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by Ian Delahanty

Abstract

While the South seceded from the Union throughout the winter and spring of 1861, Americans prepared for what would become the country's costliest war in terms of human sacrifice. Ordinary men became citizen-soldiers in the blink of an eye, and Americans North and South rallied behind their respective causes for what many expected to be a brief conflict that would determine the fate of America. Of course the war was nowhere near as brief as many expected and eventually took the lives of hundreds of thousands of Americans. The Civil War, however, did determine the fate of America; the conflict in many ways has shaped the United States as we know it today and its consequences may be seen throughout the nation. However, the fate of America was not decided solely on its battlefields.

The world's greatest power of the mid-19th century, Great Britain, watched America with an anxious eye in 1861. Americans at home and abroad were well aware that should the British government side with the Confederacy, there was a very real possibility that the Union could do nothing to prevent the separation of the United States. With this in mind, the State Department serving under the Lincoln administration immediately set out to ensure that Great Britain, should it not see fit to side directly with the Union, remain a non-factor in the conflict. Secretary of State William Seward firmly believed that if the British government could be kept from interfering in America's Civil War, the Union would crush the Confederacy in a mere matter of time.

Thrust into this diplomatic struggle was the newly appointed American minister to Great Britain, Charles Francis Adams. Adams's mission in Great Britain was one of the most vital roles played by any member of the Union government during the Civil War. The year 1861 was a particularly essential period with...
regard to Anglo-American relations and British non-intervention in the conflict. A series of trans-Atlantic feuds beset the Union and British governments, threatening to not only bring Great Britain closer towards recognizing the Confederacy but also nearly bringing about a third conflict between America and Great Britain. Fortunately for the Union, Adams proved an adept diplomat and did a great deal to preserve relations between the two countries as well as prevent the British government from intervening in America’s domestic difficulties.

The following are selected excerpts from the author’s thesis, “Charles Francis Adams, Great Britain, and the ‘American Question’ in 1861.” A brief background to Adams’s role is provided along with a concise summary of the issues that divided America and Great Britain throughout 1861. The majority of the article details the final incident of the year, the Trent Affair, and demonstrates how Adams was able to aid in preserving peaceful relations between the Union and British governments. Finally, the conclusion offers a brief recap of the entire thesis as well as a final word regarding Adams’s critical role as American minister to Great Britain in 1861.

Adams, who had been elected to the thirty-sixth United States Congress as a member of the House of Representatives in 1859, heard many rumors in the immediate wake of the 1860 presidential election that he might be selected as a cabinet member. When Lincoln selected Adams’s friend and political ally Seward as secretary of state, Seward promised the Bostonian to do all he could to get Adams into the cabinet as well, possibly in the Treasury. When such an appointment did not materialize for Adams, Seward immediately pressed Lincoln to give Adams the mission to Great Britain. The newly appointed secretary realized that New England was an “important point” for Lincoln to consider when handing out appointments, and since Adams had not been included in the cabinet, the appointment as America’s foremost minister abroad seemed fitting. Lincoln had intended to send William L. Dayton to the Court of St. James in London to serve as America’s Minister to Great Britain. However, having been convinced by Seward that Adams was best suited for the duties and functions of America’s representative in London, Lincoln nominated Adams for the office on May 18. Adams was quickly confirmed by the Senate and received the news of his selection on May 19. The news of his father’s selection “fell on our breakfast-table like a veritable bomb-shell, scattering confusion and dismay” wrote Adams’s son, Charles Francis Jr. in his diary.

Adams took his nomination to be a sure sign of Secretary of State Seward having a growing influence over the President’s decisions, something Adams saw to be a “favorable sign.” Adams was a strong admirer of Seward and, as his son Charles Francis Jr. later wrote, believed that Seward was “at his best- truly a statesman” during the secession crisis of late 1860 and early 1861. Thus it is not surprising to find that, much the same as Seward, Adams believed that the South’s actions were merely bluster and idle threats. During the winter of secession, both men steadfastly held to the notion that a dormant Unionist sentiment existed within the South. This so far silent bloc would allow a compromise to be reached whereby the South would rejoin the Union, slavery would be maintained where it was currently in place, and any sort of conflict would be averted. Seward, along with Postmaster General Francis P. Blair, had even argued against the reinforcement of Fort Sumter because he did not want to bring about a crisis that he believed could still be avoided. Adams wholeheartedly agreed with Seward’s approach to the Sumter crisis, and when the attempted reinforcement of Sumter resulted in the first shots of the Civil War, the Bostonian was furious with Lincoln for not heeding Seward’s counsel.

Of course, Adams and Seward grossly overestimated the amount of Unionist sentiment in the South. The two also severely underestimated the extent to which Southerners were
prepared to fight for their independence during the secession crisis of 1861. However, as Adams prepared to depart for London during late March and early April, his trust in Seward's ability as a statesman was unshaken and would remain so throughout Seward's tenure as secretary of state. This trust in Seward, though put to the test often in the year 1861, was vital to his task in Great Britain. While Adams sometimes questioned and even altered Seward's tone or use of language in the secretary's instructions to the London legation, Adams was careful to always convey the actual intent and overall message of them to Lord John Russell. In many ways, the intense admiration that Adams displayed for Seward while in London, coupled with the respect earned by Adams himself within Palmerston's government, served to create a grudging amicability in the relationship between the foreign offices of America and Great Britain during the Civil War.

