

A Hard Blockade: The Union Navy and the Foundation of Union Hard War Policy

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Any discussion of the Union blockade during the Civil War inevitably leads to the argument of whether or not it succeeded. The traditional back-and-forth arguments have involved dissections of capture rates, successful runs, and the total amount of goods which slipped through in endless statistical form. Marcus Price argues that the blockade's success lay in its mere existence which deterred many ships and companies from even risking a run. There is also the argument that the blockade's success lay in its psychological impact on the Confederacy. While each of the arguments for the blockade's success have their merits and faults, one aspect of the blockade remains markedly absent from most discussions: the role of the blockade in the formation and implementation of the Union's hard war policy. Certainly the object of any blockade is not just to hurt the offending nation's economy but also to limit the entrance of military supplies. The side effect of all of this, however, is that the necessities needed by the civilian populace will also be reduced, and while it may not have been the intention of the Lincoln administration for the blockade to affect civilians in such a drastic way, that was its most lasting effect.

In his work *The Hard Hand of War*, Mark Grimsley states that two main attributes underline classic hard war operations. The first involved actions against Southern civilians and property in order to demoralize the populace and hurt the Confederate economy, and the second involved the allocation of substantial resources to accomplish such goals. He goes on to say that these attributes only surfaced in the western theatre in 1863 and much later in the east and on the coast. If these attributes are foundational for judging hard war policy, the blockade fulfilled both requirements early in the war; if not within the first year, then certainly by the bombardment of Charleston on August 12, 1863. True, the bombardment came from the

army's post on Morris Island, but that does not lessen the blockade as the vehicle for hard war policy. Grimsley goes on to break down the hard war policy into three phases which led from conciliation to a middle ground and finally to the Union's ultimate hard war policy. However, Grimsley completely neglects naval aspects, and more specifically the blockade, in his treatment. When compared side-by-side with Sherman's activities or John Pope's special orders, the blockade's activities appear very light indeed, but herein lies the reality of the blockade's hard war activities: they were consequences of indirect rather than direct actions.¹

Announced by Lincoln on April 19, 1861, the blockade was an integral part of Winfield Scott's Anaconda Plan. Though never truly adopted, the plan provided a framework for the Union's military policy. Scott's strategy appealed to the belief that a strong pro-Union sentiment existed in the South, and all that was needed was to cut off the Confederacy's line of supply and present a large enough force to foment that pro-Union sentiment into a counterrevolution. While this seems to confirm Mark Grimsley's assertions that the first part of the war involved a lack of hard war measures, it ignores the blockade's purpose of depriving the Confederacy of supply. Scott's plan relied on this deprivation to promote internal unrest and show that the Confederate government and economy could not provide for its citizens. The import-export economy was very important for southern states, as it lacked a strong industrial base, and Great Britain relied on the South's cotton exports for its mills. Because of this, the Confederacy held a strong belief that Great Britain would intervene on their behalf, and at the least either ignore the blockade or determine that it was illegal. This was one of the earliest problems faced by the Lincoln administration involving the blockade.

¹ Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy Toward Southern Civilians 1861 – 1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3.

Lincoln faced a dilemma with his announcement of a blockade of southern ports. He adamantly maintained that the Confederacy had no standing as a sovereign nation, but a blockade appeared to many nations as a de facto recognition of sovereign status. The threat of a blockade worried Britain because of its need for southern cotton, to point where Britain's foreign commissioner to the United States, Lord Lyons, threatened Secretary of State William Seward with British recognition of the Confederacy if an interruption of Britain's cotton supply occurred. Such bluster did not stop the blockade from moving forward, however, and by late 1861, workers in Britain began to blame the Union blockade instead of Confederate embargoes on cotton for the impending crisis. While this may not appear as a product of Union hard war policy, it cannot be ignored simply because of its occurrence in Britain. True, other mitigating factors, such as overproduction of mills, helped spurn this employment crisis, but the experience of those involved and their own outlooks pointed to other causes. Of course, this was not the only problem Brits had with the blockade. In December, 1861, the Union navy embarked upon another action: sinking ships at the mouths of harbors to block ships from entering and leaving. Named the Stone Fleet, these ships aroused the ire of the British populace, newspapers, and even the Foreign Office. The London *Times* believed that "among the crimes which have disgraced the history of mankind it would be difficult to find one more atrocious than this" while the Foreign Office believed such an action could "only be adopted as a measure of revenge and irremediable injury against the enemy." These words and actions certainly underscored the trade relationship between the Confederacy and Britain.²

² Amanda Foreman, *A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War*, (New York: Random House, 2010), 160 – 161; quotes found in E. Bilby Burton, *The Siege of Charleston, 1861 – 1865*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970), 88 – 89.

