

THE BLOCKADE, BLOCKADE RUNNERS, PRIVATEERS, AND COMMERICAL RAIDERS AS EFFECTIVE WAR POLICIES

By: Leslie J. Rodman

When Fort Sumter fell, President Abraham Lincoln issued a call for seventy-five thousand men to meet the Southern rebellion. In a matter of days, the president followed his first call with a second, declaring a blockade of all southern ports. Concurrent with the second proclamation, Federal authorities began seizing dispatches from the telegraph offices in Washington, hoping to find evidence against Southern collaborators within the Federal government.¹

A decision to implement a naval blockade of such magnitude as a first measure of naval warfare was unprecedented in 1861. Such a strategy fell even more into question when the size of the navy's inventory of modern vessels, which stood at only forty-two, was taken into consideration. Compounding the numbers dilemma was the fact that most of this inventory was serving in waters far from the United States.² This left fewer than a dozen warships available to patrol 3,500 miles of coastline, which included ten major ports, 180 inlets, bays, and mouths of rivers.³

This paper will undertake a critical analysis of the naval blockade as an effective war policy by the Lincoln administration, as well as the effectiveness its countermeasures, blockade-running, privateering, and raiding. The thesis of this paper will argue that although the blockade did not successfully close all

¹ Evans, Clement A., Gen., Editor, Confederate Military History, a Library of Confederate States History, Confederate Publishing Company, Atlanta, GA, 1899, Volume 1, pg. 399.

² Scharf, J. Thomas, History of the Confederate States Navy:: From its Organization to the Surrender of its Last Vessel, Random House Value Publishing, Inc., New York, NY 1996, pg. 433.

Southern ports, an impossible task in retrospect, it did pose a detrimental effect upon the Southern economy, which was woefully concentrated in agriculture, and dependant upon imports for most all manufactured goods. The effects of the blockade were not limited to imports, as the concentration in cotton left the Southern economy exposed to a dependency upon exports as a means of generating income, and thus, susceptible to such a policy. Thus, the real argument here is that although the blockade was less than operationally effective, and while blockade running, (although refined into probably the only efficient enterprise of the Confederate Government), privateering, and commercial raiding had their moments, none of the aforementioned were able to have any major impact upon the ability of the United States Navy to control the seas. In short, the blockade was successful in spite of the vastness of its mission primarily because the structure of the Southern economy rendered it dependent upon almost everything needed to fight a war. Thus, the blockade, in, and of itself a long-term strategy, contributed to the shortening of the war and the saving of lives. Certainly by that definition, it was an effective policy.

Implementation of the Blockade

As if the logistical obstacles of implementing the blockade were not enough, the Federal government faced the problem of securing international recognition of its blockade. Just the size of the navy alone left many in the international community doubtful the United States Navy could enforce such a

³ McPherson, James M., Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era, Oxford University Press, Oxford England, New York NY, 1988, pg369.

policy.⁴ Most of the influentials in Europe declared neutrality almost immediately after Fort Sumter, and many of the less influential followed shortly thereafter. By declaring their neutrality, each of the neutrals could place limitations and restrictions on both navies, in terms of number of visits as well as the ability to refit and/or take on war supplies and personnel.⁵

However, notwithstanding the size of its fleet and other predictions of doom, the Federal navy had some important things going for it. The first and foremost was that of manpower. Although 373 of the navy's 1,554 officers, and a few of its seamen resigned to join the Confederate Navy, most remained loyal, and those who left were easily replaced from the ranks of a large merchant marine fleet. In this regard, the navy held a considerable advantage over the army, which lost some of its best commanders to the South, and had to scramble to keep from losing the war in the east until 1864 when Ulysses S. Grant took command. By contrast, the navy held an advantage in capable leadership in the personages of Gideon Welles and Gustavus Vasa Fox, which allowed the Federals to establish naval dominance as early as the spring of 1862.⁶

The Men of the Confederacy

Whatever the obstacles faced by the Federal navy in the beginning, paled in comparison to those faced by the South. Most all of the country's industrial base was in the North, and the South seemed to have shortages of almost

⁴ Soley, James Russell, The Blockade and the Cruisers, Volume II Campaigns of the Civil War, Blue & Gray Press, pg. 28.

