

“THIS COUNTRY NOW OCCUPIES THE VANTAGE GROUND”:

UNDERSTANDING JOHN ERICSSON’S MONITORS AND THE AMERICAN UNION’S WAR AGAINST BRITISH NAVAL SUPREMACY

by Howard J. Fuller

On 5 August 2002, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the U.S. Navy at last salvaged the turret of the original ironclad-battery *Monitor*, complete with

dents from the famous battle of Hampton Roads (9 March 1862) against the CSS *Virginia* (or “*Merrimac*”), along with the ship’s anchor, engine, shaft, and propeller.¹ It seems in fact that history is finally catching up, piece by piece, with America’s most famous—and most misunderstood—class of naval warship.

Now is the time, therefore, for us to clarify exactly why the *Monitor* was so very important to the Union during the American Civil War. Much controversy, both now and then, has surrounded the vessel, from whether or not she was a successful warship to her legendary status as the product of either “American myth-making” or simple historical fact.² Yet her inventor, John Ericsson, made it abundantly clear what a “Monitor” was about when he named her:

The Navy Department at Washington having, shortly before the launch, requested me to suggest an appropriate name for the impregnable turreted steam battery, I addressed a letter to the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, saying: “The impregnable and aggressive character of

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this structure will admonish the leaders of the Southern Rebellion that the batteries on the banks of their rivers will no longer present barriers to the entrance of the Union forces. The iron-clad intruder will thus prove a severe monitor to those leaders.”

Usually, when this letter is quoted, the passage above is followed by the concluding statement: “On these and many similar grounds, I propose to name the new battery *Monitor*.” However, Ericsson continued: “But there are other leaders who will also be startled and admonished by the booming of the guns from the impregnable iron turret”:

“Downing Street” will hardly view with indifference this last “Yankee notion,” this monitor. To the Lords of the Admiralty the new craft will be a monitor, suggesting doubts as to

the propriety of completing those four steel ships at three and a half million apiece.

On these and many similar grounds, I propose to name the new battery *Monitor*.³

To evaluate the *Monitor*-class of warship, it is essential to explore first the full historical context of this letter to Assistant Secretary Gustavus Fox dated 20 January 1862.

EFFECT OF THE *TRENT* AFFAIR

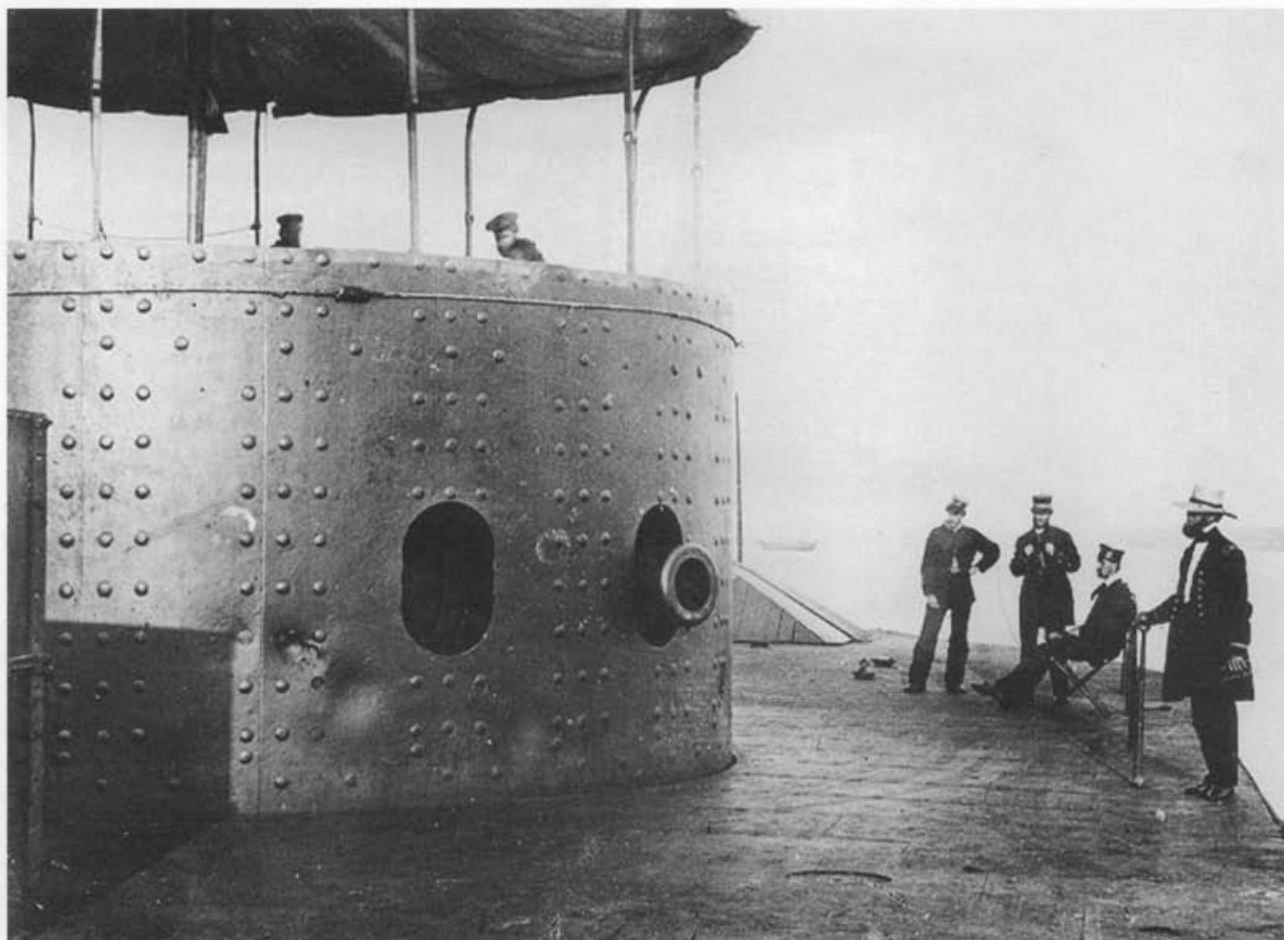
Ericsson’s allusion to “Downing Street” was aimed at the recent New Year’s Day conclusion of the *Trent* Affair, when the two captured Southern emissaries to England and France, James Mason and John Slidell, were released from Federal incarceration, and a third American conflict with the British Empire—this time in the midst of a civil



Salvaging of *Monitor* turret. Courtesy of *Monitor* Center website.

war—was barely avoided.⁴ The end of the *Trent* Affair, as such, was the greatest diplomatic humiliation suffered by President Abraham Lincoln’s administration, especially since it came at the end of a British cannon (although even the generally bellicose *New York Herald* accepted the rationale that disavowing the seizure of Mason and Slidell from the *Trent* vindicated America’s traditional policy of “freedom of the seas,” while depriving the South of its greatest hope—a war between England and the Northern states.)⁵ Had he refused the ultimatum of Lord Palmerston’s government, no amount of international law at the beginning of 1862 could have prevented the huge Royal Navy from counterblockading the North and overwhelming its coastal

defenses.⁶ This was even more so since most navies were still measured by overall numbers of wooden steamships (themselves classed by overall numbers of guns), despite the fact that the broadside-ironclad HMS *Warrior* was finally ready for sea and the *Monitor* herself, at the time Ericsson named her, was only ten days from launching. Even as early in the Civil War as June 1861, Palmerston was very keen to utilize ironclads in a show of force against the Union, for “their going could produce no bad Impression here, and depend upon it as to Impression in the United States the Yankees will be violent and threatening in Proportion to our local weakness and civil and pacific in Proportion to our increasing local strength.”⁷



USS *Monitor*, spring 1862. Courtesy of U.S. Naval Historical Center website.

