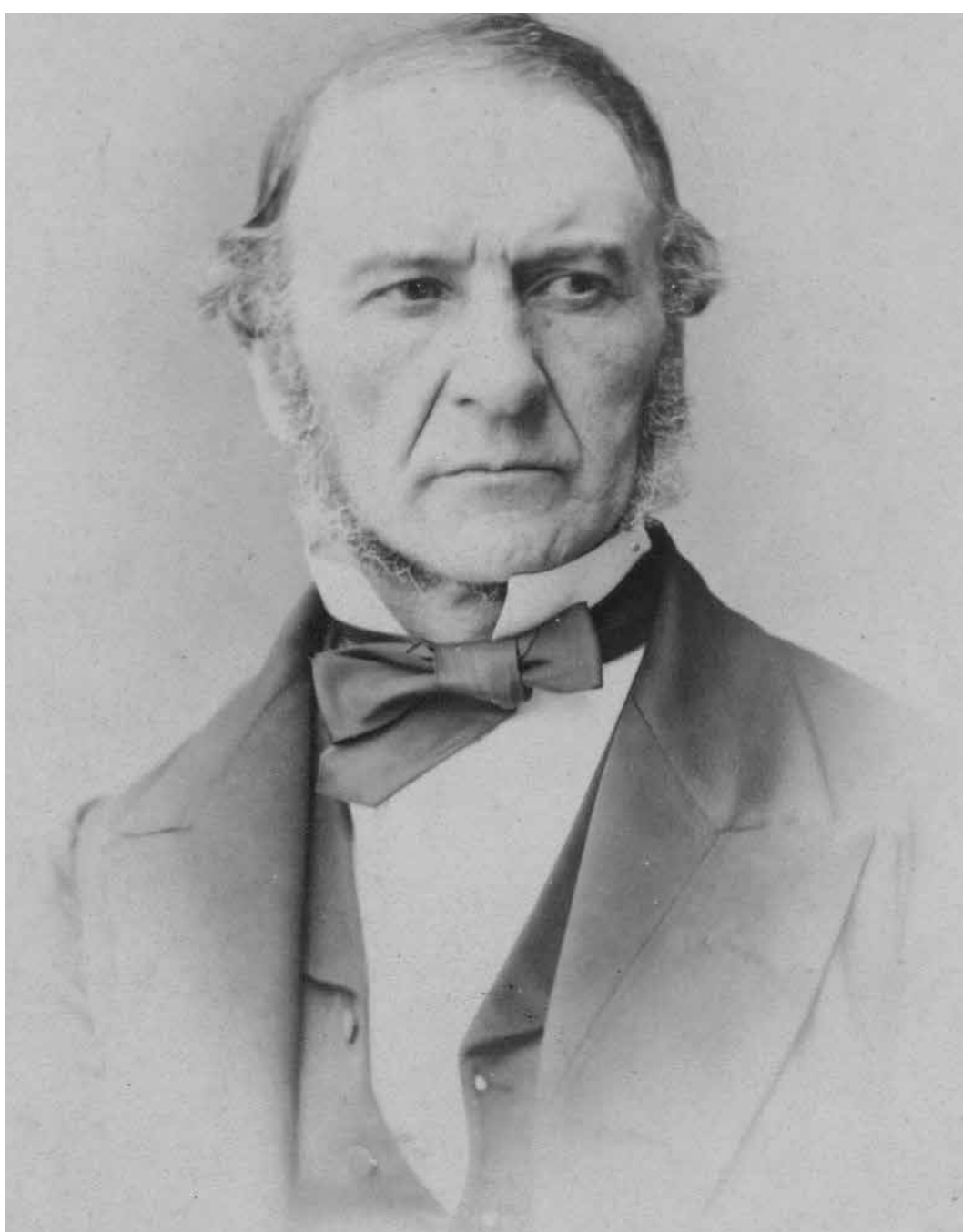


Gladstone

Tony Little examines William Ewart Gladstone's views of what he later came to consider as one of the worst mistakes of his political life.

'An undoubted error, the m Gladstone and the



William Ewart
Gladstone (1809–98),
circa 1863
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most singular and palpable' American Civil War

TOWARDS THE END of his life, William Ewart Gladstone wrote a series of autobiographical memoranda in three of which he confessed his worst errors. Twice, he berates himself over a speech made in Newcastle during the American Civil War, describing it in one place, as a 'palpable error which was of a very grave description' and in another as 'an undoubted error, the most singular and palpable', adding that it was 'the least excusable of them all ... because it was committed so late as in the year 1862 when I had over lived half a century.'¹ When a short careless electronic message can now end a political career, it is worth examining why a mistake described by Gladstone himself in such sombre terms had so little impact on his career and comparing the reasons he condemned himself with the criticisms, still repeated, made by his contemporaries.

At the time of President Lincoln's election, Gladstone was not the dominating force in the Liberal Party he later became, but a hesitant recruit. As a supporter of free trade, he had broken with the Conservative Party over the Corn Laws in 1846 and had served in Aberdeen's 1852 coalition, but had only reluctantly abandoned hope of Tory reunification. He was absent from the 1859 meeting in Willis's rooms which gathered the Whigs, Radicals and Peelites into the Liberal Party, and had, silently, voted against the motion which subsequently brought down Derby's Conservative government.²

He had, however, joined Lord Palmerston's Liberal government, as chancellor of the exchequer. Gladstone brought with him a strong reputation in finance and a programme of fiscal reforms, to promote free trade and prune government spending. This was not Palmerston's agenda and the two soon clashed. Palmerston sought increased expenditure to

strengthen coastal defences against perceived French threats. Although this dispute brought Gladstone near to resignation, he held back. By 1861, Gladstone had achieved his tax reforms and, through Cobden, a free trade agreement with France but had conceded Palmerston's increased military expenditure. The two had found a *modus vivendi* if not harmony.

