

THE STARVATION BLOCKADE

BY FLETCHER PRATT

THE news that Jefferson Davis was offering letters of marque to all comers burst upon Washington that morning, April 18, 1861, via the electric telegraph and the New York newspapers. Mr. Secretary of State Seward, who was then playing at premier, at once called a cabinet meeting to consider the problem. As a matter of tact he had to invite Chase of the Treasury and Welles of the Navy Department: they were both ex-Democrats, hence radicals, so as a matter of policy he also summoned Blair and Bates, the ex-Whigs, who, with himself, would be able to outvote them. Mr. Lincoln, at that time, was supposed to be a kind of megaphone, or instrument for making Seward's voice sound louder, and had thus far given few indications he intended to play any other role. Seward anticipated no difficulty from him.

The meeting, had it not concerned so serious a matter, would have seemed slightly comic, which is probably the reason why no notes were taken. The six were all attorneys, but none of them remembered anything about maritime law except a few odd words like "barratry"; on the question of the legal aspects of Confederate privateering they were quite willing to let Seward talk, which he did persuasively and at length, advocating the blockade of New Orleans, Charleston, and Wilmington, North Carolina.

Welles, a large man with a beard that raced away in every direction from the

center of his face as though the strands were seeking corners in which to conceal themselves, demurred on principle—the principle being that Seward should attend to the State Department and leave naval matters to him. It would have been ungracious to say as much openly; he entered the idea in his diary, but aloud remarked only that the proclamation of a formal blockade would be a concession of the Confederacy's belligerent rights. Why not simply announce that the Southern ports were closed as a "domestic municipal operation"? Then no ship which visited them could obtain a valid customs clearance and the captains of such ships would not be received in their home ports.

They batted the ball around for an hour or two of argument with hot-tempered Blair now and then chipping in on Seward's side. The President, foreseeing they would get nowhere, took a vote. It came out as expected—Seward, Blair, and Bates for blockade, Chase and Welles for closing the ports. Secretary Nicolay was called in, and with a volume of British Admiralty papers as a model, a proclamation placing the states from South Carolina around to Texas under blockade was drawn up then and there. It was on the streets by morning.

Only one small modification of the classical model was introduced. As the document was being drafted, Welles pointed out that the government had at its disposal only three warships, not

enough to blockade one port, to say nothing of the whole Gulf Coast. Would it not be better, therefore, to make the terms somewhat indefinite, allowing the blockading captains to take station where they seemed most needed? The President accepted the suggestion.

I have deemed it advisable [read the proclamation] to set on foot a blockade of the ports within the states aforesaid. If a vessel shall approach or shall attempt to leave any of the said ports, she shall be warned, and if the same vessel shall again attempt to enter or leave the blockaded port she will be captured.

But that modification, born of inexperience, purposeful indefiniteness, and hurry, in a proclamation packed together carelessly in the small hours of the morning, was sufficient to ruin the Confederacy and to launch upon the world a new principle in human strife—the principle of attacking the morale of enemy non-combatants through the starvation blockade, which is at once the most effective and most appalling feature of modern conflicts.

Thus, by a peculiar irony, it was a purely military step instituted by the most humane of men which gave rise to the most inhumane method of warfare. Hunger blockades were nothing new in land warfare, even then; they had been waged, in the form of sieges against specific localities, for centuries. This was, however, the first time a starvation blockade had ever been applied, intentionally or no, to a whole nation. And it took so long for the rest of the world to recognize the blockade as the determining factor in the war, that it was not until 1915, when the news of German shortages first began to reach Allied countries, that anyone really understood the truth. The tremendous military victories of Grant, Sherman, and Thomas had sent the Confederacy down with a

crash; these spectacular triumphs masked the fact that the real damage lay deeper. The Germans, in 1916, protested mightily—but they were just fifty-five years too late.

II

The Civil War blockade came about through a curious interplay of personality and event. When Charles Francis Adams, the new minister to England, arrived in London he found Seward's blockade the subject of a lively and somewhat amused curiosity on the part of Her Majesty's Government. Lord John Russell, then Minister for Foreign Affairs, called on him with the remark that the coast to be blockaded was excessively long—did the Americans intend to blockade it all or only to make a declaration to that effect and bottle up certain special ports? It was a sly inquiry, more sly than it sounded, made largely to get the Americans on record with a principle which they might find it inconvenient to disavow. Behind Lord Russell's Brownie-like countenance as he made it was considerable knowledge of the state of the American navy; a blockade of the whole Southern coast was a flat impossibility. Adams could hardly maintain it was; he would be forced to accept the alternative, whereupon Lord Russell, with all the politeness in the world, would point out that Great Britain had done exactly the same during the Napoleonic wars, whereupon the United States had gone to war to dispute the point as bad doctrine. The old American principle of the freedom of the seas, sacred cow of United States diplomacy, would thus be abolished by American action—or else America could be forced to swallow it with all its implications and call off the blockade.

