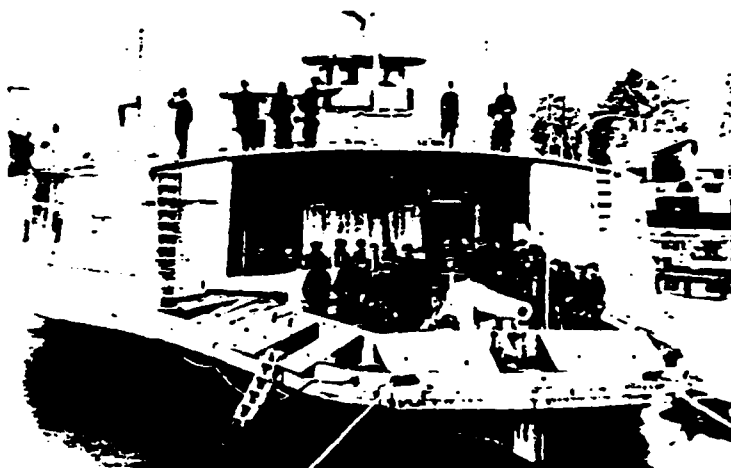
<sup>116</sup> Raphael Semmes, Journal entry of October 12, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, p. 795.

used in coastal and river operations. While their relatively heavy battery was an asset for shore bombardment, they were clearly not good cruisers.<sup>117</sup> Commander George Preble was commanding officer of one of these, U.S.S. *Katahdin*, early in the war. He concluded that these vessels were "complete failures... [as] cruising men of war [being most effective for] special service in smooth shoal water".<sup>118</sup>

Similarly, side-wheel vessels were not likely candidates to be used for pursuing the commerce raiders. U.S.S.



USS *Genesee*  
Double Ended Gunboat  
U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph



USS *Commodore Morris*  
A Converted Side-wheel Ferryboat  
U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>118</sup> Preble to Porter, March 30, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 18, pp. 91-92.

Genesee, a double-ender, had a light draft that made her acceptable for river operations, but she couldn't keep the sea well in rough water and was too slow to be effective against the Southern cruisers. U.S.S. *Hatteras*, the only Union warship to be sunk by a commerce raider, was also a side-wheeler. Her sinking by the *Alabama* alarmed Captain Sands, senior officer in the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, and he questioned the adequacy of such ships in dealing with the Southern cruisers. In February 1863 he wrote: "Many of our vessels are not a bit better than was the *Hatteras*, and could not be expected to make a better fight with such a foe, and would only be doomed to go down as she did."<sup>119</sup> Even the Confederacy's Naval Secretary was suspicious of side-wheel steamers' capabilities. On April 26, 1861 he wrote: "Side-wheel steamers, from the exposure of their machinery to shot and shell, and their liability to be disabled by a single shot...and [the fact] that they can not carry to sea sufficient coal for any but short cruises, are regarded as unfit for cruising men of war".<sup>120</sup>

Ironclads and purchased vessels, converted by the Navy Department for blockade duty, were equally unacceptable in action against the raiders. The Federal Navy simply did not have enough vessels that would be capable of sustained cruising to search for elusive, fast commerce raiders such as the *Florida* and *Alabama*.

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<sup>119</sup> Sands to Lee, February 10, 1863, ORN, ser. I, vol. 8, pp. 518-19.

<sup>120</sup> Report of the Secretary of the [Confederate] Navy, April 26, 1861, ORN, ser. II, vol. 2, p.52.

Secretary Welles realized this deficiency. In his Report to the Congress in December, 1863, he stated:

The thorough transformation which has taken place in the character of naval warfare is the result of a change not less complete in the character and structure of naval vessels. The sailing ships-of-war, whose construction had been brought almost to perfection, were superseded first by paddle-wheel steamers, and they in turn have given place to vessels propelled by submerged screws....Not only must [future vessels built by the Navy] carry guns of a heavier calibre than have heretofore been used at sea, but in order to make long cruises, and to cope successfully with any force, these vessels must have all possible strength, endurance, and speed.<sup>121</sup>

The only viable ships the Union had which could be adequately matched up to the commerce raiders were 16, propeller driven sloops. Semmes referred to these in his October 12th journal entry as the "second set of gunboats built after the war". These vessels most closely approximated the speed, cruising ability and armament characteristics of ships such as the *Alabama* and *Florida*. These were the screw sloops of 1858 (known as such because Congress authorized their construction in 1858) and the Sacramento class sloops which were authorized after the war started and were launched in 1862.<sup>122</sup>

The 1858 sloops included the *Wyoming*, *Tuscarora*, *Mohican*, *Kearsage*, *Iroquois*, *Oneida*, *Wachusett*, *Dacotah*, *Seminole*, and *Narragansett*. They possessed a light draft, could carry heavy guns

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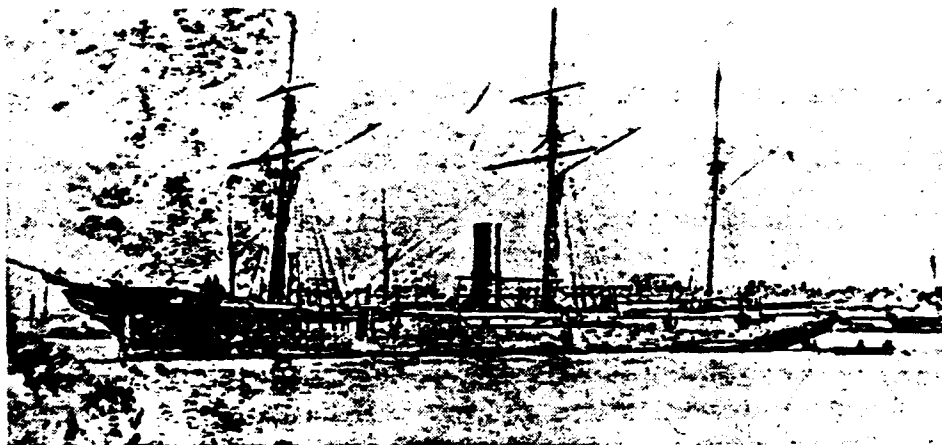
<sup>121</sup> U.S. Congress, *Report of the Secretary of the Navy*, 38th Congress, 1st Session, December 7, 1863, p. XIII.

