

# This Day in History... November 8, 1861

## The *Trent* Affair

On November 8, 1861, the *Trent* Affair began an international incident that nearly sparked a war between the US and Great Britain during the Civil War.

As America moved toward war in early 1861, the North and South both considered what role the British might play in a potential future conflict. Britain depended on Southern cotton, so the South believed that would aid them in earning diplomatic recognition. However, the Union saw the conflict as an internal issue that the British should stay away from.

In February 1861, the Confederacy appointed a three-man delegation to travel to Europe to explain the Southern cause, open diplomatic relations, and “negotiate treaties of friendship, commerce, and navigation.” Much of their argument centered on the right of secession and the importance of cotton. The delegation met with British representatives that May. Word of the Battle of Fort Sumter had just reached London, so the outbreak of open warfare wasn’t discussed at the meeting.

The British considered the Southerners’ argument, and then on May 13, 1861, Queen Victoria declared neutrality in the conflict, which served as recognition of Southern belligerency. This gave Confederate ships the same privileges in foreign ports that US ships had – they could get fuel and supplies, but not military equipment or weapons. France, Spain, the Netherlands, and Brazil soon made the same declarations.

The American diplomat in England was outraged, claiming that this declaration of neutrality was the first step toward diplomatic recognition. Secretary of State William H. Seward exclaimed that formal recognition of the Confederacy would make Britain an enemy of the US.

After the Confederates won the First Battle of Bull Run, the British believed that Confederate independence was inevitable, but they still planned to stay out of the internal conflict unless “the fortune of arms or the more peaceful mode of negotiation shall have determined the respective positions of the two belligerents.”

The Southern secretary of state grew impatient and decided to send his own diplomats to Britain and France. The Confederates considered several options to get their diplomats over to Europe, having to get through Union blockades. They decided to charter the steamer *Gordon*, which could outrun Union ships. Renamed *Theodora*, it left Charleston, South Carolina, at 1 am on October 12 and slipped through the Union blockade. They made their way to Cuba, where the diplomats would board the British RMS *Trent* after it arrived in three weeks.

Back in the US, the Union government knew they South was sending diplomats to Europe but didn’t know which ship they left on. For a time, they believed it was the *Nashville* and sent a ship to Britain to pursue it. Eventually, Captain Charles Wilkes of the USS *San Jacinto* discovered the Confederate plan to board the *Trent* in Cuba. He stationed his ship near the Bahamas Channel, which they’d need to pass through, and waited.

On November 8, 1861, the *Trent* passed through the channel. Around noon, the *San Jacinto* fired two shots across the bow of the *Trent*, after which the British ship came to a halt. The Union sailors then boarded the *Trent* and took the two diplomats and their secretaries prisoner. They reached America on November 15 and transferred the prisoners to Fort Warren in Boston.

Though Northerners celebrated Wilkes’s actions, the British were outraged. They had not taken sides in the war and had a policy to accept any paying customer on their ships. The British demanded the men be released and the US issue an apology. They also began preparing for war – banning exports to America, sending troops to Canada, and planning several attacks. Additionally, France announced it would support Britain if war erupted.

Lincoln chose to avoid war with Britain and had a message sent to Britain condemning Wilkes’s actions. The men were released in January and finally made their journey to Europe. However, they failed to convince any European leaders to support the Confederacy in the war.



*The first stamps issued in the Civil War Sesquicentennial Series.*



*Issued for Queen Victoria's 60th anniversary as queen.*



*Issued for the 1909 Alaska-Yukon Pacific Exposition.*



*From the Antarctic Explorers issue*



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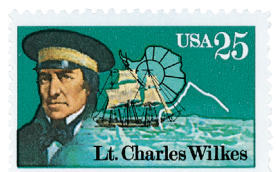
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