⁵ Soley, James Russell, The Blockade and the Cruisers pg. 29.

⁶ McPherson, James M., Battle Cry of Freedom, pg. 313.

everything. But, notwithstanding its shortfalls, which would prove to be the ultimate point upon which victory and defeat would turn the South had outstanding naval leadership in the personages of Stephen Mallory, Raphael Semmes, and James D. Bullock. Mallory, a former U.S. Senator from Florida would become Secretary of the Navy and literally build a navy from scratch, Semmes would prove himself an able commander and commerce raider, and Bulloch, an invaluable acquirer of war materials.⁷

From the beginning, the acquisition of war materials was of paramount importance to the South. Bulloch came to the job with a rich seagoing background of fourteen years service in the United States Navy, as well as eight years in commercial shipping, and an innate understanding of seagoing vessels. Possibly his most important however, were his business skills, social graces and tact, together making him the ideal man to find ways to circumvent the laws of a neutral such as Great Britain to build ships for export to the Confederate Navy.

Soon after his arrival in Liverpool on June 1861, Bulloch engaged a solicitor to advise him on the requirements of Britain's Foreign Enlistment Act, then set about in great secrecy to negotiate contracts for two-steam cruisers that ultimately became the commerce raiders *Florida* and *Alabama*. That fall, while the steamers were under construction, Bulloch purchased the steamer *Fingal*, armed it with short rifles, bayonets, ammunition, two 4 ½ inch muzzle-loading rifled guns, with carriages, and all essential gear, two breech-loading 2 ½ inch

⁷ McPherson, James M., Battle Cry of Freedom, pg. 314.

steel-rifled guns for boats or field service, with ammunition, and steamed out of the harbor.⁸

A few weeks later, with Bulloch at the helm, the *Fingal* sneaked through the Union blockade on the other side of the Atlantic and landed in Savannah. Bulloch's selection of Savannah as a port of destination proved to be as unfortunate as it was unwise, as he was soon trapped in the harbor by Union blockaders. Bulloch abandoned the *Fingal*, and the vessel was ultimately converted into the ironclad ram *C.C.S. Atlanta*. Upon escaping the blockaders at Savannah, Bulloch returned to England, ever intent upon assuming command of the new steamer 290, at the time, being completed as the *Enrica*, a name that would later be changed to the *C.S.S. Alabama*. But much to Bulloch's surprise and disappointment, command of the *Alabama* went to Raphael Semmes. Although disappointed, Bulloch took the *Alabama* by means of stealth, from her dry dock, just hours before British officials, acting under diplomatic pressure from the United States Government attempted confiscation, and moved her to the Azores where Semmes assumed command, and Bulloch returned to his procurement activities. The commercial raiders built in Britain under contracts negotiated by Bulloch became an important part of Confederate naval strategy, roaming the waters of the Atlantic from early 1862 until the demise of the *C.S.S. Alabama* at the hands of the *U.S.S. Kearsarge* on June 19, 1864 at Cherbourg France.⁹

⁸ Stern, Philip Van Doren, Secret Missions of the Civil War, Under International copyright by Philip Van Doren Stern, 1959, pg. 83.

⁹ McPherson, James M., Battle Cry of Freedom, pg. 315.

Privateering and Commercial Raiding

At the time Abraham Lincoln issued his second proclamation declaring a naval blockade of Southern ports, Jefferson Davis issued a proclamation of his own on April 17, 1861 offering letters of marque to any southern ship-owner wishing to become a privateer; an offer to which about twenty responded.¹⁰ This brought about panic among Northern, as well as neutral merchants, who began to pressure the navy to divert ships from blockade duty to hunt down, and destroy the “pirates.” But as a wartime policy, privateering was short lived, and only was mildly successful. Not only was its success measured, it also caused certain difficulties for both sides. From the Confederate perspective, had the energy and resources spent on privateering been spent trading cotton for arms during the early months of the war when the seas were relatively open, the Confederacy might have been able to earn foreign exchange badly needed to mount its war effort. In reality, the brief life cycle of the experiment ultimately proved to be a drain on Southern resources and manpower.¹¹

From the point of view of the Union, privateering raised some sticky legal issues as to how the practice had changed the legal definition of the war. The Lincoln administration had long refused to recognize the Confederacy as a legitimate government, and had reaffirmed this position by threatening to treat any captured privateer as a pirate, rather than prisoner of war. Accordingly, by mid-summer Federal prisons were bulging with men awaiting trial, forcing

¹⁰ Scharf, J. Thomas, History of the Confederate States Navy, pg. 53.