Adams saw the trap; he replied rather loftily that the difficulty of blockading the South was not as great as it seemed; the actual ports were few in number. He had every reason to believe the blockade would be effective along the whole Confederate coast. Both men knew it was a play for time; as soon as Adams got home he sent off an urgent appeal that Seward do something quick. The message arrived in time to expedite further a process already begun at Washington, where Welles' objections to a blockade were nourished by the fact that he had no ships. The whole navy consisted of only ninety vessels, half of them unseaworthy hacks forty or more years of age. Only twenty-four of the remainder had steam power; of these, eighteen were showing the flag in all parts of the world—as a matter of fact some of them did not return for a year.

The Cabinet held another navy meeting a week after the original proclamation. It had been an eventful week, with Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina going over to the rebels and Missouri and Kentucky teetering on the edge, but the naval feature of the week was that Lincoln, Welles, and Seward had severally consulted experts in maritime jurisprudence. They learned that a blockade is legal as long as there is any kind of old scow with a gun standing off a port; if however, a vessel can run into the port without seeing or being seen by a blockader, the blockade is broken and not binding till a week or more after it has been re-proclaimed. On the other hand, once the old scow-with-gun is on the job, it becomes illegal for any ship even to sail for the port in question. Such a ship may be taken on the high seas, or as it emerges from a neutral port.

It was probably with this point in view, and the fact that the decadent American

Navy consisted largely of high-sea cruisers, valuable for long-range work but not so good for a shallow water blockade, that led the President to dispatch an officer to New York, Boston, and Philadelphia to buy any steamers he could. It was the time of the Baltimore riots; bridges were down and rails up everywhere near the seacoast cities; when Lincoln next heard of his officer he was in Wheeling, West Virginia, not a very good spot to buy ocean cruisers. But the man got through eventually, purchased eight ships in Philadelphia, ten at New York, and five more at Boston. Six of the twenty-three were ferries, four were river steamers, the rest assorted marine whatnots that no one else wanted, and none of them could fire more than a few rounds without shaking their decks to pieces with recoil, but they were good enough to establish the legal point.

South of the Potomac these alarms and excursions excited only a certain amusement over "Abe Lincoln's soap box navy". The privateering proclamation had produced little result, the blockade was doing no better. In fact, it was so notoriously a blockade of words on paper that Jefferson Davis hardly considered it worth while to make a protest. Like every other Southerner at the time he clung to the slogan "Cotton Is King", as if it were an article of faith. "Cotton will bring England to her knees", the *Charleston Mercury* had declared when the blockade was announced. Everyone believed it; action on the part of the Confederate cabinet was considered unnecessary, because England must automatically rise in defense of the rights of neutrals and her cotton staple, send her vast fleet to break through the blockade, and bring home the goods her essential industry demanded.

But this attitude overlooked two points of capital importance. One was that the

British textile industry worked on a considerable time-lag from the harvesting of the cotton crop. Not till the spring of '62 would the crop of '61 be needed, and until that time there would be no one to stir the British government to action. The second was that neither the British nor any other government plunges into war for an abstract principle when no material interest has been menaced. And the menace to the textile industry of Manchester was not the Northern blockade but the Southern declaration of war. The blockade violated the principle of blockades in not being effective. But British trade with the South, the cotton-carrying trade, had gone almost entirely in American bottoms before the war. Those bottoms were owned in the Northern states; when the war began the cotton carriers returned to their home ports in New York, Boston, or Baltimore, and the harbors of the Confederacy closed automatically, tight as any military power could seal them. The question of the rights of neutrals was academic where there were no neutrals to claim rights.

It required a month or two for the appreciation of this to filter into Confederate intellects. Probably the first resulting idea came from Judah Philip Benjamin, a great head for working out complicated diplomatic schemes. At all events when Major Huse and Captain Bulloch went to London in the summer of 1861 to buy arms for the Confederacy, they were given the secondary object of creating a neutral interest that the blockade would menace—in other words, opening up British trade with the South, cotton against munitions, profitable to both sides. Fraser, Trenholm & Company, were the financial agents; they chartered a big new freighter, the *Bermuda*, loaded her with munitions, and sent her to Charleston, S. C. The *Ber-*

muda's captain chose his time carefully, rode in through an offshore gale, came out on another with a hold full of cotton, and was able to report that he had failed to sight any blockaders on either trip.

