

### Caution and Cooperation: The American Civil War in British-American Relations

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## Review

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**Myers, Phillip E.** *Caution and Cooperation: The American Civil War in British-American Relations*. The Kent State University Press, \$55.00 hardcover ISBN 9780873389457

### The Diplomatic History of the Civil War

Few subjects in U.S. diplomatic history have received more attention than Union and Confederate relations with Great Britain during the Civil War. Ephraim D. Adams, Richard J. M. Blackett, D. P. Crook, Norman B. Ferris, Charles M. Hubbard, Brian Jenkins, Howard Jones, Dean B. Mahin and other historians too numerous to name have engaged this matter in great depth. In *Caution and Cooperation*, Phillip E. Myers draws upon extensive primary source research in U.S., Canadian, and British repositories and an impressive grasp of the work of his predecessors to probe anew Anglo-American relations during the conflict. Most especially, Myers addresses the overriding question of the U.S. South's failure to secure the recognition and aid it expected from Britain when it risked war with the North by seceding in 1860-61.

Myers thoroughly covers the major issues that British, Union and Confederate officials grappled with during the war, including Britain's neutrality and recognition of Confederate belligerency, the *Trent* affair, disputes over the Union's enforcement of its blockade and the construction of Confederate commerce raiders in England, the recognition/mediation crisis of 1862, Canadian complications, and the Union-British treaty to repress the African slave trade (1862). Although Myers's focus is on Union-British negotiations, he devotes an entire chapter to Confederate diplomacy.

Revisionist in tone, *Caution and Cooperation* challenges many popular beliefs about Civil War trans-Atlantic affairs. Myers argues, for example, that: (1) Britain's aristocracy was not pro-Confederate; (2) Britain's recognition of Confederate belligerency supported rather than threatened the Union cause; (3)

Union Secretary of State William Seward was not a "loose cannon" during the war's first months; (4) historian Russell Weigley is right in arguing that the Trent affair was "not so dangerous as both the American and British bluster made it appear"; (5) Britain would not have intervened in the war even if General Lee had been victorious at Antietam; (6) Confederate plots on Canadian soil improved rather than endangered Union-British relations; (7) there was "no substance to [Charles] Sumner's postwar threats" (245) of revenge upon Britain for helping the Confederacy if she failed to cede Canada to resolve the "Alabama claims." However, Myers adheres to the common wisdom that Confederate diplomacy stunk, one of the few conclusions in U.S. historiography apparently immune to revisionism. Myers is particularly critical of Confederate efforts early in the war to pressure Britain into intervention by withholding cotton from the international market.

Most of these contentions have been articulated before in one scholarly work or another. What makes *Caution and Cooperation* distinctive is the sustained theme it presents and what might be called its packaging. Myers sandwiches his account of Civil War diplomacy between chapters about Anglo-American relations during antebellum and postbellum times. This allows him to develop two major arguments that he reiterates throughout the work.

First, although Myers does not list Bradford Perkins's works on Anglo-American rapprochements in his bibliography, he applies a Perkins-like perspective to nineteenth-century Anglo-American relations by emphasizing the commercial, strategic, cultural and ideological factors that bound the U.S./Union and Britain together. Decades of antebellum "cooperation" by two powers sharing an "antimartial spirit" (2) ensured that Britain would never intervene on the Confederate side and that the Union would refrain from pushing wartime disputes past the brink. Four years of Union-British cooperation during the conflict guaranteed, in turn, that postwar disputes such as the *Alabama* claims, Fenian raids, and the U.S.'s abrogation of the 1854 Marcy-Elgin Reciprocity and Fisheries Treaty" about U.S.-Canadian relations would not provoke a war. To demonstrate his point, Myers traces in some detail how a joint U.S.-British pursuit of informal empire in East Asia spanned most of the years his study covers. It was unlikely that two powers cooperating in gunboat diplomacy and trade policies in China and Japan would fight each other in the Atlantic or Caribbean.

