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William N. Still Jr

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# A Naval Sieve: The Union Blockade in the Civil War

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by

William N. Still, Jr.

**A** navy imposes a blockade in order to isolate the enemy, or some part of his territory, from the rest of the world. In most wars the side with the stronger fleet tries to blockade the other side. Thus, the British Navy has blockaded among others, France, the United States, Germany, and most recently the Argentine forces in the Falkland Islands. The United States Navy has blockaded Mexico, the Confederacy, the Spanish forces in Cuba, Japan, and briefly, North Vietnam.

Blockade has been hailed by those who have used it, or wish to employ it anew for some current conflict; it has been reviled by its victims. When we look at its results we find that it has been useful. However, it has not always had the influence with which it is often credited. The American Civil War in 1861-1865 is a good example.

Historians generally agree that the Union navy's major task in the Civil War was the establishment and maintenance of the blockade. This was determined on 19 April 1861, when Lincoln proclaimed a naval blockade against the seceded states. His navy's secondary tasks included the protection of American foreign commerce and the support of land operations. Both the blockade and support of land operations would necessitate combined operations, including amphibious operations, against the Confederate states. In his first annual report, for 1861, the Union Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, listed these tasks:

"1. The closing of all the insurgent ports along a coast of nearly three thousand miles, in the form and under the exacting regulations of an international blockade, including the naval occupation and defense of the Potomac River . . . .

"2. The organization of combined naval and military expeditions to operate in force against various points of the southern coast, rendering efficient naval cooperation with the position and movements of such expeditions when landed, and including also all needful naval aid to the army in cutting intercommunication with the rebels and in its operations on the Mississippi and its tributaries; and

"3. The active pursuit of the piratical cruisers which might escape the vigilance of the blockading force . . . ."

These tasks determined Union naval strategy for the war.

Although this strategy is obvious, the results of it are not so clear. In fact, historians continue to debate the Union navy's effectiveness in the war. This has been particularly true of the blockade. What makes this issue highly significant is the emphasis placed on the blockade. An impressive number of historians consider it a major factor in the Confederacy's ultimate collapse. They hold that the ever-tightening blockade strangled both the import of vital war material and essential necessities of life from Europe, and the export of cotton, the Confederacy's most acceptable collateral to European ports; that is, the blockade was instrumental in stimulating the economic chaos that ultimately shattered the Confederacy's will to fight as well as its means. For example, E. Merton Coulter in *The Confederate States of America 1861-1865* wrote, "Without a doubt the blockade was one of the outstanding causes of the strangulation and ultimate collapse of the Confederacy," and Rear Admiral Bern Anderson in what is probably the best one-volume naval history of the war, stated, "Without the relentless pressure of Union sea power . . . economic disintegration could not have been achieved. The blockade was the active instrument of that sea power, and it was one of the major factors that brought about the ultimate collapse and defeat of the South."<sup>1</sup>

Charles P. Roland wrote that "The silent grip of the Federal navy grew tighter and the number of captures among blockade-runners steadily mounted. Still more significant, Southern ports were avoided altogether by the major cargo vessels of the world. By 1864 the blockade was strangling the Southern economy."<sup>2</sup>

Roland's statement implied that the Union navy expanded until it was powerful enough to close the 189 inlets and river mouths scattered along the more than 3,000 miles of Southern coastline as well as provide support for operations on the Mississippi River and its tributaries. From approximately ninety warships in 1861, the navy expanded to more than 700 by April 1865.

James R. Soley, one of the first writers to accentuate the Union navy's role in defeating the Confederacy through the blockade, wrote that "The number of prizes brought in during the war was 1,149 of which 210 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 . . . . Of the property afloat, destroyed or captured during the Civil War, the larger part suffered in consequence of the blockade."<sup>3</sup>

There can be no question concerning the economic exhaustion within the Confederate states. A host of writers have graphically described it; the sufferings and hardships of civilians and soldiers; the impact it had on both the means and the will to continue the struggle. Students of the war overwhelmingly agree that this economic collapse was a major factor in Confederate defeat. The question is, however, the role that the Union blockade played in the collapse. Was it a principal reason as Anderson, Coulter, Soley, and others have

suggested? There is considerable evidence that it was not. If the blockade was not a major factor in the Confederacy's economic exhaustion, why not? This certainly was the objective of the blockade. Was it because the blockade was ineffective and, as Frank L. Owsley wrote, a "leaky and ramshackled affair?"