Jefferson Davis to respond by declaring for every privateer hanged for piracy, the Confederacy would execute a Federal prisoner held in one of its prisons.¹² This came to a head in the fall when a court in Philadelphia convicted several privateer officers of piracy, and sentenced them to be hanged. Davis promptly ordered Federal prisoners at Libby Prison in Richmond to draw lots, the losers, including the grandson of Paul Revere were to be executed. While the country prepared itself for an “*eye for an eye*” showdown, Lincoln suddenly backed down, and on February 3, 1862, announced a policy of treating captured privateers as prisoners of war.¹³

By early 1862, the naval character of the war had changed, and most privateers had disappeared. Some of this was because the blockade had made it difficult to bring prizes into Southern ports, and most neutral ports had been closed to them.¹⁴ Consequently, from early 1862 until the end of the war, the Confederacy relied upon commercial raiders to conduct operations against commercial shipping. The real difference was that the raiders were official navy vessels, manned by navy personnel, and were designed to sink, rather than capture commercial vessels.

The transition in naval operations from a reliance on privateers to the use of commercial raiders began in June 1861 when the *C.C. S. Sumter* captained by Raphael Semmes steamed through the blockade at the mouth of the Mississippi

¹¹ Nevins, Allan, War For The Union 1861-62: The Improvised War, Copyright by Mary R. Nevins, Executrix of the Estate of Allan Nevins, Konecky & Konecky, New York, NY, 1971, pg. 208.

¹² Scharf, J. Thomas, History of the Confederate States Navy, pg. 71.

¹³ McPherson, James M., Battle Cry of Freedom, pg. 316.

and steamed into the gulf. This not only launched Semmes's career as a Confederate raider, but also began a period of the war in which commercial shipping in the Atlantic and the Gulf fell under a new, and much more formidable threat than in the old days of the privateers. Over a six-month period, the *Sumter* captured and/or burned eighteen Union vessels before being trapped in the harbor at Gibraltar in January 1862.

Realizing his predicament, Semmes sold the *Sumter* to the British, escaped and made his way to England where he took command of the *C.S.S. Alabama*. For the next twenty-two months, Semmes wreaked havoc upon commercial shipping, seizing a total of 64 Union ships, 52 in the first ten months, as well as sinking the warship *Hatterias*, before meeting its own demise at Cherbourg France on June 19, 1864. For all practical purposes, the loss of the *Alabama* and the *Florida* closed the book on the Confederate commerce raiders, and by the end of 1864, nearly all of the Confederate raiders were gone, as the Confederacy itself was facing the final stages of its own demise. While the privateers and the commercial raiders both had their successes, neither was able to mount a serious threat to the blue-water supremacy of the United States Navy.

15

The Enterprise of Blockade-Running

By 1864, the Confederacy had turned most all of its attention to blockade running as a means of sustaining its war effort. Since the law of the seas

¹⁴ Romanus, Charles F Army Historical Series American Military History, Chapter 9, Center of Military History, United States Army, Washington D.C., 1989, pg 202.

considered a vessel to be in breach of a blockade when it departed for a blockaded port, the distance between the port of departure, and the port of destination became very important in terms of risk. ¹⁶ To deal with these problems, commercial shippers began break a voyage into a series of shorter distances utilizing intermediate ports. As the practice of blockade running grew, four intermediate ports, Bermuda, Nassau, Havana, and Matamoros emerged as the favorite stopover points. Of these, Nassau was the most popular, since it was conveniently located on the island of New Providence, a mere one hundred and eighty miles due east of Florida. ¹⁷

Not only was this practice safer, it was also practical since shorter trips required small quantities of coal, and increased the cargo room available for stowing. In fact, this supported how the crews were paid. Captains of blockade-runners received as much as \$5,000 in gold for a successful run while other officers received \$750 to \$3,500, and common seamen \$250. As an incentive, the captain could often reserve part of the cargo space for his own smuggling operation. This increased his profits, and made the risk of capture well worthwhile. ¹⁸ Soon, the profitability of the goods carried began to determine the kind of cargo carried by the blockade-runner. While the Confederacy was in desperate need of heavy equipment, the lighter and faster blockade runners could see far greater profits hauling lighter consumer goods. These goods were

¹⁵ McPherson, James M., Battle Cry of Freedom, pg. 316.