Congress was more than bitter about the Union's weakness, exclaiming that England's "standard of right has been, is, and will be, the interests of England. There is nothing in the law of nature or of nations that will stand in the way of her imperious will."⁸ British naval might seemed behind British political and legal right. At the same time, *Blackwood's Magazine* made this point:

the Americans have been coerced into an act of justice, which they performed with the worst possible grace; and we are frankly assured that a time is coming, when they mean to take ample vengeance for present humiliations. It appears, then, that a war with the Federal States



Waiting for an Answer in *Punch*, 14 December 1861.



Columbia's Fix in *Punch*, 28 December 1861.

of America is only deferred. If not imminent, it is pretty sure to come sooner or later.⁹

Thus the original *Monitor*, according to Ericsson, was now openly intended to deter at least the wooden ships of the Royal Navy from further influencing U.S. policy. Indeed, when Cornelius Bushnell, Ericsson's earliest backer, first exhibited the *Monitor* plans to Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, in September 1861, he announced that an anxious President Lincoln "need not further worry about foreign interference; I [have] discovered the means of perfect protection."¹⁰

BRITISH REACTIONS TO THE *MONITOR*

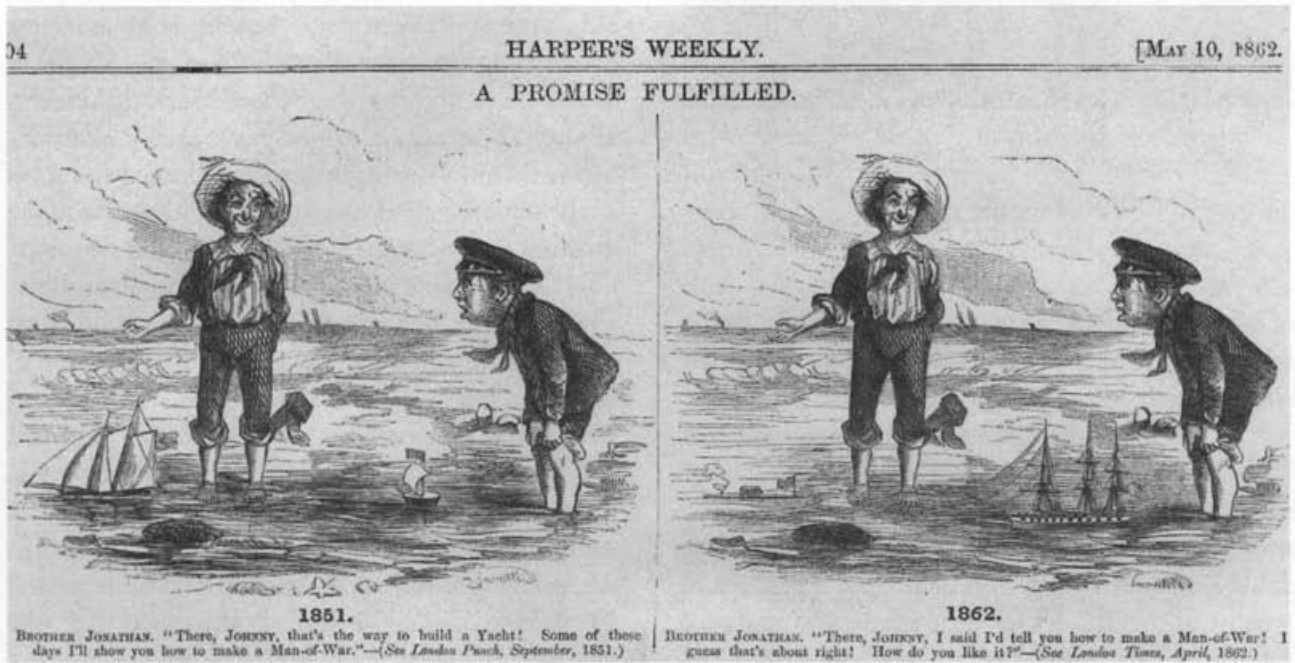
We do not have enough space here to go into the extraordinary reaction of Great Britain to news of the battle of Hampton Roads; nevertheless, a few illustrations reveal a remarkable transformation of attitude. In reply to Ericsson's published letter on the naming—and nature—of the *Monitor*, the *London Times* had this statement:

We are much obliged to Mr. Ericsson for his hint. We take the warning as it was given, and acknowledge with all frankness that "this last Yankee notion" merits all the attention which he claims for it. . . .

At Washington, says our Special Correspondent, "the common remark is that the naval supremacy of Great Britain is disposed of." We don't think it will be disposed of quite so easily, and yet the conclusion has really better warrant than usual. . . . Six months ago the Secretary of the Admiralty described

our active force afloat as 19 line-of-battle ships, two iron-cased frigates, 38 frigates and corvettes, and 90 sloops. Of all this force there are but two vessels that could be relied upon to meet such a ship as the *Monitor*.¹¹

In Parliament, it was also tellingly reflected that "the great question of iron-plated ships against wooden vessels had been brought to an issue, and, happily, without any action on our part." News of the American naval battle, with its impervious iron-clads, struck even deeper against government plans already underway for exorbitant coastal fortifications. It was to save face for Palmerston's anti-French forts—and his own expensive seagoing ironclad program—that the Duke of Somerset, the first lord of the Admiralty, famously ridiculed the *Monitor* as "something between a raft and a diving bell" in the House of Lords; while the prime minister himself, never very confident in the partially-armored *Warrior* that he privately expressed to Somerset as "a fine yacht, but not an efficient Ship



A Promise Fulfilled in *Harpers Weekly*, 10 May 1862.



John Ericsson. Courtesy of U.S. Naval Historical Center website.

of War,” now defended her in the Commons as “a very splendid ship” almost solely on the basis that she was at least seagoing, unlike “floating batteries.”¹² “Only think of our position,” wrote the foreign secretary, Lord Russell, to Palmerston, “if in case of the Yankees turning upon us they should by means of iron ships renew the triumphs they achieved in 1812–13 by means of superior size and weight of metal.”¹³ The U.S. minister to Britain, Charles Francis Adams, meanwhile noted the change: “the effect is to diminish the confidence in the result of hostilities with us. In December we were told that we should be swept from the ocean

in a moment, and all our ports taken. They do not talk so now.”¹⁴

ERICSSON’S DEFINITION OF “NAVAL POWER”