Some fifty years ago, Owsley's monumental study *King Cotton Diplomacy* was published. In a chapter entitled, "The Effectiveness of the Blockade," Owsley evaluated the Union blockade in terms of numbers of violations along with the increase in Confederate cotton exports and the successful delivery of huge amounts of cargoes to the South. For example, in the last four months of 1864, more than 90 percent of the cotton shipped out of the Confederacy managed to get through the blockade. More than 80 percent of the ships carrying munitions to the Confederacy in 1862-1864 reached their destinations.<sup>4</sup>

Owsley's conclusions concerning the blockade were not generally accepted by historians, but in later years other studies appeared that substantiated his work. By far Marcus W. Price's series of articles published in *American Neptune* have been the most important. In an article entitled "Ships that Tested the Blockade of the Carolina Ports, 1861-1865," he estimated that out of 2,054 attempts to run past the blockading vessels off Wilmington, North Carolina, 1,735 succeeded. They amounted to an average of 1.5 attempts per day with 84 percent of them getting through. In a second article he analyzed the blockade off the Gulf ports. Between 20 April 1861, and 4 June 1865, according to his calculations, 2,960 vessels attempted to slip through the blockade, a daily average of two. As with the Carolina ports, in 1861 very few vessels were taken. But in 1862 and 1863, the blockade was tightened. During that period the percentage of successful runs into and out of these ports was 65 percent and 62 percent respectively. He attributes the lower percentage of successful runs to the larger number of sailing vessels used in the Gulf. In 1864 and 1865, however, the picture changed dramatically, particularly in steam-propelled vessels challenging the blockade. Eighty-seven percent in 1864 and ninety-four in 1865 of vessels that challenged the Gulf blockade got through. Although there is reason to believe that Price exaggerated his statistics on successful runs by including so-called violations that were not, he nevertheless clearly suggests that the blockade was quite porous.<sup>5</sup> It certainly was off Wilmington, North Carolina, which became the most important port in the Confederacy for blockade running. One recent student estimates that 230 runners entered the port in 1863-64, and 15 more slipped in before the port was taken early in 1865.<sup>6</sup>

Frank Vandiver in several of his books recognized the ineffectiveness of the blockade. In a study of blockade running through Bermuda which was published in 1947, he wrote, "It must be apparent that the blockade was, from the Union point of view, far from a completely effective

measure . . . it is not too much to say . . . that the amount of supplies which did arrive through the blockade enabled the Confederate armies and people to carry on appreciably longer than would otherwise have been possible.”

Over thirty years later he remained convinced of this: “The task of sealing off the South with its vast coastline was super-human; not even the Federal navy could meet the challenge.”<sup>7</sup> A recently published study by Richard L. Lester, a British historian, agrees substantially with Vandiver.<sup>8</sup>

**B**ecause the blockade was the major Union naval strategy, it has been assumed by many historians that the major strategy of the Confederate navy was to destroy the blockade. As Anderson wrote, the Union blockade “automatically made attempts to thwart that blockade the primary task of the Confederate Navy.”<sup>9</sup> This was not true. From the beginning Stephen Mallory, the Confederate Secretary of the Navy, viewed defending the harbors and rivers as his navy’s major responsibility. This, of course, fits in well with Jefferson Davis’ overall strategy of defense.

It is true that Mallory wanted to challenge the blockade. A principal reason for the assault on Union shipping by cruisers such as the *Alabama* and *Florida* was to force the Federal navy to weaken the blockade by drawing off ships to protect Northern shipping. Also early in the war the Secretary ordered the construction of armored vessels both at home and abroad to attack blockaders.

Neither idea was successful. The Union navy did not weaken its blockade despite losses among Union merchant ships, and only one of the armored ships built in Europe, the *Stonewall*, actually reached Confederate hands. She was too late to have even challenged the blockade. Mallory also tried to build five large ironclads within the Confederacy capable of going to sea, but of these only the *Arkansas* and the *Virginia* were completed, and they were not seaworthy.<sup>10</sup>

Historians in general consider the Confederate naval effort a failure. This is particularly true of the ironclad program. They base this on the erroneous assumptions that the ironclads were built to challenge the blockade and that only a few were commissioned. Out of approximately fifty armored vessels laid down within the Confederate states, twenty-two were completed and placed in operation. With the exception of the five initial vessels, the ironclads were built as harbor and river defense vessels.<sup>11</sup>

Confederate officials wrote surprisingly little about the blockade in their official correspondence. Much of what was written concerned the international implications of the blockade rather than the blockade itself or its effects. President Davis had little interest in naval affairs and generally left them in the capable hands of Secretary Mallory. His few references to the blockade indicate concern from an international point of view; that it was a paper blockade, clearly illegal and should be ignored by other nations.<sup>12</sup>