Even before Lincoln assumed office in March 1861, southern states had begun to secede from the Union and Jefferson Davis had become president of the Confederacy. In April 1861, the American Civil War commenced.

Although trade between Britain and the United States had flourished, diplomatic relations were frosty. The two countries had been in dispute over Central America as recently as 1856. The USA coveted Canada and Lincoln's secretary of state, William Seward, described by a modern historian as a 'ferocious Anglophobe',³ aspired to reconcile North and South to exclude Britain from the continent.⁴ Events early in the Civil War further strained the relationship.

In April 1861, Lincoln announced a blockade of Confederate ports and by August had begun their closure. Britain imported four-fifths of her cotton from America and a quarter of her food supplies. The reduced supplies to British textile manufacturers brought a 'frightful level' of unemployment to Lancashire.⁵ In a May 1861 proclamation concerning 'hostilities unhappily commenced between the United States of America and certain states styling themselves the Confederate States of America', the Queen announced her 'Royal determination to maintain a strict and impartial neutrality in the contest between the said contending parties.'⁶ This pleased neither North nor South. Lincoln's government viewed the Southerners as rebels not

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Gladstone and the American Civil War

belligerents, and Jefferson Davis had hoped for official British recognition. In November, a US frigate stopped the Royal Mail steamer *Trent*, and seized Confederate envoys travelling to Britain and France, causing a major diplomatic dispute. It has been described as 'the most dangerous single incident of the Civil War and perhaps in the whole course of Anglo-American relations since 1815.'⁷

I think that principle detestable

The differences between Gladstone and Palmerston extended to America as, years later, Gladstone recalled:

I was not one of those who on the ground of British interests desired a division of the American Union. My view was distinctly opposite. I thought that while the Union continued it never could exercise any dangerous pressure upon Canada to estrange it from the Empire: our honour as I thought rather than our interest forbidding its surrender. But, were the Union split, the North no longer checked by the jealousies of slave power, would seek a partial compensation for its loss in annexing or trying to annex British North America. Lord Palmerston desired the severance as a diminution of a dangerous power but prudently held his tongue.⁸

Although the abolition of slavery was not among Lincoln's initial war aims, Gladstone recognised its significance. To the Duke of Argyll he confessed, 'It seems to me that the South has two objects in view: firstly the liberation of its trade and people from the law of tribute to the North; secondly and perhaps mainly, the maintenance of the slave system without fear or risk of Northern interference.'⁹ His own view on slavery was expressed to the Duchess of Sutherland, in May 1861, 'the principle announced by the vice-president of the South ... which asserts the superiority of the white man, and therewith founds on it his right to hold the black in slavery, I think that principle detestable and I am wholly with the opponents of it.' But he doubted that slavery could be suppressed by war. 'No distinction can in my eyes be broader than the distinction between whether the Southern ideas of slavery are right and the question whether they can justifiably be put down by war from the North.'¹⁰

Despite the clarity of these private statements, Gladstone's reputation is still tarnished by association with slavery as a consequence of his carefully obscure public expressions on

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the subject, his propensity to draw fine distinctions and his family connections.¹¹ Gladstone's father had owned slave-worked plantations in the West Indies, receiving substantial compensation on the abolition of slavery. Early in his parliamentary career, Gladstone defended conditions on his father's plantations and defended the transitional compulsory apprenticeship system which replaced slavery but was little better. Many years later, he recorded that he had 'perused' his speech in the 1833 abolition debate 'with dissatisfaction' but added that he had not said 'a word, I think, unfavourable to the great change.'¹² Although denouncing the slave trade as 'by far the foulest crime that taints the history of mankind in any Christian or pagan country', in 1850 Gladstone unsuccessfully supported a resolution to stop the navy's anti-slave patrols because the non-cooperation of other countries made them ineffective. 'If you wish to suppress the slave trade', he argued you must 'repeal the Sugar Duties Bill; double your squadron; obtain the right of search from France and America; obtain the power to treat slave trade as piracy, and those engaged in it as pirates; and you must compel Spain and Brazil to fulfil their treaties.' 'The first two you might do,' he continued, 'you cannot the three last, it would belong to other nations to do that; and we know full well that they would not consent to it.'¹³

As the naval patrols debate illustrates, Gladstone approached politics as an efficient administrator. He was later to say: 'ideal perfection is not the true basis of English legislation. We look at the attainable; we look at the practicable; and we have too much of English sense to be drawn away by those sanguine delineations of what might possibly be attained in Utopia.'¹⁴ One corollary of this was an antipathy to zealous idealists, in this instance 'his long-standing distaste for the fanatical abolitionists'. A revulsion expressed to Lord Stanley in 1864 when he 'spoke with astonishment of the eagerness of the 'negrophilists ... to sacrifice three white lives in order to set free one black man, even after it was shown that there was no disposition among the negroes to rise to their own defence'. In addition, throughout the Civil War, Gladstone was constrained, in public, by collective cabinet responsibility to the *realpolitik* of 'strict and impartial neutrality'. As will be seen later, his Newcastle pronouncement was taken as indicative of changing government policy.¹⁵

A gross outrage

Gladstone's involvement in the Civil War began with the *Trent* incident. Writing to the Queen,