Shortly after the *Monitor* checked the *Virginia* at Hampton Roads, Ericsson wrote Secretary of State William Seward that “the state of the naval defences of the country being so intimately connected with its international relations, I deem it my duty to report to you that under orders from the Secretary of the Navy, keels for six vessels of the *Monitor* class of increased size and speed have already been laid.” Their ultimate purpose was to destroy oceangoing broadside-ironclads through a combination of greater maneuverability, lighter draft for coastal operations, greater protection in the form of low freeboard submersion and thicker, more concentrated armor, and deadlier firepower—now measured in caliber of gun, not numbers. These “recent developments in naval warfare,” Ericsson declared, “tend to prove that this country now occupies the vantage ground.”¹⁵ With ship-to-ship superiority confirmed, it would be suicide for a maritime power such as England to risk either wooden steam ships of the line or her magnificent, though comparatively lightly-armored, broadside-gunned ironclads for at least the crucial duration of the Civil War—the most vulnerable period in the nation’s *international* as well as domestic history.¹⁶

This was confirmed in September 1862 following Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation (after the battle of Antietam), when the British cabinet, fearing a grisly slave uprising in the South reminiscent of the ferocious Sepoy Mutiny in India (1857–58), debated a French proposal to co-intervene.¹⁷ Secretary for War Sir George Lewis put in a printed memo what practical factor, among others, influenced their decision not to try and stop the Civil War. Even if Britain and France had “the right to intervene,” he wrote, large transatlantic deployments (of “peace-keeping” troops) were “difficult and expensive,” suggesting bitter memories of the recent war in the Crimea against Imperial



HMS *Warrior* in 1862 in *Warrior: The World's First Ironclad Then and Now* by Andrew Lambert (London: Conway Maritime Press, 1987), 27.

Russia, while “the wooden ships of Europe would encounter the small iron-cased steamers of America, which, though not seagoing ships, would prove destructive in the ports and rivers.”¹⁸

This was a conclusion, moreover, that the Admiralty—whose business it was to know—also reached. Although he strongly objected to Union monitors as a model for the Royal Navy in general, the commander-in-chief of the North American and West Indian Station, Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Milne, recognized that their potency for harbor and coast defense had completely upset the balance of power in North America. Following news of the naval action at Hampton Roads, Milne, surveying the most powerful British fleet ever assembled at Bermuda, wrote privately to an Admiralty Board member that “if these ships of the line now here were cut up into small vessels, they would be of use to me, but except for Demonstrations clear of *Merrimac* and *Monitor*, they are no use.”¹⁹ The Controller of the Royal Navy (the influential equivalent of Fox), Admiral

Robert Spencer Robinson, also acknowledged Ericsson’s “riddle” for British naval supremacy. With various Union ironclad descriptions before him, from American newspapers and Royal Navy officers under Milne’s command, Robinson reported that “there appears to be no novel or important principle elucidated by these constructions.” Those that “seem to possess sea going qualities,” particularly the experimental broadside-ironclad USS *New Ironsides*, “are in no way superior to the French *Gloire* or *Invincible* or the Ships of the *Royal Oak* class.” The obvious bulk of the armored Federal warships were “mere Rafts carrying very few heavy guns propelled at moderate speed, and though perfectly well adapted for the Inland waters of that great Continent, and most formidable as Harbour Defences, are not in any sense sea going Ships of War”:

This is not said with any view of disparaging the Skill and industry which has been displayed in their construction, still less with

any intention of undervaluing the enormous defensive power which has thus been developed: a power which I believe renders the Americans practically unassailable in their own waters. . . .

If again, Admiral Milne means that we have not yet an Iron plated Flotilla capable of going into the inland waters, rivers and Harbors of the United States, and when there, able to fight an Action on equal terms with the description of Vessels which will be found awaiting us, he is perfectly right and it will be only necessary to observe that such a proceeding on our part is simply impossible.²⁰

THE THREAT OF FOREIGN INTERFERENCE GROWS

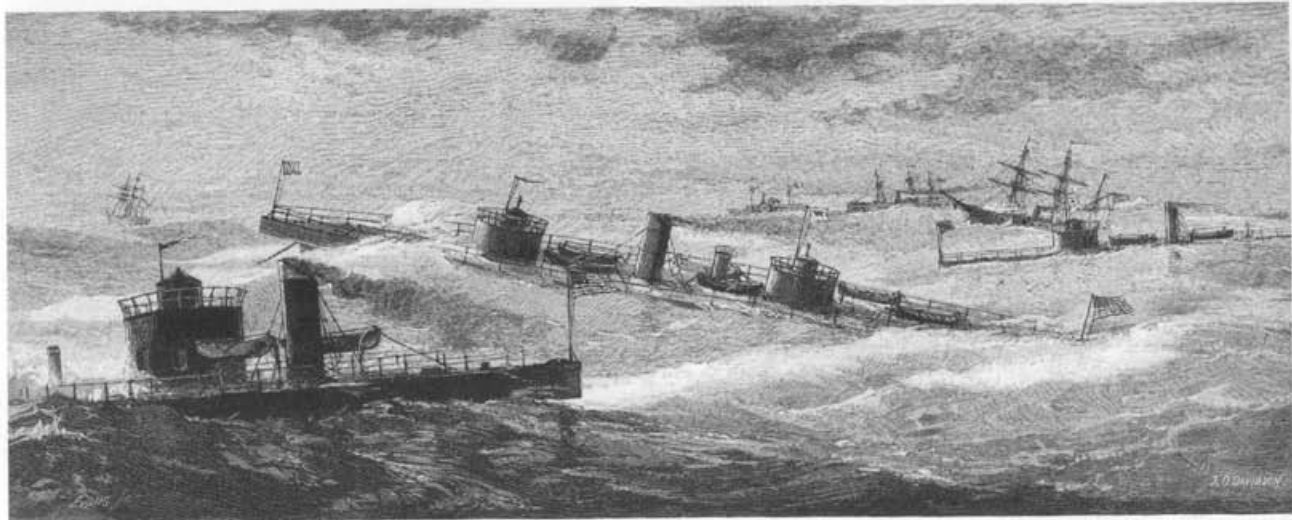
Congress, meanwhile, was in a spending mood far beyond the needs of the Union Navy. The sum of ten million dollars was appropriated for "20 more ironclads," in addition to the \$1.5 million already invested for the three initial prototypes, the *Galena*, *New Ironsides*, and *Monitor*—and after



AN ADVOCATE OF MORAL FORCE

BRITISH LION (sings) "This hain't the attitude we used to take—hem! but 'Circumstances alter Cases.' Those Iron Vessels of the Yankees—hem!—yes! We must try the 'Peaceable Resistance' Dodge."

An Advocate of Moral Force in Harpers Weekly, 31 May 1862.



THE MONITORS "MONADNOCK," "CANONICUS," "MAHOPAC," AND "SAUGUS" AT ANCHOR NEAR FORT FISHER DURING A GALE. (AFTER LITHOGRAPH BY ENDICOTT & CO.) Their commanders were surprised to find that not one of the turret vessels dragged its anchor, while the remainder of the fleet was in great danger owing to the inability of the ground tackle to hold out against the pressure of the wind on the top hampers, from which the monitors were free.

Various monitors at sea in the Fort Fisher Campaign, 1864, published in "The Monitors" by John Ericsson in *Century Magazine*, 31:2 (December 1885): 289.