<sup>122</sup> Donald L. Canney, *The Old Steam Navy: Frigates, Sloops, and Gunboats, 1815-1885*, vol. 1, Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, pp. 71-108.



*USS Iroquois*

U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph



*USS Kearsage*

U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph

and were capable of speed between 10 and 12 knots. As heavy armament, they had either one or two 11 inch Dahlgren rifles, mounted on pivot circles in the ship's waist. In addition, they carried up to six 32-pound broadside guns. Using this configuration, a ship such as *Kearsage* had the "theoretical

equivalent of a ten-gun broadside".<sup>123</sup>

The Sacramento Class was designed as "fast screw steamers for ocean cruising". Ships in this class were all capable of 12 knots and had heavy armament. Vessels included the *Sacramento*, *Monongahela*, *Shenandoah*, *Canandaigua*, *Lackawanna* and *Ticonderoga*.<sup>124</sup>

There were certainly more heavily armed vessels in the Union Fleet, but only a few had all of the characteristics required to hold their own against a ship such as *Alabama*. When the veteran steam frigate U.S.S. *San Jacinto* discovered *Alabama* at Martinique in June 1862, the Union ship seemed to have the upper hand. She was twice the size of the Confederate cruiser. With larger guns, *San Jacinto*, appeared to be well in control, but it was not to be. As a confident Semmes reflected after the war:

We paid no sort of attention to the arrival of this old wagon of a ship. She was too heavy for me to think of engaging, as she threw more than two pounds of metal to my one-her battery consisting of fourteen eleven-inch guns-and her crew was more than twice as numerous as my own; but we had the speed of her, and could, of course, go to sea whenever we pleased.<sup>125</sup>

Welles understood the limitations of his expanded fleet in operations designed to counter the commerce raiding threat. He knew of the most capable vessels through discussions with his Chief of the Bureau of Steam Engineering, Benjamin Franklin Isherwood. In a

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<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 71-72.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 97 - 103.

<sup>125</sup> Semmes, *Memoirs of Service Afloat*, p.515.

letter of March 21, 1864 Isherwood described the capabilities of U.S.S. *Iroquois*. He wrote:

The dimensions of the Rebel Steamer *Alabama* are almost identical with those of the U.S. Steamer *Iroquois*. The beam and draught of water are believed to be exactly the same, and the slight difference in length can exert no sensible influence on the speed....The machinery in both vessels...[as well as] the boilers...[are] nearly the same....With such close approach to equality of conditions, the speed of the two vessels must be sensibly the same. The speed of the *Alabama* is not known by direct observation, but that of the *Iroquois* is...[and she can attain] a maximum rate of 11 and seven tenths knots per hour. It may be certainly inferred that the speed of the *Alabama* under the most favorable circumstance, using steam alone, never exceeded this, and it could be maintained but for a very short time.<sup>126</sup>

Although Secretary Welles sent other vessels off in pursuit of the commerce raiders, he clearly made a conscious decision to use these ships as much as possible, and they made numerous cruises in search of the raiders. In February 1862, *Wyoming* was sent on a cruise to China and Japan to look for commerce raiders; *Tuscarora* and *Kearsage* spent many months off Europe blockading C.S.S. *Sumter* and cruising in search of the *Alabama*; *Dacotah* was dedicated to the hunt for *Sumter*, *Alabama* and the *Florida*. Only the *Monongahela* and *Lackawanna*, commissioned in January 1863, do not appear to have been involved in the Union's search for the Confederate cruisers. However, both participated in the Battle of Mobile Bay in August of the following year.

Limited by resources to deal with the enemies' cruisers,

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<sup>126</sup> Isherwood to Welles, March 31, 1864, Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy From Chiefs of Navy Bureaus 1842-1885, RG 45, M518, National Archives.

Welles made the best possible use of assets available to him. He had only a handful of vessels that were an equal match for the Confederacy's best ships, and he kept these at sea as much as possible in a tireless search trying to destroy them.

#### Pre-positioning Coal

The British neutrality proclamation created a significant problem for the Union's coal driven steamers. Unable to regularly refuel with any degree of assurance from the large network of British coal stations around the world, her operations in search of the Confederate raiders were obviously undermined. U.S.S. *Vanderbilt* became stranded at Cape Town in September 1863 as a direct result of this situation.<sup>127</sup> The need for coal could be a critical problem. For example, U.S.S. *Sacramento* reported giving some of her coal to U.S.S. *Sonoma* after *Sonoma* had been compelled to anchor off an island and cut wood for fuel.<sup>128</sup>

The coal capacity of ships during the 1860s was small. It was difficult to remain at sea under steam power alone for long periods of time. Regardless of the proximity of a commerce raider, when fuel was depleted, a pursuing vessel had to make port to coal. Because of this problem Commander Craven of U.S.S. *Tuscarora* could not effectively pursue *Alabama* after her departure from the Laird

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<sup>127</sup> ORN, ser. I, vol.2, pp.474-75.

<sup>128</sup> Lew A. Chase, "The Search for the *Alabama*, and the New Era in Naval Warfare", *Sewanee Review*, July 1910, p. 354.