Without a strong industrial base, the Confederacy relied on Britain and other nations for all sorts of goods during the war and even before the war. Prior to the war, Southern manufacturing firms represented just 14.7 percent of the nation's total while those products represented only 8.2 percent of the nation's total manufacturing value. The majority of Southern exports centered on staple goods, and though the total amount of goods imported from foreigners was small, it does not take into account goods imported from northern states. Several states even imported a majority of their grain. The same was true of salt, as Virginia, producing nearly two million bushels per year, did not supply enough for the Confederacy. Indeed, Virginia produced twice the amount of wheat of any other Southern state and also half the value of flour and meal. The Confederacy could not have been more ill-prepared for a prolonged war if they tried. However, the long-term problem came in the form of civilian goods. Seemingly ordinary items such as needles, coffee, and tea became rare and expensive commodities, and while, Southerners adjusted and created useable replacements, it was in the capacity of limiting consumer goods which the blockade excelled.³

Some of the most glaring arguments against the blockade's effectiveness come from studies of capture rates and the amount of goods which passed through. The rising cost of consumer goods in Confederate states made blockade running a lucrative endeavor for those with an adventurous spirit and made the smuggling of consumer goods a greater priority than the smuggling of military goods. Still, the amount of smuggled goods could not compete with demands of the populace or military, and such a lack of goods was not lost on the public. As

³ Mark Thornton and Robert Ekelund, jr., *Tariffs, Blockades, and Inflation: The Economics of the Civil War*, (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2004), 30 – 31; David Surdam, *Northern Naval Superiority and the Economics of the American Civil War*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 12 – 13, 43.

early as summer, 1861, Mary Boykin Chesnut noted that the army begins to “cry out for more ammunition, and already the blockade is beginning to shut it all out.” Inflation ran rampant as the war progressed, dramatically raising prices of goods as real wages remained the same. Blame for this settled on blockade runners and speculators who dealt in high priced goods, but this anger can be traced back to the blockade. Fear of the blockade’s effect on the public emanated from the government as well. War Department clerk John Jones, after purchasing some clothes, wrote “what will be the price of such commodities a year hence if the blockade continues?” The blockade posed a real and visible threat; one that threatened daily civilian life along with the life of the military. It is no wonder then, that Mary Boykin Chesnut wrote “thank God for a ship. It has run the blockade with arms and ammunition.” Such language brings to light not just the physical effect of the blockade but the psychological effect as well.⁴

In December, 1863, Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas told her children that “Santa Claus has not been able to run the blockade.” For a child, this must have seemed a devastating blow and all due to the Union blockade. Whether or not the blockade itself was responsible for a lack of goods, it provided an easy scapegoat for those looking to place blame for material deficiencies. For those who grew up in Southern port cities, the blockade provided a constant reminder of the presence of the enemy. At any moment, shelling could occur or an invasion might come. The blockade provided the catalyst for Southerners fears to run wild simply due to its existence. At one point in her diary, Mary Boykin Chesnut refers to the blockade as a “stockade which hems us in – only the sky open to us.” This usage suggested a belief that the

⁴ Mary Boykin Chesnut, *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War*, ed. C. Vann Woodward, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 101; found in M. Brem Bonner and Peter McCord, “Reassessment of the Union Blockade’s Effectiveness in the Civil War,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 88, no. 4 (2011): 376.

blockade turned into a prison, letting in and out only a small amount of goods. Some goods managed to make it through the blockade and into civilian hands, but a general lack of goods created a dilemma for a large portion of the population. The blockade had such a psychological impact on people that any successful attempt at a run boosted spirits. Mary Boykin Chesnut stated that a steamer's successful run at Savannah made citizens "raise our wilted heads like flowers after a shower." Civilians bore the brunt of the blockade and experienced its repercussions daily, but common soldiers recognized its potency as well.⁵

In his memoirs, William A Fletcher tells of his experiences in the Confederate Army. After the battle of Fredericksburg, Fletcher noted the dead soldiers who had been stripped of their clothes and other belongings. The work, he said, was not done by soldier except in times of necessity but by "those who make a business of it, as the clothing, when washed, was good stock in second hand stores." This clothing supplied needy civilians and soldiers who could not afford anything better. Certainly the people purchasing these goods knew or at least suspected where the clothing came from. It was to measures such as these that the populace was forced to go. Few, if any, people would willingly resort to wearing clothing formerly on a dead body. Fletcher placed the blame for these actions squarely on the blockade. Nobody stopped the practice nor saw any harm because "the party stripped was a party to blockading our ports, which created the urgent necessity." Any niceties previously allowed the dead was no longer required because blockade created desperate needs in the Confederacy. These psychological