Hampton Roads this was raised to nearly thirty million dollars—but another ten million dollars was devoted to Union coastal fortifications.²¹ This was followed closely by a ten-million-dollar bill calling for an improved interior canal network that would link the Great Lakes with the Mississippi River—all in anticipation of hostilities with England.²² Even the first transcontinental railroad was urged on the floor of the House by reason that it would help protect California from strategic isolation in an Anglo-American conflict.²³

Nor were these considerations entirely groundless. British reinforcements to Canada, although themselves defensive by nature, were seen as threatening; while Napoleon III's extended imperial "visit" to Mexico, with large French military and

naval forces, only heightened a sense that the United States was now surrounded by European enemies—the nightmare scenario that prompted the Monroe Doctrine in 1823—as much as it was divided from within by "Southern traitors." What started as the North's "personal" irritation with Queen Victoria's Proclamation of Neutrality at the start of the conflict (which automatically granted the Confederates belligerent rights), nearly turned to war over the *Trent*; but ever-present was the threat of British and French intervention in the conflict, whether to relieve themselves of the cotton shortage imposed by the Union blockade or for strictly humanitarian reasons.²⁴ Britain's largely ruling-class sympathy with the Southern aristocracy, in addition to its contempt for popular



The Rod in Pickle in *Harper's Weekly*, 8 August 1862.



Rodman 15-inch smoothbore. Courtesy of U.S. National Archives.



Dahlgren 15-inch smoothbores. Courtesy of US National Archives.

democracy, was also well known. William Howard Russell of the London *Times* recorded these remarks in his diary:

There is after all great satisfaction among the representative property men & Tories in England with the rupture in America & I confess for one that I agree in thinking this war if it be merely a lesson will be of use. . . . Had there been a possibility in human nature to make laws without faction & interest & to employ popular institutions without intrigue & miserable self seeking the condition of parts of the U.S. does no doubt cause regret that it did not occur here, but the strength of the U.S. employed by passion interest self seeking became dangerous to other nations & therefore there is an utter want of sympathy with them in their time of trouble & England regards the North without fear, favour or affection & in spite of liberty rather favours the South.²⁵

When British subjects began constructing and manning fast blockade runners, commerce raiders, and even ironclad rams for the Confederacy—utilizing British naval bases in Halifax, Bermuda, and the West Indies—the American Civil War took on a different dimension that historians tend to overlook, though the phrase “Anglo-Rebel” fills contemporary newspapers, political debates, and private letters.²⁶ Indeed, the greatest threat to the survival of the nation throughout the American Civil

War arguably came from the great powers, not the South. It is significant that the first official naval history of the Civil War saw the Union Navy’s primary victory as having “saved us from foreign intervention that could not have been otherwise avoided,” adding almost as an afterthought, “while at the same time its labors in putting down the rebellion have been far greater than has been generally supposed.”²⁷ When we recall what foreign recognition and assistance meant for the original thirteen colonies struggling for independence, we can see how important this hope was for the Southern states. How long could the Confederacy hold out without blockade running to and from England?²⁸ Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Charles Sumner informed his English friend Richard Cobden of the situation:

[O]ur people are becoming more and more excited, &c., there are many who insist upon war. A very important person said to me yesterday—“we are now at war with England, but the hostilities are all on her side.”²⁹

UNION RESPONSES TO AN “ANGLO-REBEL” THREAT

The result of this attention on the “Anglo-Rebel” threat was the development of ironclad-killing weapons, the monster 15- and later 20-inch Rodman and Dahlgren smoothbores, mounted in both the new fortifications and the monitors, re-

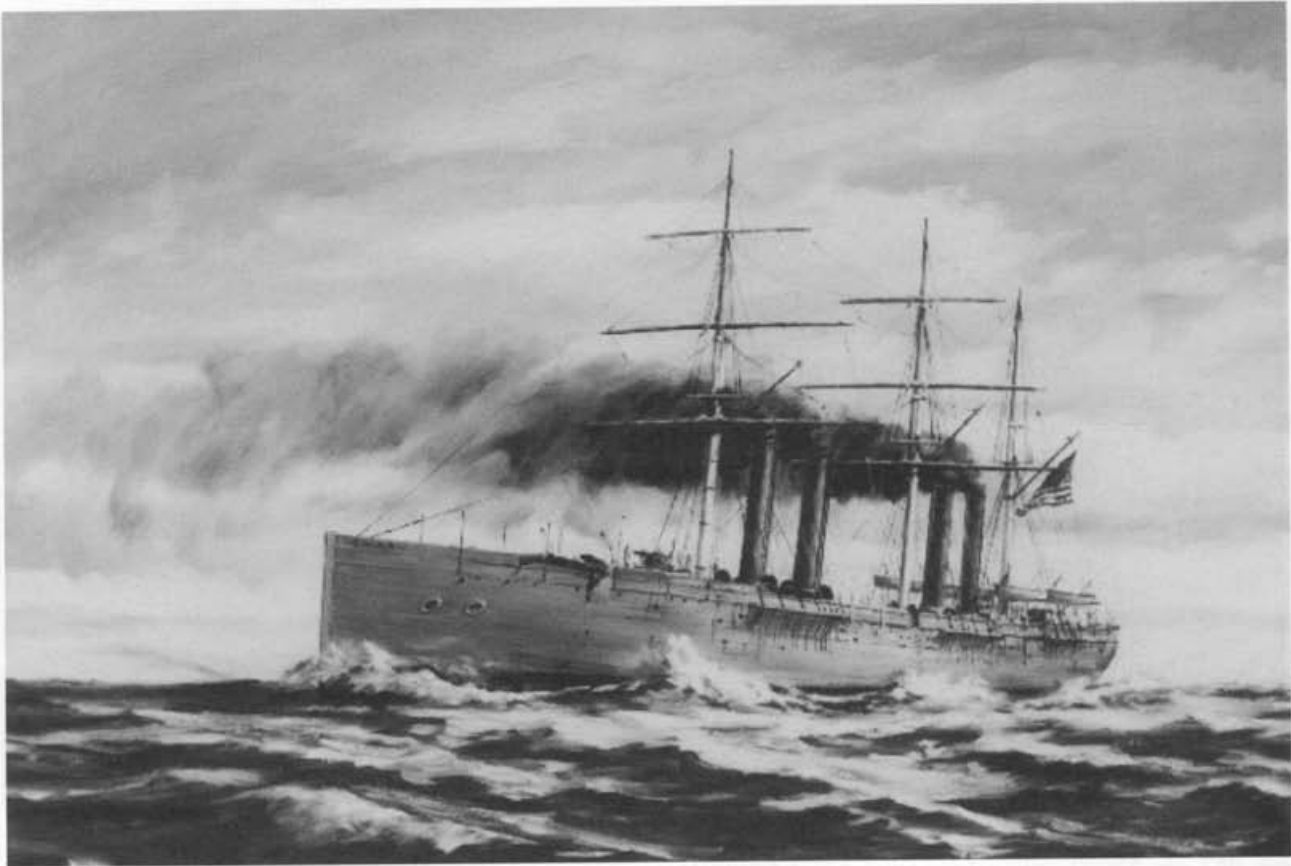


French 7-inch-steel armor plate target penetrated by a 15-inch shot. Courtesy of U.S. Archive Record Group 74, Entry 99 ("Reports of Target practice, 1862-1866"), vol. 3.

spectively. Fox confirmed this strategy when he wrote to the Navy's Bureau of Ordnance that the U.S. had to "keep pace, and lead, if possible, in the production of smooth bore and rifled guns of such calibres and velocities as shall be irresistible *against anything possible to construct which will cross the ocean.*"³⁰ The Bureau subsequently proved Fox and Ericsson's belief that the 15-inch gun would be supreme at effective combat ranges. "Target 57," that included a large, 5-inch thick, rolled iron plate from John Brown and Company of Sheffield, was punched clean through, in addition to "Target 51"—a rolled plate six inches thick procured from a reputable French manufacturer.³¹ According to J. P. Baxter, "when Fox sent [Ericsson] a plan of one of the Laird rams . . . [he] replied 'such a gingerbread affair must not come near our XV inch bulldogs in their impregnable kennels.'"³² It is impor-

tant to note that the "fever" over Confederate ironclad-rams added to this concern.