¹⁶ Scharf, J. Thomas, History of the Confederate States Navy, pg. 455.

¹⁷ Scharf, J. Thomas, History of the Confederate States Navy, pg. 479.

¹⁸ McPherson, James M., Battle Cry of Freedom, pg. 380.

not only more profitable, they were also lighter and had a better chance of making it through the blockade on faster shallow draft ships.

Summary and Conclusions

When coming to conclusions about the effectiveness of the blockade one needs to look at the numbers. Throughout the four years of the war, the Union blockaders brought in a total of 1,149 prizes, 210 of which were steamers. There were also 355 vessels burned, sunk, driven on shore, or otherwise destroyed, of which 85 were steamers; making a total of 1,504 vessels of all classes. The value of these vessels and their cargoes has been estimated at thirty-one million dollars. When compared to the War of 1812, generally considered a successful naval war, (1,719 captures) this blockade would appear to have been a success. However, to make this comparison more credible, one must realize that the War of 1812 was waged against a commercial nation, and the number of vessels open to capture was much greater.¹⁹

But strictly from a military perspective, the blockade was vitally important to the Union war effort, shortening the war by months or even years. Geographic isolation, and the want of an industrial sector made the South dependent upon imports for almost all military as well as consumer goods, and over the years of the war, attrition brought this dependency to a fatal conclusion.²⁰

The effects of the blockade were not just limited to imported goods. The dire economic conditions in the South were acerbated by the limitations the

¹⁹ Soley, James Russell, The Blockade and the Cruisers, pg. 32.

blockade placed on the exportation of cotton, which was the region's primary export. There never was a large amount of floating capital at the South, as most investment was in land and slaves. By way of example, the 1860 census reflected that black Georgians, who were forty-four percent of the state's population, constituted forty-five percent of its wealth. This all translated into a slave value of just over three hundred million dollars, making them the most valuable property in Georgia, worth more than twice the value of the land they tilled.²¹

While many of the Southern states could show a disproportionate share of the nation's wealth, most of this prosperity was financed and maintained by income received from the sale of cotton. When cotton exports were cut off, or severely limited, the government was deprived of revenue vital to financing of its war effort and the civilian economy the very means of existence. The South had long assumed that the world's dependence upon cotton would protect it from any disruption in trade, and that any blockade would ultimately backfire, and prove fatal to those who would adopt such a policy.²²

While the assumption that cotton exports would protect the South from a blockade was in error, the assumptions about the damage such a policy would do to foreign markets were accurate. Once implemented, the blockade ignited cries of outrage from effected interests in England and France, bringing about the closure of mills in Lancashire, the great cotton manufacture center in England,

²⁰ Soley, James Russell, The Blockade and the Cruisers, pg 31.

²¹ Kennett, Lee, March Through Georgia: The Story of Soldiers and Civilians During Sherman's Campaign, Harper & Collins, New York, NY 1995, pg. 20.

damaging the British economy to the tune of millions of pounds. But even in the face of economic distress, there is no evidence the British Government ever seriously considered intervention on behalf of the Confederacy.²³

While the blockade played a key role in the Union war effort, it also became the best organized and administered of all Confederate wartime activities, being refined into an extremely efficient business. Since the South was isolated and had no industrial base, it was dependent upon imports for all finished goods, both consumer as well as military. This dependency elevated blockade-running to a new priority within the Confederate bureaucracy.²⁴ Much of the credit for realigning priorities within the bureaucracy went to Josiah Gorgas, head of the Confederate Bureau of Ordnance, who purchased five cruisers and directly put the Confederate Government in the business of blockade-running. Although success was immediate, the War Department was slow to adopt the practice as official policy. Much of this reluctance was delusional, as many within the department continued to cling to a belief that a resurgence in domestic manufacturing, coupled with official recognition by Great Britain and France would soon make blockade-running unnecessary. But a domestic industrial sector never developed, partly because there was so little to begin with, and recognition never happened, making blockade running the sole source of procurement. Once this was recognized, the practice was expanded,

²² McPherson, James M., Battle Cry of Freedom, pg. 546.