As the Lincoln Administration came into office in early March, 1861, it was faced with myriad challenges, not the least of which was essentially creating a new government from outgoing President James Buchanan's bureaucracy. This meant that Lincoln and Seward had to select and have confirmed by the Senate their selections for foreign ministers. It also meant that the incoming administration was forced to leave in place the outgoing ministers until their replacements had arrived, as was the case in Great Britain. In a number of cases these ministers were by no means loyal to the newly elected president and several had gone so far as to openly support the Confederacy while still stationed in their respective nations. Needless to say, Secretary of State Seward must have desired to have his new ministers situated in their new missions as soon as possible...

Adams did not set foot in England until May 13, however, and in the meantime the British government issued a declaration, the Queen's Proclamation of Neutrality, that recognized both North and South as belligerents in a state of civil war. Although the Palmerston ministry claimed to issue the Proclamation as purely a domestic measure, many within the Union government (especially Seward) saw it as a hostile act that would pave the way for full-fledged recognition of the Confederacy. More importantly, the Proclamation was only the first incident in a series of quarrels between the British and Union governments throughout the spring, summer, and autumn of 1861. Negotiations relating to neutral maritime rights created an atmosphere of mistrust between Washington and London in May and June. Great Britain's need for cotton caused the Palmerston ministry to complain bitterly against the Union blockade and threatened to destroy relations between the two countries when rumors reached England of the possibility that the Union would close Southern ports by decree in July and August. The results of the Battle of Bull Run in late July led many in the British government to seriously question the Union's ability to conquer the South militarily. Backdoor negotiations between a British consul stationed in Charleston, South Carolina and representatives of the Confederate government were exposed to the Union government in September and remained an outstanding issue in Anglo-American relations throughout the fall. British participation in a French-led intervention in Mexico caused great apprehension amongst Northerners who viewed the Mexican venture as an attempt to evade the Union blockade and undertake direct contact with the Confederacy.

Throughout 1861, as Washington and London traded jabs across the Atlantic over these issues, Charles Francis Adams was working fervently in the British capital to prevent the Palmerston ministry from interfering with the Union's war effort. Adams often found himself having to tone down the words of Secretary of State Seward lest the British government take offense at Seward's often terse and brusque messages. The American minister to Great Britain did a superb job of not only assuring that Great Britain avoided any interference in the conflict, but also performed the vitally important task of keeping the relationship between American and Great Britain a civil and working one. However, the
possibility of one incident igniting a powder keg in Anglo-American relations hovered over Adams's work, threatening to not only push Great Britain towards the Confederate corner but quite possibly foment a third war between America and Great Britain. In early November, such an incident occurred and at once threw into question British neutrality as well as a nearly fifty year long peaceful relationship between America and Great Britain. The months of November and December provided Adams with his most formidable task of the year and were the setting for one of America's most fateful diplomatic events.

THE TRENT AFFAIR AND THE DRAMATIC END TO 1861

During the fall of 1861, as Adams and Seward labored to prevent a rupture in Anglo-American relations, the Confederate State Department grew increasingly frustrated by its failed attempts to gain British or French recognition. The cards seemed to be stacked in favor of the Confederacy. Despite Britain's refusal to make the blockade an issue, the fact remained that cotton would have to be attained at some point in the future. The blockade also threatened to create an international incident between the Union and Great Britain, as British men-of-war loomed ready to defend any violation of the rights of British subjects in the North. Furthermore, the Mexican expedition coupled with mounting pressure in France for cotton left Napoleon pondering over whether to open official diplomatic relations with the South. Most importantly, the series of crises that had played out between America and Great Britain ever since (and even before) Adams's arrival in London led policy makers throughout the North to believe that it would not be long before Great Britain bestowed recognition upon the Confederacy. The Queen's Proclamation of Neutrality, Declaration of Paris negotiations, blockade and port closures debates, results of Bull Run, Bunch-affair, and British participation in the Mexican intervention had all served to create a great deal of mistrust and misapprehension on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet in spite of all these issues, Great Britain, up to November, had maintained its pledge to remain strictly neutral in the contest between the Union and the Confederacy.

It is not surprising, then, that the Davis administration in Richmond decided to dispatch a new diplomatic team to Great Britain and France in the hopes that it would have more success than the Yancey-Mann-Rost trio which had received a lukewarm reception in May. Davis, along with Confederate Secretary of State R.M.T. Hunter, selected James Mason and John Slidell to head to London and Paris respectively in order to accomplish what their predecessors had not: recognition of the Confederacy by the powers of Europe. The two men were appointed in early September and were prepared to depart from Charleston in early October with their new diplomatic instructions in hand. After calculating how best to go about evading the blockading squadron that lay off Charleston's harbor, Mason, Slidell, each man's secretary, and Slidell's family departed on the newly renamed Theodora on the night of October 11 and by October 14 arrived at Nassau in the Bahamas. Before arriving ashore, however, the Confederate envoys learned that a British mail packer was to leave Havana, Cuba that would be able to connect them to Southampton, England. Although they did not arrive in time to catch the already departed British steamer, Mason and Slidell were comforted in the knowledge that they were now under the protection of a foreign flag. The two men and their secretaries thus awaited the arrival of another vessel that could take them to their destination in England.