⁵ Found in Bonner and McCord, 377; Mary Boykin Chesnut, 306 and 197.

and physical effects were directly fomented by the blockade, but other, more subtle effects display the extent of the blockade and its involvement in hard war policy.⁶

In August, 1861 the Union captured Fort Hatteras in North Carolina, and in November of the same year captured Port Royal Sound in a joint venture between the army and navy. Port Royal's capture gave Union forces a base of operations deep in enemy territory from which to maintain the blockade and maintain a threatening land force. Following up this success, the Union commander, Samuel F. Du Pont, sent gunboats "up some of the rivers as far as they could go, destroying bridges and conveying army troops to most of the sea islands." These occupations closed other navigable waters to blockade runners, thereby depriving Confederate civilians of even more goods. Almost immediately, civilians living on the sea islands fled, leaving most of their belongings and some of the richest areas in South Carolina. This flight and loss of a majority of their worldly possessions certainly felt like hard war to those inhabitants. After Union occupation of Albemarle Sound, General Ambrose Burnside sent out detachments to help Union sympathizers and harassing Confederate supply lines. On February 19, 1862, a Union brigade performing these tasks was ambushed by Confederate troops. The next day, after landing at the town of Winton and discovering its use as a Confederate storehouse, the brigade set fire the town and pillaged its buildings. While the army carried out the act, the navy and blockade were its catalysts. The same is true of the bombardment of Charleston by the Swamp Angel battery on Morris Island. It was through the actions of the blockade that these occupied areas along the Confederate coast were taken and maintained. The navy provided groundwork for these inland excursions which were feared by Confederates along the coast. Of

⁶ William A Fletcher, *Rebel Private Front and Rear: Memoirs of a Confederate Soldier*, (New York: Dutton, 1995), 67.

course, the Confederacy offered some resistance to the blockade, but this resistance contributed to the hard war.⁷

To counter the Union blockade, the Confederacy relied upon Secretary of the Navy Stephen Mallory's ideas of ironclad ships armed with large caliber guns. Unfortunately, a lack of iron necessitated scavenging from many sources, including little used rail lines. This had consequences later in the war, but to break the blockade, or even attempt to damage it, certain sacrifices were needed. Additionally, the blockade preempted other forms of transportation. Any movement along the coast for trade or troop transport was too risky except for the most local of movements. Any Confederate designs at such notions were quickly tabled as blockading ships grew numerous by the day. All of this put an even greater stress on a fragile railroad infrastructure. By the start of Grant's Petersburg campaign, the Confederacy's internal transportation system fell apart keeping much needed supplies in the deep South from reaching Lee's army and the civilian population in Virginia. Another side effect of the blockade was the need for Confederate forces to maintain a military presence all along the coast to discourage too much raiding by Union forces and to give blockade runners help in making it to port. This used precious manpower and war material needed in other theatres. The blockade commandeered Confederate resources simply because it existed and helped bring about internal problems for Confederate infrastructure; problems which hurt civilians just as much as the military.

By the end of 1863, the Union navy and blockade had already implemented a hard war strategy on the Confederacy. To be sure, the process itself was drawn out and involved many

⁷ James M. McPherson, *War on the Waters: The Union and Confederate Navies, 1861 – 1865*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 42; Mark Grimsley, 60 – 61.

pieces indirectly, but that does not limit the blockade's importance on hard war strategy.

Directly, the blockade limited the amount of consumer goods as well as military goods which entered into Confederate ports. Exports of cotton and other products vital to Confederate trade were hemmed in as well. This caused runaway inflation and stressed the already overused railway system. Indirectly, the blockade was responsible for the maintenance of Union soldiers along the Confederate coast and forced the Confederacy to maintain adequate troops in coastal regions. The blockade's impact was also felt overseas as thousands of British workers found themselves unemployed due to a lack of cotton. Though this affected Britain and not the Confederacy, it must still be included because it was a side effect of the blockade's hard war tactics. The effects of the blockade reached far and wide.

It is easy to dismiss the blockade's contributions to the Union's hard war policy and its place as foundational because of the extent of the evolution of the eventual hard war policy. Nevertheless, the blockade should not be overlooked. The experiences of those living with the blockade attest to its effect physically and psychologically. Helping to lay the foundation for the Union's eventual hard war policy, the blockaded demonstrated an ability to reach beyond direct action and affect multiple areas. It is in this capacity that the blockade stands out. Before Sherman cemented hard war legacy or Pope's special orders in the valley, the blockade set precedent in measures for hard war. Instead of viewing the blockade in terms of its success or lack thereof against blockade runners, it is imperative to look beyond the numbers and see the extent of the blockade's imprint on hard war policy.