Palmerston called the seizure of the envoys a 'gross outrage and violation of international law'.¹⁶ The garrison in Canada was reinforced. Despite Gladstone's plea for moderation, the cabinet instructed Lord Lyons, the senior British diplomat in Washington, to demand an apology and reparations. Lyons was to return home if no favourable response was received. By coincidence, Gladstone was in attendance at Windsor and briefed Victoria and Albert before the cabinet discussion. Returning to dine with the royal family afterwards, he helped Prince Albert soften the draft, offering the Americans an opportunity to disown the seizure as unofficial and release the envoys. The threat to break diplomatic relations was withdrawn.¹⁷

The Americans were also lobbied by the French government while the Radical MPs Cobden and Bright wrote to Senator Sumner, an abolitionist leader, warning him of the risks of war with Britain. Over Christmas 1861, Lincoln's cabinet agreed to release the envoys despite the popularity of their seizure in the North. In the New Year, Gladstone undertook a series of engagements around Edinburgh. In Leith, he urged the acceptance of the 'concession' in 'a generous spirit' as having 'removed any apparent cause of deadly collision' with the Americans.

In summarising the views of 'all thinking men in this country' Gladstone revealed his anxiety that 'the party which was apparently the strongest had committed themselves to an enterprise which would probably prove to be completely beyond their powers'. Northern success he anticipated would 'only be the preface and introduction to political difficulties far greater than even the military difficulties of the war itself.' It was a 'war to be lamented and to be deprecated, and likely to result in great misery, great effusion of human blood, enormous waste of treasure, permanent estrangement and bitterness of feeling.'¹⁸

The painful effects of the struggle upon ourselves

Gladstone made a number of speaking tours in 1862 highlighting the conflict. He wished to celebrate his tax reforms, to raise his profile within the Liberal Party and to find a new constituency. He had been MP for Oxford University since 1847, but anticipated difficulties in any future election from his increasing Liberalism, notably, his attitude to university reform and sympathy for Nonconformists. A visit to Manchester in April served all these purposes and in 1865 he successfully stood for South West Lancashire.

Speaking of America to the Manchester Chamber of Commerce, he flattered the audience's hostility to slavery: 'Why, no doubt, if we could see that this was a contest of slavery or freedom, there is not a man in this room – there is hardly, perhaps, a man in all England – who would for a moment hesitate as to the side he would take.' 'But', he continued, 'we have no faith in the propagation of free institutions at the point of the sword; it is not by such means that the ends of freedom are to be gained. Freedom must be freely accepted – freely embraced.'¹⁹

Gladstone also drew attention to the distress of the Lancashire textile workers and their selfless response, highlighting the 'painful effects of the struggle upon ourselves ... and not upon ourselves alone but upon the other countries of Europe ... [E]very country that has a cotton manufacture is suffering – grievously ...' The workers were commended 'in their patient endurance, in their mutual help, in their respect for order, in their sense of independence, in their desire to be a burden to no one, in the resignation with which they submit to positive privation.' The employers were equally praised: 'the steam engine is kept going, the factory, if not on all days, on some days is kept at work, not with a hope of profit to the master, but in the face of known and positive loss in order that ... they may not desert and abandon the noble hands they employ.'²⁰ More practically, that summer, Gladstone provided relief work in Hawarden for Lancashire operatives and Mrs Gladstone put her family energetically to work seeking donations, set up soup kitchens and undertook her own tour of Lancashire in the autumn.²¹

Procuring a cessation of the deadly struggle in America

The early months of the Civil War were both bloody and inconclusive. In the spring and summer of 1862, a Northern victory was doubtful. In evaluating what he called the 'deplorable struggle' for his Mancunian audience, Gladstone reflected these doubts. He compared the Northern campaign to reunite the country with British efforts in the American War of Independence where, despite 'successes in the field', 'we found we were no nearer our objective than before.' He added, 'Some persons may say that the Northern States are a great deal stronger than the Southern, and therefore they must win. Now, England was in former times a great deal stronger than Scotland' but 'it was not the exercise of force, but a sense of policy and prudence on both sides, dictated in the main by

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natural circumstances which led to the union of the two kingdoms.’ For Gladstone, if the heart of the opposing ‘country is set upon separation’, ‘then it is almost impossible that the military object should be effected; and if it were, the civil and political difficulties remaining would render that military success a curse and a misery to those who achieved it.’ He ended with a prayer:

May the Almighty disposer of all hearts bring that struggle to an end! For the sake of ourselves – for the sake above all, of the Americans themselves, – may that struggle quickly reach its termination! May that take place, not which we wish or may prefer, but which is for the peace, the happiness, and the welfare of the inhabitants of that country, be they white or be they black.²²

In the same month as Gladstone’s Manchester visit, the Liberal ship owner, William Schaw Lindsay, privately proposed to Palmerston and the foreign secretary, Earl Russell, that Britain and France mediate in the American war. With Russell’s approval, Lindsay had been discussing

the blockade of Southern ports with the French emperor. His endeavours, though encouraged by Napoleon III, were quickly and coldly rebuffed in London.²³ In July, Lindsay initiated a debate in the Commons where Palmerston, more diplomatically, again rejected the idea.