Yet Ericsson, Fox, and the Union Navy's ambitions reached far beyond the American coastline. Even as Ericsson boasted to Seward of the geostrategic value of the *Passaic*-class coastal monitors, he also wrote to Fox that "the national contest for supremacy is now fairly inaugurated," for to break up any distant blockade of the Northern States, or engage broadside-ironclads on the open sea, Ericsson also proposed a "super" monitor-ram fully twice the size of the original. The vessel would continue to forego the tactical weaknesses associated with sails and rigging in combat (in addition to the much larger crew of sailors needed to work them), in favor of a massive coal-carrying capacity of one thousand tons. Low freeboard of hull, also permissible without masts, would continue to al-



USS *Wampanoag*. Courtesy of U.S. Naval Historical Center website.

low the maximum concentration of armor along the waterline, while forming an unusually steady gun platform for the heaviest possible guns—mounted behind fifteen inches of turret armor. Gigantic engines in the larger hull were expected to make sixteen knots.³³ “Sir William [Armstrong] may do his best,” wrote Ericsson, “but we will make floating targets which he cannot demolish and guns that will sink any thing his country can put to sea.”³⁴

Added to this, Welles informed Congress in his annual report dated 1 December 1862 that “we must have a formidable Navy, not only of light draught vessels to guard our extensive and shallow coast, but one that with vessels always ready for service, and of sufficient size to give them speed, can seek and meet an enemy on the ocean.”³⁵ The result of this appeal was the establishment of the

League Island dockyard at Philadelphia to facilitate the construction of a full-scale, wide-ranging iron-clad navy that had nothing to do with the prosecution of the war against the Rebellion and everything to do with a war against British naval and maritime supremacy. The following year Welles also revealed plans for a class of “super-*Alabamas*,” “with which to sweep the ocean, and chase and hunt down the vessels of an enemy.”³⁶

It was this combination of plans and proof in the shape of warships already built and under construction by 1864 that led Admiralty-appointed naval observer Captain James G. Goodenough, R.N., to report to the worried British minister to the United States, Lord Lyons, that “this country is preparing for war against a maritime power by aiming at destroying its commerce and protecting its [own] ports with vessels of a peculiar construc-

tion and by breaking a blockade of any of its ports with [the] aid of swift manageable invulnerable vessels.”³⁷ Nor was this development necessarily inconsistent with the Union’s foreign policy. Lincoln himself declared towards the end of the Civil War that “England will live to regret her inimical attitude toward us.” The resolution of the *Trent* Affair was “a pretty bitter pill to swallow, but I contented myself with believing that England’s triumph in the matter would be short-lived, and that after ending our war successfully we would be so powerful that we could call her to account for all the embarrassments she had inflicted upon us.”³⁸

CONCLUSION

Understanding the monitors means understanding the Civil War, not exclusively one of North and South, but an international contest be-

tween the two great English-speaking peoples of the mid-Victorian era. The “iron shield” of the American republic—struggling for its survival against slave-holding factions from within and from British support via commerce raiders and blockade runners—was Fox and Ericsson’s idiosyncratic force of monitors, that the Royal Navy simply could not challenge. On 23 December 1861, the height of the *Trent* crisis, Ericsson wrote this to Welles: “Our gun boats or floating batteries, since they lack speed, size and many other potent elements of the large European iron clad war ships will be worthless unless absolutely impregnable and capable of carrying the heaviest ordnance.” The original *Monitor*, still under construction, possessed “the properties called for, requiring only increased substance of turret plate and to be armed with 15-inch guns to bid defiance to any war ship afloat.”³⁹ Following the ironclad stalemate at Hampton



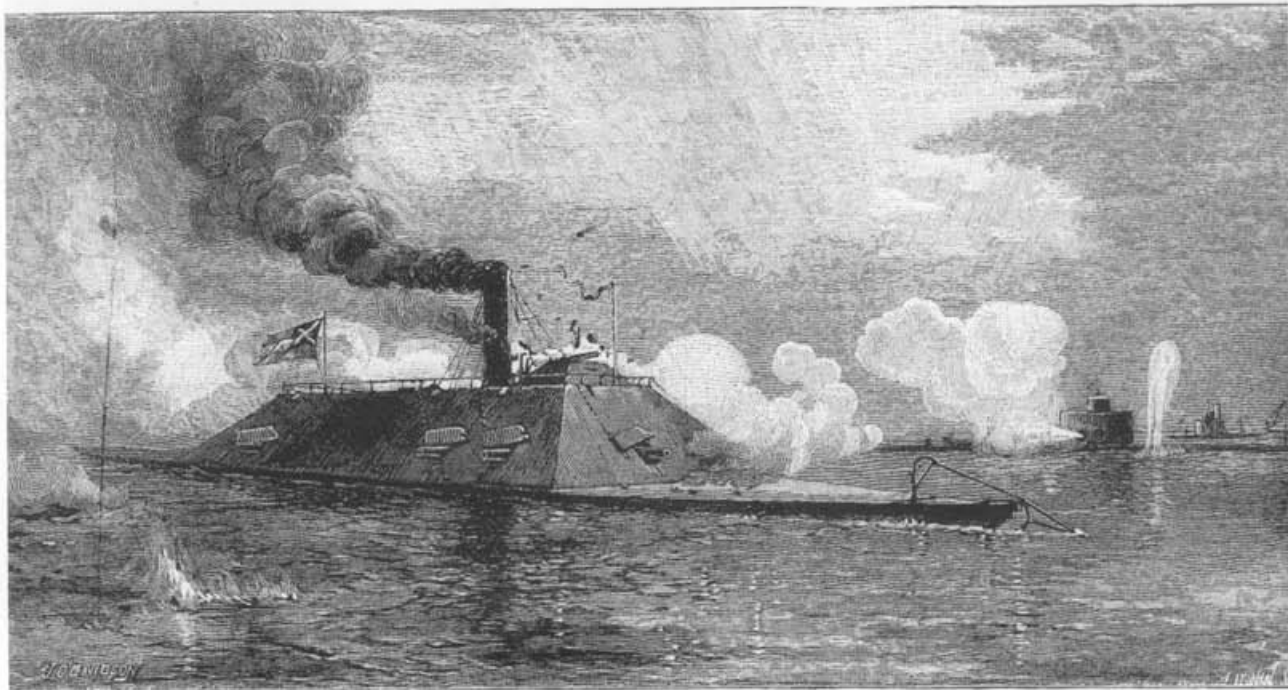
The naval assault on Charleston Harbor, 7 April 1863, from *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* edited by Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel (1887; reprint, New York: Castle Books, 1956), 4:38.