By the end of October, Mason and Slidell were growing weary of their stay in Havana, where they found the heat to be unbearable, despite the warm welcome they had received in the city. So they were pleased to learn that a British mail packer, the Trent, would be able to sail them to St. Thomas, where they could be transferred to another steamer sailing for England and arrive at their destination on November 28. The travel plans of the Confederate envoys were not a very
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well kept secret, however, and fell into the hands of Captain Charles Wilkes, commander of the U.S.S. San Jacinto who was supposed to be taking his ship back to Philadelphia for repairs after having sailed the African coast for a month in search of Confederate privateers. Wilkes made the fateful decision to try and intercept the Trent and take the Confederate emissaries on board prisoners as contraband of war along with seizing the ship itself for adjudication in a prize court. When, on November 8, the San Jacinto spotted the Trent, Wilkes ordered a shot to be fired across the bow of the British vessel. The mail packet kept on going, however, and Wilkes ordered a second shot that exploded much closer than the first had, stopping the Trent immediately. A boarding party from the San Jacinto was sent on board the Trent and announced its intention to capture Mason and Slidell as well as their secretaries. After a few meek attempts at resistance, the aforementioned men accepted their arrest and went somberly on board the San Jacinto where Captain Wilkes greeted them. The Captain was persuaded by Lieutenant D.M. Fairfax to forgo taking the Trent as a prize because doing so would deplete the San Jacinto's crew, and the two ships parted ways with the Confederate emissaries on board the Union vessel. Wilkes, by not leaving a prize crew on board the Trent, would eventually discover that he had made a grievous error and had lost all claims to a legal seizure. However, that was in the future, and as the San Jacinto sailed north, the Captain was overjoyed with his capture.

News of Wilkes's exploits did not reach Washington until over a week after the capture of Mason and Slidell. Lyons first wrote to Russell on the subject on November 18, although he could only inform the foreign secretary that Mason and Slidell, with their secretaries, had been captured and taken as prisoners from the British mail packet Trent. The following day, Lyons apprised his superior in London on what position he planned to take over the Trent matter in Washington (which, in fact, was none). "I feel that the only proper and prudent course," Lyons wrote to Russell, "is to wait for the orders which Your Lordship will give with a complete knowledge of the whole case." The British minister to America, however, could not help but notice the "great exultation" exhibited in the Northern press over the capture of the Confederate envoys and believed that this was partly due to the fact that Mason and Slidell had been taken from a British ship. Lyons, who at times was prone to exaggeration in his dispatches to the British foreign secretary Russell, was not placing any undue emphasis on the joy exuded throughout the Union over the situation. When Wilkes arrived in Boston on November 24 with Mason and Slidell aboard, he was given a banquet at the Revere House during which many prominent lawyers and politicians rushed to congratulate the Captain of the San Jacinto and defended his actions as having been entirely legal. Navy Secretary Gideon Welles was among the first to offer Wilkes congratulations and the United States Congress eventually saw it fit to award the Captain a gold medal of honor for his actions of November 8.

Adams received the news of the Trent situation while visiting a British acquaintance's countryside home. A telegraph from Adams's secretary at the legation, Benjamin Moran, was handed to the American minister to Great Britain just as he was about to head out on a trip to see some of the local ruins. "The consequences necessarily rose up vividly at once in my mind," Adams recorded in his diary that night. While acknowledging that Wilkes's actions were possibly "justified in the doctrines of Great Britain," Adams believed that this would "scarcely make up for the loss of popular sympathy in England." Although the news understandably shocked Adams, both he and the Palmerston ministry were well aware of the possibility that an American vessel would try and capture the Confederate envoys. For the British government knew of Mason and Slidell's expected arrival in November just as much as the Lincoln administration was aware of the envoys' departure from Charleston in mid-October. On Tuesday, November 12, the prime minister had summoned
Adams to a meeting at his Cambridge House in Piccadilly. After greeting Adams in a "very cordial and frank" manner, Palmerston immediately got to the substance of the meeting. The aging British statesman had been "made anxious" over reports of a United States naval vessel, the James Adger, sitting outside English port of Southampton that was purportedly there in order to intercept the Confederate envoys then on their way to London. Palmerston told Adams that the Captain of the James Adger, "having got gloriously drunk on Brandy on Sunday," was set up at the mouth of the river "as if on watch." While not pretending to know the legal pretext for the vessel's right to take Mason and Slidell prisoners, the prime minister believed that such an action would be highly unfavorable to America's image in Great Britain. Furthermore, Palmerston believed it to "surely be of no consequence whether one or two more men were added to the two or three who had already been so long here." The British government, Palmerston concluded, had already made up its mind not to entertain official intercourse with Confederate emissaries, and the arrival of Mason and Slidell would do nothing to alter its decision. The American minister, who had already been in contact with the Captain of the James Adger, informed Palmerston that the ship's mission was not to capture the Confederate envoys but to take the Nashville, a known Confederate blockade runner which just so happened to be carrying Mason and Slidell. However, having been informed that the Confederate emissaries were not on board the Nashville, which was nowhere in the vicinity of England, the Captain intended to sail back to America.