However, intervention had not been discarded. On 24th September, learning of Gladstone’s prospective trip to Tyneside, Palmerston wrote to warn the chancellor against being ‘too sympathising with the Tax Payer’ or agitating to bring ‘the House of Commons and the Government to more Economical ways & Habits’. He also notified him that, subject to the ‘Sanction of the Cabinet’ and the outcome of the battle, which ‘appeared by the last accounts to be coming on’²⁴, ‘it seems to Russell and me that the Time is fast approaching when some joint offer of Mediation by England France, and Russia if She would be a Party to it, might be made with some Prospect of Success to the Combatants in North America.’ If, when Lyons returned to Washington in October, the proposal was accepted, he anticipated recommending ‘an Armistice and Cessation of Blockades with a View to Negotiation on the Basis of Separation.’²⁵

While reassuring the premier that ‘I am not therefore going to the North upon an economical crusade’ but to celebrate the French trade treaty, the greater part of Gladstone’s reply responded to the prospect of ‘procuring a cessation of the deadly struggle in America.’ He was apprehensive that further Confederate successes would ‘authorise that Government with something like justice to ask of us prompt recognition’ and increase Southern territorial demands. ‘... [A] state of things may come about, if Europe does not speak at the right moment, in which she will find a new set of obstacles set up on the side of the South, and these obstacles again reacting unfavourably on the disposition of the North’. He feared that the ‘one great requisite’ for intervention, ‘moral authority’, could be undermined by the recent French invasion of Mexico, and potential unrest among the Lancashire unemployed. ‘[W]e might then seem to be interfering, with loss of dignity on the ground of our immediate interests, rather than as ‘representing the general interests of humanity and peace.’²⁶

They have made a nation

Gladstone arrived in Newcastle on Monday 6 October, staying overnight with Gateshead MP, William Hutt. That morning’s newspapers published Lincoln’s preliminary emancipation proclamation, issued on 22 September and

Lincoln’s Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, 22 September 1862 (© US Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana)

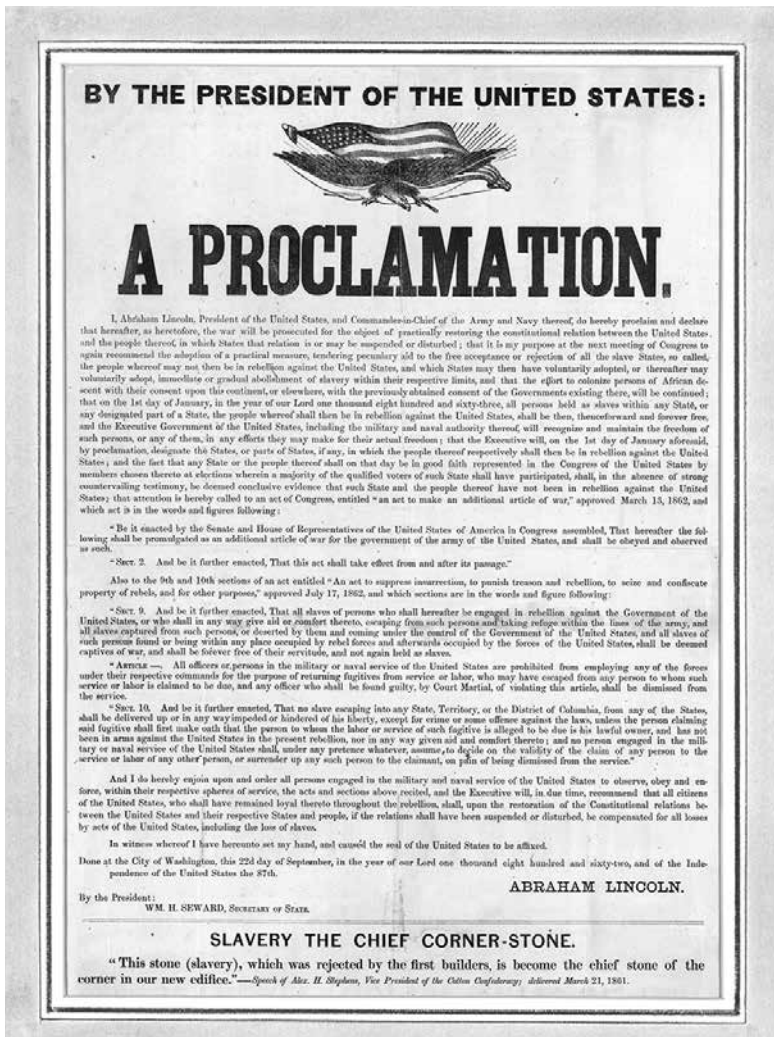


Table 1: Press Reaction to Lincoln's Proclamation		
Paper	Politics	Reaction
<i>The Times</i>	Independent/ Conservative	'The North must conquer every square mile of the Southern States before it can make the proclamation more than waste paper.'
<i>Morning Post</i>	Palmerstonian, later Conservative	'... it is not easy to estimate how utterly powerless and contemptible a Government must have become who would sanction with its approval such insensate trash. It is evidently a bait thrown out to gain the support of the Abolitionist party. It will prove useless.'
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	Conservative	'The North is only Abolitionist by compulsion, and that this step is altogether inspired by Military and not moral considerations. Undoubtedly it has been taken with repugnance.'
<i>Daily News</i>	Radical	'... does not allude to the proclamation, but instead has a leader on the assertion of the Southerners that when their independence is achieved they will abolish slavery.'
<i>Morning Star</i>	Liberal	'... thinks it is indisputably the great fact of the war. The turning point in the history of the American Commonwealth, an act only second in courage and in probable results to the declaration of independence.'
Source: <i>Leeds Mercury</i> , 7 October 1862, p. 4		
Newspaper political affiliations: C. Cook and B. Keith, <i>British Historical Facts 1830–1900</i> (St Martins Press, 1975), pp. 201–05		

carried to Britain on the Royal Mail steamer *Australasian* together with news of the Union victory at Antietam. *The Times* portrayed early American reaction to emancipation as hostile: 'It is considered a blunder by all except extreme Abolitionists. It sent down the price of all securities ...'; 'Such a proclamation cannot possibly be enforced, and its only effect will be to strengthen the determination of the rebels to fight to the very last.'²⁷

The proclamation received a mixed reception in the British press, as may be seen from the summary in the *Leeds Mercury* which illustrates the range rather than the balance of opinion – see Table 1 below.