Roads, Ericsson further assured the secretary that the new, enhanced monitors were “exactly what we most need” *on the basis* “that there are no vessels yet produced in Europe that could sustain an encounter with the fleet of turret vessels now building under your orders.”⁴⁰

Previously, Welles had replied to the Senate Naval Committee’s request for particulars on the navy’s ironclad lineup that “the Department does not propose to confine itself exclusively to any particular plan yet offered but proposes to avail itself of the experience which will be gained in the construction of those now going forward, one of which will soon be tested in actual conflict.” This referred to the expected duel with the converted *Merrimac*, and of the three original Union ironclads contracted, only the *Monitor* would possibly be ready in time. He also noted, however, that “the ends proposed for the gunboat class is to reduce all the fortified sea ports of the enemy and open their

harbors to the Union army.”⁴¹ This was a significant caveat not mentioned by Ericsson, who based his conception of a superior *ironclad* more on a concentrated, thicker armor scheme and larger though fewer guns; specifically, an ironclad-killing ironclad, or “machine.”

Because of this discrepancy, the *Passaic*-class monitors proved to be of limited value in bombarding Confederate land works, as during the great naval assault on Charleston’s defenses of 7 April 1863, where a rapid suppressing fire counted more than individual weight of shell.⁴² Their defensive powers, on the other hand, were extraordinary. At less than eight hundred yards, USS *Passaic* (844 tons, with a crew of only seventy) was struck thirty-five times in under forty minutes, though firing only thirteen times in return. A month before, she was struck thirty-four times in an attack against Fort McAllister. “One of my officers who was below,” reported her commanding officer,



THE MONITOR “WEEHAWKEN” CAPTURING THE CONFEDERATE IRON-CLAD RAM “ATLANTA,”
WARSAW SOUND, GEORGIA, JUNE 17, 1863.

Capture of the Confederate ironclad-ram *Atlanta*, 17 June 1863, from *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* edited by Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel (1887; reprint, New York: Castle Books, 1956), 4:42.



Salvaged turret of the *Monitor*. Courtesy of *Monitor Center* website.

Captain Percival Drayton, “tells me that at one time in a few seconds he counted fifteen shot which passed over his head just above the deck, and at times the whistling was so rapid he could not keep count at all.”⁴³ In fact, by the end of 1863, Welles was responding to a complaint from another monitor captain that “neither the XI inch smooth bore nor the VIII inch rifle can penetrate the armor of the rebel iron clads, and in a contest with them, only the 15 inch gun can be effective, according to the experience derived from the contest between the *Atlanta* and the *Weehawken*. In a contest with sand batteries, broadside vessels are required, so that it is immaterial whether the guns are 15, 11 or 8 inch. Against the exposed masonry of forts we have the testimony of our own officers and the rebels that the 15 inch gun is the most effective.”⁴⁴

Then again, when the Confederate States Navy ventured to oppose these monitors, the results were

disastrous. The casemate-ram CSS *Atlanta* was forced to surrender after five shots from the monitor *Weehawken* (17 June 1863); the mighty *Tennessee* was pounded into submission at Mobile Bay (5 August 1864) first by the 11-inch guns of the river monitor *Chickasaw*, and then the 15-inch guns of the *Manhattan*, while the *Virginia II* was heavily damaged by the double-turreted *Onondaga* at Trent’s Reach (24 January 1865).⁴⁵ At the same time, public and professional opinion in Great Britain was turning against the broadside-ironclad principle.⁴⁶ The London *Mechanics’ Magazine*, jubilantly quoted by *Scientific American*, wrote that “the fleet of experimental iron-clads, of which the *Warrior* is the type, must, if they are to be in a condition to cope with the armor-plated ships of foreign powers, be reconstructed. . . . The remedy is a bitter pill for the Government to swallow; but there is no avoiding it.”⁴⁷ Even the London *Times* admitted that, for all intents and purposes, “a perfect Ironclad is an imperfect seaboat”—a momentous though unconscious distinction between what may be termed tactical and strategic naval supremacy.⁴⁸ Which was more important, and upon that was the other based?

What we see, therefore, in the recent salvaging of the original *Monitor* is not just a forgotten warship; indeed, the *Monitor’s* place in American and naval history has been assured since 1862. What we see is the primary weapon in a *forgotten war*—an entire dimension of the American Civil War—that was never fought. Probably as a consequence of their much more decisive though less obvious *deterrent* success, John Ericsson’s monitors have been understood only in relation to Confederate defenses, rather than as a “national defense system” of the most sophisticated war machines of their day, conceived and manufactured on an unprecedented, industrialized scale against the offensive capability of the world’s greatest naval power. In that respect, perhaps, they were the timely fulfillment of Thomas Jefferson’s dream of strategic isolation secured by a host of comparatively inexpensive gunboats—not a “Blue Water” navy.⁴⁹

~ NOTES ~

1. The *Monitor's* turret also contains dents from the subsequent, unsuccessful attack against the batteries of Drewry's Bluff, 15 May 1862. Inside the turret are two 11-inch Dahlgren smoothbores; the contents of the guns themselves were described by Francis R. Butts in his account of the sinking of the *Monitor* in a heavy gale off Cape Hatteras on the night of 29 December 1862: "I took off my coat—one that I had received from home only a few days before (I could not feel that our noble little ship was yet lost)—and, rolling it up with my boots, drew the tompon from one of the guns, placed them inside, and replaced the tompon. A black cat was sitting on the breech of one of the guns, howling one of those hoarse and solemn tunes which no one can appreciate who is not filled with the superstitions which I had been taught by the sailors, who are always afraid to kill a cat. I would almost as soon have touched a ghost, but I caught her, and, placing her in another gun, replaced the wad and tompon; but I could still hear that distressing howl," from "The Loss of the *Monitor*," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vols., Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, eds. (1887; reprint, New York: Castle Books, 1956), 1:746.
2. See the weighty *Report of the Secretary of the Navy in Relation to Armored Vessels* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1864) for a full record of monitor reports, pro and con.
3. Quoted from John Ericsson, *Contributions to the Centennial Exhibition* (New York: Nation Press, 1876), 465–66.
4. Kenneth Bourne sees the *Trent* crisis as "the most dangerous single incident of the Civil War and perhaps in the whole course of Anglo-American relations since 1815," in *Great Britain and the Balance of Power in North America, 1815–1908* (London: Longmans, Green, 1967), 251. See also Norman B. Ferris, *The Trent Affair* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977).
5. *New York Herald*, 29 December 1861.
6. John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, 10 vols., (New York: Century Co., 1917), 5:35–39. For British preparations for war against the North, see the British Public Record Office, Kew (hereafter "P.R.O."), ADM 3/269 (Special Minutes from Board); ADM 128/56 (Correspondence arising out of the Civil War, 1860–65); ADM 1/5766 (from Admiralty, 1861 July–December); ADM 1/5787 (from Admirals 'P', Jamaica 1-592, 1862; W.O. (War Office) 33/11, 1862; and the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, Milne Papers Collection, MLN/125/1, "Memorandum relative to the Civil War in America;" also Kenneth Bourne, "British Preparations for War with the North, 1861–1862," *English Historical Review* 76 (October 1961): 600–632. "There is a story, derived apparently from the prime minister's private secretary, that Palmerston had opened [cabinet] business by throwing down his hat upon the table, and bluntly telling his colleagues, 'I don't know whether you are going to stand this, but I'll be damned if I do!' . . . True or not the story is a good clue to the atmosphere of the occasion" (Bourne, *Great Britain*, 219).
7. Palmerston to Somerset, 23 June 1861, Somerset Papers Collection, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire Record Office, D/RA/A/2A/37, Letters from Viscount Palmerston, 1861.
8. *Congressional Globe*, Thirty-Seventh Congress, 2d Session, series no. 14, 7 January 1862, 210.
9. "The Defence of Canada," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 91 (February 1862): 228. One Congressman was particularly enraged: "Every time this *Trent* affair comes up . . . I am made to renew the horrible grief which I suffered when the news of the surrender of Mason and Slidell came. I acknowledge it, I literally wept tears of vexation. I hate it; and I hate the British Government. I have never shared in the traditionary

