

**History 282 US Diplomatic
Discussion Transcript for September 15, 2020
Lincolnian Diplomacy**

Main Reading: Chapter 5, Herring

It was not by accident that I chose to title this section in our syllabus as “Lincolnian Diplomacy.” Unlike Herring, I tend to give Lincoln more credit (or blame) for US foreign policy initiatives than his powerful secretary of state, William Seward. Both Lincoln and Seward were master politicians, but as Moyra Schaffler’s student essay shows (assigned for class on Thursday), at moments of crisis, Lincoln always seemed in command over Seward. Yet regardless, the Trent affair and the US acquisition of Alaska both showcase Seward’s considerable talents as a diplomatic strategist.

The following selections come from student comments & questions.

CIVIL WAR PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

STUDENT COMMENT: “One word that kept popping up in this chapter that I haven’t seen much up till now is propaganda. Herring reflects on how the Union and the South both tried to influence the public opinion in Great Britain and France towards sympathy with their cause. As literacy rates in the United States and Europe continued to increase, a wider part of the population had turned to the written word for news. Accordingly, and especially during a war that was highly ideological, each side found it worth investing in opinionated journalists to spread their ideas. The Union hired “European journalists to write favorable articles” and “gave speeches discussing the horrors of slavery” (240), while the Confederacy promoted a pro-southern organization that used factsheets, handbills, and lectures to sway British opinion toward recognition” (235). These tactics on both sides highlight the key role that European powers of Britain and France played. It would not be worth it for either side to invest in propaganda if they didn’t see foreign support as crucial to winning the war. As this was a civil war, many people forget that foreign affairs and diplomacy still played a major in the war effort on both sides because United States was not yet powerful enough within the international system to not look toward Europe in a crisis.”

TRENT AFFAIR (1861)

STUDENT COMMENT: “Before taking this class, I thought of diplomacy as a complex process between large foreign entities rather than an intimate process between individuals and it still is difficult for me to grasp just how the actions of one person can cause large-scale effects in relations between countries. The Trent Affair is one of many examples of this, as naval officer Charles Wilkes single-handedly sparked major conflict with Britain. He made the decision on his own to board the British neutral ship, *Trent*, and captured Confederate diplomats James Mason and John Slidell as they were heading to Europe. By doing this, he did not follow the official rules of “search and seizure” and thus violated the freedom of the seas practice that Americans preached.

This infuriated the British, who requested that the U.S. denounce the actions of Wilkes, apologize, and release the two men while also being ready to terminate cordial relations. Just as a single person was able to provoke this conflict, two individuals were mostly responsible for de-escalating it. President Abraham Lincoln and his Secretary of State William Henry Seward recognized the need to compromise with the British. While Lincoln handled the public within the borders, Seward negotiated with the British- he justified Wilkes's seizure of the two men in terms of freedom of the seas, "opposition to impressment" and because they were considered contraband, but condemned the way he did so and thus released Mason and Slidell. While Lincoln and Seward essentially talked Britain down from war with the United States, Herring still wrote that the Trent Affair encouraged British leaders to think that the best way to "deal" with the United States was to "take a hard line"- which I'm assuming means a more rigid approach. I never had considered how individuals can play such a large role in relations between entire countries, like in the way that Wilkes' decision to capture the men led to Britain's perception that the whole country was deceptive and did not play by the rules."

STUDENT COMMENT: "The American Civil War, in some sense, was a diplomatic battle. While the Confederacy desperately looked for European recognition, economic and military aid, the Union struggled to secure European neutrality and refusal to intervene (Herring, 226). The indifference from the British and the French was favorable to the Union, until the 1861 Trent Affair, when "an impetuous individual could provoke a major crisis" (Herring, 232). I was shocked by how quickly this disastrous event put the Lincolnian administration into a national crisis. The British were outrageous, they did mobilize troops to Canada and additional ships to the Western Atlantic (Herring 232-233). Neither the United States nor Great Britain wanted war, but it was clear that, the Trent incident had sparked a major diplomatic disagreement, which could result in armed conflict."

STUDENT CONFLICT: "In 1861, the Civil War broke out, and the Republic was divided between Washington D.C. and Richmond, VA. In the situation that European powers could not assure which side would win, most of them indecisively declared neutrality and wished the result of the war could serve their national interests best. Secretary of State William H. Seward threatened Europe and tried his best to deter any European intervention into the War. However, there was one incident in November 1861 that might have drawn the British into the War and possibly led them to ally with the Confederate. Captain Charles Wilkes captured newly appointed Confederate diplomats James Mason and John Slidell aboard the British neutral vessel Trent. Although his act of seizing the ship transporting the southern diplomats was legitimate, Great Britain firmly protested because "impulsive and ambitious" Captain Wilkes did not follow the proper rules of search (p. 232). Soon the tension between the two countries escalated, and the British government "demanded that the United States disavow Wilkes's actions, release Mason and Slidell, and apologize" (p. 232). Traditional roles reversed, the United States and Great Britain were on the edge of leading the American Civil war to be a world war. Enraged and furious Great Britain "prepared to break relations" with the United States and "took steps to fortify Canadians" (p. 233). However, U.S. public