This conversation with Adams did a good deal to alleviate the prime minister's concerns over an American vessel intercepting the newly appointed Confederate commissioners. On the same day as the Palmerston-Adams interview, the Crown Law Officers, at the request of Palmerston, looked into the legality of the potential seizure. Their conclusions were as follows: United States naval officers had the right to board a British mail ship, review its papers and mailbags, and take the ship for prize adjudication if found to be carrying dispatches of the enemy. However, if Mason and Slidell were removed and the ship was allowed to continue on its voyage without being claimed as a prize, the seizure would be illegal under international law. Of course, this final scenario was precisely what occurred on November 8, however at the end of November there were many issues that remained unclear with regard to the Trent affair.

On November 29, after rushing back to his duties at the American legation in London, Adams met with Earl Russell who was searching for any information he could get on the Trent matter. Adams, a little embarrassed by his own lack of knowledge on the situation, told Russell "not a word had been whispered" to him on the subject. The meeting lasted only 10 minutes as it was obvious that Adams knew little more than what was being reported in the London newspapers, while Russell's dispatches from Lyons provided the bulk of the foreign secretary's knowledge. Upon examining the London newspapers the following day, Adams learned, much to his chagrin, that the Crown's Law Officers had "modified their opinion as I supposed, and now the dogs are all let loose in the newspapers." The law officers had decided that because Wilkes did not condemn the entire ship as a prize, the capture of Mason and Slidell was unlawful and a direct affront to the British flag. "The tone now taken," Adams sorrowfully recorded, "is of such a kind that I must make up my mind to vacate this post some time in January." The American minister was convinced that the Trent affair would be the straw that broke the camel's back in Anglo-American relations and prepared to arrange for his departure.

Immediately after his meeting with Adams on December 29, Russell attended a meeting of the cabinet to discuss what should be done with regard to the Trent situation. The cabinet members were outraged by the entire set of circumstances; they saw the facts as being that an American vessel had forcefully boarded a neutral British mail packet, illegally captured four of its passengers, and forfeited all claim to le-

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gality by not claiming the entire vessel as a prize. After several tense meetings, the ministry adopted a dispatch to be sent to Lyons that sought the immediate release of Mason, Slidell, and their secretaries, along with a formal apology from the United States government. It was decided that Lyons would deliver these demands to the Lincoln administration, and if after one week it refused to make the necessary reparations and offer a formal apology, the British minister at Washington was to take his leave of America.

On November 30, the cabinet met to complete the dispatch that was to be sent to Lyons in Washington. Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria and one of her most trusted political advisers, had been informed by Chancellor Gladstone of what the ministers planned to demand of the United States. In what was the prince's final memorandum (for he would collapse on December 2 and die on December 14), he suggested that a much more conciliatory tone be taken towards the United States in the patch that Lyons would present to Seward. The prime minister, upon reading the Prince Albert's memo, wholeheartedly agreed, and the resulting dispatch, containing the British demands for reparations as well as the demand for a formal apology, reflected an earnest desire to maintain the peaceful relations that marked the relationship between America and Great Britain during the past several decades. The final dispatch, written by Russell, gave an account of all the pertinent information of the Trent case known to the British government and referred to the seizure of Mason and Slidell as "an affront to the British flag and a violation of international law." However, the British government was willing to believe that the Captain of the San Jacinco had acted either without orders from the United States government or had misinterpreted his orders. For the ministry believed, the American government was far too wise to believe that Great Britain would allow such a flagrant offence go unnoticed. Surely, the dispatch continued, the Lincoln administration realized that "the British government could not allow such an affront to the national honor to pass without full reparation." These reparations entailed the release of the four prisoners incarcerated at Fort Warren in Boston as well as "a suitable apology for the aggression which has been committed." If Secretary of State Seward did not freely offer these terms to the British government, via Lyons in Washington, the British minister to America was to propose them to the secretary. These were the orders that Lyons received in Washington in mid-December. Upon their delivery to Seward, Lyons was to wait no more than seven days for a reply, after which he was to demand his passports from the American government.

As Russell's instructions to Lyons made their way across the Atlantic, both the Palmerston ministry and Adams knew that the reply would be a good deal of time in coming. Approximately four weeks would be needed just for the dispatches to make their way across the Atlantic and back to London, and even if Lyons handed the demands to Seward the day he received them the Lincoln administration still had a week to deliberate upon them. This created a minimal five-week interval for Adams to languish at the American legation in London knowing he was powerless to control the outcome of the situation. This was in large part due to the fact that Seward had suddenly ceased to provide his representative to the British government with any solid information that Adams could have used to combat the mounting tide of anti-American sentiment in England. Adams, however, was doing all he could to keep his superiors in Washington apprised of British public opinion, as well as what course the Palmerston ministry was likely to pursue in the matter. "The pride of the British nation is deeply touched," Adams wrote to the secretary on November 29. In a separate dispatch written on that same day, the Bostonian informed Seward that the Crown's Law Officers had decided that by not seizing "papers and things," Wilkes had forfeited his right to seize persons on board the Trent. "In other words," Adams mused, "Great Britain would not have been offended if the United States had insulted her a good deal more." Regard-
less, Adams told Seward that he believed the British government would demand an apology and the release of Mason and Slidell as reparations for the illegal act by Wilkes. The American minister was certainly doing his job by providing constant updates of the situation in London to the State Department in Washington; however, in the American capital, Seward grew strangely quiet with regard to what the government was planning to do over the Trent issue.