Shipyard in Liverpool. He described the problem in a letter to the Navy Department:

Mr. Adams wished me "to follow the vessel [Alabama] across the Atlantic;"...and as this ship only carries twelve days' coal (full steaming), I could not follow with any possibility of overtaking the pirate, who had at least thirty days' coal on board. He could go across, while I would have to stop for coal at Fayal.<sup>129</sup>

There was little Welles could do about this problem. He realized that he needed to keep his pursuit vessels at sea if he ever hoped to corner a commerce raider and he aggressively pursued any and all alternatives to accomplish this.

*The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies* abound with Departmental directions to conserve coal. In addition, Welles frequently informed vessels where they could find coal on their deployments. To directly support operations of the newly formed West India Squadron, the Secretary established a coal depot at Turtle Harbor on the southern tip of Florida. He had coal ferried to this remote location and sent escort vessels to ensure its protection.<sup>130</sup> This was soon followed by converting U.S.S. National Guard to a coal vessel which could re-supply other deployed units from the base at Turtle Harbor and thus keep the ships of the West India Squadron at sea longer.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Craven to Welles, August 4, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, pp. 414-15.

<sup>130</sup> ORN ser. I, vol. 1, pp. 479, 515.

<sup>131</sup> ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, p. 560; ser. I, vol. 2, pp. 127-28; and ser. II, vol. 1, p. 156.

In Europe, the Secretary evaluated establishing a coal depot at Cadiz, Spain, and shipping U.S. coal across the Atlantic. Rejecting this, he eventually decided to buy directly from Spanish suppliers. In July, 1862 he wrote: "...The Department would not probably require more than 2,000 tons of coal at Cadiz at any one time and the location for a depot should be such that the coal can be readily landed and loaded."<sup>132</sup> In October Welles wrote: "...it appears that coal can be purchased at Cadiz for less than it will cost to send it and keep it there. Under these circumstances it is...preferable to purchase coal there when needed by our cruisers rather than to establish a depot."<sup>133</sup> He explored similar initiatives with the Portuguese and ensured that he developed harmonious relations with these two countries.<sup>134</sup> As a result, Union steamers were able to obtain coal from Spain, Portugal and their dependencies, such as the Canary Islands or the Azores, throughout the war.

#### **Blockade of Raiders**

C.S.S. *Sumter* arrived in Gibraltar in January 1862 desperate for repairs to her boilers. While awaiting funds from London,

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<sup>132</sup> Welles to Seward, July 17, 1862, Letters Sent by the Secretary of the Navy to the President and Executive Agencies, 1821-1886, RG 45, M472, National Archives.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, Welles to Seward, October 30, 1862.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, see Welles to Seward, November 26, 1862 and Welles to Seward March 23, 1864.

U.S.S. *Kearsage* and *Tuscarora* arrived in the area. These vessels took station in the bay where they could best observe *Sumter's* movements. *Sumter's* physical condition was so bad that she probably could not have escaped but Semmes still contemplated taking advantage of Britain's 24 hour rule. He later reflected in his memoirs:

January 23d...Received a visit from Captain Warden [Royal Navy]...We discussed a point of international law while he was on board. He desired...to call my attention to the well-known rule that, in case of the meeting of two opposite belligerents in the same neutral port, twenty-four hours must intervene between their departure...I remarked, however, that it was useless for us to discuss the rule here, as the enemy's ships had adroitly taken measures to evade it. "How is that?" he inquired. "Why, simply," I replied, "by stationing one of his ships in Gibraltar, and another in Algeziras. If I go to sea from Gibraltar, the Algeziras ship follows me, and if I go to sea from Algeziras, the Gibraltar ship follows me."<sup>135</sup>

These two Union warships were soon joined by others. Together with *Ino*, *Chippewa*, and *Release* they established a continual blockade on *Sumter*. Vessels relieved each other as specific ships were called off to chase other commerce raiders or to go into port for repair. The result was that there was always a Union Naval presence watching *Sumter*. This practice continued throughout the year until the Confederate cruiser was sold in December 1862.

#### Formation of the Flying Squadron

The Navy Department's most well known action to curtail the commerce raider's activities was forming a special squadron

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<sup>135</sup> Semmes, *Memoirs of Service Afloat*, pp. 320-21.

dedicated to the protection of commerce in the Antilles. Officially known as the West Indies Squadron, many people referred to it as the Flying Squadron. Secretary Welles reflected on the need for this special effort in his diary of September 4, 1862:

Something energetic must be done in regard to the suspected privateers which, with the connivance of British authorities, are being sent out to depredate on our commerce. We hear that our new steamer, the *Adirondack*, is wrecked. She had been sent out to watch the Bahama Channel. Her loss, the discharge of the *Oreto* [Florida] by the courts of Nassau, and the arrival of Steamer 290 [Alabama], both piratical, British wolves, demand attention, although we have no vessels to spare from the blockade. Must organize a flying squadron [as has been suggested] and put Wilkes in command. Both the President and Seward request he should go on this service.<sup>136</sup>

Four days later, Welles issued orders and provided detailed guidance to Commodore Wilkes. He was to take "prompt and vigorous measures...for annihilating these lawless depredators". Provided with the latest intelligence which placed the *Florida* at Nassau and anticipated that *Alabama* would soon be in the same vicinity, Wilkes took command of a squadron composed of the steamers *Wachusett*, *Dacotah*, *Cimarron*, *Sonoma*, *Tioga*, *Octorara* and *Santiago de Cuba*. His cruising ground was established as the West Indies and Bahamas, although he was authorized to go beyond these limits if his "judgement and discretion" warranted it. Welles also gave him the customary warning to respect the rights of neutrals and the limitations imposed by international law. Welles ordered Wilkes to depart on his cruise "at once" with the vessels that were

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<sup>136</sup> Beale, *Diary of Gideon Welles*, September 4, 1862, I:109.