In the evening, Gladstone socialised with Hutt's guests. He did not recast the speech planned for 7 October to reflect the proclamation. His topics remained the celebration of his economic policy, commendation of the Italian policy, which had helped enlist him in Palmerston's government, and preparing the way for mediation. He spoke after a banquet in Newcastle town hall where 500 men had dined and the galleries were filled with a 'large assemblage of ladies among whom were Mrs Gladstone, Mrs Hutt and the Lady Mayoress.'

Gladstone proclaimed his faith that 'in part the Government of the country is carried on, and the confidence of the people conciliated and attracted to the laws and institutions of the country' by 'free communication'. He analysed, in detail, the benefits of the French trade treaty and demonstrated that – despite 'a blight altogether unexampled in our history' smiting 'the greatest industry of the country', Irish

'distress', and his tax cuts – government revenue remained resilient. He commended 'the fortitude, resignation and self-command' of the Lancashire textile workers. He estimated that half the mill owners were keeping their factories open despite a fourfold increase in cotton costs and static sales prices and he urged a more sympathetic administration of poor law relief.

He concluded his speech by praising Palmerston and Russell for recognising the need for Italian unification. 'For generations back, almost for centuries, divided Italy has been a focus of troubles for Europe, has been a tempter to ambition Italy united ... will afford by a new example a new and signal proof that constitutional freedom ... is the best security that human wisdom can devise ...'²⁸

It was the penultimate, American, section of the address which caused sensation, controversy and, later, repentance. The problem was a memorable phrase in a single sentence. Gladstone acknowledged that he favoured maintaining a United States, despite believing that slaves would be better off under their Southern masters rather than the 'whole power' of the federal authorities. He defended the policy of strict neutrality between the warring parties even though he 'will offend both, because the state of mind in which his conduct will be judged of by either'. He asked the audience to sympathise with the Northern fight against dismemberment. 'It is the more necessary to do this because I think we are of one mind as to what is to come. We know quite well that the people of the Northern States have not yet drunk of the cup – they are still trying to hold it far

from their lips – the cup which all the rest of the world see they nevertheless must drink.’ It was to his next sentence that G. J. Holyoake’s press agency report attached the word sensation:

We may have our own opinions about slavery; we may be for or against the South; but there is no doubt that Jefferson Davis and other leaders of the South have made an army; they are making, it appears a navy and they have made what is more than either – they have made a nation.²⁹

The next day ‘the people of the Tyne gave him the reception of a king.’ ‘The bells rang, guns thundered, a great procession of steamers followed him to the mouth of the river’ and the banks were thronged with the workers from the local shipyards and local factories.³⁰ Thereafter Gladstone made his way, via speeches at Sunderland, Middlesbrough and York, to London where the cabinet would deliberate on mediation.

Holyoake later described ‘sensation’ as too strong and suggested ‘surprise’ might have been more appropriate.³¹ The summaries of editorial

reaction circulated in the provincial press were more subdued – see Table 2 – but do highlight the areas where Gladstone was censured:

- his partiality to the South,
- ignoring the ‘curse of slavery’, and
- anticipating recognition of the Confederacy.

Gladstone responded firmly to the allegation of partiality for the South, ‘I have never to my knowledge expressed any sympathy with the Southern cause in any speech at Newcastle or elsewhere, nor have I passed any eulogium upon President Davis’, adding that ‘I have thought it out of my province to touch in any way the complicated question of praise and blame’ between North and South. These comments were amplified in a letter to the Duchess of Sutherland: ‘the South has not my sympathies except in the sense in which the North has them also. I wish them both cordially well, which I believe is more than most Englishmen can at present say with truth.’³²

At Newcastle, Gladstone had shared his analysis that ‘We may anticipate with certainty the success of the Southern States so far as regards their separation from the North. I cannot but

Table 2: Press Reaction to the Newcastle Speech

<i>Paper</i>	<i>Politics</i>	<i>Reaction</i>
<i>Morning Herald</i> ¹	Conservative	‘It will now be understood throughout Europe and America Both, that the English Government are convinced the time has come to recognise the Independence of the South’
<i>The Times</i> ¹	Independent/ Conservative	‘... it can hardly be alleged that Mr. Gladstone has gone beyond the bounds of official reserve in the statement that Jefferson Davis has made a nation of the South. If any community ever did earn the name of a nation, the Southern Confederates have.’
<i>Daily News</i> ¹	Radical	‘Mr Gladstone has never concealed that he is favourable to Southern independence ... We do not find fault with him for recognising the progress which the South has made in establishing its independence. It is the proper business of a statesman to look before all things at the facts ... Could he not have said one word in favour of saving from the curse of slavery the vast countries which must fall to one or other of the combatants, but whose destiny is at present undecided.’
<i>The Globe</i> ²	Radical	‘For the Birth of a nation the cosmopolitan certificate of birth, consisting of the recognition of other nations, follows ... The sincere repugnance in the general feeling of Europe, independent of state policy, to countenance or encourage by any premature act, the formation of an independent slave power, can alone account for the delay interposed in this instance ...’
<i>The Star</i> ²	Liberal	‘The people of the northern States have undoubtedly no strict right to complain, because a leading English statesman chooses to proclaim to the world that they are certain to be defeated and humiliated in a great struggle in which their dearest hopes and interests are staked.’