In January 1865, Davis issued one of his few directives concerning naval operations when he ordered the Confederate naval squadron at Charleston to attack Union forces off the harbor; not, however, because of the blockade, but in order to prevent if possible a link-up between the warships and the approaching army of Major General William T. Sherman.<sup>13</sup> Even Mallory in his reports and correspondence rarely mentions the blockade. This suggests that many Confederate officials did not consider the blockade to be very effective or a serious threat to the Confederacy. This does not mean to say that they ignored the existence of the blockade; but from their vantage point it was never damaging enough to require a change in strategy. It is often asserted that Confederate officials ignored it during the early months of the war, but as its effectiveness increased, they became more concerned. In fact the blockade was being broken more frequently in 1864-65 than at any time previously and Confederate officials were aware of this.<sup>14</sup>

A major factor in explaining their attitude was the industrial revolution experienced by the Confederate states. In order to have a chance to win, the Confederacy had to industrialize. This transformation from an agrarian to an industrial economy has never been completely told, but in recent years several writers have examined aspects of it. Vandiver in his biography of Josiah Gorgas, Confederate ordnance chief, recounts his success in developing an arms industry. Goff does the same with the quartermaster stores, while Still tells of the creation of a naval shipbuilding industry. Although self-sufficiency was not obtained, the Confederacy made extraordinary progress. As Raimondo Luraghi wrote, "Never before in history had anything like this been seen. A backward agricultural country, with only small preindustrial plants, had created a gigantic industry, investing millions of dollars, arming and supplying one of the largest armies in the world . . . ."<sup>15</sup>

This does not mean to say that supplies from abroad were not vital—they were. What it does say, however, is that the economic collapse of the Confederacy cannot be blamed on the blockade, but on its internal problems, primarily the breakdown in transportation and inadequate manpower resources.

Although the Confederate government would nationalize industry, it generally allowed blockade running free reign until early 1864. Even when it finally established trade regulations on blockade running, it only required ships to reserve one-half of their cargo for government shipments. During the first years of the war the evidence strongly suggests that, to those involved in the blockade running business, what sold well was far more important than the needs of the war effort. As late as November 1864, only a few months before the final collapse, a Wilmington, North Carolina, firm was writing to its agent in Nassau not to send any more chloroform as it was too hard to sell. The firm requested perfume, "Essence of Cognac," as it

would sell "quite high."<sup>16</sup> Cargo manifests found in port newspapers and elsewhere suggest that this was not an isolated incident.

**I**n describing efforts by the Union navy to enforce the blockade, historians usually emphasize the numerical increase in warships on blockade duty during the course of the war, suggesting that at some point there were enough ships on station in Southern waters to retard blockade running significantly. The evidence does not substantiate this. One recent study points out that although the number of blockaders on the Wilmington station steadily increased, the number of blockade runners captured or destroyed remained approximately the same.<sup>17</sup> Squadron commanders were constantly appealing for additional vessels. Because of the shortage of vessels for both blockade duty and combined operations, vessels had to be shifted from one point to another. Although this was a normal naval procedure, it did affect the blockade's efficiency. This would frequently result in a noticeable increase in shipping activities at the port from which blockaders were withdrawn.<sup>18</sup>

Union squadron commanders encountered extremely difficult logistical problems in their efforts to enforce a tight blockade. The use of steam-powered vessels theoretically helped the efficiency of a blockade, but this was largely offset by problems of maintenance and supply. As early as 1862 the four blockade squadrons required approximately 3,000 tons of coal per week, and the amount needed grew as the number of blockaders increased.<sup>19</sup>

Robert Browning's recent study of the blockade off Wilmington, North Carolina, clearly demonstrates that the naval force on that station, by 1863 considered the most important, was frequently and seriously weakened by the inefficiency of the vessels deployed there. Many of them were too slow or were poor sea boats. A large number were converted vessels, without the qualities necessary to operate at sea for long periods. Carrying heavy guns, for which they were not designed, in numerous cases had a detrimental effect on their performance. Breakdowns in machinery were all too often normal occurrences resulting in vessels having to leave their station for repairs without being replaced. Browning suggests that repairs kept from one-third to two-fifths of the vessels constantly away from the station. At one time ten vessels from the Wilmington station were in the yards undergoing repairs.<sup>20</sup>

Although the blockaders replenished some provisions and supplies while on station, coal and ordnance stores usually could be obtained only by leaving the station. Beaufort, North Carolina; Port Royal, South Carolina; and Pensacola, Florida, became the most important supply depots for the various squadrons in the Atlantic and the Gulf. Even the depots were frequently short of coal, resulting in delays for vessels returning to their station. The coal shortage also affected their readiness while on station. In

September 1863, Rear Admiral Samuel P. Lee, in command of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, wrote to the force commander off Wilmington: "You may find it expedient not to keep more than one of the little vessels moving about at a time, even at night."<sup>21</sup> If logistical problems and vessel inefficiency were the same throughout all the blockading squadrons, and they probably were, the effectiveness of the blockade was seriously affected.