hostility of many of my countrymen against England. But I now here publicly avow and record my inextinguishable hatred of that Government. I mean to cherish it while I live, and to bequeath it as a legacy to my children when I die. . . . Sir, I trust in God that the time is not far distant when we shall have suppressed this rebellion, and be prepared to avenge and wipe out this insult that we have received. We will then stir up Ireland; we will appeal to the Chartists of England; we will go to the old French *habitans* of Canada; we will join hands with France and Russia to take away the eastern possessions of that proud empire, and will darken every jewel that glitters in her diadem" (*Congressional Globe*, Thirty-Seventh Congress, 2d Session, series no. 21, 14 January 1862, 333).

10. James Tertius DeKay, *Monitor: The Story of the Legendary Civil War Ironclad and the Man Whose Invention Changed the Course of History* (London: Random House, 1999), 73. John Murray Forbes also noted to Fox his "original idea with which I have bored you so much & which I broached to the President in April 61 that the sea belongs to us, & ought to be made our chief dependence for putting down the Rebels & keeping the foreign bull dogs peaceable" (Forbes to Fox, 19 November 1862, Gustavus Vasa Fox Papers, New York Historical Society Library Manuscripts, Box 3: Letters received, 1862, A–K).

11. *London Times*, 1 April 1862.

12. *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 166 (London: Cornelius Buck, 1862), 31 March 1862, "Iron-plated Ships—Observations," 263; 3 April 1862, "Iron-plated Ships," 433–34; Palmerston to Somerset, 11 June 1862, Somerset Papers; and *Hansard*, vol. 166, 4 April 1862, "Iron-plated Ships and Land Fortifications," 608.

13. Russell to Palmerston, 31 March 1862, Palmerston Papers, University of Southampton, MS 62, GC/RU/691-716, January to June, 1862.

14. Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *A Cycle of Adams Letters, 1861–1865*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1920), 1:123.

15. Ericsson to Seward, 23 April 1862, John Ericsson Papers, American Swedish Museum, Philadelphia, Penn.

16. By 11 August 1862, Gideon Welles was writing in his diary that "we are not, it is true, in a condition for war

with Great Britain just at this time, but England is in scarcely a better condition for a war with us," Howard K. Beale, ed., *Diary of Gideon Welles: Secretary of the Navy under Lincoln and Johnson*, 3 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960), 1:79.

17. See Howard Jones, *Union in Peril: The Crisis over British Intervention in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), and his essay "History and Mythology: The Crisis over British Intervention in the Civil War," in Robert E. May, ed., *The Union, the Confederacy, and the Atlantic Rim* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1995), 29–67.

18. P.R.O., WO 33/12 (nos. 186 to 212, 1863), 7 November 1862, "Printed for the distribution of the Cabinet," *Confidential, Recognition of the Independence of the Southern States of the North American Union*, Secretary of War Sir George C. Lewis, 2.

19. Quote from Regis A. Courtemanche, *No Need of Glory: The British Navy in American Waters, 1860–64* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1977), 153.

20. P.R.O., ADM 1/5840 (From Surveyor, January–April, 1863), 30 January 1863, "American Iron clad Vessels—Statements of the *New York Herald* forwarded by Adm. Sir A. Milne," no. 215. See also *Scientific American's* two-page feature on "English and American Iron-Clad Ships of War" (9:15 [10 October 1863]: 229–30).

21. See for example the *Joint Resolution Relative to Lake and River Defences of Pennsylvania* and the privately printed *Defences of Maine, 31 January 1862*, both found in the Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington D.C.; also *37th Congress, 2nd Session, House of Representatives, Executive Document No. 14, Fortification of the Sea-Coast and Lakes—Message from the President of the United States*, 19 December 1861; "Report of the Board of Fortifications," *Congressional Globe*, Thirty-Seventh Congress, 2d Session, series no. 162, 5 June 1862, 2589–92; and *Congressional Globe*, Thirty-Seventh Congress, 2d Session, series no. 47, 11 February 1862, 739–50.

22. "The enlargement of the Illinois and Michigan canal has, by the conduct of Great Britain, been rendered a clear, absolute, military necessity. A failure on

our part to construct it would now be sheer stupidity. England has, by her canals, made the lakes as free to her navy as the ocean. . . . The paw of the British lion is rather too plainly in sight on these peaceful lakes" (*Congressional Globe*, Thirty-Seventh Congress, 2d Session, series no. 189, 30 June 1862, 3026–27); see also *Ship Canal to Connect Mississippi River and Lake Michigan—Report from Committee on Military Affairs*, 37th Congress, 2nd Session, House of Representatives, report no. 37; and "Defence of the Upper Lakes—Memorandum for the President," by Major-General Joseph Gilbert Totten, Engineers Department, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress. See Richard P. Morgan to Ericsson, 17 March 1862, and Ericsson to Samuel B. Ruggles, 14 April 1862, Chairman of the Lake Defense Committee, New York Chamber of Commerce (Ericsson Papers, Philadelphia), on proposed specifications for a Great Lakes monitor drawing eight feet fully loaded; 6'6" without stores, ammunition, or ballast for canals.

23. *Congressional Globe*, Thirty-Seventh Congress, 2d Session, series no. 168, 13-6-1862, 2675–80. See also the *London Times*, 9 September 1862. The *Passaic*-class monitor USS *Camanche* was dispatched (manufactured but unassembled) to San Francisco to provide added security; see Donald L. Canney, *The Old Steam Navy, Volume Two: The Ironclads, 1842–1885* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1993), 77–78.

24. See Allen Salisbury, *The Civil War and the American System: America's Battle with Britain, 1860–1876* (New York: Campaigner Publications, 1978), for an argument that Britain's economic motives for intervention were far more insidious than simply resuming the cotton trade.

25. Entry dated 6 December 1861; from Martin Crawford, ed., *William Howard Russell's Civil War: Private Diaries and Letters, 1861–1862* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 198.