Sources:

1 *Belfast News-Letter*, 11 October 1862, p. 4

2 *Newcastle Courant* 10 October 1862, p. 5

Newspaper political affiliations: C. Cook and B. Keith, *British Historical Facts 1830–1900* (St Martins Press, 1975) pp. 201–05

believe that that event is as certain as any event yet future and contingent can be.³³ His assessment accurately foretold the difficulties of Reconstruction but, as he later accepted, was ‘a false estimate of the facts’, about the potential for a Northern victory.³⁴ His adversaries, as Granville concluded a decade later, committed ‘the fallacy of confounding the expression of an opinion as to the probable course of events, with the desire that such should be their course.’³⁵ Analysis, faulty or otherwise, is not advocacy.

Contemporary critics concluded Southern sympathy implied support for slavery, suspicions still aired in today’s ‘culture wars’. Foremost among them was John Bright who, after Newcastle, wrote to Charles Sumner, ‘he is unstable as water in some things; he is for union and freedom in Italy, and for disunion and bondage in America ... he has no word of sympathy for the four million bondsmen of the South’.³⁶ To Cobden, Bright complained ‘He was born of a great slave holding family & I suppose the taint is ineradicable.’³⁷ But, again, his critics misunderstood his views. As Gladstone later wrote ‘It is one thing to anticipate an issue of the war favourable in the main to the Southern view; it is quite another to sympathise with men whose cause is, as I think, seriously tainted by its connection with slavery.’³⁸ In backing mediation, Gladstone would not ignore the ‘bondsmen’.

In his usual way, Gladstone had studied the background to the war. He had met representatives of both sides and would have been aware of Northern as well as Southern racial prejudice. For example, in November 1861, during a long weekend at Blenheim, he both discussed US affairs with Edward Schenley, a commissioner for repressing the slave trade, and read *American Union* by James Spence, a Liverpool merchant and Confederate agent.³⁹ Nevertheless, it is hard to understand how Gladstone believed that slaves would be better off under their southern masters than under the federal government, particularly given the view he had expressed to Argyll of the Confederate objectives. Together with the ambiguity of the phrase ‘our own opinions about slavery’ this hurt Gladstone’s reputation.

Bright was also mistaken in suggesting Gladstone applied different standards to Italy and the Confederacy. Defending Gladstone and ‘the little knot of men who thought with him’, his friend, the lawyer, Sir Robert Phillimore argued that they were ‘not moved by any tolerant feeling towards slavery, by any sympathy for the southern planter as a fellow aristocrat

or by any mean jealousy of the growing greatness of the United States ... Their position was perhaps a narrow one ... historic ... academic, but perfectly creditable ... As disciples of Burke they had admitted the justice of the claim of the States to self-government ... On the same ground they admitted the claim of the Southern States to secede from secession. It was in fact the doctrine of Home Rule⁴⁰ Gladstone based legitimacy on the consent of the population, the standard he later also applied to Alsace Lorraine after the Franco-Prussian War as well as to Ireland over home rule.⁴¹ Gladstone’s fallacy was that the Southern slaves had no voice in their governance.

The senior Northern representative in London, Charles Francis Adams anticipated serious diplomatic damage from Gladstone’s Tyneside soundbite: ‘If he be any exponent at all of the views of the cabinet then is my term likely to be very short.’⁴² Wisely, he delayed challenging the Foreign Secretary for a fortnight and then only asked obliquely if Lord Lyons would return to Washington for a long stay before adding ‘If I had entirely trusted to the construction given by the public to a late speech I should have begun to think of packing my carpet bag and trunks.’⁴³ Discreetly ignoring the potential mediation initiative, Russell assured him that government policy remained unchanged. Later, Russell gently reprimanded Gladstone, ‘I think you went beyond the latitude which all speakers must be allowed when you said that Jeff. Davis had made a nation. Recognition would seem to follow, and for that step I think the cabinet is not prepared.’⁴⁴

The hint of recognition is the offence for which Gladstone most condemned himself, writing in one list of errors, ‘I did not perceive the gross impropriety of such an utterance from a Cabinet Minister of a power, allied in blood and language and bound to loyal neutrality⁴⁵ and in the other, ‘Not only was this a misjudgement of the case but even if it had been otherwise, I was not the person to make the declaration.’⁴⁶

Feeble and half-hearted support

Gladstone returned from his Tyneside triumph still supporting Russell’s mediation plan but soon discovered that cabinet heavyweights such as Argyll, Lewis, and Granville were opposed. Granville, later Gladstone’s closest ministerial colleague, wrote to Russell, ‘The North hate us now, the Southern leaders did hate us, and may for all we know do so now ... Public opinion in England is diametrically opposed to that of both

Contemporary critics concluded Southern sympathy implied support for slavery, suspicions still aired in today’s ‘culture wars’.