The next step was to organize a British & American Southern Steamship Company and announce a list of monthly sailings for Charleston. It was August now; the blockade was beginning to tighten, but that was all the better. The *Bermuda's* sailing had shown the blockade did not really exist, it had not been re-proclaimed, and if one of the British & American Southern ships were stopped or captured, it would be a flat violation of international law with Britain the aggrieved party.

The plan worked; within a month one of the steamers was stopped, sent in for adjudication, and condemned as a blockade runner. The Confederates now had their talking point, though its value was less than it seemed, for the stately pavaues of the diplomatic manoeuvre had consumed six months during which the Union navy had come home from the four corners of the world and received a reinforcement of double its numbers besides. There was already a good deal of a blockade; and it had been opened with a studied and surprising moderation that left little cause for neutral complaint. The few foreign ships found off Confederate coasts were warned as provided in the proclamation—in fact, the July and August reports of blockading officers consisted of little but lists of ships warned.

Such as the point was, the Confederate cabinet lumbered on to make the most of it, clinging to the picture they had built up of an England only waiting for a sound pretext to declare the blockade illegal. They were right enough as regards the English aristocracy, but England was no longer ruled by the county aristocracy;

the royal family were for peace and Premier Palmerston did not wish to risk his slender majority in the House on the issue of war on the side of a slave power. Yet Davis made the most of his issue — James M. Mason was accredited ambassador to the Court of St. James, was instructed to protest the blockade in the strongest terms, and slipped through to Nassau on a blockade runner. He took a British mail steamer for London.

At this point matters were complicated by the injection of the personality of Captain Charles Wilkes, U. S. N., an old-school sea dog who detested politicians and all their works. (Parenthetically, he had good reason: while in charge of the department of charts at Annapolis thirty years before, he had set up instruments for shooting the stars, but had been forced to take them down again at the instance of certain Southern congressmen who insisted a national observatory was unconstitutional.) Wilkes — “an exact, but crank, disobedient man”, said Welles — was then in command of the steam frigate *San Jacinto*, cruising for blockade runners off Nassau. In port he heard that the steamer *Trent* was due to leave for London in a few days, with Mason and a fellow-ambassador, John Slidell, aboard. Mason was then regarded throughout the North as the arch-traitor of the whole Secesh lot, the man who had tumbled Virginia into rebellion. He was a prize worth having; Wilkes kept his own counsel, but determined to show the politicians back home how a navy man could cut their cobwebs. As the *Trent* made her way out of harbor he put his frigate across her bows, fired a couple of shots that brought her to, sent a lieutenant and a file of marines on board, and demanded the persons of Messrs. Mason and Slidell. They refused to leave, but “after a gentle application of force” they

were taken aboard the frigate, and carried off to prison in Boston.

The country went wild with delight. Welles wrote Captain Wilkes a letter of congratulation, Congress voted him a gold medal, and the city of Boston promised a chicken dinner. But when the news reached London, Charles Francis Adams’ hair stood on end. The *Trent* was a British mail steamer plying between imperial ports and had never even approached the blockade. A raging tide of resentment blew up like a tornado, and the mildest proposition Palmerston could extract from an excited cabinet was that a demand be made for the cashiering of Wilkes and the delivery of the prisoners with military honors on threat of instant war. Eight thousand troops were ordered to Canada, the Channel Fleet was placed in commission, and Lord Russell prepared a fighting ultimatum.

But it was never sent; for while Russell was drawing it up, Prince Albert posted into town from Oxford, and simultaneously with his arrival came a note from Napoleon III, offering to help the British resent the insult. The latter brought Palmerston up all standing; it would never do to have that imperial busybody taking action in a purely Anglo-Saxon matter, especially as he would be sure to claim some absurd reward for his help. As Palmerston hung undecided, Minister Adams arrived with a dose of soothing syrup — Captain Wilkes’ action had certainly been unauthorized and would probably be disavowed. Why not let the British note on the subject suggest as much? The idea fell on fertile soil; Palmerston was past seventy, an age at which a new war meant for him only the disruption of an agreeable mode of life. Nobody knows what he said or wrote to the Prince, but next morning Albert got out of bed at seven-thirty

to tear Russell's ultimatum to bits. When the note finally went off it was merely a polite request for the delivery of the prisoners.

There were no cables in those days, so the note had to wait for the mails, and the American cabinet spent Christmas Eve talking the matter over. Strangely enough, it was Lincoln who held out for keeping the prisoners; Wilkes' capture had proved so popular that the President feared the effect an adverse ruling would have on the administration's credit. The Cabinet was all against him, however, and he let himself be persuaded, for which he was later devoutly grateful.