²³ Soley, James Russell, The Blockade and the Cruisers, pg 34.

²⁴ Vandiver, Frank E., Rebel Brass: The Confederate Command System, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA, 1956, pg. 113.

organized, and made a central part of the logistical pattern for the Confederacy.

25

In 1864 the Bureau of Foreign Supplies was formed and given official control over all government blockade-running activities. This was exactly what was needed, as now a single bureau had sufficient authority to allocate shipping space, cotton and other supplies to bureaus most in need, as well as administer all phases of the foreign purchasing program.²⁶

As blockade-running became more efficient on the American side of the Atlantic, it was becoming chaotic in Europe. Almost every state, as well as department commander had purchasing agents in Europe attempting to procure war goods, each competing with the other, as well as with Federal purchasing agents driving up the cost of everything.²⁷

The system was finally put into order in 1863 when J. Colin McRae was sent to Europe as a special agent to take control of all financial transactions, including the administration and supervision of all contracts and payments. With the support of the Josiah Gorgas, McRae successfully convinced the Secretary of War to set up a companion department to the Bureau of Foreign Supplies, which streamlined the movement of essential supplies between Confederate bureaus.

The question of why blockade running was so successful in a bureaucracy where nothing else seemed to work is probably best attributed to necessity. It is also possible that since blockade-running was new, there was no established

²⁵ Vandiver, Frank E. Rebel Brass, pg. 117.

²⁶ Vandiver, Frank E., Rebel Brass, pg.117.

tradition or red tape in place to hinder its flow. Whatever the reasons, out of a need for survival, the inter-bureau jealousies and conflicts infecting every other enterprise of the Confederate government were never a factor. All had to work together for mutual survival. One thing is certain, that blockade running marked the high point of Confederate logistical efficiency.²⁸

One may reach several important conclusions from the study of the blockade over the years 1861-64. First, while the Confederates some success against American shipping interests by use of privateers and raiders, they were never able to mount a serious threat to the Union dominance of the seas. In fact, the time and energy spent on privateering proved a drain to the Confederate war effort. The critical window of opportunity opened and closed during the first months of the war and the Confederacy failed to capitalize by selling as much cotton as possible to accumulate foreign exchange.

Second, much of the South's vulnerability to the blockade was directly attributable to the region's reliance upon cotton as a sole export, and an unwillingness to diversify its economic structure. Without question, the North was not as industrially advanced as it needed to be, but whatever its limitations, it was far ahead of the South. Much of the South's problems in the 1860s were the product of a lack of vision in the 1820s. Throughout the first half of the 19th century the Southern elite class refused to entertain any form of structural change which would have supported industrialization.²⁹ This seems to have

²⁷ Vandiver, Frank E., Rebel Brass, pg. 118.

²⁸ Vandiver, Frank E., Rebel Brass, pg. 121.

²⁹ Craven, Avery, The Coming of the Civil War, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL., 1942, pg. 110.

been much more than just a preference for agriculture, but more a deep-seated inferiority complex within the Southern psyche.

In the response to the industrialization in the North, Southern attitudes seemed to coalesce around a defensive-aggressive attitude fostered, in part, by a sense of economic subordination. The census of 1850 began to show the first cracks in the national economic structure, and laid bare the angst of a nation, which had long equated growth with progress. During the 1840s, population growth in the North had exceeded the South by 20 percent, and nearly three times the number of people born in slave states had migrated to the free states than the reverse. These numbers are buoyed by the fact that during the same period, seven-eighths of all foreign immigrants settled in the North where jobs were plentiful and there was no competition from slave labor.³⁰

In addition to these shifting demographics, the transportation revolution, opened distant markets, and restructured the emerging American economy, allowing farmers, for the first time, to produce a surplus, establish trade, earn valuable foreign exchange, and lay a foundation upon which the Industrial Revolution could flourish.