opinion on the Trent Affair was divided. Some acclaimed Wilkes' seizure of two southern diplomats, and others criticized Wilkes that he "violated the nation's traditional stand for freedom of the seas" (p. 233). However, Lincoln and his secretary of state Seward "gradually recognized the hornet's nest Wilkes had stirred" (p. 233). They were afraid of possible British intervention in the Civil War or alliance with the Confederate, which might work as a game-changer against them. Experienced and skillful politician Seward killed two birds with one stone; he released Mason and Slidell to alleviate the conflict with England, but he justified the cause of the illegal seizure to save face. "Seward spoke loudly but acted quietly" (p. 247). I think Seward should get the most credit for de-escalating the unnecessary and conflict with Great Britain when especially the Republic was in warfare and even one minor factor could affect the whole game."

STUDENT COMMENT: "When it comes to the individuals most responsible for deescalating the Trent Affair, Herring mentions how the "dying Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's closest advisor, softened the tone of the cabinet's ultimatum, giving diplomacy a chance to work" (232). Although this is a brief mention, and Herring notes that the British were still prepared afterward to engage in war with the U.S., I would have been interested to see to what extent Prince Albert (or other international figures) mediated British anger and, perhaps, delayed their war-making plans. On the U.S. side, President Lincoln was key to settling the domestic population, which was divided on whether to celebrate the capture of the Confederates, to fear or to invite the British threats of war, or to reprimand Wilkes' violation of freedom of the seas. Meanwhile, Secretary of State William Henry Seward arranged a compromise with Great Britain, in which the two diplomats who had been captured through Wilkes' breaking of protocol were released, while pointing out that, as two Confederate dispatches on a neutral British ship, "since they were contraband... their seizure had been legal" (233). Without such de-escalation, I doubt (as does Herring) that the Union would have withstood affronts by both Great Britain and the Confederacy."

SEWARD'S FOLLY (1867)

STUDENT COMMENT: "One of the key contextual factors that made the purchase of Alaska by the US in 1867 possible, was that the strategic geo-position of the Russian territory allowed for it become a "potential way station towards domination fo East Asian trade," (Herring 257). Similarly, previous Confederate attacks on Union ships in the Aleutian Islands in 1865 emphasized the strategic geopolitical significance of Alaska in the northern Pacific. For the US, it was also seen as a way to pressure Canada to join the United States. This helped Seward lobby more effectively citing such economic and strategic reasons for the purchase, despite facing conservative hostility in the Congress. Other factors that influenced this purchase were the Russian fears that the US would just capture Alaska with no compensation, the weakening of Russian influence over the territory, Russia's growing "defensible" territories in Central and East Asia leaving them with less time/resources to focus on Alaska and their desire to solidify friendly relations with the United States."

STUDENT COMMENT: "The earliest positive note in Russian-American relations is most likely the successful negotiations in the 1820s regarding Russian North America (pg. 157). The two countries would draw much closer during the American Civil War, when Russian and American interests were conveniently aligned. Unlike France and Britain, which the United States had seen as rivals to its interests in California and Hawaii, as well as in East Asia, Russia's expansion (chiefly in Central Asia) did not offend US interests. Herring notes that, in the 1840s, the two powers were bound by both economic and cultural ties, with Americans providing material support to the Russians in the Crimean War (pg. 228). Added to this was a political and moral issue, "the rise of abolitionism in both countries in the 1850s," as well as a shared strategic interest: their mutual concern about the British Empire (pg. 228). Russia thus strongly endorsed the Union in the Civil War, for both moral and practical reasons (pg. 229), the former again highlighting the importance of slavery and abolitionism to the international relations of that period. The practical aspect of this relationship also emanated from the American side: Union officials were aware of the distraction provided by the Polish rebellion, and Secretary of State Seward "[expressed] contentment to leave the Poles to the tender mercies of the tsar," despite US rhetoric on self-determination (pg. 245). Seward's extensive plans for expansion were helped by this long-standing mutually beneficial relationship. It highlighted the lofty and practical nature of the US-Russian relationship: the sale was a capstone on an era of positive relations between St. Petersburg and Washington (pg. 257-8) while also offering the Russians compensation for something the United States might have been able to simply demand in the future. For the beleaguered Johnson administration, it also offered a policy victory in a time of divided domestic politics (pg. 257). It is thus no surprise that both Seward and his Russian counterpart were both keen on reaching an agreement."