**H**ow effective was the Union blockade? It would be an oversimplification to say that it was either effective or not effective. It was both. In general, its effectiveness increased as the war progressed. Nevertheless, no Confederate port was completely closed until it was captured by Union forces.

Perhaps a more important question would be what effect did the blockade have on the war's ultimate outcome? Was it an important factor, as various writers say, in Confederate defeat? In this case, the answer is no. It was not a major factor in the collapse of the Confederacy.

Obviously, imports could at best provide the Confederates with only a small percentage of the material they needed to fight the war. In fact, a substantial percentage of the imports consisted not of war materials, but of clothes, liquors, and other items that would bring high profits. In order to fight, the Confederacy had to industrialize and did so. There was never a serious shortage of guns, munitions, and other war material. In fact, no Confederate army lost a major engagement because of the lack of essential supplies and arms.

The Union navy might well have contributed more to victory by concentrating more on combined operations along the seaboard and the inland rivers. The blockade absorbed hundreds of ships and thousands of men, and generally had little effect on the war's outcome.

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## NOTES

1. E. Merton Coulter, *The Confederate States of America 1861-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), p. 294; Bern Anderson, *By Sea and By River* (New York: Knopf, 1962), p. 232.

2. Charles P. Roland, *The Confederacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 137.

3. J. Russell Soley, *The Blockade and the Cruisers* (New York: Scribner, 1890), pp. 44-45.

4. Frank L. Owsley and Harriet C. Owsley, *King Cotton Diplomacy: Foreign Relations of the Confederate States of America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed., 1959), pp. 229-267, 392.

5. Marcus W. Price, "Ships that tested the Blockade of the Carolina Ports, 1861-1865," *American Neptune*, July 1948, pp. 196-241; "Ships that tested the Blockade of the Gulf Ports, 1861-1865," *ibid.*, October 1951, pp. 262-297; "Ships that tested the Blockade of the Georgia and East Florida Ports, 1861-1865," *ibid.*, April 1955, pp. 97-132.

6. Richard E. Wood, "Port Town at War: Wilmington, North Carolina 1860-1865," PhD dissertation, Florida State University, 1976, pp. 183-184.

7. Frank E. Vandiver, ed., *Confederate Blockade-Running through Bermuda, 1861-1865: Letters and Cargo Manifests* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1947), p. xli; Vandiver, *Their Tattered Flags: The Epic of the Confederacy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 233-234.

8. Both Lester and Richard Goff say, however, that the war might have been won by the Confederacy if the blockade had been destroyed. They imply that the Confederates were unable to create a naval force



powerful enough to challenge Union sea power and break the blockade. In fact, the Confederate government never gave priority to challenging the Union blockade. Richard I. Lester, *Confederate Finance and Purchasing in Great Britain* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), pp. 49, 165, 168, 177, 197, 199; Richard D. Goff, *Confederate Supply* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1969), p. 139.

9. Anderson, p. 288.

10. William N. Still, Jr., *Iron Afloat: The Story of the Confederate Armorclads* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971), *passim*.

11. For the Confederate ironclad program see *ibid*.

12. Dunbar Rowland, ed., *Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalalist: His Letters, Papers, and Speeches* (10 vols., Jackson, Miss.: Little & Ives Company, 1923), v. V, p. 405.

13. Davis to Tucker, 15 January 1865, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (31 vols., Washington: US Govt. Print. Off., 1894-1927), Series I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. 2, p. 1014.

14. Raimondo Luraghi, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation South* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1978), p. 136; Goff, pp. 145, 247.

15. Luraghi, p. 128.

16. Wood, p. 178.

17. Robert Browning, "The Blockade of Wilmington, North Carolina: 1861-1865," MA thesis, East Carolina University, 1980, pp. 176-177.

18. Goff, p. 141.

19. Robert E. Johnson, "Investment by Sea: The Civil War Blockade," *American Neptune*, January 1972, pp. 53-54.

20. Browning, pp. 58-59.

21. Lee to Ludlow Case, 4 September 1863, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, Series I, Vol. IX, p. 191.

William N. Still, Jr., is Professor of History, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina.



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