

### Parlor Games: Union And Confederate Diplomats Courted Europe's Favor

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## Review

### PARLOR GAMES

#### Union and Confederate diplomats courted Europe's favor

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**Jones, Howard** *Abraham Lincoln and a New Birth of Freedom: The Union & Slavery in the Diplomacy of the Civil War*. University of Nebraska Press, ISBN 803225822

The focus of this slim but important volume, Howard Jones states, is "on the integral relationship of the Union and slavery to the crisis over foreign intervention." By describing the shifting diplomatic strategies of the Union, the Confederacy, and the chief European powers, Britain and France, Jones persuasively demonstrates that slavery lay at the center of virtually all the crucial debates over intervention, and that the war on the foreign front played a major role in determining the outcome at home.

As the title suggests, Abraham Lincoln was the central player in the drama. As deeply principled as he was pragmatic, Lincoln hated slavery, had always done so, and he understood that the slavery issue was the main cause of the War. But to retain his bipartisan war effort and the loyalty of the border slave states, Lincoln initially insisted that his sole purpose was to preserve the Union. He expected Britain and France, with their anti-slavery sensibilities, to understand that slavery was indeed the great issue in the contest and to refrain from intervention.

Yet with Washington and Richmond both downplaying slavery, British and French leaders felt free to act on self-interest. Driven by their need for cotton and a desire to curtail the United States, the two governments granted the Confederacy belligerent status and stood prepared, should the Confederacy prove itself invincible, to recognize it as a nation.

Such recognition, of course, would have been a catastrophe to the Union. As a member of the family of nations, the Confederacy would have been able to

form alliances with the European powers, which might well have led to their direct involvement in the conflict. Had that happened, Jones writes, the Confederacy would have won the War.

Lincoln understood the danger. Determined to keep Britain and France out of the War, to remove its cause, and to forge a better Union, Lincoln issued his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, announcing that on January 1, 1863, the eradication of slavery would become a Union war objective. But, as Jones shows, Lincoln's proclamation, instead of keeping Britain and France at bay, had the opposite effect.

Fearful that emancipation would provoke a slave uprising and lead to a wider war that imperiled Europe, the two countries came perilously close in the autumn of 1862 to a joint offer of mediation and "de facto recognition" of Confederate nationhood. It was, Jones asserts, the Union's greatest foreign crisis in the War. But it took place "in the private chambers of Paris and London" and was "all unbeknown to American dignitaries" there and in Washington. The crisis passed, however, when 1863 came, no slave revolt had occurred, and Lincoln issued his final Emancipation Proclamation, which imposed an "inescapable moral tone" on the War.

After that, the London government not only "dropped all official talk of intervention," but also emphatically rejected a motion for recognition in the House of Commons. Any lingering notions of British intervention died with the Union's great victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg and with Lincoln's immortal address at Gettysburg, which, as Jones says, was "so critical to defining the war's higher purpose."

Meanwhile, French Emperor Napoleon III resolved to act alone in recognizing the Confederacy because his Grand Plan to establish monarchical rule and a new French empire in the Americas depended on an independent Confederacy. But Union Secretary of State Seward's repeated warning that intervention meant war with the French government forced the emperor to abandon his schemes regarding the Confederacy. By 1864, Jones states, "the possibility of foreign intervention in the war had ceased to exist," and the Confederacy stood alone, unrecognized and doomed.

There are two problems I might note. Jones persistently refers to the Confederacy as "the South," which is inaccurate, given that one southern state,

Kentucky, and three other slave states remained in the Union. Jones also faults most studies of the Civil War for "dwelling on battles and personalities." By his own account, however, the War's crucial battles and the actions of the powerful personalities involved largely determined the course of diplomatic events. These complaints aside, the book deserves praise for giving us an astute, sophisticated analysis of a complex and often misunderstood story.

*Stephen Oates taught history at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and is author of The Whirlwind of War, With Malice Toward None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln, A Woman of Valor: Clara Barton and the Civil War, and other works. He currently is writing a new book on Lincoln.*