

**THE CRISIS OF FOREIGN  
INTERVENTION IN THE WAR  
OF SECESSION, SEPTEMBER-  
NOVEMBER, 1862**

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The Crisis of Foreign Intervention in the War of Secession, September-November, 1862 by  
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CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS

BOSTON

1914

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*Prof. Murray Seayford*

[The following paper, prepared for the Massachusetts Historical Society, and submitted at its April Meeting, 1914, appears in the printed *Proceedings* of that Society, vol. XLVII, pp. 372-424.]

## THE CRISIS OF FOREIGN INTERVENTION IN THE WAR OF SECESSION, 1862

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At the November meeting, 1911 -- thirty months since -- it may by some be remembered I submitted a paper -- "The Trent Affair; An Historical Retrospect" -- which now appears in its proper place in our *Proceedings*. The episode then discussed was one of indisputable historical interest, and I was able to speak of it to a certain extent from personal recollection. What I now submit amounts to a sequel. I then had occasion to refer in some detail to the Confederate Commissioners arrested in transit by Capt. Wilkes -- James M. Mason of Virginia, and John Slidell of Louisiana. I described their seizure, their subsequent detention at Fort Warren, their release, and, finally, their arrival at their original destinations in the two European capitals -- London and Paris -- there to represent the Confederacy.

The present narrative has in it not a few of the elements which enter into works of fiction; and, on behalf of the Confederacy, it was John Slidell who at that juncture arranged the diplomatic program about to be described. Such being the case, it is historically interesting, in view of what subsequently occurred, to recall the impression once made on his contemporaries by Mr. Slidell; for, so highly developed was his faculty of political management supposed to be, he was popularly regarded as little short of a magician. This impression was shared also by those exceptionally competent to form opinions on that head. For instance, in his publication, *My Diary, North and South*, W. H. Russell thus describes a social call at New Orleans, May 24, 1861, immediately after the fall of Fort Sumter. He says:

In the evening I visited Mr. Slidell, whom I found at home with his family. . . . I rarely met a man whose features have a greater *finesse* and firmness of purpose than Mr. Slidell's; his keen grey

eye is full of life, his thin, firmly-set lips indicate resolution and passion. Mr. Slidell, though born in a Northern state, is perhaps one of the most determined disunionists in the Southern Confederacy; he is not a speaker of note, nor a ready stump orator, nor an able writer; but he is an excellent judge of mankind, adroit, persevering, and subtle, full of device, and fond of intrigue; one of those men, who, unknown almost to the outer world, organizes and sustains a faction, and exalts it into the position of a party — what is called here a “wire-puller.” Mr. Slidell is to the South something greater than Mr. Thurlow Weed has been to his party in the North. . . . Mr. Slidell and the members of his family possess *naïveté*, good sense, and agreeable manners; and the regrets I heard expressed in Washington society, at their absence, had every justification.

This was written in May. Six months later Mr. Slidell emerged into world-wide notoriety, and Russell, then still sending his “Special Correspondent” letters to the *Times*, thus referred to him immediately after the *Trent* affair, the letter, written in Washington, appearing in the *Times* issue for December 10th:

Mr. Slidell, whom I had the pleasure of meeting in New Orleans, is a man of more tact and he is not inferior to his colleague, Mr. Mason, in other respects. He far excels him in subtlety and depth, and is one of the most consummate masters of political manoeuvre in the States. He is what is here called a “wire-puller,” — a man who unseen moves the puppets on the public stage as he lists — a man of iron will and strong passions, who loves the excitement of combinations, . . . and who in his dungeon [at Fort Warren], or whatever else it may be, would conspire with the mice against the cat sooner than not conspire at all. . . . Originally a northern man, he has thrown himself into the southern cause and staked his great fortune on the issue without hesitation, and with all the force of his intellect and character.

Commenting on the above, I thus expressed myself in the paper on the *Trent* affair:

Slidell, on the other hand, was considered one of the most astute and dangerous of all Confederate public characters. An intriguer by nature, unscrupulous in his political methods, he . . . was generally looked upon as the most dangerous person to the Union the Confederacy could select for diplomatic work in Europe. The first object of the envoys was to secure the recognition of the Confederacy.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings*, XLV. 40.



In the present study my purpose is to describe, in the light of material to which access has since been obtained, the work done by this master of political management, this diplomatic magician, during the eight months immediately succeeding his arrival in Europe. The narrative, an extraordinary one, involves, as I shall show, the crisis of our Civil War. Well-designed, the scheme — plot, it cannot properly be termed — at one time seemed almost certain to prove a triumph of diplomatic art. In the event it failed, and failed utterly; but its failure was due to a combination of circumstances highly improbable of occurrence, and quite beyond the control of Mr. Slidell. Not long surviving the cause he had furthered, Mr. Slidell died in exile. No biography of him has since been published, and his papers, like those of his colleague in the Senate and Chief in the Confederate State Department during the Civil War, Judah P. Benjamin, have been destroyed. In his share in what then occurred, however, so far as the record survives, I find nothing provocative of censure, nothing which an opponent would be justified in stigmatizing as otherwise than in accordance with the accepted rules of the game. On this point my judgment is also worth something; as, first so to do, I have been privileged to read the confidential correspondence between him and Mr. Mason.

