

Symbol on the Waves: Model of the *CSS Alabama*
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The War Between the States formed a definite marker in the history of the young United States as the definition of statehood, nation, and government were fought out on the fields of battle. Both the North and the South utilized land and sea forces to fight for what they believed to be their rights; and with armies and navies forming part of the arsenals, the war affected every part of life. Most famously, the battle between the USS Monitor and the CSS Virginia proved the sea power of both North and South, but the actions on the sea which was more effective was the blockade on Southern ports. The North employed its navy for a stifling blockade of the South restricting aid, monies, or supplies from abroad while the South attempted to gain notice as a nation and free itself from its oppressor. In the Confederacy, the blockade runners were seen as heroes and symbols, bringing in necessary supplies for the armies and hope from abroad. One of the more famous of these ships was the *CSS Alabama*. For the Southern cause, the *Alabama* formed a hope and mainstay as it raided Union vessels and sought to disrupt the stranglehold on the ports. Both sides utilized the seas as a battlefield, the North with its blockade and the South with its runners. Although the *Alabama* and her confederates did not bring enough aid to bring ultimate victory, the Confederate navy stood as a hope and served as a symbol for Confederate freedom.

When President Lincoln declared the blockade on April 19, 1861, he and those in the North sought to control the war through strength, mind, and power, for the navies would be used as a way to return wayward sons to the right.¹ Through manpower, the North overhauled its ships which had been lying in peacetime harbors and purchased more in order to contain the erring

¹ Craig Symonds, *Lincoln and His Admirals*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 41.

states.² Within the beginning months of the war, the Northern navy purchased ninety ships and repaired many more in order to be ready for the constancy of coastal watch as well as the roughness of river fighting. Through politics, Lincoln utilized the navy as a way to keep foreign nations from interfering by declaring the conflict an internal rebellion instead of a war against a neighboring power. Through trade, the North controlled the Southern way of life as the Anaconda Plan, suggested by Secretary of the Navy Gideon Wells, strangled the Confederacy.³ The blockade was not a complete one, as runners did succeed in gaining open waters and returning with supplies, but the Northern navy did cost the Southerners much of their necessary cotton trade and caused them to carry less cargo at each pass through the gauntlet. Through force, the battles of the seas raged in favor of the North, for, even if the Confederacy gained victory, the Union still maintained its grip through more ships and men. With the ships and the seas, the Northern navy controlled the war on many levels, for although the Union's greatest battles remained on land, the navy allowed the armies the conditions to succeed.

In the South, breaking from the Union brought on a new way of life as a new country attempted to become free, and the navy was formed as a symbol of the new freedom desired by the Confederacy. Although they re-fitted merchant ships, repaired sunken ships, and purchased new ones from foreign powers, the Confederate navy had no power on the waves at the beginning of the war, having to earn its status through valor and action. Ironclad ships allowed for some success on the waves because of their strength against the conventional wooden ships which the Union employed, but the necessary resources for building an entire navy of iron never came to be for the Southern nation.⁴ In addition to these metal machines and equal in emphasis

² Donald Canney, *Lincoln's Navy: The Ships, Men and Organization, 1861-65*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 1.

³ Symonds, 41.

⁴ Canney, 18.

were the commerce raiders as, though more light weight and small, they disrupted Northern commerce in the Atlantic and Caribbean and brought back spoils to support the war. Although the South was never capable of disrupting commerce as completely as the North, the ships which bore the stars and bars gave hope to their people through their victories over their more powerful opponents. Seen as an oppression of the North, the blockade served as a symbol of what the people were fighting against, while the runners returning with supplies and hope gained the gratitude and hope of the people. The victories of the commerce raiders were read widely in the newspapers and the repeated successes as signs of the righteousness of the Confederacy cause. Throughout the war, the navy of the South gained small victories, never serving as a turning point in the conflict, but keeping up the hopes of the people through their successes.

Within the ranks of the Southern commerce raiders, the *CSS Alabama* served as one of the most important symbols for the Confederacy as it swept across the oceans for nearly two years gaining victories and spoils. Commissioned and secretly built in England in 1862, the *Alabama* served from 1862-1864 and was captained by Raphael Semmes and crewed by men from both sides of the war as well as some from England.⁵ The impact on the conflict of armies was not great as the commerce raider never saw a Confederate port, but the influence on morale was significant each time news of its worldwide victories returned. Traveling across the seas, the *Alabama* served to upset the commerce of the Union by taking sixty-four merchant prizes as they sailed to Europe and over \$6.5 million dollars in spoils.⁶ The victories of the commerce raider were known in the South and viewed with great joy as through the Atlantic, Caribbean, Indian, and Pacific, the *Alabama* gained success. Even over the US Navy in a firefight off of Galveston,

⁵"Captain Raphael Semmes and the C.S.S. Alabama." The Navy Department Library. <http://www.history.navy.mil/library/online/cssalabama.htm> (accessed February 14, 2013).

⁶"Captain Raphael Semmes and the C.S.S. Alabama." The Navy Department Library. <http://www.history.navy.mil/library/online/cssalabama.htm> (accessed February 14, 2013).

the *Alabama* defeated the *USS Hatteras*. In spirit, the victories of the *Alabama* and other commerce raiders raised the hopes of the Confederacy not only in the support of foreign powers but also in supremacy on the waters. Just as the *Alabama* defeated the Union merchants, the Confederacy hoped on land to do so, just as the ship sailed as a recognized power, so too the land forces hoped to be seen, just as the raider saw freedom, so too the South dreamed.

The War Between the States ultimately fought out with most of its most important victories and defeats on the land instead of the sea, but nevertheless, the navies of both sides formed an integral part of the conflict. Without the ships of the blockade and the commerce raiders, the war could have issued down many different paths, making the war faster, slower, or even have the opposite outcome. For the North, the War caused a navy to come further into fruition, for it forced the Department of the Navy develop into more than a single man branch as it had been in the early part of the century. For the South, the War birthed a few ships and victories, but its more effective use was the hope and morale support through the tales of the *Alabama* and her fellow raiders. In the end, the North claimed victory, but the effects of the commerce raiders still remained in the form of legends, sea shanties, and significant financial losses. The war defined the coming nation, sealing the ideals in blood, and through the land and the sea, the war birthed a country stronger and united.

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