Throughout December, Adams repeatedly lamented both in his diary and letters to acquaintances that he was grossly uninformed on the Trent affair and therefore could do little to defend his government. When in early December the liberal British M.P. for Yorkshire William E. Forster, the leading champion of the Northern cause in the House of Commons, stopped by to see if there was anything he could learn from Adams that could lessen the anti-American rhetoric in England, the American minister was forced to confide that he knew only what the newspapers were reporting. Adams wrote bitterly to Seward on December 11, complaining of a lack of information from the State Department on such a dangerous and explosive issue. The American minister told his superior that his dearth of intelligence on the Trent issue placed him in "a predicament almost as awkward as if I had not been commissioned here at all." Indeed, the only dispatch that Adams received from Seward that provided any intelligence on the Trent affair did not arrive until mid-December and was hardly enough to allow Adams to form a justification of the government's policy. Seward told Adams that "Captain Wilkes...acted without any instructions from the government," leaving the Lincoln administration "free from the embarrassment" that it would have incurred had Wilkes been acting in accordance with orders issued from Washington. The secretary accounted for the lack of information from Washington as being necessary because the administration wished to learn the British opinion on the matter before acting. Having hardly given Adams a sufficient overview of the situation, Seward concluded the dispatch by telling Adams he would not object to the American minister reading its contents to Russell.

After receiving Seward's dispatch on December 16, Adams immediately scheduled a meeting with Russell in order to provide the Palmerston ministry with Seward's most recent views of the situation. On Thursday, December 19, Adams met with the British foreign secretary in order to read to him Seward's dispatch concerning the Trent affair. At a three o'clock meeting in Russell's Downing Street office, Adams read word for word off the secretary's recently arrived dispatch. He was sure to emphasize to Russell that Wilkes had not acted under any orders from the United States government but had taken Mason and Slidell completely on his own volition. Adams then asked the Englishman what course the British government had opted to take. Russell told Adams of the two dispatches that had been sent to Lyons at the beginning of the month, the first with the British government's demands and the second giving the British minister at Washington a one week interval for the Lincoln administration to provide a reply. If this week was allowed to pass without a proper answer, Russell continued, Lyons was to proceed back to England, however this did not necessarily imply that hostilities were a foregone conclusion. Much would depend on the American answer, Russell indicated, and Adams perceived that the ministry was not entirely desirous of war with America despite the violent and threatening rhetoric emulating from the London press. For the first time, Adams was beginning to feel that there could possibly be a peaceful solution to the Trent issue.

Adams's newfound optimism in late December reflected his personal doubts about the wisdom of provoking the world's greatest naval power at a time when America was beset with its own internal difficulties. The American envoy to the Court of St. James, ever since he first heard the news of Wilkes's actions in late November, was highly dubious about the legality of seizing Mason and Slidell, as well as the precedent it might establish for future cases involving
the United States. In a letter to John Motley, Adams pointed out that America had long been a champion of neutral maritime rights. Thus, no matter how many precedents or laws could be cited in America's favor, it would be difficult to ignore British complaints because America might very well some day find itself in the shoes Great Britain now stood in. In a private letter to Seward in early December, Adams acknowledged that a strong argument against Britain's claims could be made and even based upon British treatment of American neutral vessels in past conflicts. However, Adams saw little value in "varying from what seems to me so honorable a record, under the temptation of a little ephemeral success. ... Our Neutral rights are as valuable to us as they ever were whilst time has reflected nothing but credit on our own steady defence [sic] of them against a superior power." Only a little over two weeks since word first arrived of the Trent affair in England, Adams warned the State Department that preparations for war were rapidly progressing in the British capital. Many Londoners, Adams wrote to Seward, believed that America was pushing the limits of Great Britain's patience, and the American minister urged caution in Washington lest the Union bring Great Britain into a de facto alliance with the Confederacy. It is obvious from Adams's personal reflections, private correspondence, and official dispatches to Washington that Adams, the direct descendant of two American Presidents, was not willing to sit idly by as his government blundered into a third war with Great Britain.

Adams's letters to Seward urging restraint and caution arrived on the same vessel, the Europa, which carried a special messenger, Captain C.C. Seymour, who was to deliver to Lyons the British instructions. After receiving Russell's instructions at 11:30 p.m. on December 18, Lyons paid a visit to Seward the next day in order to unofficially communicate to him the terms of the British demands. The secretary requested that Lyons delay making the official presentation of Russell's dispatch for two days, when on December 21 Seward would be ready to accept it and the seven days interval could begin. Lyons agreed, and in a summary of the conversation wrote to Russell that Seward "begged me to be assured that he was very sensible of the friendly and conciliatory manner in which" Lyons had made the communication. However, when Lyons appeared on Saturday, December 21 as Seward had requested, the secretary again pleaded with the British minister to allow him two more days before the official British ultimatum was delivered to the American government. Lyons again acquiesced to Seward's appeal and thus made the official presentation of the British government's demands on Monday, December 23.