Captain Charles Wilkes, USN  
U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph

immediately available, because "...the danger to our merchant and shipping interest is pressing and imminent".<sup>137</sup>

For several reasons, this dedicated squadron effort was not successful. *Wachusett* and *Dacotah* were screw sloops and the only vessels "fitted to cope singly with the *Alabama*".<sup>138</sup> *Cimarron*, *Sonoma*, *Tioga* and *Octorara* were double-enders, unsuitable for

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<sup>137</sup> Welles to Wilkes, September 8, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, pp. 470-71.

<sup>138</sup> Soley, *The Blockade and the Cruisers*, p. 202.

pursuing the raiders. The commander of *Cimarron* reported to Welles that "her decks leak badly, and she is, from the very peculiarity of her model and low draft, without buoyancy or any quality requisite for a sea-cruising vessel".<sup>139</sup> *Sonoma* actually found the *Florida* and chased her for thirty-four hours, covering a distance of 300 miles, but, as her commander reported: "[as] the sea and wind [intensified] she rapidly drew away from us".<sup>140</sup>

Welles eventually added other ships to the squadron, but Wilkes continually complained about the quality of his vessels. After his removal, he wrote in a letter to the *New York Times*:

The activity of this small squadron of inefficient vessels, (anything but a flying squadron)...[succeeded in] breaking up the...[blockade business] of Nassau....I respectfully request that this letter, with my correspondence during my cruise in the West Indies, may be laid before Congress for my full justification, and to others, that the true cause (want of vessels both in numbers and efficiency) why the *Alabama* and *Florida* were not captured in that sea.<sup>141</sup>

Not everyone shared this opinion. Isherwood later reflected that Wilkes' squadron included the best in the Navy. After Wilkes had been relieved, Isherwood wrote to Secretary Welles:

In answer to your inquiry of the status of the steamers comprising the Squadron of Admiral Wilkes, I have respectfully to state: That they were all new vessels sent out with as thorough repair and equipment of machinery as the best marine engine building establishments could give them...as regards speed and efficiency, I believe they include the best in the

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<sup>139</sup> Woodhull to Welles, September 10, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, pp. 473-74.

<sup>140</sup> Stevens to Welles, February 3, 1863, ORN, ser. I, vol. 2, pp. 68-69.

<sup>141</sup> *The New York Times*, December 18, 1863, p. 4.

possession of the Navy Department.<sup>142</sup>

There is, perhaps, some truth in each position. More than anything else, what hindered the operation of the squadron was its commander's personality. Wilkes was notoriously headstrong and hungry for glory. As Gideon Welles reflected in his diary on January 6, 1863: "Wilkes is not doing as much as we expected. I fear he has more zeal for and finds it more profitable to capture blockade-runners than to hunt for the *Alabama*".<sup>143</sup>

A few days later, Welles ordered the stubborn squadron commander to transfer his command to Commodore James Lardner.<sup>144</sup> Frustrated with Wilkes' performance, Welles wrote: "Wilkes has accomplished but little, [and] has interfered with and defeated...Navy plans".<sup>145</sup> Unfortunately, by this time the commerce raiders had ceased their activity in the West Indies and Lardner's command could do little to counter this aspect of Southern Naval strategy.

#### Forward Deployments

When Confederate forces attacked Fort Sumter, most of the

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<sup>142</sup> Isherwood to Welles, April 6, 1864, Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy From Chiefs of Navy Bureaus, 1842-1885, RG 45, M 518, National Archives.

<sup>143</sup> Beale, *Diary of Gideon Welles*, January 6, 1863, I:217.

<sup>144</sup> Welles to Wilkes, June 1, 1863, ORN, ser. I, vol. 2. p. 253.

<sup>145</sup> Beale, *Diary of Gideon Welles*, May 22, 1863, I:309.

Union fleet was on foreign station. The Federal navy had ships in the Mediterranean; on the African and Brazilian coasts; and in the East Indies. Welles ordered most of the ships home once hostilities began, because the blockade had quickly demanded all the resources the small fleet could provide.<sup>146</sup> By 1862, however, he was able to dispatch a small number of ships for the protection of commerce. These ships patrolled not so much in reaction to any specific intelligence regarding the whereabouts of the cruisers. Rather, they were intended to show a maritime presence in important areas that might become targets of the commerce raiders. Welles' direction to U.S.S. *Jamestown* reflects this approach:

As soon as the U.S. sloop of war *Jamestown*...is in all respects prepared for a cruise, you will proceed with her to the East Indies via the Cape of Good Hope....Your special object in the East Indies will be the protection of American commerce in those waters from piratical cruisers...and for the better accomplishment of this object the Department will not restrict your cruising ground to any definite limits but leave the matter to your discretion. You will remain in the East Indies and on the coast of China until receiving further orders from the Department.<sup>147</sup>

The *Jamestown*, a sailing sloop, and therefore not dependent on the availability of scarce coaling stations, spent the years 1862 through 1864 cruising in the East Indies.<sup>148</sup> The *Wyoming*, one of

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<sup>146</sup> U.S. Congress, Report of the Secretary of the Navy, Ex. Doc. No. 1, 37th Congress, 2d Session, December 2, 1861, pp. 10-11.

<sup>147</sup> Welles to Green, September 11, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, p. 475.