As in the industrialization of nearly a half-century later, the development of transportation was not equally proportioned between the two regions. By 1850 only 14 percent of canal mileage ran through slave states. In 1840, the South had 44 percent of the country's rail mileage, while by 1850, the escalation of industrialization in the North had reduced the South's share to 26 percent. Even more discouraging to the Southern economy were the data on industrial

production. While the slave states could boast in 1840 of having 42 percent of the population, they could show only 18 percent of total American manufacturing capacity. All of this laid the groundwork for a significant regional advantage, and when war came and the South was forced to embark upon a war effort absent an industrial infrastructure.

The only economic numbers in the 1850 census favoring the South were in agriculture. By 1850, cotton prices had climbed to nearly double those of 1840s of 5.5 cents per pound. But this only created an illusion of economic well being, as concentration in the production of cotton became the best illustration of the South's economic inferiority. A most shocking statistic reveals that the cotton producing states actually consumed less than 5 percent of their total crop. Of the portion not internally consumed, 70 percent was exported overseas, while the remainder went to mills in the North where the value added by manufacture into finished goods equaled the price of the raw cotton to the producer. This situation was worsened by the fact that the South imported two-thirds of its clothing and other finished goods from the North or from Europe, creating a severe trade deficit.

This all began to resemble the mercantilism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which built England and France into economic superpowers at the expense of their colonies. To the mercantilist, the colonies represented an endless supply of low cost raw materials as well as markets for their finished goods. This is exactly the relationship, which developed between the American South and its northern neighbors.

³⁰ McPherson, James M., Battle Cry of Freedom, pg. 91.

In reality, nearly all commerce in the South was either directly or indirectly controlled by Northern interests, a circumstance which left many Southerners feeling more economically enslaved than their Negroes. To many, this economic “*vassalage*” manifested itself in bitterness, which only hardened the unwillingness to adapt. Thus, the blockade may have been less than totally successful to the eye of a casual observer, but considering the South’s dependence upon imports for almost every form of finished good, and exports for most all its foreign exchange, the blockade turned out to be an effective wartime strategy.³¹

Third, from an economic perspective, the blockade was effective in that it influenced the type of goods shipped. Since there was more profit in light-weight consumer goods, which could be loaded in greater volume on lighter, faster ships, these goods most often made it through the blockade at the expense of heavier industrial equipment which took up too much space, and was less profitable, but was desperately needed. Thus, the blockade succeeded not only in interrupting the flow of trade between the South and its European partners, it also interrupted the flow of heavy industrial goods, which were critical to the South’s war effort.

However, from a purely operational point of view, the blockade was only moderately successful, at best, more a sieve than a cordon. Blockade-runners stood little chance of being caught, and the profits were high compared to the risk taken. But that having been said, the value of the blockade to the Union war effort was unquestionable, due primarily to a non-diversified Southern economy. There is little doubt that had the blockade not been in place, and the free

³¹ McPherson, James M., Battle Cry of Freedom, pg. 92.

commerce between the South and its European trading partners left uninterrupted, the war would have lasted much longer, and cost more lives.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Craven, Avery, The Coming of the Civil War, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1942.

Evans, Clement A., Gen., Editor, A Library of Confederate States History, Confederate Publishing Company, Atlanta, GA 1899.

Kennett, Lee, Marching Through Georgia: The Story of Soldiers and Civilians During Sherman's Campaign, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1995.

McPherson, James M., Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era, Oxford University Press, Oxford England, New York, NY, 1988.

Nevins, Allan, War For The Union 1861-62: The Improvised War, Volume I, Mary R. Nevins, Executrix for the Estate of Allan Nevins, Konecky & Konecky, New York, NY, 1971.

Romanus, Charles F., Army Historical Series: American Military History, Center of Military History, United States Army, Washington D.C., 1989.

Scharf, J. Thomas, History of the Confederate States Navy: From Its Organization to the Surrender of Its Last Vessel, Random House Value Publishing, Inc., New York, NY 1996.

Soley, James Russell, The Blockade and the Cruisers, Volume VII Campaigns of the Civil War, The Blue & Gray Press

Stern, Philip Van Doren, Secret Missions of the Civil War, International copyright Union by Philip Van Doren Stern, 1959.

Vandiver, Frank E., Rebel Brass: The Confederate Command System, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA, 1956.