The Lincoln administration received plenty of advice from outsiders on how to settle the Trent issue during the month of December. From New York City, George Opdyke wrote to the President, expressing his concern that Great Britain would soon "commence hostilities" without a formal declaration of war and pressing the president to upgrade the city's defenses. Millard Fillmore urged the President to avoid the "double calamities of civil and foreign war" by making a "firm but conciliatory argument" to any English demands. Meanwhile, James Doolittle proposed to Lincoln that the matter be brought before the Emperors of France and Russia, "to determine the question whether upon the law of nations we were not as belligerents justified in making that arrest." The president himself was not entirely sure how to approach the situation, and in his customary fashion wrote out a memorandum on the subject that never saw the light of day. In it, Lincoln wrote that if Russell's November 30 dispatch to Lyons was in fact correct and contained all the "pertinent" facts to the case, reparations to Great Britain were indeed "justly due." The United States government, Lincoln continued to himself, in no way meant to offend the British flag or force Great Britain into dealing with this "embarrassing question." However, the Union government had rights as well, and reparations should only be made when it was proved that the act was "wrong, or, at least, very ques-
tionable.” From this memorandum, it seems that Lincoln was not willing to simply give in to the Palmerston ministry’s demands and might have even been considering taking the matter before an international court.

The president, though not once making any reference to his private memorandum, brought this viewpoint to a special cabinet meeting called for Christmas Day, December 25. Despite this inclination to bring the matter for arbitration, the president and his cabinet were convinced by the secretary of state that it was of the utmost importance to acquiesce to the British demands without delay. Arbitration would take months to play out, and it was obvious from Russell’s dispatch to Lyons that the Palmerston ministry would only give the administration one week to come to a decision on the matter. Furthermore, it had become evident that America could expect no support from Europe on the Trent matter. Seward came to the meeting bearing in mind Adams’s warnings from earlier in the month. The secretary’s London representative had offered up several cogent points to the matter, not the least of which was the precedent it would establish for future cases. Moreover, Adams’s warnings concerning war preparations in the British capital must have had a profound effect upon Seward and the rest of the cabinet, who were not oblivious to the fact that America would be incredibly hard pressed to fight a war against Great Britain coinciding with a struggle against the Southern rebels. Facing this daunting possibility, the cabinet agreed that Seward would draft a dispatch to Russell in which the secretary would only give the administration one week to come to a decision on the matter. Furthermore, it had become evident that America could expect no support from Europe on the Trent matter. Seward came to the meeting bearing in mind Adams’s warnings from earlier in the month. The secretary’s London representative had offered up several cogent points to the matter, not the least of which was the precedent it would establish for future cases. Moreover, Adams’s warnings concerning war preparations in the British capital must have had a profound effect upon Seward and the rest of the cabinet, who were not oblivious to the fact that America would be incredibly hard pressed to fight a war against Great Britain coinciding with a struggle against the Southern rebels. Facing this daunting possibility, the cabinet agreed that Seward would draft a dispatch to Russell in which the secretary would meet the British foreign minister’s demands.

Seward’s reply to the British demand for the release of Mason and Slidell, completed the day after the Christmas morning cabinet meeting, was a comprehensive summary of Wilkes’s actions and an analysis of their legality. Seward informed the British government that it had “rightly conjectured” that Wilkes had “acted upon his own suggestions of duty, without any direction or instructions or even foreknowledge of it, on the part of this government,” thus relieving the government itself from all responsibility for the actual seizure. Seward pointed out several facts which Russell had neglected to include in his November 30 set of demands, namely that the four captured men were “pretended commissioners” sent by a “pretended” president, Jefferson Davis, to Great Britain and France in order to persuade those nations into recognizing the insurgent authorities at Richmond. The men were also carrying “pretended credentials and instructions, and such papers are in the law known as dispatches.” Therefore, Wilkes’s actions should be seen “as a simple legal and customary belligerent proceeding,” instead of “a merely flagrant act of violence,” as they were portrayed in England.

The secretary of state put forward five questions relative to the seizure of Mason and Slidell: 1) Were Mason, Slidell, and their dispatches contraband of war? 2) Did Wilkes have the lawful right to stop and search for Mason, Slidell, and their dispatches? 3) Did Wilkes exercise that right of search in a lawful and proper manner? 4) Did Wilkes have the right to capture Mason and Slidell? 5) Was the right of capture exercised in accordance with the law of nations? If all five of these questions could be answered in the affirmative, Seward continued, then Great Britain would have no right to claim reparations. After answering the first four questions with a “Yes,” the Secretary took up the last and most important question. Did Wilkes exercise the right of capture according to the guidelines of international law? For if he did not, then questions one through four would become irrelevant, and Great Britain would be fully entitled to the reparations which it sought. Seward concluded that by not taking the Trent to prize court for adjudication, Wilkes had “prevented the judicial examination which might otherwise have occurred” in the affair. The Captain had voluntarily given up his claim to a legitimate capture, just as the Crown’s Law Officers had decided in November and just as Adams had surmised in his dispatches to Seward in early December. “I have fallen into an argument against my own country,” Seward wrote,
"but I am relieved from all embarrassment on the subject." Mason, Slidell, and their secretaries "will be cheerfully lib­
erated," Seward concluded, once Lyons named a time and place for their departure.