<sup>148</sup> Register of the Navy of the United States, September 1, 1862, January 1, 1863, and January 1, 1864.

the North's best steam cruisers, also went to the Far East in 1862. Welles ordered her commanding officer to: "...proceed with her to China, touching at Japan on the way. You will remain on the coast of China at least two months, and longer than that should you receive information of the appearance in those waters of armed piratical vessels fitted out by the rebels".<sup>149</sup> Two years later, she was still cruising in Chinese waters and had been close to engaging *Alabama* on several occasions.<sup>150</sup> Likewise, the *Constellation* was sent to the Mediterranean in February 1862 and remained there until her conversion to a receiving ship in 1865.<sup>151</sup> The Navy was also able to keep the steamer *Pulaski* off the Brazilian coast, while the sailing sloop *Saratoga* cruised off Africa in 1862 and 1863.

None of these vessels succeeded in finding a Southern cruiser nor did they stop Confederate commerce raiding in their patrol areas. However, it is possible that Confederate cruisers might have been more active in those areas, if there had been no Union naval presence. For instance, Northern merchant vessels were never sunk in the heavily travelled shipping lanes of the Mediterranean, but whether this was due to the presence of U.S.S. *Constellation* is mere speculation. Nevertheless, the deployments do demonstrate the

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<sup>149</sup> Welles to McDougal, February 3, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, p. 301.

<sup>150</sup> McDougal to Welles, January 24, 1864, ORN, ser. I, vol. 2, pp. 591-92.

<sup>151</sup> *Register of the Navy of the United States*, January 1, 1865, p. 285.

Navy Department's clear willingness to commit scarce resources for the protection of Northern commerce.

#### **Hurry All to Sea: the Navy's Reaction to Intelligence**

Despite the communication and intelligence gathering problems which plagued the Navy of the 1860s, the Union used intelligence information on the commerce raiders as wisely as possible. The Navy Department took action, whenever it had credible knowledge regarding the whereabouts of the Confederate cruisers. For example, when *Alabama* left the Laird Brothers Shipyard, officers from U.S.S. *Tuscarora* discussed *Alabama*'s planned itinerary with the Liverpool pilot who helped Semmes put his ship to sea. They expeditiously reported this information to Secretary Welles in an August 4 letter:

...pilot reported that the steamer [*Alabama*] had gone to Nassau and steamed about 12 knots. I enclose a description of her:....Screw steamer of 1,050 tons, built of wood; is about 200 feet long; has 2 engines; propeller lifts up; bark rigged, with short bowsprit; smoke pipe is just forward of mainmast; steam pipe of copper, forward of smoke pipe, and also 2 ventilators forward of smoke pipe;...Stern round, with blank stern windows, gilt carving, and a motto, "Aid toi et Dieu t'aidera" [Help yourself and God will help you]....Mizzenmast well aft, with a great rake;...Decks are flush and had tracks laid for 3 pivot guns<sup>152</sup>

Nine days later, U.S.S. *Adirondack* sailed from Hampton Roads, Virginia with the following orders:

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<sup>152</sup> Craven to Welles, August 4, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, pp. 414-15.

It has been frequently reported and generally believed that a propeller designed for war purposes was in the course of construction at or near Liverpool by Laird & Co. for the rebel service. The vessel has been completed and equipped, and it is understood -- has sailed from England...Her destination is probably Nassau....proceed with the *Adirondack* to the vicinity of Nassau and communicate to our cruisers in that quarter the above information, and direct them to be on the alert to intercept and capture the rebel steamer....The Laird gunboat, or No. 290, as she is called, is about 1,000 tons burden and is represented to be a substantial and well-fitted vessel...[your squadron commander] can furnish you with other information respecting her.<sup>153</sup>

Although *Alabama* did not behave as anticipated (see Figure 3), it is clear that Welles attempted to use the information he had received in a productive manner. Even when the Union Navy obtained intelligence which predicted *Alabama's* appearance in wide-ranging locations throughout the globe, the Navy responded appropriately. If the source seemed dependable, Welles was more than willing to commit his scarce resources to the hunt. For instance, Welles quickly relayed to squadron commanders the news he had received from the master of a merchant vessel. On October 19, 1862, Welles sent the following:

I transmit herewith photographs of the rebel steamer 290, or *Alabama*, which has recently destroyed a number of American vessels, most of them in the vicinity of the Western Islands.

The latest information we have from the 290 is of the destruction of the *Emily Farnum* and the *Brilliant*, on the 3d instant, in latitude 40°, longitude 50° 30'. The master of the *Brilliant*, Captain Hagar, has furnished a statement with regard to the 290 from which the following extract is taken, but should not be made public, viz:

Her rendezvous and place where letters are to be sent

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<sup>153</sup> Welles to Gansevoort, August 13, 1862, *ORN*, ser. I, vol. 1, pp. 416-17.

to her are Terceira (Western Islands), Porto Praya (Cape Verde Islands), Bermuda, Nassau, Martinique, and from an English vessel that is to meet her in all this month off Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, with letters, papers, and orders from the Confederate Government...It was understood that she would call at one of these places as often as once in three months for letters, papers, and orders...<sup>154</sup>

Two weeks later, Welles summarized the actions that had been taken since he had received this information. Writing to Acting Rear-Admiral Wilkes, Welles explained the disposition of the ships sent out to search for the *Alabama*:

The *Dacotah* having returned to New York with the yellow fever on board, the Department has sent her to the coasts of Newfoundland and Nova Scotia for the health of her crew and in search of the *Alabama*, or 290. We have heard nothing of the movements of this steamer since the Department last wrote to you concerning her [i.e., October 19]. It is important you should know what vessels of the Navy are in search of the 290, so that you can direct the movements of your squadron more effectually.

