

## **Confederate Foreign Policy**

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On Saturday October 12, 1861, the blockade runner *Theodora* left Charleston harbor with two passengers of great importance to the future of the Confederacy. James Mason of Virginia and John Slidell of Louisiana had been charged by Jefferson Davis with a mission of persuading England and France to recognize the Confederate States of America as a sovereign nation. Their voyage would lead to a famous international incident a month later but they would ultimately fail in their mission. Both England and France would remain neutral throughout the war.

A critical component to potential Confederate success was the support of foreign nations, particularly England and France. The dream scenario was actual military intervention by one or both powers, but at the least Jefferson Davis and his cabinet were hoping for allies who could supply materials, supplies and finances.

The key to the Confederate position was what has been termed “cotton diplomacy”. This strategy was based on an understanding that both England and France required Southern cotton for their textile industries. Southerners often referred to “King Cotton” as their leverage in forcing England and France to come their aid.

When war broke out, many southerners decided to hold back their cotton in order to force the hand of the foreigners, but this embargo became something of a moot point when the Union navy began their blockade of Southern ports. Since the British government was adamant about neutral nations respecting their blockades, the English supported the situation though it certainly had a detrimental effect on their ability to secure cotton.

As it turned out, shipments from the United States became of even greater importance to the British. A huge percentage of the grain imported to Britain came from the United States and going to war with the United States would have likely caused famine. In addition, the British were eventually able to secure enough cotton from their Indian territories to enable their textile industry to survive. Eventually Union conquests in the South would enable them to begin supplying cotton to the British as well as grain.

One other factor working against the Confederacy's acceptance was slavery. The English found the practice abhorrent, having abolished it themselves throughout their empire three decades earlier. Still in the fall of 1861 the abolition of slavery was not a key feature of Union war strategy as several Union states still allowed slaves to be held. As Mason and Slidell began their journey, there was still hope in the South that British and/or French aid and support would be forthcoming.

As events unfolded during the next year, it became obvious that the British were hedging their bets and waiting to see how events on the battlefield unfolded. If the Confederacy showed any chance of winning the war, perhaps it would be advantageous to begin to work with them. As Lee began his invasion of the north in September 1862, the British were on the verge of coming forward with an offer to mediate a settlement between the Union and Confederacy, effectively recognizing the new nation's official existence. However, Lee's failed invasion and subsequent retreat to Virginia convinced British officials to sit the war out as a neutral bystander.