The importance of this teapot tempest in history was its effect on the general question of blockade and neutral rights. Mr. Mason was the typical Southern pre-war political whip, respectable, indolent, proud, and humorless. Not altogether unnaturally he attributed the uproar over his case to English affection for himself and the Confederate cause. Upon his release, he breezed into London all ready to play the conquering hero, with a mouth full of platitudes and a heart full of "Cotton will bring England to her knees". He made himself quite insufferable. England looked, comprehended, and was annoyed; a week later the London *Times*, which had been thundering for war with America, growled that Mason was "The most miserable prey possible to have wrested from the jaws of the American lion", and Lord Russell refused to receive him. Whatever the present merits of his case, they were blanketed under the handicap of his bumptious method of presentation, so sharply at contrast with Mr. Adams' courteous deference. Worse even—the passing of the *Trent* cloud generated an atmosphere of good feeling in which all minor questions vanished like thin smoke.

Mason might have overcome his initial mistake in time—he was, after all, a clever politician—but time was just what Mason lacked. It was January before he arrived in England, and it was the end of February before he found a friendly member of the opposition to raise a question in the House. When the Foreign Office passed the question along to Adams, that gentleman had no longer to avoid the issue: he quoted good, hard statistics—how the American navy, during the last ten months, had increased from twenty-four steamers to 136, and how every important Southern port was sealed by a double line of blockaders, light vessels close inshore and big ocean-going cruisers in the offing to pick up or run down anything that got through. Russell replied to the question by declaring that the blockade was in fact effective, and thereby put England on record as accepting it.

III

In the meantime the blockade was producing an effect unexampled in naval history, partly directly, partly collaterally. The motley collection of ex-ferry boats and river steamers that went down to the Carolina shores in the summer of '61 included very few craft that could maintain station for any length of time. Baltimore was a poor port because half-rebellious; the distances to New York, Philadelphia, and Boston were excessive and, seagoing speeds being what they then were, three or four vessels had to be kept in service for every one kept off the Confederate coast. The navy felt the burden intolerable; at the urgent request of its officers an expedition was prepared to seize some of the North Carolina islands as an advanced base. The idea was not altogether unexpected by the Confederates, but the work of fortifying

the islands had been botched and delayed. When the big frigates hove up out of the blue one August morning and began to lob shells in, the defenders discovered their guns would not reach the attacking ships and their bombproofs were not bomb proof. They surrendered; the whole North Carolina coast system of inlets and sounds fell into Union hands, closing off a long array of ports and giving the Federals a powerful base.

But the sound harbors were shallow and set round with bars; they would not do for the deep-sea frigates that formed the backbone of the navy. Emboldened by their success in the sounds, the Federals attacked Port Royal, S. C., one of the finest harbors on the whole Atlantic. The ships' big guns shot the heart out of a weak and unready defense, Port Royal fell, and became a first-class Union naval base in the heart of the enemy country.

The results in these two cases were so good that the federal government made a system of attacking coastal ports. Whenever it became difficult to blockade a place, whenever a new advanced base was desirable, another descent was made. Now sea attacks on coastal fortresses are not normally valid — "A man who fights stone forts with wooden ships is a fool", said Admiral Nelson—but the conditions of the Civil War were not normal and the position was reversed. The Confederacy's very richness in ports was a liability; there were so many points to cover that none of them could be adequately fortified; the demands of the land armies were such that the coast defense received only inferior artillery and troops of the second line. There was practically no Confederate navy, certainly no fleet in being to prevent the Federal ships from concentrating where and when they pleased, while the Northern arsenals, like the mill that

ground the sea full of salt, were turning out new cruisers so fast that the government actually began to have difficulty in finding employment for them all. When a new coastal attack was moot it sufficed to assign to it enough ships to give a two or three hundred per cent superiority, add another hundred per cent for good luck, and send them out. Only one attack failed throughout the whole war, and the policy reached its climax in the capture of New Orleans, which at a single blow took from the Confederacy its metropolis and greatest seaport, and in a practical sense, cut the nation in half.

After that event, protests against the efficacy of the blockade were simply silly. With the bases furnished by Port Royal, New Orleans, Fernandina, and Fort Pickens, Fla., the Union navy was able to set up such a blockade as had never before been seen in history. The Confederacy was rich in inlets and small harbors, but the tremendous growth of the Union navy put ships in every one; not even the meanest coasters could operate. No formal notification of blockade was required; the vagueness of Lincoln's original proclamation made the whole Confederacy a blockaded port and every vessel caught off the coast subject to capture. Even when the inshore blockaders had been passed, the big Federal frigates cruising off Havana, Nassau, and Bermuda could pick up the runners under the terms of the proclamation and condemn them with perfect legality. And if the runners developed in speed and stealth, the Union cruisers developed faster; the highest speed attained under steam by any runner was around fourteen knots, while the U. S. S. *Wampanoag*, which floated out of New York Yard just at the close of the war, drove through the water at the fantastic figure of twenty-three. Against such speeds blockade run-

ners stood no chance, even if they got clear through. A sight was enough; they were run down in the end.