Second, Myers contends that the methods of Anglo-American diplomacy were as important as its purposes. That is, British and U.S. leaders well before the Civil War mastered the technique of enabling treaties through personal letters and conversations (as in negotiations preceding the Webster-Ashburton, Oregon, Clayton-Bulwer, and Canadian Reciprocity agreements), and Union and British policy makers naturally continued this pattern of private diplomacy once the fighting began. One of the most striking examples Myers provides of this pattern is the anti-slave trade convention that Secretary Seward negotiated with Britain's minister Lord Lyons in 1861-1862 without consulting other members of Lincoln's cabinet. The agreement, one of the great triumphs of Lincoln's diplomacy given that it passed the U.S. Senate unanimously despite a provision allowing for Royal Navy searches and seizures of American vessels, appalled Union Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles. Welles resented Seward's bypassing his colleagues and concluded that Seward had been "duped" (p. 213) into a document detrimental to Union interests.

So committed to peaceful relations were British and U.S. leaders that when they could not resolve disputes, they sensibly deferred them until conditions were riper for settlement. This was the case before the war. The Oregon treaty of 1846, for example, left imprecise the boundary at Puget Sound between U.S. and British territory. And the pattern continued during the war, with both British and Union leaders demonstrating restraint in crisis after crisis, trusting that conditions would eventually be conducive to resolution. The British, for example, waited until after the Civil War ended for a U.S. Court to award almost \$68,000 to the owners of the *Peterhoff*, taken by U.S. Acting Rear Admiral Charles Wilkes near St. Thomas in February 1863.

Myers attributes Anglo-Union cooperation in the Civil War to strong commercial bonds, a shared commitment to informal empire, Britain's need to preserve its military resources for potential application against the rising threats of France and Prussia and its unwillingness to risk U.S. attacks on the Canadian provinces, and other factors including, of course, the South's identification with slavery and Lincoln's conversion to emancipation. Myers's argument is compelling. For instance, he draws on Jay Sexton's *Debtor Diplomacy* (2005) to show that during the *Trent* crisis, British banking houses played a key role for peace by threatening to refuse loans to the Union so long as war seemed pending. But I suspect that given the way he presents his evidence, many readers will finish this book with the misleading impression that a third Anglo-American war was not only unthinkable between 1861 and 1865, but also for the entire

nineteenth century after the War of 1812. Rabid Anglophobia and militarism, however, ran deeper in the U.S. than Myers allows, and disputes such as Oregon and the *Trent* affair had more potential to erupt in conflict than Myers's narrative implies. Americans were not so much antiwar as averse to standing armies. They constantly nominated and elected generals as presidents and were confident that they could rapidly grow their military with volunteers if war came—as they did successfully in the conflict with Mexico of 1846-1848. Myers construes what might be called a pacific synthesis of Anglo-American relations by ignoring Anglophobic "Young America" antebellum Democratic politicians such as Lewis Cass and Stephen Douglas; his emphasis, rather, is upon U.S.-British peacemakers like the Barings, Lord Aberdeen, and Daniel Webster. Myers's surprising slip (252) respecting postwar diplomacy that President Grant saw to Charles Sumner's dumping "as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for opposing the president's desire to annex Cuba" raises questions about Myers's handling of the interplay between domestic politics and foreign relations. The Grant-Sumner split over Grant's scheme to annex the *Dominican Republic* is one of the best-known chapters of that *general's* presidency.

This book's strengths far overshadow its arguable weaknesses. I found *Caution and Cooperation* extremely informative on the process of Union-British negotiations and its chronology. Myers's depictions of key personalities, such as Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer William E. Gladstone, are illuminating and persuasive, and his plunge into the thicket of slave trade treaty negotiations and blockade disputes is adept. On the one hand, Myers demonstrates, British leaders refrained from challenging the Union blockade (even off neutral ports where according to international law they would have had cause to do so), refrained from threatening protests when the Union actually seized British vessels, barred blockade-runners from docking at Bermuda for repair work, and detained the Laird rams rather than allow them to steam for the Confederacy. On the other hand, the Lincoln administration bent to British sensitivities by returning captured British mailbags, appeasing British opinion by transferring its combative admiral Charles Wilkes to the Pacific, supporting U.S. prize courts releasing captured British blockade-runners, and purposely allowing leaks in its own blockade so that some Confederate cotton could reach England, partially relieving the depression in the British textile industry.

*Caution & Cooperation* makes an important contribution to the historiography of the Civil War and U.S. diplomacy. Its holistic approach to U.S.-British relations is thought-provoking and rewarding.

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