The *Mohican* has gone to Cape Verde, and will cruise in that vicinity and on toward the Cape of Good Hope; the *San Jacinto* to Bermuda, thence through the Windward Islands to as far south as Trinidad; the *Augusta*, via Bermuda and St. Thomas, through the Windward Islands, and along the coast of South America to Pernambuco; the *Onward* will cruise in the track of vessels between England and the United States; the *Sabine* will go to the Azores, Cape Verde, over to the coast of Brazil, and back to New York; the *Ino* to St. Helena. The *Kearsage*, *Tuscarora*, and *St. Louis* are cruising...about the Azores. Under this arrangement it will be well to keep your squadron within the West Indies. The *Vanderbilt* is not quite ready...[and we are undecided whether to] send her to the West Indies or directly after the 290, on learning again where she is.<sup>155</sup>

Welles realized that the Navy's efforts depended as much on the

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<sup>154</sup> Welles to Wilkes and Welles to Lee, October 19, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, pp. 509-11.

<sup>155</sup> Welles to Wilkes, November 1, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, pp. 525-26.

capabilities of the ships chasing the *Alabama* as it did on the accuracy of intelligence concerning her and the speed with which he received it. On the rare occasion when he obtained intelligence by telegraph, Welles reacted with determination and force. On November 3, a vessel which had just arrived in Boston sent Welles a telegraphic report. The *Alabama* had been seen four days earlier at latitude 39°, longitude 69°, steering N.W.<sup>156</sup> Welles immediately modified sailing orders and redirected his ships. Telegrams went to all ports where ships were preparing for deployments. He gave Rear-Admiral Lee in Hampton Roads *Alabama's* latest position and told him to alert all his vessels.<sup>157</sup> He told the Commandant of the Philadelphia Navy Yard the same information and directed him to: "Hurry the *Augusta* to sea with directions to vary from previous orders to get upon her track."<sup>158</sup> Rear Admiral Paulding, Commandant of the New York Navy Yard, was closest to the scene. Welles ordered him: "The *Dacotah*, *Mohican*, *Ino* and any other vessels leaving the yard can vary from previous orders to go upon her track. Hurry all to sea."<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Smith to Welles, November 3, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, p.528.

<sup>157</sup> Welles to Lee, November 3, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, p. 529.

<sup>158</sup> Welles to Pendergrast, November 3, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, p. 529.

<sup>159</sup> Welles to Pendergrast, November 3, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, p. 529.

## Conclusions

Although heavily criticized by merchants, politicians, and private interest groups, Secretary Welles clearly took deliberate action to curtail the efforts of the commerce raiders. It would be difficult to argue that he had a systematic, centralized strategic maritime doctrine to catch the Confederate cruisers, but the sum total of Union naval actions reveal a strategy in practice. While Welles focused principally on the blockade, he undertook a great many initiatives to undermine the raiders' effectiveness.

Concern regarding the shipment of Northern gold resulted in a two year convoy of mail steamers transiting from Panama to New York carrying this valuable commodity. Constrained by the type of ships which were built or purchased to facilitate the blockade, Welles made effective use of his most suitable vessels to pursue the likes of the *Alabama*. When coal became a hinderance to the effective search for the cruisers, he established depots to ensure his vessels could remain at sea longer. The Navy Secretary also established a special squadron to protect commerce along the lucrative West Indies trade routes. In addition, by 1862 the Navy was able to forward deploy some of its ships to ensure that a maritime presence was established in various locations around the world. Welles was not reluctant to dedicate some of his best ships to contain a raider. One example of this is the Union Navy's year-long blockade of *C.S.S. Sumter* at Gibraltar. Likewise, he willingly used his ships to respond to intelligence reports. Together, these operations led to the demise of Confederate commerce raiding.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS

The beginning of the Civil War found the Union with a small obsolescent Navy totally unprepared for the war it would have to fight over the next four years. There were no contingency plans for the effective use of existing forces in wartime nor any established methodology for the dramatic expansion of the fleet. The Navy Department did not have a professional operations staff; all major decisions regarding the employment of its forces were made by the Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, and his assistant, Gustavus Fox.

The blockade proclamation, issued in April 1861, quickly became the central focus of Union naval strategy. Welles was not its architect and he clearly opposed it. He wrote in his diary: "...there ought never to have been a blockade...we had placed ourselves in a wrong position at the beginning, made the Rebels belligerents, given them nationality, an error and an anomaly. It was one of Mr. Seward's mistakes."<sup>160</sup> Nevertheless, since the President had ordered the blockade, Welles committed himself to support it. Another entry in his diary reflects his attitude on this point: "There is, or there is not, a blockade. If there is, I

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<sup>160</sup> Beale, *Diary of Gideon Welles*, October 15, 1862, I:174.

shall, until the President otherwise directs, enforce it."<sup>161</sup>

The navy that evolved to support the most unique and challenging blockade that the world had ever witnessed was unique. By 1864, there were 671 vessels in the Union Navy. These ships had been built or purchased specifically to support this enormous task. The result was that it was a Navy singularly designed for coastal and amphibious warfare. It was not a Navy designed to capture elusive enemy steamers, operating in the vast stretches of the open ocean.

The Navy was constrained by late and often inaccurate intelligence, which precluded accurate predictions as to where the commerce raiders would next appear. This problem was magnified by ineffective communications, which prevented the Navy from relaying vital information to a central command point and from coordinating pursuing ships. These conditions shaped Union naval strategy during the war. Without radar, shipboard radio capability or even the trans-Atlantic telegraph, the Union Navy faced an overwhelming challenge in trying to stop Confederate commerce raiding.