For a brief moment, indeed, there was possibility of another diplomatic tangle, when the runners discovered the Mexican port of Matamoros at the mouth of the Rio Grande. Goods could be shipped there from England, transferred to light coasters and slipped up through the inlets or across the river. In the effort to break up this traffic the Federal navy trod on some toes; explanations were asked and given, ship A was ordered released, the owners of ship B sued in British courts. But the Matamoros trouble was soon stopped by the standard Federal procedure of a successful attack on Galveston, and after Vicksburg fell, events in Texas ceased to be important in any case.

By the middle of the second year of the war, it is true that a considerable British commerce with the South had grown up. If it could have been conjured into existence earlier there might have been trouble. But coming as it did after the question in the House which Mason had so unwisely prompted, and after Lord Russell's recognition of the legality and effectiveness of the blockade, this traffic was strictly a bootleg business to which Her Majesty's government could give no official countenance. The question of neutral rights never entered, because neutral ships had no business off blockaded ports with cargoes of munitions.

The freedom of the seas question also was quietly disregarded. That doctrine, as elaborated by the United States during the Napoleonic struggles, was that neutrals have a right to engage in trade in non-contraband goods except into fortress-ports actually under siege. "Free ships make free goods", as it was succinctly expressed. But during the Civil War blockade there was

an increasing lack of free goods, particularly of non-essential foods. Tea, coffee, chocolate, and salt vanished from the market almost as soon as the blockade was proclaimed. They were swiftly followed by bacon, quinine, chloroform, nails, tools, and cloth. As internal stocks were used up and communication with the Southwest broken by the loss of the Mississippi, essential foods—beef and cereals—joined the list, and the last year of the war found the Confederacy suffering the same bitter want of everything, the same war-weariness, the same famine and collapse of home morale, that is so familiar to the present generation in the case of Germany.

In the old French wars where the law of blockade originated, foodstuffs had never been on the contraband list, neither had minor manufactured articles, such as cloth and matches. The United States had maintained, indeed, that nothing but actual war material, such as powder, shot, guns, and uniforms, could be considered fair contraband. Lincoln's government receded only in the slightest degree from this position during the Civil War; there were additions to the contraband list (like cotton) which might indeed be questioned, but needed very little defense. If Northerners had been accused of imposing a hunger blockade on the South they would have been horrified; they would have protested with perfect sincerity that such a thing was furthest from their intentions. They were devoted to the freedom of the seas and perfectly willing to pass through food cargoes.

Yet the blockade had the same effect as though food had been declared contraband along with munitions. The only party interested in maintaining the freedom of the seas was the Union government, and it was the party doing the blockading. The British authorities had

never been partial to the doctrine; the Confederate government was in such desperate straits for munitions that tonnage could not be afforded for other articles. Private individuals made no effort because the profits to be earned by running the blockade with munitions or cotton were so enormous that shipments of food-stuffs would hardly pay. No one among the low-salaried classes could afford to buy imported food with war freights added. These classes were, in a sense, forced to bid against the government for tonnage; the government always won the auction, with the result that the people suffered and ultimately gave up.

Hence it is not at all likely today that the blockade in the form fixed by the Civil War will be abandoned after having been twice shown as the most effective and least expensive method of bringing down an enemy nation. Any future conflicts are likely to be featured by a couple of violent naval battles for the hegemony of the seas, followed once more by the slow but deadly process of war by starvation. As for the freedom of the seas and the rights of neutrals, they will make good subjects for the League of Nations to debate, but like most matters discussed in that august body, they will be, at the outbreak of hostilities, quietly dropped out the window.



PROBLEM GEOMETRIC

BY LIONEL WIGGAM

DEFT and serene the formal sun
 Enormously proceeds through
 space,
 And through infinity is spun
 A pattern of consummate grace.
 Planet and star devise for us
 Angle, curve, and parallel line.
 We find all things prodigious
 Adhere precisely to design.

A narrow object is the heart,
 Inconsequential and absurd:
 The product of a dubious art,
 Of pattern inexact and blurred.
 Wherefore the heart may boldly dare
 A route no compass has extended,
 Abstractly carve an arc in air
 Uncharted and uncomprehended.