

William Seward and the Trent Affair **<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

In late December, 1861, the *Trent* Affair continued to dominate national and international news, with President Lincoln and his secretary of state, William Seward, both playing major roles in ending the controversy. Born in Orange County, New York in 1801, William H. Seward was one of the most prominent anti-slavery politicians of the mid-1800s, first as a Whig and then as a Republican. He had studied law at Union College in 1820 and within a few years entered the world of politics. Starting in 1830, Seward served in the New York state senate, and in 1838 he became governor of New York for the first of two terms. Even though Seward was born into a slave owning family, his abolitionist stance made him well known and in 1849 and 1855 he was elected to the U.S. Senate. In the aftermath of the Compromise of 1850 he had gained prominence for his “Higher Law” speech opposing the expansion of slavery. Seward hoped to obtain the Republican nomination for president in 1860, and was disappointed when the party chose Abraham Lincoln as its standard bearer. After Lincoln won the presidential election, Seward accepted the position of Secretary of State, hoping he could influence the less-experienced president. Seward and Lincoln clashed over various issues during the early months of the administration, but he eventually developed into an able and loyal cabinet member.

In early November 1861, Captain Charles Wilkes of the U.S.S. *San Jacinto* had seized Confederate diplomats James Mason and John Slidell from British ship *Trent*. News of the capture created a furor in Great Britain, with threats of war and demands for the release of the diplomats. William Seward was heavily involved in efforts to negotiate an end to the dispute. He conferred extensively with Richard Lyons, the British Ambassador to the United States, to come up with a reasonable solution to diffuse the situation. On November 30, 1861, the British

cabinet “drew up a dispatch to Lord Lyons demanding the surrender of Mason and Slidell to the British Minister in Washington and an apology for the aggression committed by the American commander.” The British ministry gave the U.S. Government seven days to comply with the demands. On December 19, Lyons discussed with Seward the “tenor and demands of the British government for the release of Southern commissioners.” Seward informed Lyons that he needed to discuss the issue with President Lincoln and the rest of the cabinet, but he also took time to tell the French minister to the United States, that there would be no war with England. By this time the secretary favored the release of Mason and Slidell, though President Lincoln considered proposing the establishment of a neutral arbitration board.

During cabinet meetings held on Christmas day and the day after, Lincoln accepted the views of Seward and others that the British diplomats be released. The northern leadership had realized the foolishness of antagonizing relations with the European powers while fighting a major war with the rebelling states. Seward subsequently informed Lyons that, while “[t]he prisoners were contraband of war and therefore the *Trent* . . . was subject to seizure,” that the prisoners would be released because they and the *Trent* “should have been taken before an American prize court for adjudication of status.” In his reply, Seward reminded the British of the American position during the War of 1812, when American ships were being harassed and its sailors forcibly impressed, that “the right or wrong of seizure should be decided, not by the captor, but by a legal tribunal.” Federal authorities eventually released Mason and Slidell on January 1, 1862, and the pair reached England by the end of the month. They ultimately failed in their efforts to obtain European support for the Confederate cause. Though the British would again consider recognition of the Confederacy in the Fall of 1862, the *Trent* Affair is generally considered the closest in which a foreign power came to intervening in the Civil War. William Seward had played a major role in preventing that from occurring.