Upon receiving the secretary's note on the morning of December 27, Lyons immediately sent a dispatch to Russell, informing the foreign secretary, "I consider that the demands of Her Majesty's Government are so far substantially com­plied with...and [will] remain at my post until I receive fur­ther orders." After several days of debating where the most suitable place would be for the prisoners to depart without causing a violent scene, it was decided that the small Mas­achusetts town of Provincetown would provide the ideal location. On January 3, in a brief dispatch to Russell, Lyons was able to inform his superior in London that "Mr. Mason and Mr. Slidell and their two companions sailed from Prov­incetown on board Her Majesty's ship Rinaldo at five o'clock the day before yesterday." Although poor weather would prevent their arrival in England until January 30, the four ex-captives were free from their nearly two month long im­prisonment. More importantly, war with Great Britain had been averted by the Lincoln administration.

The news of the diplomatic settlement reached London officially on January 8. The word quickly spread like wildfire throughout England, causing church bells to be rung, theater audiences to burst into applause, and buoyant Britons to congratulate themselves on having avoided a war with America. Adams, though slightly less jubilant than his English counterparts, nevertheless recorded in his journal that "the danger of war is for the present removed. I am to re­main in this purgatory a while longer." His tone was modi­fied the next day when, upon reading Seward's dispatch, he believed that "traces of my dispatch" from early December could be found in the secretary's decision. Two days later, Russell showed Adams a copy of a dispatch he intended to send to Lyons, accepting the American reply. The American minister responded by reflecting that he was "very glad this was so well settled," to which Russell assented "in the same view, and hoped that nothing was left in the way of contin­ued peace" between the two nations.

Adams was correct in his belief that Seward had paid close attention to his warnings in early December. Even though Adams felt slighted by the lack of information he re­ceived from Washington, he had performed more than ably in keeping his superiors informed of the public and political sentiment pervading throughout Great Britain in the wake of the Trent news. Furthermore, Adams's astute remarks about creating precedents, which in the future could do more harm than good to America, were not ignored by the secre­tary of state. In Washington, Seward and Lyons both did a good deal to preserve peaceful relations between America and Great Britain. Lyons's forbearance in officially present­ing Seward with the British ultimatum allowed the Secretary to develop a more forceful argument against rejecting the British demands. Seward himself deserves commendation for realizing that America had to submit to Great Britain's demands in order to avoid a war with the world's most powerful nation, despite cries from Congress and cabinet members that Mason and Slidell should never be released. While it will never be known what would have happened had Seward and Adams been unable to convince the cabi­net and the president to accede to the British government's claims, public sentiment had been so aroused in England as to quite possibly make further relations between the two na­tions impossible. Adams, for one, clearly believed that if his government did not satisfactorily comply with Russell's No­vember 30 dispatch to Lyons, his presence in London would be of no further use. Although he was not entirely convinced that war would necessarily follow an American refusal, Ad­ams realized that the Lincoln administration could ill afford to incur even the diplomatic wrath of Great Britain when America was in such a state of internal turmoil. Thus, while unable to in any way alter the Palmerston ministry's actions in London, Adams was able to influence Seward's actions in
Washington through his private and diplomatic correspondence with the Secretary. At a time when patriotic fervor ran rampant through both capitols, the American minister to Great Britain put aside all such emotion and passion in order to rationally argue against what could have caused a devastating breach in Anglo-American relations.

The Trent affair was the low water mark of Anglo-American relations in 1861 and almost led to a trans-Atlantic conflict that quite possibly would have ruined any hopes the Lincoln administration had of restoring the Union. Its successful resolution, due in no small part to Adams's warnings and advice from London, allowed the Union to momentarily put foreign matters on the back burner and focus on stepping up its war effort against the Confederacy. As 1862 progressed and the Union naval and land forces recorded numerous victories, it became clear that Great Britain would not intervene in the Civil War so long as hope remained for a Northern military victory. In late January, Adams reflected upon the settlement of the Trent affair as having staved off British attempts at interference in America's domestic matters. "The army will have time to determine the question," Adams gladly recorded in his diary. Indeed, when news reached London of the fall of Forts Henry and Donelson in early March, along with the Battle of Pea Ridge later in the month, Adams noted the upswing in pro-Unionism throughout the British capital. "Nothing shines so dazzling to the military eye of Europe as success," Adams wrote. "Our English friends appreciate it as fully as any body." At a dinner party in early March, Adams "was congratulated all around" by newfound well-wishers of the Union. "Even Lord Palmerston seemed to doubt his former judgment," Adams cheerfully noted. The first half of 1862 was indeed an extraordinary one for Northern forces, and news continued to pour into England of the Union's military prowess. Late April and early May were filled with talk of the Battle of Shiloh; on May 11, Adams received word of the capture of New Orleans by Union forces under Admiral David Farragut; two weeks later, the capture of Norfolk was the talk of the town in London; early June witnessed news of the rebels being "driven out of Corinth."