26. See, for example, the *New York Herald*, 27 June 1862. "You hardly cannot mean to say," Russell defensively replied to Somerset, "that if the American merchants in Japan did what the Liverpool Merchants have been doing with impunity we should be obliged to go to war with America, for this would be urging that we are at this moment giving America just cause of War. This of

course would be a strong condemnation of ourselves, and one which we could never admit," 21 August 1863, Russell to Somerset, Somerset Papers, D/RA/A/2A/52, Letters from Lord John Russell, 1863. Within two weeks the Foreign Secretary wrote Palmerston that he had ordered the detainment of the Laird Rams under private construction at Birkenhead—undeniably for Confederate service—though this was against British common law. "We shall thus test the law, and if we have to pay damages, we have satisfied the opinion which prevails here, as well as in America, that this kind of neutral hostility should not be allowed to go on without some attempt to stop it" (3 September 1863, Russell to Palmerston, MS 62, Palmerston Papers, GC/RU).

27. Charles B. Boynton, *The History of the Navy during the Rebellion*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton, 1868), 1:6.

28. Stephen R. Wise, *Lifeline of the Confederacy: Blockade Running during the Civil War* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 3–18, 27, 221–26. Wise notes that the South did not have a merchant marine, and initially assumed "King Cotton" diplomacy would force England to break the Northern blockade for its cotton supply.

29. Letter dated 16 March 1863, from Beverly Wilson Palmer, ed., *The Selected Letters of Charles Sumner*, 2 vols. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 2:150.

30. Fox to A. A. Harwood, 15-5-1862, U.S. National Archives, Record Group (hereafter "N.A., R.G.") 74, Records of the Bureau of Ordnance, Entry 16, "Letters Received from the Secretary of the Navy and Navy Department Bureaus," Box 4, September 1861 to December 1866 (Letterbook), 46, [author's emphasis].

31. N.A., R.G. 74, Bureau of Ordnance, Entry 98, "Reports Concerning Target Practice on Iron Plates, 1862–64, 2 vols.," 2:27, 45–46.

32. Ericsson to Fox, 26 September 1863, Fox Papers, quoted from James Phinney Baxter, *The Introduction of the Ironclad Warship* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), 329, n. 1.

33. Ericsson to Fox, 28 April 1862, John Ericsson Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C. "Whatever success may attend the large and costly armored ships of the Warrior class, which are being

constructed by some of the maritime Powers of Europe, cruising in deep waters, they can scarcely cause alarm here, for we have within the United States few harbors that are accessible to them, and for those few the Government can always be prepared whenever a foreign war is imminent. It has been deemed advisable, however, that we should have a few large-sized armed cruisers, of great speed, for ocean service, as well as of the class of smaller vessels for coastwise and defensive operations" (*Congressional Globe*, 37th Congress, 3rd Session, Appendix, Report of the Secretary of the Navy, 1 December 1862, 18). See the contemporary description of this monitor, USS *Dictator*, in *Scientific American*, 7:7 (16 August 1862):106, which also quotes Ericsson's claim that the reinforced iron structure of the ship's prow "will split an iceberg."

34. Ericsson to Fox, 28 April 1862, John Ericsson Papers, Library of Congress.

35. *Congressional Globe*, 37th Congress, 3rd Session, Appendix, Report of the Secretary of the Navy, 1 December 1862, 18–19.

36. *Congressional Globe*, 38th Congress, 1st Session, Appendix, Report of the Secretary of the Navy, 7 December 1863, 16–17. Welles makes the point in his journal entry of 26 December 1863 that "a few strong, powerful vessels will conduce to economy because they will deter commercial nations from troubling us, and if not troubled, we need no large and expensive navy" (*Diary*, 1:496).

37. P.R.O., ADM 1/5879, from Captains A–G, 1864, "Report on Ships of United States Navy 1864, Capt. J. G. Goodenough, R.N., received in 'M' Dept. 21 October, 1864." Goodenough's enclosed report to Lyons is dated Washington, 12 April 1864. See also Richard M. Basoco, William E. Geoghegan, and Frank J. Merli, eds., "A British View of the Union Navy, 1864: A Report Addressed to Her Majesty's Minister at Washington," *American Neptune* 27 (1967): 30–45.

38. Horace Porter, *Campaigning with Grant* (1897; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), 407–8. Another account, possibly apocryphal, quotes Lincoln thus: "I remember when I was a lad, there were two fields behind our house separated by a fence. In each field there was a big bulldog, and these dogs spent the

whole day racing up and down, snarling and yelping at each other through that fence. One day they both came at the same moment to a hole in it, big enough to let either of them through. Well, gentlemen, what do you think they did? They just turned tail and scampered away as fast as they could in opposite directions. Now England and America are like those bulldogs" (Emanuel Hertz, ed., *Lincoln Talks: A Biography in Anecdote* [New York: Viking Press, 1939], 356–57).

39. Ericsson to Welles, 23 December 1861, quoted from Baxter, Introduction, "Appendix G," 358–59. See also Baxter's groundbreaking exposition of the Navy Department's own turret ironclad scheme, particularly Chapter XIII, "The North Seeks a Solution," 238–84, 305–6.

40. Ericsson to Welles, 28 April 1862, Ericsson Papers, Philadelphia.

41. Welles to Senator John P. Hale, 7 February 1862, chairman of the Naval Committee, N.A., R.G. 45, Entry 5, "Letters to Congress," Letterbook 13:457–58.

42. On the other hand, Charleston's batteries might have accomplished more with fewer though heavier guns. *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (hereafter "O.R.N."), 30 vols., (Washington: G.P.O., 1894–1922), series I, 14:111–14; also Johnson and Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders*, 4:32–47. See particularly Alvah F. Hunter (edited and introduction by Craig L. Symonds), *A Year on a Monitor and the Destruction of Fort Sumter* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 33–37, 47–61.

43. USS *Passaic*, 8 April 1863, O.R.N., series I, 14:9–11.

44. Welles to Commander Thomas Craven, 2 December 1863, Gideon Welles Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C., "Correspondence, October–December, 1863."

45. O.R.N., series I, 14:265–8 (CSS *Atlanta*); 417–20, 425–28, and 21: 494–46, 531–33 (CSS *Tennessee*); 11: 658 (CSS *Virginia II*); and Johnson and Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders*, 4:27–31; 379–406; 705–7, respectively. See also the vivid account of the capture of the *Atlanta* in Hunter, *A Year on a Monitor*, 73–86.

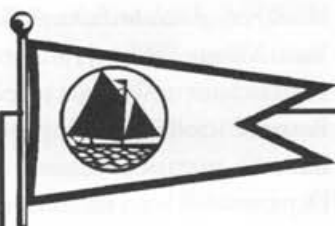
46. As also noticed by the *New York Herald*: see 3 November 1864.

47. *Scientific American* 11:26 (24 December 1864): 402.

48. *London Times*, 1 November 1865.

49. See Spencer Tucker, *The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy* (Columbia: South Carolina University Press, 1993); Spencer Tucker, "The Jeffersonian Gunboats in Service, 1804-1825," *American Neptune* 55 (1995): 97-110; Gene Allen Smith, "A Means to an End: Gunboats and Thomas Jefferson's Theory of Defense," *American*

Neptune 55 (1995): 111-21; Samuel J. Watson, "Knowledge, Interest and the Limits of Military Professionalism: The Discourse on American Coastal Defence, 1815-1860," *War in History* 5 (1998), 3:280-307; and Gene Allen Smith, "The Ruinous Folly of a Navy: A History of the Jeffersonian Gunboat Program" (doctoral thesis, Auburn University, 1991).



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