July, 1863, witnessed the Gettysburg struggle and the fall of Vicksburg. That month, consequently, is by general historical consent looked upon as marking the climax and turning-point of the War of Secession. Perhaps it did; but it may none the less fairly be questioned whether for sympathisers in the cause of the Union, the previous September did not furnish occasion for a deeper solicitude. In it the crisis became acute; and, until the ensuing July, it continued to be so.

To summarize briefly the course of events, it will be remembered that in August, 1862, the great Union advance inaugurated, East and West, in the preceding February, had spent its force; and, in Virginia, ceasing to be aggressive, it was thrown back to such an extent that Washington, and not Richmond, stood in danger of hostile occupation. At the same time, the European situation was far from satisfactory. Not only was the Confederate cotton campaign in progress, but every indication favored for it an early and successful

issue; and that issue involved nothing less than the outcome of the struggle. Was Cotton not indeed King? This had, in the summer of 1862, become a world question; and the machinery and life incident to and dependent upon the cotton production and the cotton textile industries, whether in Great Britain, on the continent, or in Asia, were disorganized. The social unrest and economical suffering, necessarily incident to a commercial confusion literally world-wide, were at their height. This condition of affairs was, moreover, by common consent, attributed to the American War. The blockade of the Southern cotton-shipping ports by the National Government of the United States was accepted as the obvious cause of ills and disturbances in Hindustan and China no less than in Lancashire.

The question of foreign action in some form, bearing on this situation — whether an offer of mediation, or through the formal recognition of the Confederacy as a member of the family of nations, or through a refusal farther to recognize the blockade — now presented itself. It had been in the air since the commencement of the struggle. Indeed, weeks before the attack on Fort Sumter, M. Mercier, the French Minister in Washington, had become so convinced that a permanent separation, South from North, was impending and inevitable, that he had even gone so far as to suggest to Lord Lyons that it was desirable that he, the British Minister at Washington, acting in connection with the representative of France, should be clothed with discretionary power to recognize the Confederacy. This was in March.<sup>1</sup> The conviction further on assumed in Mercier's mind the shape almost of an obsession;<sup>2</sup> and, naturally, it colored his official dispatches, operating immediately on the minds of the Emperor and his advisers in potent furtherance of the program which had early outlined itself in Mr. Slidell's busily scheming brain. Indeed, that program may be said to have originated with the French representative; for, in April, 1862, Mercier obtained a permit to visit the Confederate capital. Judah P. Benjamin was then acting as the Confederate Secretary of State, and with him, Creole Senator from Louisiana up to the previous February, the French Minister had, during their common resi-

<sup>1</sup> Newton, *Life of Lord Lyons*, 1. 34.

<sup>2</sup> *Ib.*, 90.

dence in Washington, held social relations of a peculiarly friendly character. Lord Newton, in his *Life of Lord Lyons*, says of Mercier in this connection, "after the manner of French diplomatists of the period, he could not resist the temptation of trying to effect a striking *coup*."<sup>1</sup> Whether such was or was not his moving impulse, Mercier had concealed from Lord Lyons his project until it was too late to endeavor to dissuade him from it. Indeed, he was bent upon it. More cautious in his disposition than his colleague, Lord Lyons apprehended that in going to the Confederate capital at that time he was "as likely to get himself into a scrape as to do anything else." And it so turned out. It was an officious act, characteristic of the man and of the imperial diplomatic service.

Mercier got back on the 24th of April.<sup>2</sup> He returned more than ever persuaded that a restoration of the Union was impossible;<sup>3</sup> that unless the Powers of Europe intervened the war would last for years; that in the end the independence of the South would have to be recognized; that the evils incident to a cotton shortage would meanwhile be intensified; and that, in view of these conditions, the Governments of Europe should be on the watch for any favorable opportunity of exerting themselves in such a way as to end the war. His dispatches would in this connection be of great historic value; and, at some future time, will probably be accessible. At present, however, they are buried in the archives of the French Foreign Office; but the Minister of course freely communicated his views whether to the Emperor personally or to his official superior in the department of the French Foreign Affairs. Those views also, it so chanced, chimed in most opportunely with the plans of the Emperor in connection with the Mexican enterprise on which he was at the time fully embarked. Napoleon III, therefore, was under every inducement to exert himself actively and openly to bring the proposed intervention about.<sup>4</sup> A little later, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, M. Thouvenel, was in England, and the Emperor then sent

<sup>1</sup> Newton, *Life of Lord Lyons*, i. 82; *Lyons to Russell*, April 14, 1862.

<sup>2</sup> *Lyons to Russell*, April 25, 1862.

<sup>3</sup> See Butler, *Judah P. Benjamin*, 288.

<sup>4</sup> Rhodes, iv. 94.