Welles and Fox were not unresponsive to the demands of special interest groups calling for protection from the commerce raiders. Asked to send warships to virtually every sea of the world, the Navy effectively used its limited resources to directly defend the North's most vulnerable targets - gold shipments from California. In addition, approximately forty vessels were directly involved in

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<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p 174.

the search for the raiders. Many of these were incapable of challenging a Southern cruiser on the open ocean. Nonetheless, they were all that the Union could spare without weakening a blockade that had to remain effective, if it was to be recognized by international law. However, the handful of ships in the Navy inventory which were suitable opponents for the commerce raiders were virtually continually employed in that enterprise.

Welles invested enormous energy, and the individual crews endured tremendous hardships, in scouring the oceans for the "roving wolf", known as the *Alabama*. Some of the North's best ships, such as U.S.S. *Tuscarora* and U.S.S. *Wyoming*, spent years on patrol looking for the enemy. In the end, only U.S.S. *Kearsage* had the satisfaction of actually locating and destroying a southern cruiser.

Nevertheless, Welles was right in maintaining his focus on the blockade. Even in the twentieth century, using the resources and technology available to a modern Navy, such an approach is clearly the basis of a protracted strategy. The Union blockade demanded a long term perspective - there could be no focus on short term gain. Undeniably, this strategy played a key role in the eventual defeat of the Confederacy. However, the economic and military effects of the blockade required time to take effect. Welles clearly understood this and he refused to weaken the blockade despite the demands of many Northerners that the cruisers be hunted down and destroyed at all costs. Had the Union altered its strategy, it would have provided the South with the relief it so desperately

needed. In addition, even if the Union Navy had detached more ships from the blockade, it is doubtful they could have been any more effective in dealing with the commerce raiders. The appropriate ship types, fast enough to find the raiders yet armed sufficiently to overpower the enemy, simply did not exist in sufficient quantities to make any difference.

The Confederate commerce raiding strategy, on the other hand, was poorly conceived and improperly focused. While the North concentrated on one objective and subordinated everything else to it, the South divided its naval efforts between two competing goals. Confederate Secretary of the Navy, Mallory, wanted an effective coastal defense, as well as an offensive campaign against Northern commerce. However, the South had neither the time nor the resources to pursue both objectives productively. In the winter of 1861, the Confederacy had the opportunity of purchasing a fleet of ten first class steamships and converting them for use in coastal defense. The proposal, submitted to the Confederate Government, was not fully appreciated and was rejected. Instead, the Confederate Government sent Captain Bulloch to England to obtain "ships to cruise and destroy the enemy's mercantile marine." Mr. Robert Barnwell Rhett, Chairman of the Confederacy's Committee of Foreign Affairs, wrote after the war: "It was of infinitely more importance to keep Southern ports open, but this does not seem to have been understood until too late. The opportunity of obtaining these [ten

steam-] ships was thrown away."<sup>162</sup>

Secretary Welles' preoccupation with the blockade did not terminally affect the life of the American merchant marine and whaling industries. The war no doubt accelerated their decline, but these industries were already weak prior to the war.

The Atlantic commercial steamship service had become a highly competitive marketplace with England and the United States vying for the largest share of the market. The British government heavily subsidized the Cunard Line. England started such subsidies in 1840 (five years before they began in the United States) and they were consistently more extravagant than those the Federal government provided.<sup>163</sup> In 1855, Senator Jefferson Davis of Mississippi introduced legislation to discontinue the subsidy to the Collins Line, one of the largest steamship carriers in the United States. Southern legislators viewed the subsidies as principally a Northern benefit and they were more than willing to take action which favored England, their principal cotton customer. While the subsidies were not discontinued at this time, they were, however, drastically reduced.

During the war many vessels fled from the American flag due to fear and to exorbitant insurance rates. Neutral shipping rapidly

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<sup>162</sup> R. Barnwell Rhett, *"The Confederate Government at Montgomery", Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, Volume I, p. 107.

<sup>163</sup> Winthrop L. Marvin, *The American Merchant Marine: Its History and Romance From 1620 to 1902*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902, pp. 240-46.

gained a larger share of the world trade market as more than 100 American ships sought protection under British registry alone. However, the merchant marine was further crippled in the immediate post war period as a Western dominated Congress turned its attention away from shipbuilding and commerce that were principally interests of the nation's eastern states. In fact, on February 10, 1866 Congress passed legislation to forbid any American vessel which had sought protection under foreign flags from returning to U.S. registry. Thus, the Congress delivered the final blow to any hopes of reviving the industry.

By 1875, the U.S. merchant marine had lost the Atlantic to the British. In that year American vessels were carrying only 26.2% of their own commerce. This was less than half the amount they had carried in 1861. The war had hastened the demise of an already declining industry, but the loss of subsidies before the war and the lack of protection after the war were the ultimate downfall of the merchant marine.

The destruction of the American whaling industry has also been attributed to the exploits of the commerce raiders. Even, Raphael Semmes, captain of C.S.S. Alabama was amazed at the North's failure to protect its whale fisheries. In his memoirs, he wrote:

It was indeed remarkable, that no protection should have been given to these men [i.e., the whalers], by their Government. Unlike the ships of commerce, the whalers are obliged to congregate within small well-known spaces of ocean, and remain there for weeks at a time, whilst the whaling season lasts. It was the most obvious thing in the world, that these vessels, thus clustered together, should attract the attention of the Confederate cruisers, and be struck at. There are not

more than half a dozen principal whaling stations on the entire globe, and a ship, of size and force, at each, would have been sufficient protection. But the whalers, like the commerce of the United States generally, were abandoned to their fate.<sup>164</sup>

In one sense Semmes was right but in another sense he is also guilty of unfairly criticizing the Union Navy. He appears to have forgotten his journal entry of October 12, 1862 in which he scrutinized the force structure of the entire Union Navy. On that date, he wrote: "Of the whole number [i.e., the Union fleet] there are only 13 superior in force to myself".<sup>165</sup> Moreover, this comparison was made largely on the basis of number of guns. What of speed, endurance and the ability to remain on station in the far reaches of the ocean without supplies or coal. Overall, the Alabama was clearly a superior vessel to the vast majority of ships opposing her. Given the conditions and technology of the time, the Union would have faced insurmountable logistical problems in trying to keep one of her best cruisers on patrol in an isolated region of the ocean for months at a time.