Northern and Southern statesmen on slavery. ... I doubt if any European Government really understands American politics ...' Granville feared the Americans using mediation to gain time for renewing 'military resources', making 'dupes' of the British. He was concerned that 'our offers would be refused by one or both belligerents, as such offers generally are when made before they are wanted.' A refusal by the North could lead to calls to 'recognize the South' inevitably leading to war with the North, freeing Napoleon III to make mischief in Europe.⁴⁷

After an inconclusive cabinet,⁴⁸ Gladstone circulated a long memorandum to sway the debate. When 'the South has driven the North over the Potomac, and the North has driven back the South over that river in return', he suggested, the time was ripe for intervention. Delay risked increasing 'the terrible distress in Lancashire', compromising 'public peace'. He was concerned that 'people are being rapidly drawn into Southern sympathies'. He worried that the 'increasing exasperation and deepening horrors of the war' would make peace harder. On slavery he argued, 'I cannot suppose that we are to refuse to cure, or aim at curing, one enormous evil, because we cannot cure another along with it. But I feel it would be most desirable in a process of interference by which the South would be ostensibly, though perhaps not really, the greatest gainer, to use every moral influence with a view to the mitigation, or if possible, the removal of slavery.'⁴⁹ On 12 November, Gladstone wrote home, 'The United States affair has ended and not well. Lord Russell rather turned tail. He gave way without resolutely fighting out his battle ... Palmerston gave to Russell's proposal a feeble and half-hearted support.'⁵⁰

A final rebuke can fittingly be left to Gladstone himself: 'a man who speaks in public ought to know besides his own meaning, the meaning which others will attach to his words.'

The only policy which answered the convictions of the country

Gladstone's final public contribution to the Civil War policy debate came at the end of June 1863 when John Roebuck proposed recognition of the Confederacy. Opposing the motion on behalf of the government, Gladstone reiterated previous arguments of sympathy for 'heroic' Southern 'resistance' offset by 'a strong counter-current of feeling' towards slavery, and disagreement with those 'who thought it was a matter of high British interest that the old American Union should be torn in pieces'.

Throughout the war, Gladstone's horror of the casualties coloured his analysis: 'was there ever a war of a more destructive and more deplorable – I will venture to add, of a more hopeless – character'. Just days before the

decisive Union victory at Gettysburg, Gladstone still did not believe 'that the restoration of the American Union by force is attainable' or that 'the emancipation of the negro race is an object that can be legitimately pursued by means of coercion and bloodshed.' He defended the government's policy of 'faithful and strict neutrality' as 'the only policy which would have answered to the convictions and desires of the country' and urged its retention concluding, 'do not let us run the risk of making worse that which is already sufficiently horrible, and adding to the deadly feud which now exists other feuds and other quarrels which will carry still wider desolation over the face of the earth.'⁵¹ Other Liberals dealt more harshly with Roebuck and, after some chivvy from Palmerston, he withdrew the motion. After Gettysburg, eventual Union victory was no longer in doubt.

Hostile animus

In the summer of 1862, bumbling British bureaucracy allowed the newly launched sloop *Alabama* to escape from Merseyside and pursue a two-year career harassing Union shipping, further aggravating relationships with the United States. Ministerial responsibility for the escape lay with Russell but the odium attached was Gladstone's wartime legacy. America claimed for damages caused both directly by the *Alabama* and her sisters and indirectly for prolonging the strife, causing additional costs of war and higher marine insurance rates.⁵²

Russell resisted the American demands and they remained unsettled by the 1866–67 Derby/Disraeli government. After 1868, Gladstone took responsibility for settling the claims by arbitration together with outstanding British grievances including raids on Canada by American based Fenian Civil War veterans and Canadian fishing disputes. He saw 'arbitration as exemplifying the means by which two civilised nations could settle differences without either having to admit being in the wrong.'⁵³

To his embarrassment, his words at Newcastle 'were cited as part of the proof of hostile *animus*' by the British during the war.⁵⁴ The settlement cost Britain \$15m in 1872 and was taken publicly as a blow to British prestige, becoming a factor in Gladstone's general election defeat of 1874. The \$7.5m paid by the Americans to Canada and the lasting improvement in British–American diplomatic relations went unremarked.⁵⁵

Gladstone's trips north in 1862 helped create a Liberal statesman, more appreciative of the contribution made to the national wealth and the exchequer by the industrial heartlands.

They fostered his respect for the civic capabilities of the working people and served as an apprenticeship for his style of campaigning leadership. His speeches on the Civil War demonstrated his both his sympathy for the Union and flawed analysis of the federal capacity to preserve it. They showed his humanitarian instincts to minimise suffering and casualties in both America and Lancashire but also his reluctance to express in public an empathy for the slaves that matched his loathing for the principle of slavery.

Gladstone had a lifelong urge to communicate, as the volume of his records amply testifies. But students of his life quickly learn Gladstone was a very careful ‘Colossus of Words’³⁶ whose lengthy sentences as often qualified as clarified his meaning. So it is ironic that, as a consequence of the apparent clarity of that one sentence at Newcastle, the Confederacy and slavery still taint his reputation despite his disdain for the one and detestation for the other. The *Alabama* negotiations were prejudiced by those words and the settlement politically costly. A final rebuke can fittingly be left to Gladstone himself: ‘a man who speaks in public ought to know besides his own meaning, the meaning which others will attach to his words.’³⁷

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- 1 John Brook and Mary Sorensen (eds.), *The Prime Minister's Papers: W. E. Gladstone, vol. i, Autobiographica* (HMSO, 1971), pp. 132–4, pp. 249–50.
- 2 See H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809–1874* (OUP, 1986), pp. 103–9.
- 3 Kathleen Burk, *Old World New World: The Story of Britain and America* (Abacus, 2009), p. 270.
- 4 Kenneth Bourne, *The Foreign Policy of Victorian England 1830–1902* (OUP, 1970), p. 92.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- 6 *The Times*, 15 May 1861, p. 5.
- 7 Kenneth Bourne, *Britain and The Balance of power in North America 1815–1908* (Longmans, 1967), p. 251.
- 8 Brook and Sorensen (eds.), *Gladstone Autobiographica*, pp. 132–4.
- 9 26 Aug. 1861, cited by John Morley, *The*

- Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, vol ii (Macmillan, 1903), p. 72.
- 10 Cited in Morley *Gladstone*, p. 71.
- 11 See Roland Quinault, ‘Gladstone and Slavery’, *The Historical Journal*, 52/2 (2009), pp. 363–83 for a full analysis over Gladstone’s lifetime. Dr Quinault is a harsher critic than I have been. For the business interests of Gladstone’s father see S. G. Checkland, *The Gladstones: A Family Biography 1764–1851* (CUP, 1971) especially ch. 19, 23 and appendix ii.
- 12 In 1894, Brook and Sorensen (eds.), *Gladstone Autobiographica*, p. 41.
- 13 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 109, cc. 1156–73 (19 Mar. 1850).
- 14 *Ibid.*, vol. 285, c. 123 (28 Feb. 1884).
- 15 This paragraph was developed from a conversation with Dr Quinault. Quotations from Quinault, ‘Gladstone and Slavery’.
- 16 Brian Connell, *Regina v. Palmerston: The Correspondence between Queen Victoria and her Foreign and Prime Minister 1837–1865* (Evans Brothers, 1962), p. 309.
- 17 Morley, *Gladstone*, pp. 73–4; Philip Guedalla, *The Queen and Mr Gladstone, vol. i, 1845–1879* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1933), p. 123; Kurt Jagow, *Letters of the Prince Consort 1831–1861* (John Murray, 1938), p. 372.
- 18 *The Times*, 13 Jan. 1862, p. 6.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 25 Apr. 1862, p. 7.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Morley, *Gladstone*, p. 77, footnote; Joyce Marlow, *Mr & Mrs Gladstone An Intimate Biography* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1977), pp. 110–11.
- 22 *The Times*, 25 Apr. 1862, p. 7.
- 23 Duncan Andrew Campbell, ‘Palmerston and the American Civil War’, in David Brown and Miles Taylor (eds.), *Palmerston Studies II* (Hartley Institute, University of Southampton, 2007), p. 156.
- 24 The battle, Antietam, the bloodiest single day of the war, had already taken place, on 17 Sep.
- 25 Philip Guedalla (ed.), *Gladstone and Palmerston, Being the Correspondence of Lord Palmerston with Mr. Gladstone, 1851–1865* (Victor Gollancz, 1928), pp. 232–3.
- 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 233–6.
- 27 *The Times*, 6 Oct. 1862, p. 7.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 9 Oct. 1862, pp. 7–8.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 30 Morley, *Gladstone*, p. 77.
- 31 Cited in Richard Shannon, *Gladstone, God and Politics* (Hambledon Continuum, 2007), p. 150.
- 32 Morley, *Gladstone*, pp. 71–2.
- 33 *The Times*, 9 Oct. 1862, p. 8.
- 34 Brook and Sorensen (eds.), *Gladstone Autobiographica*, pp. 132–4.
- 35 Agatha Ramm (ed.), *The Political Correspondence of Mr Gladstone and Lord Granville 1868–1876*, vol ii (Royal Historical Society, 1952), p. 313.
- 36 Philip Magnus, *Gladstone A Biography* (John Murray, 1954), p. 154.
- 37 Cited in Shannon, *Gladstone*, p. 150.
- 38 Guedalla, *Gladstone and Palmerston*, p. 245.
- 39 H. C. G. Matthew, *The Gladstone Diaries, vol. vi, 1861–1868* (OUP, 1978), p. 75.
- 40 F. W. Hirst, ‘Mr Gladstone as Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1853, 1859–1865’, in Sir Wemyss Reid (ed.), *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone* (Cassell & Co. 1899).
- 41 I owe this point to a reviewer of an earlier draft.
- 42 Charles Francis Adams, Sr., diary, 8 Oct. 1862, in *Charles Francis Adams, Sr.: The Civil War Diaries* (unverified transcriptions, Massachusetts Historical Society, 2015): <http://www.masshist.org/publications/cfa-civil-war/view?id=DCA62d281>, accessed 12.6.2021.
- 43 Charles Francis Adams, Sr., diary, 16 Oct. 1862, *ibid.*: <http://www.masshist.org/publications/cfa-civil-war/view?id=DCA62d289>, accessed 12.6.2021.
- 44 Morley, *Gladstone*, p. 80.
- 45 Brook and Sorensen (eds.), *Gladstone Autobiographica*, pp. 132–4.
- 46 *Ibid.*, pp. 249–50.
- 47 Edmond Fitzmaurice, *The Life of Granville George Leveson Gower, Second Earl Granville KG 1815–1891*, vol. i (Longmans Green & Co, 1905), pp. 442–4.
- 48 Spencer Walpole, *The Life of Lord John Russell*, vol ii (Longmans, Green & Co, 1889), pp. 351–2.
- 49 Guedalla, *Gladstone and Palmerston*, pp. 239–47.
- 50 Morley, *Gladstone*, p. 85.
- 51 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 171, cc. 1800–12 (30 Jun. 1863).
- 52 Fitzmaurice, *Granville*, vol ii, p. 87.
- 53 Matthew, *Gladstone 1809–1874*, p. 186.
- 54 Brook and Sorensen (eds.), *Gladstone Autobiographica*, pp. 132–4.
- 55 Compensation figures from Bourne, *Foreign Policy*, p. 95.
- 56 The caption to a cartoon in *Punch* in 1879.
- 57 Morley, *Gladstone*, p. 79.