Of course, the Union did see its share of military failures in 1862, perhaps none worse than the rout of soldiers under General John Pope at the Battle of Second Bull Run in late August. In September and October, the British cabinet, led by foreign secretary Russell, seemed to move ever closer towards offering recognition to the Confederacy and the results of the second defeat of Union forces near Manassas Junction, Virginia served to lend further weight towards a call for an armistice followed by recognition of the Confederacy. However, as the intervention clamor reached a peak in the Palmerston ministry in November 1862, British secretary for war George Cornwallis Lewis cited historical precedents in order to justify non-intervention and was able to dissuade Lord Russell from recognizing the Confederacy. Palmerston also remained cautious in meddling with American affairs and never truly supported full-fledged recognition of the rebels during the 1862 intervention crisis. Despite initial doubt over the outcome of the Battle of Antietam, September 17, 1862, Englishmen ultimately realized that the battle was a turning point in the American war. Similarly, initial hostility towards the Emancipation Proclamation, viewed by many in England as a desperate attempt to incite a servile insurrection in the South, eventually gave way to acceptance of the measure as a vital step in the fight against slavery. While it was not clear to contemporaries, the autumn and early winter of 1862 ended any serious hopes that the Confederacy had for British intervention or recognition.

Although 1862 may have seen Great Britain teeter on the brink of intervention, 1861 was one of the most strenuous years in Anglo-American relations since the two nations had been engaged in battle almost fifty years prior. Almost as soon as the Lincoln administration stepped into office it was forced to deal with British recognition of Confederate belligerent rights. Even before the newly appointed minister to Great Britain had arrived in London, the British foreign sec-
secretary was meeting with Confederate emissaries and hearing their pleas for recognition in early May. Negotiations between the two countries over neutral rights, which by their nature should have created a more amicable friendship, met with complete failure and served only to enlarge the sense of mistrust being built up on both sides of the Atlantic. The British dependence upon Southern cotton turned the blockade and port closures measures into divisive issues between the two nations throughout the year. A minor dispute over the actions of the British consul at Charleston threatened to erupt at any moment throughout the fall of 1861 into a major quarrel. British participation in the Mexican intervention caused many Northerners to fear that Great Britain was growing bolder about possibly making its presence known on American soil. Finally, the Trent affair, in and of itself merely a minor violation of international law by an ambitious Captain in the United States Navy, led to war preparations in London and narrowly missed causing the third conflict in less than a century between America and Great Britain.

All of these disagreements, misunderstandings, and disputes were the direct results of the underlying issues between America and Great Britain in the first year of the Civil War. However much Adams and others wished for emancipation to come about in the early stages of the conflict, the Lincoln administration was initially unwilling to make slavery an issue at home or abroad. The British belief that separation between the North and South was inevitable allowed Russell to hold talks (even if they were "unofficial") with Southern envoys, and led the Union government to believe that recognition of the Confederacy was not far off. The Queen’s Proclamation of Neutrality, despite Russell’s legitimate claim that it was a purely domestic measure, confirmed this belief to many in the North who viewed it as merely a precursor to formal recognition. Seward’s insistence that the Union government be treated as the only government in America led to the debacle over the Bunch affair because the secretary was unwilling to accept that a British consul had entered into negotiations with the Richmond authorities, no matter how necessary such negotiations were for the British government. The Palmerston ministry’s mistrust of Seward led to the collapse of the Declaration of Paris negotiations when Russell insisted upon inserting a clause to the agreement that was unacceptable to the Americans. The Union’s military woes in 1861, particularly its complete rout in the first major battle of the war, substantiated the opinions of men like Russell and Gladstone who believed the North could not bring the South back into the Union and that Southern independence was indeed a fait accompli. Many Northerners saw the Mexican intervention as a violation of the Monroe Doctrine and a direct challenge to America’s power in the Western Hemisphere. Moreover, Adams represented many in the Union in his belief that Europe was taking advantage of America’s internal turmoil in order to reestablish itself in North America via the Mexican expedition. The year culminated in the Trent affair, which brought every source of mistrust between the two countries to life and exposed the vulnerability of two governments who had assumed such vastly differing positions in the earliest stages of America’s Civil War.

In the end, fortunately, both nations stepped back from the edge of destruction that war between them would have brought and cast aside their previous slights in order to reach a diplomatic (and relatively simple) compromise. The value of diplomacy for this period of American history cannot be overestimated; although the incompatibility of American and British interests in the Civil War threatened to destroy civility between the two countries, sound and rationalized diplomacy on the part of men such as Adams, Seward, Lyons, and Russell helped to stave off what could have been the ultimate demise to Anglo-American relations. Adams, in particular, was able to cast aside the intense patriotism that came naturally to him as the son and grandson of American Presidents in order to calculate what was in the end best for his country regardless of popular opinion or short-term con-
sequences. Whether this was accomplished through a small act such as dressing in silk and lace to please British high society at the Court of St. James or an enormous decision like urging his government to ignore public sentiment and abide by the British demands during the Trent affair, Adams always sought what was most beneficial for America in his first year in London. Although the end of 1861 by no means signified the end of difficulties in the relationship between America and Great Britain during the Civil War, Adams’s success in maintaining a stable, civilized connection between the governments of both nations was a vital contribution to the Union’s diplomacy during the Civil War.