Furthermore, whaling was not important to the nation's economy at the time. In 1850, it comprised approximately one percent of the nation's production capacity, and by 1860, this had dropped to one half of one percent.<sup>166</sup> Clearly, the whaling industry's demise was

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<sup>164</sup> Semmes, *Memoirs of Service Afloat*, p. 424.

<sup>165</sup> Journal entry for October 12, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 1, p 795.

<sup>166</sup> David Moment, "The Business of Whaling in America in the 1850's", *Business History Review*, 1957, XLI, p. 264.

not solely attributable to the activities of the commerce raiders. The Crimean War in 1854, the financial depression of 1857, and the rising costs of building and maintaining whaling vessels were all contributing factors to the industry's dramatic decline in the late 1850's. Most importantly, the introduction of petroleum and kerosene oils caused an unparalleled drop in the price of whale oil.<sup>167</sup>

Welles, continually criticized for disorganized and ineffectual pursuit of the raiders, maintained the correct approach throughout the war. Southern naval strategy was flawed and lacked the consistent comprehensive planning of the North's blockade. In the end, the Confederate cruisers had no great influence on the outcome of the conflict.

The North adopted specific actions to deal with the raiders on an *ad hoc* basis. It did not benefit from the "boarded" strategy decisions, which addressed such areas as supply bases for the blockade or the development of ironclads. In an environment severely constrained by communications and which precluded the rapid and effective use of available intelligence, Welles properly employed his resources. If he had used additional ships and placed greater emphasis on the raiders, it is doubtful that he could have ended the threat any sooner, and such action would have had little appreciable effect on the outcome of the war.

Many people ridiculed Welles and his management of the Navy

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<sup>167</sup> Stuart S. Sprague, "The Whaling Ports: A Study of Ninety Years of Rivalry, 1784-1875", *American Neptune*, April 1973, p. 128.

Department during the war. He was accused of obsessive bureaucracy and of being a slow and an ineffective administrator. The truth was quite the opposite, as the historian Charles Paullin wrote: "Welles often cut the red tape unmercifully, that no business of the war was more economically conducted than that of the Navy Department, and that, all things considered, he extemporized a navy in a remarkable short time."<sup>168</sup> In a rare positive report on the Union Navy during the war, *The New York Times* carried the following story in its January 1, 1863 edition:

The failure of our naval vessels to capture the *Alabama* before this time has caused the most erroneous impressions to prevail relative to the doings of the Navy Department. The public has been so far misled in this matter that it is only right to state the facts of the case. Notwithstanding the still unchecked success of Capt. Semmes, it is beyond contradiction that the history of the American, English or French Navy furnishes no parallel for the feats accomplished by our naval authorities in conjunction with the much dreaded pirate. In times of peace we had six Navy-yards, which were pretty generally kept going, providing for the current wants of the forty men-of-war we used to have in commission. When war came upon us, Norfolk and Pensacola were swept away, leaving only New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Portsmouth...available. And these have had to fit out a series of squadrons in fifteen months, which could not be armed elsewhere in the same time. We have now over sixty vessels more in commission than England, and to keep their wants supplied, to keep them repaired, always relieved at the proper time, and to have ships approaching completion as others wear out, is one item of the daily work of the four Navy-yards named. Besides doing it well, time has been found, within the brief space of three months, to equip a fleet for the purpose of overhauling the *Alabama*, which is now represented in every sea. In order to estimate the extraordinary energy required to accomplish this it is only necessary to know that not one vessel in forty at Mr. Welles' command would be worth anything for the business. The proper ships had to be first picked out, and as they all need great alterations, and as some of them were at the furthest end of the blockade, time was

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<sup>168</sup> Paullin, *History of Naval Administration: 1775-1911*, p. 304-05.

required to bring them home and put them in proper trim. And now, after twelve weeks work, the following fleet is on the ocean, every vessel belonging to it a match for the Alabama, save on speed...This is twelve weeks' work, but it does not include...[new ships under construction or maintenance of the vessels on blockade duty]...storeships [which] were provisioned, transports commissioned and sent away, and other work done which should be performed if troops were to be fed or a blockade maintained.

We challenge any naval power in the world to show each a twelve weeks' work as this. Under the circumstances, the mere manning of such a fleet as ours, and keeping it supplied with beef, bread, butter, cheese, flour, raisins, apples, &c., is marvelous. France challenged the world to equal her sending off 14,000 men in transports, and about ten men-of-war, in two weeks. We have sent as many in a week, if the everlasting changing of crews, relieving and reshipping were taken into account.<sup>169</sup>

The frantic experience of wartime execution, bereft of peacetime contingency planning, underscored the Navy Secretary's approach to the blockade and to the control of commerce raiding. Welles readied vessels as quickly as possible and deployed them where they could be most effectively utilized. On November 3, 1862, Welles felt he was close to capturing the *Alabama*. He telegraphed intercept instructions to his squadron commanders and directed his best available ships to the area. The final phrase in his order to Admiral Paulding seems to epitomize the way he ran the Navy, maintained the blockade, and deployed ships to counter the commerce raiders: "Hurry all to sea".

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<sup>169</sup> *The New York Times*, January 1, 1863, p. 8.

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